

MICAH'S THEORY OF THE JUSTICE OF JUDGEMENT (MICAH 3:1–12)¹

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ABSTRACT

This article is an examination of Micah's theory of justice within the overall context of his oracles of judgements. While there are competing perspectives in the justice of judgement in the book of Micah, particularly in relation to the extent of judgement, this article concerns itself with the interrelatedness and connection between sin and judgement. The judgements envisioned in Micah's oracles are provoked by the violations of the traditional moral and social solidarities resulting from the Covenant, which formed the basis of society. As an egalitarian society, the social blueprint of Yahweh's Torah for Israel advocated special concern for weak and vulnerable individuals as fundamental. The gift of Torah inaugurated Israel as a community meant to personify Yahweh's justice. However, increasing injustice profoundly jeopardized this witness to God's healing agenda. For failing to uphold justice the perpetrators are liable and the judgements constitute justice. This justice may not necessarily be corrective in quality but punitive. The article therefore examines briefly the background, structure, and approaches to the book of Micah, analyses a unit of judgement oracle (3:1–12), and concludes by synthesising Micah's theory of justice within the overall context of his oracles of judgements.

INTRODUCTION

The biblical data on justice are varied and it is approached differently from different perspectives. Justice operates within wider religious and cultural worldviews and this calls for a consideration of different and sophisticated methodologies. Marshall (2012:12) notes:

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Our ability to grasp the meaning of justice is constrained by our creaturely finitude. It is also constrained by historical circumstance. Our experience of justice and of reality in general is always mediated through particular cultural and historical traditions. It is therefore unavoidably contextual. It can only be partial, fallible, and provisional. This is an important warning against seizing on selected biblical texts or practices to do with justice (such as those mandating capital punishment or chattel slavery), isolating them from their historical context and canonical setting, and absolutizing them as an unchangeable expression of God's eternal justice.

Justice is a pervasive theme in the Old Testament, both in history and literature (Wright 2006:253). The concern for justice was fundamental in any discussion of social ethics in all of ancient Israel's multifaceted societal life (Boloje and Groenewald 2014:1–9). It is a concern which focuses on legitimate methods or the essential structures of community of humanity such as how opportunities, entitlements, and other privileges are allocated to deserving individuals or groups within a community in order to sustain and enhance the community's well-being. As it is frequently used in biblical texts, justice is a call for action more than it is a principle of evaluation (Mott 1993:79) (cf. Isa 58:6; Job 29:16; Jer 21:12). The one who is "considered as just is he or she that is characteristically seen as one who invests actively in the community, demonstrating unique concern and attentiveness to the poor, helpless and the needy" (Boloje and Groenewald 2014:1; cf. Brueggemann 2002:177).

As for Israel, justice was not an abstract concept or a philosophical theory but fundamentally theological: "It was rooted in the character of the LORD, their God; it flowed from his action in history; it was demanded by his covenant relationship with Israel; it would ultimately be established on earth only by his sovereign power" (Wright 2006:254). The whole concept of justice is firmly entrenched in the covenantal framework of Israel's historical relationship with Yahweh. This covenantal and historical relationship made it possible for Israel to understand Yahweh's concern

for justice and their comprehensive universalisation of the affirmation: “The LORD loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of his loving-kindness (Ps 33:5)”; “He has told you, O mankind, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? Nothing, but to do justice (מִשְׁפָּט), to love kindness (דֶּבֶר), and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). The urgency of justice was an urgency of aiding and emancipating the victims of oppression. Thus God demands it of every man (Isa. 1:17). The idea of justice and its interrelated concepts informed Israel’s prophetic exhortation and encouragement communication as they act as intermediaries between God, kings, and covenant people (Carroll 2006:169–176; Carroll 2012:185–193; Friedman 2011: 297–305). It is used to evaluate social and economic relationships in covenant community (cf. Isa 1:11–17; Jer 22:3, 15–16; Am 5:21–25; Mic 6:6–8).

The basic task of this article is the uncovering (or constructing) of Micah’s theory of the justice of judgement from a synchronic perspective.³ Micah demonstrated an explicit and unbreakable link between justice toward covenant community members and righteousness before God; a connection that goes back to Israel’s covenant at Sinai and to ancient Israel’s prophetic tradition. While there are competing perspectives in the justification of judgement in the book of Micah, particularly in relation to the extent of judgements, this article concerns itself with the interrelatedness and connection between sin and judgement. The proposition of this article is that Micah’s oracles of judgement constitute justice on account of the failure of individuals in the covenant community of Israel to embody Yahweh’s justice. The article begins with a brief survey of the background, structure, approaches, and unity of the book of Micah, continues with analyses of a unit of judgement oracle (3:1–12), and concludes by synthesising Micah’s theory of the justice of judgement.

³ In biblical scholarship, two general types of exegetical methodologies, namely diachronic and synchronic approaches, have been used in an attempt to understand the texts of the Old Testament. No method can totally exclude the other. Diachronic approach deals with the history of texts or authorial original intention and synchronic approach is concerned with the final form of texts rather than textual origin. In their mutuality of results and status of questions, Counet and Berges (2005:6) observe, “one can speak either of synchronic oriented diachronics (question: how come the final text to its present form), or diachronic oriented synchronics (question: what is the meaning and function of the final text).”

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF MICAH

The book's title, as is traditional in most Old Testament prophetic books, comes from the name of the traditional author. Micah, at the outset of the biblical book, is identified as coming from Moresheth, a small community on the border of Philistia. The designation indicates that he prophesied outside his community – probably in Jerusalem – and his place of origin would have well been more recognised by his audience than the name of his family. He was a younger contemporary of Isaiah, who ministered in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (Isa 1:1). His reputation as a prophetic opponent of rulers/leaders was well enough known to be cited more than seven decades later, during the reign of King Jehoiakim (Mic 3:12; Jer 26:18). While not much is said about the personal details of prophet Micah beyond the indication of his origins (1:1; cf. Jer 26:18–19) (Huber, Grant and Grant-Starter 1994:295), the book conforms adequately enough to provide a portrait of a prophetic theologian who had cast his lot with the poor of the land and had become a fearless defender of the rights of the oppressed (Alfaro 1989:4; Waltke 1998/2:594).

The socio-political and economic situation of the period of Micah point to historical events of late eighth century B.C.E. Judah⁴ which was incessantly under the political and military intimidation and danger of the Assyrian empire (Carroll 2006:173). He witnessed the collapse of the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C.E. and lived through the offensive raid of the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the aggressive Assyrians under Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E. It is therefore argued that Micah wrote around 735–710 B.C.E. on account of his omission of the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib (Wood 1979:309). Nevertheless, Allen (1976:242, 244, 301) contends persuasively that Micah 2:12–13 makes reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. by Sennacherib.

It is difficult to ascertain with precision the specific systemic, economic, and social focus of Yahweh's anger. The denunciations of Micah reflect more probably the

⁴ The eighth century was a period during which the privileged few in Israel were enjoying unprecedented prosperity while most Israelites were experiencing dire poverty. For information regarding developments in eighth century B.C.E. see Chisholm (1990:21); Pitard (1994:207–222); Kaiser (1998:352); Hoerth (1998:329–330).

social situation during the reign of King Ahaz (Huber, Grant and Grant-Starter 1994:295). Assyrian exactions of tribute had heightened the situation and were a permanent drain on the economy. The poor became victims of the new realities as they remain the ones to bear the weight of the new loads. The authorised religion of the temple at Jerusalem seemed to lack the courage to challenge the blatant and deliberate injustices. The traditional moral and social solidarities resulting from the covenant, which form the basis of society, were gradually disregarded or overlooked (Alfaro 1989:6). The economic prosperity under kings Uzziah and Jotham gave way to a strong wave of self-satisfied materialism. Ethical and personal values steadily decomposed; nevertheless, the people found solace in the solemn rites of false worship. Land which initially served the good of everyone, under Torah's inheritance system became the principal commodity for investment of wealth (cf. Mic 2:1–5). The poor eventually became landless, powerless, and voiceless. Corruption, poverty, and distress struck the people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The powerful took over the fields and homes of the weak, sold their children as slaves, and violated women (cf. Mic 2:1–11).

Political powers, namely princes, elders, military officials, rather than offering a solution for the situation, exploited the people and used their power to steal and abuse (cf. Mic 3:1–4). The judiciary, which was expected to assist the weaker members of the society who otherwise had no power and influence, refused to denounce the injustices but sold themselves to the system (cf. 3:9–11). Religious leaders, such as priests and prophets, made money their real god. Their attitude made the temple worship a stumbling block to genuine orthodoxy. Their leadership made the people forget that sacrifices and rituals without the practice of love and justice were worthless. Liturgical ritual is empty and useless unless it is combined with moral integrity and good ethical conduct (cf. 3:3–8, 11; 6:6–7:6) (Alfaro 1989:6–8).

Micah's age witnessed Israel's social transformation which had decisively moved away from covenant faithfulness. In the name of the God of Israel Micah confronted the elite from the standpoint of the violated ethos of traditional communal solidarity embodied in covenant law (Allen 1973:22). Micah's oracles allow him to describe in

some detail the behavior that he finds to be unacceptable. His message is one of uncompromising misfortune and complete condemnation of the complacency of a nation blindly anchored in an impression of false reliance on accumulated wealth, unjustly acquired. He makes no effort to prove logically that judgment upon the oppressors will be the outcome of the present situation (Shaw 1993:88–89). His message provoked the national conscience of his era and has continued to influence and stimulate societies wherever socio-economic injustices have manifested.

STRUCTURE, APPROACHES AND UNITY OF THE BOOK OF MICAH

One of the most debated issues in Micah studies is the structure of the book as a whole and whether there is consistency regarding the book as it is. The organisation of the book reveals Micah's intention. The book of Micah has been structured in various ways. Some scholars argue for a six-fold division: 1:2–16; 2:1–13; 3:1–4:8; 4:9–5:15 [14 MT]; 6:1–7:7; 7:8–28. Others are for a four-fold division (Cuffey 1987:301–304)⁵ with variation between three different proposals, a three-fold division (Andersen and Freedman 2000:7–14; Brueggemann 2003:234–235) with a difference as to whether chapter 3 be grouped along with chapters 1–2 or 4–5. Many agree that chapters 6–7 constitute a separate section, and two distinct two-fold divisions: Micah 1–5 and 6–7; or 1–3 and 4–7 (Mignon 2001:62–63; Smith-Christopher 2015:33). Andersen and Freedman (2000:7) chart a course of dividing the book and considering it as a whole in terms of a larger structure. They accept a threefold division and sections: the book of doom (1:2–3:12); the book of vision (4:1–5:14); the book of contention and conciliation (6:1–7:20). These originally isolated prophecies vary in form and are classified as oracles of doom and of hope (Keil 1949:424). Each of these oracles begin with the Hebrew verb **שָׁמַע** (hear or listen), a customary word used by Israel's prophets to call attention to their messages (cf. Isa 1:2, 10; Amos 3:1; Joel 1:2; Hos

⁵ Cuffey discovers coherence within the book's structure around the key theme of remnant which is seen in four instances in the book resulting in four-fold structural division: 1:2–2:13; 3:1–4:8; 4:9–5:14; and 6:1–7:20.

4:1) (Pfeiffer and Harrison 1990:851). The oracles of hope, all of which connect in part to the theme of remnant (2:12–13; 4:6–7; 5:6–7 (7–8); 7:18), correspond to the topics of doom and as such resolve the crises (Waltke 1998:594). The diagram below indicates the occurrences and places in which Micah’s oracles of hope and comfort are utilised in comparison with oracles of warning and uncompromising doom.

Oracles of Hope and Comfort	Oracles of Warning and Doom
1:1 Micah’s audience is told about the prophetic דְּבַר־יְהוָה “word of the LORD,” its divine Author	1:2–16 Yahweh’s warnings and judgement on Samaria (1:2–7) and Judah (1:8–16)
2:6–7 Micah’s conflict with rival prophets	2:1–5 Denouncement of social injustice (ruling elites)
2:12–13 Yahweh preserves a remnant in Zion	2:8–11 Condemnation of Judean military elites and denouncement of their prophetic supporters
3:8 Micah’s consciousness of power from Yahweh’s Spirit	3:1–4 Indictment of the Judean leadership of economic cannibalism
	3:5–7 Accusation against corrupt prophetic advisers
	3:9–12 Coming judgement on account of gross sin and crime
4:1–5 Micah’s vision of the revitalisation of Judah’s economy	
4:6–10 Gathering and building a new society out of crisis	
4:11–13 Yahweh’s vindication of His people to be witnessed by their enemies and announcement of final victory.	
5:2–9 Birth and exaltation of the ideal king (the Messiah)	5:1(MT 4:14) Exhortation to prepare for a coming exile
Birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem	5:10–15 ⁶
5:2,3	Israel deprived of material strength and support

⁶ While this unit appears with elements of doom, it is in fact a promise that Yahweh will rid Israel of her besetting sins. See Waltke (2007:15).

The Messiah's glorious and beneficent reign 5:4-7 Israel over (or among) the nations as great conqueror 5:8-9	6:1-8 Yahweh reconvenes the trial and Israel is accused of breaking covenant 6:9-16 Yahweh accuses Israel of injustice and sentences of judgement fulfilled on Jerusalem 7:1-6
7:7-20 Coming vindication and prayer for deliverance	Micah's anguish and description of unjust and disintegrating Judah's social structure

The interruption of a preponderance of judgement oracles with salvation oracles have made a number of scholars interpret the latter as insertion and accommodation by later redactors so as to reduce the weight of harsh and negative indictment in the book. In the mind-set of such readers and interpreters, such differences of view reflect a difference in authorship and perhaps a fundamental difference in time as well (Jeppesen 1978:8; Wolff 1990:17-27; Wagenaar 2001:6-15; Waltke 2007:13-16; Smith-Christopher 2015:34). Scholars who accept the canon of literary-historical criticism think that only the first three chapters contain genuine oracles from the historical Micah (Jeppesen 1978: 3-32; Waltke 1998:593), while the rest are confined to anonymous disciples spanning the exilic and postexilic periods (Allen 1976:251; Van der Woude 1976:10-11).⁷ From a grammatical point of view, the grammar of Micah is pre-exilic; none of the characteristic grammatical features of post-exilic Hebrew is displayed and many of the religious traditions in Micah as alleged are found in pre-exilic Jeremiah (cf. 23:1-6; 26:18) (Waltke 2007:10-11).

From form-critical perspective, certain literary formats or styles such as warning prophecy, lament song (1:8-16), funeral lament (2:1-5), prophetic judgement oracle, or a theophany or epiphany (1:2-7) are systematically presented (Smith-Christopher 2015:35). Literary-thematic approach examines the book's curve that moves from

⁷ Allen has questioned the genuineness of Micah 4:1-4, 4:6-8; 7:8-20. Van der Woude regards 1-5 as authentic, but consigns 6-7 to an anonymous author whom he regards as Second (Deutero)-Micah.

punishment to exaltation or from destruction to rebuilding. Smith-Christopher remarks that if a theme has emerged in these various proposed divisions of the book of Micah, it is surely the importance of judgement and salvation as contrasting subjects addressed by the book (Smith-Christopher 2015:34). A very striking feature is the basic concept of remnant, “which appears in four strategic places in the book: 1:2–2:13; 3:1–4:8; 4:9–5:14 and 6:1–7:20. Each of these sections consists of a negative part followed by a positive section which contains the idea of a remnant (cf. 2:12–13; 4:1–8; 5:1–14; 7:7–20)” (Wessels 2013:2). McComiskey (1985:399) makes these remarks about the motif of remnant:

Micah’s doctrine of the remnant is unique among the Prophets and is perhaps his most significant contribution to the prophetic theology of hope. The remnant is a force in the world, not simply a residue of people, as the word ‘remnant’ (*she’erit*) may seem to imply. It is a force that will ultimately conquer the world (4:11–13). This triumph, while presented in apparently militaristic terminology (4:13; 5:5–6), is actually accomplished by other than physical force [cf. Matt 5:3–12]. By removing everything that robs his people of complete trust in him (5:10–15), the Ruler from Bethlehem will effect the deliverance of his people. The source of power for God’s people in the world is their absolute trust in him and his resources.

Oral rhetorical style (Andersen and Freedman 2000:24–27) and dramatic reading⁸ have also been adopted as ways of understanding the various stylistic variations and unanticipated grammatical forms. All of these approaches raise methodological questions since advocates regard the texts from different or particular perspective which they consider to be important, be it thematic, structural, or rhetorical (Wessels 2013:3).

⁸ “Micah is an intentionally dramatic text, ‘dramatic’ not in the sense of being deeply impressive but in the *technical* sense: Micah is a drama reflecting many of the accepted definitions of ancient dramatic texts” (Smith-Christopher 2015:37).

In arrangement, the first three chapters, as well as the additional traditions found in the remaining four chapters, confirm harmoniously to a pattern of judgements followed immediately by promises of restoration and comfort. The horizon of hope in Yahweh's mercy, which always follows the harshest words of criticism, comes into clear focus at the end of book of Micah (7:18) (Allen 1976:241–252; Mays 1976:21–33; Longman III and Dillard 2006:451–452). If one takes the inspired superscription (1:1), that identifies Micah as the author of all its prophecies and the editorial observation at 3:1 that suggests that Micah himself edited the book, then no valid linguistic or literary explanations give grounds for hesitation regarding the book's unity and authenticity (Waltke 1998:593; Waltke 2007:13). Micah represents a composite unity. The various units of prophetic oracles or collections grew in stages, but each stage was conscious of the primary prophetic voice reflecting its message from the perspective of the eight-century prophet, though exilic and post-exilic modifications may have shaped Micah's theological reflection on events from the exilic to the post-exilic period (Nogalski 2011:516).

ANALYSIS OF MICAH'S UNIT OF JUDGEMENT ORACLE (3:1–12)

Micah 3 is clearly a judgement oracle that has been interpreted to be a reaction to Micah 2:6–11 (Mignon 2001:84–85). This article takes up this unit because of the impact of so much material emphasising the necessity of doing justice, as Yahweh's primary requirement and demand on Israel's leaders, their failure to embody justice, and its attendant consequences. The three sub-units: 3:1–4, 3:5–7, and 3:9–12 (with the exclusion of v.8), are connected by their shared addressees (Israel's ruling classes), their shared form (judgement oracles), their basic shared length, as well as their shared theme (manipulation of justice for personal interest). The indictment and judicial sentence are connected with appropriate participles: **אָז** [then] (v. 4) and **לְכֵן** [therefore] (v. 6, 12) (Waltke 1998:656). An analysis of the three sub-units 3:1–4, 3:5–7, and 3:9–12 is undertaken below.

Indictment of the Judean leadership for economic cannibalism (3:1–4)

Text and translation:

3.1 Then I said,	3:1 וְאָמַר
“Hear now, heads of Jacob	שְׁמַעוּנָא רְאִשֵׁי יַעֲקֹב
and leaders (rulers) of the house of Israel.	וּקְצִינֵי בַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל
Is it not for you to know justice?	הֲלוֹא לָכֶם לְדַעַת אֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּט:
3:2 You who hate good and love evil,	3:2 שִׂנְאֵי טוֹב וְאֹהֲבֵי (רָעָה) (רָעָה)
Who tear off their skins from them	גָּזְלֵי עוֹדָם מֵעַל־יָהֶם
and their flesh from their bones,	וְשֶׁאֲרָם מֵעַל עֲצָמוֹתָם:
3:3 And who eat the flesh of my people (like meat),	3:3 וְאֹשֶׁר אָכְלוּ שֶׁאֲרַ עַמִּי
strip off their skin from them,	וְעוֹרָם מֵעַל־יָהֶם כְּשִׂיטוֹ
break their bones to pieces	וְאֶת־עֲצָמֹתֵיהֶם פָּצְצוּ
and spread them in the pot	וּפְרָשׁוּ בְּאֹשֶׁר בְּסִיר
and as meat in a cooking cauldron.	וּכְבָּשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ קִלְחָת:
3:4 Then they will cry out to Yahweh,	3:4 אֲזַ יִזְעֻקוּ אֶל־יְהוָה
but He will not answer them.	וְלֹא יַעֲנֶה אוֹתָם
Instead, He will hide His face from them at that time,	וְיִסְתֵּר פָּנָיו מֵהֶם בְּעֵת הַהִיא
because they have practiced evil deeds.	בְּאֹשֶׁר הִרְעוּ מֵעַל־יָהֶם:

This sub-unit of doom oracle has three sections: an address (v. 1a), accusations (vv.1b–3), and sentence (v. 4). Micah begins and ends his indictment by accusing Israel’s leaders of רָע [evil] (vv. 2, 4) (Waltke1998, 2:656). Coming again to his accusations, Micah describes in horrific language the depredations of the ruling class throughout the whole country (Judah/Israel). The opening clause, וְאָמַר (“then I said”) in verse 1 is often read to link what follows with what has gone before. Here Micah’s call to attention, to “listen” signals a particularly strong turn in his rhetoric. The text calls the hearers (and readers) to hear with understanding so as to heed. The “heads”⁹

⁹ The word ראש(head) as used in the text has a clear association with the court of ancient Israel. The title was applied to judges of the tribe, city, and nation. These judges were not only involved in judicial arbitration. Indeed, some of them had no such function, but were perhaps, solely, military deliverers. The king also instituted professional judges over the nation just as Moses appointed competent laity to administer justice (Exod 18:13–26; Deut 1:15–18). See Roland (1961:152–153), Wright (2006:270).

and “leaders/rulers” of the people are expected to know justice by experience. Thus Micah’s question requires an answer in the affirmative. Instead of knowing justice, these heads and leaders are pictured as habitual haters of good and lovers of evil. This is a clear reversal of the norm which is well familiar to Micah’s contemporaries, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa. 5:20, and implied in Amos’s statement in 5:15 “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate”) (Smith-Christopher 2015:109).

With no passion to protect and preserve the familial covenant community, the vile leaders perversely destroyed it. Instead of being the good shepherds taking care of the flock of God, they transformed themselves into cannibals “who tear off their skins from them and their flesh from their bones” (3:2). Micah does not withdraw from his gruesome imagery to describe the brutality and corruption of these heartless leaders. Changing his style from relative participles to verbal clauses, he depicts the horrifying scenes not only in chronological order but in ever greater detail, hoping to stir the soured consciences of his audience, by his shocking depictions: “they eat the flesh of my people,” “strip off their skin from them,” and “break their bones to pieces” (3:3a). As if these are not horrible enough, by simile in verse 3b, Micah expounds further the incomplete metaphors of verse 3a: “spread them in the pot” and “as meat in a cooking cauldron.” The combination of *שָׂרֵר* (inward flesh) and *בָּשָׂר* (outward flesh) underscores the complete feasting on of Yahweh’s people (Waltke 1998:658).

Micah’s sentence on these leaders is just. Since they refused to change their minds before the cries of their victims, so now Yahweh will not change his judgement. They will repeatedly cry to him when the hour of punishment comes, but he in turn will not respond and will hide his face from them (3:4).¹⁰ The turning away of his face is a sign of no mercy (cf. Isa 1:15; 8:17; Deut 31:17–18); it is a very concrete act of his anger and wrath. Because of the evil they have done, justice must take its course and the worst form of judgement for Israel is Yahweh’s absence, not affliction itself.

¹⁰ This is a clear opposite of what is envisioned in the priestly blessing, when Yahweh is asked to make his face shine upon his people with protection, gracious blessing, and peace (cf. Num 6:24–26).

Accusation against corrupt prophetic advisers (3:5–7)

Text and translation:

<p>3:5 Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray; When they have something to bite with their teeth, They cry, “Peace,” But against him who puts nothing in their mouths, they declare holy war.</p>	<p>3:5 כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים הַמְתַּעֲצִים אֶת־עַמִּי הַנֹּשְׁכִים בְּשִׁנֵּיהֶם וְקָרְאוּ שְׁלוֹם וְאָשַׁר לֹא־יִתֵּן עַל־פִּיהָ וְקָדְשׁוּ עָלָיו מִלְחָמָה:</p>
<p>3:6 Therefore, it will be night for you without vision, and darkness for you, without divination. The sun will go down on the prophets, and the day will become dark over them.</p>	<p>3:6 לָכֵן לַיְלָה לְכֶם מִחֹזֶן וְחֹשֶׁכָה לְכֶם מִקְסָם וּבָאָה הַשָּׁמֶשׁ עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים וְקָדַר עֲלֵיהֶם הַיּוֹם:</p>
<p>3:7 The seers will be humiliated and the interpreters of signs (diviners) will be embarrassed. Indeed, they will all cover themselves up to their moustache Because there is no answer (from) God.</p>	<p>3:7 וּבִשְׂוֵי הַחֲזִים וְחִפְרוּ הַקְּסָמִים וְעִטּוּ עַל־שִׁפְתֵי כָלֶם כִּי אֵין מַעֲנָה אֱלֹהִים:</p>

As in chapter 2, where Micah reproached the prophets (2:6–11) after a sharp sentence on the greedy land magnates (2:1–5), so also in chapter 3 a judgement oracle against the greedy prophets (3:5–8) follows one against greedy leaders (3:1–4). The structure of this sub-unit is clear: the messenger formula with inserted addressees (3:5a), the accusation (3:5b), and judicial sentence (3:6–7) (Waltke 2007:168). In this section, Micah turns his attention to those prophets who have misled the people into thinking that they will soon find peace, as long as the people are willing to pay them. The oracle denounces these prophets, whose cynical attitude allows them to take advantage of the people’s trust. People come to the prophets to request a prophecy about the future. If the prophets have been paid, then the prophets give them a positive response **שְׁלוֹם** (peace), but if the prophets have not been paid, then they transfer **מִלְחָמָה** (war) to the sphere of the holy (cf. Jer. 6:4; Joel 4:9[3:9]). As the parallel **וְקָרְאוּ** indicates, they make holy the battle by their announcement. The problem with this attitude is that it

cannot be trusted. In this instance, what controls the direction of the message is the greed of the prophets, not Yahweh's intention (Nogalski 2011:547).

Micah pronounces an ironic verdict on these prophets (3:6–7): God will remove their sight and they will be unable to speak. These prophets, who ought to have been the moral guardian of the nation, will lose their gifted insight. They will no longer be able to see through the wall of darkness to the bright mysteries of divine revelations. The image of loss of sight is explored first in 3:6, symbolising the absence of God for the prophet. In darkness the prophet cannot see. This image conveys the loss of power for these prophets, for God no longer provides genuine revelation. Thus there will be no more visions for them (Andersen and Freedman 2000:374). Micah 3:7a conveys the removal of speech from those who make their livelihood by speaking. What then is a prophet without vision and speech? Since prophets see vision from Yahweh and speaks on Yahweh's behalf, the removal of sight and speech goes to the heart of their identity. This sentence of judgement removes their ability to function as prophets because they falsified the right to act as prophets (Nogalski 2011:548). The implication of this dark silence from God will be the disgrace of the prophets. The two terms: **בוש** (shame) and **קפר** (disgrace), are often rendered as embarrassment and humiliation respectively (Job 6:20; 19:3; Psa. 6:10; 22:5; 44:7; Prov. 14:35) (Smith-Christopher 2015:117). These prophets will be ashamed at their loss of position and influence, they will be exposed as unclean, and God will not answer them when they cry for the restoration of their gift (Walke 1998, 2:664–665). As a result of this embarrassment and humiliation, they will “cover themselves up to their moustache (v.7b).” This is an expression of wonder and amazement at the action of God. They will have nothing to say and as such they will cover their faces with sorrow to hide their shame when their separation from Yahweh becomes a public knowledge (cf. Lev. 13:45; Ezek. 24:17, 22) (Alfaro 1989:37–37).

Warnings of coming judgement on account of gross sin and crime (3:9–12)

Text and translation:

3:9 Now hear this, heads of the house of Jacob וְקַצְיֵי בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
and rulers of the house of Israel, וְרֹאשֵׁי בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל

You abhor justice and twist everything :קְשַׁוּ יְעַקְשׁוּ וְאֵת כָּל-יִשְׁרָהּ יַעֲקֹשׁוּ: that is straight.

3:10 You build Zion with bloodshed
and Jerusalem with injustice

3:10 בָּנָה צִיּוֹן בְּדַמִּים
וִירוּשָׁלַם בְּעוֹלָה:

3:11 Leaders (Judges) who pronounce
judgment for a bribe,
Priests who instruct for a price,
Prophets who divine for money.
Yet they lean on the LORD saying,
“Is not the LORD in our midst?
No calamity will come upon us.”

3:11 רְאֵשִׁיָּה בְּשֹׁחַד יִשְׁפֹּטוּ
וְכֹהֲנֵיָה בַמִּחִיר יִוְרוּ
וְנְבִיאֵיָה בְּכֶסֶף יִקְסְמוּ
וְעַל-יְהוָה יִשְׁעֲנוּ לֵאמֹר
הֲלוֹא יְהוָה בְּקִרְבָּנוּ
לֹא-תָבוֹא עָלֵינוּ רָעָה:

3:12 Therefore, because of you,
Zion will be plowed as a field;
and Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house will become
high places of a forest.

3:12 לָכֵן בְּגִלְלָתְכֶם
צִיּוֹן שָׂדֵה תִּחְרָשׁ
וִירוּשָׁלַם עֵיִן תִּהְיֶה
וְהָר הַבַּיִת לְבָמוֹת יַעַר:

This sub-unit of judgement oracle has an elegant form: addresses with an invitation to listen, accusation with development, and judicial sentence. It is addressed directly to the transgressors, with the exception that the indictments are developed in the third person (3:11) (Waltke 2007:184). Using the traditional call to attention, Judah’s rulers are called first to pay attention and then castigated for failing to seek justice and equity. The parallel terms “heads” and “rulers” expand the charges against the political leaders of Judah and Israel. The accusations against the religious leaders mark the climax of Micah’s prophetic judgement. He goes straight to the foundation of the evil, their internal disposition: “abhor justice and twist everything that is straight” (3:9). He outlines their crimes: they pervert justice and build Zion with blood; greediness rules their lives; and they think God is unconditionally on their side (Alfaro 1989:38).

The charges concern the taking of money by each of these groups for their own advantage rather than speaking truth for the sake of Yahweh and the benefit of his people. Their perspectives toward what they do are regulated by their own sense of entitlement. They mistakenly believe their positions of power and privilege will protect them. Thus they traded their responsibility to rule, teach, and speak for

Yahweh for symbols of power and wealth. To “build a city with blood” (cf. 3:10)¹¹ according to Smith-Christopher (2015:123), “involves carefully planned injustices and perversion of God’s intention.” The blood of the poor in Micah’s shattering imagery is converted into money and buildings. Where others see beautiful palaces, comfortable homes, and monumental structures, Micah sees the human price tag of such apparent prosperity. The riches of the few are based on the poverty of many. The whole city is but a glittering monument to Mammon (Alfaro 1989:38).

Micah 3:12 thus ties the fate of Zion to the shortcomings of its judicial, religious, and political leaders. The impending destruction of Jerusalem is related to the greed and cynicism of its leaders. The metaphors in 3:12 invoke images of destruction. While a ploughed field and a heap of rubble could be seen as part of the planting process, where the soil is tilled and the debris piled up, however, when applied to a city, the image of a levelled field implies devastation (Nogalski 2011:549). Thus the prophecy ends on the climatic note that Zion, the most historically holy city in Judah on account of Yahweh’s presence, will become the most unclean place.¹²

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

The primary task of this article was the uncovering (or constructing) of Micah’s theory of the justice of judgement. That is, the interrelatedness and connection between sin and judgement as reflected in Micah’s canonical oracles. The article has so far surveyed some background issues about the book of Micah and has undertaken an analysis of a unit of judgement oracle (3:1–12). What then is the theory (or principle) behind Micah’s announced sentences? From the essential structures of Israel’s covenant community concept, and at a basic level, justice is both social or distributive and punitive or criminal (Marshall 2012:13). Social or distributive justice deals with

¹¹ Micah’s vision of the bloody city finds parallel in Jeremiah’s denunciation against Jehohaz (cf. Jer. 22:13–17).

¹² יַעַר (forest) is a metonymy for unclean animals and death. Hillers (1984:48) notes, on figurative grounds that prophets frequently threatened that wild animals would inhabit the deserted city (Isa 13:21–22; 34:11–17; Jer 50:39; Zeph 2:13–15), and that the city becomes a ruin-heap and then is overwhelmed with wild animals.

how opportunities, entitlements, and other privileges are allocated among individuals, and punitive justice focuses on how misconduct is discerned and punished. While the Bible has so much to say about these perspectives, the focus of this article is only on punitive (retributive) justice. However, these two perspectives cannot be viewed in isolation as this article seeks to apply biblical perception and primacy to its context, and as much of what the Bible says about distributive (social) justice is directly related to punitive (retributive) justice. Commenting on biblical justice as “essentially retributive conception of corrective of justice,” Marshall (2012:13) notes:

As a justification for inflicting punishment, retributive justice requires that the recipient must be *guilty* of wrongdoing ... and that the pain of the penalty must be *proportionate* to the seriousness of the crime (the principle of equivalence). In these circumstances the imposition of punishment is not only appropriate, it is morally *necessary* in order to satisfy the objective standards of justice (the principle of justice). Understood in this way, many justice theorists conceive of retributive justice as a moral alternative to revenge and as a check against arbitrary or excessive punishment.

The exodus event, in Israel’s history, is one of the pragmatic demonstrations of Yahweh’s justice in action, both in the sense of judgement and salvation. In this event one observes that Yahweh’s action was his concern for the suffering of the oppressed. Their situation was such an unbearable one, as they suffered the adverse effects of political servitude, economic exploitation, and social genocide. Then and there Yahweh’s action was decisively against the oppressor and for the oppressed. Yahweh’s action of justice which resulted in the vindication and salvation of his people in the most direct and concrete kind became a historical foundation of a new relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It developed into the establishment of a community, founded on the principle of Yahweh’s justice. Thus having experienced justice, they were to ‘do justice’. This was the demand confirmed and conferred on them in the covenant constitution that established them as a nation (Wright 2006:261–263).

If one takes seriously the various biblical imperatives of caring for the poor, needy, weak, and vulnerable, of avoiding unjust amassing of wealth, power, and position in the hands of few individuals, and of the liberation of those who are under oppression and exploitation, then one would no doubt find a basis for enforcing punitive sanctions on those who have violated the community's essential social structure of well-being. As an egalitarian society, the social blueprint of Yahweh's Torah for Israel advocated special concern for weak and vulnerable individuals as fundamental. It was intended to reduce the gap between the powerful elite, wealthy and a mass of poor, landless, powerless, and voiceless people. The gift of Torah inaugurated Israel as a community meant to personify Yahweh's justice. However, increasing injustice profoundly jeopardised this witness to God's healing agenda. The comprehension of justice as emanating from this background is obvious in Micah's oracles of judgement (3:1–12), where he denounced unjust leaders who have perverted justice and maltreated Yahweh's people.

While various explanations for judgement can be noted in explicit accusations in chapters 1–3 and 4–7, judgement for unethical actions by the wicked dominates the accusations of Micah 3:1–12. Judah's political and religious leadership receives special mention from Yahweh. Micah 3:1–3 portrays the leaders' greedy actions as cannibalism. The prophets are condemned for preaching for money (3:5) rather than proclaiming justice and confronting sin (3:8). A summary of the charges of greed and violence against the leadership (rulers, chiefs, priests, and prophets)¹³ concludes the accusations in 1–3 (3:9–11) before the final pronouncement of destruction. He makes no effort to prove logically that judgment upon the oppressors will be the outcome of the present situation. These false leaders, through their unjust sentences, false teachings, and invented oracles, had perverted the social order and had become pillars of injustices and inequity, doomed to failure and ruin. For Micah, justice and virtue are the main criteria by which to judge the beauty and stability of a civilisation and of the true foundations of social order; without them, the social edifice will collapse with the first storm (Alfaro 1989:38).

¹³ For a discussion of the essential roles of prophets, priest, and rulers, see Petersen (2009/4:622–684 especially 633–636).

In this oracle, Micah confronts the political and religious establishment failing to perform their duties properly. The abuse of power and greed in the name of Yahweh functions as the thematic cornerstone of the accusations. The judgements announced derives from the consequences of the behaviour of the leaders, while the voice of Micah shines the light of justice on their deeds, the abuse of power by the rulers undercuts the foundation of society (Nogalski 2011:551). Political leaders have responsibility for leading nations, and as part of the responsibility they control the reins of power: both political and military, for the purpose of preserving order and establishing justice. However, when the purpose is lost, the tools can quickly become arbitrary instruments of oppression used to benefit those in power at the expense of the people as a whole. Nowhere in the prophetic corpus is the situation presented more dramatically than in Micah 3:1–4, where the leaders of the nation no longer know justice and where their actions invert good and evil. As a result of their behaviour, people suffer while the leaders remain oblivious to the connection between their deeds and the suffering. These leaders will be surprised to learn in future times of trouble that Yahweh will not intervene on their behalf (3:4).

Within the structure of kingdoms, the prophets of Yahweh should be the ones who hold political leaders accountable. Those who speak for Yahweh should be the ones to confront wealth and power when it is not used properly. In Micah's presentation in chapter 3, however the prophets and priests, those who speak for Yahweh seem oblivious to the suffering of the people because of their own greed. They offer words of peace to those who pay them, while cursing those who cannot or will not pay (3:5, 11). Meanwhile the people suffer, and the city becomes calloused toward bloodshed since that is all it knows (3:10). Micah steps into this context holding up their deeds to them and reminding them of the insignificance of their power when compared to the power of Yahweh. Deriving his prophetic voice from the spirit of Yahweh, Micah was empowered with a sense of justice to confront the shortcomings and rebellion of the religious and political leadership of his nation. The power of God cares nothing for military trappings and armaments; it searches for justice and equity (3:9).

While Micah's oracles of judgement may not be literally applied in every occasion, the warnings themselves carry a powerful message filled with fascinating implications for leaders and capital cities needing to serve their people. Micah's oracles of doom rest on the lofty ethical laws of Yahweh's covenant handed down at Sinai (6:1–8); and his consoling message of hope, on Yahweh's unchanging covenant with Israel's ancestors (7:20). These oracles of judgements remain potentially relevant not only because they allow one to see the shortcomings of the leaders of Judah/Israel in the past but also because they confront one in the present. It may be that in our here and now we are so obsessed by our conception of power and prestige to such an extent that we will do everything possible to ensure that those among us are exploited, and so lost the capacity to hear the voice of Yahweh calling for justice and equity. If this is a reality, then our self-centred vision will disappoint us, there will be no perception of response from Yahweh, and we will not experience peace.

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