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Micah's Social Concern

Leslie C. Allen

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Micah was the younger contemporary of Isaiah. While the latter was close to the court at Jerusalem and to a large extent his ministry was to criticise government policy and its consequences, Micah hailed from Moresheth Gath on the south west borders of Judah and had evidently viewed from the other end the effects of social and economic development in Judah. Many of his oracles are imbued with a passionate spirit of protest against the evils he must have witnessed at first hand. In the name of the God of Israel he challenges the elite from the standpoint of the violated ethos of traditional communal solidarity embodied in covenant law.

MICAH 2:1, 2

The first passage which reveals Micah's concern for social justice is 2:1, 2. It forms part of a larger section, verses 1-5, a typical prophetic two-part oracle in which an announcement of God's punishment follows an accusation of wrong doing. The accusation is here couched in the form of a 'woe' (or 'alas') saying, an adaptation of what was originally a cry of lament in reaction to a death. Micah, as it were, recites an obituary notice, in which feature not virtues but vices. The core of the accusation occurs in verse 2:

'They covet fields and seize them;
and houses, and take them away;
they oppress a man and his house,
a man and his inheritance.'¹

The charge concerns misappropriation of property. It is reminiscent of the Naboth incident in 1 Kgs. 21 which, although it occurred over a century before in the Northern Kingdom, provides a good illustration of what was evidently happening in Judah in the second half of the eighth century B.C. Isaiah provides confirmation of this land-grabbing policy in Isa. 5:8, where he deplores the growth of latifundia, vast estates stretching from horizon to horizon, each with a single owner and gangs of serfs. Probably we are to envisage a similar situation here. This was a violation of what these prophets regarded as a basic freedom for the Israelite, the right to possess house and farmland. This right to property is in fact one of the basic rights of the individual which it is the duty of any community to protect. 'Without property there is no free personal life,' Emil Brunner has stated. 'Without property there is no power to act. The man who treads on strange ground, touches strange property at every movement he makes, is not a free man.'²

The Israelite concept of this freedom was by no means individualistic. Regional culture invested the ownership of land with a special sanction, expressed by Naboth in his refusal to sell his vineyard to Ahab: 'The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers' (1 Kgs. 21:3). In West-Semitic thinking the land was viewed as essentially inalienable. At Mari the transfer of inherited land was subject to strict control, while at Ugarit

¹ Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

² *Justice and the Social Order* (1945), 58.

a stipulation of perpetual family succession was written into legal documents.³ It was in the community's interest that this sanction should be observed. Brunner's discussion of economic justice

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includes a good exposition of this point: 'The peasant family is a natural unit of labour.... Not only does the peasant belong to his land, but the peasant family belong to their land. What the peasant does for his land he does, albeit unwittingly, for future generations.... We can see here the justice of a form of property for which it is not so easy to find an ethical justification—namely, inherited property. The bond between the farmer and his land is not cut off by the death of one generation; the next is standing ready and has already grown into the bond.... The community has every reason to protect this natural continuity by its legal system and to keep it as free as possible of any factors which might affect it adversely.'⁴

In Israel the same conception prevailed as elsewhere in the West-Semitic area, but it was re-orientated within the overall context of Yahwism. For the Israelite there was a higher reason for the hereditary principle of possessing land. At the forefront of Israel's economic theory stood the principle that the land belonged to Yahweh: 'The land is mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with me' (Lev. 25:23). The people had received the promised land from Yahweh as a sacred trust which was handed on from generation to generations.⁵ So in fact it was primarily a religious sanction which was violated by a forcible commandeering of property, and it was for this reason that Micah could call down the judgment of God upon the perpetrators. The holding of property by the family, the clan, the tribe, was a matter of religious tradition. By this means the right to private property was both confirmed and qualified. It was qualified because what is true in the Christian view of property is exemplified here: 'With respect to other men, man is an owner.... With respect to God he is always a steward, a man with an account to render.'⁶ The right to private property was confirmed because the divine Landlord stood behind His tenants to champion them against unauthorised eviction.

Unfortunately the religious theory of land tenure was ceasing to be a deterrent. It was associated with a strong sense of tribal and clan solidarity which was now showing evidence of breaking down. Eighth century Judah was undergoing economic and social change as a consequence of an influx of wealth in Uzziah's reign. The exploitation of new capital and economic opportunities was causing the squeezing out of the small man from the agricultural scene, as today there is pressure in many western countries upon the small shopkeeper and business man. Uneven distribution of wealth and the urbanisation resulting from a more complex economy led to a weakening of the traditional clan spirit with which the religious theory of property was intimately associated.

Micah reacted to the ousting of Yahweh from the economic realm with the challenge of denunciation and the threat of force. He characterised the tactics of the land barons as

³ Cf. A. Malamat, 'Mari and the Bible: Some Patterns of Tribal Organisation and Institutions', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82 (1962), 143-150; F. I. Andersen, 'The Socio-Judicial Background of the Naboth Incident', *JBL* 85 (1966), 46-57.

⁴ Brunner, *op. cit.*, 136.

⁵ Cf. Num. 36:7. Cf. K. A. Henrey, 'Land Tenure in the Old Testament', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 86 (1954), 5-15; G. von Rad, 'The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch', *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (1966), 79-83.

⁶ Brunner, *op. cit.*, 134.

'wickedness' and 'evil' and a blatant misuse of power (verse 1). He proceeds to use vocabulary weighted with religious authority. 'Covet' in verse 2 seems to echo the Decalogue: 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house...' (Exod. 20:17).⁷ Here were members of God's people who were transgressing a basic regulation of the covenant. The religious nature of the prophet's denunciation also appears in the following verbs, 'seize' and 'oppress'. They are often associated as a pair in the Old Testament; it is noteworthy that it is forbidden to treat a neighbour thus in the ancient stipulation of Lev. 19:13. It was not only the humanity of the prophet that was affronted by the outrages he described but his religious piety. It was on the basis of covenant law that he brought his

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accusations, charging the land barons with flouting known standards of behaviour laid upon the covenant people.⁸ His use of the word 'evil', as so often in the prophets, derives its force by contrast with the divine mandate. This is why Yahweh is necessarily involved. He had declared that property rights should be protected. Ideally it was the responsibility of those in authority in theocratic Israel to keep vigil on His behalf, but in permissive days it fell to the prophets to raise lonely voices on behalf of those who were being denied their rights. Therefore Micah acts specifically as Yahweh's spokesman: 'Thus says the Lord.' Now that the first divine word of covenant law had been disregarded, it must be followed by a second, prophetic word of threat that Yahweh is to intervene providentially in Judah's affairs to punish the transgressors.

MICAH 2:6-9

The next relevant passage is 2:6-9. A charge of social victimisation is levelled in verses 8, 9. Unfortunately the text of verse 8 is corrupt. The reconstruction of the R.S.V. is probably correct, but the precise nature of the offence to which the prophet alludes in verse 8b is still not clear. Probably we are to think of bailiffs sent by creditors to collect debts, who without warning roughly seized the debtors' cloaks as pledges. This interpretation fits the economic context of this oracle. If so, then here again probably Micah is implicitly appealing to covenant law: 'If ever you take your neighbour's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down [because it served as a blanket at night]' (Exod. 22:26f.). The next verse is more straightforward. Women, presumably widows, were being turned out of their 'pleasant homes'. The charge reminds the student of the New Testament of Jesus' criticism of those who devoured widows' houses (Mark 12:40). Not only were widows evicted, but along with them their fatherless children. They too were deprived of their rightful property. The formulation of Micah's accusation recalls the divine right of inheritance already encountered in verse 2. The estates their fathers had farmed should by rights pass to them. But 'my glory' was being taken away from them, declared God through the prophet. The term is to be compared with a word of similar meaning used of the God-given land in Jer. 3:19 'a heritage most beautiful of the nations'.⁹ Micah echoes a theme which must have been dear to the heart of every Israelite, the high value set upon his native soil as a prized possession given to his nation by God Himself. These children were cruelly deprived of their share in their beautiful heritage and denied the prospect of ever enjoying it.

⁷ Cf. W. Beyerlin, *Die Kulturtraditionen Israels in der Verkündigung des Propheten Micha* (1959), 57.

⁸ Cf. *id.*, *ibid.*

⁹ Cf. Ezek. 20:6,15; Dan. 11:16, 41. Cf. too 2 Sam. 14:16 where the woman of Tekoa speaks of herself and her son being destroyed from God's heritage.

In comparison with verse 2 the prophet raises the emotional temperature of the accusation by referring to defenceless women and children. He is undoubtedly claiming the contravention of religious law, such as Exod. 22:22: 'You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.'¹⁰ The protection of widows and orphans was a policy counselled in the common law of the ancient Near East. It was inherited by Israel from their forebears and incorporated into the highly ethical religion of Yahweh.¹¹ Widows and orphans had few legal rights; their protection was made the subject of direct divine command and the duty of the king. It has been plausibly suggested that the unique and novel factor in Israel was the extension of near eastern royal obligation to every individual Israelite.¹² With the loss of the breadwinning *paterfamilias* there was a danger that the rest of the family would starve to death or fall into slavery and the bond of continuity of the family be

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broken. The religiously motivated law of inheritance was intended to act as a check upon this situation.¹³ But an important motive for the welfare of these underprivileged folk was the communal solidarity of the covenant people. It is to this wider principle that Micah appeals in his references to 'my people' in verses 8f., as spokesman for God. He points to the tragic rift within the co-religious group whereby the powerless are the prey of the powerful, and boldly characterises the rift as demonstrating the difference between the people of God and their enemies. The oppressors have by their actions placed themselves outside the category of the chosen people and transferred themselves to the traditional camp of Israel's foes.¹⁴ They have disqualified themselves from membership of the elect nation by their disregard of obligations inherent in the covenant. 'My people' is a covenant phrase, here loaded with divine outrage.¹⁵ Laid upon the covenant people are serious responsibilities of brotherhood which its members ignore at their peril. Micah can promise only expulsion from the promised land for those who show themselves unworthy to occupy it.¹⁶

Thus Micah can appeal to a host of essentially religious traditions to add weight to his protest. In so doing he is consciously countering what he judges to be a false use of religion on the part of the victimisers. Verses 6b-7 are an integral part of the passage, recording a disputation with prophets who opposed Micah's condemnatory preaching, and it is to this disputation that he returns in verse 11. The implicit link between these rival prophets and the agents of social oppression appears to be that the former were the henchmen of the latter, who acted as their patrons. These prophets preached an optimistic gospel of infinite grace. No matter what Israel did or did not do, Yahweh was the great Forgiver, able to save and to keep.¹⁷ 'Are these his doings?', they asked: no, for God would never compromise His election love by turning against His own people, as Micah had claimed. The case which these optimistic prophets

¹⁰ Cf. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, 60.

¹¹ Cf. F. C. Fensham, 'Widow, Orphan and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21 (1962), 129-139.

¹² G. Fohrer, *JBL* 80 (1961), 315f.

¹³ Cf. Ruth 3:3, 5 which reflects an endeavour in this situation to sell property and claim support within the circle of the clan.

¹⁴ Cf. Isa. 1:21-26, especially 24, for a similar theme.

¹⁵ Cf. Exod. 3:7, 8.

¹⁶ Cf. the use of Hebrew *menûhâ*, 'place to rest' in Deut. 12:9; Psa. 95:11. R. Vuilleumier, *Commentaire de l'Ancient Testament XIb* (1971), *ad. loc.*, is probably right in seeing here 'la negation de la formule d'alliance'.

¹⁷ The end of verse 7 should probably be rendered 'Do not his words do good? Do we not walk with the Upright One?' The present writer discusses this in his forthcoming commentary in the series *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*.

presented was so plausible in its half-truths. A degenerate religion which divorced creed from conduct and promised grace to sinners that they might go on sinning was the insidious strategy against which Micah had to fight as champion of social justice. His own strong words were necessary because of a religious ideology which was being used as the servant of injustice. The true intent of the covenant was frustrated by a selective stress upon Yahwistic theology. This defective religion was the opium of the oppressors, lulling their consciences to sleep. It had to be denounced as unrealistic and fatal in its effect. Micah's task was the difficult one of attacking not irreligious immorality but the subtle combination of social injustice and a religion which virtually gave it its blessing.

MICAH 3:1-4

In 3:1-4 the prophet attacks the Judean lawcourts. To those who had closed their ears to the appeals of the oppressed for legal redress he brought the threat that Yahweh would prove deaf to their own appeals when calamity overwhelmed them, as soon it would (verse 4). Micah refers to the 'heads of Jacob' as judicial officers in the national courts (cf. verse 11).¹⁸ Representatives of the group of 'heads of fathers' houses' evidently formed an ancient court, concerning which Exod. 18 relates a tradition of its establishment by Moses. It was under royal control, nominally at least, with regard to appointment and policy. Micah calls these judges before the bar of a higher, heavenly court as guilty of corruption.

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In shocked language he pits the ideals of their office against their failure to attain them: 'Is it not for you to know justice?' To their hands was entrusted the administration of justice, and the prophet indignantly reminds them of their obligations. They of all people ought to maintain the standards of right and wrong embodied in the legal traditions handed down to them. In Israel these were accorded the force not merely of civil law backed by the authority of the state, but also of religious sanction. Yahweh was the archetypal Lawgiver: it was the terms of His covenant which the custodians of law and order were meant to enforce. 'Justice' is a term closely linked with the covenant stipulations.¹⁹ It has been well defined as 'the sum of all the obligations which were incumbent upon the people by reason of the covenant'.²⁰ So it is quite appropriate that Micah comes forward as the prophet of God he represents the source of justice.²¹ He accuses the judicature of abandoning time-honoured and God-honouring standards and putting in their place an immoral set of legal expedients. They had ceased to make what was 'good' the criterion of their verdicts; instead they cherished 'evil'. Micah's charge is reminiscent of Amos' appeal to the courts of the Northern Kingdom where he used similar terminology. Isaiah too had preached on these lines, helpfully filling out for the modern reader Micah's general indictment with particular charges

'Seek justice, correct oppression;
defend the fatherless, plead for the widow' (Isa. 1: 17).

Micah attacked such malpractices in the two denunciatory oracles preserved in chapter 2. Here he lays the blame at the doors of the courts for failing to check them. Those who should

¹⁸ See J. R. Bartlett, *VT* 19 (1969), 4, R. Knierim, *ZAW* 73 (1961), 158f.

¹⁹ Cf. Exod. 21:1: Hebrew *mishpātīm*, 'ordinances' is the plural of *mishpāt*, 'justice'.

²⁰ J. Lindholm. *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (1962), 348.

²¹ Cf. verse 8.

have been the guardians of the old social ethic had betrayed their trust. They comprised instead a power for evil, aiding and abetting criminals against society.

Micah must have known at first hand the tragedy caused by neglect of claims against oppression and by unjust verdicts. It is surely this experience which lies behind his lengthy metaphor of savagery. To the uninvolved modern reader it may sound laboured, but it reflects the vehement reaction of a sensitive soul to legalised brutality. 'The turbulent redundancy of Mic. 3:2-3 is understandable; the lines were forged in the white heat of indignation.'²² The prophet uses the weapon of scathing rhetoric, and with that he lays about him wildly. He deplors the heartless cruelty he has witnessed at the courts. The judges, hand in glove with the criminal élite who made it worth their while or even included in their ranks, butcher and batten on their victims like cannibals. The initial verb of the metaphor acts as a connecting bridge between the indictment and its illustration. Underlying 'tear' is the Hebrew verb rendered 'seize' in 2:2, already noted as part of the Old Testament vocabulary for social oppression. Now it is used metaphorically, but it retains its overtones of illegality. Micah's metaphor thus grows naturally from the grim reality of the situation. By selecting and setting first a keyword of antisocial behaviour, the prophet makes clear the nature of the crimes with which he associates the judges.

Micah's indignation is born of passionate sympathy: it is no other than 'my people', says he, who are suffering. The phrase is now not spoken from a divine standpoint, as in 2:8, 9, but used by the prophet as a representative of the social conscience of Judah. These victims of legal injustice are his brothers and sisters

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under God. It is his sense of solidarity which drives him to righteous indignation. There is to him something essentially wrong with a community which permits such a cleavage between justice and judgment.

MICAH 3:5

This note is echoed in 3:5, where the prophet condemns 'the prophets who lead my people astray'. Mention has already been made of the struggle in which he engaged against fellow members of the prophetic order. This present oracle in 3:5-8 preserves another fragment of the campaign. According to the valuable sociological list in Isa. 3:2,3 prophets played an important role as one of the pillars of the Judean establishment. They were accepted agents of the will of God at every level of life from the individual to the national.²³ But Micah accuses them of misleading the people and misrepresenting God's real messages for them. In the light of verse 8 he is evidently referring to their failure to take an uncompromising stand against a corrupt society.²⁴ The angry phrase 'my people' again shows how good a citizen and patriot Micah himself was. Moreover the sheep imagery has religious overtones. He loved the flock that these bad shepherds led astray and longed to bring them back to the paths of righteousness and the pastures of God's truth.

He supports his general charge of misdirection with a specific indictment of self-interest in their prophesying and divination. Micah considers it suspicious that favourable messages were given only and always to those who gave ample remuneration. To all such came the

²² M. B. Crook, *JBL* 73 (1954), 149 n. 26.

²³ Cf. 1 Sam. 9:6; 2 Kgs. 22:14.

²⁴ Lam, 2:14 provides a good commentary at this point.

happy word *Shālôm*, 'peace': 'Everything will be all right; God's best is coming your way.' *Shālôm* is 'a comprehensive kind of fulfilment or completion, indeed of a perfection of life and spirit which quite transcends any success which man alone, even under the best of circumstances, is able to attain, ... man's realisation, under the blessing of God, of the plan which God has for him and the potential with which God has endowed him'.²⁵ Micah accuses his colleagues of lack of integrity.²⁶ Against those who could not give them money they dared to 'declare war'. Literally 'sanctify war, wage a religious battle', the phrase refers to the sacred preparations made in ancient Israel before undertaking a war against God's enemies. In this high-sounding expression Micah echoes the pretentious claims of racketeering prophets to proclaim the vengeance of God against those who annoyed them. Those who claimed to represent God's will were really charlatans. They had commercialised their craft and put their own materialistic greed above the interests of the God and people they were meant to serve.

MICAH 3:9-12

Micah has similar charges to bring against other sectors of the establishment in the next oracle. According to verse 11 judges and priests had their price, as well as prophets. Probably in the first clause he is implicitly appealing to ancient covenant traditions which expressly barred venality in the lawcourts.²⁷ The priests were regarded as the fount of religious knowledge. It was their responsibility to enforce the maintenance of moral standards as qualification for admission into the sanctuary and to this end to instruct in the ethical traditions of the covenant.²⁸ Evidently for a consideration the priest would turn a blind eye to the applicant's shortcomings.

This lack of moral integrity among these helmsmen of society Micah finds most

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alarming. Where would the ship of state drift if these leaders of Judah disowned their public responsibilities and succumbed to individualistic self-seeking? In verse 9 he renews his complaint that 'justice' and 'equity' are perverted. Known morality was being openly defied in the name of the state. Social concern laid down in covenant law was absent from the list of government priorities. Those who should have been upholders of law and order participated in a tyranny of evil. In verse 10 he looks askance at the new buildings which had evidently mushroomed throughout the capital as monuments to the wealth of the court and the élite. Vast sums had been spent by the pacesetters of society. But Micah wastes no time admiring the architectural splendour of these new properties. Instead he looks at the shoddy ethical materials with which they were built, 'blood' and 'wrong'. Jeremiah's attack on King Jehoiakim a century or so later (Jer. 22:13, 14, 17) fills in details which were doubtless relevant in Micah's day: 'He makes his neighbour serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages.' The king is accused of 'shedding innocent blood' and practising 'oppression and violence'. An eviction order here, a whisper there to arrange compulsory purchase, drafting the unemployed into unpaid forced labour squads-in these and other more murderous ways²⁹ the men at the top held cheap the God-given rights of property, liberty and life.

²⁵ J. I. Durham in *Proclamation and Presence*, G. Henton Davies *Festschrift* (1970), 280.

²⁶ Remuneration in itself was acceptable: cf. 1 Sam. 9:8; 1 Kgs. 14:3; 3; 2 Kgs 4:42; 8:8, 9.

²⁷ Cf. Exod. 23:8; Deut. 27:25. Cf. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, 56.

²⁸ Cf. 2 Kgs. 12:2; Ps. 15; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:7. Cf. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (1962), 244f.

²⁹ Calvin held that Micah was using hyperbole (cf. Ecclus. 34:21, 22), but the actions of Ahab and Jehoiakim support a literal interpretation of premature death caused directly or indirectly.

Society's leaders had forgotten the implications of belonging to a theocracy. True, they paid lip-service to the outward forms of religion,³⁰ and religious leaders had an honoured place at the apex of society. But in verse 11b Micah repeats the charge brought earlier. It was not only that the religious system was morally corrupt, as he had argued in verse 11a. All the leaders of the establishment clung to the security of Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel: 'they lean upon the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us?"' They saw no inconsistency between selfishly exploiting their wards and sanctimoniously expressing faith in the protective presence of their God. But such promises cannot exist in a moral vacuum.³¹ The claim of 'the Lord in the midst' is a cultic reference to the temple from which in popular thinking emanated an aura of inviolability into Jerusalem. But what if the capital itself was polluted with a miasma of social injustice? Micah sees in the establishment's faith in Yahweh nothing but superstition and arrogance. He goes on to drown their 'no' to hint of doom with a defiant 'yes'. In verse 12 he shockingly throws back into their faces a reversal of their religious belief in immunity for themselves and their city. Those fine houses were condemned property in God's eyes. Even the temple, which now stood between Israel and their God as a barrier, must be demolished. A religion which bolstered up social injustice and materialism would prove useless. A century later men still remembered the shock of God's threats through Micah and recalled how they effected a change of heart and life on the part of 'Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah' (Jer. 26:18, 19). Indeed it is probably not going too far to state that 'Hezekiah's reformation was due to the preaching of Micah'.³² The divine purpose was thus achieved: the intention behind prophecies of disaster was ever to erect a warning notice lest the people, walking their present path, fall to their doom.

MICAH 6:10-12

In 6:10-12 Micah complains of economic corruption. The oracle is addressed to 'the city', which a few scholars have identified as Samaria, the northern capital,

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but it is more likely to be Jerusalem. The setting of the oracle is not clear. Probably, in view of the charges, Micah is speaking on a market day when Judeans would flock into the capital to sell or barter their goods and the citizens of Jerusalem would turn out in force to trade and make a dishonest penny at the expense of their country cousins. The prophet interrupts this unholy commerce and begs silence for Yahweh to speak. To a city teeming with both Judean and citizen he brings God's rebuke. Like Amos (8:5), Micah condemns the giving of short measure and weight. There were indeed sanctions written into the ancient lawcodes against such dishonest practices,³³ but apparently cheating was rife and tricks of the buying and selling trade were practised with impunity. Because the authorities apparently took no notice, the divine Guardian of the downtrodden intervenes to register his protest. He who had laid down ancient requirements of commercial equity for his covenant people speaks again in a manner which assumes prior knowledge of them. The rhetorical questions of verses 10, 11 express powerfully how abhorrent to God this situation is. They are designed to stir Israel's lazy conscience. Israel's God is no Olympian, remote from everyday living. He is the Lord of

³⁰ Cf. 6:6, 7.

³¹ Cf. Amos 5:14.

³² A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Doctrine of the Prophets*³ (1915), 208.

³³ Cf. Lev. 19:35, 36; Deut. 25:13-16. Cf. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, 61.

the shopping centre, whose claim over His people extends to the most mundane of life's duties.

The 'rich'—presumably merchants in the context—are accused of 'violence' in verse 12. This is a technical term for lawlessness, the breach of law and order in Israelite society.³⁴ Earlier in the collection of Micah oracles have been noted examples of this arbitrary and wilful attitude, riding roughshod over the rights of others. The following reference to the lying of the citizens of Jerusalem may allude to the way they abetted their wealthy patrons in court, swearing falsely in their favour to the detriment of the defrauded man from the country, whose grievances were thus dismissed.³⁵ Yahweh cannot stand aside from such a scene, claims Micah. He demands a proper standard of morality in business and fair dealing between buyer and seller. But the capital was infested with commercial corruption, and doubtless the blame for swindling was to be apportioned between sellers from both city and country, each vying to outdo the other in underhand dealing. In verses 13-16 Micah delivers the divine verdict of destruction of the material benefits which featured in these commercial transactions. The illegotten gains would bring no enjoyment.

'The statutes of Omri and all the works of the house of Ahab' in verse 16 refer in the present context probably to economic practices associated with these northern kings, 'a law-code of the individualistic commercialism which now was displacing the ancient community economy of Israel's past.'³⁶ Omri's alliance with the great trading city of Tyre, cemented by the marriage of his son Ahab to Jezebel, a Tyrian princess, and his subjugation of the wealthy state of Moab, attested in the Moabite Stone, are strong indications that he built up a flourishing economy. Ahab is notorious for the Naboth affair which illustrates the ruthless overriding of personal and traditional values. The presence in the south of a similar emphasis on commercial profiteering augured ill for its future.

The Christian too must heed the challenge of this passage if he is a working member of a capitalistic commerce-based society. 'The prophet would condemn all exploitation of the public, all restrictive practices, whether by employer or employee, all price rings and every person whoever he be who seeks to take out more than he puts in.'³⁷

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MICAH 7:1-4

7:1-4 is mainly a description of moral degeneration in society. Micah presents in verse 3 a fresh charge of bribery in the courts of law. The king as head of the judicial system was responsible for the maintenance of law and order. To this end he appointed officials throughout the towns of Judah with delegated authority to dispense justice. Like Isaiah in Isa. 1:23, Micah complains that these government officials ('prince') failed to do their duty, but succumbed to the temptation of replacing impartiality with self-interest. What was true of the official department of law applied generally to men of authority. Power was perverted into an unscrupulous weapon for achieving personal ends. Micah had brought a similar charge in 2:1. Let a word drop from the lips of the man in charge and his minions hastened to satisfy his

³⁴ Cf. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible (1964), 51.

³⁵ M. A. Klopfenstein, *Die Lüge nach dem A.T.* (1964), 157f., notes that 'violence' and 'lies' occur together in a forensic setting in Ps. 27:12. *Sheqer*, 'lies', is often used of perjury, e.g. in Exod. 20:16; Prov. 6:19.

³⁶ R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*² (1968), 37, cf. 178.

³⁷ N. H. Snaith, *Amos, Hosea and Micah*, Epworth Preachers' Commentaries (1956), 106.

whim by fair means or foul. They 'weave it together', wangle it for him: a sinister reference to the intricate manipulation necessary to secure the selfish end desired by the man at the top.

In this oracle Micah finds no comfort in the conduct of the lower echelons of society. Prevalent among the community as a whole was this same spirit of ruthless individualism: 'They all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts his brother with a net' (verse 2b). These are stereotyped expressions, derived from war and hunting, for self-seeking at the expense of others.³⁸ People were going to any lengths to get the better of their fellows. 'Brother' is clearly more than a cliché here: it accentuates the heinousness of the situation. Those who should have been united in the national solidarity of a common faith in Yahweh are torn asunder. Members of the covenant community of Israel treat one another like warring enemies and wild animals. Gone was the fellowship based upon traditional ties and conservative values. Society had disintegrated into a struggling mass of individualists. These sentiments Micah had just expressed in his statement concerning the disappearance of 'the godly man' and the 'upright' (verse 2a). The first term is an adjective, *ḥāsîd*, derived from *ḥesed*, 'covenant love', which speaks of a twin responsibility to God and to His people, a commitment to both which shows in one's way of life. It is a religious devotion which has strong social overtones.³⁹ The 'upright' man is one who maintains high moral standards and deals fairly with his neighbours. Wherever the prophet looks he can see only the lamentable spectacle of strife among a people who should have been bound together by strong ties of religion and race.

MICAH 7:5, 6

Finally in 7:5, 6 the prophet focuses attention upon a narrower portion of society, the circle of friends and family. The maintenance of any society depends upon mutual trust, loyalty and respect in personal relationships. Man is so constituted that he finds security within a small group among which he is accepted and receives support, a stable core of friends and, if possible, family upon which his psychological equilibrium relies. For so socially conscious a community as Israel traditionally was Micah makes in verse 5 a complaint which is a striking commentary on the new individualism. A man must retire within himself and keep his own counsel if he is not to encounter treachery. His nearest and dearest cannot be trusted to keep faith with the secrets of his heart. Intimacy is no guarantee of fidelity.

The extended family was an important stabilising factor within the structure of

[p.31]

Israelite society. Its cohesiveness depended upon the authority of the *paterfamilias* and the respect of his dependants, whether grown or young, for him and his partner(s). Included in the family was the daughter-in-law who upon marriage left her own family and became attached to that of her husband, who remained under the control of his father, although he might live apart. Family solidarity was of prime importance within Israel, as it has remained in Jewish circles. The Fifth Commandment illustrates the emphasis laid upon it in Israelite culture. A sense of shock underlies the language in which the prophet deplores a situation which approaches the modern Western norm. Generations had become walled off from each other and had little mutual respect and understanding. It reflects the period of social change, and so of tension and distress, in which Micah lived.

³⁸ Cf. Ps. 10:8, 9.

³⁹ Cf. Hos. 4:1, 2.

Micah's message is both relevant and irrelevant to the student of contemporary social justice. Irrelevant, because it presupposes a structure and ethic based upon theocracy. It is true that the prophets of Micah's stamp were 'social revolutionaries', but only 'because they were religious conservatives, seeking to revive the essential ethics and social creativity of historic Yahwism'.⁴⁰ 'The standpoint from which the prophets attacked the evils of the social order was that of the socially and historically self-conscious religion peculiar to Israel and its theocratic society.'⁴¹ National unity and the unity of the religious community were one and the same; the law of the state was religious law. It was the common basis of state and religion which provided a unique criterion for the prophets with which to probe the effects of social development upon human rights and to challenge men's consciences. Moreover, 'the Israelitic order of justice and law confronts us as that of a national community of the ancient world, which is utterly different from our own.'⁴² Yahweh's revelation to Israel via both law and prophet was necessarily set within the contemporary context of ancient Near Eastern civilisation and closely related to the common culture, even when qualifying and transcending it.

Yet the relevance of Micah's oracles strikes the modern reader at every turn. They stir his own soul and evoke an echo of approval. It is striking how many principles behind the prophet's fulminations reappear in the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights: rights to life, liberty and security, legal rights, rights to private property. Israelite religion stressed a duty towards one's neighbour, and it is for this reason that Micah attacks the exploitation of the economically weak with regard to land and property generally, lack of impartiality in the lawcourt, social service distorted by materialistic motivation and deception in the field of commerce.

But this is only one half of his platform. He emphasised above all a basic duty to God which was to be the inspiration of man's humanity to man. The Christian can take his stand with Micah insofar as God stands over every state and in His sight the leaders of any established social order are but His servants, accountable to Him. 'The old doctrine that the state needs religion... is the basis of all true statesmanship.'⁴³ In this respect Micah's prophesying constitutes both a warning and a challenge. He cautions against a religion divorced from social concern and ready to bolster the social status quo irrespective of moral considerations. In his own person he presents the challenge of a religion which is not afraid to speak in God's name on behalf of human rights and divine claims in the social outworking of human relationships.

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Prepared for the Web in March 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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⁴⁰ Scott, *op. cit.*, 185.

⁴¹ *Id.*, *op. cit.*, 179.

⁴² Brunner, *op. cit.*, 110.

⁴³ *Id.*, *op. cit.*, 189.