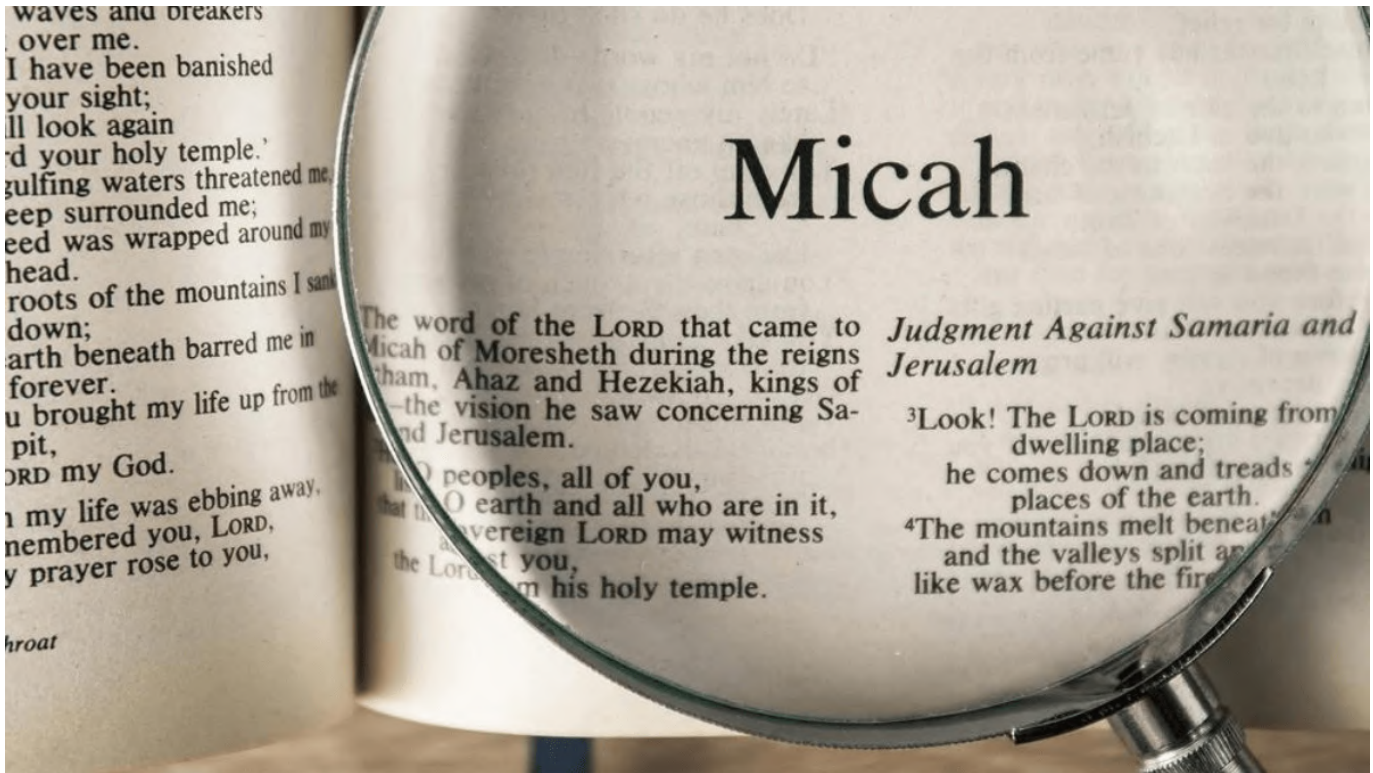


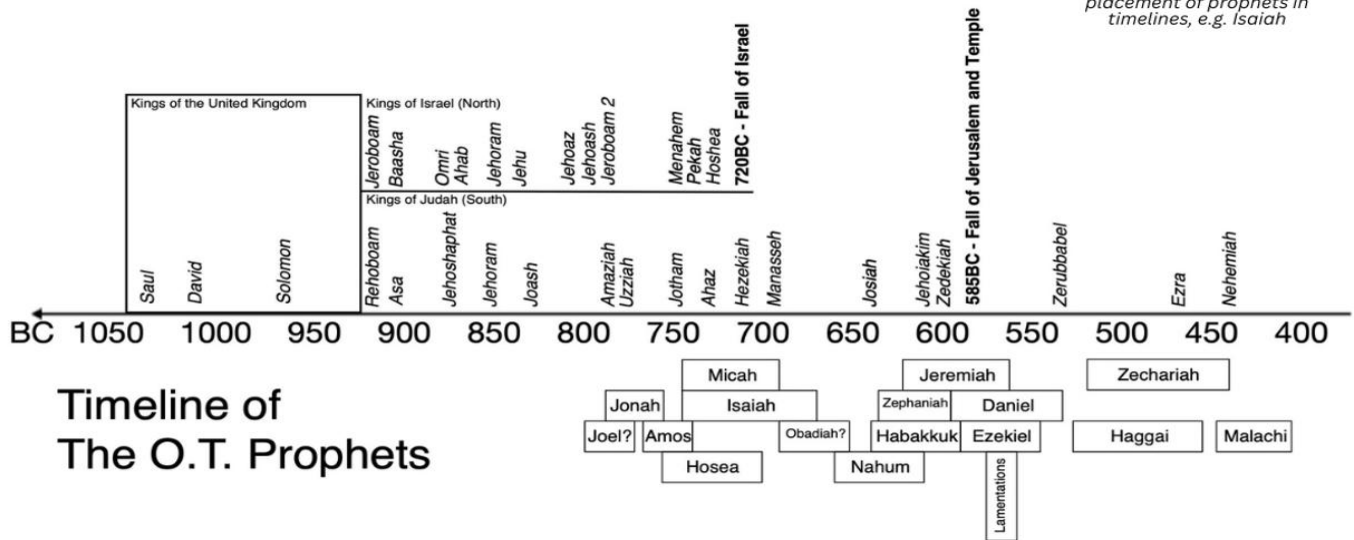
An Introduction to the Prophet Micah



The Turbulent Times of Micah

The very first verse of the book lets us know that Micah’s ministry occurred during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah. There is general agreement among scholars that the text, taken as a whole, supports the ministry’s setting. As we have discussed over the course of the Major and Minor Prophets, this was a very turbulent time in Israel’s history.

There are various views on the placement of prophets in timelines, e.g. Isaiah



Using 1st and 2nd Kings as a background, the broad movement of history is

- Solomon’s reign and the construction of the temple (1 Kgs. 1-11)

- How Israel split into two rival kingdoms (1 Kgs. 12-16)
- **How God tried to prevent the corruption of Israel and its kings by sending the prophets** (1 Kgs. 17-2 Kgs 8) ~ *Micah is part of this period of history*
- How exile became an unavoidable consequence of Israel's sin (2 Kgs. 9-17)
- Jerusalem's destruction and Israel's exile to Babylon (2 Kgs. 18-25)

King Jotham followed the reign of King Uzziah which was a period of prosperity and peace as Uzziah navigated the troubled waters of the Near Middle East. Unfortunately for Jotham, his reign coincided with a period of renewed Assyrian aggression under Tiglath-pileser III, who was Assyria's Napoleon, a leader with notions of empire. The best Jotham could manage was to accept vassalage to Assyria and avoid entanglements as other vassal states tried to rebel. In the north, the Kingdom of Israel, rebelled and then in 722 BC ceased to exist. The Kingdom of Judah survived. This was the legacy passed on to Hezekiah. This was all during the time of Micah's life.

Micah lived in a period of economic revolution, which was a mixed blessing. Unfortunately the influx of material prosperity had spawned selfish materialism, a complacent approach to religion as a means of achieving human desires, and the disintegration of personal and social values. Wealth was invested in land, with the result that the traditional system of agricultural small holdings collapsed with the growth of vast estates. The poor and landless population grew. Traditional sanctions associated with the Covenant were shrugged off, and social concern was at the bottom of the list of priorities of national and local government officials. Even religious leaders—priests and temple prophets—did little more than echo the spirit of the period, buttressing the society that gave them their livelihood.

As a countryman from the fertile lowlands of southwest Judah, doubtless Micah had firsthand knowledge of the sufferings of the rural population and was thus prepared to voice God's indignation. Micah attacked the establishment for abandoning divinely ordained standards in favor of self-interest, to the point of neglecting or actively ill-treating the underprivileged. He saw Judah to be on the brink of disaster, whose causes he interpreted in typical prophetic fashion not as solely political but as theological at heart. Claiming God-given insight, he discerned a close link between the social and economic abuses of the Judean law courts and general civil administration on the one hand, and the irresistible, glacier-like menace of Assyria on the other.

Was the prophet's message received? Jeremiah 26:18-19 - "Micah of Moresheth used to prophesy in the days of Hezekiah...Did Hezekiah, king of Judah, and all Judah condemn [Micah] to death? Did [Hezekiah] not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, so that the LORD had a change of heart regarding the evil he had spoken against them?" Because of Micah (and Isaiah), Hezekiah trusted the Lord and stayed off disaster at the hands of the Assyrians in 701 BC.

It was but a reprieve. Judah staggered on after the 701 B.C. crisis for another century or so before God's dire threats through Micah materialized in all their starkness. After 587 B.C., when Jerusalem fell and the Judeans were deported to Babylon, men must have looked with new eyes at Micah's reasoned oracles of doom, bordered by hope on the farther side.

Micah the Prophet

We know very little about Micah. There is no narrative about his activities. The heading in 1:1 tells us that he was from Moresheth, a small town southwest of Jerusalem. This, no doubt, gave him an outsider's view of what was going on in Jerusalem, unlike that of Isaiah and later Jeremiah who lived in the capital city. Micah was particularly critical of the leaders who were taking advantage of the ordinary citizens and bringing terrible tragedy to the whole nation. Though Micah left us no autobiography or account of his

call, there are a few passages that might reveal something about his inner thoughts—for example, his own attitude of lamentation in 1:8 and 7:1-7.

Though much of Micah's message warns about what is coming immediately, there are also passages of hope, probably directed later to the people who were in exile or returning from exile. Micah himself was more concerned about the immediate danger than the hope that would follow the catastrophe. But the book speaks to subsequent generations as well. For those who were living through the exile or later, Micah's prophecies of doom could help make sense of the destruction. This was God's justice after all. The words continued to serve as an ongoing warning that actions have consequences and that God's people should not again invite such disaster through actions of disloyalty and injustice.

It is highly unlikely that the entire book of Micah was written by the prophet Micah but, like many of the OT books, there were later editors who worked the book into its final written form.. There has been considerable debate about this and some difference of opinion regarding specific passages. It is too simplistic to assume that all words of warning are from Micah and all words of hope are from a later time, added to reassure people in exile or recovering from the exile experience. Yet, there are good reasons to move somewhat in that direction. Perhaps Micah did speak words of hope that would transcend his dominant message of pending doom, but most of the book's promises of hope probably stem from a later time as the book was developed to address God's word to new situations. The most often disputed passages are in chapters 4-5 and 7:7-20. By way of example, consider this outline of the first two chapters:

The Lord's Case against Israel (Micah 1:1-7) - After the editorial heading (v. 1), Micah gives reasons for the terrible fate soon to come to Israel and its capital, Samaria.

² Hear, O peoples, all of you, give heed, O earth, and all that fills you! Let the Lord GOD be witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple! ³ For see, the LORD comes forth from his place, he descends and treads upon the heights of the earth.⁴ The mountains melt under him and the valleys split open, Like wax before the fire, like water poured down a slope.⁵ For the crime of Jacob all this comes to pass, and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the crime of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the sin of the house of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?⁶ I will make Samaria a stone heap in the field, a place to plant for vineyards; I will throw down into the valley her stones, and lay bare her foundations.⁷ All her idols shall be broken to pieces, all her wages shall be burned in the fire, and all her statues I will destroy. As the wages of a harlot they were gathered, and to the wages of a harlot shall they return.

A Call to Lament (Micah 1:8-16) - Doom is soon to come to Judah also, and the appropriate response for both the prophet and the people is lamentation.

⁸ For this reason I lament and wail, I go barefoot and naked; I utter lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches.⁹ There is no remedy for the blow she has been struck; rather, it has come even to Judah, It reaches to the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem.¹⁰ Publish it not in Gath, weep not at all; In Beth-leaphrah roll in the dust.¹¹ Pass by, you who dwell in Shaphir! The inhabitants of Zaanan come not forth from their city. The lamentation of Beth-ezel finds in you its grounds.¹² How can the inhabitants of Maroth hope for good? For evil has come down from the LORD to the gate of Jerusalem.¹³ Harness steeds to the chariots, O inhabitants of Lachish; Lachish, the beginning of sin for daughter Zion, Because there were in you the crimes of Israel.¹⁴ Therefore you shall give parting gifts to Moresheth-gath; Beth-achzib is a deception to the kings of Israel.¹⁵ Yet must I bring to you the

conqueror, O inhabitants of Mareshah; Even to Adullam shall go the glory of Israel.¹⁶ Make yourself bald, pluck out your hair, for the children whom you cherish; Let your baldness be as the eagle's, because they are exiled from you.

God's Judgment Will Fit the Crime (Micah 2:1-5) - God's judgment is not arbitrary or unjust. People have brought on themselves the exact judgment they deserve. Those who have taken other's property will have their own inheritance taken away.

^{2:1} Woe to those who plan iniquity, and work out evil on their couches; In the morning light they accomplish it when it lies within their power.² They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and they take them; They cheat an owner of his house, a man of his inheritance.³ Therefore thus says the LORD: Behold, I am planning against this race an evil from which you shall not withdraw your necks; Nor shall you walk with head high, for it will be a time of evil.⁴ On that day a satire shall be sung over you, and there shall be a plaintive chant: "Our ruin is complete, our fields are portioned out among our captors, The fields of my people are measured out, and no one can get them back!"⁵ Thus you shall have no one to mark out boundaries by lot in the assembly of the LORD.

Micah Confronts Preachers of False Assurance (Micah 2:6-11) - Preachers of false hope are at least partially responsible for Judah's fate because of their refusal to speak the truth. Instead of warning the

⁶ "Preach not," they preach, "let them not preach of these things!" The shame will not withdraw.⁷ How can it be said, O house of Jacob, "Is the LORD short of patience, or are such his deeds?" Do not my words promise good to him who walks uprightly?⁸ But of late my people has risen up as an enemy: you have stripped off the mantle covering the tunic Of those who go their way in confidence, as though it were spoils of war.⁹ The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses; From their children you take away forever the honor I gave them.¹⁰ "Up! Be off, this is no place to rest"; For any trifle you exact a crippling pledge.¹¹ If one, acting on impulse, should make the futile claim: "I pour you wine and strong drink as my prophecy," then he would be the prophet of this people.

A Word of Hope (Micah 2:12-13) - A word of hope seems out of place after all the terrible pronouncements of doom in these first two chapters. These words were probably added later to bring relief from all the condemnation and hope to a later generation.

¹² I will gather you, O Jacob, each and every one, I will assemble all the remnant of Israel; I will group them like a flock in the fold, like a herd in the midst of its corral; they shall not be thrown into panic by men.¹³ With a leader to break the path they shall burst open the gate and go out through it; Their king shall go through before them, and the LORD at their head.

This pattern seems to repeat itself as Chapter 3 is a series of oracles against the leaders. Rulers, prophets, seers, and priests are singled out as major offenders and the ones responsible for God's judgment against Judah. Even the holy city of Jerusalem will be destroyed. And yet chapters 4 and 5 are mostly words of Hope. This section contains two of the best-known passages from Micah—the hope for a time when all nations will destroy their weapons and dwell in peace (4:1-4) and the promise of the new ruler from Bethlehem (5:2-5a).