MICAH 7 – THE OTHER SIDE OF PROTEST

John de Jong

Abstract

Micah 7 is written from a different point of view than the rest of the prophetic book. In chapter 7, Micah writes from the position of a person living in an oppressive society, rather than as a prophet who protests against oppression and injustice, as he does in chapters 1–6. Micah 7 thus provides us with resources to face up to difficult situations as believers.

Keywords: protest; lament; affirmation of faith; God's promises; praise.

From the end of May 2020, Black Lives Matter protests have been staged around the world, sparked by the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, on May 25 2020. The protests were not only about Floyd's murder as an individual, but about the systemic injustice in society that enables such atrocities. The prophets in the Old Testament also protested systemic injustice in their society. This is especially true of the eighth century prophets, particularly Amos, Isaiah, and of Micah, the subject of this paper.[1] But the prophets were not only protestors, they were also fellow sufferers with others in their society. This is seen strikingly in Micah 7, a chapter which gives us resources for how to trust God and remain faithful to him in difficult situations.

Micah

For the first six chapters of his prophetic book, Micah takes the role of the classic prophet, the role of God's spokesperson. Standing above the nation of Judah,

---

John de Jong (PhD, Laidlaw College – Auckland University of Technology) grew up in West Auckland. After completing his Bachelor of Ministries at Laidlaw (BCNZ) in 1997 he was a pastor at Lincoln Road Bible Chapel for four years. In preparation for missionary service John completed his Master of Theological Studies through Tyndale Graduate School of Theology in 2004. John and his family were missionaries in Myanmar for 12 years (2005-2017) where John taught Biblical Hebrew and Old Testament and was head of Biblical Studies at Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology. He completed his PhD through Laidlaw College/Auckland University of Technology while in Myanmar. He teaches Intercultural Studies, Biblical Hebrew and Old Testament at Laidlaw College, Auckland – New Zealand.

[1] The other eighth century prophet, Hosea, is not as explicit in his denunciation of systemic injustice, taking a different approach to the social issues. Ronald Laldinsuah, *Responsibility, Chastisement, and Restoration: Relational Justice in the Book of Hosea* (London: Langham, 2015).

he shines a spotlight upon it to expose their sins and speak God's word against them. Typical of the ancient Hebrew prophets, Micah's main concern is with issues of social justice and abuse of power. He portrays late eighth century Judah as a society in which the wealthy use their power to suck the life out of the poor. Micah uses some of the most striking imagery in the Old Testament, none more so than 3:1–3:

> Listen, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel. Should you not embrace justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot?"[2]

Micah pronounces God's judgement upon his people in the form of invasion and exile by imperial powers.[3] In Micah's time of the late eighth century, the international superpower was the Assyrian empire, infamous as the most brutal in history. Any resistance to their imperial expansion was met by cruel repression, with the express intention of discouraging any other peoples from resisting.[4] Yet Micah does not only bring God's word of judgement. Throughout the book, long series of judgement oracles are suddenly, almost jarringly, broken with promises of hope for a future in which God will redeem and restore his people.[5] In some places of the book, judgement and salvation become intertwined:

> [9] Why do you now cry aloud—have you no king? Has your ruler perished, that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor? [10] Writhe in agony, Daughter Zion, like a woman in labor, for now you must leave the city to camp in the open field. You will go to Babylon; there you

[2] See also 2:1–5, 6–11; 3:9–12. All Scripture references are from the NIV 2011, unless otherwise stated.

[3] 1:15–16; 2:10; 3:12; 5:1.

[4] Consider, for example, the boast of Asshur-nasir-pal II (883-859 BCE): "In strife and conflict I besieged (and) conquered the city. I felled 3000 of their fighting men with the sword. I carried off prisoners, possessions, oxen, (and) cattle from them. I burnt many captives from them. I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms (and) hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, (and) extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living (and) one of the heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city. I burnt their adolescent boys (and) girls. I razed, destroyed, burnt, (and) consumed the city."

[5] E.g., 2:12–13; 4:1–5.

> will be rescued. There the LORD will redeem you out of the hand of your enemies. (Mic 4:9–10)

The most well-known verse in the book of Micah encapsulates the prophet's message to his people:

> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)

The preceding chapters contain judgement, because God's people are not living according to God's ways, and promises of salvation, because God refuses to give up on his people. Micah 6:8 brings these oracles to a climax, showing that the people of God are called to lives of mercy and justice which flow from relationship with God.

The book of Micah, however, does not stop at chapter six. It carries on into chapter seven, but why? The reality of our fallen world, which includes our fallen societies and institutions, is that protests often do not work, especially in the short term, because power is not easily shifted. Some protesters are ignored, others are killed, some imprisoned, and some disappear, and others are moved on. Protesting is a risky business. A first century Jewish text, *The Lives of the Prophets*, maintained that every prophet in the OT had been murdered, something Jesus himself alludes to (Luke 11:47–51).[6]

The book of Micah keeps going, into chapter seven, but with an abrupt change in point of view. In chapter 7, Micah leaves his heavenly vantage point as God's spokesman, and begins reporting from the ground. This final chapter of Micah shows us what it is like to live in the midst of a society where, in spite of protest, the injustice and oppression carry on. Although still the Word of God, the point of view has changed radically as Micah 7 presents not God speaking, but Micah speaking as he experiences life in an unjust society. In chapter seven, Micah gives us resources to draw upon whenever we are faced with situations which seem impossible to change.

---

[6] Abel was the first victim of murder in the OT, while Zechariah was last recorded one (2 Chr 24:20–22), bearing in mind that Chronicles is the last book in the Jewish Bible, the Tanak. See J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 668-69.

Lamenting our Situation (7:1–7)

The first section of Micah 7, verses 1–7, takes the form of a lament, or complaint to God, a common genre in the OT.[7] Micah complains about corruption in his society. Gleaning (v.1) was a social welfare policy in ancient Israel (Deut 24:21), but in Micah's society there was no care for the needy, hence, nothing left to glean. It was an ultra-competitive society (v.2), not a caring one, an attitude that trickled down from the top (v.3). Along with social injustice and corruption, the issue of foreign oppression from earlier in the book is also present, understood, like earlier in the book, as God's judgement: "The day God visits you has come, the day your watchmen sound the alarm. Now is the time of your confusion" (7:4b). The society had deteriorated to such an extent that even family members could not be trusted (7:6).

Our contexts may be different to Micah's, but like him sometimes we are in situations which are out of our control. In such circumstances Micah shows us that, as believers, we do not have to put on a happy face and pretend that everything is OK. Micah shows us that there are times when we should gather our grievances and problems and bring them to God. Micah shows us how to lament.

But note how this first section of Micah 7 ends. "But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me" (v.7). This is typical for the lament genre throughout the Bible.[8] Although the lament is a heartfelt cry of pain, it rarely ends in despair.[9] The biblical lament typically ends with an affirmation of trust in God to help the person crying out to him in their troubled situation. Micah follows this pattern. Although as he looks around him and he sees only problems, Micah looks beyond the problems to God, and declares his trust in God. Micah models what it is to live by faith. This is easy in uncomplicated times, but difficult times test our faith.

Micah's confession of faith in the midst of difficulties is not the end of the matter. Our individual trust in God is important but in the Bible faith in God is never individualistic. Where does it lead? It leads into communal worship and

[7] Especially in the psalms, e.g., Pss 6, 10, 22.
[8] See, for example, how the psalms in fn.7 finish.
[9] An exception is Psalm 88.

commentators have identified Micah 7:8–20 as a liturgy and, as such, it follows a careful path and progression.[10]

Affirming our Faith (7:8–10)

The first part of the liturgy is the congregation articulating what their faith in God means at this point in their lives. Remember, this is a community of people who are experiencing great difficulties, living in a dysfunctional society and ruled over by a seemingly invincible empire. Typical of the biblical lament, however, Micah does not identify the "enemy." Micah's enemy, thus, can become our enemy. The words of Micah's lament can become our words which we direct against our enemy, against the seemingly immovable problems that we face. This liturgy can become our own worship.

The liturgy begins in v.8 by acknowledging the magnitude of the problems and the trouble we are in. But although faced with a powerful enemy, in faith we affirm that God is greater. Times such as this can push us in two opposite directions. One, common to modern western society, is to blame God (oddly, even atheists do this). The other direction, shown in v.9, is to allow difficult times to push us back to God, and to self-examination. How often do we take the time to examine our lives, to discern areas where we have sinned or are sinning, and consider how we could live more faithfully to God, and thus, more faithfully to those around us? This liturgy, however, does not leave us fretting over our sins and failures, but looks beyond them in the sure knowledge of God's grace and deliverance: "He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness" (Mic. 7:9b). The word translated as "righteousness" is צְדָקָה (*sedaqah*), a word with a rich depth of meaning and probably better translated by the NRSV at this point as *vindication*. To be vindicated means to be restored to *shalom*, or wholeness, showing that God has intervened to rescue you from your trouble.

In v.10 we affirm our belief that neither the problems we face, nor anything else, can defeat God and his good purposes for us (Rom 8:37–39). But it is an affirmation we make in the full knowledge that we are still on this side of the

[10] I am indebted to the excellent commentaries by Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), and Ralph L. Smith, *Micah–Malachi*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1984).

eschaton, this side of the age to come and the new creation. It is a statement of faith in the face of the problems which assail us in the present.

Hearing God's Promises (7:11–13)

In ancient Israel, when a person brought their prayers, sacrifices and problems to God, often a temple prophet would announce an oracle from God for the worshipper. Verses 11–13 are such an oracle, in which God promises a great future in spite of the present circumstances. At the time Micah was writing, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was probably already gone, overcome by Assyria, and the kingdom of Judah was under the imperial control of Assyria. Cities had been destroyed, Jerusalem had been besieged. The glory days of David and Solomon, even of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, were long gone, but look at the promise of this oracle. The derelict and vanquished nation would rebuild and extend its boundaries—it would become great again (v.11)! Even the great imperial powers, Assyria in the north and Egypt in the south, would come in homage to Judah and Jerusalem. People from all over the known world— "from Egypt to the Euphrates, and from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain"—would come to "you," that is, to the people of Judah (v.12). This means that they will acknowledge that the God of Israel is the only true God. Verse 13 is somewhat enigmatic but indicates that the nations' journey to coming to this knowledge of God will involve their own judgement and difficult experiences. Nothing worthwhile is ever easy, and nothing is more worthwhile that entering relationship with the living God and walking in his ways.

Responding with Prayer (7:14–17)

Hearing this oracle of hope for the future leads us into prayer. The congregation prays to God, reminding him that he is the shepherd and we the flock. Interestingly for our Covid-19 context, I could translate the first part of v.14 as, "Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, who dwell in isolation…" This text reveals a situation where normal life has been uprooted. The Hebrew for the remainder of v.14 is difficult to understand in places, but says something like, "…who dwell in isolation in a forest, in the midst of fertile land." It is a picture of people whose lives have degenerated into substandard or even

subsistence living, as a result of the disaster that has befallen them.[11] When we find ourselves in a situation like this, we pray for God to restore us to a good life: "Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in days long ago" (v.14b). Bashan and Gilead were renowned as fertile regions in ancient Israel, and so we also pray to God to restore prosperous and enriching social relationships.

Verse 15 can be read as a continuation of the prayer as the congregation continues to remind God of the relationship between them. Not only is God our shepherd (v.14), he is our redeemer as well. Both Smith and Hillers, following others such as Julius Wellhausen, suggest the Hebrew text should be הראנו ("Show us"), rather than the MT אראנו ("I will show him").[12] Thus it is a request to God who came out of Egypt, leading his people: "As in the days when you came out of Egypt, show us your wonders" (v.15; cf. Mic 2:13). Just as when God delivered Israel from Egypt and brought a superpower to its knees, forcing it to "know" God,[13] the congregation asks him to do it again (v16). The imprecatory language of v.17 is difficult for us, although the imagery would be less distasteful had we witnessed our daughters raped and our sons mutilated by imperial armies. In any case, as in all such imprecatory language in the OT, there is no hint that we should undertake violence on anyone. Furthermore, the abasement of the nations is not the end of the story but part of the process that brings them to recognize God in worship and obedience (c.f. v.13).

Ending with Praise (7:18–20)

The liturgy, or worship, ends with a doxology, perhaps sung as a hymn by the congregation. The doxology celebrates God's mercy to forgive sin (v.18), giving hope for the future (v.19), based on God's unbreakable promises made in the past (v.20). This doxology sums up God's covenant-faithfulness, concluding a chapter that begins with lament for the current situation, and ends in trust with a vision of God.

---

[11] So Hillers, 91.

[12] The translator of the LXX struggled with this word as well, translating it as ὄψεσθε ("you will see"). See Smith, 56; Hillers, 88.

[13] "Knowing God" is a major theme in Exodus (Exod 5:2; 6:3, 7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4, 18; 16:6, 12; 18:11; 29:45-46), as is the growing recognition of God by the Egyptians (Exod 8:19; 9:20; 10:7; 12:31–34; 14:25).

Conclusion

Like Micah, at times we find ourselves in difficult situations, although for different reasons than him. In these situations, even if we protest them, we often find ourselves helpless and powerless to bring change. Micah leads us in lamenting this situation, in bringing our complaint to God. Micah encourages us to name the challenges and injustices we face one by one to God. The complaint may be bitter, but it is not hopeless. Micah leads us on to affirm our trust in God, even as we face seemingly intractable challenges. Even in these situations, with Micah we affirm our trust in God and take hold of the hope he gives us. This is a biblical and a prophetic hope, not a pie in the sky hope. "Pie in the sky" hope leads to apathy in the here and now, the false belief that this world has no value and our goal is to escape it. Biblical hope fills us with a vision of God and his coming kingdom and calls us to walk in God's ways and strive for his righteousness and justice— "your kingdom come, your will be done." As we face up to different challenges, may we be filled with hope and trust in God, and may we bring hope to others who are struggling and despairing.