

MICAH

Personal Background

The name *Micah* is a shortened form of *Micaiah* which means "Who is like unto the Lord?" The longer form of this name appears (in the Hebrew text) in Jeremiah 26:18. In Micah 7:18 a wordplay is made on his name. "*Who is a God like Thee*, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?"

Micah was from the town of *Moreseth* (Micah 1:1), which was near Gath (Micah 1:14), which was about 25 miles SW of Jerusalem. This was a productive agricultural area on the border of Judah and Philistia. Through this area, the armies and commercial caravans frequently passed, as it was the main road to the Maritime Plain and to Egypt. "Because of this, the young prophet had opportunities to learn of big events taking place in his time" (Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History*).

Nothing is known of his family or home life. However, like Amos (whose hometown of Tekoa was just 17 miles away), Micah was a man of the country. "From his book one can surmise that Micah lived close to both the people and the soil and possessed a keen sympathy for both. Moreseth was sufficiently detached from Jerusalem to produce men of courage and independence of thought" (Homer Hailey). "His father's name is not given, and we conclude that his family was of humble origin" (Gleason Archer).

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah and Amos and Hosea. Some have even speculated that he might have been a student of the prophet Isaiah --- there are certainly several similarities in their two prophetic books (Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3 are almost identical). "Micah, however, was a rustic prophet with a rural ministry while city-bred Isaiah devoted his prophetic efforts to the population and court of Jerusalem" (Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*). "Hence he was not in as close touch with international politics as was his contemporary, Isaiah. His ministry was especially preoccupied with the sufferings of the common people and of the peasants in the agricultural areas who were exploited by rich and unscrupulous landed nobility" (Archer). "Micah was the prophet of the poor and downtrodden" ...who displays "the courageous and fearless spirit of one who is indignant over the corruption and heartlessness of inhuman rulers and time-serving religionists" (Hailey).

Date

Micah 1:1 places his prophecies over a lengthy period of time --- during the reigns of King Jotham (750-731 BC), King Ahaz (736-715 BC), and King Hezekiah (715-686 BC) ...all of whom were kings of the southern kingdom of Judah. "From Jeremiah 26:18-19 we learn that his earnest warnings during the reign of Hezekiah were taken seriously, and made an important contribution to the revival which took place under government sponsorship" (Archer).

Although the active ministry of Micah may well have covered a period of some 50 years, "it seems likely that the bulk of his recorded prophetic oracles were uttered in the period 725-710 BC" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia*). Other sources revise this figure to 735-710 BC to allow for work during the reign of King Jotham.

It is pretty obvious that this book is a collection of prophecies that were delivered over a period of several decades. "It is a series of messages called oracles given at different times, in different circumstances, in all probability spanning a considerable length of time. It is important to recognize this if we are going to make any sense out of what Micah is saying" (Stuart Briscoe).

Historical Background

The biblical texts for the history of this period are --- II Kings 15-20; II Chronicles 27-32; Isaiah 36-39. Micah speaks to both the northern and southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah), "although he deals

primarily with Judah."

The northern kingdom of Israel was soon to fall to Assyria. This occurred in 722 BC, probably within a decade of his warning that destruction was coming (Micah 1:6). The southern kingdom of Judah would become an "Assyrian vassal state" for many years, and would be forced to pay a heavy tribute to Assyria.

King Hezekiah finally abandoned this pro-Assyrian policy (II Kings 18:7, 19-20), and Sennacherib invaded Judah (701 BC), but the Lord overthrew them and drove them back. Hezekiah then introduced some broad religious reforms.

It was during this time that Micah worked. He also predicted the fall of Judah to Babylon, and their subsequent restoration (Micah 4:10). This would not occur for quite some time, however (around 125 years later), so was not taken too seriously by the people.

A great deal of Micah's message may well fall within the time of King Ahaz. "The corrupt and idolatrous conditions reflected throughout the book may be related to the low ebb of morality and religious interest during the days of Ahaz" (Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*). "Socially and morally Judah presented a dark picture" at this time (Hailey). The wealthy coveted the land of the people around them (Micah 2:1-2). They robbed the poor (Micah 2:8f). Corrupt business ethics were practiced (Micah 6:11). There were numerous false prophets (Micah 2:11) who prophesied for reward (Micah 3:11). The priests also taught for a price (Micah 3:11). Rulers and judges could be bribed (Micah 7:3).

The people were religious, but it was an empty ceremonialism. "Religion had become a matter of form; ceremonial observances were thought to meet all religious requirements. There was widespread misapprehension that as long as the external acts of worship were scrupulously performed the people were entitled to the divine favor and protection" (Homer Hailey). "The people have replaced heartfelt worship with empty ritual, thinking that this is all God demands. They have divorced God's standards of justice from their daily dealings in order to cover their unscrupulous practices" (*The Expanded Open Bible*).

Purpose of Micah

"Stemming from the poorer, working class, Micah was acutely aware of the injustices and avarice of the rich. While he was interested in the political affairs of his nation, it was only as they were connected with the religious and moral situation that Micah spoke to them" (*Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia*). Micah wants the people to realize that true faith in God results in personal holiness and social justice! He "emphasizes the integral relationship between true spirituality and social ethics" (*Expanded Open Bible*). "Worship and morality cannot be divorced from each other. They are two sides of the same coin" (Jack P. Lewis).

"Keenly he realizes that no multitude of sacrifices can adequately be substituted for righteousness in practice" (Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*). "These people have been professing much and performing little. God has been observing the contradiction between creed and conduct,' says the prophet, 'and He will not tolerate it anymore'" (D. Stuart Briscoe).

What does the Lord require of you?! Micah 6:8 answers the question --- "To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." "How will the world know that I am walking humbly with my God? They will know by the way I

treat people. Those who walk humbly with their God have a passionate concern for justice being done in society, and a deep concern to treat people lovingly and mercifully" (D. Stuart Briscoe).

Micah is the first prophet to specifically threaten Judah with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (Micah 3:12). He also threatens them with the failure of prophecy (Micah 3:6-7) --- there would be no word from God; no guidance! Micah is also the first to point to Bethlehem as the city from which the Messiah would come (Micah 5:2). The chief priests and scribes referred back to this prophecy when Herod asked where the Messiah would be born (Matthew 2:4-7). This passage also came up in a dispute among the multitude over from where the Messiah would originate (John 7:40-44). Also, Micah 2:12-13; 4:1-8; 5:4-5 "offer some of the best OT descriptions of the righteous reign of Christ over the whole world" (*Expanded Open Bible*). And, Jesus quoted Micah 7:6 when He spoke to the Twelve about discipleship (Matthew 10:36).

The Puns of Micah

"The latter part of the 1st chapter (1:10-16) reveals the prophet's skill as a communicator. He uses a play on words, showing that he is as clever a punster as he is a strikingly gifted poet!" (Briscoe). Efforts to render these into English may be seen in the translations of Moffat and Phillips. It is "the longest series of sustained puns in the OT, in which Micah describes the advance of the Assyrian army through his section of the country" (Jack P. Lewis).

For example --- *Gath* (1:10) sounds like the Hebrew word for *tell*, so it's as if he were saying, "Tell it not in Tell City." Also, in 1:10 he writes, "In Beth-le-aphrah (house of dust) roll yourself in the dust." *Zaanan* (1:11) means "going out," so he is saying, "Those of you in 'Go Out City' will not go out." Etc.

"Imagine an American preacher saying, 'Living in Pittsburgh is the pits,' or 'Los Angeles is not a city of angels,' or 'Wisconsin should only be pronounced Wiscon-*sin*.' That would get the people's attention. Micah was having a problem getting his message across to the people so he chose this dramatic vehicle to reach them" (Briscoe).