


'The godly person has perished from the land' (Mi 7:1–6): Micah's lamentation of Judah's corruption and its ethical imperatives for a healthy community living

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Dates:

Received: 18 Apr. 2021

Accepted: 28 May 2021

Published: 10 Aug. 2021

How to cite this article:

Boloje, B.O., 2021, "The godly person has perished from the land" (Mi 7:1–6): Micah's lamentation of Judah's corruption and its ethical imperatives for a healthy community living', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6757. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6757>

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Micah 7:1–6 represents the prophet's lamentation of the deficiency of moral value in a beloved nation. The oracle is a watershed in the Book of Micah that is aptly characterised by certain degrees of socio-economic and religious unfaithfulness, especially in privileged circumstances. The oracle unit (Mi 7:1–6) forms the darkest descriptions of degrees about the apparent moral wasteland of ancient Judah. The prophet's metaphors are used to describe the miserable moral morass of society form a kind of compendium with a progression of thoughts and coherence of moral depravity. This article underscores that when people and society live in dishonesty and corruption, the essentially integrated spiritual-ethical-community of health and prosperity that is expected to unfold in time of covenant fidelity will eventually be reduced to poverty and despair, where people hunt each other for survival. This article explores aspects of dishonesty and corruption in the Book of Micah that are pointers to the tragic situation, analyses the various descriptions of corruption in the oracle unit and consequently examines its ethical imperatives for community living.

Contribution: As a biblical, literary and theological interpretation of Micah's oracle concerning ancient Judah's moral morass, this article brings together moral insights that are potentially viable for making major contributions to the life of people and just social order in an economics of affluence, politics of oppression and corruption in societies.

Keywords: Book of Micah; moral depravity; corruption; dishonesty; domestic disorder; socio-economic and religious unfaithfulness; covenant fidelity; community living.

Introduction

The prophetic Book of Micah is replete with socio-economic and religious circumstances that allowed for the exploitation of people in ancient Judah (cf. Blenkinsopp 1996:95; Nogalski 2011:536). Such environmental circumstances of people's unfaithfulness to God's covenant are manifested in varying degree of the miserable moral morass of society. Micah's oracle (7:1–6) represents a pragmatic portrayal of how socio-economic and religious circumstances of unfaithfulness have apparently provided the ground for corruption in society at different levels. Enraged by such socio-economic and religious dishonesty and being zealous for true covenant fidelity (Arnold & Beyer 1999:454–456), Micah graphically bemoaned the sorry state of the nation in light of the extent to which such environmental circumstances have altered the essentially integrated spiritual-ethical-community. In style that was often uncompromising and unpolished, he invited and held them accountable to Yahweh for their uncontrollable greed (Kelly 1984:19). Throughout the various collection of speeches, one can observe Micah's lamentation regarding the scarcity of those who are like Yahweh; those who are committed to the practice of justice and love of רַחֲמֵי (variously translated 'mercy', 'fidelity', 'loyalty', 'loving-kindness', 'covenant love').¹ From Micah's perspective, such persons have disappeared from the land (7:1–2).

1. רַחֲמֵי is mostly considered as a responsibility expected of covenant members, especially those who are strong, to help in a situation of need. It carries the elements of grace and benevolence extended to the weaker party, much more than a call to duty (Clark 1993:20).

Note: Special Collection: Theology, Economy and Environment: Cultural & Biotic Influences on Religious Communities, sub-edited by Jerry Pillay (University of Pretoria).

The lamentation of the prophet concerning the sorry state of the nation and her leaders within the context of certain obvious socio-economic and religious realities is painfully similar to many contemporary contexts where national leaders and citizens have failed to live up to the heights of their respective responsibilities. As it is today in many nations of the world, there is still a massive outcry of people who are constantly seeking ways of approaching and combating economics of affluence, the growth of poverty and politics of oppression, corruption and exploitation. The theological-ethical datum of this article is that when certain persons seek the path of opportunities or privileges or benefits to the disadvantage of the good of all, in due course, the life and welfare of society become a fertile ground for exploitation, corruption, violence, suffering, death and impediment to development (Dempster 2017:257). In the following section, an attempt is made at explicating certain aspects of socio-economic and religious circumstances of the apparent moral wasteland of ancient Judah.

Aspects of dishonesty and corruption in the Book of Micah

The oracles of Micah were provoked under a certain socio-economic, political and religious context, especially the eighth century (cf. Andersen & Freedman 2000:17–20; Chaney 2014:34; Coomber 2011:396–432). They were critically well-crafted interpretations of the various ideologies and theology of the past and present. The speeches indicate that Yahweh (Dempster 2017):

[I]s a God who takes his covenant with his people seriously (1:5), who will brook no rivals to transcendence (1:6–7), and who controls the nations – even the dreaded Assyrian army (1:6–16). (p. 2)

At the same time, he is concerned with existential matters of human reality like exploitation of the poor, weak and helpless by the covetous rich (2:1–2, 8–9; 3:1–3), committed to honesty, equity and fairness (2:6–11; 3:5–8), the necessity of justice and the importance of human rights (6:6–8) and furious with oppression (7:18) (Dempster 2017:2). Given the setting of widespread economic development of the eighth century (Chisholm 1990:21; Hoerth 1998:329–330; Kaiser 1998:352), Micah gives attention to how new socio-economic development in Judah made possible oppressive socio-economic policies. As a notable era of incredible well-being and affluence (Bright 1981:252), obviously, some people lived well-off the efforts of others, as it was unmistakably the policy of the time to mobilise and claim the energies of people for the sake of the privileged and their extravagant needs (Ben Zvi 2000:44; Chaney 2014:40; Gottwald 1993:3; Premnath 2003:1, 2008:128). The standard of living claimed and described by the literary text of Micah indicates several aspects of socio-economic and religious circumstances of corruption, dishonesty and oppression. A few indices of these unhealthy environmental situations are highlighted below.

Economic opportunism and exploitation

Micah lived at a time where Judah's socio-economic situations were horribly devastated by crisis, as surrounding regions in Jerusalem were plundered, whilst defiant and rebellious neighbouring nations were preying on them. This situation resulted in a loss of several economic assets (eds. Birch et al. 1999:285; Matthews 2012:118; Mitchell 2003:66). The menu report of Micah 2:1–2, 8–9 is a remarkable pointer and reasonable enough to conjecture that affluence and prosperity are not democratically shared but exclusively the privilege habits of the wealthy entourage, which, at best was opposed to the plight of the less-privileged citizenry. Describing the relationship between politics and economics, Brueggemann (1978:36) states that 'oppressive politics and affluent economics depend on each other'. This tendency finds expression in Micah's lamentation when he notes how, in the wake of political crisis and socio-economic upheaval, merciless wealthy landowners and influential officials living in fortified cities, used their position and powers to make life comfortable for themselves at the expense of poor farmers and citizens (Jenson 2008:119; Malchow 1980:48; Matthews 2012:118; McKeating 1971:162). The process involves careful planning (Nogalski 2011:513), adoption of oppressive and tyrannical economic policies (Dempster 2017:85) and depriving them of their covenantal and legitimate inheritance (Andersen & Freedman 2000:321). Micah described the sins of covetousness and materialism of the people of Judah and pronounced a solemn warning: At night, the people of Judah schemed evil, and at the break of dawn, they busily executed their schemes (2:1). They coveted fields and houses and defrauded families by taking their inheritance (2:2). For those who devised evil work, God has devised His own disaster (2:3). As a spiritual malaise and unethical behaviour, the gravity of Judah's covetous crimes (Waltke 2007:95) affected the very pristine of Israel's social ethics. Such affected areas include inter alia, the casting away of women from their homes and separating children from their parents (2:9) (Ben Zvi 2000:59–60).

Moreover, the prophet describes Yahweh's abhorrence at crimes of injustice in commercial centres and violence in society, both in action and word (Smith 1984):

Is there yet a man in the wicked house, along with treasures of wickedness, and a short measure that is cursed? Can I justify wicked scales and a bag of deceptive weights? For the rich men of the city are full of violence, her residents speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth (Mi 6:10–12, New American Standard Bible). (p. 5)

The first two verses (10–11) emphasise the magnitude of lawlessness and injustice that characterised the city. In more specific descriptions, the indictments are focused on those who enrich themselves by dishonest commercial transactions. Micah accuses them of falsifying measures and weights; such wickedness cannot be tolerated. These ways of defrauding people in business transactions are repeatedly prohibited in the Mosaic Law and Wisdom Literature (Dt 25:13–16;

Lv 19:35–36; Pr 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23; cf. Am 8:5; Hs 12:8) (Dempster 2017:168–169). In verse 12, Micah characterises these acts of dishonesty in commercial dealings in the city by the rich and its inhabitants as ‘violence and injurious deception against those who are defrauded’ (Mays 1976:147). The venue for this dishonest characterisation of the city may probably be the law court, where the inhabitants speak lies and exercise their deceitful tongues on behalf of their benefactors. Most probably, the wealthy have been indicted of dishonesty and cheating by the poor (farmers), but because of their wealth, they could buy false witnesses and so manipulate the law. Thus a reversal existed at the law court, where, rather than being a viable centre for establishing justice, it became a vehicle for violence (Ex 20:16; cf. 1 Ki 21) (Jenson 2008:176). The use of such language to characterise the ingenuity of the wealthy and their agents places such practices in their broadest social context and illuminates the bitterness of the complaint against the city in Micah. Accordingly, ‘the injury is more than economic; it damages the lives and status of persons in the fabric of society and destroys that fabric’ (Mays 1976:147). Significantly, ethical violations are the focal emphasis of these verses, and the charges of violence and dishonesty on a societal level are comprehensive generalisations that portray the city’s population whose behaviour bears little resemblance to the standard expected of Yahweh’s people in a covenant community (Nogalski 2011:575).

Unjust leadership, religious commercialisation and profiteering

In Micah 2:12–13, a picture of God’s people as sheep is presented in a chapter that begins with judgement against Judah’s covetous crimes and materialism. However, Micah’s shepherd-flock metaphor that serves as a motif of restoration for the people of Judah (Chae 2006:37) is contradicted by his description of the upper class in Judah whom he addressed as heads of their people (רֹאשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל) and leaders/rulers of the house of Israel (3:1, 9, 11), prophets, diviners and priests (3:5, 7, 11) and the rich themselves (6:12). Micah likens these leaders’ injustices to a ravenous animal, devouring the sheep. In the litany of comprehensive condemnation, Micah directs his indictment of the leadership in Jerusalem to the judicial officials (3:1–4). The rhetorical flow unfolds relatively clearly, as Micah uses gruesome and shocking metaphors to sensitise as well as invite them into reality. He castigates the political and judicial officials in Judah who were to render the appropriate verdicts and ensure their implementation. They were expected to be acquainted with what was right and equitable so as to ensure that the marginalised was not oppressed by the powerful. Contrarily, Micah’s condemnation indicates that criminals have taken the reins of the courts and government and that vice has become virtue. Micah pictures these leaders as tyrants who have a strong passion for evil rather than good (2:2–3). In his bizarre metaphors, the deep depravity of these officials is highlighted: rather than defending justice and protecting human rights, especially the underprivileged Judeans, they aided and abetted the powerful, greedy, land-grabbing wealthy criminals in the Judean society. Whilst the political

leaders and court functionaries were perverting all equity (3:9), the religious leaders – priests and prophets, invented ‘religious justifications for the conduct of kings and leaders’ (Wessels 2009:46). This loss of religious sensitivity and responsibility resulted in false worship and corrupted the nation with deceitful attitudes.

Micah 7:1–6 and Judah’s comprehensive corruption

Micah 7:1–6 a prophetic lament that bemoans the moral condition of the nation in which the prophet lives.² The mournful dirge begins and ends with the first-person allusion. The literary context indicates that the prophet is speaking on behalf of the city of Jerusalem as the opening cry of sorrow shows. Although the description of his circumstances is not adequately specified to enable one to establish a historical setting with certainty, the general structure of the unit is similar to the preceding one (6:9–15). The unit begins with a unique metaphor of interjection that evokes vulnerable despondency that he feels about the state of society (7:1) and then continues to state more pointedly his basic theme in graphic portrayal and assertions about the absence of ‘the righteous and the faithful’ (7:2a) and the presence of ‘the incorrigible and the corrupt’ (7:2b) that creates hostility. His description of the social disintegration is presented in two levels, focusing on the one hand, on the public domain and its officials (7:3–4) and the private family domain (7:5–6) on the other hand. The unit can thus be understood as a response to the judgment portrayed in 6:13–16; the curses of 6:14–15 have been effected and the corruption in society (6:10–13) has escalated and reached the climax point, manifested in the breakdown of integrity at the highest level of leadership (3:11) and down to the lowest sphere of intimate relations of life, with friends and family (7:2–6) (Andersen & Freedman 2000:562). An analysis of various aspects of the unit is undertaken in the following sub-units.

Deficiency of genuine spiritual identity (7:1–2)

NASB 7:1 Woe is me!	7:1 אֵלַי לִי MT
For I am like the fruit pickers	כִּי הָיִיתִי כְּפֹאֲסֵי יִמְרָן
and like the grape gatherers.	כְּעֹלְלֵת בְּצִיָּר
There is not a cluster of grapes to eat,	אֵין-אֶשְׁכּוֹל לְאָכֹל
or a first-ripe fig which I crave.	בְּפֹרְהָ אֶתְהָה נִפְשִׁי:

7:2 The godly person has perished	7:2 אָבָד הַסִּיד מִדְּהָאָרֶץ
from the land,	וְיֹשֵׁר בְּאָדָם אֵין
and there is no upright person among men.	כָּל־אִישׁ לְדָמִים יִצְרָב
All of them lie in wait for bloodshed;	אִישׁ אֶת־אֶחָיו יִצְוֹדוּ תְרָם :
each man hunts his brother with a net.	

The opening verse of this sub-unit is a cry of lamentation in the first person; אֵלַי לִי [Woe is me!], illustrating through an agricultural metaphor (7:1 cf. 6:15) and its interpretation (7:2–4) the moral degeneration of the entire city population, both of the people and

²The identity of potential speaker(s) has been suggested to include, Yahweh, Daughter Zion (or Jerusalem), and the prophetic speaker identified as Micah (Ben Zvi 2000:168).

its leadership. Micah utilises an extended agricultural metaphor to compare the plight of the pious to one facing starvation after the harvest has failed. Like the gleaner after the harvest (7:1a),³ the prophet is searching in vain for some remaining virtuous person in the land (7:1b). Sincerely, harvesting has been rather ruthless in that the fig trees and vines are completely stripped. Micah's metaphor evokes a feeling of depression and anguish; the world of his daily life has become effectively frustrating, one of a death sentence for a hungry person preparing for an unproductive winter (Jenson 2008:179). Embedded in the picture of a frustrated, hungry gleaner, is an accusation of injustice, corruption and lack of kindness. The subsequent description of the human environment of Micah provides the literal counterpart explanation to this initial metaphor (Hillers 1984:85).

In verse 2, the metaphor is explained and expanded with significant social detail that explicitly hints at Judah as evidently the vineyard (cf. Is 5:1–7). In the first part of verse 2, the term that is used to depict assertions about the absence of 'the faithful' is *הַטֵּיב*. It is an adjective that describes those who live out their pieties towards fellow citizen and Yahweh with a sincere purpose in a covenant community; they practice the expected *חֶסֶד* [mercy, loving-kindness of 6:8] as a lifestyle and enact loyalty to Yahweh by their unconditional commitment to the practice of *מִשְׁפָּט* [justice] with all whom they deal. The *הַטֵּיב* furnishes values and norms assumed by the *יָשָׁר* [upright person]. In this context, *יָשָׁר* is a reference to one who lives in obedience to Yahweh's ethical standards. The search for a *הַטֵּיב* [the faithful or godly person] whose indispensable qualities are basic for the flourishing of human life and society, which was conducted from amongst the masses or the general population, as indicated by the references to *בְּאֶרְצָם* [amongst men] and *מִן־הָאָרֶץ* [from the land; i.e. a reference to Judah] was fruitless; all such persons have disappeared (*אָיִן*) or perished (*אָבַד*).

This figurative state of affairs is explained in the second line of verse 2 that supplies the antithesis to *דַּיְקָה*. The expression 'all of them' (*כֻּלָּם*) does not refer back to nouns in verse 2a but anticipates an approaching list. The pursuits of all men are nothing more than a surprise attack and hunt in which their fellow men are the prime target. According to Jenson (2008):

Robbers usually 'lie in wait' for the unsuspecting and the helpless (Ps 10:9; Pr 1:11; 24:15), but if the righteous have disappeared, then the only alternative is to 'hunt each other with nets'. This is no longer a matter of relative gain, but of 'blood', of violence and murder (a stage beyond 6:10–12). Doing away with someone is simply equivalent to catching a fish (Ezk 26:5; Hab 1:15–17). 'Each other' (literally 'his brother', New International Version, The New Jerusalem Bible) refers not only to a blood brother but also a 'kinsman' (Revised English Bible) or even 'fellow-countryman' (Good News Bible). The law set out the responsibilities owed to the 'brother' (Lv 19:17; Dt 22:1–4), but now the closest family ties mean nothing. (p. 180)

Rather than creating a community where there is a viable structure for practising traditional virtues of faithfulness,

3. In these texts, harvesters were urged to leave some of the produce for the poor and strangers to glean after the gathering of grapes or figs. It was an important traditional means of securing the poorest of the land from starvation (Hillers 1984:85).

human relations became simply an occasion for violence and injustice towards fellow citizens.

Corruption of the officials (7:3–4)

NASB 7:3 Their hands are skilled

at doing evil.

The prince asks

And the judge for profit

The great one speaks the desire of his soul; *וְהַגָּדוֹל דִּבֶּר הַתַּחְתּוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ הוּא*
And they weave it together. *וְיַעֲבֹדוּהָ :*

7:3 MT *עַל־הַרְעָה כַּפַּיִם לְהַטִּיב*

הַשָּׂר שֹׁאֵל

וְהַשֹּׁפֵט בְּשָׁלוֹם

7:4 The best of them is like a briar,

The most upright like a thorn hedge.

The day of your keeping watch

of punishment has come

Now their confusion will occur.

7:4 *טוֹבָם כְּתִדְקָה*

יָשָׁר מִמְסוּכָה

יוֹם מִצְפִּיד

כְּמַדְתָּהּ בָּצָה

עַתָּה תִּהְיֶה מִבוֹבָתָם :

This sub-unit contains an elaborate introspection. The first line of verse 3 continues the account of the people's sins from 7:2. It is expressed in dramatic irony: *עַל־הַרְעָה כַּפַּיִם לְהַטִּיב* [Their hands are skilled at doing evil]. The verb *הַטִּיב* [skilled] is derived from *טָב* [to do good] with the noun form as *טוֹב* [good]. It often means diligently, thoroughly, but here, it is an ironic reversal of the moral norms implied by the good. Their efforts indicate a wholehearted commitment to making use of both hands. Dempster (2017:175), citing Na'aman (2005:104–105), remarks that although there is evidence of ambidextrous soldiers in the Nubian army from Micah's time, it normally takes practice to learn how to become right handed or left handed. It is rare for people to be ambidextrous; however, here in Judah, the people have learned to do evil diligently with both hands. Thus their evils were calculated and planned.

The inner structure of verse 3 indicates three explicit substantives: *שָׂר* [prince or officer], *שֹׁפֵט* [judge] and *גָּדוֹל* [great one]. These nouns are the subjects of two parallel participles *שֹׁאֵל* [asking] and *דִּבֶּר* [speaking], with one appendage, *בְּשָׁלוֹם* [for profit] common to both participles (Andersen & Freedman 2000:569). The verse denounces Judah's political officials and judges as conspirators in perverting justice. The desires of the officials are what the judge delivers for a price. Both act from materialism and greed, and these are the leaders of the nation (Nogalski 2011:578). What is clear from the context of 7:1–3 is that these leaders in verse 3: *שָׂר* [prince or officer], *שֹׁפֵט* [judge] and *גָּדוֹל* [great one] manipulate the situation to their advantage; they are in collaboration with each other in defrauding the people (cf. 3:2–3). Apparently, besides the preparation of their hands for evil (7:3a), they also prepare a strategy by which the rulers can demand things from the people, and the judges will not reprove them but instead speak words (*דִּבֶּר הַתַּחְתּוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ*) in their favour. Consequently, the sins of the leaders are rooted in their minds and hearts with their selfish intentions. Rather than wholeheartedly loving and practising *חֶסֶד* [mercy, loving-kindness, cf. 6:8], they delight in materialism; wealth and treasures (6:12), and they strategise and conspire to acquire them unjustly by the abuse of their position, power and privilege.

The full-blown corruption of the nation is emphasised in verse 4a where Micah uses a botanical metaphor to describe the leaders of society: 'the best of them' (טובם) is like a useless plant, כְּהֶדֶק [brier] that serves no purpose other than to perpetuate their own existence at the expense of others (Nogalski 2011:578). As the יֵשָׁר [upright persons] have disappeared, the ones who are sarcastically called the upright (יֵשָׁר) of the nation (who are in fact wicked) are comparable to a thorn hedge (מְסוּבָה). Perhaps this intertwining of thorns continues the rhetoric of the preceding verse, 'and they weave it together' (וַיַּעֲבֹדוּהָ). Sweeney (2000:408) aptly describes this intertwining of thorns: 'Goodness and righteousness are so interwoven or tangled up with evil that they become like thorn bushes that are impossible to untangle'.

Verse 4b thus speaks punishment and confusion of these treacherous leaders on account of their intrigue and avarice. The judgement is described in the form of an enemy attack designed to punish Judah. The time when this devastation will take place is syntactically stressed as 'the day of your watchmen' (יָמֵם מְצַפֵּי). The 'watchmen', 'guards' or 'sentinels' is from the verb צָפָה [to watch, keep guard]. Usually, watchmen on the walls of fortified cities would blow an alarm when an enemy approaches. Biblical prophets regard themselves as Yahweh's watchmen who sounded spiritual alarms to caution the people of impending danger (Jr 6:17; Ezk 3:17; 33:2, 6, 7; Hs 9:8). According to verse 4b, that day of portended punishment that the prophets warned about (cf. Is 10:3; 37:3) has arrived (פָּקַדְתָּ בָּאָרֶץ) (Dempster 2017:176; Jenson 2008:181). One obvious outcome of this divine visitation, of an appointed day of judgement (פָּקַדְתָּ), is the moment of their confusion (מְבִיבָתָם); it shall be a time of confusion against the wicked.

Fragmented appetite and self-interest (5–6)

NASB 7:5 Do not trust in a neighbor; אל־תִּבְטְחוּ בְּרֵעֵי אֱלֹהֵי־תִבְטְחוּ בְּאַלְמָנָה
do not have confidence in a companion. אל־תִּבְטְחוּ בְּרֵעֵי
From the woman who lies in your bosom; מִשְׂכַּבְתְּ חֵיקְךָ
guard the doors of your mouth. שְׁמֹר פִּתְחֵי־פִיךָ :

7:6 For the son treats his father contemptuously, אָב 7:6 כִּי־בֶן מְנַבֵּל אָב
a daughter rebels against her mother, בַּת קָמָה בְּאִמָּה
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. כְּלָה בְּחַמְתָּהּ
A man's enemies are the people of his own
household. אֹיְבֵי אִישׁ אֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתוֹ :

The sub-unit begins with a new chain of imperatives that presuppose the crisis of judgement. The imperatives describe the state of society in terms that point to the breakdown of social solidarity and interpersonal relationship and responsibility. Obviously, there is confusion and social disorder in the city and society is characterised by anarchy (Hillers 1984:85; Waltke 2007:428). The illustration of instances of failure moves through structures of intimacy that begins from proportionate relationships (7:5a) and increasingly into more and more disproportionate, traditionally oriented hierarchical relationships that culminate with that of the master to his family members (Ben Zvi 2000:169). The imperatives in verse 5

deal with the situation, beginning with two prohibitions (7:5a) and then with a positive charge (7:5b). Verse 6 serves as the explanation for the imperatives.

In verse 5, one finds three descriptions of the all-time intimate relations, in which trust cannot be guaranteed even to the closest family member. The רֵעַ [friend] is a neighbour (NJB, REB, NASB) or fellow member of the covenant community. The אֱלוֹהֵי [companion] is an intimate friend (BDB 48; Pr 2:17; 16:28; 17:9 Jr 13:21), on account of whose betrayal the psalmist mourned bitterly (Ps 55:14). The closest of all is the relation mourned husband and wife: 'from the woman who lies in your bosom' (מִשְׂכַּבְתְּ חֵיקְךָ). The noun חֵיק [bosom, embrace] is an aspect of the body that has sexual connotations (Gn 16:5, cf. 1 Ki 1:2, Dt 13:17; 28:54, 56, cf. Pr 5:20; BDB 301), and the charge שְׁמֹר פִּתְחֵי־פִיךָ [guard the doors of your mouth] is a metaphorical description of the lips as being the dual doors that allow speeches to proceed from the mouth. The metaphor portrays the individual 'as a guarded house in a dangerous town, full of those who are looking for hostages to seize and use to the harm of the owner' (Jenson 2008:181). These warnings obviously reinforce the previous lament over a total collapse of society (7:2–4).

Verse 6 continues with an additional crescendo of intensification with pairs of asymmetrical, traditionally oriented hierarchical relationships to which the arrangement is one of a hostile intimacy. According to Mays (1976):

[T]he stability and harmony of the basic family unit was of such crucial value to the Israelite (cf. Ex 20:12; 21:15, 17, Dt 21:18f, Lv 20:9, Pr 20:20) that its disintegration by insolence and rebellion seemed the worst manifestation of times of woe. (p. 152)

In a network of family relationships, the closest lines of responsibility and authority are between the same members of the two sexes: males and females, who would spend most of their time together in exercising their respective tasks, most of which usually differed significantly for males and females. The unit reflects the authority structure as well as the living arrangements; the man is over his wife and son, and the wife is over the daughter and daughter-in-law. According to the law, children are expected to honour and respect their parents (Ex 20:12, Lv 20:9) and an unruly son deserves death (Dt 21:18–21). The situation in Micah 7:6a is different, 'for the son treats his father contemptuously' (כִּי־בֶן מְנַבֵּל אָב). The verb נָבַל [to treat disdainfully, to be senseless, foolish, BDB 614] is used only five times, once to describe one who exalts himself as foolish. In the *Piel* stem, it is used four times to express disgust or contempt (Dt 32:15) or to treat one's father contemptuously (Mi 7:6a). God makes vile the recalcitrant (Nah 3:6). The prophet prays to ward off God's wrath so that he will not disgrace the throne of his glory (Jr 14:21).⁴ If the nuance is correct, the son treats his father contemptuously as a fool, probably in public (cf. Gn 9:25, 2 Sm 15). Furthermore, Micah 7:6a reveals that the close relationship between mother and daughter in this network of family relationship and responsibility would make

⁴The noun form נָבַל means a 'fool' (Dt 32:6, 1 Sm 25:25, Pr 17:21) (Goldberg 1980:547).

insubordination an even more appalling contrast; 'a daughter rebels against her mother' (בַּת קָמָה בְּאִמָּה). Whilst a daughter-in-law ought to respect and submit to her mother-in-law (cf. Rt 1), however, here again in 7:6a, there is a reversal in the natural order: 'a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law' (בְּקָה בְּהַמָּתָה) (Jenson 2008:182). These graphic illustrations of the breakdown in the fabric of society and family serve as particular examples of the principle in the last clause of 7:6b: אֹיְבֵי אִישׁ אֲנָשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ [a man's enemies are the people of his own household].

Ethical imperatives for a healthy community living

As a social evil, corruption obviously leaves societies with tragic effects. Incontrovertibly, the poor and marginalised are usually notorious victims of the evil of corruption. Micah's oracles indicate most clearly how not only the poor and marginalised became victims of corruption, but how society became comprehensively bankrupt of ethical values for healthy community living and prosperity. Micah's graphic description of the miserable moral morass of ancient Judahite society clearly indicates how court functionaries who were to be responsible for the proper and effective administration of justice, swiftly became partners in crimes of conspiracy and all forms of bribery and corruption, whilst a theocracy that was characterised by informed priests and charismatic prophets, suddenly succumbed and subscribed to a perennial culture of religious commercialisation, consumption and profiteering (Prior 1988:104; Smith 1994:102–103; Walte 1988:139). The obvious connection between socio-economic and religious venality marked and placed ancient Judahite society on the brink of inevitable disaster (Allen 1976:240). The situation and issues addressed by Micah are obviously and painfully close to many realities today in a world where people who are in privileged positions of authority and affluence engage in acts of dishonesty and corruption that obviously undermine the well-being of less-privileged citizens. In Africa, for example, corruption is the most destructive social disease. Adu-Gyamfi (2020) notes that corruption:

... undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights, distorts markets, erodes the quality of life and allows organised crime, terrorism and other threats to human security to flourish. In Africa, corruption hurts the poor disproportionately by diverting funds intended for development, undermining governments' ability to provide basic services, feeding inequality and injustice. (p. 94)

Micah's lamentation and resistance against oppression constitute a viable medium for mediating ethical relevance for contemporary readers who are confronted with corruption in multidirectional paths.

Trusting in the sovereignty of God and living with his fear

Micah's lamentation of the deficiency of ethical values necessary for an integrated, spiritual and healthy societal

flourishing echoes the urgency of the development and enactment of community social ethics that recognises and submits to the sovereignty of God and highlights the essential value of justice and virtue as the primary standard of societal sustainability (Alfaro 1989:38). The prophet's lamentation arising out of obvious violations of covenant obligations indicates a nation in which community members were living without the fear of God and the acknowledgement of his sovereignty. As their claim as Yahweh's worshippers did not match their character (cf. Allen 1976:319; Gooder 2005:191), exploitation and corruption became the tragic reality of their community. One of the saddest observations that validated the nation's unfaithfulness of injustice, especially towards the less-privileged (such as robbery and exploitation, unjust commercial dealings, leadership and government that lived in extravagance at the expense of the hard work of her people) was the disastrous, inauthentic and theological imagination and teachings of false prophets that created a fundamental tension between God's judgement and mercy (2:6–7; 3:11) (Keil 2006:300; Limburg 1998:171; Simundson 2005:305). Micah's heartfelt and passionate lamentation of the deficiency of moral value constitutes an ethical stimulus to contemporary readers of the text in societies where corruption has fractured interpersonal relationship and community social solidarity. The understanding of Yahweh's sovereignty resulting in living daily with Yahweh's fear will potentially and enthusiastically stimulate in people right moral resolutions and healthy social order.

Commitment to principles of healthy social solidarity

At the heart of Micah's lament is the moral decadence that he witnessed in the beloved city that had lost its genuine spiritual uniqueness and thus was no longer a paradigm to the nations. His damning description of the state of society highlights once again, how leaders of the judicial system that was responsible for upholding dignity, justice and law and order, failed in their responsibility but succumbed to the temptation of replacing impartiality with self-centeredness. Their network of conspiracy perverted power into an unscrupulous and corrupt weapon for achieving personal ends. Consequently, the prevalent situation amongst the community members in general was the obvious spirit of heartless and mean individualism (Allen 1973:30–31). His damning description of the disorganisation of the social cohesiveness of the people in society is sketched out by Reimer (2013):

His oracles display a community not gathered with a common focus on the God of Zion but fragmented by appetite and self-interest. It is a community that feeds off suffering brought about by injustice, rather than one that in its common struggle affirms equity and mercy. Its demeanour is not marked by joyful participation in redemption and freedom but rather by loss, grief and the ruin of its land and life within it. It is finally a society whose speech leads inevitably to violence, its troubled discourse tending towards breakdown of communication within the community, as well as between the community and its God. (pp. 223–224)

Regrettably, the lamentable phenomenon of strife amongst the people destroyed the strong social implications of race and religious devotion that bound them together as a covenant community. The viable circle of friendship and family faced psychological disequilibrium as intimacy could no longer guarantee faithfulness and reliability. In fact, the disintegration and fragmentation of family life in Micah's striking commentary on the development of individualism force a man to go against his nature and outside the very core of the inner circles of interpersonal responsibility and familiarity –'friend-best friend-wife' – and keep his own suggestions and advice if he is not to encounter disloyalty and treachery (Allen 1973:30). This description of an extreme case of social disintegration in Micah's oracles clearly confirms cultural degeneration on account of corruption and moral deterioration. The social change, tension and distress in which Micah's oracles were literarily anchored reveal that family solidarity that was of primary significance within Israel could no longer be supported as 'generations had become walled off from each other and had little mutual respect and understanding' (Allen 1973:31). The cohesiveness of the entire family and household that should stand united, structured and depended on the authority of the accepted hierarchy headed by the father of the family, now lack both individual and cooperate confidence.

Sadly, the fundamental regard for virtue and disapproval of evil so as to give attention to the welfare of marginalised and most vulnerable individuals was ignored. Although they were expected to know justice (both by experience and practice), they hate good and love evil (3:1–2). Micah observes a significant disparity between the principles of the covenant for a viable community living especially in the equitable distribution of available basic resources and the unevenness and fragmentation that marked the socio-economic sphere of their lived contexts (2:1–2). Mays (1987) aptly describes the structural shift that undermined Israel's covenant community living:

The shift of the primary social good, land from the function of support to that of capital; the reorientation of social goals from personal values to economic profit; the subordination of judicial process to the interests of the entrepreneur. (p. 148)

The extent to which the deficiency of moral value affected community living is seen also in the prophet's indictment of those who exploit and defraud by corrupt commercial dealings or the perversion of the processes of justice in the interest of the wealthy (6:11–12). The shattering of the moral fabric of their society and the collapse of the basic family structure (7:2–4) constitute both a resultant societal collapse and a cause of it. Micah's dynamic emphases about viable community living are vital elements for creating a healthy viable community today. Viable community living must be a deliberate desire of community members and well-supported commitment to a covenant and constitutional ethos of justice, honesty, integrity and responsibility.

Informed prophetic advocacy

One of the saddest realities that Micah's lamentation highlights for contemporary readers and especially religious landscape, in Africa, for example, is the pervasive presence of deceitful teachers, uninformed pastors and fraudulent prophets. Generally, the reality of poverty and corruption in Africa has overwhelmingly resulted in the compromised pastoral leadership and pulpit ministry of the Christian Church (cf. Woodbridge & Semmelink 2013:79–80; Younger 2013:295–300). In the Old Testament, the prophetic concern for the oppression of the poor prioritises the demand for justice. The classical prophets were nonconformists, relentlessly exposing and denouncing exploitation, corruption and oppression in whatever shape and wherever they found it. They never maintained the status quo in the name of religion. Filled with genuine spirituality and becoming informed advocates of socio-economic justice, they proclaimed a prophetic message of 'healing and wholeness of human relationships, of the well-being of creation, and of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel' (De Gruchy 1995:44). Amos, for example, in no uncertain terms condemned the insensitivity and cruelty of the wealthy towards the poor: 'they sold the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals' (2:6), 'oppress the poor and crush the needy' (4:1) and 'tread upon the poor' (5:11) in their uncontrollable greed for gain. It is despicable to note the unfortunate tendency of the church and her leaders to undermine the human component in unjust and unreasonable socio-economic structures of livable human society and thus to defend the existing state of affairs, by not speaking out against matters of socio-economic injustice and demanding social reforms but spiritualising socio-economic contradictions. Although it is difficult to deny that poverty, corruption and injustices are basically spiritual problems arising from the depravity of fallen humanity, however, one cannot just consider these issues as spiritual ones as human beings are responsible for the administration and implementation of economic structures (Banda 2018:5). Micah's lamentation thus becomes an ethical concern that reminds contemporary religious leaders and faith communities that any attempt to sacrifice the demands of truth and justice in favour of lies will obviously bring tragic ends.

Conclusion

The prophet's lamentation indicates that corruption threatens the general well-being and prosperity of society, as it creates a fragmented and disorganised society in which social vices flourish. The lamentation is obviously as a result of the failure of Israel's leaders, who corrupted the political, socio-economic and religious structures of their community, by disregarding the covenant principles that were expected to guide them. The basic and essential moral deduction from Micah's lamentation for contemporary readers is that the prophetic lamentation demonstrates an insightful awareness of the problems that endanger the quality and fabric of human life, and all the more so, the likelihood of human survival. Consequently, reflection on Micah's lamentation of the miserable moral morass of ancient Judahite society

obviously presents one with ethical imperatives that are capable of helping in the creation and maintenance of socio-economic and religious order and ultimately overwhelm structures of corruption. Although Micah's call for ethical reform stemmed from different experiences and contexts, however, his lamentation of the moral wasteland of Judah is a stimulating invitation to contemporary readers' critical and serious self-reflection and evaluation of the impact of their actions on both human life and societal well-being.

Acknowledgements

This article forms part of the author's current research project on 'The nexus between ethics and socio-economic actuality in Micah'. The project is hosted by the chair, Prof. Dr. Christian Frevel, Old Testament Studies, Ruhr- Universität Bochum, Germany, with the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

B.O.B. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institutions of the author.

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