

**June 28, 2009**

## **Micah: What Is True Righteousness?**

**Purpose:** To help us consider Micah's portrayal of God's role in the life of the Israelites and what God expected from them and expects from us today

Key Bible reference: Micah 6

Key Verse: Micah 6.8

### **Biblical Interpretation**

The name Micah is a shortened form of the Hebrew name Micayahu, which means "Who is like the LORD/Yahweh?" The prophet's name is a statement of praise or adoration. It expresses wonder at the greatness and majesty of God.

What we know of the prophet Micah comes from Micah 1:1. We read in this verse that Micah was from a village called Moresheth [MOR-uh-sheth]. In Micah 1:14, the village bears the longer name Moresheth-gath, meaning "Moresheth of Gath." Moresheth was a country town about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. The land was hilly, and there was no major road between the two communities. Hence, though Moresheth was part of the southern nation (Judah), its citizens were relatively isolated from life in Jerusalem. No doubt the citizens of Moresheth did not always view favorably that which went on in their capital.

We also read in Micah 1:1 that the prophet lived and prophesied "in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah." This listing of kings dates Micah's ministry to the second half of the eighth century B.C., or shortly after the ministries of Amos and Hosea. Jotham, the first king listed in Micah 1:1, was the sole ruler of Judah from 742 B.C., when his father, King Uzziah, died, to 735 B.C. So we can date

the beginning of Micah's ministry to sometime between the years 742 B.C. and 735 B.C.

King Hezekiah of Judah is the last king mentioned in Micah 1:1. Hezekiah was king in 701 B.C. when the mighty Assyrian army, commanded by King Sennacherib [suh-NAK-uh-rib], invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. The ruthless Assyrian invaders destroyed many of the tiny, unfortified towns of Judah, like Micah's hometown, Moresheth. Then Assyria laid siege to Jerusalem. However, as we read in 2 Kings 18:13-19:37 and Isaiah 36-37, Jerusalem was spared the total destructive force of the Assyrian army. It is likely that the Assyrian invasion of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. prompted the prophet Micah to utter the oracles recorded in Micah 1:8-16; 3:12.

In sum, the ministry of the prophet Micah can be dated roughly to the years 740 B.C. through 700 B.C.

Micah 6:1-2. In these dramatic verses the divine court is called to order. "The LORD has a controversy with his people" (Micah 6:2b). The Hebrew word rendered "controversy" in the New Revised Standard Version is *rib*. This Hebrew word can also be translated "lawsuit." Some English translations—for example, the Good News Bible and The New English Bible—render Micah 6:2b by saying that the Lord "has a case against his people." The Hebrew word *rib*, meaning "controversy," "lawsuit," or "a case

against somebody," has its original setting in the courtrooms of ancient Israel. Its use in our Bible Lesson sets the tone for Micah 6:1-8 and places us, as readers of the prophetic text, in the visitors' gallery of the divine courtroom.

We are spectators as God charges the people of God with failing to live up to their legal obligations as specified in the covenant. (For other passages in which lawsuits and court proceedings provide the setting for prophetic oracles, see Isaiah 3:13-15; 41:21-29; 43:8-13; 45:20-25; Hosea 12:2-14.)

The Lord speaks in Micah 6:1-2 as the plaintiff in the case. The Lord has a case against the people.

Verses 3-5. Here, the situation is somewhat reversed. God seems to be the defendant, arguing that the people have no basis for being unfaithful to their covenant pledge. The complaint the people might have raised is difficult to determine. The only clue to what it could have been appears in Micah 6:3, where the Lord raises two questions: "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!"

The Hebrew word here rendered "wearied" also appears in Job 16:7a where Job comments, "Surely now God has worn me out." The same word is used in Exodus 18:8 and Numbers 20:14 to describe the weariness and exhaustion or hardships that the people of Israel experienced in Egypt and during their wanderings in the wilderness. With these passages in mind, it would seem from Micah 6:3 that the people of Israel are emotionally and physically drained. The problems of life have "wearied" them. The turmoil of everyday existence has exhausted their patience, and they are holding the Lord responsible for their weariness.

Perhaps the threat of destruction by the Assyrian army is behind the charges of the people against God. Indeed, the threat of war, the anxiety of not knowing whether one's home will be destroyed in battle, and the fear of death are enough to "weary" anyone. And so the people question whether God is in the right; they charge God with wearying them and raise the issue of whether God has kept covenant with them.

In defense, God challenges the people to testify to the ways in which God has wearied them (Micah 6:3). But no testimony is given. So, God offers a summary of the wonderful things God has done for the people of Israel (Micah 6:4-5), citing all the "saving acts of the LORD" (Micah 6:5). By presenting these examples of divine power exercised on their behalf, God offers evidence of not breaking the covenant. God testifies, "I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery." (Micah 6:4a)

God points out that God provided leaders for Israel. These leaders were Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The mention of "King Balak of Moab" and "Balaam son of Beor" in Micah 6:5 refers to a story recorded in Numbers 22-24. Balak had enlisted the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. But God foiled Balak's plans, turning the tables on him so that instead of cursing Israel, Balaam blessed Israel. The point of this entire testimony by the Lord is summarized in the word remember used in Micah 6:5: "O my people, remember."

Thus, in defense against the charges brought by the people, God testifies to all the "saving acts of the LORD" (Micah 6:5), hoping that the people will "remember" all that God has done for them. Instead of blaming God for their problems, the people need to "remember" and

"know the saving acts of the LORD" (Micah 6:5), the acts to which the people of Judah owe their very existence.

Verses 6-8. Micah 6:6-8 is among the most well-known passages in the Book of Micah—perhaps in the entire Old Testament. This portion of Scripture raises a fundamental question of faith: What must a person do in order to restore or maintain a right relationship with God? What does God expect of the people of God?

Micah 6:6-7 is a response by Israel to God's defense in Micah 6:3-5. A person representing Israel speaks in verses 6-7. These verses indicate that the people of Judah have come to a realization of their own sin. God's response has convinced the people that God is righteous and that they are not. The question raised by the people's representative cuts to the depths of human relationships with God: "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?" (Micah 6:6a)

In the lines that follow, the representative of the people of Israel reveals that he is working on an assumption that a particular kind of sacrifice will restore the relationship of Israel with God. Several kinds of sacrifice are mentioned in Micah 6:6b-7. The sacrifices increase in extravagance from a simple burnt offering in verse 6b to the offering of the person's firstborn child in verse 7b. But the declaration that comes from the divine court in Micah 6:8, our Key Verse, is that sacrificial offerings and acts of piety and liturgy do not in themselves show evidence of a righteous life. What God really wants is human love and human obedience.

Micah 6:8 is a wonderful, easily memorized summary of the kind of life that God expects the people of God to live. This verse

summarizes what it means for us to do the right thing, what true righteousness involves.

Actually, the representative of Israel was asking the wrong question of God. The proper question is not "With what shall I come before the LORD?" God does not want things. God wants the love of the people of God, a steadfast love that will not let go. True righteousness, God declares, involves humans dealing justly with one another, showing kindness or mercy toward one another, and humbly submitting our wills to the will of God. Thus God tells us, Don't come with things. Come with yourself! Paul expressed this idea in Romans 12:1: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." True righteousness, Micah 6:8 explains, is not manifest in expressions of piety and liturgy unless those acts of worship are accompanied by acts of justice and kindness toward others. These latter acts demonstrate humble submission of the human will to the will of God.