# **A THUNDER OF DISASTER (Micah 1) AND AN ASSERTION OF WHO IS TO BLAME (Micah 3)**

# ***John Goldingay***

# **Abstract**

This paper analyses the revelations in Micah 1 and 3 concerning the frightening sovereignty of Yahweh and Yahweh’s threats towards Jerusalem. It explores Micah’s exercise of his skill and gifts as a communicator in conveying these threats. It examines his account of how the action of leaders, prophets, and priests lies behind the threats. It considers what leaders, prophets, and priests were supposed to do, and what they were actually doing. It notes Micah’s combination of bad news and good news.

# **Keywords:** Yahweh, rebellion, offence, leaders, prophets, priests, Zion

This paper starts where Micah starts, with his declaration that Yahweh is coming to bring devastation on Israel on account of its rebellions and offenses. It then goes on to the account in Micah 3 of the nature of those rebellions and offenses, and in particular the responsibility of Israel’s leaders, prophets, and priests for it. It considers the way Micah talks about himself as grieving over the price Israel is about to pay for its waywardness and as providing the evidence that he is a truthful prophet, in his seeking to face Israel with the facts. And it sets the prophet’s threatening account of Yahweh and of Yahweh’s intentions for Zion alongside the more encouraging other side to Yahweh and Yahweh’s intentions, which the Micah scroll will go on to.

## **Micah and His Curator Talking about Yahweh**

In Micah as in other prophetic books, there is a part played by the prophet and a part played by a curator. A prophet typically speaks to people gathered in the temple courtyard or some other community context, conveying messages that may run to ten or twenty lines of verse. Whereas Micah himself came from a little town west of Jerusalem (1:1; see also 1:14), his messages suggest that he preached in this way in Jerusalem. In the Hebrew Scriptures, then, prophets speak, they do not write (Nissinen 2014). Eventually a scribe transcribes some of a prophet’s messages, and the scribe may also be the curator who arranges the messages so that they become an organized anthology that will speak beyond their original context. In the Micah scroll, then, the curator introduces the prophet (1:1), and then Micah himself speaks. Redaction criticism seeks to trace the process whereby curators do their work.

In the Micah scroll, an indication of the work of a curator is the promise about Zion and Jerusalem in 4:1—3, which also appears in Isaiah 2:2—4. So, either Micah’s curator took it over from Isaiah, or Isaiah’s curator took it over from Micah, or both curators took it from the work of an anonymous prophet. As this example shows, it is impossible to be sure of the extent of a curator’s work, and thus impossible to tell where the prophet’s message stops and the curator’s pen starts. With the Micah scroll, scholarly views on this matter vary more than they do with most of the Prophets, and discussion of the composition of Micah has reached a “stalemate” (Wessels 1998, 439): for instance, Bruce Waltke (2007) attributes most of the Micah scroll to Micah, while Ehud Ben Zvi (2000) attributes most of the scroll to Micah’s curator.

One result of the involvement of a prophet and a curator who is a scholar-theologian-prophet may be that they complement each other in the insights they bring. In Micah, a spectacular example would be the way the scroll as a whole speaks of God. In Yahweh’s classic self-revelation in Exod 34:6—7, the self-description is as one who is compassionate and gracious, but also one who does not acquit but attends to people’s waywardness. The story of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures illustrates this double aspect to Yahweh’s character, and the Prophets and Psalms pick up the wording that appears in the Exodus passage. However, Exodus puts the gracious side of Yahweh first and the tough side second, but the Prophets are inclined to put the tough side first, and to come to the gracious side later. It is so in Micah. After the curator’s introduction in 1:1, Micah begins:

Listen, peoples, all of them,

give heed, earth, and its fullness.

The Lord Yahweh is to be an advocate against you,

the Lord from his sacred palace.

Because there is Yahweh, going out from his place,

and going down, and walking on the heights of the earth.

Mountains will melt under him,

and valleys, they will open.

(1:2—4; all translations are my own)

At the other end of the book, the scroll declares:

Who is a God like you, carrying waywardness,

and passing over rebellion for what remains of his domain?

He has not kept his anger strong permanently,

because he loves commitment.

He will again have compassion on us, tame our acts of waywardness,

and you will throw into the depths of the sea all their wrongdoings.

You will show truthfulness to Jacob,

commitment to Abraham,

Which you pledged to our ancestors,

from past days. (7:18—20)

The Micah scroll thereby closes with one of those reflections of Exod 34:6—7 that appear in the Prophets and the Psalms, focusing on the gracious side.

In the case of the Micah scroll, then, the work of curating included structuring the compilation so that it begins and ends with visions of who Yahweh is, accounts of God’s activity and being. An understanding of God’s being and activity that combines these two visions provides a framework for reading the book as a whole. The framework gives the Micah scroll a “conceptual coherence” based on both judgment and hope (Jacobs 2001, 222).

The people who heard prophets such as Micah preach, and the people who later read the books that bear their names, might well have taken for granted that Yahweh was a loving and compassionate God in whom they could be confident. Being a prophet then meant disabusing them of assuming this too easily. Ultimately it is indeed Yahweh’s nature, but there is a more solemn side to Yahweh that they need to think about. Micah requires its readers first to come to terms with Yahweh being a threatening force operating against Israel because of its rebellion and offenses (1:5, 13). Yahweh being a powerful, threatening force can be good news for the victims of powerful people (see Mic 3). But it is bad news for the powerful themselves.

## **Listen, Peoples**

The first chapter of the scroll illustrates two aspects to Micah’s communicating. He speaks in a straight and everyday fashion, but also with subtlety.

### **2.1 Micah the Communicator**

In any culture, there are customary ways of observing and describing aspects of life such as birth, marriage, and death, and the resolving of disputes and conflicts. The Prophets presuppose the “form” of such experiences, associated observances, and ways of describing them (hence “form criticism”). These “forms” are part of the background to texts and they impart nuances to them. Micah’s account of Yahweh coming as an advocate in 1:2—4, quoted above, thus presupposes some kind of court procedure. However, Micah’s references to these familiar ways of describing aspects of life involve tweaking them so that they can enable people to think about Yahweh’s relationship with them. Micah thus shows himself a gifted and subtle preacher-poet-prophet. He knows how to work people. His listeners or readers have to pay careful attention. Or they may suspect that they will be wise not to listen or read too carefully, as they will end up being discomfited.

Micah’s message, presupposing the working of the community court, is a summons to all the earth from Yahweh. Micah calls Yahweh *’adonay*, “the Lord,” This is a familiar designation to English readers because it occurs often in English translations to replace the name Yahweh, but the term itself is not common in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Micah, it comes only in 1:2. But it constitutes “an apt introduction to talks on power” that will follow in these chapters (Wessels 1998, 438—39). Yahweh is the Lord, the powerful, sovereign God. The God who speaks is Lord over Israel, and also Lord over the peoples of every land, though they do not know it.

Yahweh who lives in the heavens, and has a palace there, is coming out from there to act like a prosecuting attorney in relation to “the peoples,” striding across the heights of the earth and causing reverberations throughout it (Mic 1:2—3). The leaders, prophets, and priests in Samaria and Jerusalem would be glad to hear this. In the period suggested by Mic 1:1, the Assyrians began to take an interest in northern Israel and its capital in Samaria. They imposed taxation obligations on it, then annexed parts, then imposed direct rule, transported many of its people, and replaced them by people from other parts of their empire, and also began to put similar pressure on Judah (though we don’t know precisely how to relate Micah’s message to the sequences of events in Israel and Judah between the 730s and the 700s). The Israelites and Judahites might be glad to hear that Yahweh is going to take action against the Assyrians.

But is Yahweh acting “against” the peoples or “among” them? That would be just as possible a translation (Ben Zvi 1998, 106—7). Mic 4:3 will speak of Yahweh making decisions “between many peoples,” sorting things out among them. It will be another expression of being Lord over all peoples, as the only God who deserves an upper-case G. It would be anachronistic or misleading to say that Micah presupposes a monotheistic theology. Mic 4:5 will also describe all the peoples going each in its own god’s name, while the Israelites go in Yahweh’s name (Schenker 1997, 441-42). There are other gods. But there is only one God.

If Yahweh is acting as an advocate among the peoples rather than coming to judge them, who are on the receiving end of the judgment? The next line clarifies that Yahweh is acting

Against the rebellion of Jacob,

yes, against the offenses of Israel’s household. (1:5)

So perhaps “the peoples” are present to be witnesses to this judgment on Israel. Perhaps the earth or land (’*erets*) on whose heights Yahweh us striding (1:2) is the land of Israel and the “heights” (*bamot*)are the “high places,” the shrines of Israel. Yes, Micah’s listeners have to listen carefully and think carefully when he speaks (Goldsmith 2011). People who actually read Micah, later, when his messages have become part of a written scroll, will be in an easier position to get the subtleties in his words (Ben Zvi 1998, 118), though they, too, may want to ignore them.

Micah uses two key images to describe Israel’s wrongdoing. The word for “rebellion” (*pesha‘*) is traditionally translated “transgression,” but it characteristically refers to acting wrongly in relation to people in authority, not in relation to some laws—though that might also be involved. So Edom, for instance, “rebelled” against Judah (2 Kgs 8:30), and the northern state of Israel “rebelled” against the Assyrians (2 Kgs 18:7—though the verb there is *marad*), and eventually lost any vestige of independence as a consequence of its rebellion. Micah argues that, in addition, it was involved in rebellion against Yahweh, who was supposed to be its “Lord,” but whose policies it did not follow.

Micah’s other image is that Israel commits “offences” against Yahweh. This word (*hatta’*) is traditionally translated “sins,” which they are, but more concretely the word suggests offences against the standards and norms set by a culture or by a deity. Micah will go on to itemize Israel’s offences as making images and acknowledging idols (1:7). This could cover both worshipping Yahweh by means of images and recognizing other deities, which might be involved in making treaties with people such as the Arameans and the Assyrians.

There is yet another subtlety about Micah’s picture. Who is the Jacob/Israel whom Yahweh is judging? “Israel” is the regular political name of the northern state well as the original name of the people of Yahweh as a whole, and “Jacob” can have the same reference. The northern state can also be referred to as “Ephraim,” which is less confusing. But using the name “Israel” opens up this further subtlety. Yahweh is indeed intending to bring catastrophe on the northern state of Israel, as happens when the Assyrians besiege Samaria. And as both Ephraim and Judah could be glad to hear about the judgment God was planning for other peoples, so Judah could be glad to hear about judgment coming on those pesky northerners.

A further aspect to the possibly equivocal nature of Micah’s words, which might trip up his listeners, becomes significant here. He speaks of Yahweh’s palace (*hekal*), from which Yahweh is coming to sort things out as king of the realm. Now, this word more often than not refers to the temple in Jerusalem (e.g., 2 Kgs 23:4; Jer 7:4), which is Yahweh’s “palace” there as Israel’s king. So here the palace from which Yahweh is coming out in judgment may be the earthly palace in Jerusalem, not the heavenly palace.

The Jerusalemites could also nod at Micah’s comments on Israel’s “rebellion” and “offenses,” which had been involved in turning from the Jerusalem temple and from David’s line, and their making images and acknowledging alien gods. Micah’s succeeding words confirm the critique.

What is Jacob’s rebellion? —

Samaria, isn’t it. (1:5)

However, Micah goes on:

But what are Judah’s shrines? —

Jerusalem, aren’t they. (1:5)

“Israel” or “Jacob” can just as easily refer to Judah as to Ephraim, and Judah is part of the Jacob/Israel that is involved in rebellions and offences. So, Jerusalem is just another collection of “shrines.” It’s that same word that is traditionally translated “high places,” the kind of sanctuaries that the Canaanites had. Micah’s pronouncement is slightly enigmatic, but it implies that Judah’s shrines and Jerusalem’s worship are just as offensive as the rebellion and offenses of Ephraim. If Yahweh is coming out from the temple in Jerusalem to act in judgment, it will be to act against Jerusalem itself.

Yahweh does intend to take action against Samaria, and the action will be ruinous, but it will also bring ruin in Judah:

Because it’s devastated, in its wounds,

because it’s come right to Judah.

It’s reached right to my people’s gate,

right to Jerusalem. (1:9)

Micah works in a way that compares with Amos. Amos 1—2 first gets Ephraim to affirm how grim are the actions of Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, and thus by implication to affirm how excellent it is that Yahweh will not turn a blind eye to their rebellions. But then he turns on Ephraim, to say that Ephraim is at least as bad and that the consequences for it will be at least as bad. Micah does something similar in reverse to Judah.

### **2.2 Consider Me, Judah**

A second aspect of everyday life that Micah picks up is the mourning procedures that follow a death in the family. Yahweh is bringing deathly calamity on Samaria and on Jerusalem.

On account of this I will lament and howl,

I will go barefooted and stripped.

I will make lamentation like jackals,

yes, mourning like ostriches. (1:8)

When someone dies, people express their grief in lamentation and wailing. Micah wants people to see that the coming calamity will deserve this kind of response. He declares the intention to embody that grief in himself to bring the point home. Isaiah 20 records Isaiah doing this, though Micah’s curator includes no account of Micah actually doing as he says. In Micah, the prophet appeals to people’s imagination simply by making a literary point (Döhling 2013). There is a further subtlety. Is it Micah who mourns? Or is it Yahweh lamenting the deadly consequences of the action that is coming (Jerome 2016)?

Another literary point surfaces in 1.9—11, a point about gender that is now striking in a cultural context where gender questions are important. In these verses, the gender and number of the words keeps changing (see further Goldingay 2021, 419—20).

Because it’s devastated, in its wounds,

because it’s come right to Judah. (feminine)

It’s reached right to my people’s gate,

right to Jerusalem. (masculine)

In Gat don’t tell of it,

don’t cry and cry. (masculine)

In Bet-le‘aprah

cover yourself in dirt. (feminine)

Pass on, you people, inhabitants of Shapir,

in shameful nakedness. (feminine and masculine)

The inhabitants of Tsa’anan

haven’t gone out. (feminine)

The lamenting of Bet-’ezel—

it will take up from you, its stance. (masculine)

There are more examples of gender switching in 2:10—12 and 6:12—13 (Runions 1998). Are Israel and Judah and their towns masculine or feminine, male or female? Can women and men both find their identity there? Might the verses discourage each sex from excluding the other? Can neither stereotype the role of the other? Can neither confine citizenship or humanity to itself? The questions the text may raise in a twenty-first century Western context, in destabilizing assumptions about gender, also link with the concept of hybridity in post-colonial thinking (Runions 1998, 234—36).

The subtle side to the preaching in Micah features further as he addresses a sequence of towns on the way down from Jerusalem to the Mediterranean, or (more to the point) on the way up from the Mediterranean to Jerusalem. They are in the “frontier lands” or “badlands” between Judah and Philistia, and near the major trade route northward along the coastal strip (Smith-Christopher 2015, 52). And they are on the route that invaders such as the Assyrians would take in coming to attack Jerusalem (for the historical background, see Shaw 1987). They comprise “the soft underbelly of Judah” (Sweeney 2000, 353). They will therefore fall first. Thus, Micah laments over their fate. But the dirge implies two ironies. One is that the disaster hasn’t yet happened. The pretend dirge is another way of seeking to win the attention of the people Micah is addressing and to get them to imagine the threatened disaster. The other is that he only half-means the dirge. He means it because he (or Yahweh) is talking about “my people.” But he is incensed about their rebellion and offenses, and in a sense, he is looking forward to seeing them chastised for it.

### **2.3 The Significance of Rhythm and of Names**

There is another feature of a dirge or lament. Poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures is not metrical, like traditional English poetry, but it is rhythmic, like rap. Typically, a line divides into two halves with three stresses in each. In 1:8, two 3-3 lines work rhythmically as follows:

On account of this I will lament and howl,

I will go barefooted and stripped.

I will make lamentation like jackals,

Yes, mourning like the daughters of the steppe

However, in poetry that expresses grief or fear or loss or anxiety, the second half-line is often shorter than the first. It mirrors life itself in bringing one up short. And almost every line in Micah’s lament works in that way.

In addition, in his lament Micah reveals yet further his skill with words in his use of paronomasia, juxtaposing similar words or working with aspects of words that are similar though etymologically unrelated. The theological or philosophical assumption behind paronomasia is that such similarities may suggest deep actual connections between things that people have not noticed.

The rhythm and the paronomasia in 1:10—15 work as follows.

In Gat don’t tell of it,

don’t cry and cry.

[2-2; the verb for “tell”, *tagidu*, resonates with the name]

In Bet-le‘aprah

cover yourself in dirt.

[2-2; the word for “dirt”, *‘apar*, resembles the name]

Pass on, you people, inhabitants of Shapir,

in shameful nakedness.

[4-1; the noun *sheper* means “beauty, goodliness”]

The inhabitants of Tsa’anan

haven’t gone out.

[2-2; the name resonates with the verb “go out”, *yatsa’*]

The lamenting of Bet-’ezel—

it will take up from you, its stance.

[3-3; the name could suggest links with this phrase]

Because the inhabitants of Marot

have writhed for something good.

[2-2; the name could suggest “bitter things”]

Because dire fortune has gone down from the presence of Yahweh

to the gate of Jerusalem.

[4-2]

Hitch the chariotry to the horse,

inhabitants of Lakish.

[3-2; it’s the great fortified town, but people are to flee]

It is the first of Daughter Zion’s wrongdoing,

because in you were present

the rebellions of Israel.

[3-2-2]

Therefore, you will give farewell gifts

for Moreshet Gat.

[3-3; the name could mean “Gat’s Bethrothal”]

The houses of ’Akzib will be a disappointment

to the kings of Israel.

[3-2; *’akzab* means “disappointment”]

I will yet bring a dispossessor to you,

inhabitants of Mareshah.

[3-2; the name could link with the verb “dispossess,” *yarash*]

Right to ‘Adullam

Israel’s splendor will come.

[2-2; “right to” is the first syllable of ‘Adullam, which means “refuge”]

As a sequence of biddings, the verses don’t make sense, but the individual biddings make sense because of the connections they suggest (see further Goldingay 2021, 425—28). Think about the towns’ names and then think about what the names imply, Micah says.

## **Listen, Heads of Jacob**

After describing in chapter 2 how some people in the community are profiting by swindling other people out of their land, in chapter 3 Micah looks behind and in front of the dynamics of this development. The chapter might be “a reflection of a struggle between rival parties” (Wessels 1997a, 127), though Micah gives no hints of this, and rather speaks as “the voice of a single prophet” confronting Judah’s leadership (Nogalski 2011, 550).

### **3.1 The Vocation of Leadership**

Chapter 3 instances a further “form” of speech that might be familiar, a confrontation or disputation such as may involve first an accusation and then a declaration of the consequences that will follow (Wolff 1990, 11, 92). The bridge between the two is typically marked by a “therefore” (see 3:12). Micah begins with another irony, a polite “please” (*na’*)before putting the boot in.

So I said, listen, please, heads of Jacob,

chiefs of Israel’s household.

It’s your responsibility to acknowledge the exercise of authority, isn’t it—

you people who repudiate what is good and are loyal to what is dire. (3:1—2)

In commenting on the responsibility of leadership, Micah introduces some terms of key significance in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word for the exercise of authority or government (*mishpat*) was traditionally translated “judgment,” though more recently it has usually been translated “justice.” It suggests having the authority to take action, and specifically to take action against wrongdoing. “The primary meaning of mishpatis ‘judgment’” and Micah is “a prophet of judgment and justice” (Candelaria 1983, 77, 76). By definition, the “heads” of the community are people who have that responsibility, but people in authority often exercise their authority in a way that ignores justice. They exercise *mishpat*, but not proper *mishpat*. It’s been suggested that the perverted *mishpat* herehas the nature of militarism (Smith-Christopher 2015), but this requires considerable inference. Rather, “the contrast in Amos and Micah” is “between ‘justice’ paid for by those with means and the lack of justice for those without ability to pay,” whereas “justice should not be something that means one thing for those with resources and another for those without” (Nogalski 2011, 546). But the leadership thus repudiate what is good and give allegiance to what is bad. The words for repudiation and allegiance (*sane’* and *’aheb*) are usually translated hate and love, but they denote not just feelings but attitudes and actions in relation to “fundamental and universal values” that are basic to life in society (Jenson 2008, 445).

The repudiation means they are people

Who tear their skin from on them,

yes, their flesh from on their bones,

And people who have eaten my people’s flesh,

yes, their skin from on them they have stripped. (3:2—3)

A brutal and savage metaphor describes brutal and savage actions (Dempsey 1999, 124). In isolation, Micah might be referring to the action of foreign nations invading Israel (Hutton 1987), but in the context, the murderers are Israelites brutalizing fellow-Israelites. The emphasis in chapter 2 on accumulation of land points to how they do it (see Wessels 1997b), though 1 Kings 21 suggests how they might be directly murderous. If people have land, they can grow food, eat, and live. If other people take away their land, they cannot and they starve. People who (perhaps quite legally) realize the debts owed to them, by taking over the land of the debtors, do not see themselves as savage or murderous, but they are (Boloje 2018; 2021). They are engaged in “economic cannibalism” (Boloje 2023, 66). In pre-monarchic times, it might have been easier for a household to stay economically viable, but the development of the society and the introduction of central government, which costs money to run, has made it harder (West 2011). Putting together 2:1-5, 3:1, and 3:5 might suggest that in Micah “denial of justice to ‘my people’ moves through three stages”: appropriating someone’s land, getting the authorities to hold back from doing anything about it, and getting the prophets to collude with the action (Andersen and Freedman 2000, 361).

### **3.2 Prophets, Seers, Diviners, Priests**

Micah moves on from the people’s rulers to their religious leaders.

Yahweh has said this

to the prophets who lead my people astray,

Who bite with their teeth

but proclaim well-being.

And someone who does not give at their word—

they sanctify war against him. (3:5)

In English “the prophets” suggests the people in the Scriptures with books named after them, but those are a tiny minority among the prophets in Israel and other ancient Near Eastern peoples. Such prophets are all people who may be convinced that God speaks to them, and many of them may be right. But most references to prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures are to “false prophets.” The Aramaic Targum simply translates the Hebrew word for “prophets” here by an expression meaning “false prophets,” as the Septuagint does in other passages.

There are two ways in which prophets might become false prophets and lead people astray. Prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel took the initiative in bringing a prophetic message to their people and its leaders, but people also took the initiative in approaching prophets to ask for a message or for guidance (e.g., 1 Sam 9:9; 1 Kgs 14:5; 2 Kgs 8:8; Jer 21; Ezek 14; 20). People may well have done this in relation to Micah. Not unreasonably, they would then be expected to give the prophet a gift in return for the help; it would be the way the prophets earned their livelihood. But if they receive no gift, there could be consequences, Micah here says. The further problem is that the prophets’ need to receive payment biases them into giving the kind of answer that people want. Prophets will not be confrontational if they hope to continue earning their living and feeding their families. That means they can lead “my people” astray, even though they may be sincere and may believe that their messages come from God. They will promise them “well-being” whether or not that is appropriate. Micah introduces another significant word, the word *shalom*, which is traditionally translated “peace,” but can also mean recompense, or can have the broader meaning of welfare. Micah referred to “my people” earlier (3:3), and there it might mean Micah’s people. Here, the context suggests it means Yahweh’s people, and it draws attention to the scandalous and risky nature of the prophets’ action. Micah’s comments point to a key criterion whereby it should be possible to tell the difference between a truthful prophet and a false prophet. A truthful prophet confronts people when they need confronting (see further Jer 23:9—40).

The second way prophets may get led astray and may lead astray is their common association with the national leadership. In the West, national leadership and religious leadership are generally separate. In Israel, state leadership was not secular; leaders claimed to be and hoped to be seen as serving God. And conversely, the religious leadership was not separate from politics. Prophets were among the king’s advisers (Smith-Christopher 2015, 114). They provided the king with God’s guidance. He then paid their salary. So, they were also under pressure to tell the king what he wanted to hear. Nathan’s encouraging David about his temple-building project is an example (see 2 Sam 7:1—3).

“Seers” and “diviners” might be the same people as “prophets.” But “diviners,” at least, implies a form of gaining guidance other than prayer and fasting, in that divination usually denotes seeking supernatural insight or guidance by means of procedures such as omens, ritual practices, and casting lots. The Scriptures usually critique divination, chiefly because it suggests procedures that other people went in for. But the Scriptures accept the use of Urim and Tummim, which was perhaps a procedure like casting lots. So divination was not inherently unacceptable.

Micah subsequently moves on from leaders and prophets to the other regular form of religious leadership, priests. Presumably he is referring to Levi’s clan who are priests through their membership of the clan that Yahweh so designated. Being a priest was thus not a matter of individual vocation, and the role did not require more training than a father might give his son, though it would require knowledge of Torah in whatever form it took in Micah’s day. The single critique that Micah makes of them is that they charge for instruction, like the prophets (3:11), which rather implies that people came to them for advice, as they came to prophets, but in their case the questions might concern matters that the Torah could be expected to cover. The priests were also responsible for offerings in the temple, from which they gained their livelihood and their families’ livelihood. So, they had no reason to be charging a fee for their work. Further, the temple for whose ministry they are responsible, in association with the monarchy, also absorbs considerable resources that ultimately come at the expense of ordinary people, as Samuel warned it would (1 Sam 8:15—17; see West 2011). This might be one way Israel built Zion with blood (3:9).

“It is permitted to you, O priest, that you should ‘live from the altar’, not to grow luxuriant” (Jerome 2016, picking up Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 9:13—14). In any culture, rulers or leaders, prophets or scholars, and priests or pastors are usually better off than the ordinary people whom they “serve” and who pay their salary. Micah thus critiques a regular feature of the dynamics of the life of the people of God.

Micah has no message for ordinary people, for the victims of leaders, prophets and priests. He does not summon them to action (Mosala 1989, 149). His challenges and declarations about Yahweh’s intentions address only the powerful. And to them he issues a further devastating threat: Yahweh is not going to be listening to their prayers, even when they are desperate and they “cry out” (3:4). People who withhold mercy from others do not find mercy themselves (Calvin 1847, 3:222, with a reference to Jas 2:11). However, the Psalms provide many examples of victims crying out to Yahweh against their oppressors, and they imply that Yahweh will listen to these pleas. Indeed, Micah’s threats to the leadership would be Yahweh’s answer to such pleas.

### **3.3 Consider Me, Judah**

In the context of his critique of the leadership, Micah draws attention to himself as he did in 1:8, but in a different connection. He claims that there is a perceptible difference between him and the other prophets.

I—I am full of energy, with Yahweh’s spirit,

and of the exercise of authority and strength,

To tell Jacob about its rebellion,

yes, Israel about its offences. (3:8)

The Micah scroll gives no account of Yahweh’s summoning Micah to be a prophet, which might mean he is a different kind of prophet from the ones who do give such an account (Eck 2018). However, though “there is no call narrative in Micah… it is implicit in this verse, which reflects Micah’s confidence that he has the authentic prophetic gifting (v. 8a) that will enable him to declare the authentic prophetic message (v. 8b)” (Jenson 2008, 137).

Yet again, Micah makes his point with some subtlety, and his hearers will need to keep listening carefully. Saying that he is “full of energy, with Yahweh’s spirit” could sound like boasting (Wolff 1990, 8), and as a way he distinguishes himself from the other prophets. Yet they would also be full of energy and would see themselves as full of Yahweh’s spirit, as Hos 9:7 implies when referring to people of the spirit who act like someone crazy. The difference with Micah is not his energy and spirit. Nor perhaps is it even his authority and strength, though arguably “insofar as it is possible for one notion to be the central critical factor in a prophet’s consciousness and speech, *mišpāṭ* was that notion for Micah” (Mays 1978). What is different is the way he uses his energy, spirit, authority, and strength: “to tell Jacob about its rebellion, yes, Israel about its offenses.” Again, his comments compare with Jeremiah’s declarations about the difference between truthful and false prophets (Jer 23:9—40).

## **Micah and His Curator Talking about Jerusalem**

Chapters 1—3 close their judgment on leaders, prophets, and priests:

Therefore, on account of you,

Zion, as open country it will be plowed,

yes Jerusalem, ruins it will become,

Yes, the mountain of the house,

shrines in a forest. (3:12)

That didn’t happen. However, this prophetic message gets quoted in another prophetic scroll. Jeremiah tells the Jerusalemites that Yahweh intends to destroy the temple and their city unless they start taking notice of the Torah and the Prophets. Priests and prophets urge that prophesying against the city is a capital offense, but some elders remember about Micah, quote 3:12, and comment:

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? He was in awe of Yahweh, wasn’t he, and he sought Yahweh’s goodwill, and Yahweh relented of the dire thing that he had spoken of against them. (Jer 26:19).

This “unique and impressive mention” of Micah (Jenson 2008, 95) opens a tiny window on questions about the process whereby memories of Micah’s preaching (and memories of other prophets’ preaching) were preserved in Judah. Yet it is also a frustrating window, as any further understanding of this process can only be a subject of guesswork, as is reflected in the impasse or “stalemate” that characterizes study of the relationship between Micah’s own preaching and the Micah scroll that we have.

Jeremiahsurvives. He is not put to death. One might then wonder whether people are just putting two and two together in implying a link between Micah’s threats not coming true and Hezekiah’s seeking of Yahweh. Yet the principle that Yahweh will relent concerning threats of catastrophe if people turn from their waywardness is a principle that prophets such as Jeremiah and Amos affirm. Micah himself doesn’t say that Yahweh will relent if the people change their ways, as if the prophecy is conditional on the response it receives. But neither does the Jonah story describe Jonah as telling the Ninevites that Yahweh would relent of the threat to bring catastrophe on their city if they changed their ways, but they did turn, and Yahweh did relent (for a while). Both the Jonah story and the account of Micah’s prophecy and its (non-)aftermath show that prophecy commonly involves not prediction but a declaration of intent that may or may not find fulfillment. Perhaps offering the possibility that Yahweh will relent risks encouraging people to go through the motions of changing without really changing. The tough-minded Micah is not someone to take that risk. Ironically, Jeremiah takes the risk, but nevertheless the people do not respond, and the kind of threat that Micah made and Jeremiah repeated came true in 587 when the Babylonians brought devastation on Jerusalem and the temple.

That calamity did not mean city and temple being totally destroyed. Both could eventually be restored and rebuilt. And this illustrates a further typical feature of Micah’s prophecy. Another way that Yahweh may not quite mean either threats or promises is that they involve hyperbole. They picture blessings in technicolor more glorious than the reality will be, and they picture catastrophes in gloom and darkness bleaker than the reality will be. Such hyperbole brings a point home.

The principle applies to the promises that immediately follow 3:12 concerning the future destiny of Jerusalem. After the threat, Yahweh affirms that “the mountain of the house” will not be reduced to “shrines in a forest” but will “become established at the head of the mountains … and peoples will stream to it” (4:1). The contrast between 3:12 and 4:1 compares with the contrasting statements about Yahweh’s toughness and compassion. Those statements gain force through coming at the very beginning and end of the Micah scroll. Here, the contrasting statements gain force through coming back-to-back. In each case, it is a common scholarly view that the tough statement derives from Micah and the encouragement from his curator (see, e.g., Wolff 1990), and the duplication of the promise in Isaiah and Micah provides evidence that placing 4:1—3 after 3:12 was an aspect of the curator’s arranging the messages in the scroll. However, it is also noteworthy that the promise in Micah begins with a “but” (or an “and” – *waw* can be translated either way), which makes a link and/or a contrast with what precedes (most translations omit the “but/and”). It makes one wonder whether it was wise for scribes to make Micah 4 a separate chapter from Micah 3.

Like the two angles on Yahweh with which the Micah scroll begins and ends, the two angles on the destiny of Jerusalem and its temple may reflect the different perspectives of Micah and his curator (see Cruz 2014) and the different contexts to which they speak, while in the context of the Micah scroll as a whole they contribute to a multifaceted presentation of complex realities (Cruz 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The opening chapters of Micah reflect the work of the prophet himself and the work of a curator. They complement each other in their affirmations about Yahweh’s toughness and his compassion. Either or both of them are skilled communicators. They drive their listeners or readers to think, and they take up aspects of everyday life and use them to bring their message home. Micah 1—3 begins and ends with the threat of darkness and disaster. In the context of the scroll as a whole, Yahweh’s threats may be easier to live with. But the scroll insists on its readers facing the threats and responding to them before they look on the bright side of Yahweh’s willingness to hold back from implementing threats and be the God of compassion. Initially, Micah focuses on the threat of catastrophe that hangs over the Ephraim and Judah because of their rebellion against Yahweh. He then goes on to itemize the failures of leaders, prophets, and priests that lie behind this rebelliousness. It is his willingness to confront his people in this way that marks him out as a truthful prophet. However, the threats to leaders, prophets, and priests could be good news to the victims of leaders, prophets, and priests.

## **Works Cited**

Andersen, Francis I., and D. N. Freedman 2000. *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible 24A. New York: Doubleday.

Ben Zvi, Ehud 1998. “Micah 1.2—16: Observations and Possible Implications.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 77: 103—20.

Ben Zvi, Ehud 2000. *Micah*. Forms of the Old Testament Literature 21B. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Boloje, Blessing O. 2018. “Trading Yahweh’s Word for a Price: Ethical Implications of the Collusion of Prophets and Priests in Micah 3:5–7, 11.” *Old Testament Essays* 31: 630—50.

Boloje, Blessing O. 2021. “ExploringReligious Power: A Re-readingof Micah’s Metaphor ofFood (Mi 3:5) in the Context of African Religious Space.” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 421.

Boloje, Blessing O. 2023. *Reading Micah in Nigeria: Ethics, Wealth, and Corruption*. International Voices in Biblical Studies 15. Atlanta: SBL.

Calvin, Jean. 1847, original 1563. *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*. Translated by John Owen. Five volumes. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society.

Candelaria, Michael 1983. “Justice: Extrapolations from the Concept *Mishpat* in the Book of Micah.” *Apuntes* 3: 75—83.

Cruz, Juan T. 2014. “Metaphor and Disunity: Tensions between Metaphors in Micah 3—5.” *Tropos* 11: 36—43.

Cruz, Juan T. 2016. *Who Is Like Yahweh? A Study of Divine Metaphors in the Book of Micah*. ForschungenzurReligionundLiteraturdesAltenundNeuenTestaments 263.Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.

Dempsey, Carol J. 1999. “Micah 2—3: Literary Artistry, Ethical Message, and Some Considerations about the Image of Yahweh and Micah.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 85: 117—28.

DöhlingJan*-*Dirk 2013. *“*Prophetische Korper: Ein exegetisch-soziologisches Pladoyer zu einer vernachlassigten Dimension der sog. ‘prophetischen Zeichenhandlungen.’” *Biblische* *Zeitschrift* 57: 244—71.

Eck, Joachim 2018. “Divine Strategies against Abuse of Power in the Opening of the Book of Isaiah and the Exodus Story: Some Aspects where Micah is Not Similar to Isaiah.” *Zeitschrift für die Altes Testament Wissenschaft* 130: 4—25.

Goldingay, John 2021. *Hosea to Micah*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Prophetic Books. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Goldsmith, Galen L. 2011. “The Cutting Edge of Prophetic Imagery.” *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 3:3—18.

Hutton, Rodney R. 1987. “Eating the Flesh of My People: The Redaction History of Micah 3:1—4.” *Proceedings, Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Society* 7: 131—42.

Jacobs, Mignon R. 2001. *The Conceptual Coherence of the Book of Micah*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 322. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Jenson, Philip P. 2008. *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: A Theological Commentary*. Library of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 496. London: T&T Clark.

Jerome of Strydon. 2016, original c. 420. *Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets*. Two volumes. Translated by Thomas P. Sheck. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Mays, James L. 1976. *Micah*: A *Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster.

Mosala, Itumeleng J. 1989. *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Nissinen, Martti 2014. ʻSince When Do Prophets Write?ʼ. Pages 585—606 in K. de Troyer, T. M. Law, and M. Liljeström, eds., *In the Footsteps of Sherlock Holmes: Studies in the Biblical Text in Honour of Anneli Aejmelaeus*. Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology. Leuven: Peeters.

Nogalski, James D. 2011. *The Book of the Twelve: Micah to Malachi*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys.

Runions, Erin 1998. “Zion Is Burning: ‘Gender Fuck’ in Micah.” *Semeia* 82: 225—46.

Schenker, Adrian 1997. “Le monothéisme israélite: Un dieu qui transcende le monde et les dieux.” *Biblica* 78: 436—48.

Shaw, Charles S. 1987. “Micah 1:10—16 Reconsidered.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106: 223—29.

Smith-Christopher, Daniel L. 2015. *Micah: A Commentary.* Old Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Sweeney, Marvin A. 2000, *The* *Twelve* *Prophets*: *Micah*, *Nahum*, *Habakkuk*, *Zephaniah*, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*. Berit Olam. Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press.

Waltke, Bruce K. 2007. *A Commentary on Micah*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Wessels, W[ilhelm] J. 1997a. “Wisdom in the Gate: Micah Takes the Rostrum.” *Old Testament Essays* 10:125—35.

Wessels, W[ilhelm] J. 1997b. “Conflicting Powers: Reflections from the Book of Micah.” *Old Testament Essays* 10: 528—44.

Wessels, W[ilhelm] J. 1998. “Micah 1, an Apt Introduction to Power Talks.” *Skrif en Kerk* 19: 438—48.

West, Gerald 2011. “Tracking an Ancient Near Eastern Economic System: The Tributary Mode of Production and the Temple-State.” *Old Testament Essays* 24: 511—32.

Wolff, Hans Walter 1990. *Micah: A Commentary*. Translated by Gary Stansell. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.

**About the Author**

John Goldingay is an Anglican priest and senior professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He lives in Oxford, England with his wife, Kathleen, where he joins in Morning Prayer at the cathedral, reads in the Bodleian Library, and walks by the Thames. He is the author of a number of books on the Old Testament and commentaries on Genesis, Psalms, Jeremiah, Hosea to Micah, and other books.