Judgment before Redemption: 
An Examination of Micah 6:1-8

by

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The book of Micah is a prophecy of judgment to a rebellious people who had broken the covenant that they had with God. Micah declares that God’s people have fallen into iniquity and thus requires action from the just nature of God. It also declares that his people are in need of a deliverer who can save them; lead them to do what God requires of them and what they are unable to do on their own.

It is the thesis of this paper that Micah 6:1-8 is part of a larger theme that announces the promise of a messianic savior from the judgment of God. This paper will illustrate the redemptive message through judgment by highlighting the structure of the book itself, the nature of the court case presented in the text, the ultimate transgression that occurred along with the people’s motivation behind it, and then finally Micah’s conclusion in the final chapter pointing to the Messiah. The themes of sin, salvation and the enablement of righteous living for the people of God also characterize the Christian walk that we must follow as well. Thus, this paper will also present an application in its conclusion for those that are living today. The Gospel itself declares to us all God’s wrath, mercy from Jesus Christ, and the ability to walk in him because of the leading of the deliverer.

The redemptive message found in Micah is connected to the structure and framework of the book itself. There is a repetition of the declaration of judgment, sins recounted and a promise of deliverance in the book, the repetition may be related to the nature of the prophetic genre itself. “The genre of the book of Micah is, as mentioned above, prophetic book, a literary work of some length that is written so as to be read and reread, that presents itself as YHWH’s word, and that is associated with a prophetic personage.”¹ Micah 1:1 starts with the declaration of judgment on Israel and Judah and moves into Micah 1:2-16 with a description of the destruction.

Micah 2:1-11 then recounts the specific offences of the people. The conclusion in Micah 2:12, however, is not complete despair but the promise of provision for the remnant which points to 2:13’s promise that, “Their king will pass through before them.”

The message repeats again in chapter 3 with the declaration of judgment and the recounting of specific offences. Chapters 4 and 5 recount the Lord’s plan of restoration for his people. Restoration will occur specifically through the person described in 5:2-4. The ruler will come from Bethlehem and Judah to rule over Israel, but whose beginning is from ancient times. He will be a shepherd of God’s people and will bring peace. This passage is specifically referred to in Matthew 2:6 as being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

This redemptive message through judgment starts again in Micah 6 in which God calls forth a court case, or *rib*, against the people for their sins. The mountains and hills themselves are called as witnesses to the case, reflecting the necessary number of participants to satisfy Deuteronomy 17:6, harkening the people back to their covenant that they have violated. “In the OT the natural elements are invoked where the covenant between YHWH and Israel is at issue, and as parties to a *rib* concerning the faithfulness of the parties to the covenant. Their role is that of witness to the original covenant.”

The Lord charges the people, not just of violating his rules but also of their inability to keep them. “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you?” (Mic 6:3).

“There is a play here between *hel’etika* ‘I burdened you’ and *he’eletika* ‘I brought you up.’ This play could be captured in English by either, ‘How have I overburdened you? . . . I unburdened you,’ or ‘How have I ground you down? . . . I brought you up.’”

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should not obey what the Lord has said, and yet they stand condemned through their pride and in need of deliverance.

The case continues with God recounting his previous salvation and protection over the people, implying ownership and covenant over them. Micah 6:4 is setting the precedent that God brought them up and redeemed them from Egypt, while also giving them godly leaders. Not only did he save them, he gave them an example to follow in the people through whom their deliverance was brought, namely Moses and others. Not only did he deliver them, but it also says specifically that he “redeemed” them from slavery. The Lord has purchased this people and thus has the claim of ownership over them.

This providential hand is also seen in the situation with Balaam, a symbol of God’s covenant keeping blessing. It is also a remembrance of the thin line between salvation and condemnation that can come through blessing and cursing. Numbers 22-24 recounts that God took the desire of a pagan king and an odd prophet and turned the curse and blessing around in order to save Israel and defeat their enemies. But for the will of God, the situation of Israel could easily be reversed as it was on Balak. God is in control of blessing and cursing, not seers, kings, or mere practitioners of religious rituals. “The reference to Balak and Balaam as well as the twofold reference to Shittim and Gilgal are intended to evoke a recollection not simply of ‘saving’ deeds of YHWH but in fact of ‘judging’ deeds of YHWH that respond to Israel’s deepest failure.”

The court narrative picks up almost directly after the story of Balaam, in the book of Numbers, at Shittim. This is to show the Lord’s righteousness in the matter and his guiltless

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keeping of his side of the covenant. In Numbers 25 it tells us that at Shittim the people were disobedient to the covenant, but that through the leader Joshua at Gilgal there was a restoration in Joshua 5. Not only does this vindicate the Lord, but it is also a condemnation to the people who stand in violation of the covenant. “This historical summary establishes God’s innocence and the guilt of his people.”

This also illustrates, once again, the close link between the theme of judgment and salvation, and God’s use of restoration through chosen leaders. The connection is made evident with the close of the Lord’s comments in Micah 6:5 that this was so “that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

The rhetorical question of the people’s voice in Micah 6:6-7 not only further shows their guilt and sin, but also their inability to follow the commands of God and thus their need of a savior to come. “It is a question that tries to provoke. And before there is the possibility of a response, the people offer a number of alternatives, always with the intention of bargaining.”

Their trust in sacrifices has been so corrupted that they think that they can bribe God with the giving of possessions. The line between being rhetorical and sarcastic is very fine here, as it quickly descends into the realm of the absurd. The offers of appeasement of “thousands of rams” or “ten thousand rivers of oil” are of such a nature that the people obviously could not give them. The irony of this is that even if those things were sacrificed God would not be satisfied, for they broke the covenant at the most fundamental level. The offering of these suggestions seem to imply that they believed that they kept the covenant, for they kept the sacrifices. They are frustrated by the continual call of God for the hearts of his people. This does not go against the idea of the sacrificial system; rather it makes clear that God cannot be bought off by the giving of things.

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The absurd suggestions of sacrifice in Micah 6:7 escalate even to the point of their “firstborn.” The rebelliousness is hard to miss in the tone, however, as the offer of the firstborn is something that was forbidden by God but presented here as a service to him. “It is cited hypothetically as the logical climax of sacrifice, the acme of religious zeal, to be prepared to give one’s dearest possession to God. Here the purpose of this sacrifice is explicitly stated to be for sin and rebellion.” There is an implication in this passage that links it to the message of salvation history, for it was not their firstborn son that God needed as an offering, but his own Son that he would give. The firstborn as payment for “transgressions” and for the “sin of their soul” was not of their own flesh but from the very God that is now calling for just judgment against them.

God’s response ignores the issues that they bring up of sacrifice and instead points them back to the root of their covenant violation. “The response is silent about sacrifices, even though he questions concern what Man should bring with him as a sacrifice as he approaches the Lord. While the questions deal with what, the response deals with how Man should approach the Lord.” In Micah 6:8 His requirement is not for more sacrifice but that they would act with justice, love mercy and walk humbly with him. “In Judaism the word for ethics is halacha which means ‘walking’; the idea is that the task of ethics is to describe how one ought to walk one’s day-by-day life.” This is not a call for them to do better but the indictment against them that they have transgressed. This is what the Lord required of them; in fact this is what the Lord had always required from the beginning of the covenant.

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This was not a requirement that was sprung onto the people but the very heart of the law that was presented to them at Sinai. “He does not desire ritual sacrifices divorced from a changed life, a life given over completely to the covenant Lord. Rather, his people must change their ways and actions. Furthermore, he had already revealed what he requires and ‘what is good.”10 In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, it is made clear that what “God requires of you” is to “fear” him, “love” him and “keep the commandments.” This command is given to them right after the people’s treason with the golden calf, and shows their inward corruption and inability to follow God consistently throughout their existence. This same indictment is given by Jesus when he charges the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 that they have, “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” Their pattern from Egypt to Sinai, Balaam and Balak, Shittim to Gilgal all point to their need of further deliverance and salvation, for they are only fit for destruction if left to their own corruption of God’s ways. “It must be said that Micah is not introducing something new to his people so much as he is pointedly reminding them of that which had always been true: Covenant obligations involve much more than sacrifice; at the heart of the covenant is total obedience.”11

Just as the other sections of Micah repeated a call to Judgment, a recounting of the transgressions and an ultimate promise of salvation through a deliverer, so too that pattern continues in the next chapter. Micah 7:7-9 specifically shifts the focus from the present condemnation to the coming salvation. “If Micah did see any hope beyond such a total catastrophe as he believed was coming on nation and temple, it must have been a future with a

new set of institutions and a new line of leaders.”\(^\text{12}\) The very God that is accusing the people is that same God that Micah says that he will look to and that he “will wait for the God of my salvation” (7:7). Micah will bear the indignation of the Lord because of sin, but the same God will also “bring me out of the light; I shall look upon his vindication” (7:9). God is the judge but he is also the deliverer from the judgment. The court declares the destruction of the people, the worth of the destruction because of their sin, but also the salvation that will being vindication from God.

While judgment comes, ultimately it is the forgiveness of God himself that will bring deliverance. The call for the Shepherd of the people is again brought up in Micah 7:14. The true nature of their salvation from judgment is seen in 7:18, in that God will be “pardonning iniquity and passing over transgression” and continues that he will not remain in anger “because he delights in steadfast love.” Micah 7:19 puts the matter to a rest with the amazing promise that not only will God have compassion on his people but that, “he will tread out iniquities underfoot” and will, “cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” God has declared righteously his judgment, the people’s violation and also his salvation that will come. Not only does he keep the covenant, but he will preserve his character and the nature of his people so that the covenant can ultimately remain.

We have traced the format of the book of Micah, with its repetition of the judgment, charges and deliverance cycle, the court case recounted for us in Micah 6:1-8, and the nature of the people’s inward transgression. We have also seen Micah’s conclusion to the cycle, pointing to the deliverance and salvation that will come from God for the inward transgression of the people. This was to show that the message of Micah 6:1-8 was part of a larger theme that

announces the promise of a savior from the judgment of God. This text is not about trying harder or shaping up, but the state of judgment the people found themselves in because of their sinful hearts and their need of salvation. While truly there should be a desire to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God, if left to ourselves this would only be a message of condemnation, for none of us could possibly fulfill it. We must, as Micah did, look to God to bring us out to the light and to bring vindication. The promised Shepherd will come and defeat our iniquities and transgressions so that we may be delivered.

This divine message has much that we can learn and apply in our own modern day. Micah’s words must be given the proper weight and time for explanation, however, lest they be taken inappropriately. In a small church context, specifically presented in the format of a sermon, the historical and cultural context must be established. Before we can apply it to today, the above information we have already recounted will be necessary to understand what it meant then. The differences between our era and the text must be established. We are under a different covenant. We live after the time of the Messiah’s sacrifice. The canon of Scripture is closed, thus we do not rely on prophets. We are not organized into a specific national-religious body; rather we are organized as the church. Explaining these differences help to prevent incorrect application.

The first, and most important point, is that the people fell into sin because of their own sinful nature. They rebelled against God and were thus rightly deserving of God’s judgment. It was through the coming Shepherd and ruler that all was indeed set right, through Jesus Christ. He enabled us to live in the New Covenant with the law of God written on our hearts (Jer 31:31-34). The Gospel is present in a shadowy form in Micah and can point us to the expectation and longing for the deliverer.
There are other lessons we can learn as well, such as the fact that God cannot be deceived by outward acts of religious devotion. While they hid behind sacrifices, we can hide behind good works, church services, Bible studies, missionary activities and other events in order to mask our sinfulness before God. God requires all of who we are, including our inward devotion and obedience, not just an outward show of religiousness. This very charge of being outwardly righteous but inwardly hold to sin is the very trap that the Pharisees fell into (Luke 11:39).

We must also learn from their destruction and take it as a warning to us. They were the people of God but that did not stop him from bringing an end to their sinfulness. Thankfully, because of the grace and mercy shown through Christ we are saved from the wrath of God. This does not mean, however, that he will allow us to continue in sin. We are told to learn from the judgment placed upon the people of Israel so that we can be cautious of being too presumptuous with our own faith (Romans 11:17-21). Rather, in his love he will chastise us so that we will turn our hearts back to him (Hebrews 12:6-8).

Lastly, we must strive to live according to the word of the Lord through Micah 6:8 that we are to, “do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” We can only do this truly through the working of the Spirit in our lives. These are the weightier matters of the Law that we should concern ourselves with and not with the minute issues such as tithing herbs (Matthew 23:23). These attributes are the attributes of Christ, who is the very definition of humbleness, mercy and justice. He humbly left his heavenly estate to take on the form of a man and sacrificed himself for us in mercy so that the justice of God could be satisfied. Just as the people in Micah 6:7 offered their own sons hypothetically, God gave his own son in actuality. Through Christ’s righteousness God was able to do what the law of Moses could not do on its own, enable people to walk in righteousness (Romans 8:3-4).
The material here is good for unbelievers as well as mature Christians and is challenging on many levels. As long as it is exposited in its context and draws out the applications above, the fullness of Micah’s message can be explained to avoid confusion. Micah is about God’s holiness, judgment, mankind’s sin, religious hypocrisy, the Lord’s compassion and also his promise of deliverance. The main themes that run through the entire Bible can be found and learned from these passages.
Bibliography


