



Research Article

Corruption of the “Powerful” in Ancient Judah in Micah 2:1-11 and 3:1-12: An African Reflection

ABSTRACT

Corruption in high places of societies is known everywhere around the globe. This phenomenon is not something new among God’s people. The book of Micah shows that corruption among leaders of all sectors of the society existed in ancient Judah. This article looks at the book from the perspective that the powerful men in Judah were perpetrators of corruption. The poor and needy suffered in the hands of these men. Surprisingly, these men claimed to be religious. The prophet Micah as a concerned citizen preached against these men and their corrupt practices. This article reveals that the corrupt behaviour of “powerful” in ancient Judah pertains in African societies. It challenges the Church in Africa to stand up to preach against these men and their evil deeds. It finally shows that evil attitudes of the “powerful” bring down societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a social evil. It is most perpetrated by the rich, civil and religious leaders in societies. Unfortunately, it is the poor and needy who suffer most in the hands of these “powerful” men. This article seeks to show that among God’s covenanted people, ancient Judah, corruption by high ranking members of the society existed. The article analyzes Micah 2:1-11 and 3:1-12 to reveal the kind of people who perpetrated corruption in Judah, the kind of corrupt practices they engaged in, and who were the victims of corruption. The study shows a true prophet, Micah, publicly exposed the perpetrators and spoke against their corrupt practices. However, these men thought YHWH was with them and so rejected the message of the prophet. The article shows that the wickedness of the “powerful” brought hardships on the citizens. The article further demonstrates that the situation of ancient Judah is a reflection of contemporary African societies. It shows that African societies need “Micahs” to strongly expose the perpetrators of corruption and boldly speak against their practices.

DEFINITION AND FORMS OF CORRUPTION IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Definition

Many Hebrew words are used for the word *corrupt*.² **הָבִיל** used in the Piel means to “ruin,” “destroy”; in the Qal it means “act corruptly.”³ **נָוֶה** means “to waste away”; “to cause to waste away,” i.e. gradually to ruin others by oppression.⁴ **שָׁחַת** means “to spoil,” “to destroy,” “to ruin,” “to pervert,” “to corrupt”;⁵ as in Ezekiel 28:17, to corrupt wisdom, to pervert it to the purpose of craft and deceit.

² See William Wilson, *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987), 97.

³ See Carl P. Weber, “הָבִיל” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:258; David J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 3:149-50.

⁴ Wilson, *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, 97.

⁵ Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 2003), 1124; see also Wilson, *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, 97; D. Vetter, “שָׁחַת,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 3:1317.

Forms of Corruption

Several acts of corruption are directly mentioned and condemned in the Bible. The following biblical references are simply a sampling of the numerous texts in the Old Testament which condemns a multiplicity of corrupt behaviours: bribery [שחד] – e.g., Exod 23:8; 1 Sam 8:3; Deut 10:17; 16:19; 2 Chr 19:7; Prov 17:23; Mic 3:11); cheating [התל] – e.g., Gen 31:7 and Exod 8: 25); covetousness [חמד] – e.g., Exod 20:17; deceit [עקב] – e.g., Jer 17:9; dishonest gain [בצע] – e.g., 1 Sam 8:3-5; extortion [עשק] – e.g., Lev 5:23; Ezek 22:29; false testimony/lying [שקר] - e.g., Exod 20:16; deception [גנב] – e.g., Gen 31:26; oppression [לחצ] - e.g., Exod 22:21; 23:9; greediness [בצע] - Prov 15:27; Ezek 22:27; coercion/robbery [גזל] – e.g., Gen 31:31; Ps 62:10; Isa 61:8; falsification [חלף] – e.g., Lev 27:10; injustice [עיל] – e.g., Lev 19:35); defraud [עשק] – e.g., Micah 2:2; hoarding [חסן] – e.g., Isa 23:18; pretending [נכר] – e.g., Gen 31:32; corruptness (perverseness) [לזת] of lips – e.g., Prov 4:24.

Corruption is ruining God's work (Gen 6:11-12) and acting contrary to his command (Exod 32:7). It includes any act that is tantamount to turning away from God (Deut 9:12; 31:29; 32:5; Isa 1:4; Ps 14:1). Moral corruption implies the loss of integrity and of virtue.

THE SOCIETY OF THE PROPHET MICAH

From Amos, a generation earlier we have first-hand knowledge of the moral rot at work inside Samaria (cf. Amos 2:6-7; 4:6-9; 5:10-12; 8:4-6). According to Hosea a generation later, the same sorry situation pertained. Micah delivered his messages to Jerusalem during the reigns of Jotham (742-735 BC), Ahaz (735-715 BC), and Hezekiah (715-686BC). From information given us later by Isaiah and Micah we learn that the moral rot in Samaria prevailed in Jerusalem too.

In Micah's day, increasing affluence led to increasing callousness (2:1-2) and eventually, if not inevitably, to blatant disregard of foundational laws from YHWH (6:10-12). Those responsible for administering justice in accordance with these laws became involved in conspiracy, bribery and other forms of corruption (3:1-3, 9-11; 7:3).⁶ Dishonest practices prevailed everywhere, since the judges were venal and the poor had no redress (6:10-11; 7:1-4a). Moral corruption was so rife that it even debauched the nation's religious leaders. This venality became endemic, even in a purported theocracy, when gifted prophets (2:6, 11; 3:5-7) and educated priests (3:11) prostituted themselves for their elite pimps. To be sure the nation looked religious as it thronged the Temple and offered lavish gifts, but the moral covenant, which mandated a loving spirit towards God and one's neighbour, had been replaced by a covenant between the powerful to spoil the poor (chs 2-3).⁷ Thus all these forms of corruption took place under the veneer of continuing religious performances (3:1), to which the wealthy minority regularly subscribed and which they would have indignantly denied to be in any sense a veneer. They had managed to perfect the perennial heresy of compartmentalizing their religious beliefs and practices from their daily occupations and business.⁸

Micah attacked the establishment for abandoning divinely ordained standards in favour of self-interest, to the point of neglecting or actively ill-treating the underprivileged. He saw Judah to be on the brink of disaster a close link between the social and economic abuses of the Judean law-courts and general civic administration.⁹

ANALYSIS OF MICAH 2:1-11 AND 3:1-12

Corruption by the Rich - Micah 2:1-5

¹Woe to those who plan iniquity,
to those who plot evil on their beds!
At morning's light they carry it out
because it is in their power to do it.
²They covet fields and seize them,
and houses, and take them.
They defraud people of their homes,
they rob them of their inheritance.
³Therefore, the Lord says:
"I am planning disaster against this people,
from which you cannot save yourselves.
You will no longer walk proudly,
for it will be a time of calamity.

⁶ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 104-105.

⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, *Micah: An Introduction and Commentary in Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 138-39.

⁸ Prior, *Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 105.

⁹ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 240.

⁴In that day people will ridicule you;
 they will taunt you with this mournful song:
 ‘We are utterly ruined;
 my people’s possession is divided up.
 He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.’”
⁵Therefore you will have no one
 in the assembly of the Lord to divide the land by lot.

The men addressed here are the rich people in Jerusalem, members of the power structure in Judah’s society, “whose riches had greatly increased during the long and prosperous reign of Uzziah.”¹⁰ John Marsh describes them as “the enemies within.”¹¹ The interjection הוֹי (hōy) has been interpreted by some as “alas,”¹² the cry of a funeral lament (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 13:30; Jer 22:18). But it is interpreted as “woe to” in contexts of accusation and threat, and the mood is one of scorn and criticism,¹³ which is the case here. However, if the former is meant here, then Micah is here placing the wielders of power under God’s verdict of death.

On their beds in the night they plan to get rich by violence. How can they carry out their evil plans on their beds? Renaud explains that the distinction between projecting and acting are attenuated in Semitic anthropology. For instance, in Ps 58:3, the verb פָּעַל is connected with activity “in the heart,” which can be translated in English as “forge.” In Ps 58:3 as in Micah 2:1, this inward decision is followed by the outward action in the next verse.¹⁴ Then they carry out their evil plans *at morning’s light*. The irony here is that thieves usually cover their evil deeds with the darkness of night. In ancient Near East courts were held when the sun rose because it symbolized the dispelling of the darkness that covered the crime (cf. Job 38:12-13). But these “legal sharks” performed their treacherous acts at daybreak by perverting the legal system.¹⁵

Verse 2 moves from a general description of conduct to specific deeds of these men. The deeds of the powerful were coveting and seizing people’s land and houses. Hence Alfaro calls them “landgrabbers”¹⁶ and Waltke “venal land barons.”¹⁷ Micah uses the word “covet,” the Hebrew חָמַד, which means self-centred desire. Boice defines covetousness this way:

It means to want earnestly something you do not have, particularly something belonging to another person. It means not to be satisfied with what God has already given you. It means to be materialistic and greedy.¹⁸

This is the word used for the last of the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:21; cf. Exod 20:17). So Micah accuses them of breaking this tenth commandment.¹⁹ As Boice posits, “the tenth commandment reveals that sin is essentially a matter of the heart, for coveting is something that exists internally long before it expresses itself in any outward action.”²⁰ For Waltke, “coveting points to the human heart as the source of spiritual malady and unethical behavior toward another human’s property.”²¹ Their covetousness has led them into the plotting and violence they are blamed for. As Alfaro shows, the covetousness of the rich “inspires all their works and actions and produces all sorts of injustice.”²²

Micah uses the word עָסַף, “oppress” or “defraud,” which represents a situation where the stronger takes away, either directly or indirectly, the produce and labour of the weaker, giving nothing in exchange.²³ *Oppress* “speaks of

¹⁰ John Merlin Powis Smith, *Micah, Zephaniah and Nahum* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985), 56.

¹¹ John Marsh, *Amos and Micah* (London: SCM, 1959), 94.

¹² See, e.g., Richard Clifford, “The Use of Hōy in the Prophets,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 458-64; James Williams, “The Alas-Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets,” *HUCA* 38 (1967): 75-91.

¹³ Bruce K. Waltke, *Micah*, vol. 2 of *The Minor Prophets*, ed. Thomas McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 635.

¹⁴ Cited in Waltke, *Micah*, 634-35.

¹⁵ Waltke, *Micah: Introduction and Commentary*, 157.

¹⁶ Juan I. Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty: A Commentary on the Book of Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: The Handsel, 1989), 23.

¹⁷ Waltke, *Micah: Introduction and Commentary*, 156.

¹⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, *The Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 325.

¹⁹ Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty*, 23.

²⁰ Boice, *Minor Prophets*, 325.

²¹ Waltke, *Micah*, 636.

²² Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty*, 23.

²³ Waltke, *Micah: Introduction and Commentary*, 157; idem, *Micah*, 637.

violence, and violence is not confined to physical assault.”²⁴ Prior suggests it could “be by making loans and then foreclosing on them.”²⁵ For Waltke, it could be by “using dishonest scales (Hosea 12:7-8) or by extortion, either by employing naked force (Isa 52:4; Jer 50:33) or by manipulating the legal system.”²⁶ The parallel in Amos 5:7, 10-17 suggests Micah had manipulating the court in mind. Thus in corrupt courts the bureaucratic sharks finagled the farmers’ patrimonies away from them.

These men could engage in these corrupt practices “because it is in their power to do it” (v. 1). Prior describes this phrase as “the give-away line.” He explains that wealthy and successful people usually reach a point in their lives when there is nothing they reckon they cannot achieve or acquire. They have the resources; all they need is the opportunity. And they become accustomed to using their resources to create their opportunities; the means and the morals are irrelevant. The bottom line is “I want it and I am going to get it.”²⁷ As Mays asserts, “the source of their dreams is opportunity created by their power.”²⁸ Since they controlled the social structure, they had a free hand to perpetuate their deeds with impunity.²⁹ So the root of the evil was power at the service of greed; without their power, their greed would not have been fulfilled.³⁰ Thus in verse 2, injustice shows itself, according to Micah, primarily in three activities: in coveting what belongs to others, in perverting justice, and in hypocritical religiosity.³¹

Verses 3-5 provides YHWH’s punishment for these powerful men in Judah. They will bow to the yoke of a captor and walk in humiliation. As these strong and mighty men ruined others by taking their fields and houses, so others stronger than them will take theirs. According to v. 5, their sentence looks to a future beyond the Exile.

Dispute between the False Prophets and Micah – vv. 6-11

⁶“Do not preach”—thus they preach—
“one should not preach of such things;
disgrace will not overtake us.”

⁷Should this be said, O house of Jacob?
Is the Spirit of the Lord impatient?
Are these his doings?

Do not my words do good
to him who walks uprightly?

⁸But you rise against my people as an enemy;
you strip the robe from the peaceful,
from those who pass by trustingly
with no thought of war.

⁹The women of my people you drive out
from their pleasant houses;
from their young children you take away
my glory for ever.

¹⁰Arise and go,
for this is no place to rest;
because of uncleanness that destroys
with a grievous destruction.

¹¹If a man should go about and utter wind and lies,
saying, “I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,”
he would be the preacher for this people!

In these texts, Micah’s audience confronts him; these were the same oppressors that he condemned in 2:1-5 and 8-10. These oppressors protested – they rejected Micah’s preaching. Thus Micah’s addresses did not please the corrupt great

²⁴ Prior, *Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 126.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Waltke, *Micah: Introduction and Commentary*, 157.

²⁷ Prior, *Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk*, 126.

²⁸ James Luther Mays, *Micah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 63.

²⁹ Thomas E. McComiskey, *Micah*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 407.

³⁰ Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty*, 24.

³¹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah the Prophet*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 8.

men.³² Their objections to Micah’s preaching were grounded in theology, a theology which assured them of God’s perpetual blessing, of his long-suffering and patience, and of his mighty acts on behalf of his people - Micah’s threats are irreconcilable with the goodness of YHWH. But a “theology which knows only of blessing and protection and success” was a wrong theology.³³ Delbert Hillers posits that “Do not prophesy” in v. 6 is plural, and therefore they did not reject only the words of Micah, but any prophetic reproach as in Amos 2:12. He stresses that emending the text to the singular misses the point.³⁴

In vv. 7b-10, Micah relies in the name of God. He reacts that while God speaks compassionately to the upright, these oppressors rise against the innocent like an enemy. In v. 7, “walk” refers to the manner of one’s life and according to Micah his opponents had not been walking uprightly.³⁵

In v. 11, Micah characterizes these people by drawing a portrait of the sort of celebrity preacher they are itching to hear: a preacher who would proclaim the glories of wine and liquor; a preacher who would befog and befuddle their sensibilities, who would provide beautiful decoration and a pleasant background for their machinations, who would mesmerize them with visions of comfort and of “the good life.” Thus Micah counters with a sarcastic comment that what they really want are preachers who “go about uttering falsehoods,” who will tell them what they want to hear as long as they keep providing food and drink.³⁶ Micah is scathing: these oppressive landowners would prefer a drunken liar for their prophet, one who would pander to their need for assurance.

Corruption by Judges and Public Officials – Micah 3:1-4

¹And I said:

Listen, you heads of Jacob

and rulers of the house of Israel!

Should you not know justice?—

²you who hate the good and love the evil,

who tear the skin off my people,

and the flesh off their bones;

³who eat the flesh of my people,

flay their skin off them,

break their bones in pieces,

and chop them up like meat in a kettle,

like flesh in a caldron.

⁴Then they will cry to the Lord,

but he will not answer them;

he will hide his face from them at that time,

because they have acted wickedly.

The “heads of Jacob” and “leaders of the house of Israel” are the public officials of Jerusalem. The terms *Israel* and *Jacob* are used of the Southern Kingdom. Only Judah was left to represent the covenant people of God, for the north had been wiped out by Assyria.³⁷ The titles רֹאשׁ “head” and קִנְיָן “leader” are synonyms.³⁸ Both are associated with the administration of justice (see 3:9, 11). The earliest use of “head” as a title for leader in the Old Testament is Exod 18:25 where it is applied to the “able men” whom Moses appointed to serve as judges for division of Israel; they were also called שְׂרִיפִים “officers”, which is the title Isaiah gives to the men in Jerusalem who are responsible for justice (Isa 1:23). Traditionally, the elders had a responsibility of presiding over the court in the gates of villages and towns. However, in Jerusalem there were officials appointed by the king to serve as judges (2 Chr 19:4-11; Deut 16:18-20).

With an accusing question Micah states that the official task of the heads of Jacob when they function as judges in the court is to administer מִשְׁפָּט “justice”. מִשְׁפָּט went beyond just conformity to legal standards. It was YHWH’s order for the covenant community as set forth in the traditions handed down from generation to generation. It was to reflect YHWH’s character and commands designed to restore those who were wronged to their proper place in the community. Such “justice” was to rescue the endangered, help the hurt, and end the suffering of victims of violence. Its

³² Carl F. Keil, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 10 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, trans. James Martin (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 300.

³³ James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1998), 171.

³⁴ Delbert Hillers, *Micah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 34.

³⁵ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 27.

³⁶ Daniel J. Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 305.

³⁷ Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 306.

³⁸ Mays, *Micah*, 78.

purpose was not only to punish the wrongdoer but also to offer aid to the innocent.³⁹ The verb “know” here means to be skilled in acquaintance with the normative legal traditions of justice and sound in recognizing their authority. Those who know justice will reach the right decision, the finding which upholds justice. Micah views Judah’s leaders in the light of traditions like those recorded in Exod 18:13-27 and in Deut 1:9-18, which define their obligation to be righteous judges, free from partiality and impervious to bribery. The right decision was the concern of God himself (Deut 1:17), so the righteousness of a judge was an obligation to YHWH.⁴⁰

In v. 2a, alongside their responsibility Micah sets the reality of their conduct: they hate what is good and love what is evil. In v. 2b-3, the leaders are described as “cannibals in the court”⁴¹ and “legal butchers”.⁴² They skin their victims, strip their meat, chop their bones, and lump them in boiling kettles. “Eating their flesh” was a common expression for oppression.⁴³ The metaphor uncovers the vicious nature of the economic and legal processes by which the powerless are devoured. Micah’s words give the impression of a wicked conspiracy at work. The judges were hand in glove with the criminal elite who made it worth their while or were even included in their ranks. “The defenseless were skinned of property and money to swell the fortunes of those who should have been their protectors.”⁴⁴

Verse 4 gives the punishment that will be meted out to these leaders. The precise details are not given though. However, Micah portrays a time in the future when circumstances will wring a cry of anguish from the guilty leaders. The fate of suffering they brought on their victims will come upon them. Thus, those who prey on the helplessness of others will themselves know the terror of helplessness. The concluding measure echoes the indictment and states its significance as the basis for the future of Judah’s leaders; YHWH does not answer the laments of those who choose evil instead of good.

Corruption of Religious Leaders – Micah 3:5-8

⁵Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets
 who lead my people astray,
 who cry “Peace”
 when they have something to eat,
 but declare war against those
 who put nothing into their mouths.
⁶Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
 and darkness to you, without revelation.
 The sun shall go down upon the prophets,
 and the day shall be black over them;
⁷the seers shall be disgraced,
 and the diviners put to shame;
 they shall all cover their lips,
 for there is no answer from God.
⁸But as for me, I am filled with power,
 with the spirit of the Lord,
 and with justice and might,
 to declare to Jacob his transgression
 and to Israel his sin.

Micah accuses the prophets he knew of corrupting their office; what the people heard from them was based, not on YHWH’s way, but on self-interest. Clients were given calculating manipulating words as the revelation of God. They heard words empty of divine reality and were drawn by deceit into a swamp of professional avarice.

In two scornful and derisive lines Micah uncovers the true sources of the prophet’s words. What comes out of their mouths depends on whether anything goes in. Feed them and you hear good words; slight them and you hear of your doom. Jerusalem’s prophets produce divinations for money (3:11). The old seers and prophets had received gifts and fees for their services (1 Sam 9:6-10; 1 Kgs 18:19; Amos 7:12). But in the history of the prophetic guild, the patronage of the royal house and the support of the emerging commercial urban class had turned the custom into the controlling concern of the prophets. The rich men in Jerusalem had drawn prophet and priest into their own environment

³⁹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; Carisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996), 317-18.

⁴⁰ Mays, *Micah*, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴² Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets*, 317.

⁴³ Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 307.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

where money talked louder than God.

Because the false prophets have misused and corrupted God's gifts of revelation to them, the gifts will be taken away, and they will have no further divine illumination given to them (vv. 6-7). They will in the words of Amos, suffer a famine of the word of the Lord (Amos 8:11-12) and even should they call upon the Lord in truth, the Lord would not answer them. They will be shame before the people and will cover their lips. To cover the upper lip was a sign of mourning in Israel (Ezek 24:17, 22) and was a gesture required of lepers (Lev 13:45), but here it is apparently a sign of shame because the prophets will have nothing to say.⁴⁵ As Simundson asks, "what good is a visionary with no vision, a prophet with no word from God, a diviner who has lost contact with the divine?"⁴⁶

In v. 8 Micah continues his polemic against false prophets (3:5, 11) and lays claim to his authority. He distinguishes himself from the other prophets. Unlike them, he demonstrates his uncompromising stand against a corrupt society. This verse provides a profile of Micah's personality.⁴⁷ First, his ministry is based on the Spirit of God, not sensuality, not a pandering spiritual huckster; second, he proclaims sin and judgment, not peace; and third, he establishes justice and does not foster injustice.⁴⁸ In view of this, he is able to declare to Judah his transgression and sins. Unlike his rivals, he does not join society's moneymaking entourage. His sole motive is to encourage right and discourage wrong. Uninfluenced by fear or favour, he is filled with courage to speak uncompromisingly in God's name, unpopular though his message may be. As Allen shows, "it is one thing to possess a knowledge of what is wrong, but to be effective also requires the fortitude to pass on that knowledge. This was the quality that regularly marked out the true prophet who challenged society in OT times."⁴⁹ They were able to face the corrupt society in the power and might of the Spirit of God.

The Corruption of the Leaders: Judges, Priests and Prophets – 3:9-11

⁹Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
¹⁰who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
¹¹Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the Lord and say,
"Surely the Lord is with us!
No harm shall come upon us."

In v. 9a, the *rulers or leaders of the house of Jacob* has a broader meaning than used in 3:1, which referred to judicial leader. Here it refers to all leaders of the community as indicated in Isa 3:2-3: mighty man and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, captain of fifty and man of rank, counselor and skillful craftsman and expert in charms – all those who in any way guided the life of the community or had authority over it.

In vv. 9b-10, once again Micah traces the source of the problem back to man's immoral appetite. Instead of delighting in justice, they are repulsed by it. From their darkened hearts come distorted actions: they twist everything that is upright. Instead of being a theocracy under God's law, Israel has become an oligarchy under tyrants. The leaders build the city at the cost of bloodshed and violence (NIV: wickedness). King Hezekiah, in the time of Micah carried on extensive building and water projects (2 Chr 32:27-30). Building the city with blood and violence could be an allusion to the use of forced labour for such projects, which led to destruction of Jerusalem's ordinary citizens. "The blood of the poor is converted into money and buildings."⁵⁰

Micah looks with distaste at the new buildings that had evidently mushroomed throughout Jerusalem. Huge sums had been spent by the pacesetters of society. But Micah wastes no time admiring the architectural splendor of these new properties. Instead, he criticizes the immoral means by which they were built.⁵¹ And so in v. 11 Micah repeats the indictment of the judicial leaders, the judges and prophets as was in 3:1-8. In their greed and avarice, the judges

⁴⁵ Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, 320-21.

⁴⁶ Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 315.

⁴⁷ Wolff, *Micah the Prophet*, 4.

⁴⁸ Waltke, *Micah: Introduction and Commentary*, 164.

⁴⁹ Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 314.

⁵⁰ Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty*, 38.

⁵¹ Allen, *Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 317.

accept bribes forbidden in the covenant law (Exod 23:8; Deut 16:18-20). The prophets gave oracles for money. A new group is included here. The *priests teach for a price* (v. 11b). They were responsible to teach the Torah and the whole sacred tradition of YHWH's words and deeds, handed down through the generations to give direction and meaning. But they will teach only if they are paid. Although the priesthood was provided for by special arrangement (see Num 18:20; Deut 18:2), their greediness led them sell YHWH's word for a covetous price.

The irony is that all of these greedy and irresponsible leaders of the Jerusalemite community nevertheless profess a pious faith in God. From the beginning of Israel's history, YHWH was present in the midst of his people. His presence with his people was symbolized by the ark of the covenant, which was conceived to be the base of YHWH's throne. No harm could come to them as long as YHWH was there, they thought (cf. Ps 46:5). Surprisingly, Jerusalem's leaders at the time of Micah accepted this doctrine without devoting their hearts to God (cf. Isa 29:13); they have assumed the truth of Israel's tradition without absorbing anything of the ethic integral to it. They rely on "cheap grace," in which their religion is simply a source of security and comfort, with no thought of responsibility and obedience. "How tragic that they could see no inconsistency between selfishly exploiting their wards and sanctimoniously expressing faith in the protective presence of their God!"⁵² "A claim that we believe in God is no good if our actions do not match our words."⁵³

The Consequences of Corruption on a Nation – 3:12

¹²Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

The nation was in trouble. The services available in the nation have been corrupted. A legal problem? Take it to the judge. A religious problem? Take it to the priest. A personal problem? Take it to the prophet. But a satisfactory answer was guaranteed only if money passed from hand to outstretched hand.

Micah wanted to see justice triumph in Judah. But instead he saw each branch of government supporting the others in overturning justice and pulling the highest standards down.⁵⁴ What these pious leaders forgot was that YHWH's presence in their midst could also be a consuming fire. Because of the sin of the leaders, the fate of Samaria (1:5c-7) will also be the fate of Jerusalem (v. 12). The *temple* will be destroyed and its *mound* will become a *plowed field*. Jerusalem, with all of its buildings built "with blood," *will become a heap of rubble*, and its site will be *overgrown* by trees and *thickets*. The temple where the true God has been ignored and insulted will become similar to the high places of the idols which Micah had condemned at the beginning of his work (cf. 1:5). The final sentence of destruction has been passed. The sin of the few will result in YHWH's destruction of all. The sentence pronounced by Micah did not fulfil in his time. It was recalled by the leaders of Jerusalem a century later in the time of Jeremiah (26:16-19). But YHWH's word of sentence did not return to him void. In 587 BC, the armies of Babylonia destroyed Jerusalem with its temple, and the people mourned:

O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble. (Ps 79:1)

The book of Lamentations graphically describes the fulfillment of Micah's words:

For this our heart has become sick,
for these things our eyes have grown dim,
for Mount Zion which lies desolate;
jackals prowl over it. (Lam 5:17-18)

AN AFRICAN REFLECTION

Any reader of Micah 2:1-11 and 3:1-12 who is conversant with Africa, either an African or non-African, will testify that the situation of ancient Judah is a vivid description of contemporary Africa. The biblical texts mirror the African situation where people in authority and the rich engage in corrupt practices to the detriment of the well-being of the

⁵² Ibid., 319.

⁵³ Paula Gooder, *Hosea to Micah* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005), 191.

⁵⁴ Boice, *Minor Prophets I*, 333.

citizens.

African Social Ethics

Just as ancient Judah had a standardized social ethics enshrined in its scriptures, so there is a standardized African morality and ethics that need to be upheld in an African society. As Mbiti shows,

[m]orals deal with the question of what is right and good, and what is wrong and evil, in human conduct. African peoples have a deep sense of right and wrong. In the course of the years, this moral sense has produced customs, rules, laws, traditions and taboos which can be observed in each society. Their morals are embedded in these systems of behavior and conduct.⁵⁵

Africans test and approve its community members' quality of life by their ethical values and morality. Therefore, in African societies, to say a person is "good" or "bad" has profound connotations because it sums up the whole image of the person in the context of their actions.⁵⁶

In view of this, a corrupt member of an African society is expected to know that by offering or accepting a bribe he or she is automatically a bad person. According to African moral life and teaching, robbery, murder, rape, telling lies, stealing, being cruel, saying bad words, showing disrespect, practicing sorcery or witchcraft, interfering with public rights, backbiting, being lazy or greedy or selfish, breaking promises, are all morally wrong and evil, and so whoever practices them is considered a bad or evil person.⁵⁷ "African morals lay a great emphasis on social conduct, since a basic African view is that the individual exists only because others exist"; and "[i]t is morals which have produced the virtues that society appreciates and endeavors to preserve, such as friendship, compassion, love, honesty, justice, courage, self-control, helpfulness, bravery, and so on."⁵⁸

Corruption in Africa

Just like ancient Judah, Africa is said to be a continent where people are religious and so fear God. It is on record that Christianity has flourished in Africa with most people claiming to be Christians. Paradoxically, just like ancient Judah, corruption has pervaded every part of the African society. "A report prepared for the African Union in 2002 estimated that corruption costs Africa \$148 billion annually – more than a quarter of the continent's entire gross domestic product."⁵⁹ Corruption "has killed more African than slavery and colonialism combined."⁶⁰ It is the most destructive among all African social diseases. The continent is widely considered among the world's most corrupt societies. Corruption in Africa covers a lot of different phenomena – bribery, theft, embezzlement, fraud, money laundering, tax evasion, collusion, nepotism, favouritism, facilitation payments and many others. As Kofi Anan indicated, corruption "undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights, distorts markets, erodes the quality of life and allows organize 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."⁶¹

The "Powerful" and Corruption in Africa

Africa has suffered and continues to suffer grievously at the hands of its Big Men and its ruling elites. Their preoccupation is to hold power for the purpose of self-enrichment.⁶² Power refers to "...the ability to influence the actions and the opinions of people and so causes effects in affairs and people."⁶³ In Africa, "office carries power, prestige and money. Power is incredible."⁶⁴ Power is central to the issue of corruption and corrupt acts. The abuse of power is a manifestation of acts of corruption. As Haller and Shore show, "transactions of bribery and corruption always take place in power relationships that invariably stratify, marginalize and exclude."⁶⁵

⁵⁵ John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 175.

⁵⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 215.

⁵⁷ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 178.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁹ Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: From the Hope of Freedom to the Heart of Despair* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 687.

⁶⁰ Alemayehu Mekonnen, *The West and China in Africa: Civilization without Justice* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 276.

⁶¹ United Nations. Statement by the General Secretary at the UN Assembly on the Adoption of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), New York, 31 October, 2003. Online at: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CAC/.../secretary-general-speech. Accessed: 17 June 2020.

⁶² Meredith, *Fate of Africa*, 686.

⁶³ Johan Zaaïman, "Power: Towards a Third Generation Definition," *Koers* 72/3 (2007): 374.

⁶⁴ Meredith, *Fate of Africa*, 170.

⁶⁵ Dieter Haller and Cris Shore, (eds), *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto, 2005), 17.

The various forms of corruption are seen at various sectors, in both public and private entities – politics, education, law enforcement and the judiciary, public procurement, commercial transactions, and traditional and religious institutions. So just like ancient Judah perpetrators of corruption in Africa have mostly been the “powerful” – leaders and the rich. In fact, “[I]njustice, exploitation, and oppression are created and sustained by the rich and powerful.”⁶⁶ John Dalberg-Acton is right, “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”⁶⁷ The DNA of African leaders and the rich is implanted with corruption and greed. Like the ancient Judah situation, these “powerful” claim to know God and are in the churches.

The “abuse of power” is at variance with the virtues of public accountability and personal responsibility. It leads to communities being socio-economically marginalized. In most African countries, some leaders tend to concentrate power and resources within specific ethnic groups,⁶⁸ which results in other ethnic groups marginalized. The life of many African people is characterized by dependency and oppression. Many Africans “have very little opportunity for their own decision-making to shape their lives.” What they want and like in all areas of their lives “are determined or conditioned by the economic system, political power and religious sanctions controlled by the rich, the powerful and the influential.”⁶⁹ Thus just as prevailed in ancient Judah, relationships in society and social structures in Africa promote injustice and inequality between the powerful and powerless, rich and poor, beneficiaries and victims.⁷⁰

In the Old Testament, it was clearly believed that leaders were appointed and anointed by God in order for them to protect the weak. So, as Micah shows, whenever leaders violated the power and authority God granted them, God was angered because it was acting contrary to his will.

Politicians and Public Servants

In Africa, political activity is seen by ambitious people as the most direct way of securing wealth and social standing. A small elite use their position to great personal advantage. They have control of land registration, credit, taxation, marketing boards, public investment, import requirements and negotiations with private capital. Politicians lose no opportunity to accumulate wealth and privilege. Many are preoccupied with their own business deals, with contracts, commissions and quick profits than with government affairs. “The bigger the politician, the bigger the political or business manipulation.”⁷¹

Public servants who benefit the most from the states tend to steal the most from their countries. In Ghana, a project that is executed by the private sector at GHC1 million would be executed by a public institution at a cost of GHC1.5 million. Such practices are in all sectors of African societies. The ideas “I chop, you chop,” and “Goats eat where they are tethered”⁷² reveal the foundation of corruption in the workplaces. Public servants find solution to poverty by exploiting their profession or their workplace and so inadvertently ruin the nations. Bribery, embezzlement, contract kick backs, and inflation of invoices are means of doping their nations.

Security Personnel

African military overthrow civilian governments in the name of preventing their nations from sliding into corruption. But the military rulers have been more corrupt than the civilian administrations they replaced. They ruined African countries with brutal efficiency and looted African treasury with military discipline. Corrupt military leadership has destroyed many African countries. In the words of Ayittey, they “came from the bottom of the pit and left wanton destruction and carnage in their wake.”⁷³ In civilian regimes, among the security services, the police force is most often accused of taking bribes; they attract the highest ratings of corruption across the continent.

Traditional Leaders

Chiefs and traditional leaders have the responsibility to keep law and order and to execute justice in their jurisdictions.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, however, traditional leaders are not exempted in corruption in Africa. Many chiefs sell plots of land

⁶⁶ Chavannes Jeune, “Justice, Freedom, and Social Transformation,” in *The Church in Response to Human Need*, edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Oxford, UK: Regnum, 1987), 219.

⁶⁷ Cited in Mekonnen, *West and China in Africa*, 275.

⁶⁸ Frank Holmquist and Michael Ford, “Kenya: State and Civil Society the First Year after the Election,” *Africa Today* 41/4(1994):5.

⁶⁹ Julio de Santa Ana, introduction to *Towards a Church of the Poor*, edited by Julio de Santa Ana (Geneva: WCC, 1979), xvii.

⁷⁰ Jeune, “Justice, Freedom, and Social Transformation,” 219.

⁷¹ Meredith, *Fate of Africa*, 172.

⁷² Jean-Francois Bayart, “The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly,” in *Perspectives on Africa*, 2nd ed., edited by Roy Richard Grinker, et al (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 638.

⁷³ George B. N. Ayittey, *Africa in Chaos* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999), 8. For the brutal and corrupt reign of the military see Meredith, *Fate of Africa*, 218-249; Mekonnen, *West and China in Africa*, 288-292.

⁷⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 211.

and fail to account for them. In some cases, a single plot of land is sold to more than one person, which leads to land litigations. Chiefs and their sub-chiefs collect monies from people to grant them favour during settlement of disputes at the palaces.

The Rich

Like their ancient Judah counterparts, most rich people in Africa exploit the poor and needy. There are stories of unpaid or underpaid employees of the rich. Many women and the poor have been and are being maltreated by “big men”. Some either forcefully or subtly takeover landed properties of the poor. Many widows and orphans have been victims of seizure of properties.

Judicial Personnel

The judicial system is equally corrupt. Judges collect bribes from the “powerful” who are guilty of corrupt offenses and go free. Thus there is no prosecution to face the consequence of financial scandal or abuse of authority. Politicians who steal huge amount of money walk free while the poor who stole a fowl goes to prison, because they cannot pay. The “powerful” are always “innocent” while the poor are imprisoned in African courts.

Religious Leaders

It is unfortunate and disturbing that the church that is known to be a moral institution is guilty of corruption. In Africa, bishops, pastors and prophets have been accused of embezzlement of church funds meant for projects, unauthorized sale of church-owned land for private gain, payment of bribes to be elected as Bishops, elders and heads of hospitals, schools and colleges run by the church, nepotism, and many other corruption practices.⁷⁵ As in Micah’s day, some church leaders give false prophecies in exchange for money and possessions. Ordinary water and oil are sold to innocent poor people at exorbitant prices.

Africa Needs “Micahs”

Surprisingly, African states have enough laws to deal with corruption, yet corruption persists. Don Etiebet is right, “no task force put in place can check them.” As Stückelberger asserts, “[i]f even pastors and bishops are corrupt, who else can set benchmarks of truth and transparency?”⁷⁶ However, a reflection on the book of Micah shows that Africa needs “Micahs” among the many church leaders to fight corruption. Such “Micahs” must be innocent of corruption, just as Micah was. They are to distinguish themselves from corrupt church leaders and demonstrate their uncompromising stand against their corrupt nations. Like Micah, their ministry should be based on the Holy Spirit, preach about sin and judgment, speak against injustice and make sure they are not money-conscious. By this, without fear or favour, they can courageously speak in God’s name against corruption. This is important because the church has the responsibility to impart integrity, honesty, and fairness. The church is to stand at the side of Jesus Christ to continue his mission to fight all contradictions to freedom and brotherhood of humankind.⁷⁷ When the church through its “Micahs” plays its active role, it will be helping in the formation of a socio-political order that overcomes the suffering caused by corruption. Allan Boesak warns that if the church keeps silent the consequences will be that the state will: (1) underestimate its limitations and lapse into greed and corruption; (2) fail to acknowledge the role of faith and spirituality in moral regeneration; (3) elevate its leaders to a god-like status; and (4) deprive the powerless and voiceless.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Corruption from all works of life in ancient Judah was against YHWH because it contravened the covenant stipulations that governed his relationship with his people. Disobedience to these stipulations was to bring curse upon the nation. To avoid such a situation, YHWH put in place kings, elders and judges, prophets and priests to lead his people to promote social justice for the betterment of the nation. Unfortunately, these leaders failed in their responsibilities and made the ordinary citizens suffer, as a “consequence of victimization and abuse by the wicked and powerful.”⁷⁹

Micah attacked the spiritual and secular authorities not out of some abstract sort of fanaticism for justice. He

⁷⁵ See Christoph Stückelberger, *Corruption-free Churches are Possible: Experiences, Values, Solutions* (Geneva: Globethics.net., 2010), 67.

⁷⁶ Stückelberger, *Corruption-free Churches are Possible*, 16.

⁷⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Hope for the Church: Moltmann in Dialogue with Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 176-77.

⁷⁸ Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience: African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2005), 169.

⁷⁹ Daniel J. Simundson, “The Book of Micah: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 7, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 5.

attacked the prophets “because they lead my people astray” (3:5), the political leaders in Jerusalem “because they eat the fresh of my people” (3:3[2]), and the officials at Moresheth because “they drive the women of my people out of the homes they love” (2:9). He attacked them all in general, “because they rise against my people like an enemy” (2:8). In 3:1-11, using gruesome images of butchery and cannibalism to dramatic effect, Micah indicts the leaders of his people for economic injustice and bloodshed. It is clear that concern for his oppressed kinsmen motivated Micah to speak out. Micah warned perpetrators of corruption of the impending destruction if they do not change. Though the perpetrators remained religious, they never allowed their God-given beliefs inform their attitudes. As a result, YHWH handed over Judah to Babylon, that destroyed Jerusalem and its temple.

The study has shown that Micah’s society is not different from contemporary Africa. People of power - political, social, religious, traditional and the rich are the most perpetrators of corruption in African societies. The poor and needy suffer in the hands of these people in various ways. Mbiti is right when he said that if injustice is not adequately addressed, then African communal “sense of security and unity [will be] shaken and undermined. [Then] Africa must now search for new values, new identities and a new self-consciousness.”⁸⁰

The study demonstrates that it is time the Church addressed this social canker based on biblical theological-ethical principles. As Gustafson shows, theology and Christian ethics should provide guidance and inspiration to the Church to address real situations that face society.⁸¹ Stressing on active faith, Klaus Nürnberger indicates,

Realism [also with regard to corruption - AuS] is indispensable to dispel wrong expectations, but it cannot have the last word. It is precisely the role of faith to prevent realism from turning into fatalism. The human being cannot live without a hope that transcends current limitations. Hopelessness leads to paralysis. But faith is not a kind of make-believe utopianism. Faith is protest against apparent inevitabilities. It is faith which detects that fatalism is not realistic; fatalism buries sensitivities for possibilities of the future under the dead weight of despair.⁸²

Beliefs or faith, culture and customs must be integrated in any attempt to deal with the challenges facing Africa. It is true that if theology fails to play its part, faith as a resource becomes inactive in directing and inspiring transformational visions and strategies.⁸³ It is no wonder then that Rev Dr Kojo Osei-Wusuh, former President of the Ghana Baptist University College, has founded the *Forum for Christians Against Corruption* (FOCAC).

Men and women in the church in Africa must rise like Micah to expose and speak against the corrupt practices of the “powerful” in the continent. Africa can only bear a certain amount of rot and decay; beyond which it is certain to collapse. If we do not kill corruption, it is sure to kill all of us very soon. As we keep adding infidelity to infidelity, a time will come when there will be no remedy like it happened to ancient Judah. As Graham Phipott shows,

we recognize that a primary cause of poverty and human suffering is powerlessness. The absolutizing and oppressive abuse of power, together with the divinizing of unjust and exploitative systems, ensure that the poor are denied access to resources, that there is no meaningful participation of the oppressed in society, that there is no need for accountability of the present power structures. The idolatrous and unjust abuses of power need to be discerned and exposed, and an appropriate mediation of God’s “power to change” needs to be established and sustained. This struggle with the transformative power of God will need to bring life where there is death, hope where there is fear and despair. ... Prayer is not an escape from reality, but an occasion to equip ourselves for the ongoing struggle. We need to pray for power to change the system. ... This prayer for power needs to be part of an ongoing involvement in activities toward the transformation of our society.⁸⁴

The Church must sit up and speak against corruption. There is no neutrality. If Africa does not change its course, it would end up where it is headed. Africans must all reflect on the dire consequences of continuing business as usual. On this note, let this study end with a biblical quote to warn Africa:

¹⁴Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the LORD, which he had consecrated

⁸⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 271.

⁸¹ James M. Gustafson, *Theology and Ethics: Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia, PA: Pilgrim, 1977), 83-100.

⁸² Klaus Nürnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty & Pollution: Managing the Approaching Crisis* (Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster, 1999), 159.

⁸³ Cf. Nürnberger, *Prosperity, Poverty & Pollution*, 156-163.

⁸⁴ Graham Phipott, *Jesus is Tricky and God is Undemocratic* (Pietermaritzburg, SA: Cluster, 1993), 103.

in Jerusalem. ¹⁵The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. (2 Chr 36:14-16)

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