

Introduction to | **The Prophets** |

The books of the prophets make up the second major division of the First Testament. These books account for about a third of the First Testament, and one quarter of the whole Bible. The prophets were people chosen by God to bring *the word of the LORD* to Israel at urgent times in the life of that nation. Though they came from many different walks of life and lived under different historical conditions, they nevertheless speak with a single voice. (Indeed, they understand themselves to be speaking within a living tradition: many of them refer self-consciously to the words of the prophets who came before them.)

The prophets typically delivered their messages by composing poetic oracles, which they recited in public settings. (Many of these oracles may actually have been sung: the prophets sometimes refer to their oracles as “songs” or “laments,” and the closing oracle of Habakkuk actually bears musical notations.) But the prophets also used a wide variety of other means of communication, such as writing letters, giving sermons, explaining the meaning of signs that they observed or created, challenging the people with questions and then engaging them in dialogue, and sharing the content of visions that God gave them. While most of their communication was initially oral, under various circumstances it was preserved in writing and guarded by their followers. Their message was finally embraced by a repentant nation and included in the Scriptures, where it still speaks to us today.

The prophets whose words have been collected for us in the Bible were active from around 750 BC to about 450 BC. Their activity is clustered around a few key periods. (We learn elsewhere in the scriptures, however, that other prophets, both men and women, spoke to the people both before and after these times.) Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah prophesied as the empire of Assyria was growing so strong that it threatened and ultimately conquered the northern kingdom of Israel; the southern kingdom of Judah narrowly escaped being conquered itself. Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk spoke to a later situation, when the Assyrian Empire was crumbling and the Babylonians and Egyptians were jockeying to become rulers of the region. Jeremiah, Obadiah and Ezekiel lived at the time when the Babylonians conquered Judah and deported much of its population. And Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi brought their messages to the community that had returned from Babylon to Judea under Persian rule. The prophecies in the second part of the book of Isaiah also speak to this situation of return and restoration. It is difficult to determine precisely when the prophet Joel lived; scholars place him anywhere from the 800s to the 400s BC. Therefore, while we have presented the other prophets in what we feel is plausibly their historical order, we have put the book of Joel near the end of the group, where it may be understood in light of the prophetic tradition as a whole.

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The word the prophets brought to Israel urged the people of God to covenant faithfulness: to care for the weak, poor and needy; to embody lives of moral purity; and to pursue social and economic justice. The essential theme of their message, which can be seen in the actual sequence of oracles built into many of the prophetic books, is first of all judgment for the failure to follow God's ways, but then a promise of restoration after the rebuke. Many of the prophets use the technique of a "covenant lawsuit," gathering witnesses and marshalling evidence to demonstrate clearly that Israel has disobeyed the requirements of the bond between God and his people. Yet the Lord's promises will prove to be resilient, overcoming even the stubborn wrongdoing of his people.

These promises can be seen to have had a partial fulfillment in the return of Israel from exile in Babylon. But the prophets themselves speak of a hope that is both deeper and wider, a grand and universal salvation that extends beyond Israel, to the nations of the world and finally even to the creation itself: all things will be made new. The realization of this hope lies beyond these books, beyond the First Testament itself. The prophets looked to later events concerning one who will take Israel's suffering and exile onto himself, personally facing the crisis of judgment to find vindication for a renewed Israel in the surprising ways of their faithful God.

Introduction to **Micah**

Micah spoke to the southern kingdom of Judah during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (that is, from around 740 BC until some time after 700 BC). He foresaw that Samaria and Jerusalem, the capital cities of Israel and Judah, would be destroyed because of their injustice and corrupt religion. The complaints that Micah delivered in God's name were essentially the same ones that Amos and Hosea had brought a generation earlier. The people had abandoned the covenant God had made with them, and they had taken up the pagan religious practices of the Canaanites. (Micah speaks of *witchcraft, spells, idols, sacred stones* and *Asherah poles*.) Because the covenant had been abandoned, the rich and powerful were ruthlessly exploiting the poor, ignoring the law of Moses (*They covet fields and seize them; her leaders judge for a bribe; they use dishonest scales and false weights*). Micah warned that in punishment for their unfaithfulness and injustice, both kingdoms would be invaded, conquered and exiled. Just as he predicted, Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587/6 BC.

Nevertheless, Micah's prophecies actually alternate between warnings of destruction and promises of restoration. Micah foresees that in forgiveness, compassion and covenant faithfulness, God will preserve a remnant of the people, purify them, and bring them back from exile to the promised land. There they will be ruled by a righteous king and become a beacon to the whole world. They will become a kingdom that will show all nations the ways of God.

These prophecies of doom and hope alternate in the book of Micah in a much more systematic way than in Hosea. In Micah there are three groups of oracles; each one begins with a series of judgments, but each one then concludes with promises of restoration. The book is therefore organized thematically; even so, its oracles are not in exact historical order. For example, its first two oracles are linked together in an opening judgment section, but they date from different periods in the prophet's ministry. The first oracle discusses the destruction of Samaria, which took place in 722 BC, as an event still in the future. But the second oracle describes the Assyrian invasion of Judah, which took place at least twenty years later, as a contemporary event.

This Assyrian invasion was ultimately unsuccessful, however, and Jerusalem was spared the fate of Samaria, at least for a time. This seems to have been due at least in part to Micah himself. Nearly 150 years later, when the prophet Jeremiah was threatened with death for declaring that Jerusalem would be destroyed, some of the elders of Israel defended him by recalling that Micah had once said the same thing (see page 750). These elders noted that Micah's prophecies had prompted King Hezekiah to *fear the LORD and*

*seek his favor*, and that this had led the LORD to *relent*, so that *he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them*. We thus see that Micah helped encourage the reforms that took place in Judah under Hezekiah (see page 461). He therefore helped the people of Judah discover in his own day that God does *not stay angry forever but delight[s] to show mercy*.

## Micah

The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah—the vision he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Hear, you peoples, all of you,  
listen, earth and all who live in it,  
that the Sovereign LORD may witness against you,  
the Lord from his holy temple.

Look! The LORD is coming from his dwelling place;  
he comes down and treads on the heights of the earth.

The mountains melt beneath him  
and the valleys split apart,  
like wax before the fire,  
like water rushing down a slope.

All this is because of Jacob's transgression,  
because of the sins of the house of Israel.  
What is Jacob's transgression?  
Is it not Samaria?  
What is Judah's high place?  
Is it not Jerusalem?

"Therefore I will make Samaria a heap of rubble,  
a place for planting vineyards.  
I will pour her stones into the valley  
and lay bare her foundations.

All her idols will be broken to pieces;  
all her temple gifts will be burned with fire;  
I will destroy all her images.

Since she gathered her gifts from the wages of prostitutes,  
as the wages of prostitutes they will again be used."

Because of this I will weep and wail;  
I will go about barefoot and naked.  
I will howl like a jackal  
and moan like an owl.  
For Samaria's wound is incurable;  
it has come to Judah.  
It has reached the very gate of my people,  
even to Jerusalem itself.  
Tell it not in Gath<sup>o</sup>;  
weep not at all.  
In Beth Ophrah<sup>o</sup>  
roll in the dust.  
Pass on in nakedness and shame,  
you who live in Shaphir.<sup>o</sup>  
Those who live in Zaanan<sup>o</sup>  
will not come out.  
Beth Ezel is in mourning;  
its protection is taken from you.  
Those who live in Maroth<sup>o</sup> writhe in pain,  
waiting for relief,  
because disaster has come from the LORD,  
even to the gate of Jerusalem.  
You who live in Lachish,<sup>o</sup>  
harness the team to the chariot.  
You were the beginning of sin  
to Daughter Zion,  
for the transgressions of Israel  
were found in you.  
Therefore you will give parting gifts  
to Moresheth Gath.  
The town of Akzib<sup>o</sup> will prove deceptive  
to the kings of Israel.  
I will bring a conqueror against you  
who live in Mareshah.<sup>o</sup>  
The nobles of Israel  
will flee to Adullam.  
Shave your head in mourning  
for the children in whom you delight;  
make yourself as bald as the vulture,  
for they will go from you into exile.

Woe 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.  
They covet fields and seize them,  
and houses, and take them.  
They defraud people of their homes,  
they rob them of their inheritance.

Therefore, 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.  
In 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.' "

Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the LORD  
to divide the land by lot.

"Do not prophesy," their prophets say.  
"Do not prophesy about these things;  
disgrace will not overtake us."  
House of Jacob, should it be said,  
"Does the LORD become impatient?  
Does he do such things?"

"Do not my words do good  
to those whose ways are upright?  
Lately my people have risen up  
like an enemy.  
You strip off the rich robe  
from those who pass by without a care,  
like men returning from battle.  
You drive the women of my people  
from their pleasant homes.

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You take away my blessing  
from their children forever.

Get up, go away!  
For this is not your resting place,  
because it is defiled,  
it is ruined, beyond all remedy.

If liars and deceivers come and say,  
'We will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,'  
they would be just the prophets for this people!

"I will surely gather all of you, Jacob;  
I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel.

I will bring them together like sheep in a pen,  
like a flock in its pasture;  
the place will throng with people.

One who breaks open the way will go up before them;  
they will break through the gate and go out.

Their King will pass through before them,  
the LORD at their head."

Then I said,

"Listen, you leaders of Jacob,  
you rulers of the house of Israel.  
Should you not know justice,  
you who hate good and love evil;  
who tear the skin from my people  
and the flesh from their bones;  
who eat my people's flesh,  
strip off their skin  
and break their bones in pieces;  
who chop them up like meat for the pan,  
like flesh for the pot?"

Then they will cry out to the LORD,  
but he will not answer them.

At that time he will hide his face from them  
because of the evil they have done.

This is what the LORD says:

“As for the prophets  
who lead my people astray,  
if you feed them,  
they proclaim ‘peace’;  
if you do not,  
they prepare to wage war against you.  
Therefore night will come over you, without visions,  
and darkness, without divination.  
The sun will set for the prophets,  
and the day will go dark for them.  
The seers will be ashamed  
and the diviners disgraced.  
They will all cover their faces  
because there is no answer from God.”  
But 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,  
to Israel his sin.

Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob,  
you rulers of the house of Israel,  
who despise justice  
and distort all that is right;  
who build Zion with bloodshed,  
and Jerusalem with wickedness.  
Her leaders judge for a bribe,  
her priests teach for a price,  
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.  
Yet they lean upon the LORD and say,  
“Is not the LORD among us?  
No disaster will come upon us.”  
Therefore because of you,  
Zion will be plowed like a field,  
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,  
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established  
as chief among the mountains;  
it will be raised above the hills,  
and peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He will judge between many peoples  
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.

They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
nor will they train for war anymore.

Everyone will sit under their own vine  
and under their own fig tree,  
and no one will make them afraid,  
for the LORD Almighty has spoken.

All the nations may walk  
in the name of their gods;  
we will walk in the name of the LORD  
our God for ever and ever.

"In that day," declares the LORD,

"I will gather the lame;  
I will assemble the exiles  
and those I have brought to grief.

I will make the lame a remnant,  
those driven away a strong nation.

The LORD will rule over them in Mount Zion  
from that day and forever.

As for you, watchtower of the flock,  
stronghold of Daughter Zion,

the former dominion will be restored to you;  
kinship will come to Daughter Jerusalem.”

Why do you now cry aloud—  
have you no king?

Has your ruler<sup>a</sup> perished,  
that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?

Writhe in agony, Daughter Zion,  
like a woman in labor,

for now you must leave the city  
to camp in the open field.

You will go to Babylon;  
there you will be rescued.

There the LORD will redeem you  
out of the hand of your enemies.

But now many nations  
are gathered against you.

They say, “Let her be defiled,  
let our eyes gloat over Zion!”

But they do not know  
the thoughts of the LORD;

they do not understand his plan,  
he who gathers them like sheaves to the threshing floor.

“Rise and thresh, Daughter Zion,  
for I will give you horns of iron;

I will give you hooves of bronze,  
and you will break to pieces many nations.”

You will devote their ill-gotten gains to the LORD,  
their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.

Marshal your troops now, city of troops,  
for a siege is laid against us.

They will strike Israel’s ruler  
on the cheek with a rod.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
though you are small among the clans<sup>b</sup> of Judah,

out of you will come for me  
one who will be ruler over Israel,

whose origins are from of old,  
from ancient times.”

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Therefore Israel will be abandoned  
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth  
and the rest of his brothers return  
to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock  
in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they will live securely, for then his greatness  
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace  
when the Assyrians invade our land  
and march through our fortresses.  
We will raise against them seven shepherds,  
even eight commanders,  
who will rule<sup>a</sup> the land of Assyria with the sword,  
the land of Nimrod with drawn sword.<sup>b</sup>  
He will deliver us from the Assyrians  
when they invade our land  
and march into our borders.

The remnant of Jacob will be  
in the midst of many peoples  
like dew from the LORD,  
like showers on the grass,  
which do not wait for mortals  
or depend on any human being.  
The remnant of Jacob will be among the nations,  
in the midst of many peoples,  
like a lion among the beasts of the forest,  
like a young lion among flocks of sheep,  
which mauls and mangles as it goes,  
and no one can rescue.  
Your hand will be lifted up in triumph over your enemies,  
and all your foes will be destroyed.

“In that day,” declares the LORD,

“I will destroy your horses from among you  
and demolish your chariots.

I will destroy the cities of your land  
and tear down all your strongholds.  
I will destroy your witchcraft  
and you will no longer cast spells.  
I will destroy your idols  
and your sacred stones from among you;  
you will no longer bow down  
to the work of your hands.  
I will uproot from among you your Asherah poles\*  
when I demolish your cities.  
I will take vengeance in anger and wrath  
on the nations that have not obeyed me.”

Listen to what the LORD says:

“Stand up, plead my case before the mountains;  
let the hills hear what you have to say.

“Hear, you mountains, the LORD’s accusation;  
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.

For the LORD has a case against his people;  
he is lodging a charge against Israel.

“My people, what have I done to you?  
How have I burdened you? Answer me.

I brought you up out of Egypt  
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

I sent Moses to lead you,  
also Aaron and Miriam.

My people, remember  
what Balak king of Moab plotted  
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.

Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

With what shall I come before the LORD  
and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?

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Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown all you people what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly<sup>a</sup> with your God.

Listen! The LORD is calling to the city—  
and to fear your name is wisdom—  
“Heed the rod and the One who appointed it.”

Am I still to forget your ill-gotten treasures, you wicked house,  
and the short ephah,<sup>b</sup> which is accursed?

Shall I acquit a person with dishonest scales,  
with a bag of false weights?

Her rich people are violent;  
her inhabitants are liars  
and their tongues speak deceitfully.

Therefore, I have begun to destroy you,  
to ruin<sup>c</sup> you because of your sins.

You will eat but not be satisfied;  
your stomach will still be empty.<sup>d</sup>

You will store up but save nothing,  
because what you save<sup>e</sup> I will give to the sword.

You will plant but not harvest;  
you will press olives but not use the oil on yourselves,  
you will crush grapes but not drink the wine.

You have observed the statutes of Omri  
and all the practices of Ahab’s house;  
you have followed their traditions.

Therefore I will give you over to ruin  
and your people to derision;  
you will bear the scorn of the nations.”

What misery is mine!

I am like one who gathers summer fruit  
at the gleaning of the vineyard;

there is no cluster of grapes to eat,  
none of the early figs that I crave.

The faithful have been swept from the land;  
not one upright person remains.

Everyone lies in wait to shed blood;  
they hunt each other with nets.

Both hands are skilled in doing evil;  
the ruler demands gifts,  
the judge accepts bribes,  
the powerful dictate what they desire—  
they all conspire together.

The best of them is like a brier,  
the most upright worse than a thorn hedge.

The day of your watchmen has come,  
the day God visits you.  
Now is the time of their confusion.

Do not trust a neighbor;  
put no confidence in a friend.

Even with the woman who lies in your embrace  
be careful of your words.

For a son dishonors his father,  
a daughter rises up against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—  
your enemies are the members of your own household.

But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD,  
I wait for God my Savior;  
my God will hear me.

Do not gloat over me, my enemy!  
Though I have fallen, I will rise.

Though I sit in darkness,  
the LORD will be my light.

Because I have sinned against him,  
I will bear the LORD's wrath,  
until he pleads my case  
and establishes my right.

He will bring me out into the light;  
I will see his righteousness.

Then my enemy will see it  
and will be covered with shame,  
she who said to me,  
"Where is the LORD your God?"

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My eyes will see her downfall;  
even now she will be trampled underfoot  
like mire in the streets.

The day for building your walls will come,  
the day for extending your boundaries.

In that day people will come to you  
from Assyria and the cities of Egypt,  
even from Egypt to the Euphrates  
and from sea to sea  
and from mountain to mountain.

The earth will become desolate because of its inhabitants,  
as the result of their deeds.

Shepherd your people with your staff,  
the flock of your inheritance,  
which lives by itself in a forest,  
in fertile pasturelands.

Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead  
as in days long ago.

“As in the days when you came out of Egypt,  
I will show them my wonders.”

Nations will see and be ashamed,  
deprived of all their power.

They will put their hands over their mouths  
and their ears will become deaf.

They will lick dust like a snake,  
like creatures that crawl on the ground.

They will come trembling out of their dens;  
they will turn in fear to the LORD our God  
and will be afraid of you.

Who is a God like you,  
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression  
of the remnant of his inheritance?

You do not stay angry forever  
but delight to show mercy.

You will again have compassion on us;  
you will tread our sins underfoot  
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

You will be faithful to Jacob,  
and show love to Abraham,  
as you pledged on oath to our ancestors  
in days long ago.

### Micah Endnotes

- Page 530 *Gath* sounds like the Hebrew for *tell*.  
 Page 530 *Beth Ophrah* means *house of dust*.  
 Page 530 *Shaphir* means *pleasant*.  
 Page 530 *Zaanan* sounds like the Hebrew for *come out*.  
 Page 530 *Maroth* sounds like the Hebrew for *bitter*.  
 Page 530 *Lachish* sounds like the Hebrew for *team*.  
 Page 530 *Akzib* means *deception*.  
 Page 530 *Mareshah* sounds like the Hebrew for *conqueror*.  
 Page 531 *Does the LORD become: Or Is the Spirit of the LORD*  
 Page 534 *stronghold*: Or *hill*  
 Page 535 *king*: Or *King*  
 Page 535 *ruler*: Or *Ruler*  
 Page 535 *clans*: Or *rulers*  
 Page 536 *rule*: Or *crush*
- Page 536 *Nimrod with drawn sword*: Or *Nimrod in its gates*  
 Page 537 *Asherah poles*: That is, wooden symbols of the goddess Asherah  
 Page 538 *humbly*: Or *prudently*  
 Page 538 *Heed . . . appointed it*: The meaning of the Hebrew for this line is uncertain.  
 Page 538 *ephah*: An ephah was a dry measure.  
 Page 538 *Therefore . . . ruin*: Or *Therefore, I will make you ill and destroy you; / I will ruin*  
 Page 538 *empty*: The meaning of the Hebrew for this word is uncertain.  
 Page 538 *empty . . . save*: Or *You will press toward birth but not give birth, / and what you bring to birth*  
 Page 538 *scorn of the nations*: Septuagint; Hebrew *scorn due my people*  
 Page 540 *in fertile pasturelands*: Or *in the middle of Carmel*

