

CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

EXPOSITION PAPER:
MICAHA 6:1-16

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INTRODUCTION

Leading off the third cycle of judgment and salvation in the book of Micah,¹ 6:1-16 is comprised of two sections (6:1-8, 9-16). In this essay I offer an exposition of Micah 6:1-16, focusing on the underlying argument which unifies the two pericopae. Through the voice of the prophet Micah, in front of the enduring covenant witnesses, and on the basis of his redemptive faithfulness, Yahweh accuses his people of their covenant faithlessness – the abandonment of justice, “reliable solidarity,”² and humility – and promises to afflict them with the covenant curses.

MICAH 6:1-8

Micah 6:1-8 the clearest example of *rîb*-form in the book of Micah.³ However, there has been considerable scholarly debate over the precise nature of what has been called the *Gerichtsrede* or lawsuit form.⁴ On balance, I prefer the approach taken by Laney, who

¹ First cycle: 1:1-2:13; second cycle: 3:1-5:15[14]; third cycle: 6:1-7:20. Following the structural approach to Micah adopted by Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 260-1; Kenneth L. Barker, "A Literary Analysis of the Book of Micah." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 437-41; J. Gordon McConville, *A Guide to the Prophets*, Vol. 4 of Exploring the Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 197; and Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 14.

² This is Brueggemann's practical translation of *hesed* at Micah 6:8. See Walter Brueggemann, "Walk humbly with your God: Micah 6:8," *Journal For Preachers* 33 (2010): 14.

³ The central term in this discussion is the Hebrew root רִיב (*rîb*), which occurs three times in the book of Micah (6:1, 2[x2]; 7:9).

⁴ Relying on the form criticism of Gunkel and Begrich, Huffmon provides the following main outline for the lawsuit form, of which there are variations:

- I. A description of the scene of judgment
- II. The speech of the plaintiff
 - A. Heaven and earth are appointed judges
 - B. Summons to the defendant (or judges)
 - C. Address in the second person to the defendant
 1. Accusation in question form to the defendant
 2. Refutation of the defendants possible arguments
 3. Specific indictment

Huffmon and Watson both conclude that Micah 6:1-8 is an example of the *Gerichtsrede*, lawsuit, or trial form as “an indictment of Israel for breach of covenant.” See Herbert B. Huffmon, "Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *JBL* 78 (1959): 285, 295; Paul L. Watson, "Form Criticism and an Exegesis of Micah 6:1-8." *Restoration Quarterly* (1963): 64. However, De Roche sharply dissents, claiming that to call the *rîb* form a “lawsuit” is to impose upon the text “a modern technical term that has no real Hebrew equivalent.”⁴ He argues that almost all *rîb* oracles are not modeled after lawsuits, and that the terms “prophetic lawsuit” and “covenant lawsuit” should therefore be abandoned. See Michael De Roche, "Yahweh's Rib against Israel: A Reassessment of the so-called 'Prophetic Lawsuit' in the Preexilic Prophets," *JBL* 102 (1983): 564, 574. Barker, however,

maintains that the passage is “best understood against the background of the *international* lawsuit. For literary and communicative purposes Micah has adopted the lawsuit forms which originally functioned in the sphere of international relations to bring God’s lawsuit against the people of Israel.”⁵ This approach successfully relieves most of the tensions of the *rîb* debate and reflects the true *gravitas* of the biblical *rîb* oracles.

According to Laney, Micah 6:1-8 exemplifies a legal process in which “a covenant lawsuit [is] brought by a messenger (a prophet) against the vassals (the people of Israel) for their violation of their treaty (the Mosaic covenant) with the Great Suzerain (Yahweh).”⁶ Micah summons the people and witnesses (6:1-2), presents Yahweh’s implicit accusation of covenant faithlessness (6:3-5), and speaks on behalf of the people to illustrate their misunderstanding (6:6-7), before presenting a beautiful distillation of the covenant principles (6:8).

The Summons – 6:1-2

The passage opens with a threefold summons: first, for the people of Israel to hear what Yahweh says (6:1a); second, for them to arise and plead their *rîb* before the mountains and hills (6:1b); and third, for the mountains and the foundations of the earth to hear Yahweh’s *rîb* against his people (6:2). As Ben Zvi notes, “the first summons creates the expectation that the following text will be directly associated with YHWH. Given that there are no clear markers to the contrary in 6:1b, it seems that the following text was constructed to suggest to the readers that they should understand it as YHWH’s direct speech.”⁷ Furthermore, the calls

maintains that De Roche has probably overreacted, although he concedes that “it might be preferable here to use Westermann’s term ‘legal procedure.’”⁴ See Barker, 441. Cf. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (trans H.C. White; London: Lutterworth, 1967), 199.

⁵ Emphasis added. J. Carl Laney, “The Role of the Prophets in God’s Case against Israel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 322.

⁶ Laney, 323.

⁷ Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah*, Vol. 21B of FOTL (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 142-3.

to “listen” or “hear” (6:1-2) emphasize this pericope as an integral part of the book (cf. 1:2, 3:1, 9; and 6:9).⁸

As noted above, Gunkel’s *Gerichtsrede* form includes the appointment of heaven and earth as judges. Huffmon, however, argues that the heaven and earth are invoked not as judges or as members of Yahweh’s divine assembly, but as witnesses to the covenant (cf. similar appeals at Deut 4:26; 30:19; and 31:28).⁹ As Waltke notes, “the mountains served as sober and salient witnesses to the truthfulness of *I AM*’s accusation. They ‘saw’ both his saving acts that demanded as the only reasonable response Israel’s heartfelt commitment to *I AM* and also Israel’s unfulfilled obligations.”¹⁰ Likewise, they were also present to witness the curses promised for covenant faithlessness (6:13-16; cf. Deut 28:15-69).¹¹

The Case – 6:3-5

Micah then presents Yahweh’s *rîb* against Israel in two strophes, each beginning with the vocative “my people” (*‘ammî*; 6:3-4, 5), which strengthens the rhetorical impact.¹² Nevertheless, this is an unusual accusation. The first strophe contains two rhetorical questions which blend the roles of plaintiff and defendant (6:3).¹³ The questions seem to imply that the people of Israel had an accusation against Yahweh: that *he* had somehow wronged *them*. However, in Yahweh’s defense of himself, he implicitly accuses Israel of wrong and of wearying *him* with *their* faithlessness. What had Yahweh done wrong (6:3a)? *Nothing*. How had he burdened them (6:3b)? *He had not done so*. In fact, Yahweh had brought them up

⁸ Ben Zvi, 142.

⁹ Huffmon, 292.

¹⁰ Waltke, 375.

¹¹ Waltke, 375. Although there is not an emphasis on punishment in the pericope at hand, there are promises of punishment in the pericope to follow (6:9-16), and throughout the rest of the book.

¹² After all, Israel was not acting like Yahweh’s people! *Contra* Voth, who claims that this is “a vocative that expresses tenderness,” I believe that this address is yet another implicit accusation. See Steven M. Voth, “What does god expect of us? Micah 6-7,” *Review & Expositor* 108 (2011): 303.

¹³ “[W]hat have I done to you? How have I wearied you?” Micah 6:3, English Standard Version (ESV).

from Egypt (6:4a), delivered them from slavery (6:4b), and provided them with leaders (6:4c). As Chisholm notes, “the similarity in sound between the Hebrew verbs translated ‘burdened’ and ‘brought up’ draws attention to the contrast between their false accusation and reality.”¹⁴

The second strophe continues as Yahweh urges his people to remember (6:5a) how he successfully intervened on their behalf against Balak and Balaam (6:5b-c; cf. Num 22-24; Josh 24) and how he faithfully delivered them through the Jordan and into the Promised Land (6:5d).¹⁵ From the Exodus event to their entry into the Promised Land, Yahweh has been Israel’s faithful God. In just three verses, Yahweh recounts his *righteous acts* (6:5e), his works of redemptive faithfulness, delegitimizing the Israelites’ unstated accusations.

The False Answer – 6:6-7

In 6:1-5, Micah speaks on Yahweh’s behalf to the people. In 6:6-7, he appears to speak on the people’s behalf toward Yahweh, wondering aloud what is required to enter into Yahweh’s presence. However, it is unclear whether the progression from burnt offerings (6:6b) to firstborn child (6:7b) is sincere or ironic hyperbole. If sincere, Micah appears to be representing the people’s legitimate, yet misplaced, desire to meet Yahweh’s standards. If ironic, then he is illustrating their pompous attempt to critique the supposedly impossible requirements for pleasing their deity.

Nevertheless, regardless of sincerity or lack thereof, Brueggemann notes that 6:6-7 is a “false answer.”¹⁶ That is, everything that Israel proposes here is a commodity. But, as Brueggemann puts it, “YHWH does not want ‘stuff’ from Israel or from humanity (see Psalm

¹⁴ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 425.

¹⁵ Commenting on the awkward phrase “from Shittim to Gilgal” (6:5d), Allen notes that “the crossing of the Jordan is obviously meant. Shittim was the last stopping point before crossing and Gilgal the site of the first encampment on the west side (Josh. 3:1; 4:19). In between lay the Jordan, frontier of the land of promise and traditional scene of a miraculous event commemorated in future years at Gilgal (Josh. 4:19-24).” See Allen, 368.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, 14.

50:8-13).” As 6:8 abruptly suggests, the ponderings of 6:6-7 are rejected outright. Yahweh desires something much better than burnt offerings, rivers of oil, and firstborn children. He wants justice, reliable solidarity, and humility.

The Main Point – 6:8

Although at this point the *Gerichtsrede* form leads us to expect a judgment/sentencing, the pericope concludes with Micah’s reminder to the people of Yahweh’s *true* standards.

Furthermore, as Hyman notes, “while the questions deal with **what**, the response deals with **how** Man should approach the Lord.”¹⁷ This is neither the sentence nor the answer (to the questions of 6:6-7) the audience would have been expecting.

If Yahweh’s speech in 6:3-5 was meant to recall his saving acts from Egypt to the Jordan, the phrase “He has told you” at 6:8a hearkens back to the covenant.¹⁸ Furthermore, the vocative address “O man” suggests that “the question posed to Israel is, *mutatis mutandis*, the same question the creator puts to Adam, that is, to all humanity.”¹⁹ If humans want to know “what is good” and “what the Lord requires” (6:8a-b) – or, as Brueggemann puts it: “how to come before YHWH when the relationship has been fractured”²⁰ – they must do *mishpat*, love *hesed*, and walk *hasnea*.²¹ The first two terms “stand at the center of Israel’s faith-talk.”²² However, the third only occurs twice in the Old Testament (here, and at Prov 10:12). Although much more could be said about all three terms, I appreciate Brueggemann’s

¹⁷ Emphasis original. Ronald T. Hyman, “Questions and response in Micah 6:6-8.” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 33 (2005): 161.

¹⁸ However, “he [the prophet] frames his response indefinitely, ‘one has told you’ (= ‘it has been told you’) to take the focus away from the historical incident and locate it in the answer.” Waltke, 390.

¹⁹ Cf. the parallel question posed to Israel at Deut 10:12. Brueggemann, 14.

²⁰ Brueggemann, 14.

²¹ Yes, I realize that the sentence does not quite work. As Waltke notes, “*hasnea*’ (and...wisely) consists of conjunctive *waw* and the *hapax* hipil infinitive absolute, which is used adverbially to qualify *leket*, of the root *sn*’, also found as a qal passive participle in Prov 11:2.” See Waltke, 364.

²² Brueggemann, 15.

explanation that to do justice (*mishpat*) is “to be sure that the neighbor is well provided for,” to love kindness (*hesed*) is “to practice a life of reliable solidarity,” and to walk humbly (*hasnea*) is to embody *alterity*, “to pay attention to *the other*.”²³ When paired with the earlier vocatives of “my people” (6:3, 5), the final phrase, “with *your God*” (6:8dβ, emphasis added) brings the point home by completing “the traditional description of the covenant.”²⁴ Relational justice, reliable solidarity, and radical alterity – these are the “good” (6:8a), the pillars upon which the covenant rests. However, they are also the areas in which Israel has abjectly failed.

MICAH 6:9-16

Although there is a clear shift in addressees (from “Israel” [6:2] to “the city [6:9]) and form (from covenant accusation to judgment prophecy), the two pericopae are linked by their accusatory tone of covenant faithlessness – or, as Waltke puts it: by “the contrast between what *I AM* requires and what the people in fact do.”²⁵ Micah 6:9-16 makes explicit that which was left implicit in the covenant accusation of 6:1-8. As perhaps the strongest example in the entire book of what Matthews identifies as “social criticism in the face of high-level injustice,”²⁶ this pericope contains a summons (6:9), an accusation of covenant faithfulness (6:10-12), a sentencing of the covenant curses (6:13-15), and a final recapitulation (6:16).

The Summons – 6:9

Mentioned above, the introductory call to *hear* or *listen* (6:9c) links this pericope with 6:1-8, and also highlights the passage as an integral portion of the book (cf. 1:2; 3:1, 9; 6:1-2). Nevertheless, instead of the typical “Thus says Yahweh” (cf. 2:3; 3:5), Micah begins with

²³ Brueggemann, 14-6.

²⁴ “Cf., e.g., Lev. 26:12; Ps. 50:7; Hos. 2:23(25); 4:12; Jer. 11:4.” See Allen, 374, n. 48.

²⁵ Waltke, 406.

²⁶ He also describes 1:2-2:11; 3:1-12; and 7:17 in this way. See Victor H. Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 118.

“The voice of Yahweh. *He* cries out” (6:9a). This is, according to Waltke, “a unique and shrill introductory formula that stops the audience in its tracks with God’s thunder from heaven.”²⁷ There is also a considerable narrowing of scope from the universal “O man” of 6:8 – first to “the city” (presumably Jerusalem, 6:9a), the tribe (presumably Judah), and the city’s assembly (6:9c).²⁸ Nevertheless, just as Yahweh’s contention against Israel (6:1-5) is expanded to humanity at 6:8, Jerusalem and Judah are almost certainly a metonymy for the entire nation here.

The Accusation – 6:10-12

Yahweh takes his people to task for neglecting the core covenant principles of *mishpat*, *hesed*, and *hasnea*’. Instead of making sure their neighbors were provided for (*mishpat*), they used short measures to extort their neighbors and store up treasures of wickedness (6:10). Instead of embodying reliable solidarity (*hesed*), they used wicked scales and deceptive weights to overcharge and underpay (6:11).²⁹ And instead of paying attention to the other (*hasnea*’), they committed the verbal violence of oppressive deceit (6:12). Yahweh’s accusations are strengthened by rhetorical questions. Could he forget such things (6:10)? Should he acquit this economic wickedness (6:11)? *By no means*. As the preeminently faithful God, he is obligated to respond to these breaches of covenant with the promised curses.

The Covenant Curses – 6:13-15

Shifting from the third person (6:12) into an emphatic second person address (6:13), Yahweh sentences his people the punishment of futility curses.³⁰ These curses were “traditionally used

²⁷ Waltke, 407.

²⁸ Following Wellhausen’s reconstruction of 6:9c. See Waltke, 397, 408.

²⁹ “Standard weights and measures require the legal sanction of the ruler to enforce their authority. The righteous *I AM* stands behind them (Lev 19:35-36; Deut 25:13-16; Ezek 45:10; Prov 11:1; 16:11; 20:23).” Waltke, 409.

³⁰ “See, e.g., Lev 26:26; Deut 28:30-31, 38-40; Hos 4:10; Am 5:11; Zeph 1:13; Hag 1:6.” Cf. Ben Zvi, 161.

in association with the covenant as a warning against its infringement.”³¹ Here the prophet apparently draws from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 in the content of these curses.³²

Although the Hebrew of this section is difficult, and the immediate cause of the agricultural and economic desolation described could possibly be enemy invasion, the primary cause of these curses was the abandonment of 6:8 for the behaviors described in 6:10-12.

Recapitulation – 6:16

The final verse of this pericope is a “prophetic loop” which reexamines the themes of 6:10-15 in a different light.³³ Ben Zvi notes that, at 6:16 “the inhabitants of the city addressed by YHWH are now described as those who follow the rules and deeds of the worst kings imaginable within this discourse in general and the constraints of the *Sitz in Buch* in particular.”³⁴ Instead of walking in humility with Yahweh (6:8), the people had walked in the ways of the two ninth-century northern kings Omri and Ahab (6:16a).³⁵ Destruction and international derision were the righteous consequences of such a covenant breach (6:16b).

CONCLUSION

At the center of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel, as Micah 6:8 makes clear, were *mishpat*, *hesed*, and *hasnea*. True covenant loyalty engenders concern for and reliable solidarity with the divine and human *other*. Because Israel had breached the covenant and failed to walk in the ways of Yahweh, Micah called the people of Israel, on Yahweh’s behalf, to repent and be faithful to their God, which involved being faithful to *each other*. If they continued to abandon the covenant principles, they would soon receive the covenant curses.

³¹ Allen, 379.

³² Allen, 380.

³³ Other examples of the prophetic loop: Zeph 3:1-8; Obad 7, 12; Mic 2:11. See Ben Zvi, 161.

³⁴ Ben Zvi, 161.

³⁵ Chisholm (426) notes: “Omri ruled over the northern kingdom from 885-874 B.C., while Ahab reigned from 874-853 B.C. Ahab’s treatment of Naboth (see 1 Kings 21) epitomized his attitude.”

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