

Economic Piracy and Land Confiscation (Micah 2:1–5): Micah’s Portrayal of Evil-doers, Evil-doing, and Yahweh’s Action

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Abstract

The struggle over land and its socio-economic relatedness, power, loss, and restoration ignites prophetic oracles represented in different clusters of prophetic activities in the Prophetic Books. While prophetic indictments against injustice have attracted the attention of many readers and interpreters, they have, however, presented contextual complexity and ambiguity. Since the text does not allow readers to easily contextualise these oracles in terms of any particular historical narrative or metanarrative about an event, this article attempts to understand the dynamics of injustice in society within the textual window of Micah 2:1–5, as it relates to evil-doers, evil-doing, and Yahweh’s action. The text does not give the identity of the evil-doers, but it does present a graphic picture of evil-doing (of economic piracy and land confiscation) and Yahweh’s intervention to correct evil-doing. The theological proposition of this article is that in situations of socio-economic transgressions in which covenant community members are denied their symbolic and material possessions, such ethical violations will never go unaddressed. Although this portrait of Yahweh’s intervention to correct evil-doing in the context of socio-economic transgression conflicts with the hard realities of a world populated by evil men and plagued with unjust dealings, it is consistent with Yahweh’s concern for justice and reflects his just decrees and deeds, especially as revealed to and experienced by his covenant people.

Keywords: Micah; evil-doers; evil-doing; economic piracy; land confiscation; socio-economic transgression; theological synthesis

Introduction¹

The struggle over land, power, loss, and restoration ignites prophetic oracles represented in three different clusters of prophetic activities in the Prophetic Books: eighth century, Babylonian exile, and the return from exile. Socio-economic perspectives regarding developments in the eighth century B.C.E. are seen in the prophetic books of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. Reasonable claims to eighth century prophetic masterpieces imagine and refer to the economic structures and dynamics of their day and under the influence of Yahweh interpret events of their era by looking back at crucial experiences of the past (Anderson 1978, 6; Chaney 2014, 34). Although it occupies sixth position in the Twelve (MT) and third in the LXX (after Hosea and Amos), Micah is the first in the Book of the Twelve to direct criticism at Judah and Jerusalem. The canonical book itself is dominated by scholarly debates that deal with the issue of origin and final shape of the book of Micah.² Methodological approaches include the literary, historical, and theological criteria which attempt to determine what was original to the prophet and what came from other and later hands, and the form and redaction-critical methodology which focuses on the final shape of the book. These approaches have led to the search for and evaluation of the different traditional points of view represented in different layers of the book (Mason 2004, 27).

Redaction critical scholars hold that Micah 1–3 (especially because of the anticipation of judgement) refers to the later part of the eighth century as an attractive setting. However, Micah 4–7, which in essential parts consists of prophecies of salvation, is treated as consisting of a mix of oracles added to the Micah collection in the exilic or postexilic periods (Zapff 2012, 131). Reading the book of Micah against a postexilic background, O'Brien (2015, 52) remarks that Micah's criticisms function within a context of occupation. The seizures of lands and houses (2:2), the homelessness of women and children, and the concern for the loss of familial inheritance (2:2–4) would have been direct accusations against the elite within the context of the challenges of the ideal of land division among kinship groups (cf. Ezra 2). Thus, the charges against political and religious leaders of greed and financial gains function alongside the social elite. Similarly, Mason (2004, 53), who is an advocate of a postexilic setting, notes:

The book of Micah ... shows how the words of a pre-exilic prophet could become the text for a proclamation of the certainty of God's salvation for the people who had suffered, and in many ways were still suffering, the judgments of which the prophet had

1 This article is a revised version of the paper presented at the SBL International Meeting held in Helsinki, Finland from 7/30/2018 to 8/3/2018 in partnership with the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS). The article forms part of the author's current research project on "The Nexus Between Ethics and Socio-Economic actuality in Micah" at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, with the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

2 I have in an earlier article addressed some issues of background, structure, approaches and unity of the book of Micah. See Boloje (2017, 691–97).

spoken. The prophet's words furnished the material for preaching and worship in the post-exilic period.

Like other prophetic books that developed in the postexilic period, Ben Zvi (2000, 9–10) holds that Micah as a whole originates in a post-monarchic era. He believes that the book of Micah mirrors the intents and interest of the well-informed, privileged scribes who were residing in Jerusalem during the postexilic period. The mention of the Babylonian exile and other allusions to exile and loss of land (4:10; cf. 2:4,10), the gathering of exiles (2:12–13; 7:17) as well as salvific speeches from various speakers after exile (4:10; 7:11–13, 18–20)³ indicate well-crafted literary and theological explanations of the words of past prophets regarding the fall of Judah (exile) and its future restoration (hope) to a post-monarchic community. These literary characterisations of additional oracles to Micah's collection and the internal mutual relationships that exist between these sections are being addressed quite controversially (Zapff 2012, 131).

Micah's concern for land and its associated economic dynamics has become a necessary parameter for interpreting the book of Micah in its eighth century context (Chisholm 1990, 21; Kaiser 1998, 352; Hoerth 1998, 329–30; Andersen and Freedman 2000, 17–20; Coomber 2011, 396–432). Prophetic masterpieces attributed to eighth-century prophets offer a sublime matrix of materials on various issues of socio-economic transgression in ancient Israel and Judah (Isa 5:8–18, 10:1–2; Mic 2:1–2). While the prophetic indictments against injustice in ancient Israel and Judah have attracted the attention of many a reader and interpreter (Barton 2003, 77–144), they have, however, presented contextual complexity and ambiguity (Coomber 2011, 397). Micah's prophecy confronts contemporary readers and interpreters with ambiguous socio-economic contexts and variables—the driving force of the prophet's indictment, identity of wrongdoers and victims—in light of the limited amount of evidence offered by the text. The existence of the poor and victims of oppression is not evidently seen in archaeological records, but their memory is preserved in Micah's oracles. As it is in human history, their voice was not heard but ignored. But in the word of God, especially in the book of Micah, the poor are considered for their value (Alfaro 1989, 6–7). Thus, in light of the scarce records—both biblical and archaeological—and the difficulty to ascertain with precision the specific systemic, economic and social focus of Yahweh's anger, this article examines the literary portrayal of the dynamics of injustice within the textual window of Micah 2:1–5. Although Micah 2:1–5 does not give the identity of the evil-doers, it does present a graphic picture of Judah in terms of evil-doing and of Yahweh's intervention to correct evil-doing. The unethical activities of the addressees consist in coveting the houses and property of their neighbours and adopting oppressive economic policies in blatant violation of the requirement of the social scheme of Yahweh's law. Injustice threatens economic sustainability and survival of families in

3 See Nogalski (2010, 125–42) who identifies Micah 7:8–20 as containing salvific speeches of a postexilic collection.

the covenant community. Consequently, the textual and exegetical analysis of the unit (2:1–5) provides stimulating insight into the socio-economic character of the oracle unit in addition to a description of impending lamentation of the people as reaction to Yahweh’s judgement which is an obvious evidence of Yahweh’s interaction with a community experiencing his disciplinary pain.

Setting and Literary Structure of Micah 2:1–5

Micah 2:1–5 falls within the oracle unit of Micah 2:1–11, originally two separate oracles (2:1–5 and 2:6–11) that were integrated into one large unit (Dempster 2017, 80). The first chapter of Micah (1:2–16) announced judgements with more general discussion of the sins of the nation and less identification of its causes. The first section of the second chapter (2:1–5) essentially deals with more specific identification of crimes of the influential with fortified judgements, followed by distorted theological justification and condemnation of injustice, in the second section of the chapter (2:6–11) (Sweeney 2000, 357; Dempster 2017, 80). It is difficult to reconstruct the original setting of the oracle, but according to Jenson (2008, 119), it “might have been given in Moresheth and aimed at the royal officials who occupied the fortified cities and used their powers to make life comfortable for themselves at the expense of citizens.” The identification of Moresheth with Moresheth-Gath,⁴ an agriculturally rich region of the Shephelah, on the border of Philistia, has given rise to the notion that Micah was a local critic of Judean and Israelite urban settings who cast his fate with the less privileged individuals of his land and became a prophetic theologian and courageous advocate of the rights of the disadvantaged (Andersen and Freedman 2000, 109). Since Moresheth was located in the rich and fertile region of the Shephelah (southern hill country of Judah) (King 1988, 60; Walton, Matthews and Chavalas 2000, 780–81), it would have been an important farming community, providing not only fruits and vegetables for self-support but also extra produce intended for markets of neighbouring communities (Dempster 2017, 6).

Considering the third person reference in verse 3, the description of judgment is constructed in more general terms that allow for multiple referents with a view to understanding a generalised condemnation of such evils (Ben Zvi 2000, 54). The frame of the text and its particular characterisation of evil-doers indicates a power struggle that is linked to the control of fields and houses. Accordingly, the socio-economic processes that are in the background of the characterisation of evil-doing in Micah 2:2 are most certainly not common in agrarian societies. They mirror the concentration of property through land foreclosure (Ben Zvi 2000, 44) and a system known as *latifundialisation*, that is, consolidation of land for wealth development and a growing accumulation of its associated benefits by the elite to the deprivation of the peasantry (Premnath 2003, 1;

4 It is probable that Gath, according to 2 Chronicles 11:8, was a short form of Moresheth-Gath and has been disregarded as a result of the mention of Mareshah. See, for example, Ehrlich (1996, 62); Aharoni (1979, 330–32)

Coomber 2011, 401). This process, which is aggravated by uncontrollable greed and moral corruption and differences of individuals (Gottwald 1993, 3), easily allows the social and wealthy elite to navigate their quests to intensify their agricultural enlargements. Thus, as the balance of power sloped in favour of the elite, the shared and communal dependence soon deteriorated into obvious exploitation (Premnath 2008, 128; Chaney 2014, 40).

The crashing waves of Micah's accusations indicate the degree to which the changing domestic, socio-economic and religious landscape has significantly benefited the wealthy at the expense of the poor (Malchow 1980, 48). Peasants' indebtedness is associated with several factors: heavy exactions in agricultural produce, increased taxation, a fall in the price of produce at harvest, dishonest business practice of landowners, and failure of rains. A number of these factors can cause peasants to borrow to feed their families, resulting in indebtedness. Consequently, peasants were forced to present an item of value, a piece of their land, or sometimes a family member as collateral for the loan (McKeating 1971, 162). Inability to pay back the debt resulted in foreclosure (i.e., the removal of the right to redeem mortgage) of land and/or entering into debt servitude (Premnath 2008, 131). Micah could have pronounced the oracle at one of the farms where the wealthy land magnates were coming to take possessions, as the owners were evicted due to failure to pay back a loan. An illustration of this situation is the example of Elijah's encounter with Ahab at Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21:16–20) (Dempster 2017, 93).

The supremacy of the elite over the peasants is obvious in Micah's stunning accusations (2:1–2). The disenfranchisement of people from their homes and land by creditors and land magnates (2:2), trafficking in children and women (2:9), and corruption in courts (3:1–4, 9, 11; 7:3) are all indication of the exploitation of the poor and peasants by the rich and powerful. Micah addressed various groups regarding their collusion and collaboration in matters of corruption and injustice and highlighted the adverse consequences of their practices and policies that impoverished the disadvantaged sections of their society. While it is clear that Micah is confronting the rich oppressors of Yahweh's people, the text does not allow readers to easily contextualise these oracles in terms of any particular historical narrative or metanarrative about an event or events that occurred against particular situations and in which the prophet said such-and-such to a specifically defined group. "On the surface level, the text seems to communicate to its readers a position consistent with a widely accepted ideal of social ethics ... and with a trust in divine retribution against those who violate these ethics" (Ben Zvi 2000, 52).

In its literary structure, Micah 2:1–5 is the first sub-unit of Micah's second lament oracle (2:1–13), which takes hold of those responsible for the misfortune and downfall of Judah. It is usually regarded as a prophetic announcement of judgement against a group of individuals who violate ethical standards in the covenant community (Westermann 1991, 142; Sweeney 1996, 529). The characterisation of evil-doers is sustained by linguistic and syntactical markers, such as **הַשָּׂדֶה** ('field') and **בֵּית** ('house', 'household');

נְהִלָּה and בְּיָת (‘inheritance’); גָּבַר (‘man’) and אִישׁ (‘man’); גָּזַל (‘seize’, ‘snatch’) and עָשָׂק (‘extort’, ‘defraud’, ‘oppress’). Such characterisation is devoid of unequivocal markers pointing to any specific historical situation (Ben Zvi 2000, 44). The passage describes the situation by employing different denunciation techniques, followed with condemnation of the social transgressions of greed and violence (2:2). The announcement of Yahweh’s judgement is introduced by the adverbial particle לְכֵן (‘therefore’) and the messenger formula כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה (‘thus says the Lord’) in 2:3. The internal layers of the oracle indicates varying speakers: the voice of the prophet accusing unidentified group (2:1–2), the divine first-person speech (2:3), and third-person references to Yahweh (2:4–5) (Nogalski 2011, 535).

Analysis of Micah 2:1–5

The sub-sections below analyse this unit of Micah’s oracle along the following structure: the woe-cry and its targets—the evil-doers (2:1), the social transgressions of the greedy; namely, piracy and land confiscation (2:2) and the announcement of Yahweh’s judgement (2:3–5).

The Woe-cry and its Targets: Evildoers (Micah 2:1)

2:1 Woe to those devising troubles,
and working evil on their beds.

They put it into execution with the daylight;
because it is in the power of their hand.

2:1 הוֹי חֹשְׁבֵי-אָוֶן
וּפְעֹלֵי רָע עַל-מִשְׁכְּבֹתָם
בְּאוֹר הַבֶּקֶר יַעֲשׂוּהָ
כִּי יִשְׁלֹאֵל יָדָם :

Micah 2:1 begins with a signal of lamentation marked characteristically by the interjection particle הוֹי (‘ah’, ‘alas’, ‘woe’) that is used at a funeral to convey grief, woe-cry or lamentation of distress (Isa 5:9, 13; 28:2–4; 30:3–5; Hab 2:16; Zeph 3:5 cf. I Kgs 13:30; Jer 22:18). The interjection is linked with participles that indicate the unnamed group to whom the oracle is addressed. According to Gerstenberger (1962, 252), “The normal prophetic woe-form contains general and timeless indictments of historically unspecified evildoers.” In the present prophetic context, the combination of introductory woe-cry followed by indictment and threats serves as a kerygmatic unit in which the second part is made as an independent unit of threat and messenger-formula (2:3; cf. Isa 5:24; 28:2–4) (Gerstenberger 1962, 253). The unit thus functions more as a prophetic judgment or woe oracle (Gerstenberger 1962, 252–54; March 1974, 164–65; Westermann 1991, 190–94; Sweeney 1996, 529–30).

The woe-cry or lamentation is followed by an identification of a group whose scheme and actions the prophet brands as mischievous. As the participles indicate, they have made it a habit of “devising troubles and working evil” (חֹשְׁבֵי-אָוֶן וּפְעֹלֵי רָע). These participles are modified by the prepositional phrase עַל-מִשְׁכְּבֹתָם (‘upon their beds’). Thus Micah’s graphic characterisation of their scheme as אָוֶן (‘troubles’, ‘harms’, ‘misdeeds’, ‘injustice’) intentionally distinguished from אָוֶן (‘generative power’,

‘physical strength’, ‘riches’) and רָע (‘evil’, ‘bad’—in the absolute, ethical sense) (Holladay 2000, 7), the location of their schemes עַל־מִשְׁכְּבֵיהֶם (‘on their beds,’ ‘during the night’), and the time of execution יַעֲשִׂיהָ בְּאֹרֶךְ הַבֶּקֶר (‘they are to put it into execution with the daylight’), indicates that he is not addressing arbitrary transgressions but well-organised schemes with evil objectives (Nogalski 2011, 513). The anticipated patterns indicate that the criminal action is working perfectly; everything is working according to plan (Dempster 2017, 83). These perpetrators carefully plan their mischievous actions and move on with execution at every slightest opportunity, believing that with their status—wealth, authority and interest—no one can challenge them: כִּי יֶשׁ־לָאֵל יָדָם (‘because it is in the power of their hand’). The expression כִּי יֶשׁ־לָאֵל יָדָם is an idiom meaning to have resources or strength at one’s disposal. These perpetrators actually do their evil simply because they have the ability, which they were supposed to use to support others who were in need (Prov 3:27; cf. Gen 31:29; Deut 28:32; Job 12:6) (Dempster 2017, 85). The idea of the time of execution of their action associated with daylight (בְּאֹרֶךְ הַבֶּקֶר) indicates supposedly the time when the courts gathered for the defence and protection of people. In the ancient Near East, it was a time for the anticipation of divine help and justice after thieves and evil-doers have shielded their atrocities with the darkness of the night (Waltke 2007, 62).⁵ It does appear that while the Judean citizens expected justice, they experienced just the opposite.

Socio-economic Transgressions of the Greedy: Piracy and Land Confiscation (Micah 2:2)

<p>2:2 And they covet fields and violently take them; and houses and take them away. And they oppress a man and his household, even a man and his inheritance.</p>	<p>2:2 וְחָמְדוּ שָׂדוֹת וַגְּזְלוּ וּבָתִּים וּנְשָׂאוֹ וַעֲשִׂקוּ אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ אִישׁ וְנַחֲלָתוֹ:</p>
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Micah 2:2 proceeds with specific elaboration of the “troubles and evil deeds” (evil-doing) of the evil-doers addressed in 2:1. Micah identifies the root of their mischief as covetousness; these tyrants covet (חָמְדוּ) the possession of others and their uncontrollable desire drives them to commit the various transgressions described in 2:2. חָמְדוּ originally had to do with misappropriation of land and was not to be understood as a matter of jealousy, an issue of the heart. This particular instance in Micah is viewed to be the most direct commentary on coveting in the Bible (Dempster 2017, 86). Helped by the grammatical structure of the verse, the *qal* consecutive perfect aptly describes the habitual or customary actions of the group. The evils of covetousness (חָמְדוּ) manifest in other heinous violations: גָּזַל (‘seize’, ‘take away by force’) נָשָׂא (‘take’) and עֲשִׂק (‘extort’, ‘defraud’, ‘oppress’). This group covets fields and houses and violently takes

5 The LXX explains the success of the people’s schemes and execution by this rendering, “Because they have not lifted up their hands to God” (διστι ουκ ηραν προς τον θεον τας χειρας αυτων), a setting in which lifting up of hands implies worship and loyalty to God. This is apparently due to the lack of understanding of לָא (‘strength’, ‘power’) to mean God (Waltke 2007, 94).

them (וְהִמְדוּ שְׂדוֹת וְגִזְלוּ וּבְתֵימִים וְנִשְׁאַר). They exploit property-owners, defrauding them of their homes and legitimate inheritance (וְעֵשְׂקוּ גְבֵר וּבֵיתוֹ וְאִישׁ וְנַחֲלָתוֹ) (Nogalski 2011, 536). Whatever the means they adopted in taking advantage of the symbolic and material possessions of others, whether lawful or unlawful, it was in blatant violation of the essential blueprint that established them as a covenant community. Covetousness is an unethical behaviour and spiritual malaise that is prohibited in the Decalogue (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21) (Waltke 2007, 95). Thus, at the centre of Micah’s indictment is the condemnation of the abuse of position and influence, the greed and thirst for power, possession and wealth that motivated these ungodly individuals in society (Blenkinsopp 1996, 95; Nogalski 2011, 536).

The victims of exploitation in the text are landowners and farmers who have access to property and houses and occupy an essential aspect of Israelite society. They have access to landed property, houses and occupy an essential aspect of Israelite society. Their symbolic and material possessions as the context indicates come from inheritance. They could not be traded or substituted for other property (cf. 1 Kgs 21:1–3). In the OT and especially for Israel, God is presented as the supreme landowner who grants families some degree of ownership (McKeown 2003, 487). The intricate association of Yahweh, Israel and land is most obvious in the deliberate use of the language of “inheritance” (נַחֲלָה) in connection with Yahweh’s gift of land to Israel. This is reflected in Moses’s distribution of the land (Num 26:52–57; 27:7) and the enactment of law for the protection of its inheritance (Lev 25:10; Num 36:1–12). For individuals and families, it was not just an asset but essentially a sacred entitlement of trust. If the land is lost, at best a person might reduce himself to a short-term employee or, at worst, a slave. When this happens, the individual loses his independence and freedom before Yahweh and lives at the mercy of the land magnates (Waltke 2007, 106). What is projected in Micah is the crime of robbing persons of their homes and legitimate inheritance, which essentially consisted of the land and dwellings. While Micah does not specify the methods the influential land magnates adopted to exploit and defraud their victims, the corresponding reference in Amos 5:7, 10–17 indicates that it was through the court system.⁶ The remarks of Dempster (2017, 86) are instructive:

This was not done by the use of brute force, but as a result of legitimized violence in which loans would be called in against poor farmers who would be unable to pay and would consequently lose their estates, which would then enlarge the holdings of the rich creditors. The loss of one’s house had not only dire economic consequences but profound theological implications ... Without land an Israelite would be economically and spiritually rootless, and certainly materially poor, probably reduced to debt slavery since there was frequently no other means of sustenance.

6 Dishonest scales (Hos 12:7) and extortion by force (Isa 52:4) are other possibilities (Waltke 2007, 96).

Announcement of Yahweh's Judgement (Micah 2:3–5)

2:3 Therefore, thus says the LORD,
Behold, I am planning against
this (group, clan, family), calamity
from which you cannot remove your necks;
And you will not walk haughtily,
for it is an evil time.

2:3 לְכֵן כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה
הִנְנִי חֹשֵׁב עַל־הַמְשָׁפָחָה
הַזֹּאת רָעָה
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִמְיִשׁוּ מִצְּמֹם צְוֹאֲרֹתֵיכֶם
וְלֹא תֵלְכוּ רוּמָה
כִּי עֵת רָעָה הִיא :

2:4 On that day, they shall take up a parable against you,
and a plaintive (sorrowful) lamentation shall be uttered,
Saying, “we are thoroughly miserable,
the portion of my people has been exchanged.
How he removed what is mine
Our fields have been given to the apostate.”

2:4 בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִשְׂאָ עֲלֵיכֶם מִשְׁלַל
וְנִהְיָ נִהְיָ נִהְיָ
אָמַר שְׂדוּד נִשְׁדָּבוּ
הִלְקָ עַמִּי יִמְגֵר
אֵיךְ יִמִּישׁ לִי
לְשׂוֹבֵב שְׂדֵינוּ יִחְלַק :

2:5 Therefore, you will have no one
stretching a measuring line for you by lot
in the assembly of the LORD.

2:5 לְכֵן לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְךָ
מִשְׁלֵיף חֶבְל בְּגוּגְרָל
בְּקֹהֵל יְהוָה :

Micah 2:3 sounds a threatening note as it moves from indictment of the influential land magnates (2:1–2) to the announcement of judgment. The verse is headed by the transitional particle לְכֵן (therefore). The text imagines a cause-and-effect theology. Based on the principle of just recompense, the judgement sentences are appropriate for the transgressions of the powerful group. Just as they are devising “wickedness and evil on their beds,” Yahweh is also “planning evil against this family” (חֹשֵׁב עַל־הַמְשָׁפָחָה הַזֹּאת) (רָעָה) (2:3). Since the transgressions of the powerful group were directed against the possessions and persons of the victims, Yahweh’s judgement sentences will be executed against the possessions and persons of the powerful (Waltke 2007, 107). While in 2:1 the powerful used their power and influence to take advantage of the possessions of the weak and helpless, in 2:3 the powerful are made powerless because they have violated Yahweh’s requirement.

The targets of Yahweh’s plan “against this family” (עַל־הַמְשָׁפָחָה הַזֹּאת) most probably refers to Judah as a whole (cf. Amos 3:1, 12). The relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר (‘which’, ‘from which’) points back to רָעָה (‘evil things’), from which this family or clan (הַמְשָׁפָחָה הַזֹּאת) cannot remove its neck (לֹא־תִמְיִשׁוּ מִצְּמֹם צְוֹאֲרֹתֵיכֶם). The reference to מְשָׁפָחָה (‘family’, ‘clan’, ‘tribe’) reinforces the frame of community impression. Thus, in accordance with the principle of community responsibility and solidarity, the whole nation (pictured as family or tribe) will suffer the adverse effects of the transgressions of the powerful and oppressive elite. Truly, when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C.E. both the wicked and the righteous suffered (Waltke 2007, 97–98). The burden of these evils will be on their necks, such that they cannot escape their effects. Like yokes, the effects of their transgressions will compel, subjugate and humiliate them. Because they have acted out of greed and the lust for power and have not walked humbly with God (cf. Mic 6:8),

Yahweh's yoke upon them will make them walk without self-importance (ולא תלכו רומָה); they will be humbled. The final phrase in 2:3 indicates that Yahweh's judgement will not be delayed, and they cannot escape the humiliating punishment of their transgressions, "for the time is evil" (כִּי עֵת רָעָה הִיא).

Micah 2:4 continues Yahweh's judgement sentences against Judah for the transgressions of the wealthy and powerful with the transitional formula, "on that day" (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא). The phrase בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא ('on that day') logically refers back to the "time of evil" at the end in 2:3 and imagines a special moment of Yahweh's intervention to correct evil-doing. Most often in the Book of the Twelve, the formula brings revival of hope and restoration of fortunes but the reverse is the case in 2:4. Nogalski (2011, 537) notes, "In fact, this verse adds insult to injury by citing a taunt song placed in the mouths of unnamed enemies. This taunt adds a second stage to the punishment of 2:3 since the cries of those being punished consist of lamentation in response to disaster, calamity, and death." Although it is difficult to determine the scope of this lament, the taunt song is the modification of the words and quote of the wealthy tyrants in Judah, that is, "we are thoroughly miserable" (שָׂדוּד נִשְׁרָנָו) considering the destruction, the alteration of relationship with Yahweh, and the loss of land. In all probability, the expressions appear to be the same words of the victims who were exploited in the first instance. Consequently, in the shrieks of their victims the oppressors will hear their own cries (Dempster 2017, 84).

In the expression הֶלֶק עַמִּי ('portion of my people'), "my people" (עַמִּי) is a possessive genitive while the noun הֶלֶק ('portion') implies their land or inheritance. The land owes its existence to Yahweh (Lev 25:23), and he creates its inhabitants, continually supervising or monitoring their behaviour. He allocates land to people (Gen 2:8; Deut 2:5, 9, 19; Josh 12–22). Conversely, he removes people from the land and gives it to their enemies when they do not behave in worthy manner (Gen 3:23–24; Lev 26:33; Deut 28:49–68) (Waltke 2007, 108). Yahweh's just sentence at the end of 2:4 is that those who have violated his requirements will forfeit their fields. In this regard, the quote "we are thoroughly miserable" (שָׂדוּד נִשְׁרָנָו) communicates an ironic, poetic justice as it calls to mind the themes of 2:2. Those who coveted and seized the fields of others now lament the loss of their own; those who schemed to exploit, defraud and steal the inheritance of others now weep as they lose their right to shares of ancestral inheritance from Yahweh (O'Brien 2015, 19). This forfeiture of ancestral inheritance is reinforced in the following verse.

Yahweh's just sentence reaches its climax with the transitional particle לָכֵן ('therefore') in 2:5. Micah 2:5 announces the consequences of the wealthy land magnates being deprived of their fields and allocated to their enemies. The verse assimilates vocabulary from traditions of the first land allocation (Josh 14–15 and 18–20) and actualises them for the entire exilic community as well as reversing the conquest (Nogalski 2011, 538). The idea of "stretching a measuring line for you by lot" finds expression in the original allocation of the land (Josh 18–22), which was carried out through the casting of lots by

the priest (Num 26:55–56; Josh 14:2; 18:11; 19:51). The implication of this sentence is reflected in the remark of Wolff (1990, 80), “Whoever has been dispossessed of his land can no longer expect his lost property to be returned in a future social distribution of the land.” As a defender of the oppressed against the dishonest social elite, “Micah speaks of the achieving of social and religious ideal from which the covetous and their descendants will be excluded” (Hillers 1984:33). This exclusion of the offspring of the transgressors from “the assembly of Yahweh” (קְהֵל יְהוָה) indicates a transgenerational aspect within the contextual and conceptual perspective of divine punishment expressed in the text, and some secondary form of punishment upon the transgressors since those afflicted will be their descendants. The prophetic reading concludes with the image of a new allocation of lands to future Israel, who, rather than being a perverse or infidel people, are described as קְהֵל יְהוָה, an assembly that is purified so as to exclude the descendants of the land-grabbers (Ben Zvi 2000, 47).

Theological Synthesis and Conclusion

What sense does this unit of Micah’s oracle make for readers of the book of Micah in their experience of socio-economic contradictions and theological construct? Obviously, the open interaction in the text that allows for multiple rereading and determination of acceptable ethical models is of noteworthy acclamation. The exegetical analysis of the unit (2:1–5) highlights the multi-layered picture of a cold-hearted indulgency that violated Yahweh’s blueprint for healthy covenant community living. This violation thus evoked the cause-and-effect theology. For intentional and unintentional readers of the text, the alternation in his wordplay between רַע and רָעָה (1, 3), חֲשָׁבִי and חָשַׁב (1, 3), וַנְּחַלְתּוּ and הִלַּק (2, 4), תַּמְיִשׁוּ and יַמְיִשׁוּ (3, 4), וְנִשְׁדָּנוּ and שִׁדְדֵנוּ (4), highlights the conflict that exists between prejudice and justice, while stressing that human transgression will be dealt with by Yahweh’s justice. Dempsey (1999, 120–121) writes,

By means of vignettes occurring throughout the book of Micah, all readers of the book are prompted to visualize a causal relationship between negative social behavior, namely, sin and divine punishment. The present vignette (vv. 1–5) suggests a direct relationship between the harshness of the actions of those who deserve punishment and the harshness of their own coming punishment.

At the foundation, the elite in Judah had misguidedly taken covenantal responsibility for covenantal advantage and freedom. This development gave way to a high sense of security that eventually led to self-gratification (Jacobs 2008, 278; Moberly 2008, 24). Their reprehensible acts were an affront to Yahweh’s character and attack on the basic ethical structure of his people in covenant community (Hillers 1984, 33; Carroll 2006, 171). The development of Micah’s rhetoric indicates that Yahweh does not put up with attitudes that are unethical. The connection between the literary form and ethical thrust makes the unit very stimulating. His soaring indictments and judgement sentences provoked by the inner social ills of the people of Judah (Carr 2010, 120), acknowledge

the realisation of Yahweh's sovereign rule in judgement by affirming the innocent and punishing the guilty (Reimer 2013, 216). Micah's message alternates between words of judgement and warning and language of promise and hope to Judah and Jerusalem. This continuing alternation presents a theological dichotomy that invites readers to live and move with caution, to evaluate their own motives and actions, and to understand that the present challenges are foundations necessary for a better future (Nogalski 2011, 516).

People in every society and period of history suffer injustice at the hands of the powerful and influential. The process usually involves some sections of the population being treated unjustly to the degree that right and wrong are overlooked. Consequently, the selfish goals of the conceited can be achieved. Ethical values are ignored. Decisions are not made out of a concern for the common good. No matter what the justification or the circumstances, the Bible consistently pictures God as one who always judges inequality and fights on behalf of justice. The unspecified general accusation of the oracle unit against the wealthy, powerful, and influential explicates one of the most significant themes (i.e., the social problem of injustice) (Carroll 2012, 222)⁷ in Micah and its applicability to today's socio-economic contradictions in societies where there is a commitment to biblical/Christian traditions. Micah's scathing condemnation of socio-economic transgressions and injustices, while it may not provide an efficient assessment of and specific programme for contemporary socio-economic contradictions and transgressions, is open enough to guide readers in understanding the dynamics of injustice in their relative settings. The oracle is presented in such a manner that it captures the broad aspects of human imagination—both of intended and unintended readers—with an invitation to be transformed by the message of the text and afterward become vehicles for the transmission of the message as it continues to unfold beyond the present horizon of socio-economic contradictions.

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7 The social problem of injustice and concern for the poor are basic theological facets constantly repeated in Micah in his social criticism of oppression and cruelty (Carroll 2012, 222).

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