

Introduction to Micah

Micah is a short but powerful book. Before we start reading it, let's take a moment to look at its background.

The Divided Kingdom: North and South

After Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel went through a civil war and split into two nations:

- The Southern Kingdom – called Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital.
- The Northern Kingdom – called Israel, with Samaria as its capital.

To avoid confusion, I will mostly use the terms northern kingdom and southern kingdom, because in the Bible the word *Israel* sometimes refers to the entire nation, and at other times specifically to the northern kingdom (“the house of Israel”).

The historical books break down roughly like this:

- First Kings covers the early history of both north and south.
- Second Kings continues that history and carries us through to the fall of both kingdoms.

If we focus on the portion of history that Second Kings covers, it helps us locate Micah.

The northern kingdom goes from bad to worse spiritually. Eventually it falls into Assyrian captivity. As a kingdom, it never returns from that captivity. It disappears from the stage of history as a political entity.

The city of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, becomes important earlier in this story, before the final fall of the northern kingdom. It appears on the scene as the city God sends Jonah to.

The Myth of the “Ten Lost Tribes”

Some people talk about “the ten lost tribes of Israel,” as if the northern tribes vanished and are now hidden in various modern nations. That idea does not stand up to careful biblical study.

- When the kingdom split, many of the faithful from all twelve tribes—especially the Levites—migrated south to remain near the temple and true worship (see especially 2 Chronicles 11).
- The names “Judah” and “Israel” are often used geographically for regions, while the people of all tribes were more scattered and mixed than we sometimes assume.

The southern kingdom, though dominated by Judah and Benjamin, contained representatives from all twelve tribes, especially after the northern kingdom's idolatry became entrenched.

The southern kingdom did go into exile for seventy years, but because of God's promise to David, they were restored. Later, after rejecting their Messiah, they were scattered again among the nations (the diaspora), but Scripture promises that God will regather them a second time (see Isaiah 11:11), which we are witnessing in our own era.

The southern kingdom, Judah, eventually goes into Babylonian captivity. Unlike the north, Judah is promised restoration. After seventy years, they return to the land. That return is what we call the post-exilic period (post-exile), referring to the exile to Babylon as a milestone.

It is in that post-exilic period that we read the books of:

- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- Esther

under leaders like Zerubbabel and others.

Babylon and the Captives of the North

Many people overlook an important detail: when Babylon rose to power, it absorbed the Assyrian empire. That means the captives from the northern kingdom—those scattered throughout the Assyrian empire—were later absorbed into the Babylonian system.

So when Babylon conquered, it did not just take Judah's captives; it also inherited those who had already been taken from the northern kingdom by Assyria about a century earlier.

After the Babylonian captivity, God—because of His promises to David—brought Judah back into the land. That restoration and the post-exilic period are essential to understanding the prophets.

Major and Minor Prophets

Now let's situate Micah among the prophets.

The **Major Prophets** (so called because their books are longer) are:

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- Daniel

Isaiah and Jeremiah minister around the time leading into and just before the Babylonian captivity. Ezekiel and Daniel minister during the Babylonian captivity—Daniel in Babylon from the first deportation, Ezekiel from the second deportation.

Then we have the Minor Prophets—"minor" not because they are less important, but because their books are shorter. In our Bibles, they appear in this order:

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

That order is not chronological, nor is it arranged by which kingdom they primarily addressed. So it helps to regroup them logically.

Grouping the Minor Prophets by Audience and Time

A more helpful way to think of the Twelve Minor Prophets is to cluster them by which kingdom they mostly addressed and when they ministered.

To the Northern Kingdom:

- Hosea – preached to the northern kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II.
- Amos – also to the northern kingdom, roughly contemporary with Hosea.

To the Southern Kingdom (Judah) before the exile:

- Joel – preached to the southern kingdom.
- Micah – a prophet in Judah, roughly contemporary with Isaiah.
- Zephaniah – in Judah during the days of Manasseh and afterward.
- Habakkuk – to the southern kingdom just prior to the Babylonian exile.
- Obadiah – near the end of the southern kingdom, just before or around the exile, focusing especially on Edom.

To Nineveh (Assyria):

- Jonah – sent to Nineveh; he resisted going to the enemies of Israel, but finally obeyed. Nineveh repented and was spared judgment for about a century.
- Nahum – later prophesies against Nineveh again. This time they do **not** repent, and the city falls.

So Jonah and Nahum are like brackets around Nineveh's story:

- Jonah – Nineveh repents and is spared.
- Nahum – Nineveh refuses to repent and is destroyed.

Post-Exilic Prophets (after Babylonian captivity):

- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

All three preach after the return from Babylon, during the time of temple rebuilding and spiritual restoration.

If you group the Minor Prophets this way, it becomes easier to remember:

- Hosea and Amos – primarily to the northern kingdom.
- Jonah and Nahum – focused on Nineveh.
- Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Obadiah – primarily to the southern kingdom before the exile.
- Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi – after the Babylonian exile.

The “Silent Years”

Historically, after Malachi, we have about 400 years before the New Testament opens—often called the “400 silent years.” They are called “silent” in the sense that there was no new inspired prophetic book added during that period.

But those years were not silent in terms of events. They are actually foretold in detail in Daniel 11:5–35. The events between the Testaments—Persian, Greek, and early Roman political struggles—are so precisely described in advance that critics (ignoring the existence of the Septuagint 250-150 B.C.) insist Daniel must have been written later. Jesus, however, identifies Daniel as a true prophet, which settles the matter for us.

Many Men Named Micah – But One We Are Studying

There are several people named Micah in the Old Testament:

- A man of Mount Ephraim in Judges 17–18.
- A son of Merib-Baal (Mephibosheth) in 1 Chronicles 8.
- A priest of the family of the Kohathites.
- A descendant of Joel the Reubenite.
- Micah the son of Imlah, a prophet in the time of Ahab (1 Kings 22).

But the Micah we are studying is:

- A prophet of Judah.
- A younger contemporary of Isaiah.
- From Moresheth-gath, about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem, near Lachish.
- He prophesied in the latter half of the eighth century B.C.

His name is not an accident. In Scripture, names often carry meaning.

- Micah (shortened from *Micaiah*) means “Who is like Yahweh?” or “Who is like the Lord?”
- Contrast that with Michael, which means “Who is like El?” (another name for God). Same idea, different divine title.

Micah’s Timeframe and Focus

Micah prophesied during the reigns of:

- Jotham,
- Ahaz, and
- Hezekiah

over the southern kingdom, and during the reigns of:

- Pekahiah,
- Pekah, and
- Hoshea

over the northern kingdom.

He never dignifies the northern rulers by calling them “kings of Israel” in the way he refers to the Davidic kings in the south. There is a subtle disavowal of their legitimacy because they are the leaders of a rebellious breakaway kingdom.

Micah’s period covers roughly 40 years.

He is deeply concerned about the sins of the northern kingdom, but he addresses them primarily as a warning to the southern kingdom. Judah was supposed to learn from the northern kingdom’s failures and from God’s judgment on the north.

What Makes Micah Different?

If you read Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah, you notice that:

- Their messages were largely ignored.
- Their warnings were rejected.
- As a result, judgment came.

Micah stands out. His message was actually heeded. The people repented, and disaster was postponed for about a century.

Like Jonah, Micah is a prophet whose ministry changed history.

- Jonah’s preaching brought Nineveh to repentance, and the city was spared for about 100 years.
- Micah’s preaching contributed to a revival under Hezekiah, and judgment on Judah was delayed.

One person, faithful to God, can make an enormous difference.

Micah and Isaiah

Micah was a contemporary (and likely a friend) of Isaiah.

- Many scholars have called Micah’s book a “miniature Isaiah” because of the similar themes.
- Parts of Isaiah 2 closely parallel Micah 4. There is debate over who quoted whom, but the connection is clear.

Micah prophesied during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, and his ministry bore fruit especially in the time of Hezekiah.

Interestingly, we learn from Jeremiah 26 (more than a century later) that Micah’s preaching, not Isaiah’s, is specifically credited with sparking the revival that spared Jerusalem in Hezekiah’s day.

Jeremiah, on trial for his own life, defended himself by reminding the leaders:

“Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and spoke to all the people of Judah, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts:
“Zion shall be plowed like a field,

Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins,
And the mountain of the temple
Like the bare hills of the forest.”

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah ever put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and seek the Lord’s favor? And the Lord relented concerning the doom which He had pronounced against them. But we are doing great evil against ourselves.” (Jeremiah 26:18–19, NKJV)

So, more than a hundred years after Micah, his words were still remembered—and used by God to save Jeremiah’s life.

Micah’s Style and Personality

Micah was a rural prophet, like Amos. He was not a city man or a palace man like Isaiah.

- His writing is pungent, personal, tender, and straightforward.
- Several of Micah’s passages are very familiar to believers.

One of the most famous is Micah 6:8:

“He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, NKJV)

Many have called this the Old Testament “Sermon on the Mount” in miniature. It summarizes the heart of how God wants His people to live.

Micah is also the prophet quoted in Matthew 2 when Herod’s advisors answer the wise men’s question about where the Messiah would be born (Micah 5:2).

Jesus Himself quotes Micah at least once (for example, compare Micah 7:6 with Matthew 10:35–36).

Micah has been called “the prophet of the city” because he condemns:

- violence,
- corruption,
- robbery,
- covetousness,
- gross materialism,
- spiritual bankruptcy, and
- sexual immorality

especially in the urban centers of the nation. All of that sounds very contemporary.

The Message of Micah: Judgment and Hope

Micah's book combines:

- Strong warnings of judgment – especially because of idolatry, injustice, and corruption.
- A clear vision of future glory – the redemption and restoration of Israel and the coming kingdom.

That is why Micah is so relevant to our own time. He speaks into a setting of deep spiritual darkness, yet he lifts our eyes to the coming kingdom and the faithfulness of God.

Micah's central question, built into his own name, is:

“Who is like the Lord?”

In Micah 7:18 he declares:

“Who is a God like You,
Pardoning iniquity
And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?
He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in mercy.” (Micah 7:18, NKJV)

God hates sin, but He loves sinners. His holiness requires Him to deal with rebellion, but His mercy moves Him to provide forgiveness without compromising His righteousness. Micah will unfold that tension and point us toward God's way of resolving it.

The Structure of Micah's Message

Micah's book can be loosely traced like this:

- Chapter 1 – Sins against God.
- Chapter 2 – Sins against one another.
- Chapter 3 – Sins by the leaders.
- Then comes a movement into hope, restoration, and the coming kingdom (chapters 4–7).

He also uses the word “Hear!” (or “Listen!”) as a structural marker three times (1:2; 3:1; 6:1), starting three major sections of his prophecy.