



Micah 2.¹⁻³

dispossession and homelessness: a societal choice

¹Warning! There are those who plot to abuse their power,
those who spend the night planning crimes.

Come daylight, they act upon their plans
because it is within their power.

²They covet tracts of farmland, and find a way to steal them.
They covet houses, and seize them.

Thus, they extort a property owner of his home,
and an individual of their property.

³On account of this, YHWH has warned:

“Understand that I am planning disaster for this people
such that you’ll not be able to remove it from around your necks
or be able to walk upright.

For it is a disastrous time.”

Introduction

Micah was a prophet who ministered to ancient Israel during the second half of the 8th century B.C. He was a younger contemporary of the prophet Amos and was roughly a contemporary of Hosea and the more famous Isaiah. Like all the prophets, he spoke in an elevated, poetic style as was customary and expected of those who claimed divine appointment to speak the word of God.

Poetry can be difficult to understand. However, there is nothing difficult about Micah’s poetry here. No doubt, the reader can easily understand Micah’s critique of and warning to Israelite society found in these verses. Nonetheless, we will begin this homily by restating Micah’s critique and warning in non-poetic and more contemporary terms.

We will then turn our attention to a more detailed look at the specific economic/ ethical issue Micah addressed—the purposeful and immoral dispossession and homelessness created by

Israel's wealthy, powerful, and influential manipulation of the "real estate sector" of their economy. In order to understand the broad nature of the threatened coming societal disaster, we will observe the choices that both individual and society write large made in creating dispossession and homelessness. Before concluding, we will consider the relevance of this passage to contemporary American society. For, though ancient Israelite laws regarding land possession and transfer were very different than ours today, there are, nonetheless, principles that apply across time and cultures so that Micah's social critique and warning can be applied to modern society.

a more contemporary restatement

Crimes are being committed in Micah's Israel. The criminals committing the crimes are individuals of wealth, power, and influence. Indeed, they are using their wealth, power, and influence as tools to facilitate their criminality. The criminals are fully committed to their criminality. There is nothing haphazard, accidental, or lackadaisical about their crimes. Their crimes are premeditated, imaginative, and well thought out. That's verse one.

The stage upon which the criminals act is the "real estate market." Their victims are the less wealthy, powerful, and influential property holders. Through the actions of their wealthier, more powerful, and more influential fellow citizens, the less wealthy, powerful, and influential are left dispossessed and homeless. While the criminals use their wealth, power, and influence to victimize their fellow citizens, the driving force behind their crimes is unchecked desire and a disregard for the divinely granted value and dignity of their fellow citizens. That's verse two.

Micah will brook no nonsense. The dispossession and homelessness that he finds in Israelite society are not the consequence of some theoretical or inevitable "market forces."

Dispossession and homelessness are a choice. They are a consequence of the choices that wealthy, powerful, and influential citizens make. They are the consequence of human desire, not some preordained inevitability of nature. That's verses one and two.

However, with verse three and its warning of broad and sweeping societal disaster, we are reminded that the criminal choices that result in the dispossession and homelessness of vulnerable populations is not, in fact, limited to a few rogue individuals. They are choices of society writ large. It seems unlikely that the Lord would warn of broad societal disaster if it were a matter of a few bad apples. Indeed, this runs contrary to scripture's testimony that Yahweh is a mercy God, full of compassion and patience. Thus, the warning of broad and sweeping societal disaster can only be explained by the presence of a broad and sweeping malignancy infecting the entire society.

The choices are societal rather than simply private and individual

It takes two to tango, the say. The simple fact of the matter is that Israelite society's wealthy, powerful, and influential could not do what they did on their own. They required help. Co-conspirators. They required the help of those who legislate and enforce the laws by which society functions—in this case, we are dealing with laws regulating economic, and particularly real estate affairs. Micah is clear that government officials of all stripes were corrupted, and that their corruption was in part the result of bribes and kickbacks they received.

“Those of integrity have vanished from the land.
There isn't an upright individual among them.
All of them are involved in violent intrigues.
Each of them prey upon his fellow citizen as if cursed.
Their palms are open to corruption.
For a favorable decision, the government official demands,
along with the government decision maker, bribes.
Also, the powerful makes known his hidden desire.
They are united in what they do and want.”¹

¹ Micah 7.²⁻³; author's translation.

“I beg you to listen to this, you leaders of Ya‘aqōb,
and you rulers of Yīsrā’ēl
who show abhorrence for justice
and pervert all that is right;
shaping Šîyôn through violence,
and Y^erûšalāyim through injustice.
Its leaders make decisions based on bribery,
its priests offer direction for a fee,
and its prophets offer predictions for money.”²

Obviously, less wealthy citizens lacked the means to offer such bribes and kickbacks. The sort of bribes and kickbacks that Micah condemns surely came from the wealthier, more powerful and influential citizens who could afford them. Such underhanded expenses were simply written off as the price of doing business.

One could easily predict that individuals involved in business would have profit as their overriding objective. One could even justify it, within reason. But their willingness to acquire profit/property through bribery and other unethical practices demonstrates that their desires for profits were not within reason, or decency, for that matter.

While one is not shocked at the wealthy’s actions, one is shocked at the behavior of those whom society expected to look after the welfare of all. Micah’s judgement is that every leader to whom people looked for leadership and guidance was motivated by their own economic interests and used their positions of trust for their own personal gain. There was total synchronicity between business and political leaders when it came to motivation, and complete cooperation when it came to the means by which immoderate economic desires were realized. Bribes were given and received so that laws would be passed that advantaged the wealthy and the governing at the expense of everyone else. Bribes were given and received to deny the less influential a just settlement in any case that might be brought to redress the abuses perpetrated by the wealthy, powerful, and influential.

² Micah 3.⁹⁻¹¹; author’s translation.

Micah’s most famous contemporary prophet, Isaiah, complained of the immoral and unethical laws passed and upheld by the nation’s legislative and judicial leaders.

“Warning! To those who issue oppressive statutes
and continuously write laws that afflict;
that put redress out of the reach of the underprivileged
and rob the poor among my people of justice,
making prey of widows
and plundering orphans.”³

So, there you have it. Wealthy, powerful, and influential individuals used their wealth to buy legislators. Corrupted by their own lust for wealth and the “legalized” bribes/ kickbacks they accepted to fulfill their lusts, legislators and the judiciary passed and enforced laws that were, themselves, corrupt, unethical, and criminal—in the ancient world of Israel, the “legislative” and “judicial” functions of government were conducted by the same small group of officials as no equivalent to our modern “separation of powers” or “checks and balances” existed. Part of the corruption was found in the way the laws advantaged the wealthy and influential and disadvantaged the less wealthy and less influential. And this, ladies and gentlemen is how the dispossessed and homeless were created.

Nay, it is how the dispossessed and homeless ARE created.

Choosing dispossession and homelessness in contemporary America

If all of this sounds eerily familiar, it should. The first two verses of this reading could easily serve as text for a story found on the evening news of America’s news networks. We see the same personal desires and intentions, the same schemes and societal choices today that Micah saw in his day. Indeed, Micah could hardly better describe what has happened in

³ Isaiah 10.¹⁻²

America over the course of the past forty years. What is happening in America today. It has happened and is happening in every sector of the economy—banking, employment/ wages, insurance, healthcare, entertainment, retailing, manufacturing, food production and distribution, etc., etc., etc. But, as our thematic passage focuses on real estate and housing, we will limit ourselves to that sector of our economy, the immoral choices being made in and by it, and the attack it levels against the dignity of individuals created in the image of God.

The ability to buy a home and afford mortgage and rent payments has rarely been more difficult for more regular working people. Homelessness has grown accordingly and is growing exponentially. Tens of thousands of individuals who work hard, many even working two jobs, find paying a mortgage or rent payment impossible. By the thousands, even individuals who worked and studied hard to earn the all-important college education end up homeless because the cost of housing—both owned and rented— is out of reach (The old and somewhat dismissive belief that mental illness was the major cause for homelessness is no longer true). Many teachers, for example, have and are leaving the teaching profession because they cannot afford housing on their salary. Others are living in their cars. The horror stories are multiplying exponentially.

To a large extent, this state of affairs is the result of laws passed and policies implemented by legislators who have increasingly become beholden to the money provided by the wealthy. Legislators who have had their offices purchased by the wealthy have passed bills that advantage wealthy real estate manipulators and cause hardship and homelessness. Worse, as in many industries, legislators pass laws written by the very wealthy, powerful, and influential individuals and institutions that those laws are intended to oversee.

Talk about giving the fox the key to the hen house! Nay, rather it is like giving voracious and ravenous wolves a license to kill those created in the image of God.

It would require a book length manuscript to catalogue all the oppressive real estate/ associated banking laws and “regulations” that have been written in this manner and that cause dispossession and homelessness. Unfortunately such dastardliness is limited to the real

estate sector of our economy. It permeates every economic sector.

As but only one example in the real estate sector, consider the matter of leverage. Individuals who wish to purchase a home are held to very strict rules about how leveraged they can be to purchase a home. Yet, huge corporations, banks, private equity firms, etc., are allowed to buy homes—whole neighborhoods of them—with very little control on how leveraged they are. This puts the private individual at a serious disadvantage in purchasing a home. With little regulation, such manufactured entities buy up so many homes that they control the price of homes. Soon, the price of housing goes up, putting the expectant individual home buyer at an even larger disadvantage.

But it does not end there. Oh, no. Even poorer individuals who are reduced to renting without any hope of buying a home are adversely impacted. The conglomerates that buy up homes by the millions also have no limit on how much they can extort renters. Rents go up, renters are evicted, people end up on the street or in cars or under cardboard boxes. Rental evictions are now at an all-time highs.

Just as in Micah's day, all of this is permitted by legislators and legislatures. It has become "lawful." However, there is at least one big difference between how all of this is achieved today verses how it was achieved then. For the most part ancient citizens had no ability to choose their leaders and thus no control over laws enacted or the gross violations of human dignity that they perpetrated. But we live in a free society in which legislators and legislatures are elected. This difference makes the "legal" violation of others even more vile and expands the accountability across broad swaths of American society. In America, the electorate is ultimately responsible. We choose. And by electing individuals who then stay in office after passing such offensive laws that demean those created in the image of God, we choose—yes, CHOOSE—to assign hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens to the indignities of poverty, dispossession and homeless.

Our entire society will pay the price of such brutal and demeaning criminality. We. The. People. Choose. We. The. People. Are. Responsible. We. The. People. Will. Pay.

It is only right that it be so.

Conclusion

Micah witnessed first-hand the indignity of poverty, dispossession, and homelessness. As if this indignity were not enough, Micah observed wealthy, powerful, and influential citizens, fueled by their avarice, add to the indignity by vilely and purposefully scheming with lawmakers to pass and enforce laws that expanded the rolls of the poor, the dispossessed, and the homeless. By so doing, society's leaders made legal what was immoral and unethical, called good what was evil, and abrogated the final and ultimate of the Ten Commandments:

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.”⁴

In the short term, passage of such inhuman laws brought temporary advantages and benefits to the legislators who “legalized” them and the wealthy, powerful, and influential citizens that benefited from them to the disadvantage of those with less wealth, power, and influence. Micah's contemporaries, Amos and Isaiah, witnessing the same people and the same vile behaviors, spoke of those who luxuriated on huge tracks of land⁵ and were able to afford multiply homes—the “winter house” and the “summer house.”⁶ Inside these “great houses” built with the finest in building materials—“hewn stone,”⁷ “cedar,” and rooms “painted with vermilion”⁸—the wealthy, powerful, and influential schemers stretched themselves out on divans decorated with ivory, dressed themselves up with the finest in perfumes, and listened to live music while they ate the choicest cuts of meat money could buy and drank the finest

⁴ Exodus 20.¹⁷

⁵ See Isaiah 5.⁸

⁶ Amos 3.¹⁵

⁷ Amos 5.¹¹

⁸ Isaiah 22.¹⁵

of wines⁹ which they had cultivated in their own magnificent vineyards.¹⁰

Sound familiar? The old adage rings true: “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

But, such shenanigans brought great suffering to those dispossessed and made homeless by them. And, understanding that such living was akin to the cannibalizing of one’s fellow citizens,¹¹ Micah warned that in the long haul such immoral “legalities” were disastrous for rich and poor, powerful and weak, influential and ignored alike. The disastrous behavior of society’s wealthy, powerful, and influential would bring disaster on all—a disaster that would strangle the neck, cripple the body politic, and bring the end of a once great nation.

Notwithstanding the warning of history and the inspired counsels of ancient Hebrew prophets, America tragically follows in the footsteps of that once great nation turned cannibal to its own citizens and traitorous to God. If we do not repent and change our ways, we will follow in its footsteps into the heart of dark disaster.

Those in the halls of power, in the boardrooms of American business, and in the college classrooms of economic departments can proclaim until they are blue in the face and have convinced every undiscerning soul that the dispossession and homelessness of many of our fellow citizens is the consequence of objective, unfeeling, and inevitable market forces. But those who hear and know and discern the word of God know, as Micah did, that such vain and lying proclamations are those of false prophets interested only in filthy profit.

Dispossession and homelessness in America is a choice. A conscious and devious and devilish choice. Not a choice made by those whose walls are made of interior car fabrics, canvas, and cardboard. But a choice made by the wealthy, powerful, and influential. A choice made by legislators, legislatures, and courts. A choice made by every single American who

⁹ See Amos 6.⁴⁻⁶

¹⁰ See Amos 5.¹¹

¹¹ Micah 3.²⁻³

has the power through their vote to elect individuals who will respect the dignity of every living soul created in the image of God.

Might does not make right, though the world would have us think otherwise and it is how, in this dark and dreary world, the rich grow richer, the powerful grow more powerful and the influential grow more influential. "Might makes right" is against everything that God stands for. The very first criminal in human history questioned whether he was expected to be his brother's keeper. In his life, in his teachings, and in his death, Jesus taught that, yes, we are all our brother's keeper. Indeed, the greater are to be servants to the lesser.

That's the truth and the word of the Lord to which Micah would utter a loud and heartfelt, "Amen."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!