



Profit above all

Micah 6.9-12

- ⁹YHWH's voice calls out to the city—
and it is wise to reverence his power;
pay heed to the warning of the one who issues it—
¹⁰"Do they continue to exist—a house built by wicked means,
treasuries acquired through wicked means
even through fraudulent measures, which are condemned?
¹¹Should I acquit any with false balances,
acquit any with a bag of fraudulent weights,
¹²acquit the city's wealthy who are full of violence,
acquit its citizens who utter deception,
their tongues flapping deceptively in their mouths?" (author's translation)

It is at the very heart of the Hebrew Bible's witness that the people who would come to be known as Israel was long the victim of Egyptian oppression; that God heard the peoples' cry of pain and involved Himself in human affairs to emancipate the victims from their victimizers. But emancipation from oppression was only the first part of a divine three-part plan for Israel.

After the emancipation, and as the second part of His plan for Israel, God issued directives concerning the establishment of a new kind of society. The new nation was to be the exact opposite of Egypt. All forms of oppression were to be radically rejected and eliminated while justice was to reign supreme.

The third part of the plan called for Israel to serve as example and evangelist to the world through the justice that resided among its citizenry and in its governing bodies.

Israel could only endure through the avoidance and rejection of Egyptian-style injustice and

oppression, by establishing a just society through faithful observance of God's just directives—private and public, individual and national—and through fulfilling its role as servant to the world through example. If Israel reverted to Egyptian style injustice the nation could have no more expectation of endurance than Egypt.

All of this, in a nutshell, is the central message of the Hebrew Bible. That longest of Judeo-Christian scriptures records Israel's attempts to fulfill God's dream for and expectations of a just society—the only kind of society that can endure in this world or the next. The nation's journey was spotty at best, replete with ups and downs. Mostly downs, it seems. For that reason, it finally ceased to exist.

While God issued many directives aimed at the establishment of a just society in Israel, most of which Israel seems to have disregarded, in this reading Micah addresses just one of them: Israel's injustice in regard to the maintenance and use of weights, measures, and commercial scales. At the nation's inception and as part of its “constitution,” God had directed,

“You are not to engage in injustice in regard to administering the measurement of length, weight, or volume. You are to possess accurate balances, accurate weights, accurate dry measures, and accurate liquid measures. I am YHWH, your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”¹

“You are not to keep in your pouch a weight, one heavy and one light.

You are not to keep in your house a dry measure, one heavy and one light.

You are to possess a scrupulously accurate weight and you are to possess a scrupulously accurate dry measure so that your existence in the land that YHWH, your God, is giving you will be long-standing. For YHWH, your God finds abhorrent all who do these things—all who act unjustly.”²

But now, Micah reports, he has heard a voice. It is the voice of God speaking a message directly

¹ Leviticus 19.³⁵⁻³⁷; author's translation

² Deuteronomy 25.¹³⁻¹⁶; author's translation

to Israel. The voice of God and the message it announces are not to be ignored. To ignore the message is most unwise. With his own voice, God charges Israel, and particularly its merchant class, with not having obeyed these directives, these foundational and constitutional principles. The nation's merchant class have utilized fraudulent weights, measures, and commercial scales to cheat and defraud their unsuspecting and vulnerable customers and to enrich themselves through the manipulation and expansion of profit margins

As a result of the fraud, the merchants have grown rich. They live in big homes with spacious treasuries. We can imagine these treasuries filled with gold and silver chalices, plates, candle holders, etc.; with jewels and artwork made of alabaster and lapis lazuli; with the finest of potteries; with the best of linens and wool weavings; with the latest in clothing fashions; with the latest in home decor.

No doubt, there is much to learn from Micah's critique of the merchants. We would note four things that stand out most to us. First, increased profit margins and wealth were the very purpose of and motive behind the fraud. The merchants can, of course, be criticized for their lack of personal integrity and their willingness to cheat. But they did not cheat to *be cheaters*. Being cheaters was not their goal. They engaged in fraud in order to increase their profit margins. The cheating was merely a means to an end. The cheating was not the disease, but the symptom of the disease. The disease was lust and covetousness. The disease was their lust for increased profit margins and the material advantages they brought to themselves and their families.

The second thing we note is that the fraud perpetuated through the use of inaccurate weights, measures, and commercial scales worked. The merchants' fraud made their big homes and their packed treasuries possible. Fraud produced wealth. That, in this world, immoral and unethical business practices often produce wealth is a view shared by all the Hebrew prophets, contrary to the view of those who propagate false "prosperity gospel" narratives about wealth and "righteousness." Indeed, much of the wealth accumulated through business is a direct result of fraud. Skepticism about the legitimacy of accumulated private wealth is biblical and justified.

Third, we note Micah's prophetic boldness and insight in his naming the economic fraud,

“violence.” The businessman’s fraud is a violation of another every bit as much as is that of that proverbial young urban male who robs a convenience store at gunpoint. One uses a gun, the other a briefcase, but both are deadly weapons.

Finally, we note that God holds accountable those who increase profit margins and accumulate wealth through fraudulent, immoral, and unethical means. It is true, as the Psalmist disappointedly recognized, that it may take a while for their wickedness to catch up with them.

“Even in death, they experience no suffering,
but die with stomachs full.

They do not experience the hardships of common people,
nor are they struck as others are struck.

So, they adorn themselves with self-conceit;
cloak themselves in a garment of cruelty.

Their eyes bulge out on account of their corpulence;
their physique goes beyond imagination.”³

But catch up with them it will.

“Until, that is, I entered the holy place of God,
there to discern what awaits the ungodly.

Contrary to what I had thought, you subject them to delusions.

You let them fall prey to lies.

How suddenly they become objects of horror;
come to a complete end through multiple catastrophes!

They are as a dream from which one awakens.

My Lord, upon waking up, the shadowy memory of them is loathsome.”⁴

Yes, the wealthy and their propagandists talk a good game, “their tongues flapping deceptively

³ Psalm 73.⁴⁻⁷ author’s translation

⁴ Psalm 73.¹⁷⁻²⁰ author’s translation

in their mouths.” They are, as the wicked usually are, good at justifying their one-track mind—
increase profits—no matter its cost to their fellow citizens and the society that makes their lives
possible and enjoyable. Their justifications sound, as they are meant to, ever so reasonable and
rational. But God will finally expose the fraud. God will expose them as frauds. And all who
once bought their fraudulent justifications and wished to be like them will, like the Psalmist, feel
fraudulent, foolish, beastly even.

“But I, for a time, lost my footing;
lost my balance.
I felt envious of the corrupt
when I observed how well off the ungodly were...

My mind then became disillusioned.
Inside, I felt humiliation.
I, myself, had been stupid and knew nothing.
Beastly was I before you.”⁵

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁵ Psalm 73.^{2-3, 21-22} author’s translation