



## **Day 8: Rectify Injustices...**

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### **Micah 6:1–8**

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<sup>1</sup>Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. <sup>2</sup>Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. <sup>3</sup>“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! <sup>4</sup>For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. <sup>5</sup>O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.” <sup>6</sup>“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup>Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” <sup>8</sup>He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

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Good prophets are hard to find today. Do you have a prophet, like Micah, in your country who is willing to confront the government or the church with the truth about how they treat people? Does that prophet also have a solution for healing? In 2002, the prophets in Australia were a group of lawyers challenging the government to grant amnesty and citizenship to refugees and asylum seekers. Who are the healing prophets in your land?

## The covenant

To understand the bold and daring words of Micah we first need to understand the nature of a covenant (*berit*) in the Old Testament. A covenant is like a treaty. Treaties in the ancient Near East had a basic form or structure:

- A preamble addressing the sovereign making the treaty.
- An historical prologue describing previous relations between the two parties, including the deeds of the sovereign.
- Stipulations or requirements to be kept to maintain the treaty.
- Provisions for preserving and a regular reading of the covenant.
- Witnesses to the treaty, including the gods and parts of nature.
- Curses and blessings on those who were unfaithful or faithful to the treaty.

Elements of this treaty form were used in various ways to express the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel. The Ten Commandments, for example, are preceded by a preamble acknowledging Yahweh as the God and

sovereign over Israel and a summary of what Yahweh has done in bringing Israel out of Egypt (Ex 20:2). In the covenant Joshua makes with Israel, he includes a lengthy account of past relations and Yahweh's "saving acts" on Israel's behalf (Josh 24:2-13).

## Taking Israel to court

Micah's problem is that Israel has broken its covenant with Yahweh, its God. He declares that God is taking Israel to court for breaking the covenant. The situation is deadly serious. Listen to how Micah begins:

Rise, plead your case [*rib*] before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy [*rib*] of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy [*rib*] with his people (Mic 6:1-2).

The Hebrew expression *rib* is a technical term for a court case or pleading a case in court. Micah hears God summoning the people of Israel to plead their case at court. Why? Because God has a case against Israel. Israel has broken the covenant. Israel is on trial!

Why are the hills, the mountains, and the very foundations of earth involved? These domains of creation are the witnesses to the original creation. Now they

How can Micah bring home to Israel the seriousness of the situation? How can he convince them of the need to return to basics, to restore their community, heal the rift and renew the covenant?

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are called to testify to the original covenant, and to support God's accusations against Israel.

## God's saving acts

In verses 3–5, God's side of the story is presented. God declares what God has done to remain faithful to the covenant. God rescued Israel from Egypt and delivered the people from slavery, a mighty deed that sometimes is called the "gospel of the Old Testament." As an act of sheer grace, God redeemed a helpless and undeserving bunch of slaves, and promised to make them a people. God's undeserved love is implied in the term "redeem" used in verse 4.

Why did God do all these things for Israel? To prove this God was superior to the other gods of the day?

The answer is given at the end of verse 5, "that you may know the saving acts of the Lord." The expression translated as "saving acts" (*tsidqot*) literally is the "righteousnesses" of Yahweh. The *tsidqot* of Yahweh are those deeds of God's that reflect God's identity; God is a God whose righteous love reaches out to those in need, and finds a way to restore, rescue or liberate.

## A possible defense

After presenting God's case, Micah imagines Israel speaking (verses 5–7). Israel knows that she is guilty. She does not try to justify her misdeeds. Instead, we hear her reflecting on how she might appease the anger of her aggrieved partner in the covenant. Israel wonders what kind of gift—like a bribe—will be sufficient to satisfy the demands of an angry God.

The wrong committed is so great that Israel thinks in terms of gifts that are "over the top"—such as thousands of rams for sacrifice to appease God's anger, or ten thousand rivers of olive oil

If the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt reflected the character of God, what are the saving acts/righteous deeds of love which reflect that same character of God in the New Testament?

that would burn as an eternal flame. Israel even considers the supreme sacrifice, a first-born son. The innuendoes here are quite powerful. Abraham had been tested to offer his first-born son, but God said, "No!" The Egyptians had lost their first-born sons in the final plague that saved the Israelites. Should they now offer their first-born sons? The sacrifice of a child was condemned as wrong. Surely they would not have to do what was forbidden! No animal or child sacrifice will work. Not even the riches of the world are sufficient. Israel cannot make God forget her sins by lavish rituals, grand gestures or bribes. There are no "deals" with God, only repentance.

## The core value

The verdict in the trial that Micah presents, the list of the wrongs Israel has committed, the pronouncement of God's judgement follow later in this chapter (verses 9–16). The verdict is a declaration of what might be called the core of the covenant, the basic values associated with living in a constructive covenant relationship with Yahweh:

and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8).

Notice that Micah does not list a set of laws or commandments, such as the Decalogue. He does not demand regular worship in a particular form. Nor does he expect great achievements in war or mission. Instead, Micah reflects the radical orientation of several Old Testament prophets: the heart of the covenant is social justice.

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Have you met people who think they can bargain with God, make a deal and appease God's anger or win God's favor? What is wrong with this approach? What do we know about how we are to come before God?

There are three features to this radical expectation: justice (*mishpat*), kindness (*chesed*) and walking humbly. The term *mishpat* is usually translated as justice; it refers to restorative justice rather than retributive justice. This term, common among the prophets, refers to making the right decision (judgement) and to the process of setting things right in the family and the community. It is this capacity that Solomon requests (1 Kings 3:11). In Isaiah 1:17 it is clear that for the prophets, seeking justice means "rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow." Micah claims that he is filled not only with God's Spirit, but with this urge for justice (Mic 3:8).

The Hebrew term *chesed* is sometimes translated as "loving kindness,"

but is probably closer to "covenant loyalty." The term implies not only compassion, but fidelity to the principles of justice and care inherent in the covenant. In Genesis 24:27 for example, the servant blesses Yahweh as the God who has not forsaken his *chesed* (steadfast loyalty) and faithfulness to Abraham. To "love" loyalty is to make covenant fidelity and compassion one's top priority in life.

The third expression, "walk humbly with God" is quite rare, but complements the other two expressions. The faithful person is to walk humbly, seeking to know God as a constant caring companion in the search for justice and healing in the covenant community.

God expects the people of the covenant to focus on a justice that restores, sets things right, overcomes oppression, exhibits compassion for the unfortunate and heals communities.

*Norman Habel*

## References:

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In what ways is the church pursuing this kind of justice in your community? Who are some prophets in our day who help expose where the church has avoided pursuing justice?



## Luke 1:46–55

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<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

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Like Hannah, Mary knew how to sing the topsy-turvy upside-downside good news carol for the poor and the hungry, victimized, oppressed. At our eternal peril we choose to ignore the thunder and tenor of her song, its revolutionary beat.<sup>1</sup>

There are several instances in the Bible where, in response to a personal and community experience, the individual or the community breaks into a song of praise and thanksgiving (the song of Moses—Ex 15:1–18; Miriam—Ex 15:21; Hannah—1 Sam 2:1–10; of David—2 Sam 22:2–51). The Magnificat is one such song, placed on the lips of Mary of Nazareth. Before looking at this song, it is important to know a little about the singer.

### Who was Mary?

Mary was a Jewish girl of royal descent, but of an otherwise obscure and ordinary family. She was a poor, working-class girl betrothed to Joseph, a local carpenter. She lived during the Roman occupation. Her spirituality reflects that of a religious movement in Israel based on messianic expectations. Because body and spirit are one in Judaism, to meditate on the hope of salvation is to speculate on when and where the Messiah would come, and of whom he would be born. Mary, like many others of her time and community, must have also pondered these things. She evidently was a thoughtful and “interior” person, but her thoughts were the thoughts of her people, its prophecies, hopes and despair.

One day she has a disturbing vision which startles her out of her wits. Even more astonishing than the presence of the angel in her home was the angel’s message, informing her that she was going to have a baby. This seemed impossible, for she knew no man. Besides, what was she going to tell Joseph?

Perhaps, it was the imminence of marriage, a concrete and practical reality, that challenged her intense, highly private spiritual life. Whatever the case,

suddenly she felt a unique demand. Her response was a self-giving so total that she was subsumed in that giving. She was to conceive a baby, which is above all a bodily event.

Mary’s response is that of a creature to its Creator; it is her own personal and unique response of love. Once she replies, she herself becomes the unique place of exchange between the divine and the human. She is not merely passive; she willingly and consciously cooperates in God’s work of procreation. Her whole body responds to its Creator and Redeemer. She is a co-worker, in whose body God’s body is to be formed.

Mary is the “handmaid,” the slave of Yahweh. She is one of the poor, the *anawim* of Yahweh, through whom God’s passion and love for human beings break through to all creation.<sup>2</sup> She is earth, body and “medium of exchange.” She is all three consciously and willingly, actively and sensitively, as a real human life. Her courage and doubt, joy and bewilderment, deep pain and utter fidelity are all involved.

Upon the angel’s departure, Mary realizes the significance and magnitude of the task she had accepted. With this comes the revealing of a God who risks the divine reputation by choosing an unmarried, lowly handmaiden to become the bearer of God’s holy child, the Messiah. His arrival has been awaited with anticipation as the one who will rectify the injustices in the world. Hence, the moment of breakthrough for Mary was also the beginning of the breakthrough of salvation for all creation. One kind of breakthrough prepares the way for another kind. Her personal experience of salvation gives her the courage to envision salvation for the rest of the community.

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Mary then visits her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who also is pregnant. There she discovers another miracle and occasion for rejoicing and praising God. Mary could not contain her wonder, her joy and delight. She bursts into song.

## The Magnificat

The song is called “The Magnificat,” because in Jerome’s Latin version the first words are *Magnificat anima mea Dominu* (My soul magnifies the Lord). The song, which expresses deep emotion and strong conviction, has two parts. The first part (verses 47–49) describes Mary’s exultation at what God is doing for her and the second (verses 50–55) is her exultation at what God is doing for Israel. They have a common theme: the lowly being lifted up and what is high being cast down. All this is done in remembrance of God’s mercy. She portrays her new vision of God in poetry. In Israel, as in many other cultures, poetry is a recognized form of theology. It is a cultural revolution that could serve as the forerunner to social revolution.<sup>3</sup>

Mary begins with praise: her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. Why? Because in her God has turned things upside down! Any other god would surely have chosen a mother of a higher standing to bear God’s Son. But this God to whom Mary is singing has stooped to regard the low estate of God’s handmaiden. This God pays special attention to the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved. If you are looking for a savior, you will not find him in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. Look for him in the back streets of Nazareth, the city of which it has been said, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (Jn 1:46). God is not bound to human estimates of worth, status and power. Hence, it is a peasant girl, one of no consequence, whom God raises up, and whom henceforth all generations will call blessed.

The song which starts with God’s favoring the lowliness of God’s servant Mary, stirs up historical consciousness in her, and leads her to look at the revolutionary actions of God in the history of Israel: God has helped God’s servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy. Mary sees her own experience as being also applicable to social patterns. Deprived groups were raised up, and those on top cast down. With such unsettling and disconcerting notions, Mary’s song continues.

She moves from singing about herself to singing about all those who worship God from generation to generation. What will it be like when the reversals come at the hand of a God whose arm has shown strength? God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. These are not simply the rich but those with pride in their abilities, who are overconfident, who feel little need for God in their lives. They will be “scattered” in such a way that they will be unable to find themselves.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. Those who are powerful politically, economically, culturally, religiously, racially, sexually, or by virtue of their caste, those who manipulate, control and subjugate others, and rob them of their humanity will be brought down or toppled. Those who have no power, the “no people,”—Dalits, women, people who until now have not mattered, whose destinies have always been in the hands of the powerful, whose identity and individuality have been demoralized and whose culture has been erased—**they** will be lifted up.

God had filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. The hungry are those who suffer from physical hunger in contexts of poverty, discrimination and unjust sharing of resources. There is enough food for all and yet millions all over the world suffer for want of food. In countries of extreme

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poverty, hunger prevails alongside food surpluses. Advanced technology and modern food production have not eradicated hunger. Surplus food is often thrown away or, literally, thrown to the dogs rather than shared with the hungry. Many are deprived of food on account of caste, gender or race. Dogs and human beings are fighting each other for the crumbs thrown away by the rich. The hungry are also those who hunger for justice, both for themselves and for the world in which they live. For all of these, Mary envisions due justice and recompense for the hardships and the want they have endured.

The rich are the non-hungry as well as those who manipulate and use the judicial and economic systems for their own selfish gains. They go to the courts for further benefits, but God will send them away empty. Their scheming, ma-

neuvering and manipulating of the system will no longer bear fruit.

In verses 54 and 55, Mary celebrates the mercy of God shown to Israel, a small insignificant nation located between the powers of Assyria, Babylon, Egypt and now Rome. A nation which despite its apparent weakness was chosen to be the servant of God. There are more references or allusions to God's mercy than to God's power. The oppressed find solace in a compassionate God who exercises God's mercy in remembrance of the promises made to the ancestors. The celebration of God's sovereignty and power in the Magnificat is placed within the context of God's liberative activity in favor of the oppressed and lowly. God's power is not an enslaving but a liberative power that promises to rectify injustices.

*Monica J. Melanchthon*

Who are the "Marys" of today? How can individual experiences of salvation be translated into liberation for a whole people? How can you participate in the coming of God's justice?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas John Carlisle, "Revolutionary Carol," in *Beginning with Mary: Women of the Gospels in Portrait* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> V. Devasahayam, "Formative factors of Dalit Theology: Luke 1:26–45, Mary, the First Christian Theologian," in *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Chennai: Gurukul, 1997), p. 12.