

Haftarat Balaq בלק

Torah: Numbers 22:2–25:9

Haftarah: Micah 5:6–6:8 (English 5:7–6:8)

Do Justice, Love Kindness, and Walk Humbly With Your God

General Overview

The prophecy of Micah consists of three clearly defined sermons, each repeating the theme of the other in different language and imagery. This haftarah comes at the end of one of those judgment–blessing cycles so common to Micah’s writing. Indeed, “threatening and promise, judgment and mercy, alternate in these three addresses.”¹ Here, in Haftarat Balaq, we enter into a section of mercy and encouragement with an important exhortation at the end.

The encouragement begins in 5:7 by speaking about a remnant that is scattered among the nations and performing certain important ministries for the Lord. Second, the prophet foresees a time during that dispersion when God will cleanse Israel of their idolatry, while at the same time executing judgment against the nations that inflicted Israel with misery.

Then, at the beginning of chapter 6, there is a sudden transition back to God’s indictment against Israel where He makes a plea to Israel to defend herself against His indictment — if they could. Finally, in 6:6–8 God changes His judgmental tone with the nation and describes what they would have to do to set things right for their covenant unfaithfulness.

Connection to the Parasha

Verse 5 of Micah chapter 6 makes a direct connection to the corresponding Torah portion, Parashat Balaq. Here, the prophet implores his listeners to remember both the council of Balaq and the response that the prophet Balaam gave to him. In essence, Balaq hired Balaam with the intention of having the noted prophet place a curse on Israel. Instead, however, Balaq — as much as he may have wanted to do so, could do nothing but to bless God’s people. Micah cites this story in order to encourage the people of Israel. Despite the stiff sentence of tribulation levied upon the people, God will, in the end, carry out His promised blessings for them and to them.

Exposition

There are four distinct sections to this Haftarah. The first is a prophecy for the remnant. Next, there is a paragraph foretelling the removal of idolatry and external enemies from God’s people. Third, God returns to Micah’s present situation by reminding them that He has a legal case against them. Finally, the haftarah concludes with a strong plea to covenant faithfulness. Hence, we have developed the following outline that reflects each of these different parts of Haftarat Balaq:

- I. A Prophecy of a Remnant 5:7–9
- II. A Prophecy of Rectification 5:10–15
- III. A Prophecy to Remember 6:1–5
- IV. A Prophecy to Return 6:6–8

In this excerpt from Haftarat Balaq, we will focus on the section IV, A Prophecy to Return.

IV. A Prophecy to Return 6:6–8

At first glance, it appears that this final section of the haftarah, 6:6–8 reflects a repentant Israel seeking ways to come back to God. However, we agree with Bruce Waltke when he comments,

Instead of responding to such a wonderful Lord with loving and obedient hearts, Micah's generation transformed the covenant into a contract. In a series of parallel lines, each beginning with a question, a representative "worshipper" seeks to establish the price that will win God's favour by raising the bid even higher.²

Thus, first the worshipper says, Shall I bring simple burnt offerings or calves? Then, he puts the bid higher by asking if the Lord would rather thousands of such sacrifices. He raises the stakes even higher by offering to bring costly oil. Finally, he says in verse 7 that he will even bring his own children to be offered by the Lord.

Outwardly he appears spiritual as he bows before the Most High with gift in hand. But his insulting questions betray a desperately wicked heart. Blinded to God's goodness and character, he reasons within his own depraved frame of reference. He need not change; God must change.³

"Do Justice, Love Kindness, and Walk Humbly"

To all of this Micah poetically teaches the sinful worshipper the correct answer in verse 8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

The first time I can remember reading these words was when I was very young and I saw them written in beautiful script engraved on a synagogue in my hometown. It struck me back then that these must be important words for people to know and to follow. It is only as an adult that I can begin to understand how profound they are.

As we begin to unpack these precious kernels of wisdom, there is an important comment we need to make about the purpose of these words. We need to understand that Micah did not intend that practicing what these words teach was a substitute for offering sacrifices to the Lord according to the Torah. After all, calling God's people back to the Covenant was one of the primary tasks of the biblical prophets. Certainly, one of the main features of the covenant of Sinai was offering blood sacrifices in the proper way and with the correct motives.

But we can mistakenly assume from the context in Micah from which these words are taken that God does not desire sacrifices for atonement. Nothing can be further from the truth. The Torah is clear when it states that there is no atonement apart from the shedding of the blood of an accepted sacrifice.

What Micah was emphasizing is that a sacrifice was to be offered sincerely and correctly in accordance with the attitude depicted by this verse, not separate from it. If this is not the case, then the Bible would be hopelessly contradictory.

Another misunderstanding of this verse leads some to think that one's behaviour will atone for sin and make a person acceptable before a holy God. After all, do not these words indicate that if we do the things taught in verse 8, that this is what the Lord requires of man?

Again, we need to place Micah 6:8 in the context of the whole of Scripture. When we do so, we can readily see that God can accept no one into full and proper relationship and have his sins atoned for without the accepted sacrifice of God. In Micah's days it was by participating sincerely in the Temple sacrificial system. In our day it means by going to God through the once-for-all sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah. It was Yeshua who said, "no one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

Rather than viewing verse 8 as a means of attaining atonement and acceptance by God, we suggest that a better way of understanding it is to see it as a verse that teaches covenant responsibility. Remember that the context implies that it was Israel's covenant unfaithfulness that is in question. Accordingly, this verse teaches how a person who is *already* in covenant relationship with God is to be covenantally faithful — and not how to become part of that covenant.

A. Do Justice

The verse opens with a question. In English it is a little deceiving. Many translations render the Hebrew words, מה-ממך דרוש יהוה to mean "What does the Lord require from you." The word "require," however, is much too strong. It implies that there are certain standards by which we must live up to in order to please God. Rather, it might be better to render the verb, *doresh* (דורש) as "seek," i.e., "What does the Lord seek from you?" This implies that we already have something within ourselves that the God can seek from us. This is a theologically more accurate way of describing a new creation. A new creation is one who is already in a covenant relationship with God. The new man is one who does justly, loves kindness, and walks humbly with God.

The first covenant expectation is that a redeemed person does justice. We note that the verb "to do" is used with the word "justice" because justice can only be done and executed, not merely intellectualised. Rabbi Hertz aptly remarks that

Justice implies reverence for the personality of every human being as the possessor, by virtue of his humanity, of inalienable rights to life, honour and the fruit of his toil. The whole machinery of the state must be set in motion to protect those inalienable human rights against outrage and injustice.⁴

This was one area in which Israel failed miserably in her covenant responsibilities. She permitted injustice to happen to the most vulnerable of her society — the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners living among them. But the redeemed community demonstrates their covenant faithfulness by providing for the protection of those human rights of which Rabbi Hertz spoke.

B. The Love of Mercy

The second covenantal characteristic of God's holy community is that they have a love of mercy. The word mercy, *hesed* (חסד) is a word that is often used in covenants. Basically it means "kindness." However, sometimes, especially when used in a covenant context, it "contains an element of reciprocity, for the recipient of kindness was expected to show kindness in return."⁵

If this is true then, perhaps Micah is stressing the fact that God seeks out from His people faithfulness to His covenant. However, there is always a practical side to this word *hesed*. Consequently, covenant faithfulness is always expressed by doing acts of kindness to others in a very visible way. Hence, again we shall rely on Rabbi Hertz, to enlighten us, when he writes,

hesed can mean kindness to the lowly, needy, and miserable, as shown in charitable acts, especially such as go with personal service.⁶

Micah tells us that a covenantally faithful person not only does such acts, but he has a love for doing them as well.

C. Walk Humbly

Last, Micah says that the Lord seeks those who walk humbly before their God. The first two characteristics affect our relationship with others, especially those in the covenant community, but not limited only to such. This last characteristic of covenant faithfulness has to do with a person's walk before God.

In the previous verses Micah depicted a people who brashly thought that God owed them something, that he overburdened them. They, in essence demonstrated considerable pride, making themselves accusers of the Holy One. Here, however, Micah explains that one who is covenantally faithful is a person who has a humble walk before his God. It is as Hertz states, one who is in "fellowship and communion with God; not ostentatiously, but with inward devotion and noiseless acts of love."⁷

Since we have been relying on Rabbi Hertz's comments much throughout this section, it is only appropriate that we let him conclude our study for us. He does so by saying,

The prophet seems to feel that what he is saying is an eternal truth; we seem to feel it as we read it or hear it read. Man may come and go, but Micah's ideal must live for ever (Singer).⁸

¹ Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, 215.

² Desmond Alexander, David W. Baker, and Bruce Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (“TOTC”), 194.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 194–195.

⁴ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 684–695.

⁵ Thomas E. McComiskey, “Micah” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (“EBC”), vol. 7, 437, n. 8.

⁶ Hertz, *op. cit.*, 685.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 685.

⁸ *Ibid.*