



Blessing Onoriode Boloje

Reading Micah in Nigeria: Ethics, Wealth, and Corruption

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Blessing Onoriode Boloje's study of the book of Micah, which has been included in SBL's International Voices in Biblical Studies series, is devoted to an exegetical discussion of relevant passages from the book (chs. 2–5), the findings of which are then applied to the social realities found in Nigeria (ch. 6), where Boloje detects several structural parallels.

The introduction (presented as the first chapter) opens with some observations on Nigeria, "the poverty capital of the world" (1), a circumstance that is attributed primarily to exploitation and corruption. This, Boloje notes, has led to a growing concern for equity and justice, which, in turn, has directed him to the "moral sensitivity of the prophet Micah" (3), whose sociopolitically motivated discourse he seeks to interrogate for its ethical thrust and potential principles, before asking about their wider applicability in Nigeria and wider human society. Methodological considerations conclude the introduction, with Boloje emphasizing notions such as the truth of the Bible as the "Word of God," emphasizing the "global South's" respect for the authority of scripture, a tendency to literalism, "a belief in the continuing power of prophecy," and a "veneration of the Old Testament" (10); a concern for the well-being of African society; an awareness of the biblical texts bearing the marks of their complex origins and thus requiring critical interrogation; a penchant for contextual biblical interpretation; and a focus on synchronic-theological interpretation that allows for contemporary theological-ethical reflections, with "the

prophetic concerns of the past [being] creatively linked with the present so that the word of God becomes relevant for today" (16).

Chapter 2, entitled "Micah: Character, Location, Context, Book," opens by summarizing some research on the prophet Micah, especially his name and social location, possibly as a "farmer in the agrarian community of Moresheth" (19), while also entertaining H. W. Wolff's notion of him having been a "leading Moresheth city councilman." Some comments on Moresheth follow, as well as on Micah speaking as a "man of the people" (22). The context of his oracles is elucidated politically (with comments on the period marked by the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah), socioeconomically (as a period of economic growth and socioeconomic injustice characterized by inequality, commercialization, and centralization of power), and religiously (with a focus on syncretism understood as a result of Assyrian subjugation and the failure of religious functionaries to provide appropriate guidance). The final section discusses the book of Micah, understood as a "literary image of a prophet" (35), looking at its development and structure. While Boloje shows a preference for a more conservative, early dating, he nonetheless concludes that the book "has gone through various editorial stages and reached a final form in the exilic period or in the postexilic period in Judah" (46). As for its structure, he detects a strategic design in which oracles of judgment and hope have been integrated into "three major cycles of escalating intensity" (43), with the concept of a remnant having been strategically incorporated and the final text featuring a "complete unity."

The next two chapters are devoted to exegetical engagement with those passages from Micah that are at the heart of the concerns of this study. Chapter 3 focuses on "Socioeconomic Transgressions and Power Relations in Micah's Oracles," concentrating on three texts: 2:1–5; 2:6–11; and 3:1–12. The first of these addresses power struggles, indeed, well-organized schemes by the powerful designed to facilitate their unethical (by violating the covenant) acquisition of fields and houses. In 2:6–11, Micah moves on to claims and counterclaims by rival prophets (55): the contestation of his own prophecy of judgment by those who claim that no disgrace would overtake them. Micah responds by arguing that their theology is unwarranted due to their violations of core covenantal values. The final passage (3:1–12) focuses on corrupt leaders, with their destructive actions being portrayed as cannibalistic (vv. 1–4), and corrupt prophets whose messages depend on the payments they receive (or do not receive) (vv. 5–7). The concluding section (vv. 9–12) summarizes the reprehensible behavior of the nation's leaders (judges, priests, and prophets), highlighting their corruptness. In each case, Boloje shows how Micah identifies the targets of his diatribes before outlining their "uncovenantal" behavior and the divine punishments that await them.

The fourth chapter moves on to "Religious Unfaithfulness and Community Moral Depravity in Micah's Oracles," looking again at three pericopes: 6:1–8; 6:9–16; and 7:1–6. The focus here is on the whole people, as Boloje first considers Israel's religious sin as addressed in a unit (6:1–8) that incorporates elements of a covenantal lawsuit (*rib*) and ends in verse 8 with what has been described

as “the supreme definition of ethical religion” (89). The following section (6:9–16), addressed to the “city” and “tribe,” turns to what Boloje sums up under the heading cheating and violence, which refers to dishonest business practices that in their abhorrence are compared to nothing less than the reprehensible practices of Omri and Ahab. Not only will these backfire (as driven home with the help of some futility curses); they will lead to the nation’s destruction and disgrace. The final section in 7:1–6, a lament introduced with “woe,” deals with what Boloje describes as the people’s total corruption or social disintegration witnessed both in the public (neighbors, companions) and private (family) domains.

Chapter 5 summarizes “the ethical burdens” of Micah’s oracles. Noting Hector Avalos’s caveat that the Bible is no more than an ancient relic whose ideas are no longer applicable today, Boloje defends his “prescriptive application of Micah’s ethical concern for contemporary Christian ethical engagement” (112) theologically by regarding Israel as a “paradigm of God’s purpose for human community as a whole” (113). He begins (1) with a consideration of Yahweh’s sovereignty and concern for justice, while making a claim for the moral necessity of retributive justice as a check against arbitrary or excessive punishment. This, to be sure, can be said to be one of the distinctive features of the Old Testament’s—and the prophets’—perspective on corrective justice. Yet in a discussion of Micah’s ethics as an intermediate step before the eventual application of the prophet’s thought to contemporary issues in Nigeria one would have liked to see some consideration of alternative perspectives, such as restorative justice. Even if one agrees, which I do, that justice questions are important and urgent, should Micah’s penchant for retributive justice really have the last word? In other words, can or should the prophet’s outlook be applied apart from any consideration of relevant New Testament perspectives or wider engagement with Christian ethics? Even agreeing that Israel’s understanding of justice was rooted in the character of Yahweh, one might still wonder whether the retributive approach to justice reflects a full understanding of that character or whether there might be further perspectives, including New Testament ones, that might also have a bearing on these questions. The other themes considered by Boloje include (2) responsible leadership and authority, which are impeded or perverted by the leaders’ materialistic cravings and abuse of power; (3) inner-communal relationships and social solidarity, which are thwarted by greed, exploitation and oppression, commercial corruption, and decadence; and (4) worship and a dedicated lifestyle, highlighting the “inseparable connection between cult (worship) and culture (ethics)” (135).

In the final chapter, Boloje turns to apply Micah’s ethical thrust to what he calls “contemporary socioeconomic and religious engagement” in Nigeria (and repeatedly Africa in general). Here, the focus is (1) on contemporary Christian communities and their leaders where, in the face of the perversions of an apparently widely influential prosperity gospel, Boloje urges a return to the fear of God and trust in God’s sovereignty, a healthy balance of worship and lifestyle, and pastoral leadership characterized by prophetic advocacy. This, he elaborates, necessitates sound theology and moral rectitude for that prophetic advocacy to be uncompromised, focused on truth and

justice, to develop human potential, and to censure greed and economic idolatry. As for (2) the development of wider society and its socioeconomic realities, what is required are inspiring governance and accountable leadership, just civil rule and economic policies that prevent abuse, and a commitment to healthy and viable community living. Boloje ends his discussion (3) with some final comments on injustice and national development, noting how the former undermines Nigerian society's peacefulness and well-being.

In his brief concluding chapter, Boloje revisits the question of Micah's relevance for contemporary ethical discourse, pointing to the book's own preservation as documenting its ongoing relevance in providing a "theology of resistance against oppression" and "making contemporary ethical demands upon Christian communities and the larger human society" (170).

In conclusion, Boloje's study offers competent exegesis on the book of Micah combined with some pertinent observations on the prophet's powerful rhetoric and a passion for addressing, on the back of Micah's ethical and theological perspectives, some pressing concerns in his native Nigeria, not only concerning the wider, national issues of justice and economics but also with respect to the perceived lack of responsible, ethically attuned, and morally exemplary Christian leadership. As already noted, one may question Boloje's perspectives on retributive justice as advocated by Micah as being directly and unmitigatedly applicable to today's realities in Nigeria, or anywhere else, for that matter. Similarly, the opening discussion of methodological and hermeneutical questions is not given much space and hence is somewhat lacking in nuance and depth. That said, however, this is not only an informed but a passionate reading and application of the prophet Micah to contemporary realities that deserves to be heard and considered.