

# CRITIQUE AGAINST THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS MINISTRY IN MICAH 3:5-12 AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RESONANCE

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## 1. Introduction

The oppressive exploitation of the people by their own leaders is the subject matter of the present text of Mic 3:5-12. The leaders comprise of both religious and political leaders. Each one uses his or her ministry or office to get quick wealth through the exploitation of the people. This particular point makes this text of Micah very topical. The prophet condemns a social environment in which leadership is no longer for the uplift of the people but for their destruction, as leaders prey on their people with reckless abandon. The issues so reflect the prevailing situation in Africa, and particularly Nigeria, that this text of Micah becomes an appropriate one for contextual discourse. While most African political leaders have always been criticized for their anti-people policies,<sup>1</sup> it is a fact today that many religious leaders are not in any way different. Many use their positions to get as much as they can from the people who are systematically brutalized and impoverished. The text of Micah 3 attacks all cadres of leaders in the society, but the present discussion focuses more on the religious leaders, especially the prophets and priests, who are entrusted with the spiritual and moral wellbeing of the people.

## 2. Text of Mic 3:5-12

5 Thus says YHWH regarding the prophets who lead my people astray; who, when they have something to bite with their teeth, announce peace, but who, when one does not put something in their mouth, consecrate war against him.

6 Therefore you will have night rather than vision, and it will be too dark for you to make divination. The sun will go down on the prophets, and the day will become dark over them. 7 The seers will be ashamed and the diviners will be embarrassed. Indeed, they will all cover their mouths because there is no answer from God. 8 On the other hand I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord and with judgment and courage to make known to Jacob his rebellious act and to Israel his sin.

9 Now hear this, heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and twist everything that is straight, 10 who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with violent injustice. 11 Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, her priests instruct for a price and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord saying, "Is not the Lord in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us."

12 Therefore, on account of you Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the temple will become a forest for high places.

## 3. Form and Setting of the Text

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (First Published by Heinemann in 1984; Reissued, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co., 2000); Theophilus Okere, "The Church in African Development: Yesterday's Roles and Today's Obligations," in N. Y. Soede & I. Ndongala (eds.), *The Church in Africa 50 Years After States' Independence* (Ivory Coast: Editions ATA, 2013), 43-57. According to Okere ("The Church" 46-47), "Far too many leaders have too little wisdom and even less competence and are too bereft of conscience to lead a people who are illiterate, poor and grossly underdeveloped. Some leaders stay too long in power and try to become 'presidents a vie', many *usque ad senilitatem*. They sustain themselves in power by violence, nepotism and corruption and all the thousand and one tricks in their election-rigging arsenal. Others cannot share power and pretend they are entitled to and must work solo, rule solo and spend solo."

The text of Mic 3:5-12 is in form of a lawsuit, that is, a legal controversy called *rib*. This is a characteristic form in the prophetic literature. It is a juridical proceeding or legal controversy brought by YHWH or the prophet against Israel, any group or the nations. The lawsuit is declared because of the transgression of a covenantal ordinance or divine rule. Scholars are not agreed how this lawsuit-form of prophetic speech originated,<sup>2</sup> but it was, most likely, a literary form patterned on the juridical processes in the social sphere. In the present case, Micah declares a lawsuit against Israel's leaders for their flagrant transgression of the ethical principles that ordered the society, which are incidentally the basic principles of the covenant ethos. This juridical form is seen in the various segments of the book of Micah and it is well suited to the setting of the prophecy.

The prophetic book of Micah is set within the reigns of three kings of Judah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Mic 1:1). This puts Micah within the second half of the eighth century B.C. Not much is known about Micah as person apart from this information in Jer 26:18: "Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah; and he spoke to all the people of Judah..." Moresheth was one of the rural villages of Judah, and this background made Micah to represent the voice of the suffering masses in the rural villages. He takes a critical stance against the ruling class in Jerusalem whose policies are responsible for the suffering of the rural dwellers.<sup>3</sup> He was a contemporary of Isaiah of Jerusalem who seemed to have reflected the concerns of the city dwellers and elite in Jerusalem. The book must have taken its definitive form in a later period, probably the Persian period,<sup>4</sup> but in line with many prophetic books it is presented as a prediction of the future, and in this case, a prediction of the Assyrian conquest of Samaria in 722 B.C. and the impending Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.

Micah's prophecy is directed against both Samaria and Jerusalem, the capital cities of Israel and Judah respectively. However, the book's primary concern is with Judah and its inhabitants. As Joyce R. Wood aptly expresses it,

Micah's prophecy is a drama based on history – the fall of Samaria in the relatively distant past and Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in more recent times. Micah dramatizes for his audience in Jerusalem what was already known in his own day, yet his audience is expected not to participate emotionally in the actual event but to be engaged in the events of the performance. Past events are dramatized; they are used as a living element in the present, as something affecting the present, and as a paradigm for what is about to happen in the future. Prophecy is not simply prediction; it is thoughtful reflection on the future in terms of the past.<sup>5</sup>

As regards the immediate literary setting, the text of Mic 3:5-12 is within the larger text unit of Mic 3:1-12 which is unified by the prophetic critique of exploitation and extortion of the people by their leaders. It is part of chapters 1-3 constituting the first division of the book with the common theme of threats or judgment.

#### **4. Structure of the Text**

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> See Victor H. Matthews & James C. Moyer, *The Old Testament: Text and Context* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 155; David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 194.

<sup>4</sup> Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature*, 193.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce R. Wood, "Speech and Action in Micah's Prophecy," in *CBQ* 62 (2000), 649.

The book is structured in such a way that one finds the alternation of oracles of doom and those of hope. Thus, while chapters 1-3 have threats or doom, the other divisions are chapters 4-5 (promises, hope), 6:1-7:6 (more threats, doom), 7:7-20 (more promises, hope).<sup>6</sup> The majority scholarly opinion is that chapters 1-3 constitute the core text of the book while ch. 3, which condemns the exploitative tendencies of the people's leaders, is central to the argument of the whole book. The text of Micah 3 is itself clearly structured by three related oracles in 3:1-4 (against Israel's political leaders), 3:5-8 (against the prophets), 3:9-12 (against both political and religious leaders). The present discussion will focus particularly on the two oracles in vv. 5-12 which deal directly with the extortion in the religious context. However, some elements in the first oracle (vv. 1-4) will still feature in the discussion.

The text of 3:5-12, which is the focus of the present discussion, is structured in form of a juridical proceeding, comprising of accusation (v. 5) and judgment (vv. 6-8) in the first oracle, and accusation (vv. 9-11) and judgment (v. 12) in the second oracle.

## 5. Analysis of the Text

The following characters can be identified in the text: YHWH, the prophet (Micah), the religious leaders (prophets and priests), the political leaders (heads, rulers, judges), and the people. The text distinguishes between the words of the Prophet Micah as a person and the words of the oracle from YHWH. This makes it possible to identify YHWH's viewpoint and the prophet's viewpoint even though both resemble. The religious and political leaders are passive characters and are presented as the oppressors and culprits. The people are also passive characters and are presented as victims of the oppression, avarice and exploitative tendencies of their political and religious leaders.

### 5.1: v. 5: Accusation against the Prophets

Micah launches a heavily worded accusation against the prophets: "Thus says YHWH regarding the prophets who lead my people astray; who, when they have something to bite with their teeth, announce peace, but who, when one does not to put something in their mouth, consecrate war against him." All those classified as prophets in this text are most probably those genuinely called to be YHWH's prophets or mouthpieces, as there is no indication that they are impostors. They are supposed to be true prophets of YHWH, but the problem with them is that they abuse their office.<sup>7</sup> Instead of being concerned with communicating the will of God, their primary concern is their mouth.

The great accusation against the prophets is that they mislead "my people", that is, God's own people. They are perjoratively qualified as "the prophets who mislead my people" (*hann<sup>e</sup>bî'im hammatîm ammî*). The form *hammatîm* ("who mislead") is Hiphil participle masculine plural of the root *tyh*. In the Hiphil, it has the moral sense of causing someone to err. The prophets are supposed to guide the people on the right path but instead they lead them into error. The phrase "my people" (*ammî*) is used rhetorically to intensify the gravity of the offence. It is employed to stress the point that these prophets are not just mistreating the people but they are recklessly misleading YHWH's own people, the very people for

<sup>6</sup> For this structure, see J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, <sup>3</sup>1989), 319. See also the following studies, with minor differences B. Renaud, *Michée, Sophonie, Nahum*, Sources Bibliques (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1987); H. W. Wollf, *Micah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990); B. M. Zapff, *Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Michabuch in Kontext des Dodekapropheten*, BZAW 256 (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> See C. J. Dempsey, "Micah 2-3: Literary Artistry, Ethical Message and Some Considerations about the Image of Yahweh and Micah," *JSOT* 85 (1999), 125.

whom they are chosen as prophets. In a society where the people depend solely on the prophetic word to know the will of God, the abuse of office by the prophet makes it difficult for the people to know the divine will, hence they easily stray.

The text is full of imagery. The flagrant perversion of prophetic ministry is expressed with a paradox. The prophet's mouth, which is supposed to be the instrument of the divine word, thirsts no longer for the word from God but for something to bite from the people. The two words, "teeth: and "mouth", are employed to portray the grasping nature of these prophets. The mouth organ, which is the greatest weapon of the prophetic ministry, is abused and diverted only to the biting of offerings extorted from the people. The consequence is that oracles of blessing are given only to those who bring gifts to the prophet. They declare peace for those who bring gifts and consecrate war against one who has nothing to give. The two primary words here are peace (*šālôm*) and war (*milhāmāh*). The prophet puts it ironically by using the strange expression "consecrate war" (*qīdšû milhāmāh*) to highlight the perversion of issues by these prophets. The worst of it is that if one does not bring a gift, an oracle of woe is pronounced against him. This blatant perversion of divine blessing makes nonsense of the whole prophetic ministry.

## 5.2: vv. 6-8: Judgment of the Prophets

The judgment oracle pronounces doom as punishment for the erring prophets but reward for the faithful prophet Micah himself. The punishment is in accordance with the nature of their crime. This is presented in v. 6 in a well-crafted chiasmic word order with images of darkness and light. They will have night (*laylāh*) instead of vision (*ḥāzōn*), and it will be too dark (*ḥoškā*) for them to make divination (*q'sōm*). Micah uses the term *qsm* (divination) only in this context (3:6,7,11), and he understands it as a mantic activity that involves "seeing" or "perceiving". It is taken for granted in this text that visions and divinations are normal means of prophetic activity. Robert R. Wilson has argued that the title "visionary" (*ḥōzeh*) is characteristic of Judean traditions, pointing out that the visionary is one who obtained revelations through visions.<sup>8</sup> According to him, the visionary used divination (*qsm*) to obtain his oracles and this was seen as a normal form of prophetic activity in Judah.<sup>9</sup> The whole activity requires light, and from this perspective one appreciates that nature of the punishment for these prophets. Since they have distorted the instrument of the prophetic office, their punishment, which comes in form of retributive justice, consists in blocking all the avenues for the reception of divine communication. Instead of the normal illumination for divination, darkness will overshadow them as the light of the sun will elude them. So they will not be able to see visions. In v. 7, another form of reversal is presented in the fact that instead of having their mouths filled with divine messages, they will have closed lips because God will no longer disclose his will to them.

On the other hand, v. 8 presents the faithful prophet, Micah, as one who remains filled with power (*kō'āh*), YHWH's spirit (*rû'āh YHWH*), judgment (*mišpāt*) and courage (*g'êbûrāh*). These are the great prophetic qualities that these other prophets seem to have compromised because of their abuse of the prophetic office. The most important of all these is the *rû'āh YHWH* which is the source of the other qualities. Because Micah possesses YHWH's *rû'āh*, he is able to carry out the distinctive prophetic duty which he puts simply as "to make known to Jacob his rebellious act and to Israel his sin" (v. 8).<sup>10</sup> The other prophets were so compromised that they lacked courage to condemn transgression and sin.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 254.

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 254-263.

<sup>10</sup> See Dempsey, "Micah 2-3," 125-127.

### 5.3: vv. 9-11 Accusation of political and religious leaders

This third oracle brings together and elaborates the accusations of the first two oracles in vv. 1-4 and vv. 5-8. The political and religious leaders are generally identified in v. 9 as “the heads (*rā’sē*) of the house of Jacob and rulers (*q’šînē*) of the house of Israel”. The first word *rā’sim* (“heads”) can refer to all kinds of leaders (family, tribe, religious, military, political) but the second term *q’šînîm* (“chiefs, rulers”) is a military terminology and refers to leaders as military commanders or military administrators. All Israel’s leaders are included in these two classes and they are all accused in strong terms of abhorring justice (*mišpāṭ*) and twisting everything that is straight (*kol-hayšārāh*). The situation is so bad that all leaders of the society are brought up for indictment; the head, the priest and the prophet (v. 11). Every one of these leaders is found wanting as each does what is opposed to the proper office. The rulers hate justice and shed blood, the heads take bribes in judgment, the priests commercialize their ministry and the prophets divine only for money. In this way, Micah explains how each class of leaders has its own specific ways of transgressing the ethical principles.

The great accusation against the leaders is that of the abhorring and perversion of justice (*mišpāṭ*). The Hebrew word *mišpāṭ* denotes a number of activities all geared towards the establishment and maintenance of order in the society and, thus, it can refer to divine laws or instructions and various kinds of juridical processes.<sup>11</sup> According to Deut 1:15-17, the very office of *rā’sim* (heads, rulers) was established by Moses for the purpose of maintaining justice and equity in the Israelite covenant community. The point here is that these heads of different communities, usually regarded as elders, function as the judges of their communities. Thus if the leaders now abhor justice and equity, as Micah accuses them, it means that they are negating the very reason for which their offices exist and undermining the very principles on which the covenant community is founded.

The oracle also accuses the leaders in v. 10 of building Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness. This recalls the accusation against them in the first oracle where the language is couched in the cannibalistic imagery of eating the people: “You who hate good and love evil, who tear off their skin from them and their flesh from their bones, who eat the flesh of my people, strip off their skin from them, break their bones and chop them up as for the pot and as meat in a kettle” (vv. 2-3). The leaders are so ruthless that they not only eat the flesh of the people but also crush their bones. This needs not be understood in its literal rawness but means that the oppressive savagery is such that the people are left with nothing to hang on to. As L. C. Allen puts it, “The defenseless were skinned of property and money to swell the fortunes of those who should have been their protectors.”<sup>12</sup> Micah laments a situation where the poor are made to contribute to the reckless opulence of their leaders, the consequence being that the leaders grow richer just as their people grow poorer. One form of this opulence is expressed in the mighty buildings that adorned Zion and Jerusalem. These structures were erected with ill-gotten money as extortion and bribery were the order of the day. The political leaders are, thus, guilty of corruption and bloodshed, as the poor is exploited to death.

The religious leaders are grouped under the two classes of priests and prophets. The crimes of these two groups, as mentioned in v. 11, are similar, namely, the commercialization of their ministry. One of the priest’s primary functions is to instruct (*yrh*) the people, which is the same as teaching the will of God, called *tôrah*. Micah accuses the priests of teaching with a

<sup>11</sup> See Richard Schultz, “Justice,” *NIDOTTE* 4, 838.

<sup>12</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976) 307.

price (*m<sup>e</sup>hîr*). The word *m<sup>e</sup>hîr* is used 15 times in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>13</sup> and it has the sense of “hire, price, reward or payment”.<sup>14</sup> People usually brought offerings to priests for their ministrations, but this is not necessarily seen as prices for those services. In Isa 55:1, the spiritual nourishment that God gives is to be received without a *m<sup>e</sup>hîr* (cost, payment). What Micah condemns in his critique of the priests is not that they receive gifts but that they now insist on payment for their teaching. In other words, they now dispense the free divine nourishment in exchange for monetary or material reward. The crime of the prophets is of the same nature.

The corruption of the whole system, both political and religious, is carried out without qualms by those concerned. The text thus laments that they do all these and still nurse the fantasy of continuing to have YHWH as their protector.

#### 5.4 v. 12: Judgment of Political and Religious Leaders

The judgment oracle pronounces a punishment that accords with the accusation. Because the city is built through injustice and the oppression of the poor masses, the prophet announces that “Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the temple will become a forest for high places.” This same prophecy is reported by the elders during the trial of Jeremiah in Jer 26:18, showing how famous the prediction became. What this prophecy means in effect is that the two symbols of YHWH’s presence, the city and the temple, will be destroyed, implying that YHWH will depart from Jerusalem. The political leaders will no longer have a seat of governance and the religious leaders will have no cultic centre from where to ply their trade. This final punishment of Jerusalem, the capital city, accords with the logic of Micah’s whole prophecy that identifies the two capital cities, Samaria and Jerusalem, as the main troubles with Israel and Judah. As he puts it, “What is the crime of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the sin of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? (Mic 1:5). For Micah, then, the destruction of these two centres of crime becomes a triumph of divine justice.

### 6. Theological Synthesis

The theme of justice is central to the prophetic critique in Mic 3:5-12. Justice has been considered as a central theme in the whole book of Micah, and this is most expressed in the present chapter 3 of the book.<sup>15</sup> The political and religious leaders are chided for perverting the principles of justice in their dealings with the people. In a situation where every institution is accused of injustice, the people have nowhere to run to in the face of oppression and deprivation of rights. Such a society easily recedes into a state of anarchy or a jungle with the consequent brutish use of force. The intervention of Micah is a way of showing that God has his own way of coming to the defense of the oppressed in an unjust and apparently hopeless situation. The text ends on a note of destruction for the oppressive city. At the end, justice triumphs but, significantly, the God of justice in Micah is also a God of mercy. Ironically, the Zion-Jerusalem that is to become a heap of ruins in Mic 3:12a is the same Zion-Jerusalem that will be raised above the nations of the world in 4:1-3. Also, the temple mount that is doomed to become a forest for high places in 3:12b is the same temple mount that will be made to tower above all the mountains in 4:1. This sounds like a contradiction, but it is typical of YHWH’s judgment of his people, which does not end in death but always opens up the promise of restoration. As Dempsey points out, with particular reference to the

<sup>13</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “*m<sup>e</sup>hîr*,” *TWOT* 1, 500.

<sup>14</sup> For the meaning of the word, see E. Lipiński, “*m<sup>e</sup>hîr*,” *TDOT* 8, 231-234.

<sup>15</sup> For this theme of justice in Micah, see J. I. Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty: A Commentary on the Book of Micah*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

book of Micah, “Israel’s God is a God of justice who takes action against injustice but who also will, as the prophet claims, act compassionately to bring about the ultimate plan for humankind—restoration, salvation and liberation.”<sup>16</sup>

In Micah, justice is rated first among the most important things that YHWH demands of his people: “He has told you, O human (Adam), what is good; and what does YHWH require of you but to do justice (*mišpāṭ*), to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8).<sup>17</sup> Commenting on this text in a recent study, Emmanuel Nwaoru shows how it highlights the fact that what pleases God is not the multiplication of empty offerings but the growth in ethical life and social justice.<sup>18</sup> As can be seen, the text rates justice very high, and by this it is expected that the people’s leaders should be the champions of justice (3:1). Instead, they are the ones who oppress the people through religious manipulation, exploitation and other forms of social injustice. The religious institution, thus, becomes a rogue institution, robbing the people under the pretext of procuring divine blessings.

## 7. Contemporary Resonance of the Text

The very practices that the prophet critiques in Mic 3:5-12 resonate in many ways in the religious practices of the contemporary society. Many aberrations in the contemporary religious practice in Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular, reflect the very issues that Micah condemns.

### 7.1 Abuse of Leadership Position

The whole prophetic critique of Micah 3 is anchored on the reckless abuse of office by Israel’s political and religious leadership. Office meant for the maintenance of justice for all and welfare of the people is now turned into an instrument of oppression, disruption of the just order and selfish profiteering. In the religious ministry, the situation becomes chaotic as ministry that is supposed to have its orientation in God is now channeled towards the acquisition of material success and material wealth. In the process, the people who are to be protected are the ones that are exploited and brutalized. This kind of abuse of office resonates in the present African and Nigerian society. It is rampant in the Protestant and new religious movements most of which are rooted on quick acquisition of wealth. More worrisome, the same spirit is currently causing a lot of confusion in many Catholic circles. Jerome N. Madueke cautions, “A priest will find pastoral ministry very cumbersome if he does not nurture a single and undivided heart for the kingdom of God, exemplified in a simple life-style.”<sup>19</sup> According to him, “People will not seek genuine pastoral assistance from a minister unless he has the self-renunciation that breeds good character.”<sup>20</sup>

### 7.2 Commercialization of Religious Ministry

It is instructive how the text condemns the religious ministers because of the way they attach monetary gain to their ministrations. The commercialization of religious ministry is a lamentable reality in the contemporary society. It has reached alarming levels in the Nigerian

<sup>16</sup> Dempsey, *Micah 2-3*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion of this text, see B. E. Scoggin, “An Expository Exegesis: Micah 6:6-8,” *Faith and Mission* 2 (1985), 50-58; S. B. Dawes, “Walking Humbly: Micah 6:8 Revisited,” *SJT* 41.3 (1988), 331-339; C. F. Dumermuth, “The Good Threefold Way,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 8 (1994), 186-187.

<sup>18</sup> E. O. Nwaoru, “Micah 6:1-8 in the Context of Christian Liturgy in Nigeria,” *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 26 (2012), 122.

<sup>19</sup> Jerome N. Madueke, “Renewal of Pastoral Ministry,” in J. Madueke, J. Ezeokana and B. Obiefuna (eds.), *The Church & Development* (Awka: Bigard 1983 Priests, 2008), 77.

<sup>20</sup> Madueke, “Renewal of Priestly Ministry,” 77.

society. In many contexts, blessings are graded according to the amount one brings. In a good number of cases, just as Micah condemns, ministers refuse to minister unless their pockets are filled. In this regard, Leo Mozie criticizes the situation whereby many now consider the priesthood as a business transaction and the training of future priests as an investment.<sup>21</sup> The problem in many parts of Africa is that there is little official arrangement for the adequate maintenance of priests and religious workers. This makes them to depend entirely on the goodwill of the people. In some situations, missionary groups are constrained to turn their missionary work primarily as a means of making money. This comes in different guises. On this point, John Cardinal Onaiyekan raises a serious concern,

We need to be careful not to restrict our missions to places where we have good financial returns. It is of course legitimate for people in richer lands to share their material resources with others who are in poorer lands. St Paul did this. However, if we go on mission mainly in order to raise funds and make money, even if for the most holy of projects, there is cause for grave concern. This is valid for all our missionaries, male and female, priests and sisters.<sup>22</sup>

One has to acknowledge the fact that priests and other religious workers are entitled to adequate support for their ministry, but the ministry is never to be perceived as a business transaction.

### **7.3 Misleading Interpretation of Biblical Texts for Material Gains**

The text of Mic 3:5 condemns the prophets who mislead God's people. The thirst for quick money has led many religious leaders to mislead the people in the interpretation of a number of biblical texts. The consequence is to attribute to God what God never said. Micah does not brand all the prophets and priests whose activities he condemns as impostors or false religious ministers. He recognizes their authenticity as leaders of YHWH's people but castigates their exploitative tendencies and corruption of their sacred office. Sometimes people are deceived by the fact that a particular minister is very effective, hardworking and producing results. So they cue in to all his or her demands. This is a great danger. The euphoria of success often inclines one to keep milking the people dry knowing that everything one says is believed as coming from God. The manipulation of religion and the gospel for financial and other materialistic motives is one of the roots of evil in the contemporary society. People hide under the canopy of religion when their primary concern is material and pecuniary interest. In this guise they commit many crimes in the name of God. This is the current state of the abuse of religion.

### **7.4 Forced Donations**

The text of Micah 3 condemns the corrupt prophets who impose peace and divine blessings on those who give but declare war and divine curse on those who do not give. The great issue of controversy in the contemporary ecclesial life in Nigeria is the issue of tithing which demands that people give the one-tenth of their earnings to the religious minister or to the church as the case may be. It is no longer the issue of free will donation to sustain the Church's pastoral work; instead, people are constrained under pain of divine wrath to give of their earnings. All these are justified with quotations from one section of the Old Testament

<sup>21</sup> Leo Mozie, "The Catholic Priesthood: A Profession?" in L. E. Ijezie, S. Anyanwu and F. Usuh (eds.), *Ministry and Human Promotion in Nigeria* (Port Harcourt: BENEPS, 2013), 155-156.

<sup>22</sup> John Onaiyekan, "St. Paul and the New Aeropagi: A Nigerian Perspective," in L. Ijezie, T. Okure & C. Umoh (eds.), *Paul: Embodiment of the Old and New Testaments*, Acts of CABAN 3 (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2013), 10.



or another. The most prominent of these texts is that of Mal 3:7-10 which has been systematically misinterpreted and applied out of context. People are threatened on the basis of this text, which has little to do with the Christian religion, that they are robbing God by not paying their tithes and so remain liable to God's judgment. It is horrifying how the antiquated Levitical practice of tithing in the Old Testament has been avariciously enthroned to displace the normal Christian practice of free-will donations.

But while generous donations are ever to be encouraged, the use of divine wrath to threaten those who are not disposed to giving destroys the very essence of free-giving and religious freedom. The text 2 Cor 9:7 is very clear on this: "Each one should give as much as he has decided on his own initiative, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." The point of this text is that the donation to God should never be imposed or induced with any form of threat or psychological constraint. But many avaricious ministers abuse this text of Scripture by laying emphasis only on the last part: "for God loves a cheerful giver." With this truncated text, the impression is given that the more we give to God the more he gives to us and so one should give abundantly and with cheerfulness. The biblical idea of grace, which is a free gift, implies that God's gift is ever free and does not depend on the quantity of the human gifts. There is no doubt that God blesses the cheerful giver but the same God can also lavish his gifts on one who does not give. This is the mystery of God's grace.

### **7.5. Exploitation of People's Ignorance of the Faith**

The exploitation of the people by their religious leaders comes in different forms. In the case of Micah's critique, the people are led astray because they truly believe that the prophets speak the truth from YHWH. The unfortunate situation is that the prophets betray their office and betray the people's trust. In the Nigerian context, one notices an alarming mass ignorance of the main teachings of the Christian faith. Such ignorance sometimes is not lacking in some of the ministers. In many places the catechesis is solely based on the elementary catechism originally prepared for catechumens and children who are not deemed mature enough for solid food. When over ninety percent of what is done in Christian theology and biblical studies is not considered pastoral enough to be communicated to the people of God for fear of their not being able to understand or fear of disturbing their infantile faith, then something is seriously wrong with both the pastoral formation and the general orientation of Christian education. The people's ignorance, which accounts for their uncritical religiosity and credulousness, is grossly abused by the religious ministers. Some ministers are only content in feeding the people with the elementary lessons of the faith and doing nothing to correct their superstitious mindset. In fact, their deficient religious teachings often promote the superstitious outlook among the people.

### **7.6. Corrupt Leadership as Cause of National Disaster**

One learns from the text of Micah 3 how calamity befalls the nation because of the nefarious activities of the political and religious leaders. This plays out in various ways in the contemporary setting. For instance, most of Nigeria's current political and developmental woes are blamed on her corrupt and inept political leadership. In more recent times, the religious leadership has come under similar bashing. The insatiable appetite of many pastors and religious ministers has contributed immensely to the moral decadence of the nation. Since fat monetary donations in the religious context, no matter how it is got, is a sure means to win social prestige, people now go through any foul means to make money, given the societal craze for honour and social recognition. The consequence is increase in crimes and all forms of social malaise.

### **7.7. The Need for the Prophetic Voice**

The text of Micah shows the importance of the courageous prophetic voice in a society mired in corruption. Micah, contrary to his prophetic colleagues denounces the evil in his society. The prophet, as a visionary and watchman, sees danger ahead and warns his contemporaries. In the contemporary society, prophetic voices are sometimes compromised by the craze for patronage from the very corrupt leaders. The consequence is that people are not warned of the inevitable consequences of their actions thus leaving the society vulnerable to the looming dangers.

### **8. Conclusion**

The prophetic critique of the abuse of religious ministry in Mic 3:5-12 raises many interesting questions and points for reflection as one examines the contemporary approach to religious ministry. The essay has examined some of these points together with the challenges they pose. The corruption that characterized Micah's society has taken hydra-headed forms in today's society. The modern day prophet needs to be properly equipped intellectually and spiritually to be able to address this monster-like corrupt society.