

Family Contention and Conciliation in Mic 7:5-6 and the Future of a Generation

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Introduction

One of the major factors in Israel that eroded the family spirit, as it has in our own contemporary society, was the growth of urban life and the movement of people away from ancestral homes in search of greener pasture and from a predominantly agrarian society.¹ This societal movement can be traced back to the period of institution of monarchy, but the eight century especially was an age of reverse for tension and struggle have been initiated resulting in the breakdown of families. One can imagine how terrible it is that a son should call his father a “fool!” The literally rendering of this word “fool,” it must be noted, has the connotation of “moral depravity, spiritual irresponsibility and social insensitivity.”² Rebellious defiance of the mother by daughters of birth and marriage also counts to the family contentions. These total breakdowns are summarized in a comprehensive statement climaxing in hostility and contention between members of the same family, each to their own kind. It has also led to the unnatural cohesion in the homes, the microcosm of society.

The family contention in our society today is evident and can hardly be denied by anyone. Prophet Micah did address it in Mic 7:5-7. In his days (8th – 9th C.), the flow of current of struggle and contention in the family circle was from the younger generation against the older ones. This was without a cause. Reading through the text under study, one wonders if Micah was addressing an age in the past or the contemporary society.

1. The Sitz im Lebem of Micah 7

The moral decline in Israel and Judah during the late eight century was in inverse proportion to the material prosperity they enjoyed.³ Micah is a native of Moresheth (1:1). Moresheth is near the border, the southernmost part of Judah, very close to Philistia and thus open to attack.⁴ Rehoboam, the first king of Judah had fortified the town, so it was more than a pastoral village. Military and administrative officials of the court were present there.⁵ It is most likely that Micah was at least one of the rural upper class.⁶ Micah tells his reader that he prophesied “in the days of Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). The reigns of these three kings stretched from about 780 BC to 687 BC; so his book was probably written sometimes during this period.⁷ In their days, Judah enjoyed an economic peace and prosperity but the political and social situation was disastrous. Violence was widespread and evident, court judges were corrupt. In fact, the inverse result of this economic peace led to a false sense of security and national

¹ Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (NICOT Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976) 389.

² Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 389. Also see D. A. Hubbard NBD, 433.

³ Martin McNamara, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1 – 39* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1961) 8.

⁴ Bruce Malchaw, *Social Justice in Hebrew Bible* (Collegiate, M: The Liturgical Press, 1996) 32.

⁵ James Mays, *Micah, A Commentary* (OTL, Philadelphia: West – Minster, 1976) 15.

⁶ Robert Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 275; Also in Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah, A Commentary*, Trans. Gary Stansell (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 6.

⁷ Ronald Youngblood, et al (eds.) “Micah,” *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) 830.

arrogance. In this context, Micah laments the oppressive actions of the upper classes of society and especially their violation of justice, corruption and their unfaithfulness that has eroded the social structure down to the family life. The young people were more interested in accumulating wealth either by hook or crook even at the expense of their closest allies. The cultural facts and highlights is the same as that found in the earlier portions of Isaiah. Biblical passages covering this period are 2 Kings 15:32-20:21, 2 Chronicles 27-32 and Isaiah 7, 20, 36-39. Several significant historical events occurred during this period and kingdoms were conquered but Jerusalem was spared. Another thing that must have led to the society breakdown was following the ways of the Kings like Omri. Omri and Ahab were legendary for their swindling and extortions (1 Kings 21).⁸ As it were, their exemplary ways of living contributed to corrupt lifestyle in Judah. Thus, the prophet himself complains “For you have kept the states of Omri and all the works of the house of Ahab and you have followed their counsels...” (Mic 6:16).

Most probably, it was against this backdrop that Micah was advancing a theology to deal with the current dilemma of the chosen people of God amidst the social and moral tension in Judah. Far from implying the failure of the covenant promises, this very counsel and judgment would be the means by which God would fulfil those covenant.⁹ It was clear to Micah that this pagan nation would serve as the instrument of God’s judgment unless Judah and Israel turned back to God.

2. The Poetic Form and Significance of Micah 7

The Poetic composition of Micah 7 has the form and setting of wisdom literature and at the same time akin to Psalms of lament. It is oracular and has the genre of lament. The article within is not used consistently. The colons are of irregular length, some very long¹⁰ and others very short. The occasional bicolons with reasonable parallelism (1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 5a, 7a) are interspersed with single colons or with bicolons of rough shape. Be that as it may, Allen commenting on this chapter says: it shows a little metrical consistency falling into two stanzas, each consisting of a long description of social degeneration and concluding with a short affirmation of faith (vv.1-4, 5-7). It can be likened to what is observed in the gospel of Mark 11:12-14, 20-22.¹¹

In particular, the poetic structure of vv. 5-6 is very complex and the colons are even shorter. “Here the parallelism is more like that of standard poetry.”¹² The poetic colons are related to one another in a variety of ways. As usual with Micah, he does not use the same pattern routinely in any one composition. In his poetic inconsistency, v 5a has complete synonymous parallelism. In v 6a, the very *qâmâ* does double duty; the other words match in pairs. Around this bicolon, which deals with the female members of a family, there are two colons that deal neither with males (vv 6a, 6b). Since son and daughter are parallel, v 6a can be read as a tricolon. There exist here two climaxes. After the bicolon in v 5a, v 5b is one long clause that intensifies the point. It has to be constructed as a bicolon for reasons of rhythm. The last colon rounds everything in Micah’s lament off.¹³ There is thus, a movement from friend and acquaintance up to family members: father, mother, son and daughter. It completes the oracle that started in v 1.

⁸ Bruce Waltke, “Micah”, *New Bible Commentary* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009) 831.

⁹ T.W.C. Kaiser, *Commentary in Archaeological Study Bible* (New International Version; Michigan: Zondervan, 2005) 1477.

¹⁰ Francis Anderson – David Freedman, *Micah*(AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 564.

¹¹ Allen, Joel, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 384.

¹² Anderson – Freedman, *Micah*, 572.

¹³ Anderson – Freedman, *Micah*, 572.

Micah lamented the fact that not even a single righteous man could be found in public life; and in vv. 5-6, he finds a worst situation, that is, a complete breakdown of trust in family life. Little wonder why he waits for the Lord of his salvation as the only conciliatory saviour.

3. The Family Contention in Micah 7:5-6

The lament launching itself upon an exhortation is parallel to what Micah described in vv 2-4a.¹⁴ The situation became worse and should be taken more seriously in the smaller group of the society. He therefore focuses attention on a narrower portion of friends and the family circle. This form of exhortation is after the style of wisdom teachers and the psalmists in various types of psalm (Ps 32:9; 62:10 (ii); 146:3), but unlike them, the prophet uses it as a vehicle to further his lament and summon for restoration. His cautions are a rhetorical means of communicating the breakdown of trustworthiness in a manner similar to that of Jeremiah 9:4 (3).¹⁵

The prophet speaks of inner circles of familiarity namely: friends (best friends), son, father, daughter mother, and mother-in-law. A man is now forced to go against his nature, retiring within himself and keeping his own counsel, if he is not to face betrayal. His family relatives cannot be relied upon to keep faith with the secrets of his heart. Intimacy is no more a guarantee of fidelity. The Masoretic text as well as the LXX has the first and the second negative particle 'al. This particle expresses the negative as either a wish (Gen 13:8) or a preference, thus indicating its more reserved intent than the very adamant *lō*. Consistent in this concept whenever it is used with a verb, the verb is in the Jussive.¹⁶ The indication here presupposes not a command but an admonition, exhortation or a counsel to better the decadent society. The *pielmēnabbēl* in v 6a that is translated “treat lightly” here is of interest. The word in its *qal* form expresses disgust or contempt. It is possibly deliberative (“thinks that his father is a fool”), but action could thus be implied ‘treats his father as a fool.’ Thus, *qāmā* in verse v 6 with the same action tone does double duty that must be taken seriously.

The verb form *qūm* appears in many and varied contexts. Its root refers essentially to the physical action “rising up (against).” Derived denotations entail the end of such action: standing. Also, our root is used of figurative rising and/or standing. The same usages appear in Ugaritic (cf. UT 19: no. 2214). Our root occurs 1085 times in OT and it should be distinguished from the more narrow *shakam*, to rise from bed, to go up, and made to take a stand, or stand (to be at one's place or station).¹⁷

Fascinating is also the use of pronoun suffixes in v 6a but not with "father" in v 6a. *Baḥāmōtāh* with the feminine suffix “her” does retroactive double duty for the missing “his.” Here, Micah decries the deep moral corruption evidenced in the breakdown of the social bonds, especially the bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.¹⁸ The relationship here described by Micah cover what is found in a given family. Traditionally, the minimum size of a family that realizes all the possible relationships is five:

- (1) A father-husband who is the head of the family, directly related to his wife (v. 5b) and his son (v 6a);

¹⁴Allen, Joel, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 388.

¹⁵Allen, Joel, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 388.

¹⁶ Jack Scott “-la” in TWOT (Electronic Edition), (Chicago:Moody Press, 1980) # 090.0

¹⁷ Leonard Coppes, “ hm'äq ” in TWOT, #1999.0

¹⁸James Nelson, “ Ht'_mox]B” in TWOT, #160.1

- (2) A wife – mother, wife of the head of the household and so intimately related to him. (v. 5b) and in charge of the women of the next generation (daughter in v 6a and daughter-in-law; v 6a;
- (3) Son-if only one, he must be married, for there is a daughter-in-law – and that son could be in mind in v 5b as well as v 6a (but 6a could apply to an unmarried as well);
- (5) Son’s wife in v 6a, related more directly to her mother-in-law than to her husband.¹⁹

It must be noted that if the network of relationships shown by reading vv. 5b-6 at face value charts at least the main lines of authority and responsibility, then the household is divided into two sections namely: male and female. In which case, while the patriarch exercise his own authority over the younger man, the matriarch do the same to younger woman, including the son’s wife. In Psalm 123:2; a similar division is reflected, and this arrangement gives credence to the relationship between Naomi and Ruth in the book of Ruth.

The tone of the woe oracle abruptly changes from general pessimism to general optimism. The change is typical of the psalms of lament. This and the tone of change from singular to plural in v 5 count for its delimitation from the other texts. Thus, after lament comes the tone of confidence. For instance Ps 31:14 (15), Ps 55:16f (17f).²⁰ Many lament ends with an expression of hope and restoration. Not out of place is the rich vocabulary of faith, commonly expressed in Hebrew language of “watching and waiting.” It is essentially prophetic as the prophet looks forward to the fulfilment of divine prophecies that culminate in God restoring his people.

4. The Overture of Micah’s Lament and the Future of a Family (Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature)

A family is made up of group of persons related by marriage and blood ties and generally living together in the same household.²¹ Unlike the Western World that recognizes a family as consisting of a man, his wife and the children, family units in the bible are often much larger than the primary family, especially if the head of the house is wealthy.

In the ancient Near East, the family is extended to all of the following relationship: the man and his wife or wives; his concubines or female slaves; his sons and unmarried daughters; the wives of the sons; grand-children; aged parents and grand-parents. Others could also be included like servant and their children; or even strangers who attached themselves for a time before setting their own household. When Jacob’s family moved to Egypt from the Promised Land because of famine, he was accompanied by at least 66 people (Gen 46:26). Thus, the extended family was an important stabilizing and integrating structure within Israelites society. Its driving force depended on the absolute authority of the *Paterfamilias* and the respect of his children, whether grown or young, for him and his wife (wives). The fifth commandment emphasizes this point; the family solidarity in Israelite culture.²² “Honour your father and mother” (Exod 20:12). The Western and contemporary individualities will find it difficult to appreciate this background to Micah’s words or at least with sense shock with which they are invested”.²³ The number of persons involved in the contention was recognized as five. The “five” is also observed by Jesus

¹⁹ Anderson – Freedman, *Micah*,572.

²⁰ Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 389.

²¹ Youngblood, “Micah”, 830.

²²Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 388.

²³ Anderson – Freedman, *Micah*, 573.

in Luke 12:52. He foresaw the household divided “three against two and two against three.” It could be two splits: three females against two males, or the three younger generations against two parents or *vice versa*. That both are meant is indicated by the fact that Micah records mistrust between spouses (v5). On the other hand, it could be that Luke reports a double split because his more detailed version has the hostility going in both directions, not just from the younger towards the older generation as in Mic 7:6 and Matt 10:35.²⁴ For Luke, it is:

- Father against son, and son against father,
- Mother against daughter, and daughter against mother,
- Mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law.

It must be noted that the relationship between son-in-law and his parents-in-law is not recognized because the bride’s parents belong to a different household. The position of Moses in Jethro’s house was therefore anomalous; and so was Jacob’s with Laban, hence his desire to set up his own household (Gen 30:3). There have been some instances whereby the case is different as in Genesis 2:24; 19:12. Be that as it may, Genesis 2:24 highlights a breach of the authority structure of the extended family in which all males are under the *Paterfamilias* and all females, including son’s wives, are under the matriarch. This could account “why there is no mention of a relationship of daughters to father or of son to mother. The list therefore, reflects the most probable relationship structure as well as the living arrangements. The daughter in the family may either be unmarried or widowed as in Genesis 38 and Ruth 1.²⁵ The Male folk and female folk constitute distinct units. The man is in direct relation to the wife and the son while the wife is in direct relation to her daughter and her daughter-in-law. It is thus, not all relationships are covered in all directions. Worth noting is the fact that the prophet had no word on parents abusing their responsibilities to children and that v. 5b is not balanced by a similar warning to a wife.²⁶

The family contention in Micah is also found in some extra-biblical literatures. In the Erra Epic, the breakdown of the fabric of society is described by saying: “A son will not ask after the health of his father, nor the father of his son. A mother will happily plot harm for her daughter.”²⁷

Such deplorable states of affairs were often part of longer lists of plagues seen as causes for faulty human behaviour and marks of divine disfavour. According to the Cuthean legend of Naram sin: “City will be hostile to city, house to house, father to brother, man to man, friend to companion; they will not speak the truth with one another.”²⁸

There is also a similar language in the Egyptian writing. The instruction of Amenemhet as in Micah gives this advice: “trust not a brother, know not a friend, make no intimates, it is worthless.”²⁹ The exhortations of *Ipuwer* similarly says; “A man looks upon his son as his enemy.”³⁰

²⁴ Anderson – Freedman, *Micah*, 573.

²⁵ Anderson – Freedman, *Micah*, 573

²⁶ See Grelot (1986).

²⁷ Dalley 1991:297

²⁸ The Cuthean Legend of Naram Sin (lines 138-41)

²⁹ Hallo 1997:67.

³⁰ Hallo 1997:94.

In résumé, the social ills down to family level have been there over time beginning with the time of monarchy. Absalom for example had to rise against his father in 2 Samuel 15 and David flee from Jerusalem. The diviners had techniques for counteracting such social ills. Tablet II, lines 20–28 of the Akkadian *Surpu* incantations list estrangements of son from father, father from son, and so on “who estranged son (from) father, who estranged father (from) son...”³¹ In Micah, the list is shorter, but with fascinating similarities. The intergenerational contention is from young to old but in *Surpu*, it is both direction as well as with peers. There is no son-in-law in either parallel.

4.1 The Bible and God’s Design for the Family

The contemporary society is still being challenged with the sustenance and maintenance of the traditional family structure with its relative conciliatory features as exemplified in the biblical passages. The family as the basic social unit traced back to the time of creation (Gen 1-2), even though it is beyond the realm of human intelligence. The first account says that God created humankind in his own image, “male and female, he created them.” Creating humankind in His own image here has among others, one essential implication; that the “One God” live primarily as a family. Following the standard already set by “God’s family,” a man is to leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife. In the second account, God after creating Adam, saw that “it was not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). He created woman and they become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Hence, the family is designed by God as it is in His kingdom to provide companionship for the various members of the family. “God’s ideal for the family is that it be a harmonies unit...(male[s] and female[s]).”³² This idea here questions the intention of the proponents of gay marriage. The contention in families would have been more disastrous if one gender were to make up a family. Just as God’s, the human families are expected to be faithful.

The bible describes some situations where some people in the Old Testament failed to measure up to God’s ideal. In Genesis 4:19, a man married more than one wife, and in first Kings 11:3, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

From the history of the nation of Israel, the very existence of the country was threatened because of the break of the homes. Thus, Micah descries the family contention that is also part and parcel of the societal ruins. Ezra took steps to remedy the family problems of his day (Ezra 9-10), and Prophet Malachi condemned the men of his generation for being faithless to their wives (Mal 2:14-15).

4.2 Features of the Oracle and the Contemporary Context

The custodians of African traditional values are still basking with sustenance of its features and characteristics such as the family structure. But those who are more or less western in thoughts and orientations seem to be enjoying the disintegrating euphoria created by the unavoidable contention and struggle due to what the society present as well as what is valued by each age amidst the unfathomable breakthrough in science and technology. The contention here, it must be noted is however particularly against the gender of their own kind that may have been generated from their roles within the family circle in a given society. It further questions the survival of family in gay family system; not so much in procreation but in the hostility among themselves.

³¹ Reiner (1958) 13.

³² Youngblood, “Micah”, 831.

In Micah, there is compliance in the family as infested by the social and moral decadence of the society that made the contention possible. The contention is not intended but a resultant effect of societal ills. This tells us the level of their depravity. It is human creation and differs completely from the family hostility in the Gospel of Luke. The gospels have in mind not “a retaliatory punishment for lack of faithfulness to God as Micah has, but the possible consequences of a radical following of Jesus.”³³ Though the smallest group of the society has been found wanting and the stable cores of friends and family having been pierced by the societal contention and struggle; it can still be restored.

In *the Instrumentum Laboris* of the on-going Synod on Family 2014/2015, it proposes that the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Bishops will define the current state of the family and the challenges that face it. Family contention is one among others. I wish it will be addressed as the Ordinary General Assembly has also proposed to formulate pastoral guidelines to respond to those challenges. Reading through the book of the prophet, one will discover the state of affairs Micah is bewailing and the current situation of family today. The researcher was able to identify some parallels: the societal disparity between Israelite monarchy and the Patriarchal era; and from traditional society to contemporary up to computer age. Unfortunately, the gap continues to widen as generation go by. Contention in Micah is by and large a resultant effect, it is caused by lack of knowledge, a disregard on the authority. Each generation thinks that the other age is lacking and should stand for correction. Today each generation stands to be corrected for while the young respect the older generation; the aged should not treat the young with scorn. The problem with the aged is that they have discovered that a lot are yet to be done and that their days are numbered. Hoping that they now have the solution, they talk too much for the young to listen and heed, without knowing that the more they talk the more the young avoid them as their suggestions seem mostly archaic and out-dated. This however, does not negate or disvalue the saga of the sages.

It is almost impossible to avoid hostility in the society down to family life because of individual differences, thought and ways one is inclined to, societal influence as well as the generational values of individual and age. “Undiluted happiness is rare in this world.”³⁴ This paper recommends an extensive conciliatory gesture by the faithful men and women of our time. Firstly, the knowledge of the bible, history and society; secondly, understanding the transforming nature of the society and thirdly, faithfulness to God who is always trusted and whose family life should be imitated.

5. After Thought

In the structural system of the society, as in ours, almost every age of human generation thinks and sees the other generation as inferior. Most of the time, each age tend to evaluate the other as less responsible. It may be a situation whereby the older generation does not align their ideologies with the younger generation or vice versa. Each progeny is inclined to their societal worldview. As a result, their conceptions and manners can no longer remain the same even in a given family because of the simple age gap between parents and the children. This goes a long way contributing to differences in the way they think and act, culminating in the breakdown in family circle and societal disintegration. But in the Genesis account, the human family is made and designed by God. And whatever he made was good. What then brought about these

³³ D. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the book of the Prophet Micah* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 84.

³⁴ William Farmer (ed.) “Micah”, *International Bible Commentary* (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1998) 1226.

hostilities and contentions in their forms and numbers? The question is difficult, but the answer is as fascinating as interesting in Micah.

Conclusion

The survival and maintenance of any social structure (with specific reference to family) depends largely on mutual trust, loyalty, faithfulness and respect. Human being is so made that he or she finds joy and security in a small group where he/she came from, among whom he/she is accepted and supported. Each gender finds confidence in their kind as they relate closely to each other. The father relates to the son more closely; and the mother to the daughter and daughter-in-law. Upholding the exalted position of the father in the Hebrew Bible which is patriarchal (the rule of the father), the paper recognizes vividly the matriarchal (the rule of mother) as well. This is in respect with the Prophet's recognition of the two authorities that exist within the family life. The stability of such microcosm of the society largely counts.

From the fruits of the exegesis, therefore, contention emerges when God is thrown overboard in human undertakings and the covenant promises are violated. This is cancerous because it infiltrates itself not only to the society but more seriously into the family life. But conciliation is achieved when God is trusted, most likely by heeding to the prophetic counsel. Contention and conciliation however are the bones of the society down to family life. Be that as it may, the impressed contention needed conciliation by YHWH, in whom alone there is trust; the only One God, whose family life is exemplary to human family. Working consciously and cooperating with God's family design, the future should be brighter for the younger generation.