

Exploring religious power: A re-reading of Micah's metaphor of food (Mi 3:5) in the context of African religious space

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Dates:

Received: 17 July 2021

Accepted: 01 Sept. 2021

Published: 13 Oct. 2021

How to cite this article:

Boloje, B.O., 2021, 'Exploring religious power: A re-reading of Micah's metaphor of food (Mi 3:5) in the context of African religious space', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(1), a2328. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2328>

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Power and exploitation of power constitute an essential aspect of Micah's oracles in the literary prophetic book, and surprisingly, exploitation of religious power was both highlighted and criticised by Micah. This article attempted to explore the religious power by reading and re-reading Micah's metaphor of food in the context of contemporary Christian religious space in Africa that is marked by power relations, economic and material consciousness, exploitation, poverty and corruption. Clearly, images are important in people's attempt to comprehend God and the spiritual community of which they are part, and to understand their roles. Consequently, this article employed a biblical, literary, theological and comparative method, to explore Micah's metaphor of food in Micah 3:5 against the background of exploitative powers. In this article, the author believed that Micah's food metaphor (Mi 3:5) is an appropriate image to capture the imagination and orientation of present-day religious leaders and Christians in Africa, and consequently, a viable medium to re-direct and inspire the work of the ministry, in a materially conscious world. The article thus demonstrated how religious power can become a vehicle for exploitation of people, for services rendered in the community.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article brings together insights from the biblical, literary, and theological exploration of Micah's metaphor of food in Micah 3:5, into dialogue with practical Christian theology and ethics. Consequently, it provided a voice against commercialisation of spirituality, contemporary religious consumerism, false prophetic activities, and corrupt religious space, in the ecclesia community context.

Keywords: food metaphor; Micah; religious power; exploitation; African religious space.

Introduction

It is at times relatively difficult for one to fully comprehend the significance of the expressed or implied images or metaphors that shape peoples' values, perspectives, and responses. Metaphors are pervasive in human environment and daily life, not only in language but in thought patterns and actions. The normal conceptual system of people, especially in terms of their thinking and action, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:3). It is noted that, 'Good metaphors shock, they bring unlike together, they upset conventions, they involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary' (McFague 1982:17). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:193), 'Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness'. Through metaphorical concepts, one can understand a thing in terms of something with which he or she is already familiar. Consequently, metaphors sharpen one's observations, and helps him or her to see patterns and relationships. They awaken feelings and attitudes, and can alter the way people behave (Barbour 1976:12-14). Stovell (2015) noted:

Metaphors and genres are theologically contextualized and adaptations to metaphors and genres may have theological purposes ... Study of metaphors in the Old Testament frequently demonstrates that metaphors are constrained by assumptions around how God can be described based on preexisting theological traditions. (p. 46)

The prophetic books furnish some of the Bible's most stimulating metaphors. These metaphors undoubtedly, provide a useful and valuable atmosphere for contemporary biblical scholarship, especially in such engagement with questions that are related to the literary confusion within the prophetic texts (O'Brien 2008:xiii). Stovell (2015:37-61) explored the interactive nature of the literary-critical concept of metaphor with form-critical concept of genre – in all their

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

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diversity – with the view to understanding and appreciating how metaphorical imagery that are similar take on different meanings in contexts that are common. In her explorative analysis, Stovell (2015:48–60) concentrated on the metaphor of Israel as adulterous wife in Hosea 2 and Micah 1, and the metaphor of Israel as a woman in labour in Hosea 9 and Micah 4. She demonstrated four major constraints that are associated with the use of genre and metaphor in both Hosea and Micah's that impact their agricultural and feminine orientations. She noted that metaphors and genres in Hosea and Micah are: (1) culturally and temporally conditioned, (2) partial and blended, (3) linguistically contextualised, and (4) theologically contextualised, and adaptations to metaphors and genres may have theological purposes. From the perspective of the four passages from Hosea and Micah, it can be clearly noted that her stimulating analysis, though of a highly distinctive nature, indicates how metaphorical imageries convey diverse notions in varied situations.

Although, the Book of Micah is a relatively concise book, nonetheless, it presents distinctive interest owing to an assortment of resourceful and innovative metaphors that it used to describe Israel/Judah, leaders, and other nations (Cruz 2014:36). The agrarian community context of Moresheth may have been responsible for Micah's familiarisation with and utilisation of metaphors that are common to farming (see, Mi 1:6, 8, 16; 2:2–4; 3:12).

In view of the fact that images provide the important context for people in their attempt to comprehend God and the spiritual community of which they are part, and to understand their roles, this article examined and interpreted Micah's food metaphor (Mi 3:5) against the background of power and power relations in selected passages in the Book Micah. Furthermore, it proceeded to situate the theological message that Micah's food metaphor conveys in the context of African religious space. This author believed that ministerial unfaithfulness and corrupt religious practice especially that which is associated with the responsibility of preaching and teaching God's word to people in community constitute an abuse of power with an exploitative tendency. In this article, the author brought together insights from Micah's food metaphor to bear on ministerial unfaithfulness and corrupt religious practice in contemporary religious space in Africa.

Aspects of power and power relations in the Book of Micah

The phenomenon of power and power relations are obviously key aspects of Micah's prophetic oracles. The oracles are viewed to be a compendium of Micah's prophetic messages whose specific historical contexts have been greatly incomprehensible in the literary canonical form of the Book of Micah (Dempster 2017:17, 19; Zimmerli 1995:433). In this section, attention is given to the economic, political and judicial powers (2:1–5; 3:1–3), and how these powers were violated at the expense of the weak and helpless. The first chapter of the Book of Micah places attention on the announcements of judgements that are generally a discussion

of the sins of the nation (1:2–16) with relative identification of its causes (Dempster 2017:80; Sweeney 2000:357). However, in the second chapter (2:1–5) one observes how justice is ignored as increasing material prosperity and comfort resulted in increasing callousness and poverty (Bright 1981:252; Kaiser 1998:352). Clearly, the frame of the text and its particular portrayal of moral deficiency, indicates a situation of a power relation in which the powerful and wealthy used their privileged positions and advantages to take possession of the fields and houses from helpless individuals. Whoever these individuals were, they were dangerous to the health of the Judean society because the use of their economic power and schemes for acquiring more and more real estate at the expense of the small farmer (2:1–2) were dishonest (Ben Zvi 2000:44; Gottwald 1993:3; Limburg 1935:170).

What makes them all the more dangerous is the fact they have power: כִּי יִשְׁלֹטָאֵל יְדָם [because it is in the power of their hand, 2:1]. Since 'oppressive politics and affluent economics depend on each other' (Brueggemann 1978:36), there is no concrete evidence about the deficiency of power and energy in the regime. Without doubt, the narrative suggests a remarkable level of power and energy towards all kinds of economic exploitation (Andersen & Freedman 2000:321; Jenson 2008:119; Malchow 1980:48; Nogalski 2011:513). They have the money and the connections to get their demands, no matter who is hurt in the process. According to Mays (1976:63), 'the engine which drives the enterprise is covetousness'. There were laws in ancient Israel that protected the holdings of the less-privileged farmers; the land was an inheritance and was never to be sold (Lv 25:10–13; 23, 34) (McKeown 2003:487). However, there were ways to get around these laws: Ahab and Jezebel formulated one (1 Ki 21). These tyrannical and covetous citizens of Judah were guilty of oppressing their fellow citizens and ingeniously taking their legitimate inheritance through a corrupt legal system (Kaiser 1972:65; Limburg 1935:170; Smith 1984:24; Waltke 2007:95).

In the third chapter, Micah denounces politics of oppression and injustice. He describes the political leaders as cannibals who destroy and then devour those over whom they have power (3:1–3). The prophet addresses the leadership of 'Jacob' (רְאֵשֵׁי יַעֲקֹב) and 'leaders/rulers of the house of Israel' (3:1) (וְקַצְיָנֵי בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל) with terms that were used to refer to the Northern Kingdom in 1:5.¹ After the initial call for attention (שָׁמְעוּנָא), the prophet engages the participation of his audience by means of a rhetorical question: 'Is it not for you to know justice?' The clear response to that question is the affirmative, as the prophet assumes the leaders whom he addresses agree that the establishing and maintaining of justice is their proper task. The remainder of the accusation (vv. 2–3) helps to answer that question by describing a

1. The two nouns רֹאשֵׁי (heads) and קַצְיָנֵי (rulers) are parallel terms that refer to those who held an administrative position in Jerusalem. Although the king is not mentioned in the accusation, probably because the actual deeds take place among the lower officials in the hierarchy, notwithstanding, the king can be included in the accusation, since he has the ultimate responsibility to maintain justice, the strongest test for the corruption of power (Jenson 2008:132).

situation where justice is not being maintained. These officials are accused of hating good and loving evil; maintaining justice thus involves loving good and hating evil. Specifically, to seek justice means to correct oppression. Even more to the point, seeking justice means to take up the cause of the orphan and the widow, to pay special attention to the powerless (cf. Mi 3:1–4; 3:9). Those to whom the prophet is speaking have failed in their duty, however. It is a failure that has both moral and intellectual dimensions (Jacobs 2001:84–85). According to Jenson (2008):

These people have not only overturned the required legal standards, they have also rejected the fundamental moral basis for their society, which in turn is a rejection of the God who stands behind Israel's law and who ensures that it is obeyed. (p. 132)

This is clearly a reversal of the norm which is familiar to Micah's contemporaries as well, 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!' (Isa. 5:20), and implied in Amos's statement in 5:15 'Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate' (Smith-Christopher 2015:109).² Micah describes their actions with a metaphor that is both coarse and shocking. These leaders, he says, tear, eat, flay, break, and chop 'my people' as one would slaughter an animal to be eaten. The passion behind this charge is reflected in its structure: 'The statements are jammed together, piled up without regard to logical sequence, the prophet talking about eating before speaking of cooking (v. 3)' (Limburg 1935:175). The metaphoric character of this verse and its slow, systematic, and complete destruction of innocent life for selfish purposes are well communicated by the inexorable progression of how the leaders and judges who should have been watchdogs turn out to be ravenous lions or wolves (cf. Zph 3:3).

The following section of this article presents the complicity and collusion of the religious leaders with those in civil authorities in their exploitation of the poor, through their religious function of preaching and teaching reflected in the metaphor of food in Micah 3:5.

A literary reading of Micah's food metaphor (Mi 3:5)

In every literary text, there are basically networks of different frames of reference. Harshav (2007:6) remarked that while frames are drawn from diverse semantic contexts that may be isolated, readers have the responsibility of looking at the relationships between them so as to construct their imaginary spectrum. His definition of frames of reference indicated that an imaginary spectrum may be:

[T]wo or more referents to which parts of a text or its interpretations may relate: either referring directly and describing or simply mentioning, implying, or evoking. It may

²The failure of justice in the courts in Jerusalem is a recurrent theme in Isaiah and Micah (Is 1:17, 21–23, 26; 5:7, 23). Micah imagines these leaders in light of traditions like those recorded in Exodus 18:13–27 and in Deuteronomy 1:9–18 that define the responsibility to be faithful judges, free from partiality and corruption (Mays 1976:78).

indicate an object, a scene, a situation, a person, a state of affairs, a mental state, a history, a theory; it may be real, hypothetical, or fictional. It may appear in reality or in the reader's network of knowledge, or projected uniquely in a given text. Its ontological status is immaterial to semantics: it is anything we can talk about, no matter whether and how it exists. (Harshav 2007:40)

The food Metaphor of Micah 3:5 constitutes a dynamic example of how two frames can network. The metaphor of food in Micah 3:5 suggests the exploitation of those who relied on the prophets for direction. It is this contradictory metaphor that this article would like to focus on. Here, the text and its literary analysis are presented:

3:5^{MT} כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים הַמְתַּעֲבִים אֲתֵּי עִמָּךְ הַנֹּשְׁכִים בְּשִׁנֵּיהֶם וְקָרְאוּ שְׁלוֹם וְאָשָׁר לֹא־יִתֵּן עַל־פִּיהָ וְקִדְשׁוֹ עָלָיו מִלְחָמָה:

NASB 3:5 Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray; when they have *something* to bite with their teeth, they cry, 'Peace', but against him who puts nothing in their mouths, they declare holy war.

Generally, Micah 3 is considered as an oracle of judgement; a clear reaction to the sad socio-economic development of Micah 2:6–11 (Jacobs 2001:84–85). The oracles are read against the background of the fortune of monarchic Israel/Judah on the one hand, and the condition of the post-monarchic community of readers of the book, on the other hand (Ben Zvi 2000:69). Micah 3:5 falls within a literary unit (3:5–8) that demonstrates a pattern of accusation (3:5), the declaration of punishment (3:6–7), and continues, through in this regard, that the announcement of punishment is developed further, and an autobiographical statement appears at the close (3:8). The accusation in its entirety has to do with religious leaders, the theologians of Micah's era, pinpointed as prophets, seers, and diviners. Micah underscores that these prophets are infected with greed which appears to be widespread in the Judean society (cf. 2:2; 3:11) (Limburg 1935:176). In the declaration of punishment (3:6–7) which follows the accusation (3:5), one can observe that a variety of methods of receiving divine revelation are named here without making judgements about their validity. Limburg's (1935) remark about these verses is very striking:

The 'vision' was one of the classic sources for prophetic revelation (Is 1:1, Ob 1:1, Nah 1:1). 'Divination' could be practiced in a variety of ways. The Book of Numbers tells of Balaam, a famed diviner from Mesopotamia, who received revelations during the night (Nm 22:9–12) but also by means of highly complex technical procedures (Nm 23:1–10, 13–24). Other methods might involve the use of arrows or the observation of a liver (Ezk 21:21). No matter what the method, says the prophet, the result will be the same: There will be no answer from God. (p. 177)

The accusation in 3:5 indicates that the prophetic theologians of Micah's day have become more concerned about fees and/or food than faith, about honoraria than integrity. The use of the verb נָשַׁךְ [to bite] normally depicts a serpent biting or hurting (cf. Amos 5:19; 9:3), rather than eating. However, contrasting this basic proposition is the clause הַנֹּשְׁכִים בְּשִׁנֵּיהֶם [biting with their teeth] which introduces a food metaphor in the text. This metaphor would suggest that the religious

leaders were not unaware of the misdemeanour of the national leaders but were active participants and the beneficiaries of the systemic socio-economic order. The content of the messages of these prophets is not determined by what they have heard from Yahweh: 'But who has stood in the council of the LORD that he should see and hear His word? Who has given heed to His word and listened?' (Jr. 23:18 NASB), but essentially on what they are paid by their people. According to Micah, the transgression of his contemporaries is that when their salaries are up, they declare peace and prosperity [שָׁלוֹם], but when they are low or not available, they threaten holy war [וְקָדְשׁוֹ עָלֵינוּ מִלְחָמָה] (Wolff 1990:102). Similarly, Jenson (2008) noted that:

The situation in mind might be an honest person seeking a prophet's guidance for a legitimate reason, but finding that he demanded too much money. The prophet then employs the threat of God's enmity to get what he wants, a form of religious extortion. (p. 136)

This breed of religious leaders are misleaders, unfaithful shepherds who lead their trusting flocks into the wilderness of misery, rather than into green pastures of well-being and flourishing (cf. Jr 50:6; Limburg 1935:176). The religious helmsmen of Judah and their prophetic oracles are completely unpredictable since their revelations, prophecies and visions are determined by greed and materialism (Nogalski 2011:547). Micah's diagnosis is clear:

The antennas may be up, the receivers tuned in, the switches thrown, but there will be no signal. The prophet's reason for this is simple. Like the public officials of their time, the theologians have sold out – their integrity. They have become more greedy than godly (vv. 5, 11). They may be slick professionals, but we hear nothing of a passion for justice on their part. Their only passion, it would seem, has to do with their pay checks and pocketbooks. (Limburg 1935:177)

The moral situation presented by Micah regarding the religious leaders is clear; the wealthy and influential class in Judah had influenced and brought them into their sphere of recognition and influence where greed and materialism speak louder than God. Micah's discussion is complex as it provides readers with one side of the debate. From the ethical point of view, Micah's denunciation indicates that these religious leaders are false prophets whose motives are worked out in their pattern of ministry, rather than the institution of prophecy. The canonical prophets are expected to stand up for the weak and invite the powerful to the fundamental requirements of the covenant (Jenson 2008:135). However, those whom Micah indicted were concerned primarily for themselves, and so were contented to minister to those with financial ability, wealth and power to sacrifice on their altar of greed and materialism. Whilst it is clear from the text of Micah that those members of ancient Israel's religious establishment found a prosperity theology oriented to wealth preferable to social action, there is no shortage of such religious hucksters in today's African religious space. The following section of this article is thus an attempt to re-read Micah 3:5 in the context of African religious space.

Re-reading Micah 3:5 in the context of contemporary African religious space

In Micah's attempt to deal with the unfaithfulness of power; that is, power at the service of greed, he fought a perverted theology of super-grace with all his intellectual and rhetorical insights and capabilities (Dempster 2017:96). It is remarkable to observe that power is incredible; and positions and offices are often associated with prestige, privileges, and power in Africa (Meredith 2005:170). The desire for power afflicts leaders everywhere, causing them to lie and fight to gain it and keep it. It is essentially important to their identity and they cannot live without it. Observably, at the heart of corruption and corrupt practices in Africa, are the abuse of power, position and privilege. Haller and Shore (eds. 2005:17) remarked that 'transactions of bribery and corruption always take place in power relationships that invariably stratify, marginalise and exclude'.

In the last few decades of the 20th century, it has been observed that Africa has not only ceased to be the dark continent as far as Christianity is concerned, but it is increasingly being acknowledged as one of the continents to which Christianity's centre of gravity is drifting (Johnstone 1993:37, 1997:15; Mbiti 1986:3; O'Donovan 1995:2; Tienou 1982:49). Granberg-Michaelson (2015) noted:

Religious convictions are growing and shifting geographically in several dramatic ways ... Today, the Christian community in Latin America and Africa, alone, account for 1 billion people. Over the past 100 years, Christians grew from less than 10 percent of Africa's population to its nearly 500 million today. One out of four Christians in the world presently is an African, and the Pew Research Center estimates that will grow to 40 percent by 2030. (n.p.)

Certainly, this research indicates that there is obviously an overwhelming growth of Christianity in Africa. It further confirms that most African nations are embracing Christianity. This statistical evidence according to Katongole (2001:180) indicated that African from the perspective of the Sub-Saharan context is predominantly Christian. The growth rate is occasioned by the supernatural orientation of African Christianity, which places powerful emphasis on God's active involvement in human life, on miracles, healing grace and prosperity as well as eternal life (cf. Jenkins 2011:7, 129). The colourfully outward religious life of the African Christians has led to the description of African Christianity as both a 'mile long' and an 'inch deep' (Kisau 1998:93). This observation is made as both a compliment and criticism of African Christianity. As a compliment, it indicates that truly, African Christianity has witnessed an enormous growth in the past several decades. However, this growth in numbers has not been accompanied by spiritual depth and transformed lifestyle, thus the conclusion that African Christianity is only an inch deep (Kisau 1998:93).

Most African nations are faced with the daily struggle of economic survival and the failure of government. The

obvious socio-economic contradictions have presented a viable platform for the advent and sustenance of the controversial theology and gospel of Christian prosperity, popularly referred to as health-and-wealth gospel (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:202). Bonhoeffer (1995:43) described the problem with the phenomenon of cheap grace in the Church, which is simply an experience of the grace of God without an attendant change of attitude or lifestyle: 'Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before'. In the *Encyclopaedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, Burgess (2006) noted that the prosperity gospel refers to:

Christian worldviews that emphasize an earthly life of health, wealth, and happiness as the divine, inalienable right of all who have faith in God and live in obedience to His commands. (p. 393)

This particular ideology finds significant expression in contemporary African Christian culture and dominates the frontier of religious, socio-economic, and both public and private institutional spheres. Certainly, the most anticipated objects of the prosperity theology are materialistic cravings such as wealth, healing, protection, and other miraculous expectations. Mpigi (2017:34) observed that what is very striking in the drama is, 'the juicier the promises and claims, the more people it attracts, and the larger the crowd of people, the more money the preacher receives'. Although the obvious variations on the theme of self-help or motivation or simply entertainment are difficult to generalise, criticism of such ministers and ministries usually results in defensive pomposity or apparent reactions.

Today, as one can observe, the supernatural sensibilities that are supposed to distinctively characterise African Christians and religious leaders have sadly collapsed into worldly obsessions and preoccupations. Sadly, there is an unbelievable ungodliness and darkness in the practice of Christian faith as some religious leaders have become potential agents of injustice. Similarly, a number of Christian community has turned out to be centres of religious commercialisation and consumption, religious profiteering, religious perversion, exploitation and inducement to poverty. Adu-Gyamfi (2020) made a very striking remark about African religious space and her leaders:

It is unfortunate and disturbing that the church that is known to be a moral institution is guilty of corruption. In Africa, bishops, pastors and prophets have been accused of embezzlement of church funds meant for projects, unauthorized sale of church-owned land for private gain, payment of bribes to be elected as Bishops, elders and heads of hospitals, schools and colleges run by the church, nepotism, and many other corruption practices. As in Micah's day, some church leaders give false prophecies in exchange for money and possessions. Ordinary water and oil are sold to innocent poor people at exorbitant prices. (p. 96)

This trend is a direct manifestation of the spiritual materialism described by Okoli and Uhembe (2014:598) as 'commodification of spirituality in a consumerist society. In other words, spirituality is treated like every other commodity – it's

something you pay for to gratify a certain need'. For example, the degree of the infiltration of spiritual materialism in the religious space of the church in Nigeria has assumed the shape of a 'commercialization of spiritual providence' and 'materialization of religion' (Okoli & Uhembe 2014:601). The pervasive religiosity of many Nigerians and the obviously material and socio-economic crises of widespread poverty, disease, unemployment, illiteracy, and lack of general well-being have given rise to the description of the unfortunate trend as an atmosphere of 'merchandizing of religion' (Kukah 2007:38). In his description, Kukah (2007) remarked:

The ubiquity of religion has become a matter of worry and we need to pay attention to its implications. Today, Pentecostal pastors are busier than the men and women who run our polity as politicians or bankers. Pastors are scavenging for fortunes in the name of leading souls to God through the organization of endless spiritual trade fairs called revivals and vigils aimed at indoctrinating ordinary citizens away from the culture of hard work and the need to develop a truly Christian ethic to wealth. (pp. 37–38)

The phenomenon of cheap grace which is not inextricably connected with a message of responsibility is driving many gullible and uninformed worshippers to commit financial and moral transgressions so as to satisfy the demands of their self-styled prophets and the church's expectations. The unfortunate tendency to exploit religious power in the interest of materialism has to be addressed and reversed. Philpott (1993) observation about the abuse of power is noteworthy here:

We recognize that a primary cause of poverty and human suffering is powerlessness. The absolutizing and oppressive abuse of power, together with the divinizing of unjust and exploitative systems, ensure that the poor are denied access to resources, that there is no meaningful participation of the oppressed in society, that there is no need for accountability of the present power structures. The idolatrous and unjust abuses of power need to be discerned and exposed, and an appropriate mediation of God's 'power to change' needs to be established and sustained. (p. 103)

Unfortunately, one does not have to go too far to identify and illustrate the increased emphasis on materialism, commercialisation of spirituality, and contemporary religious consumerism. In light of the fact that the exercise of religious power is primarily concerned with privileges and wealth, the entire religious space is dominated by false prophetic activities and corrupt religious practices. The clear correspondence between Micah's contemporaries and contemporary religious leaders in Africa is noticeable in the avaricious and mercenary attitude of some Church leaders/pastors, whose teaching, preaching, counselling and prayers, are motivated by financial gains.³ In order to promote their reputation, and social status, these religious leaders employ all manner of deceptions, exaggeration, and falsehood. It is

3. My description of the African religious space and Church leaders in this article is borne out of my personal experience of Churches' life and Christian ministries in Africa. I have served as a pastor and religious educator for over two decades in Nigeria, and I have had the privilege of visiting other African countries for education and ministry. This description also finds expression in news media outlets all over the continent.

not uncommon to hear from religious leaders across denominational lines such religious passwords as, 'you need a prophet to profit', 'you have to envelop to develop', 'the quality of you seed will determine your harvest', among others that are used to invite their church members/congregants for economic exchanges with God. Commenting on religious leaders in the African religious space, Adu-Gyamfi (2020) noted:

In Africa, bishops, pastors and prophets have been accused of embezzlement of church funds meant for projects, unauthorized sale of church-owned land for private gain, payment of bribes to be elected as Bishops, elders and heads of hospitals, schools and colleges run by the church, nepotism, and many other corruption practices. As in Micah's day, some church leaders give false prophecies in exchange for money and possessions. Ordinary water and oil are sold to innocent poor people at exorbitant prices. (p. 96)

Regrettably, the exercise of religious power that is targeted at material benefits has resulted in lowering the standard of the divine demand on the lives of people, disregarding the less privileged on account of their economic standing, promoting religious extortion, and commercialisation and profiteering. One of the saddest realities of this development is that a number of churches and/or faith communities are becoming centres of economic idolatry with weakened evangelistic impact. This exploitative attitude of religious leaders in African religious space, obviously requires anew the voice of Micah against commercialisation of spirituality, contemporary religious consumerism, and false prophetic activities

Conclusion

Religious leaders hold the position of power and influence in Ancient Judah and as Micah's oracle demonstrates, these religious leaders were typical agents of corruption. Micah dealt with this ugly socio-economic development that was easily complemented by an ostentatious demonstration of religious power with the abundance of expensive sacrifices and offerings. It was at home with socio-economic exploitation and undermined the potential and well-being of the poor. Micah's critical observation about ancient Judah's religious leaders is painfully close to contemporary African religious space. In this article, the food metaphor in Micah's oracle is associated with economic exploitation of people in ancient Israelite community. The metaphor highlights the complicity of religious leaders in the discharge of religious functions. The prophetic indictment that is derived from the text is an urgent invitation to Christian churches and religious leaders in Africa to recognise and begin to prepare for their critical role and responsibility. The African church and her leaders stand at a very significant moment. The context and backgrounds in which Micah's oracles are presented in the literary prophetic book are very similar to life situations in Africa today. In a strongly materialist context, it must take a conscious effort for religious leaders of the church to think themselves into the spiritual world of the Bible. The inevitability of materialism and corruption as it exists in

Africa today, colours to some extent, religious leaders' understanding and interpretation of the Scripture.

African Christians and religious leaders must now radically integrate God's concern for the poor, powerless, and oppressed in their liturgies, and be ready to embody the ethical demands of the prophets with deep community consciousness. Since God cares so much about the poor and helpless, and reveals his displeasure at social systems that support and promote poverty (Sider 1997:112), Christians and religious leaders are to incarnate the truth that they proclaim, by withdrawing from religious systems and societal structures that undermine the welfare of people; either unfairly giving advantage to some or marginalising others.

Acknowledgements

The article forms part of the author's current research project on, 'The nexus between ethics and socio-economic actuality in Micah'. The project is hosted by the chair, Prof. Dr. Christian Frevel, Old Testament Studies, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany, with the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

B.O.B. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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