

TRUE-FALSE TEST

Micah 3:5-8

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“Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths” (Mic. 3:5).

When making up exams, there are a number of options available to teachers. The easiest exam questions are multiple choice or matching: the answers are provided, and students merely have to line them up with the right question. The next most difficult questions are fill-in-the-blank. Here, the student has to know what the correct answer is. The most difficult questions are the true-false variety, in which students must often make fine distinctions and exercise a high degree of discernment.

The situation of Old Testament Israel was similar to this. Perhaps the greatest challenge for God’s ancient people was in distinguishing between false and true prophets. A prophet served as God’s mouth-piece. The problem was that false prophets claimed to speak for God when in reality they did not. This was of vital importance in an age when God’s revelation to his people was still unfolding. To follow a false prophet was to be led away from the truth, whereas true prophets guided their hearers in the way of the Lord.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A FALSE PROPHET

Moses was so concerned that the people be able to discern between true and false prophets that he gave clear instructions about this in his parting message. First, Moses noted that a true prophet must be able to make accurate predictions: “when a prophet

speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken” (Dt. 18:22). But there was a second and vital test. The prophet must also speak in accordance with God’s prior revelation. In other words, he must not lead the people astray. Moses taught, “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams” (Dt. 13:1-3). Even if a prophet could display apparent divine power in prophesying, the people were to be faithful not to betray what they knew to be true of the Lord.

This is Micah’s very concern as he delivers God’s condemnation: “Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray” (Mic. 3:5).

Notice that Micah refers to these false teachers as “prophets”. It is evident from this passage that in some sense these were genuine prophets, probably members of the prophetic community once led by Elijah and Elisha. In this capacity they had some access to true divine revelation. The earliest books of the Bible had been written, but it is doubtful that average Israelite had much access to them. So when a layperson wanted to consult God’s will, the first place for him to go was to the prophets, of whom there were a great many.

What made these teachers false prophets was not their lack of access to God’s Word but rather what they did with God’s Word. Micah charges them with leading God’s people astray. They were not the kind of false prophets who taught the people to openly worship pagan idols, as was so often a problem. But they nonetheless manipulated their message for selfish gain. Instead of ministering God’s true Word to their hearers, they trimmed their message depending on who was listening. Instead of representing God’s opposition to injustice and moral corruption, they collaborated with the greedy rich in exploiting the people and they encouraged the tolerance of sin. As Jeremiah would complain to a later generation: “Your prophets... have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles that are false and misleading” (Lam. 2:14). The Hebrew word Micah uses for “lead astray” (Hebrew, *hammatyim*) has the

connotation of the wandering of a lost person or the stupor of a drunk.¹ This was the moral effect of the prophets' false teaching.

The prophets were leading the people astray by adjusting their message according to what the recipients could do for them. They gave positive messages only to those who paid them well. Micah says they "cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat" (Mic. 3:5). The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, signifies a right relationship with God with all the blessings of harmony and well-being that result. Micah charges that the false prophets were granting assurances of *shalom* to the very sinners who were most violently oppressing God's people and most flagrantly transgressing God's law. Michael Bentley comments:

These false prophets were telling the inhabitants of Judah that everything was all right. Of course that was what they wanted to hear. We all love to hear good news. We long to be assured that everything is well. We desire an easy pathway through life. No wonder the people listened with pleasure when the false prophets said that everything was peaceful.²

But the prophets were not telling everyone good news: Micah charges that they "declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths" (Mic. 3:5). In other words, you could get a positive message from the prophets if you paid well, but if you did not pay well, their message would be one of woe and doom. David Prior writes: "The people who ought to have been told about war had peace preached to them. The people who ought to have heard about peace found that the religious authorities, like the rest of those in authority, had declared war on them."³

Micah's main accusation concerns the relationship between the false prophets' message and their motive. They were to be driven by a zeal for God's glory and a holy concern for faith and godliness. But instead they cared only about their own bellies. "Selfish expediency had become their criterion for the content of their oracles, on the principle that he who pays the piper calls the tune."⁴ As Hans Wolff put it, "What came out of the mouth of those prophets depended on

¹ Cited from Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 158.

² Michael Bentley, *Balancing the Books: Micah and Nahum Simply Explained* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994), 46.

³ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 140.

⁴ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 311.

what was put into it.”⁵ This is precisely what Paul said about his theological opponents: “their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19).

It is not that the prophets were wrong for receiving money. The Bible says that preachers are to be paid for their work. Paul instructed, “The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14), and “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain” (1 Cor. 9:9). Then, as now, those who labor in God’s Word are to be provided for by the church. Yet a minister’s motivation should never be to accumulate worldly gain through his ministry. He ministers for the good of the flock, speaking God’s truth as received from God’s Word. Whenever preachers become more concerned with their paycheck, their popularity, or their comfort, they will always be tempted to suit their preaching to the ear of the consumer in the pew. It is not a coincidence that some of the largest and wealthiest churches today are those that preach the so-called “prosperity gospel”. “Peace, peace!” they cry. “God wants only to bless you and fill your life with earthly things!” Yet they seldom point out God’s holy anger against sin and suppress the message of the cross, since it implies that God might be more serious and demanding than church-goers are interested in paying to hear.

An application of this charge against false prophets is that God’s people need to be competent enough in the Scriptures to recognize false teaching. These lying prophets were credentialed spokesmen for God, members of a once-glorious prophetic college. So people believed what they said, either rejoicing that all was well with God (when it was not) or suffering under spiritual torment when they were too poor to pay. It is true that God has provided teachers of his Word, to whom his people are to listen (Eph. 4:11). But even in Micah’s time, when the Bible was still being written, and especially now when the completed Bible is widely available to all, God expects his people to discern between true and false prophecy.

John Mackay sagely comments, “History has certainly shown that no institutions can degenerate so quickly as theological colleges.”⁶ It is not sufficient, therefore, for a preacher to be credentialed by an

⁵ Cited in Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 172.

⁶ John L. Mackay, *Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 87.

impressive seminary. Church members are to insist on teaching that faithfully sets forth the whole counsel of God from the Scriptures and on ministers whose aims are demonstrably spiritual and God-honoring. Those who prefer preaching that treats sin lightly and promotes novelty or intellectual fashion are thus convicted along with the false prophets they love. Moses warned the people about the false prophets, saying, “The LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Dt. 13:3). Likewise, Christians’ love for God today is seen in the kind of preaching for which they have an appetite.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF FALSE PROPHECY

All through the book of Micah, God reacts to sin with judgments that are suited to the crime. So it is with the false prophets who enriched themselves through the abuse of their gifts and calling. “Therefore,” Micah replies, “it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them” (Mic. 3:6).

Prophetic visions were usually received at night, but now their nights would pass without such sights. The word for *divination* designates occult practices forbidden by God but apparently practiced by these prophets, to include examining livers and consulting astrology charts. God will not permit any of these superstitious efforts to produce any heavenly insight, leaving these prophets in the dark. Bruce Waltke comments, “Like Samson, who lost his gift for abusing it and was plunged into darkness, so also these prophets who should have been the moral eyes of the nation would lose their gifted insight.”⁷

The result will be the prophets’ disgrace before the people: “The seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame” (Mic. 3:7). Left to their own wits, the prophets will fail to impress their moneyed clients and their public stature will suffer. Through them, the people will experience what Amos had predicted: “a famine... of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11).

Apparently, God had graciously been providing revelation even to these false prophets. But now “there is no answer from God” (Mic.

⁷ Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*, 173.

3:7). As a result, the prophets “shall all cover their lips,” apparently indicating a desire to cover the now-failing instrument of their office. They will be like the prophets of Baal in Elijah’s time, who cried out, “O Baal, answer us!” But, the Bible records, “there was no voice, and no one answered” (1 Ki. 18:26). The prophets of Baal were taken and slaughtered for their failure; the false prophets of Judah would suffer disgrace because God was no longer speaking to them.

Something similar happens today in churches where God’s Word no longer is faithfully taught. In liberal churches, worldly theories about the Bible spread from academia into the smooth rhetoric of pulpits. The people are taught that the Bible must be interpreted to fit with current ideas of God, truth, morality, and salvation. In increasing numbers of evangelical churches, a man-centered or political agenda takes the place of the biblical gospel. In either case, the pulpit inevitably loses its power to effect true salvation, becoming a place for displays of oratory rather than divine proclamation. The church then becomes increasingly irrelevant, saying nothing different from what is heard elsewhere in the world. No longer able to rely on the Holy Spirit to draw believers to God’s Word, such churches suffer the shame of having to market their music program, exciting worship experience, and other worldly goods and services. The prevalence of this trend has accelerated the disgrace of the whole church in society so that a land filled with Christian institutions suffers a famine for hearing the Word of the Lord.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE A TRUE PROPHET

The key to true-false tests is to recognize the crucial defect of a false answer or the ring of truth in another. Micah’s message has so far made clear what makes for false prophets: they lead people astray by manipulating their message in order to enrich themselves. The false prophet, like the false preacher today, thought first about his own well-being before opening his mouth. But Micah concludes with a picture of the true prophet, offering himself as an exhibit. Micah is not boasting; rather, just as the apostle Paul frequently set forth his apostolic credentials in order to authentic his message, Micah points to the evident signs of authenticity in his preaching. “But as for me,” he says, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with

justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Mic. 3:8).

Whereas the false prophets are disgraced by their impotence, the true prophet displays divine power through the Holy Spirit. Bruce Waltke says, “The spirit of [the Lord] gives Micah the supernatural courage to stand up, at the peril of his very life, to address wrongdoers.”⁸ Just as Micah’s message comes from God, the strength to preach it in the face of opposition comes from the Lord. The true prophet is motivated not by personal gain or fear of loss, not by popularity, not by the whims or felt needs of his hearers, but by the compulsion of God’s Spirit working in and through him. Leslie Allen writes of Micah, “He is conscious of a power compelling him to speak.”⁹ He is like Jeremiah, who declared, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord” (Mic. 3:8).

Micah’s distinction – between the prophet who is motivated by the spirit of selfish greed versus the prophet who is animated by God’s Spirit – exerts a decisive influence on the kind of ministry a preacher will have today. The true minister of God’s Word relies not on oratory or zeal, not on verbal manipulation or emotional sentiment, not on scholarly authority or trendy insight, but on the powerful working of the Holy Spirit attending on God’s Word. This was the apostle Paul’s conviction when he set forth his philosophy of ministry: “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). Paul summarized, “I believed, and so I spoke” (2 Cor. 4:13).

This is the Spirit we need to animate our pulpits. With this in mind, John Calvin writes:

Let those who are charged with preaching the Word of God acknowledge their insufficiency. May they realize that however gifted mankind on their own may be with the might of all that is treasured, or however confident in their endowed good sense and intelligence, all that amounts to nothing, unless God grants us his Holy Spirit... No one is able on his own to

⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁹ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 313.

serve God until God has strengthened him with his power, which must come from above.¹⁰

The power of the Holy Spirit exerted a decided influence not only on the manner, but also on the matter, the content, of Micah's preaching. He preached "with justice" (Mic. 3:8). Instead of having his perspective controlled by bribes, Micah was directed by God's standards of right and wrong. Included are the themes of God's mercy for the weak and God's anger against proud oppressors. Micah did not believe that standards of morality are adaptable to the fashions of the time, nor that the obligations of justice, charity, and love and may be set aside when it comes to those in power. "His sole motive is to encourage right and discourage wrong."¹¹

Micah says that a true prophet is motivated by a divine compulsion to speak truth from God, is stalwart in setting forth God's standards of justice, and, thirdly, stands firm in the Holy Spirit and in "might" (Mic. 3:8). The particular connotation of the word for "might" is that of a firm resolution and of mighty deeds. Micah was prepared to suffer for God's truth and raised his voice among the people like a valorous champion striding forth into the foe. Matthew Henry comments, "Those who are sure that they have a commission from God need not be afraid of opposition from men."¹² "Let them not yield," wrote Calvin, "to any gales that may blow nor be overcome by threats and terrors; let them not bend here and there to please the world; in a word, let them not succumb to any corruptions."¹³ This is the spirit of "might" to which Micah refers.

The history of the Christian church is largely written by heroic figures empowered with the spirit set forth here by Micah. We think of Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna, who refused to recant his faith in Christ in the face of the Roman lions. "Eighty and six years have I served [Christ]," he said, "and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" We think of Martin Luther, who refused to compromise the teaching of God's Word, even when threatened with flames by the pope. "Here I stand," Luther

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, nd.), 4:1035.

¹³ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1559, reprint 1986), 3:235.

declared, “I can do no other.” We think of the English preachers, Latimer and Ridley, during Bloody Mary’s persecution. Chained to the stake awaiting the flames, Latimer called out, “Be of good comfort, brother Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust never shall be put out.” We think of Chinese house-church pastors like Allen Yuan and Samuel Lamb, both of whom were imprisoned in labor camps for over twenty years, but immediately resumed preaching about Jesus as soon as they were released. “The more persecution, the more the church grows,” Lamb states. Yuan has said: “We have a saying in Beijing. If you dare to preach, people will believe.”¹⁴ Theirs is the spirit of triumph over all the powers of earth and hell, by the Word of the Lord and the strength of his might. Of such stalwart believers, Hebrews 11:16 says, “God is not ashamed to be called their God,” and “he has prepared for them a city.”

Lastly, Micah defines the particular mandate of the true and Spirit-empowered prophet: “to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Mic. 3:8). This was the chief failing of the false prophets: they treated sin lightly and promised peace with God despite rebellion and sin. Jeremiah railed against a similar failing in his generation: “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). In contrast, the true prophet would highlight the sins of his generation, calling them to repentance for the sake of their true healing and for genuine reconciliation with God. Micah has railed against transgression and sin from the beginning of his book (1:5), not because of some perversity in his own spirit, but because Micah knew that only when sin is confessed and renounced, when God’s favor is sought through the blood of his covenant, will sin be forgiven and God’s acceptance be gained.

THE BATTLE FOR TRUTH

Like Micah, we live in a generation when truth is for sale and when the voice of the pulpit is too often bent by the winds of fashion or influence. The words of Pontius Pilate to our Lord Jesus are practically a motto for of our age: “What is truth?” (Jn. 17:38). But

¹⁴ Cited from David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, D.C: Regnery, 2003), 57-65.

Jesus declared, “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth” (Jn. 17:37). Prior to Jesus, God sent the prophets to battle for truth. After Jesus, God sends not only preachers but every Christian to stand up for truth. We must believe that there is truth and that God has revealed it in his Word. We must insist that truth matters even above our lives, that salvation comes only through belief in the truth, and that true unity is attained only in the truth. Like the prophets, we must battle for truth today. Indeed, Micah erects a standard that must be sought by all servants of God and coveted by every church: “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might” (Mic. 3:8).

Especially we must be concerned for the truth of the Bible’s teaching on sin: “to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.” The carnal heart is not warmed to the thought of a holy God, but we must preach this. The sinful nature is offended by the notion of God’s wrath on all sin. The lustful human heart resents when cherished sins are condemned as evil. Man’s self-righteous heart is repelled by the idea that sin must be atoned for by blood. The relativist is outraged by the insistence that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus. But we must battle for all these things, like Micah and the true prophets, in the Spirit of the Lord, with justice and might. We battle for truth not that sinners might be condemned, since that will happen without our preaching. We battle for truth that sinners might be saved, by confessing their sin, repenting, and believing in the Savior Jesus Christ, whose blood alone redeems our transgressions of God’s law.

It simply is not possible to stand for Christ without battling for truth. We therefore must know the truth. We must live the truth. We must tell the truth. For he is truth.