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## ON Scripture: Rise Up! (Micah 6:1-8)

Roger S. Nam

*George Fox University*, rnam@georgefox.edu

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## Rise Up! (Micah 6:1-8)

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The prophet Micah lived during a time of political turmoil and transition. Sound familiar?

For a large portion of the eighth century BC, the Assyrian Empire conducted a massive military conquest of Israel and Judah. During the time of Micah, Samaria had already fallen, and King Hezekiah was in the midst of fervent preparations of protecting Jerusalem for an inevitable Assyrian invasion. At the time, the Assyrian Empire was the largest empire the world had ever known. They were creators of a formidable army with advanced weaponry and military tactics, including psychological warfare. This military supported the empire's ambitions for political and economic expansion through exploitation. Much of this exploitation resulted in massive deportations and unprecedented scales of economic stratification.

Regardless of any perceived similarities, drawing direct parallels from the Assyrian Empire to the newly inaugurated presidential party may not always be particularly helpful. Such analogies muddle the distinctiveness of both the eighth century context of Micah and our present political era.

At the same time, the sense of despair in Micah's Judah may resemble the despair of many of today's religious leaders. In this sense, this week's passage can help us reflect on our present political era. In Micah 6:1-8, God and the people are involved in a dispute. Scholars have classified these verses describing a type of court case with testimony between God and the people and the earth serving as a witness.

### "Rise Up!"

In Micah 6:1, the prophet begins by commanding the people to "rise up!" The command to "rise up" evokes at least two distinct images. First, the term to "rise up" is used throughout Torah as God "rises up/establishes a covenant" for Abraham (Gen 17:7, 19, 21). Consequently, we are reminded of the lasting covenantal relationship with God and his people. Second, the call to "rise up" also calls forth military action such as God's call to "rise up" against the Canaanite city of Ai (Joshua 8:1,3,7). A military command is a natural response to the Assyrian encroachment. But rather than ordering a heroic defense of Jerusalem to "rise up and fight," the prophetic call is to "rise up and *plead!*"

Pleading is not a decisive military action. The prophetic word will eventually lead to a call to action (v. 8), but first, the passage renews the call of Micah 1:2-7 to testify and contend a case for justice. Herein, the people must plea to God to invoke the covenantal promises. Micah does not silence the complaining people, but rather affirms their right to rise up and voice their complaint and lament.

The passage does not explicitly state the complaints of the people against God. But it is likely that fear of the Assyrians and economic oppressions are central concerns. A conversation displays intimacy between God and the people. The invitation to dialogue directly with God is rare, and primarily reserved for special figures in biblical history (Abraham, Moses). In particular, two phrases in the passage underscore this special relationship.

### "Remember!"

God calls the people to "remember." Although the Assyrian threat is immanent, God wants the people to recall the past events, when God faithfully provided for the people despite enormous opposition. Verses 4-5 refer to pivotal events of Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua using intimate language.

In verse 3, God rhetorically asks, "What have I done for you? How have I wearied you?"

Then God responds in verse 4:

"I brought you from the land of Egypt.

I ransomed you from the house of slavery.

I sent before you Moses, Aaron, Miriam."

The repetition creates a powerful cumulative message of God's faithfulness. The reminder from God is not harsh, but reflects a thoughtful plea from God to the people. The command to "remember" depicts the desire of God to re-establish the covenantal relationship, using the intimate label of "my people" (v. 5). They can look past the terror of the Assyrians "in order to know the righteous acts of YHWH."

So how do the people respond to a God who is so powerful, and wondrous, yet also so caring, with a covenantal commitment to the people?

The answer is not in the traditional responses of sacrifice and offerings. Such displays are not condemned. During the period, the temple is still in operation and worship continues. But the urgency of times calls for something more as the calls to "rise up" and "remember" are intended to draw a more active response.

## **Justice and Mercy-kindness**

It is the covenantal relationship with God that calls what one must do:

- Do justice
- Love mercy-kindness
- Walk humbly with your God

The tremendous love from God compels us to act similarly to our fellow humans. God has loved us and will continue to love us. Accordingly, we must love one another, regardless of any governmental system, whether Moabite or Assyrian or anything modern.

During Micah's lifetime, the powerful, dominant Assyrian empire would eventually be defeated within a hundred years, never to rise again. Whatever your feelings regarding the newly inaugurated presidency, it is set to expire in four years. Whatever your frustrations, God calls you to rise up, plead, and remember as the precursor to our acts of justice and love.

Last Saturday's unprecedented participation in the worldwide March of Women's Rights suggests that the spirit of Micah 6:1-8 is alive. But Micah's view of justice demands that action will continue on behalf of the margins, and that the Women's March will be much more than a cathartic expression of protest. Justice and love naturally emerge from a covenantal relationship with an unrelenting God. These actions of justice should not depend on any reigning political systems, but despite them.