

Towards an Ethic of Family Solidarity: An Intertextual Reading of Family Fragmentation (Mic 7:5-6) and Family Reconciliation (Mal 3:23-24)

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ABSTRACT

The era of inevitable fragmentation and severance of family solidarity, forcing people to take sides and break family bonds, is an essential prophetic motif in the Book of the Twelve. By means of intertextuality, this article examines the collapse of family solidarity and family reconciliation in the books of Micah and Malachi, where fragmented family conflicts are observed, together with several prophetic laments that describe situations of complete social polarisation, which have shattered the moral and familial fabric of society. Such collapse of family solidarity and tranquillity, according to these prophets, is a symptom of society's moral degeneration. Since marriage and family life are significant issues in biblical, theological and moral discourse, this article probes the prophetic laments in the books of Micah and Malachi, providing contemporary readers with ethical insights within the larger domain of biblical theology and anthropology.

KEYWORDS: Micah and Malachi, Intertextuality, Family fragmentation and severance, Family solidarity, Prophetic laments and rhetorical concerns

A INTRODUCTION

Family is an essential aspect of life that inspires or influences people's chances of development, physical and mental well-being, socio-economic status and so forth.¹ The concept cannot be mentioned without controversies and cultural

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Submitted: 13/09/2024; peer-reviewed: 26/10/2024; accepted: 07/01/2025. Blessing O. Boloje, "Towards an Ethic of Family Solidarity: An Intertextual Reading of Family Fragmentation (Mic 7:5-6) and Family Reconciliation (Mal 3:23-24)," *Old Testament Essays* 38 no. 1 (2025): 1-16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2025/v38n1a2>.

The article is a revised version of the paper he presented at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) held at the University of Pretoria, South

conflicts, as individuals view family on the basis of their personal experiences and memories. The concept of family is considered one of the most common aspects of human existence and at the same time one of the most problematic: "It is both neglected in research and overstudied, framed both as a dated theme and as one of utmost contemporary relevance."² Research in the field of sociology presents the family with straightforward analysis that allows reflection on its status as controversial and as a crumbling institution on account of the moral freedom and independence of individuals.³ The reality of family issues of upbringing and care, relationship and responsibility, violations and so forth, substantially shapes people's identity in daily life. Families and households are a theological focus of the Old Testament⁴ narratives, legal texts, wisdom and prophetic literature. Although the literary contents of the Old Testament originated from only segments of ancient Israel, the description of the family in ancient Israelite society presents the family as both a source of moral instruction and a site of significant moral conflict.

Studies on the Book of the Twelve reveal several interesting theological constructions and formulations,⁵ related and frequent motifs and themes.⁶ The Twelve are connected with diversity of themes and it is difficult to state very precisely what the redactors and/or editors of the books want readers to consider

Africa from July 3–7, 2023, and it is part of a research project on "Family in Ancient Israel" by the author.

¹ Patricia Dutcher-Walls, "The Clarity of Double Vision: Seeing the Family in Sociological and Archaeological Perspective," *The Family in Life and in Death: The Family in Ancient Israel: Sociological and Archaeological Perspectives* (LHB/OTS 504; ed. P. Dutcher-Walls; New York: T & T Clark International, 2009), 1–2; cf. Richard C. Wells, "The Subtle Crises of Secularism: Preaching the Burden of Israel," *CTR* 2/1(1987): 51–52.

² Petruschka Schaafsma, *Family and Christian Ethics* (NSCE; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 12 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009324595>.

³ Schaafsma, *Family and Christian Ethics*, 27.

⁴ The term Old Testament will be used henceforth to refer to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

⁵ Paul R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve* (JSOT Supplement Series 97; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 68; cf. Marvin A. Sweeney, "Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney. SBL Symposium Series 15; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 62–64.

⁶ James D. Nogalski, "Recurring Themes in the Book of the Twelve: Creating Points of Contact for a Theological Reading," *Interpretation* 61 (2007): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430706100202>; cf. Paul L. Redditt, "Themes in Haggai-Zechariah-Malachi," *Interpretation* 61 (2007): 188–195 (184), <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430706100206>; Terence Collins, *The Mantle of Elijah: The Redaction Criticism of the Prophetic Books* (The Biblical Seminar 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 65.

as most significant.⁷ Whilst several studies of the literary unity of the Book of the Twelve exist,⁸ the theme of marriage and family life is an essential prophetic motif in the Book of the Twelve. Marriage and fragmented family conflicts are observed in the books of Micah and Malachi, together with several prophetic laments that describe situations of complete social polarisation, which have shattered the moral and familial fabric of society. Such a collapse of family solidarity and tranquillity according to these prophets is a symptom of the moral degeneration of society.

Marriage and family life are significant issues of biblical, theological and moral discourse and in view of the progressive complexity of social relationships, this article examines the socio-cultural and ethical perspectives of marriage and family life in the prophetic laments of the books of Micah and Malachi. The purpose is to situate as well as provide contemporary readers with ethical concerns within the larger domain of biblical theology and anthropology. Consequently, the prophetic laments and rhetorical concerns in Micah and Malachi will become relevant for contemporary ethical reflection on marriage and family life. In the following sections, the theme of family fragmentation and harmony in both prophetic books are explored through the lens of intertextual connections and the resulting ethical significance of these oracles for family solidarity and harmony constitute the synthesis and conclusion.

B INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS OF FAMILY IN MICAH AND MALACHI

As part of exegetical process⁹ and a progressive method in biblical studies,¹⁰ intertextuality is a relatively synchronic analysis of texts that addresses the

⁷ Jason T. LeCureux, *The Thematic Unity of the Book of the Twelve* (HBM 41; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 16.

⁸ Marvin A. Sweeney, "Synchronic and Diachronic Concerns in Reading the Book of the Twelve Prophets," in *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve* (ed. Rainer Albertz, James D. Nogalski, and Jakob Wöhrle; BZAW 433; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 21–33; James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 826.

⁹ Craig C. Broyles, "Interpreting the Old Testament: Principles and Steps," in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (ed. C. Broyles; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 45–47.

¹⁰ Several biblical scholarships employ intertextuality as an exegetical method in both books and articles. See, for example, Marvin A. Sweeney, *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature* (FAT 45; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Mark F. Rooker, ed. *Studies in Hebrew Language, Intertextuality, and Theology* (Texts and Studies in Religion 98; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003); Danna Nolan Fewell, ed. *Reading Between Text. Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Eugene P. McGarry, "The Ambidextrous Angel (Daniel 12:7 and Deuteronomy 32:40): Inner-Biblical Exegesis and Textual Criticism in Counterpoint," *JBL* 124/ 2 (2005): 211–228; Gary E. Yates, "Ishmael's Assassination of Gedaliah:

interconnectedness and mutual influence of different texts within a body of literature. A key assumption is that a text makes sense only when it is read in juxtaposition with other texts. It is thus immaterial if such texts were available to the author or deliberately referred to the original author.¹¹ While identifying the basic purposes of intertextuality in the Old Testament scholarship such as exegesis, influence, allusion and echo, Benjamin D. Sommer notes that within exegetical context, a text serves its purpose when it "purports to explain the meaning of a specific older text."¹²

Teófilo Correa remarks that intertextually is a critical engagement in biblical scholarship: "Reading the Bible intertextually denotes a deconstructive investigation through the inherent conflicts, tensions and paradoxes in transposition systems and subjectivities in violent juxtaposition . . . what is new and what is old."¹³ According to William Krise, "The methodology of intertextual analysis of biblical texts consists of comparing two texts to identify points of thematic and lexical continuity between them."¹⁴ Kirsten Nielsen also affirms that "no text exists independently of every other one," as meaning is determined in the connection and networking between texts. Thus, the potential meaning of texts can be actualised in the reader's encounter with the text.¹⁵

Micah 7:5–6 and Mal 3:23–24 [ENG 4:5–6] share a rich set of textual, intertextual and thematic connections, primarily due to their positioning in the Old Testament as part of the minor prophets. While the two passages are relatively separated by the entire book of Malachi and the preceding prophecies in Micah, there are direct textual contrasts and connections in terms of family relationships and societal conditions. In both books, family is presented as a microcosm of covenant community. One finds significant textual and intertextual

Echoes of the Saul-David Story in Jeremiah 40:7–41:18," *WTJ* 67/1 (2005): 103–112; Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "Facing Destruction and Exile: Inner-Biblical Exegesis in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," *ZAW* 117/2 (2005): 189–205.

¹¹ Geoffrey D. Miller, "Intertextuality in Old Testament Research," *CBR* 9/3 (2010): 284, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X09359455>; cf. John S. Vassar, *Recalling a Story Once Told: An Intertextual Reading of the Psalter and the Pentateuch* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007), 7.

¹² Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 23.

¹³ Teófilo Correa, "Significant Assumptions on the Methodology of Intertextuality and Inner-Biblical Exegesis," in *The End from the Beginning: Festschrift Honoring Merling Alomía* (ed. B. Rojas, T. Correa, L. Caesar and J. Turpo; Peru: Universidad Peruana Union 2015), 303, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/ef0k-f923>.

¹⁴ William Krise, "Methodological Problems in Intertextual Analyses of Old Testament Texts: Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as a Case Study," *SJOT* 36/2 (2022): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09018328.2022.2114189>.

¹⁵ Kirsten Nielsen, "Intertextuality and Hebrew Bible," in *Congress Volume Oslo 1998* (ed. André Lemaire and M. Saebo; VTSup 80; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 17–18.

connections that relate to family and family life. These connections are occasioned by their common emphasis on covenant fidelity, social justice and the moral integrity of society, which directly impact the family as a social institution. Whereas Micah speaks of disintegration in family and social distortion (a man's enemies being from his household), Malachi holds up the promise of reconciliation and the re-establishment of family unity through the coming of Elijah (the turning of hearts of parents and children). Clearly, these texts give attention to similar themes of societal disorder and divine justice with Malachi offering a glorious future of the hope of reconciliation, thus, making them powerful literary agencies within the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. I shall proceed to explore how these themes of family fragmentation and family peace shape, interact and contrast within the two prophetic texts of Micah and of Malachi.

1 Micah 7:5–6 and family fragmentation

The hint at the theme of family and family life in the literary prophetic book of Micah is first observed in Mic 2:8–9 in a unit of the oracle that explores social ethics, divine character and patronship, distorted theological perspectives and judgment (2:6–11).¹⁶ Micah's superscription (1:1, with supportive reference in Jer 26:18), which originates from the hand of a redactor,¹⁷ locates the prophecy in the eighth century period of Neo-Assyria ideological and political dominance of the ANE¹⁸ and control of the disorganised and fragmented kingdoms of Israel and Judah.¹⁹ Micah²⁰ emphasises how the wealthy violate covenantal principles that stand at heart of Israel's social ethics (Exod 22:21–22; Deut 24:17–18) by coveting and dispossessing their vulnerable victims of their legitimate privileges (2:8) and demoralising Yahweh's honour as patron of children and women (2:9). The shattering of the family is sketched out by Micah thus:

By means of injustice, violence and oppression these enemies ruined
the posterity of the children by driving them out of their houses and

¹⁶ Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah* (FOTL 21B; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 56; cf. Stephen G. Dempster, *Micah* (THOTC; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 80.

¹⁷ Blessing O. Boloje, *Reading Micah in Nigeria: Ethics, Wealth, and Corruption* (IVBS 15; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 23; Bob Becking, *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYBC 241; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 15.

¹⁸ Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 50; Matthew J. M. Coomber, "Caught in the Crossfire? Economic Injustice and Prophetic Motivation in Eighth-Century Judah," *BibInt* 19 (2011): 396–432. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851511X595576>; Iain Provan, Long, V. Philips and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 271–273.

¹⁹ David M. Carr, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 318.

²⁰ Reference to Micah in this article does not imply the imagined eighth-century prophet but the literary character depicted in the book of Micah.

separating them from their parents. The enemies carried out these contemptible acts either continually or they intend to stand by what they have done forever (לְעוֹלָם). A sequential and composite reading of these crimes will indicate a portrait of the typical family where fathers are robbed and disconnected from their families (possibly by slavery or forced labour), followed by the eviction of their wives and finally their children are disinherited.²¹

As a follow-up to covenantal violation and community's unfaithfulness, Mic 7:5–6 depicts a society where familial relationships are severely strained, leading to fragmentation and betrayal. The text and its familial components are analysed below:

MT	ENG ²²
⁵ אֶל-תַּאֲמִינוּ בָרֵעַ אֶל-תִּבְטְחוּ בַּאֲלֹנִי מִשְׁכַּבְתִּי חֵיקִי שָׁמַר פֶּתַח-יִפִּי :	⁵ You should better not trust in your neighbour, or have confidence in your companion. From the one who lies in your bosom, protect the doors of your mouth.
⁶ כִּי-בֶן מִנְבֵּל אֵב בֵּת קָמָה בְּאִמָּהּ כֶּלֶה בְּתוּמָתָהּ אֹיְבֵי אִישׁ אֲנָשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ :	⁶ For the son treats his father disdainfully, a daughter rebels against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law A man's enemies are the people of his own household.

Micah 7:5–6 falls under the closing compositional unit of Mic 6–7 that describes desolations resulting from the violation of the social and moral code of Mic 6:8.²³ Although text-critical interferences may be unnecessary, the Hebrew of the unit is not without problems.²⁴ The proposed potential speakers include Yahweh, Daughter Zion (or Jerusalem) and the prophet Micah.²⁵ While interpreters make

²¹ Blessing O. Boloje, "Micah 2:9 and the Traumatic Effects of Depriving Children of Their Parents," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76/1 (2020): 4. a5960. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5960>.

²² The English (ENG) translations in this submission are personal translation of the author.

²³ Micah's oracles are moulded in a variety of literary forms. Redaction-critical scholars hold that Mic 1–3 refers to the latter part of the eighth century as their setting, while Mic 4–7 consists of prophecies of salvation that are added to the Micah collection in the exilic or post-exilic periods. See Boloje, *Reading Micah in Nigeria*, 37–46. Becking intellectually proposes reading Micah in three constituent parts immediately after the title: "Micah 1: An original prophecy; Micah 2–5: A prophetic futurology based on a variety of reworked sayings from the Micah tradition; and Micah 6–7: A treatise dating to the period before the reform of Josiah." See Becking, *Micah*, 24–29.

²⁴ Kenneth H. Cuffey, *The Literary Coherence of the Book of Micah: Remnant, Restoration, and Promise* (JSOTSS 611; New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 245–253.

²⁵ Ben Zvi, *Micah*, 168.

certain distinctions regarding Mic 7,²⁶ the unit in which the family text is located (7:1–7) opens and ends with the first person allusion.²⁷ After the initial lamentation of the deplorable state of society (7:1–2), the prophet articulates social fragmentation at two levels; first, the community sphere and its authorities (7:3–4) and, second, the personal family sphere (7:5–6).²⁸ In this unit, the common emphasis on covenantal faithfulness connects the moral and spiritual health of the family to the broader health of the nation.²⁹

The imperative in 7:5 portrays a grim scenario where trust cannot be assured, even in the most intimate of family relationships. Ordinarily, trust in people around is a required and desired agent for community social relations, in normal times. Additionally, confidence in family members strengthens the moral fabric of society. However, in Micah's society, all of these ties are fragmented by the greed and cynicism of the wealthy.³⁰ The רֵעַ (a friend, who could be a neighbour or fellow community member), the אֶלֹוֹף (companion, who could be an intimate friend)³¹ and "the one who lies in your bosom" (מְשַׁכְּבֵת חֵיקֶךָ), which most probably refers to a woman and thus wife, are all described as unreliable. With the imperative exhortation "guard the doors of your mouth" (שָׁמֹר פֶּתַח־פִּיךָ; 7:5), the author reapplies a traditional wisdom saying (Prov 13:3; cf. Ps 34:14) to illustrate the degree to which his society was torn asunder, where a word spoken could be considered to be too many.³²

In Mic 7:6, the author continues with the condemnation of familial betrayal. Here, a dystopian vision of family relationships that is bereft of the traditional values of trust and mutual respect is presented. The verse shows how, in a progressive family network of relationships and responsibilities, the close relationship between father and son (בֶּן־אָבִי), daughter and mother (בִּת־אִמִּי) and daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law (בִּת־בְּרִיָּה) is undergoing gross insubordination even at a more scandalous contrast. The description recalls a reversal of the traditional instructions in the Law that urge children to honour and respect their parents (Exod 20:12; Lev 19:32; 20:9), as an unruly son would be liable to a death sentence (Deut 21:18–21). This intertextual echo brings attention to how Micah imagines the fragmentation of the family as symptomatic

²⁶ See Julia M. O'Brien, *Micah* (Wisdom Commentary 37; Collegeville: Michael Glazier Book, 2015), 102–109.

²⁷ Dempster, *Micah*, 173.

²⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 428.

²⁹ Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 85.

³⁰ Becking, *Micah*, 235.

³¹ Charles S. Shaw, *The Speeches of Micah: A Rhetorical-Historical Analysis* (JSOTSS 145; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 185; cf. Shunya Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (beit 'ab) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* (JBS 7; Jerusalem: Simor, 1996), 251.

³² Becking, *Micah*, 235–236.

of a larger societal decay, reflecting the prophet’s condemnation of the people’s moral and spiritual failures regarding their covenant relationship with God and community members. The family, which ought to have been a source of support and stability, has become a site of conflict and mistrust. The distortion of family relations has brought calamity to the family, as “trust and loyalty have collapsed, resulting in broken relationships where the harshness of egoism supplants expected solidarity.”³³

2 Malachi 3:23-24 and family reconciliation

In contrast to Micah’s dystopian image of family relationships, the book of Malachi, particularly Mal 3:23–24 (ENG 4:56), presents a vision of restored familial synchronisation as part of the eschatological hope. The text and its family resourcefulness are presented below:

MT	ENG
²³ הִנֵּה אֶנְכִּי שֹׁלֵחַ לָכֶם אֶת אֱלִיָּה חֲנָבִיָּא לִפְנֵי בּוֹא יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא : ²⁴ וְהָשִׁיב לִב־אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְלִב בָּנִים עַל־אֲבוֹתָם כִּן־אֲבֹא וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הָרָם :	²³ Behold, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of that great and dreadful day of the LORD. ²⁴ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; so that I will not come and strike the land with total destruction.

Following the return from exile, the author of the book of Malachi, acting as the literary conscience of his people, skilfully and creatively adapted older prophetic traditions to suit the religious, economic and socio-cultural context of his time.³⁴ The book presents a population steeped in religious cynicism and political scepticism. Clearly, the decline in morality and weakening of the people’s religious life during Malachi’s era were of serious social implications. Distorted theological perspectives of God and hypocritical forms of worship inevitably led to fractured social relationships. Intermarriage and divorce (2:10–16) and adultery (3:5) were so prevalent in the post-exilic community that the total destruction of Jewish families seemed almost imminent.³⁵ God’s established system of an ordered community was almost being subverted. However, amidst this domestic strife,

³³ Ibid., 236.

³⁴ Lester L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (LSTS 47; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 87.

³⁵ Cf. Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed from the Perspective of Malachi* (VTSup 52; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 339; Julia M. O’Brien, “Judah as Wife and Husband: Deconstructing Gender in Malachi,” *JBL* 115/2 (1996): 244.

there is a noticeable revitalisation and hope for harmony, particularly in Mal 3:23–24.³⁶

The placement of the motif of family reconciliation at the end of the Book of the Twelve (Mal 3:23–24 [ENG 4:5–6]) is clearly a significant literary and theological masterpiece of the redactors of Malachi which, serves multiple purposes. The redactors or editors of the Book of the Twelve possibly sought to provide a thematic closure in line with Israel's cultural and theological understanding of family as foundational to both society and covenant, encapsulating the ultimate message of prophetic hope.

The book inspires a prophetic notion at the end of an epoch with insights into a different but yet-to-come future.³⁷ In this closing part of the book, a note of caution is made concerning an eschatological reality of the inauguration of the justice of God and the arrival of the prophet Elijah.³⁸ The specific mission of the eschatological Elijah is to restore and heal fragmented familial relationships. The rhetoric of "turning hearts" (3:24)³⁹ suggests a motif of reconciliation between generations, resulting in the renewal of familial and societal peace. The restoration is crucial, as it serves as a means of dealing with impending divine judgement and destruction.

The turning of hearts (3:24) represents a deep and transformative change in relationships and attitudes within families. It imagines the restoration of strained relationships between fathers and children and of mutual understanding and empathy. Family members are expected to come to a place of mutual respect and care for one another. Such a setting fosters unity and strengthens familial bonds. Thus, by "turning hearts," Malachi imagines and implies family healing

³⁶ Malachi's epilogue (MT 3:22–24, ET 4:4–6) has elicited a number of interesting scholarly debates. For literary and redactional discussions, see Karel Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 253; Elie Assis, "Moses, Elijah and the Messianic Hope: A New Reading of Malachi 3:22–24," *ZAW* 123/2 (2011): 208–209. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaw.2011.013>; Russell Fuller, "The Sequence of Malachi 3:22–24 in the Greek and Hebrew Textual Traditions: Implications for the Redactional History of the Minor Prophets," in *Perspectives of the Formation of the Book of the Twelve* (ed. Rainer Albertz, James D. Nogalski and Jacob Wohrle; Berlin, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 272–273.

³⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Twelve Prophets* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 222.

³⁸ Beth Glazier-McDonald, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger* (SBLDissS 98; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 267.

³⁹ The reading in the LXX suggests that Elijah's mission will involve not only turning the hearts of fathers to their children but also turning the hearts of people toward their neighbours.

and reconciliation, whereby misunderstandings or conflicts are resolved, leading to a more harmonious family dynamic. This restoration motif is not merely a social or psychological healing but is deeply spiritual, signalling a return to covenant faithfulness and God's favour. The family, in this context, serves as both a literal and metaphorical unit for the larger message of societal and spiritual renewal. The focus on family reconciliation is a call to Israel to restore not only its domestic and communal relationships but also its relationship with God.

C TOWARDS AN ETHIC OF FAMILY SOLIDARITY

The Old Testament situates the family in a moral sphere whose framework of covenantal relationship with God, centre for transmission of religious and ethical values, context for moral development and responsibility, cornerstone of justice and social order and promotion of solidarity and mutual support are paramount.⁴⁰ While specific contexts and challenges have evolved, the moral concerns of family that are emphasised in the Old Testament continue to be a focal point of moral issues in modern contexts,⁴¹ where they continue to impact the moral fabric of society and the welfare and security of individuals and communities' social relations. Such a moral framework invites ethical reflection, especially where duties such as the preservation of cultural and ethical heritage, cultivation of moral character, promotion of social stability and the strengthening of community and social bonds are no longer self-evident. On the contemporary significance of the Old Testament in ethical discourse, Julián Andrés González Holguín's remark is striking:

The ethical relevance of the Hebrew Bible does not reside in accepting rules, principles, or ideas that come from the text and a reconstruction of its historical contexts based on sustained critical scrutiny

⁴⁰ Cf. Bruce C. Birch, "Divine Character and the Formation of Moral Community in the Book of Exodus," in *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium* (ed. John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carroll R; JSOTSS 207; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 134–135; Andrew Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 30.

⁴¹ Barton maintains his ethical stance on the Old Testament for modern context by stating that ethical insights from the Old Testament are drawn from experience of reading the biblical narratives and reflecting on the moral intricacies of our world rather than extracting a message from it. John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 18. While a number of pitfalls and challenges confronting contemporary ethical exegetes of the Old Testament are noted on the one hand, the significance of the biblical text for Christian ethical scholarship and moral theological reflection is highlighted, on the other hand by Emily Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention: The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 7, 21.

of the will of God in scripture. It comes from a critical discussion with the text in light of current events . . .⁴²

As a consequence, one has to understand how the biblical representation and depiction of family in ancient Israel mirror the portrait of God's relationship with his people and the ethical or prescriptive intention associated with the text. While it might not be the primary concern of the writings of Micah and Malachi to propagate an ethic of family and family life, the laments and rhetorical concerns of both books are part of a prophetic tradition that stresses the importance of family as a foundation for societal well-being. The intertextual connection between Micah and Malachi regarding family dynamics reflects a movement from fragmentation and disorder to reconciliation and peace. The networking of concepts and contrasts in these two prophetic texts highlights the consequences of straying from covenantal obligations and the hope for restoration through divine intervention. These prophets underscore the importance of covenantal faithfulness, both within the family unit and in the broader community. Consequently, reflection on these prophetic laments offers the following ethical ideals and practical moral resourcefulness towards healthy, viable, family solidarity and peace in human society.

One of the significant ethical aspects of the family dynamics in these rhetorical concerns is the invitation to readers to uphold the principles of healthy social solidarity. There is no other viable option to family harmony, social stability, support and the overall functioning of society than social solidarity. It is essentially the glue that unites families and societies, grounded in shared values and norms, mutual dependence, collective consciousness, social identity, integration and networks. The obvious deficiency of social solidarity in Micah's community gave rise to social fragmentation at different levels. The prophet emphasises the consequences of injustice, leading to fragmentation and destruction within the most intimate social unit, namely, the family which could no longer be trusted. This fragmentation can be seen as both a literal and a metaphorical representation of the breakdown of the Israelites' relationship with God and with one another.⁴³

Micah observes that family fragmentation and thus its collapse were occasioned by the inability of covenant community members to uphold the principles of healthy community living both in public and private moral spheres. As a redemptive counterpoint to Micah's dystopian vision of fragmented family, Malachi offers a profound pathway to the reconciliation of family members by

⁴² Julián A. G. Holguín, "Christian Ethics and the Hebrew Bible," *The Cambridge Companion to the Hebrew Bible and Ethics* (ed. Carly L. Crouch; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 306.

⁴³ David J. Reimer, "The Prophet Micah and Political Society," *Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela: Prophecy in Israel, Assyria, and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period* (ed. Robert P. Gordon and Hans M. Barstad; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 223–224.

suggesting the possibility of overcoming the divisions depicted in Micah. Malachi's rhetorical concern transcends his own historical context. By addressing the bitter conflicts of his time, Malachi undoubtedly grasps the broader vision of God's redemption for family unity and peace that is applicable to all people. The prophetic vision points to the broader theme of restoration in the prophetic literature where the return to covenantal faithfulness brings about not just individual restoration but also communal and familial healing (cf. Isa 58:6–12; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:24–28; Hos 2:14–23).⁴⁴

The stark portrayal of relational breakdown, from not trusting neighbours, friends and even close family members,⁴⁵ serves as a profound lesson and an invitation to community members to be committed to values of honesty, justice, importance of trust, integrity, responsibility and conflict resolution for the well-being of families and communities today. The prophets' concerns invite reflection on the dangers of betrayal, disharmony, moral integrity, social decay and vigilance. Creating healthy communities and sustainable families requires paying attention to the consequences of unresolved conflicts arising out of selfishness and communication and thus prioritising reconciliation and living ethically.

Micah's description of family conflict and Malachi's vision of family restoration call for the orientation and empowerment of families for growth and change. When marriages fail and there is a breakdown in families, communities are justifiably concerned about the emotions, needs, freedom and value of the individuals. Thus, in order to maintain the values of fidelity, commitment and steadfastness, communities and institutions must be committed to orientating families on the role of maintaining intergenerational mutual responsibility and relationship. As observed in the rhetorical concerns of the dual prophets, Micah and Malachi, the neglect of familial and community responsibility has the potential of creating societal breakdown.

The intertextual connections between Micah and Malachi offer profound ethical messages that are centred on the significance of restoring and maintaining healthy, loving relationships within families and communities. They challenge institutions and communities to seek concrete ways of affirming, strengthening, promoting and providing emotional support to persons and families in their efforts to live out their challenges and successes and in their faithfulness to the values they acknowledge and appreciate. They call for responsibility across

⁴⁴ While emphasis is placed on themes of social justice and communal restoration in Isaiah, new covenant and national transformation in Jeremiah and cleansing and renewal of the nation in Ezekiel, Hosea specifically addressed restored relationships and familial healing.

⁴⁵ Leslie C. Allen, "Micah's Social Concern," *Vox Evangelica* 8 (1973): 30–31.

generations and the prevention of social breakdown and hold out hope for renewal and reconciliation.

D CONCLUSION

The prophetic laments of Micah and Malachi indicate that family fragmentation threatens family solidarity, peace, welfare and the overall well-being of people and society. The dual prophets connect the health of the family to the nation's spiritual and moral health, highlighting the breakdown of family relationships as both a cause and a symptom of the community's unfaithfulness to God. The lamentations result from Israel's failure in all her varied departments, which corrupted the political, socio-economic and religious structures of the society by disregarding the covenant principles meant to guide them. The fundamental moral lesson for contemporary readers is that they reveal a deep understanding of the issues that threaten the quality and fabric of human life and, even more critically, the very likelihood of human survival. Through these intertextual connections, the family emerges as a fundamental sphere for living out the covenant ideals not only with God but also for reflecting the broader ethical and spiritual responsibilities of being God's people, even in modern family contexts and family life.

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