

Notes on Micah

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Chapters 1–2

'Hear your God speak' Micah says. He lived in the Southern kingdom, Judah, in the days when the North was fading and about to fall. God was about to come like a terrifying flood to judge the sin of his people. Israel's capital city, and Judah's too, had become like idolatrous shrines. Samaria's judgment time had come, and her building stones would pour down into the valley like a flood leaving the footings exposed.

The reference to prostitutes may signify that Samaria's idols had been adorned from the proceeds of temple prostitutes; now this wealth would be spent by invading soldiers on their own prostitutes.

Micah prophesied over many years, roughly the same time as Isaiah. The first and last kings who were contemporary with Micah are remembered as good kings, and the middle one, as a weak and unbelieving one, but the message he brought related to the whole tide of events during this period.

Micah could not regard this at a distance because the disease of the North had infected Jerusalem as well. Disaster would come to them as well. He recalled the lament of King David: 'Tell it not in Gath!' He could not bear the thought that Judah's shame would be known in the Philistine city (II Sam. 1:20). The cities of Micah's homeland (the foothills overlooking Philistia) would have to prepare for a doom sent by the Lord. He fondly mentions them by name but turns their names into words suggesting disaster. Families should prepare to lose their pampered children, because they would be taken into exile.

This prophecy may have been given to Micah when Assyria was campaigning against Philistia around 720 or 714–711 BC and the threat to Judah was very real. Micah's homeland was devastated in 701 BC, the time when the Assyrians swept right up to the walls of Jerusalem, and Hezekiah pleaded with God for their safety (see II Kings 19).

In Psalm 82, the faithful among God's people thank God for his judgements against the evils of their land, because it is evil doers who attack the foundations of their security.

Chapter 2

God spoke by Micah to the people who wielded power in Israel. They had used their position to enrich themselves, and now, the Lord would send a catastrophe from which they would not be able to escape. Their haughtiness would be ended. Already, the Lord could hear their lament: 'You have changed our inheritance!' In fact, they had been defining their own inheritance, and the Lord had only taken back what was always his to give. Israel was always 'The assembly of the Lord.'

Powerful leaders did not want such a message from Micah, but, said the Lord, 'Would not my message be pleasant to one who did my will?' The interests of the non-aggressive or the vulnerable were of no concern to the nation's leaders. Therefore, the land where God had given rest to his people could no longer be a place of rest; it was unclean. The powerful were only interested in their luxuries.

Amos 9:13 tells of a time when God would again provide luxuries for his people, but it would be after he had shaken sinners out from among them.

Earlier, we are told that judgement had come to the gate of Jerusalem (1:12), but the Lord foretold a time when that same gate would be the focus of deliverance. God would shepherd some survivors and lead them to safety. People from the ruined Judean towns would break through the Assyrian lines to find safety in Jerusalem. Then, the time would come when they would be led out safely by their King.

So it happened in Hezekiah's time, but how much greater a blessing awaited the besieged people of God when Christ came. He had come for judgment because of the blindness of his people (John 9:41). However he would also be the Gate for his sheep, and would lead them so that they would 'come in and go out and find pasture,' and he would give them abundant life (John 10:7–10).

God had shepherded Israel to their Promised Land and would remain their Shepherd forever (Ps. 78:52; 80:1–2).

Micah's prophecy as recounted here, sounds similar to the prophecy given by Isaiah to Hezekiah concerning the invasion of Assyrians (II Kings 19:31). The Assyrian claim that none would escape the city had already been countermanded by the prophecy given to Micah.

Prayer

Father, the proud of the earth think they may claim as their inheritance whatever lies in their power. Keep us mindful of your word lest we be in bondage to them, through fear, or envy. Help us to see that your reign is above theirs, and enable us to proclaim your justice, and to wait for it. Your judgements are sure to come, and well may we tremble because of them. But surely, as you have raised Jesus from the dead, and made him King over the nations, he will lead us in all our life and lead us to a rich inheritance. We entrust ourselves to you, Faithful Father, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 3

Israel's justice had been learned from God himself, who revealed his justice in saving his people. Justice for an Israelite was to treat his neighbour as God had treated him, with covenant mercy. Instead of this, their leaders had been harsh in the extreme. God would come in vengeance and not hear their cries for mercy, giving to them the treatment they had meted out to others.

Prophets were no better. They prophesied for profit and declared holy war against non-payers. They would be left in the dark with no word, and so, with no profit.

In contrast, Micah spoke God's word with power and declared his justice. 'You are building Zion with blood, ruling and prophesying for money and saying that God will

not worry to correct you! Your city will be a ruin, and your temple mount covered with trees.'

Chapter 4

However, God would still establish his house among them and gather the nations to himself. Though Israel refused to live by God's mercy, there would still be mercy from God. Gentiles would seek his law; strong nations would rely on him to arbitrate in cases of dispute; they would de-commission their weapons; and the humble (a vine and a fig tree were the common person's symbol of security) of all nations would dwell in safety. 'This is my word' said God. He would do what Israel was failing to do.

Every nation has its god. But this nation, made up of all nations, a new people, would walk under the Lord as their God. What of Israel, lame and abandoned? She would be strong, and the Lord would be her King.

With such a God, why was Israel lamenting like a woman in labour? Was her king not reigning? (Perhaps Micah referred to the weak King Ahaz who would not rely on the Lord, and so, allowed other nations to dictate Israel's agenda.) In fact, Judah would continue to weaken (over the next 100 years) and then be taken captive to Babylon. It would be from there that Israel would learn that the Lord was her God. The nations who refused to know the Lord would think they had mastered Israel. However, they had not reckoned with the purpose of the Lord to do good to his people and so magnify his name in the earth.

God's true Israel, those who have accepted her Christ, shall not be 'threshed' by the nations; rather Israel shall 'thresh' them, not to exploit them but to bring their glory into God's kingdom.

Prayer

Forgive us Father, that we who have tasted your kindness can still live for our own profit, and be so blind that we still call on your name and think that you will favour us. Lord, we have reaped what we have sown, and bitter have been your judgements. Yet even still, you have purposed that your grace be known in all the earth. Even now, you reign over us so that we may know and live in your goodness. Lord, may we declare your name and praise. May we live in your promise concerning all nations, and may we never fear to declare your word and your grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 5

Among the uncertain days that lay ahead, Micah saw a time when Jerusalem would be surrounded with armies. But to the South, in Bethlehem, a king would be born. David's origins had been in Bethlehem, and now, another David would arise to lead his people like a shepherd (1 Sam. 5:4).

The Gospel writer, Matthew, recognised that this king was Jesus Christ (Matt. 2:6) who had been purposed from ancient times to be Israel's king. God had never abandoned his people but would give them a king, whose strength and majesty were

in God, and who would be acknowledged in the world. He would establish peace (Isa 9:7) and raise up a leadership to withstand the enemy.

The enemy would not go, but the Lord's people, though now few in number, would settle like dew on the nations. This would be wholly from God and the nations would be as helpless as lambs attacked by a young lion. In such a manner would the strength of nations be subdued, their fortune-tellers and idols be destroyed and God's wrath triumph over his enemies.

Prayer

Father, you have spoken to us in the midst of our idolatry and distress. You have directed us to Jesus Christ your Son who has reigned among us by your strength and justified us so that we may walk before you. May we seek no other Saviour, look for no other strength, and rely on his conquests for all that remains to do in this world. May the nations know you, the God who has given us such a Saviour. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 6

God had a solemn accusation to make against his people which the mountains should witness, the same 'foundations of the earth' which had witnessed Judah's sins. Judah had become weary of God! This was why they had become so fascinated with their wealth and careless of their poor neighbours. Had they forgotten the promises made to Abraham and Jacob? Had they forgotten the events between Shittim and Gilgal (Josh. 2–4), nothing less than the crossing of the River Jordan?

Micah had condemned Judah's leaders of bribery (3:11). Given such a mind set, they may have seen their sacrifices as a way of bribing God into protecting them. But what their covenant Lord wanted was plain: justice, mercy and humility before their God.

In the cities, violence, lies and deceit were a commonplace means of maintaining profits. God would visit them with the total loss of their profits. They had learned from the Northern kings Omri and Ahab (remember Ahab's craving for Naboth's vineyard) who built a prosperous state but at a terrible price. Micah had begun by comparing Judah to the Northern tribes and to their fate (1:5). Now he does it again. As Judah watched the North dissolve under pressure from Assyria, so Micah's word would say to them: 'You also will fall.'

Chapter 7

Micah's experience in his hill side town of Moresheth had taught him not to expect justice from Jerusalem. The whole official infrastructure, judicial and financial was perverted. Israel was created to be a fruitful vine (Isa. 5:7) but her fruitlessness meant hard times for the needy. 'Be warned' Micah said. 'Even your intimate family and friends may be in the pay of the rich and unscrupulous. Be careful of even speaking to your wife!' God would send them confusion and disaster.

Jesus found the same among Israel when he came. He found leaves but no fruit on a fig tree and cursed it because it was figurative of Israel who had brought forth nothing but a show of righteousness (Mark 11:12–14, 20–22). She would suffer for her sins.

He also predicted the day when no-one could trust the members of their own family (Luke 12:49–53). Because Israel's trust was in this present world rather than in their Messiah, they would persecute those who had found God's justice and mercy and faith in Jesus Christ and who desired to live by that rule. It was this tragedy that he had come to burn away, and it was for this purpose that he would face his own baptism of fire. The injustice of this world is never dealt with fully except through the cross where Jesus died.

Micah, speaking for all the faithful, said he would wait for God's salvation. They knew they needed the judgements of God, but knew also that they trusted God to bring them through those judgements. They would rise again; and in the darkness, God would be their light. But shame would come to those who abused the power given to them. Christ, later on, said of Jerusalem, weep not for me but for yourselves (Luke 23:28). He would suffer the cross, and bring his people to victory, but Israel would suffer the breaking down of all that they trusted in. How he longed that they would cease to trust in what was passing away!

Micah foresaw the day when Jerusalem, the purified Jerusalem, would be fortified and extended and would host people of many nations, those who fled from the distress to which the nations would be subjected. Here is the Church of Christ, the true Israel. In the nations there will often be distress. God's people will also suffer, but be settled in the knowledge of Christ. Many will leave their distress and come to rest in the assurance of knowing the Lord.

Micah surely knew David's Psalm (Psalm 23)? He knew that the Lord was Israel's Shepherd and looked for the green pastures to which the Lord led his people when they trusted in his saving deeds. In contrast, he knew that the nations, together with their overlord, the Serpent (Gen. 3:14) would 'lick dust' or taste their bitter defeat. All that the nations did would come to nothing, and they would be in terror of the Lord.

What then sustained the Lord's faithful few in these sad days? It was the Lord, who pardoned iniquities and delighted in showing steadfast love, compassion and faithfulness (as in Deut. 34:5–7) His forgiveness always permitted a new beginning, a hope that the promises made to Abraham would be kept and that his people would share in them together with joy. He would not tread them under his feet but tread their iniquities under his feet.

Prayer

Father, keep us humbled by your mercy and by your saving deeds. If power or riches increase, teach us how they are to be used for justice and mercy and to express faith in you. Surely, none of us can escape your judgements, for we have all alike gone astray.

Lord, we trust in your Son who, in our place, stood in the path of your judgements. By him we have forgiveness, and a future and a hope. Your mercy is forever. Who is there to compare with you? Thanks be to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.