

4

MICAH

INTRODUCTION

The Micah Scroll

As noted in the Introduction, it is important to try to establish the context within which a prophet was speaking. It was also pointed out that this attempt is made difficult for us by the way in which the prophetic scrolls developed (see pages 8-9). There are some signs of later insertions in the Amos and Hosea scrolls. This is particularly relevant to the Isaiah scroll (see page 100). Though scholars are not all of the same mind in regards to the Micah scroll, there are very few verses that we can confidently state could not have come from the prophet himself.

In many of the prophetic scrolls we are helped to link the words of a prophet with the events of his day by the fact that those responsible for the scroll included something of the context of the prophet's words, whether it be details from his life, or details of the historical circumstances he was addressing. In the case of the Micah scroll, however, the only help we have is the opening sentence which states:

The word of YHWH came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah.

This tells us that the prophet Micah carried out his ministry in Judah in the second half of the 8th century BC. Since there is no indication in the text that Micah knows of the fall of Samaria in 721, we can probably safely place him somewhere between 740 and 725BC. He was a prophet in Judah. This makes him a contemporary of Hosea in Israel and Isaiah in Judah during the early part of Isaiah's ministry. As is clear from the summary offered in the Introduction (pages 11-12), these were turbulent times.

Like his contemporary Isaiah, Micah lived through the prosperous years towards the end of Uzziah's reign, and then the years when Judah was forced to defend itself against Israel and Syria who were determined to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. Micah experienced a call from YHWH to prophesy; that is to say, to communicate to others the insights he received in prayer. His words reveal his concern for public policy and the exercise of justice that is faithful to the covenant Judah has with YHWH.

Inspired by Micah?

Like his contemporary, Isaiah, Micah has a lot to say about divine punishment (see 1:2-16; 3:12; 5:10-15; 6:13-16). His picture, however, is not as dark as that of Isaiah, who lived through the fall of Samaria and the devastation of Judah by Sennacherib.

Like the other prophets of the eighth century, Micah speaks out against injustice (see 2:1-2; 3:1-3, 9-12; 6:10-12; 7:3). He is particularly concerned with those whom the people look to as prophets, but who 'lead my people astray' (3:5). They proclaim 'peace', but not the obedience to God's will which alone can produce it. Micah is critical of those who assume that because they are God's chosen people they are guaranteed divine protection and blessing (see 3:11). Religious cult is no substitute for justice (6:6-8).

As a true prophet, his focus is primarily on God and he speaks beautifully of God's faithful love (see 6:3-5; 7:18-20). This gives him hope that ultimately all will be restored (see 2:12; 4:1-8; 7:9). We must trust YHWH (7:7).

MICAH 1:1-16

WARNING & LAMENTATION

¹The word of YHWH that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, which he saw in a vision concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

As noted in the Introduction (page 206), this is the only biographical detail we have of Micah. Even here the three reigns are lumped together in such a way that they are treated as covering a single time frame. Micah's ministry was in the second half of the eighth century BC. This makes him a contemporary of Isaiah in Judah and Hosea in Israel. We refer the reader to the Introduction (page 11-12) where we covered the key political events that Micah lived through after the retirement of King Uzziah in 749 and before the fall of Samaria in 721.

His name translates as 'who is like'. We find it as the first part of the name Michael ('who is like God?'). There is no certainty of the location of 'Moresheth' (or more fully 'Moresheth-Gath', see 1:14), but the most likely candidate is an old fortress town of Judah (see 2Chronicles 11:6-9), 35ks to the west of Jerusalem on the road connecting Azekah and Lachish.

A century later we find contemporaries of the prophet Jeremiah quoting Micah:

Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: 'Thus says YHWH of hosts, Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.'

– Jeremiah 26:18 (see Micah 3:12)

Though Micah (like Isaiah) carried on his ministry in Judah, he addressed himself to the capital cities of both Israel ('Samaria') and Judah ('Jerusalem').

This introductory verse focuses on two aspects that are at the heart of what we have come to speak of as 'prophecy', though we should note in advance that Micah never calls himself a prophet, and when he uses the word it is only to challenge those he calls 'false prophets'. The first is that it is 'the word of YHWH'. Of course not every word in every prophetic scroll claims to be that. In most there are also biographical and historical details, as well as explanations and comments. It is significant that there are none of these in Micah. The whole text is presented as 'the word of YHWH'. The claim is that the words spoken by Micah came to him in such a way that he experienced them as coming from God.

Secondly, there is the use of the verb 'saw in a vision' (רָאָה בְּחִזְיוֹן, compare Amos 1:1). This does not necessarily imply a trance or ecstasy, but these cannot be excluded. What it does imply is that Micah experienced the insights that he shared as having been given to him as he was caught up in a mysterious communion with God, where he received an enlightenment.

We are dealing here with poetry, not prose. We need, therefore, to be ready for words to evoke more than one level of meaning. While we tend to be absorbed at the level of the everyday, the seer finds himself taken into the realm of the divine where he sees the world as God sees it and is enlightened as to God's presence and action in the world.

What Micah sees is announced in verses 3-4. He begins in verse 2 by summoning 'you peoples'. On one level he appears to be summoning all the peoples of the earth. On another level he is summoning the cosmic powers (in a polytheistic world this would include the 'gods'). Summoned also is 'the earth and all that is in it'. Their evidence will support the justice of God's judgment.

The 'you' who are being accused ('against you', verse 2) is the audience that Micah is addressing. Verse 5 makes it clear that they are representative of the whole of 'Jacob', the whole 'house of Israel', comprising the northern kingdom with its capital in Samaria, and Judah with its capital in Jerusalem. The fact that King Ahaz is reported as encouraging idolatrous practices (see 2Kings 16:1-4) could account for the presence of 'high places' (cult sites) in verse 5.

The 'holy temple' (verse 1) is heaven, God's dwelling, the object of Micah's vision. Micah sees YHWH as a warrior sallying forth from heaven, descending to the heights and marching across and subduing the earth (verses 3-4). Micah is drawing on the traditions surrounding the Sinai theophany (see Exodus 19). Note Micah's allusion to the cosmic battle from the ancient myths.

In verses 6-7 we hear YHWH announcing his punishment of Samaria for the rebellion of which she was accused in verse 5. The walls of the city will be destroyed and it will revert to being a field. All because she has proved unfaithful to her covenant with YHWH, playing the prostitute by looking to other nations instead of YHWH. Whatever she gained from this will go back to those with whom she prostituted herself. Her idols will be carried off as trophies of war.

²Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord YHWH be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple.

³For lo, YHWH is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. ⁴Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.

⁵All this is for the rebellion of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the rebellion of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high places of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem?

⁶Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards. I will pour down her stones into the valley, and uncover her foundations. ⁷All her images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste; for as the wages of a prostitute she gathered them, and for the wages of a prostitute they shall go back.

Lamentation

⁸For this I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches.

⁹For her wound is incurable. She has come to Judah.

It has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem.

The vision received in verses 3-4 was followed by an indictment (verse 5) and the consequent punishment (verses 6-7). In verses 8-9 Micah gives vent to a lamentation. One has the impression that he is sharing in the sadness YHWH experiences in having to punish the rebellion of his people. Divine punishment is demanded, but it is reluctant, not vindictive. Compare the following from Hosea:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel? ...
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

– Hosea 11:8-9

Micah's lamentation is accompanied by the traditional signs of mourning (verse 8).

They throw dust on their heads
and wallow in ashes;
they make themselves bald for you,
and put on sackcloth,
and they weep over you in bitterness of soul,
with bitter mourning.
In their wailing they raise a lamentation for you,
and lament over you.

– Ezekiel 27:30-32

The poetry of verse 9 (typically for Micah) moves rapidly. Already in verse 1 we have been prepared for a two-pronged projection, covering Samaria and Jerusalem. While verses 6-7 focused on the punishment that Samaria must undergo, once again verse 5 mentioned both Samaria and Jerusalem.

The 'she' in verse 9 appears to be Samaria. 'Her wound' seems to refer to the wound Samaria has inflicted on Judah, the wound (spoken of as a 'disaster' in verse 12) that has 'reached the gate of my people, to Jerusalem'. Micah may well be speaking of the defeat of Judah by king Pekah of Samaria and the subsequent attempt to replace king Ahaz of Judah with a puppet favourable to Samaria (2Chronicles 28:6-18; see page 12).

Micah's lamentation (verse 18) looks back to what YHWH has threatened to do to Samaria (verses 6-7). In verse 9 we discover that Micah is also lamenting what has already happened to Judah and Jerusalem.

If one is looking for clear and logical writing, the Hebrew text of this lamentation is all but incomprehensible. Any attempt at translation necessarily includes an element of conjecture. If, however, one accepts it as the thrusts and jabs of highly emotional (and perhaps even ecstatic) diction, then it offers a genuine experience of the panic that has taken hold of Jerusalem (and Micah). If it refers to something that has already happened it functions as a lament. If it is a glimpse of what is to come it functions as a warning.

It seems best to work on the hypothesis that the towns mentioned in verses 10-12 (many of them found only here) were all, like Moresheth-Gath, Micah's home town, in the hill country (the Shephelah) to the west of the mountain ridge on which Jerusalem stood. The towns named in verses 13-15 were to the south-west of Jerusalem (see 2Chronicles 11:5-12). The twelve towns represent Judah in its entirety. The centre-piece is Jerusalem, the key focus for the panic.

If the 'Gath' in verse 10 is the Philistine town, we may have echoes of Micah's lament in the command to keep news of Saul's death from the Philistines:

Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

– 2Samuel 1:20

Here in Micah what is happening is so terrible that it should not be spoken of.

It is possible that the 'she' of verse 13 refers to a goddess (the Canaanite goddess Asherah, or the 'queen of heaven', Astarte) whose cult came to Jerusalem from Samaria via Lachish (see 2Chronicles 29:19).

Verse 14 seems to state that Jerusalem has given away her endowment by ceding territory ('houses of Achzib') to buy off the invader, Israel, as the price of survival.

In verse 15 YHWH is speaking. YHWH it is who will bring the conquerer – YHWH 'the glory of Israel'.

¹⁰Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all; in Beth-le-Aphrah roll yourself in the dust. ¹¹Pass on your way, inhabitant of Shaphir, in nakedness and shame; the inhabitant of Zaanan do not come forth; Beth-ezel is wailing and shall remove its support from you.

¹²For the inhabitant of Maroth wait anxiously for good, yet disaster has come down from YHWH to the gate of Jerusalem. ¹³Harness the steeds to the chariots, inhabitant of Lachish. She was the firstfruit of sin to daughter Zion, for in you were found the rebellions of Israel.

¹⁴Therefore you shall give parting gifts on account of Moresheth-Gath; houses of Achzib to the deceiver, to the kings of Israel.

¹⁵I will again bring a conqueror upon you, inhabitant of Mareshah; the glory of Israel shall come to Adullam.

¹⁶Make yourself bald and cut off your hair for your pampered children; make yourself as bald as the eagle, for they have gone from you into exile.

