

MICAH 4-5

BOOK OF VISIONS

History's destined goal

¹And it will come about in the end of the days, the mountain of YHWH's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples will stream to it, ²and many nations will come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion will go forth instruction, and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.

³He will judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and they will not train for war any more. ⁴But they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one will make them afraid; for the mouth of YHWH of hosts has spoken.

⁵For all the peoples will walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of YHWH our God for ever and ever.

The fact that this passage is found almost word for word in the Isaiah scroll (2:2-4) has led to a lot of speculation. Perhaps the simplest way to look at this is to imagine that the text existed as a separate piece, which was thought by the scribes to come from the eighth century. Some thought it came from Micah – hence its place here in the Micah scroll. Others attributed it to Isaiah.

It is in the form of an apocalypse: a vision of the consummation of history – not the end of time, but rather how things will be when the intention of the Creator is fulfilled: when history reaches its destined goal. In 3:12 Micah has already associated the temple mount with Zion. Here in verse 1 'the mountain of YHWH's house' recalls the Sinai tradition and the instructions given to Moses on the mountain in regard to the Tabernacle.

When history reaches its destined goal (so this utopian vision imagines) peoples from all over the world will come to Jerusalem to 'go up to the mountain of YHWH'(verse 2). All the world will want to know the Torah, and will follow its instruction (as in Psalm 24:3-6). Later Zechariah will draw on this text:

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek YHWH of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of YHWH.

– Zechariah 8:22

Verses 3-4 dream of a paradise when every nation will submit to the will of YHWH, where no one will 'train for war any more', and where everyone will live in domestic and social peace. Those responsible for the 'history' of the kings drew on this 'dream' when painting a picture of the 'golden years' of Solomon's reign:

During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees.

– 1Kings 4:25

In the meantime, peoples will follow their own 'god'. Israel 'will walk in the name of YHWH our God'(verse 5), who lives for ever and ever. Through the ups and downs of history, they will hold on to the dream expressed in verses 1-4.

In verses 6-8 we are still imagining the end time of the previous passage (verses 1-4). There is a connection, too, to the promise of restoration of 2:12-13. In real time injustice continues, as chapters 1-3 have said. In one sense, granted the understanding that YHWH controls history, YHWH himself is responsible for the affliction (verse 6). But this will all be reversed (compare Zephaniah 3:19). YHWH will create out of the remnant 'a strong nation', and establish his reign 'in Mount Zion' – a reign that will never end. 'Tower of the Flock' appears to be a way of speaking of David's city (compare Song of Songs 4:4), as is 'Ophel' (2Chronicles 27:3; 33:14; Nehemiah 3:26-27; 11:21). More will be said about the 'kingship' shortly.

Verses 9-10 come from the period a century and more after Micah, when Babylon was the dominant power in the region. Verse 9 and the first part of verse 10 portray the anguish of the city bereft of its king. The most likely context is 597 when king Jechoniah was taken into Babylonia as a hostage at the conclusion of the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadrezzar's army. By likening their pain to that of a woman in labour, a note of hope is introduced – the hope of birth (new life). The second part of verse 10 refers to the exile, but promises that the exiles will be rescued, for 'YHWH will redeem you from the hands of your enemies'.

In verses 11-14 the apocalyptic focus continues. However, the nations assemble, not to know and obey the Torah as in verses 1-4, but to do harm to Zion. Little do they know that they are being enticed to the city by YHWH to be threshed. These verses do not reflect any historical event. They cover all history and call for a holy war. Success in such a war is the prelude to the final resolution presented in verses 1-4. Prior to the end there will be set-backs (verse 14).

⁶In that day, says YHWH, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. ⁷The lame I will make into a remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and YHWH will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore. ⁸And you, O Tower of the Flock, Ophel of Daughter Zion, to you will come ... and the former dominion shall come, the kingship to Daughter Jerusalem.

⁹Now why do you scream aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counsellor perished, that pangs have seized you like a woman in labour? ¹⁰Writhe and groan, O Daughter Zion, like a woman in labour. For now you will go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you will go to Babylon. There you will be rescued, there YHWH will redeem you from the hands of your enemies.

¹¹Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, "Let her be profaned, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion." ¹²But they do not know the thoughts of YHWH; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. ¹³Arise and thresh, O Daughter Zion, for I will make your horn iron and your hooves bronze; you shall beat into pieces many peoples, and shall devote their treasure to YHWH, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth. ¹⁴Now you shall gather your troops, O Daughter of Troops. He set up a siege against us. With a rod they strike the jaw of the ruler of Israel.

¹And you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel; and his origins are from antiquity, from olden days.

²Therefore he shall give them over, until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred will return to the people of Israel.

³And he shall stand and shepherd them in the strength of YHWH, in the majesty of the name of YHWH his God. And they shall live secure, for now he will be great to the ends of the earth.

In chapter 5 I am following the numbering of the Hebrew Bible (followed by the Greek). Some English translations follow the Latin Vulgate and number 4:14 as 5:1. They begin this passage with 5:2.

The text is majestic and mysterious. While the overall thrust of the passage seems clear enough, achieving an understanding of many of the details involves a good deal of conjecture.

In chapter 4 YHWH was presented as the ruler of a restored Zion. What we seem to have here is a statement that the way YHWH will bring this about is by raising up a new David who will be YHWH's instrument (see the 'for me' in verse 1) in accomplishing the great things promised in chapter 4.

'David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah'(1Samuel 17:2). Micah seems to be saying that the Ephrathite clan held a low rank in the tribal structure of Judah. We know from 1Samuel 16:7 that David was the youngest son of the family. In a summary way verse 2 seems to be describing a rise from weakness to power – something necessary if the weak Judah of Micah's day was ever to be restored to the glory of the golden years of David, who rose to be the ruler of the dual kingdoms of Judah and Israel (verse 1).

David was promised by YHWH that his dynasty would endure (see 2Samuel 7:13). This promise 'from antiquity, from olden days'(verse 1) encouraged hope that YHWH would achieve his purpose for Zion by raising up a ruler from the House of David.

The last part of verse 2 reflects the fact that since 740 Assyria has exercised control over Israel. Even before 721, when Samaria fell, people have been taken into exile. The new David will put an end to this.

As a shepherd, the ruler will care for his flock. The aspect of this caring stressed in verse 3 appears to be the ruler's strength against Israel's enemies whose desire is to massacre and scatter the flock. The new David will shepherd God's people 'in the strength of YHWH.

It is not surprising that the disciples of Jesus, who saw Jesus as the new David, supported their claim by pointing to Micah 5:2 (see Matthew 2:6).

The new David whom YHWH will raise up (verses 1-3) will be “The One of Peace”. As the following verses state, this peace will be achieved through military might. In Micah’s day the Assyrians had not yet invaded Judah, but such an invasion was surely to be expected (see 4:11, 14).

As in 5:3 ‘shepherd’ refers to ruler and the focus is on military power. The movement from seven to eight is a way of saying that Judah’s power will be full (seven), to overflowing (eight).

Verses 6-8 are perhaps best understood as referring to the new David of verses 1-3 in relation to the ‘remnant’ (already spoken of in 2:12). In verse 6 we are promised that Israel’s deliverer will bring refreshment (like dew and rain). He will come from YHWH, and at a time of YHWH’s choosing. Micah is insisting that the people wait on YHWH.

He will be like a lion, crushing anyone who is in his way (verse 7).

At the conclusion of his victorious campaign he will lift up his hand, indicating that through his success he has fulfilled his vows (verse 8).

⁴And he shall be: “The One of Peace.” When Assyria invades our land and overruns our citadels, we will raise against him seven shepherds, eight military commanders.

⁵They shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod with the drawn sword. He will save us from Assyria when he invades our land, and when he treads within our border.

⁶Then for the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, he will be like dew from YHWH, like showers on the grass, which do not depend upon people or wait for any mortal.

⁷And for the remnant of Jacob, among the nations, surrounded by many peoples, he will be like a lion among the animals of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep, which, when it goes through, treads down and tears in pieces, with no one to deliver.

⁸Your hand shall be lifted up over your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off.

Israel must be purified

⁹And it will happen in that day, says YHWH, I will cut off your horses from among you and will destroy your chariots;

¹⁰and I will cut off the cities of your land and throw down all your strongholds;

¹¹and I will cut off the instruments of magic from your hand, and you will have no more sorcerers; ¹²and I will cut off your images and your pillars from among you, and you will bow down no more to the work of your hands; ¹³and I will uproot your sacred poles from among you and destroy your cities.

¹⁴And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.

This continues the eschatological focus. For history to attain its goal, Israel must be purified.

The end of horses and chariots means the end of war (verse 9).

Cities (verse 10) were centres of injustice (3:10), and religious corruption (1:7).

History cannot attain its goal till pagan cult is entirely uprooted (verses 11-13), for all must know and obey YHWH.

Verse 14 underlines this universal dimension.