

Micah 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Micah chapter 1. The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Marosheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Hear, you peoples, all of you, pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple. For behold, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth, and the mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will split open, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel.

What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley, and uncover her foundations.

All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste. For from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return. For this I will lament and wail, I will go stripped and naked, I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches. For her wound is incurable, and it has come to Judah. It has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem. Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all. In Bethlehephra, roll yourselves in the dust. Pass on your way, inhabitants of Shepher, in nakedness and shame. The inhabitants of Zanon do not come out. The lamentation of Beth-ezil shall take away from you its standing place. For the inhabitants of Maroth wait anxiously for good, because disaster has come down from the Lord to the gate of Jerusalem. Harness the steeds to the chariots, inhabitants of Lachish. It was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion, for in you were found the transgressions of Israel. Therefore you shall give parting gifts to Marosheth Gath.

The houses of Axib shall be a deceitful thing to the kings of Israel. I will again bring a conqueror to you, inhabitants of Marosheth. The glory of Israel shall come to Adullam. Make yourselves bold, and cut off your hair. For the children of your delight, make yourselves as bold as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile. The book of Micah, the sixth of the book of the twelve, is written by a late 8th century BC prophet of Judah during a period of rising Assyrian power.

[2 : 35] Uzziah's successor Jotham came to the throne around 740 BC, while Tiglath-Pileser III was on the throne of Assyria. He would be followed by Shalmaneser V, who would bring about the end of the northern kingdom of Israel, which finally fell to his successor Sargon II in 722 BC. Hezekiah, the final of the three kings during whose reign Micah ministered, ruled until about 687 BC. During Micah's ministry, the Syrians and the northern kingdom of Israel, both of them tributary nations to Assyria, sought to rebel against Assyria and attack Judah. They sought to depose King Ahaz, who had not joined their coalition. The Syro-Ephraimite war was fought between the combined forces of Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel against the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah was devastated by them and brought to its knees. Jerusalem itself was besieged, but after appealing to the Assyrians for aid, the Assyrians subdued the Arameans in Israel, and Judah was given a reprieve. About 10 years after the end of the Syro-Ephraimite war, the northern kingdom would be finally removed. However,

Judah was now a tributary of Assyria. Chafing under the yoke of Assyria later on, Hezekiah, influenced by Babylon and Egypt, sought to lead his own rebellion against Assyria. In 701 BC, under Sennacherib, the Assyrians all but completely overwhelmed Judah. The Lord saved Jerusalem, but Sennacherib took 200,000 people of Judah captive, in the end to pay the tribute required of him by the Assyrians. Hezekiah had to strip many of the riches of the temple, his own palace, and the national treasuries. Although the Lord struck the Assyrians and delivered Jerusalem from their hands, the outcome of the war was certainly not a victory for Hezekiah, who remained a vassal of Sennacherib. Unusually among the minor prophets, the prophet Micah is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, in the book of Jeremiah, well over 100 years later. In Jeremiah chapter 26 verses 17 to 19 we read, And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, Micah of Marotheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah, Thus says the Lord 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. Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favour of the Lord? And did not the

Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves. This external reference to Micah allows us to date the prophecy of chapter 3 verse 12 to some time during the reign of Hezekiah. However, the more precise dating of many prophecies within the book is unclear, although various parts can be placed within certain temporal bounds. More generally, we should recognise that Micah's ministry was contemporary with that of Isaiah and Hosea. In addition to being an eventful period on the international stage, the time of Micah's ministry was also one of social upheaval in Judah, with the rise of larger estates and of a landless unemployed class, as smaller ancestral land holdings were taken over by those larger estates, something described in Isaiah chapter 5 verses 8 to 10.

Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing, surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah. Micah came from a town to the west of Jerusalem, and a few miles northeast of Lachish, Marashath, which was in the Sheffala, the Judean lowlands. However, his ministry seems to have been focused in and around Jerusalem.

He also spoke concerning the northern kingdom. In verse 2, the Lord assembles the people for a great trial. He is the guard of the whole earth, and he is summoning all to his act of judgment. He is arriving on the scene, and all must be ready. Coming forth from his holy temple or palace, he arrives with a shaking of the earth. The imagery of verses 3 and 4 is of a theophany, with the natural order being thrown into commotion as the Lord comes on the scene.

[6 : 54] We find very similar descriptions in places like Psalm 18. To this point, we don't know who is being judged. All of the nations have been assembled, but we haven't yet seen who is standing in the dark.

In verse 5, we finally discover that the judgment is against Israel and Judah. At first, we might think that the judgment is really focused upon Israel, the northern kingdom. Jacob is a term that is often used for the northern kingdom, and while Israel can be used for the people more generally, it's usually focused upon the northern kingdom at this time. However, by the end of the verse, it's very clear that Judah is included in the judgment. The rat of the nations starts in the very centre. The transgression of Jacob of the northern kingdom is Samaria, the capital, the place from which everything is spreading. The high place of Judah is Jerusalem. Zion is the place where the sin of Judah is most pronounced. The Lord is going to devastate Samaria for its sin.

It's going to be made into a heap in the open country, its hill reduced to a place for vine terraces, its stones cast down into the valley beneath, its laid bare, stripped naked, its sin exposed.

Drawing upon the same sort of realm of imagery that we find in the book of Hosea, the Lord describes Israel as like a prostitute. All of the paraphernalia of her infidelities will be destroyed, her carved images broken to pieces, her idols laid waste. She had gained these riches from her infidelities, and now the riches would return to her lovers as they stripped her bare.

All of this probably refers most especially to the destruction of Bethel and its site of worship. When he overthrew it, it does not seem that Sargon II devastated Samaria in quite the physical way described here. Rather, the language here should be taken more symbolically. It describes the decapitation of the great head of the whole nation of Israel, and with it the whole nation being cut off. The prophet's response to this message is to mourn, to mourn loudly, in the greatest expression of anguish. He strips himself of all of his glory, going around naked. He makes lamentation like the jackals, howling, and screeching in his pain like the ostriches. There is no hope for the northern kingdom, and the shadow of the judgment that has fallen on the northern kingdom hangs heavily over Judah itself. Micah recognises that a similar destiny threatens his own nation. Verses 10 to 15 contain a litany of place names, and instructions given to the inhabitants of them. We find a similar list in Isaiah chapter 10, verses 28 to 32, where it's a line of invasion. Here, however, the names are more random. The names seem to be of places within the Sheffala, the region from which Micah himself came.

[9 : 27] Although we don't know the precise location or identity of some of these places, the logic of their inclusion is not hard to discover. The names are mostly selected for the purpose of wordplay. As Leslie Allen observes, they come to serve as omens of the coming destruction, a destruction that probably refers to the time of Sargon's campaigns against Philistia in 720 BC or 714 to 711 BC. The opening words are taken from David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel chapter 1 verse 20.

Tell it not in Gath. Publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult. This coming destruction upon the nation is being compared with that dark day of Israel's history, with the death of the king and the crown prince.

We should also recognise that Gath was the nearest foreign city. It would be the first place where Israel was shamed among the nations by news of this devastating defeat. Bethlehem plays upon the word for dust. Shephir is similar to a word for beautiful. Zealon plays upon the sound of the verb go out. John Goldingay provides a loose rendition of this particular part of the prophecy.

Dirt house, cover yourself in dirt. Beautiful people in shameful nakedness. Exit people, don't exit. Withdrawal house adopts its stance. Bitter people writhe for something good. Harness the chariots, chariot town. You will give a marriage gift for betrothal town. The houses of disappointment will disappoint. I will bring a dispossessor to the possession people. All of these familiar place names for people in the region would now bear an ominous sense of foreboding, each testifying to their coming devastation. Perhaps even the name of Jerusalem is being used in this way. Disaster is coming to the place that has peace as part of its name. The glory of Israel finally comes up to Adullam.

Adullam was a fortified location, a place where people would retreat when they were under attack. It's also a place that reminds us of the story of David. David and his men hid in the cave of Adullam when he was fleeing from King Saul. As at the beginning of this section of the passage, there is a reminder of David, the one who founded the dynasty. His heirs would soon find themselves lamenting with him and retreating to Adullam as he had once done. Jerusalem and Judah would be stripped of its glory, its children taken from it. The reference to the exile here is probably not to the exile in Babylon, but probably to the captivity of many Judahites under Sennacherib. Those remaining in Judah and Jerusalem would be in the situation of mourners. Having lost such a great population of the land, they would shave their heads and mourn their devastation.

[12 : 09] A question to consider, where else in scripture can you find examples like the Theophany of verses 2 to 4?