

Micah 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Micah chapter 5. Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops. Siege is laid against us. With a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem of Fratha, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth. Then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure.

For now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be their peace. When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men. They shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword and the land of Nimrod at its entrances. And he shall deliver us from the Assyrian when he comes into our land and treads within our border. Then the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples like dew from the Lord, like showers on the grass, which delay not for a man, nor wait for the children of man. And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations, in the midst of many peoples, like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep, which, when it goes through, treads down and tears in pieces, and there is none to deliver. Your hand shall be lifted up over your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off. And in that day, declares the Lord, I will cut off your horses from among you, and will destroy your chariots. And I will cut off the cities of your land, and throw down all your strongholds. And I will cut off sorceries from your hand, and you shall have no more tellers of fortunes. And I will cut off your carved images, and your pillars from among you. And you shall bow down no more to the work of your hands. And I will root out your Assyria images from among you, and destroy your cities. And in anger and wrath, I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey. In treating the end of Micah chapter 4, we notice the character of Rachel, present just beneath the surface of the text. The text mentioned a particular location,

Migdal Eda, or the Tower of the Flock, and then proceeded to talk about a woman struggling in birth. All of this could be seen as a subtle allusion to the story of Rachel, back in Genesis chapter 35, while Rachel was still pregnant with Benjamin. The Lord had promised Jacob that kings would come from his own body. In verses 16 to 21 of that chapter, we read what happened next.

Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labour, and she had hard labour. And when her labour was at its hardest, the midwives said to her, Do not fear, for you have another son. And as her soul was departing, for she was dying, she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem. And Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the Tower of Eda. As we read on into chapter 5, allusions to Rachel continue. The nation, being compared to its great matriarch, Rachel, is struggling in its pangs, facing the invading Assyrians, for instance.

The great awaited royal leader of the people, who would be the full fulfilment of the promise made to Jacob back in Genesis chapter 35, has not yet arrived. Yet in these reminders of the tragic story of Rachel, Migdal Eda, Bethlehem, Ephrath, the woman struggling in birth, and the threat of death, we discover a new promise that is brewing. The birth of a new child, a one who will rule his people.

[3 : 51] The chapter, however, begins with a reminder of how low the line of David has been brought. The son of David is supposed to rule the nations with a rod of iron, yet the nations are striking him on the cheek. He is being surrounded and besieged by the Assyrians and their tributaries.

Presumably we should see the events of 701 BC at the background here, with the invasion of Sennacherib. Bethlehem, of course, was the town from which David hailed. From the place that David first came, an heir of David would arise. Bethlehem as a town promised little. It was not a great town.

It was not a place that could muster a great quantity of troops. Yet Bethlehem would be the place from which the great ruler of the people would arise. Just as in various places in the book of Isaiah, for instance, we see here the line of David that has been nearly cut off, and then, as it seems to have been removed, from the place where David first came, his greatest son would come forth, springing up like a root out of dry ground, as Isaiah chapter 53 puts it.

Rachel had struggled and failed to reach Bethlehem and had died on the way. Yet now, the woman who was struggling to give birth would reach Bethlehem, and in that town of Bethlehem, the great child that has been awaited would be born. In the Christian tradition, the end of verse 2 has commonly been taken as a reference to Christ's eternal origins. The text certainly does not need to be read this way, and we should beware, it seems to me, of trying to press it into that theological mould. Nevertheless, there is something of a mythic quality about this statement that might suggest something akin to deep magic from the dawn of time. There is here displayed something of the deeper mystery of God's purpose from the very beginning. The return to Bethlehem, the place of David's birth and the origin of the dynasty, takes us back behind the current Davidic king on the throne, to the very root of Jesse and Bethlehem beneath him. It will be from Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, that the awaited one, who was always the destiny of the Davidic line, would come forth. This awaited son of David, like his forefather, would be a shepherd of the people. Acting with the strength and the authority of the Lord as his son, he would execute justice in the land and deliver his people.

He would be the means of redemption for his brothers who would return to the land from exile. Behind this great prophecy, we should also hear the words of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12 to 16. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

[6 : 25] I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your kingdom shall be established forever. In addition to restoring the people as the great shepherd and giving them security, his glory would also go out to the surrounding lands and even to the ends of the earth. He would be the source of their peace, the prince of peace, as Isaiah speaks about. As he establishes his rule, the nation will find security and strength against its enemies on all sides. The Assyrians, being the current great threat to the nation, are set forth as paradigmatic examples here. Verses 7 and 8 are clearly paralleled.

In the first, the remnant of Jacob are compared to dew and showers on the grass, and in the second, to lions among the peoples. The clear literary paralleling of these two verses invites us to see not just the similarities, but the contrasts. The first one is one that explores an image of blessing, the dew which revives the grass and the land, saving it from the parching heat of the sun.

Jacob is here presented as a blessing for the nations, a means by which they will be revived and given health, all we should recognize in fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. The second image, however, is an image of Jacob as an agent of divine justice.

Jacob here is seen not just as a means of giving health to the nations, but as a threat to any that will resist the power of the Lord. This purpose of the Lord for them should, in the present, give the people a confidence over their adversaries. They should act with confidence, knowing that the time would come when all of their opponents would be cut off.

Leslie Allen notes the presence of a hook and line device here that connects verse 9 and verse 10. Verse 9 speaks about being cut off, and the new oracle that begins in verse 10 also plays upon that word for being cut off. Now it is not the enemies that are being cut off, but the unfaithful of the people. The context again seems to be the events of 701 BC and the invasion of Sennacherib and the Assyrian forces. As we see in 2 Kings chapter 18 verse 24, Judah had looked to Egypt for military aid, specifically depending upon Egypt for horses and chariots. This war machine gave Judah a sense of its security. Likewise, Judah also felt confidence in the great fortified cities of the land. However, when the Assyrians came to the land, the fortified cities would be breached, and the great war machine that Hezekiah had built up would be of little avail against them.

[9 : 06] They had clearly forgotten the lesson of Psalm 20 verses 7 to 8. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. Judah's strength never ultimately rested in the might of its war machine, but in the power of its God. And on the other side, when it trusted in its war machine and failed to trust in God, the war machine would prove absolutely useless when the Lord Himself turned against the people. Besides the false trust that the nation put in its military might and its strong defences, it also trusted in sorcery, divination and idolatry. Just as Israel had been instructed not to go back to Egypt for horses and chariots, they were not supposed to worship false gods or engage in any of these occult practices.

And the Lord would strip them of all of these things, not least because they are futile. They are bowing down to the work of their hands. Here we see a reminder of the common prophetic polemic against pagan idolatry. As the Lord stripped His people of all of those things in which they falsely placed their trust, instead of placing their trust in Him, He was graciously removing things that were preventing them from turning back to Himself. Judgment would begin with the house of God, but the chapter ends with a broader declaration of divine vengeance that should be expected by those disobedient nations that did not obey the word of the Lord and gave themselves to idols.

A question to consider, how do we see the prophecies of this chapter used within the New Testament?