

Micah 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Micah chapter 4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills, and people shall flow to it. And many nations shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, 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 shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk each in the name of its God, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever. In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame, and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. And the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off a strong nation. And the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion, from this time forth and for ever more. And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem. Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counsellor perished, that pain seized you like a woman in labour? Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in labour. For now you shall go out from the city and dwell in the open country. You shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued. There the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies. Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, Let her be defiled, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion. But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord. They do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion. For I will make your horn iron, and I will make your hooves bronze, and you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the Lord.

Their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth. Micah was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah, and they spoke to many of the same social and political realities. However, in Micah chapter 4 verses 1 to 5, we encounter a passage that raises more immediate questions about the relationship between the two prophets. This is because the exact same prophecy is found in Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 4, with the absence of Micah chapter 4 verse 4, and the truncated form of the material of verse 5 in Isaiah's version being the chief divergences. While there are various other occasions where we see similarities between prophetic books, one prophetic book citing another, or even common sources, such extensive common material is a unique occurrence in the prophetic literature.

There are various ways that we might understand the presence of this prophecy in two different books. We could conceivably argue that both were independently inspired to make a largely identical prophecy.

This is definitely possible, although it isn't a popular position, and we should consider the ramifications that it might have for our understanding of prophetic inspiration. Other more popular approaches include the positions that it is later material that was inserted into the text of one or both of the prophets, that one of the two was quoting a prophecy of the other, or had part of the other inserted into their text, or that both were using the same earlier material.

[3 : 38] There are various considerations that should inform our final judgment on this question. Some commentators adduce the greater prominence of Zion within the theology of Isaiah as evidence that this prophecy most likely originates with him. On the other hand, the omission of verse 4 of Micah's version in Isaiah's version might suggest that Micah's is the original, or alternatively, that he more fully quotes the original source. Then there are stylistic features. For instance, while Micah chapter 4 verse 4 is only found in Micah's version, the expression, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken, is quite Isaiahic in its style, found in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 20, 40 verse 5, and 58 verse 14, but not really found elsewhere in scripture.

Isaiah's account begins with, However, one could take the introductory formula in Isaiah as referring to something that Isaiah read in Micah or elsewhere. Just as we see Daniel reflecting upon the prophecy of Jeremiah's 70 years in Daniel chapter 9, so Isaiah might be reflecting upon the meaning of his contemporary Micah's prophecy.

There are various examples of cross-fertilization among the prophets elsewhere, and as Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries, who almost certainly knew each other in person, we should probably beware of thinking of their ministries as hermetically sealed from each other. The two prophets used the common material in different ways in their respective books. In Micah, for instance, the material opens up a new section of the book. Some have suggested tension between the vision of the two prophets, based on the question of whether the nations would still worship false gods in the latter days or not.

This is a question that is raised by Micah chapter 4 verse 5, and pressed by Marvin Sweeney. Such textual questions are challenging, not least when we bring Qumran scrolls with different forms of the text of Isaiah into the picture. We should also consider the various hands that were involved in the reception, recording, compilation, transmission, and ordering of Micah and Isaiah's prophecy during their lives and afterwards. It is not unlikely that the same group was involved in shaping both. At points like this, we might be seeing tantalizing indications of various unknown fingerprints upon the text, or indications of richer interactions between the authors and editors of these two prophetic books.

Perhaps Micah and Isaiah, both the men and the books, were informative interaction from the time of their initial oral ministries to the final form of their respective texts. Mark Ginlet, following Brevard Child's canonical approach, cautions about resting too much upon the question of which was the original. What matters far more is the literary form in which they have come down to us in the canon. The previous chapter ended with a pronouncement of doom upon Jerusalem. Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be ploughed as a field. Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. Chapter 4 begins with a sharply contrasting vision concerning the mountain of the house, terminology that connects these two prophecies. Within this prophecy, we can hear the themes of likely earlier traditions, such as the songs of Zion in the Psalms, within which Mount Zion comes to assume great significance. Psalm 46 or 48 or 76 are all referenced by some commentators in this context. Psalm 46 verses 4-10, for instance.

[7 : 11] There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage. The kingdoms totter. He utters his voice.

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord. How he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear. He burns the chariots with fire. Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations.

I will be exalted in the earth. Mount Zion is a very modest elevation. It isn't even in the top 100. tallest mountain peaks in Israel, only being around 2,500 foot tall. However, as the site of the temple, it is the mountain of the Lord. And according to this prophecy, it will function as the cosmic mountain, the mountain to which the whole world will gather, and the mountain that will join heaven to earth.

We see Zion set over the other mountains in places like Psalm 68 verses 14-18 as well. When the Almighty scatters kings there, let snow fall on Zalmon, O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan, O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan. Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode? Yes, where the Lord will dwell forever. The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands. The Lord is among them. Sinai is now in the sanctuary.

You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there. Mount Zion will become like Eden, the beating heart of the world, the place from which all life flows, and the place to which it will all return. Elsewhere in scripture, water flows out of the temple in Zion, in places like Ezekiel chapter 47 and Joel chapter 3. But here the stream is of nations flowing up to Zion in pilgrimage, an image that we also see at the end of Zechariah chapter 14, which brings the two images together, living waters flowing out from Jerusalem and the nations flowing up into her. This would be a fulfillment of the Lord's purpose for his people as a means of bringing his blessing to the nations.

[9 : 35] The nations come to Zion to learn the law and the ways of the Lord, and the law and the word of the Lord also come out from Jerusalem as their principles start to inform life elsewhere. The Lord's justice would be known on earth as he would judge between peoples and nations, settling disputes and establishing justice. The outcome of the rule of the Lord among the nations would be peace, illustrated by the refashioning of weapons of war into tools of cultivation, and the freedom to abandon the practice and the learning of conflict. Joel chapter 3 verse 10 uses the same imagery, but moves it in the different direction, where people must fashion weapons of war out of their agricultural tools.

Micah's day, as we have seen, was one of international conflict, but it was also one of predatory injustice at home, with rich landowners accumulating property and dispossessing the poor who were left landless.

The vision that Micah relates here is not merely of the cessation of international conflict, it's also one of good relations at home, where every man sits under his own vine or fig tree.

Everyone with his own vine and fig tree is an image of the fruitfulness of the land, and the participation of every single person within that fruitfulness. No one is left landless, everyone enjoys access to literally fruitful means of production, means of production that are fruitful enough that they're able to rest in their labours. The same language is found in 1 Kings chapter 4 verse 25, describing the situation of Israel at the height of Solomon's reign.

The greatest period of the nation's glory was seen in every single person enjoying his own land, and having fruitfulness within it. Zechariah chapter 3 verse 10 also uses that imagery.

[11 : 18] Ginelet pushes against the readings of such a Sweeney, who on the grounds of verse 5 pit Micah against Isaiah. Rather, he argues, we might read verse 5 as bringing the hearer's eyes back down into the immediate present, from the future horizon laid out by the prophecy of the first four verses.

This invites them to live in the present, in a way informed by the eschatological hope that has just been set forth. While the other nations might at this time in history live in terms of their gods, Israel trusts in the Lord, knowing that this is the future that they are looking forward to.

However, the movement from the people's current beleaguered position to the glorious future that has been promised to them is not an easy one. The oracle that follows in verses 6 to 8 gives some sense of how that movement will take place. The Lord will gather the scattered flock, all the lame and the wounded will be gathered as a remnant, and those who had been cast off in judgment would be made into a strong nation. The Lord would once more be in their midst, as their shepherd is the one leading them and protecting them. A nation that had been stripped of its sovereignty would enjoy it once more. The stronghold of the flock, the hill of Zion, in which they were protected from adversaries, would be built up once again and they would be safe. The reference to the tower of the flock in verse 8 might be an allusion back to something in Genesis chapter 35. In Genesis chapter 35, Rachel dies in childbirth on the way to Bethlehem. Verses 19 to 21 of that chapter.

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 Edah. This tower of Edah, or tower of the flock then, would recall the story of Rachel and the tragic manner of her death. It was in the context of Genesis chapter 35 that Jacob first received the promise that kings would come from his loins.

Reading the verses that follow in verses 9 to 10, we might see the prophet taking up some of these themes and developing them. The woman crying in labour would recall Rachel. Likewise, the lack of a king might refer to the woman struggling and failing seemingly to give birth to the king that is expected. The birth pangs that are described are painful birth pangs, pangs of suffering which will involve going into exile itself. At this point, Babylon was not the major power of the region, it was Assyria. Perhaps the first heroes of the prophecy in verse 10 would have imagined Assyria taking them captive and bringing them into the land of Babylon and resettling them there. However, the actual exile would take place under the rule of Babylon itself. Rachel had died in giving birth, and Zion would also have to die in giving birth. They would go off into the death of exile, but they would be brought up from that grave, as the Lord would redeem them from their captivity.

[14:13] Gilead comments upon the way that the stories of Jacob are being used in this passage. The echoes of the story of Rachel and her tragic death, and the birth of Benjamin, the tribe from which the first king would arise, are presenting Israel with a way of thinking of its future in terms of its past.

He writes, The narratives of Judah's patriarch are no mere rehearsal of events long lost and lapsed. Rather, the narratives are present and inhabitable memories in the figural patterns set out by scripture's traditions and narratives. When Judah enters into exile, her labor pains are mimetically related to Rachel's, devastating as they are. Yet Judah enters into this frown of providence in the assured hope of a future promise. There the Lord will redeem them. The chapter ends with an image of many nations coming up against Zion. Likely this is an image of Assyria and its tributaries gathering together against Jerusalem in 701 BC. As Joanna Hoyt observes, the gloating of the nations here very much tallies with the way that the Assyrians and their allies under Sennacherib are described in 2nd Chronicles chapter 32.

Sennacherib and his people think that they have beaten Jerusalem, that there is no hope for the people of the Lord. Yet Sennacherib and his men do not know the plans of the Lord, and they will be threshed like sheaves on the threshing floor. We might see some initial token of the fulfillment of these prophecies in this chapter in the story of 2nd Chronicles chapter 32, in verses 22 to 23 of that chapter. So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, and from the hand of all his enemies, and he provided for them on every side.

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