

Thoughts about Micah
March 22, 2020

Today we had no gathering for worship at First Presbyterian Church in Wilkes-Barre. The epidemic at present has led the Governor to decree that such gatherings are not to be held. Even so, Cindy and I were able to listen to a church service from First Baptist in Richmond where my sister attends. Though only a dozen or so persons were present, the service was conducted and broadcast over the internet. It was a substitute for being present for a real worship service. A limited substitute, in no way as uplifting and satisfying, but it was much better than leaving Sunday morning void.

Yet, I felt something more was missing: our gathering to study God's word – the Adult Bible Study that meets after our service. For today that study was from the book of Micah. I was familiar with the passage scheduled for today, Micah 6:6 ff., "With what shall I come before the Lord... ." With encouragement from Cindy, I decided to actually prepare something that might be sent to our class members, not as an adequate substitute for actually meeting, but the best I might do under the circumstances. I needed to do this, I felt. And so, here I am, trying to pull together what I found. Once I began, I found Micah to be more interesting than I had imagined.

Micah was a prophet who lived around 700 B.C. He was from a small town, Moresheth, that is in the Shepelah region, the western foothills between the coastal plain and the hill country where Jerusalem is. It is a frontier region. Earlier it was on the border of Philistia, and Egyptian control. In Micah's time it was likewise a border town toward Egypt. A town fought over in a battle once, and yet otherwise almost insignificant. It appears in some listings of towns and cities. Yet from this little town two prophets appeared. A certain Eliezer appeared during the reign of King Jehosaphat of Judah about 850 B.C., about 150 years earlier. He prophesied destruction for the fleet of ships Jehosaphat had built with King Ahaziah of Israel for a trade voyage to Tarshish (II Chronicles 20: 35-37). Now, Micah appears from the same small town about 710 B.C. in the days of King Hezekiah of Judah. (This is about 100 years before Habakkuk and Jeremiah and the threat from the Babylonians.)

Micah was a contemporary of Amos, who was a shepherd from another small town about 20 miles away to the west on the edge of the wilderness. Amos's ministry was to the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Micah prophesied in Judah. Both have similar messages, each to a different division of the Hebrew people, North and South. At about the same time, maybe a bit earlier, Hosea, born in Israel, was also prophesying to the people of the northern Kingdom of Israel, which had broken away after Solomon's reign. In Judah, Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem at about the same time as Micah's message. There was

lots of prophesy going on! Why? God was reaching out to His chosen people, trying to help them listen and understand. Each of these prophets' ministries was distinct, just as their backgrounds and messages were different. Amos was a shepherd. We don't know much about Micah; he may have been a small town artisan. A worker of some sort. Hosea seems to have been a prosperous farmer in the North. Isaiah had an aristocratic background and was comfortable in the court at Jerusalem. (He had more resources to draw on; perhaps that's why so much more of his writing survives!)

What these four had in common was an awareness of the geopolitical situation of their times, and an awareness of God's presence in the world and what was happening. All were witnesses to a lazy, parasitic complacency of the ruling classes of Israel and Judah. Times seemed to be good. In the North, Jeroboam II's reign was a time of prosperity. In Jerusalem, the capitol of the southern remnant of Solomon's united kingdom, things were pretty good too. Materially. We can read similar things in the prophesies of all four of these prophets, but especially so with Micah and Amos. Both were from the lower ranks of the social strata, and both pointed to the behavior of the wealthy, and the contempt for God's word in the deeds of the powerful.

As an aside, consider the question, "What is a prophet?" Often we think of a prophet as a seer, someone who sees into the future. This is supported by Deuteronomy 18: 20-22: God says, " 'But any prophet that speaks in the name of other gods, or presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die.' You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?'. If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it." Being a prophet was a dangerous business, in light of this. Amos claimed not to be a prophet or the son of a prophet.

Yet, there is another way of seeing prophesy. The very first person in the Bible to be called a prophet is Miriam, Moses's sister. After the miracle at the Red Sea, she sings, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (Exodus 15: 21) (This verse is incorporated later into the longer preceding "Song of Moses.") Miriam has seen what has happened, whatever and however it was, and sees it not as just a coincidence, an accident of nature, but as God protecting the Israelites from their pursuers, the Egyptian army. She is not predicting; she is seeing God's hand in the events of the present.

In a sense Micah is a prophet in both senses. He sees the state of things in Jerusalem. He sees the international scene, and hears about what is happening to the north. In it he sees God preparing to act. How and where and when God speaks to him we don't know. But

we read and hear his message, a message consistent with, though with differences from, his contemporary prophets Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah.

So, what is it about the international scene? The disaster for the world that is the expanding Assyrian empire. The Assyrian homeland was centered at their capitol Nineveh, in upper Mesopotamia (near modern Mosul, Iraq). The expansion surged outward in a series of about a dozen different campaigns. With each, the threat turned more ominous, and the threat more overwhelming. By the time of Micah the Assyrians had overrun Syria. We don't know whether they had yet conquered the northern kingdom of Israel yet. The capitol city of Samaria fell to siege in 723 B.C. Guess who is next?

The sense must have been like the early days of World War 2. The Germans tanks overran Poland in a matter of weeks. But that was out to the East; remote. Then Denmark and Norway in a sudden campaign. Well, Denmark was almost defenseless, and Norway was surprised and beset by Quisling traitors. Then France. The country thought to have the best army in Europe. Defended by the Maginot Line. Conquered utterly in a few weeks and surrendered ingloriously in the same railroad car in which the Germans surrendered the armistice to end World War 1. What next? England? The "Blitz" by air had begun. Spain? The world?

Micah sees the same in his day. And, he sees not only the Assyrians as the immediate peril, but also a complacent Judah, well-practiced in self-advancement, and unanswerable to the principles of God's covenant. Our lesson book includes a prophetic reading from Chapter 3. I won't dwell here on the details of Judah's sinfulness. You can read chapters 1-3, or the same things later in Habakkuk, or the similar goings-on in the north in Amos. This lesson book reading culminates in verse 3:12: "Therefore because of you Zion shall be a plowed field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height."

We can read about what happened next in II Kings 18: 13- 19:37. The Assyrians indeed come up against Jerusalem. They call on Hezekiah to surrender, and become a vassal king. Hezekiah consults Isaiah, and prays to God for guidance. Isaiah counsel, ""By the way he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says the Lord." (II Kings 19:33). Then, "That very night, an angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies." There's a lot more to the story. Hezekiah was a "good" king who sought to do right by the Lord. In contrast to many of the others. He did reform Judah. Ultimately, when the test came, Jerusalem was spared. There is information that suggests that he did find himself forced into some degree of accommodation to the

Assyrians in the form of tribute paid, notwithstanding his success at defending Jerusalem. Pretty much all the rest of Judah was conquered by the Assyrians, even the fortress city of Lachish.

It is interesting that Micah is now almost a forgotten prophet. He is a but a few pages among the “minor” prophets at the very back of the Old Testament. Thinking back to those words from Deuteronomy, he had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. It didn’t happen. What did that say about Micah’s prophesy? To use an expression, God seemed to let his words fall to the ground. This gives us perspective on Jonah. He was also a prophet at about the same time or a bit earlier, mentioned in II Kings 14:25 as prophesying during the time of Jeroboam II, before the Assyrians attacked Israel. He was sent to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria to prophesy the destruction of that city. Having eventually done this, he went out to await for its destruction by God. But the king and people of Nineveh repented, and God spared the city. Jonah had been afraid of that, and was very displeased! (Jonah, Chapter 4). It wasn’t just that the Lord had spared the evil city that had wrought so much destruction on the world. This was an embarrassment to Jonah – his words would be seen to have fallen to the ground. What happens to those seen as false prophets? Refer to Deuteronomy. (Nineveh didn’t last all that much longer. The Assyrian empire lasted almost 100 years more, but then fell rapidly, Nineveh being destroyed by the Babylonians and Medes in 612 B.C.

But, we hear of Micah again! Later, Jeremiah is held in prison for having prophesied that the Babylonians (the Chaldeans of Habakkuk) would conquer Jerusalem. Jeremiah replies to his critics in Jer 26: 15 ff. “Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.” Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.” And some of the elders of the land arose and said to all the assembled people, “Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah, ‘Thus says the Lord of Hosts, Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.’ Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord, and entreat the favor of the Lord, and did not the Lord change his mind about that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring about great disaster on ourselves!”

Micah is credited here, in the memories of the people of Judah more than a century later, with having helped the Lord turn Hezekiah and the people of Judah and Jerusalem back to God! And God had changed his mind about the impending disaster. As he had so

many times before, even to the time of Moses. God is merciful. He loves His people and is delighted with those who turn from their ways back to his way. Even if that means that a prophet ends up seeming to look silly, or discredited. Notice that Micah was not killed. (A prophet after Micah named Uriah, son of Shemaiah, was killed for much the same offense – prophesying against Jerusalem. We can read about that in the continuation of Jeremiah Chapter 26.)

Interestingly enough, the best known passage, what we remember most about Micah, isn't his message of doom, nor his condemnation of the transgressions of the wealthy and elite. For that we usually read Amos instead.) It is his words, "What does the Lord require of you?" He gives us a very simple statement, something that is within anyone's understanding: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

These are words illustrated in the life and ministry and sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in whom God's word and love was made manifest for all to see, all those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

There will be those, as in the days of Micah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah, who will close their eyes and their ears against God's message. But for those who will receive God, the little things, like a seeming discredit for being a part of God's message, is of small account. Let us not be so self-concerned that we would hide our light, God's light, under a bushel. As did Micah, let us speak, when God so leads us, for we know not who may be saved, regardless of how things may seem to us. For someone may hear, and obtain mercy.

The prayer from our Lesson Book: *In the silence of our hearts, O God, remind us of your better way, and give us the insight to explore justice more deeply. Amen.* (The Present Word, Spring 2020 Justice and the Prophets, Geneva Press, 2020, p19.)