

## Bible Notes: Micah 1

### Overview

The prophet Micah proclaimed his message about seven hundred years before Jesus. It was a time of crisis for the people of Israel. Already politically divided in the two kingdoms of Israel in the North, and Judah in the South, they had just watched the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the armies of Assyria (Micah 1:6-7 refers to the fall of the northern capital, Samaria). Now the Southern Kingdom and its capital Jerusalem stand in equal peril, because of those same armies – or, as Micah would have it, because of the same lethal cocktail of idolatry and injustice which had characterised the North's national life. Micah is a good example of how prophets in the Bible are not *primarily* those who see into the future. It is more that they see deeply into the *present*, seeing past the froth of any particular historical moment to discern the most deeply important questions – and warning that how their hearers respond or not to those will indeed determine their future. Their value for us depends on the conviction that those most deeply important questions may not really have changed that much, despite our drastically different historical contexts.

### Things to think about

One note just on style to start with: if you were an eighth century Israelite 1:10-16 would hit you much more forcefully than any English translation possibly could today. For one thing, you would hear the unmistakable allusions: 'Tell it not in Gath' (1:10) is the opening line of the great national lament 'The Song of the Bow' about the death of Saul and Jonathan in battle (2 Sam.1:19-26). Then you would notice how all the place names – a series of towns which would be overrun as armies approached Jerusalem – were paired sinisterly with threatening words: as in in England, we were to say 'The people of Harrow will be harrowed; Pinner will be pinned down; Luton will be looted...'

It is worth noting how the book starts: with a statement of the terrifying majesty of God. God, for the prophets, is not a way of speaking about 'our spiritual dimension' or some vague sense of the sum of goodness and beauty in the world. No, God is first experienced by them as an overwhelming force, as a reality which – or better, Who – bursts upon a world which is utterly unprepared for him. The prophets did not sit down and carefully compose nuanced and balanced reflections on the national situation after much wise contemplation. No, at the very least they want to present themselves as the bearers of a message which comes with stupendous power from beyond them – something which they could not dream up or produce for themselves, 'the word of the Lord' (1:1).

Whilst it would not be fair to characterise the overall message of Micah as being a prophecy of doom, Chapter 1 certainly is. It will take further chapters for us to be fully aware of what precisely

the indictment against Judah is: why is the country in such terrible danger? But already in the fate of Samaria there is a hint – Micah refers to her smashed images and idols, and whilst his mention of the wages of prostitution may refer to actual ‘sacred’ prostitution (we know erotic ritual to have been part of some Ancient Near Eastern religion) it certainly also embraces the idea that Israel has been faithless, committing spiritual adultery with other gods.

Why should worshipping the wrong god(s) matter so much? Often when modern people read the Bible, it seems strange that God should so ferociously insist on being the *only* God worth worshipping. It can seem as if God has an especially weak ego, in need of constant reassurance that He and He alone is loved by His people. A more fruitful way to think about such passages might be this. The God at the centre of national life radically determines the kind of society and people that nation ends up with. If your God is a God desiring peace and justice, and who is on the side of the poor and the weak, you will in short order have a very different society from that centred on a God whose priorities are the celebration of military, sexual or economic power. Not all gods are the same, which is why the prophetic condemnation of idolatry almost invariably goes hand in hand with a denunciation of injustice and wealth-worship (as it certainly does in Micah).

One of the challenges for modern people reading the prophets is that we have become almost allergic to understanding history – especially public, *international* history – as being the theatre of God’s actions. That is to say, we can just about get our heads round the idea that God might be active in our lives – but the idea that His will is worked out in what happens in the great events of history is more difficult. We would be more ready to accept the analysis of social, economic, political and military historians as to why Israel collapsed in the eighth century than Micah’s verdict: ‘it was the idolatry that did it.’ Equally, if asked to describe the causes of the First World War – or the contemporary ecological crisis – we have been schooled to do so in fundamentally secular terms. But if we go to school with the prophets, they will encourage us to think that while the other kinds of analysis have their place, the fundamental diagnosis must be spiritual: the roots of human catastrophe are always found in the national relationship, or lack of it, with God.

### **Going deeper...**

Micah is a prophet of lament, heartbroken for what has gone wrong with his people (Micah 1:8-9). What might there be in our national, and church, life which breaks God’s heart?

If a ‘god’ is simply whatever a society worships – what might ours be? (Wealth? Power? Freedom? Beauty?)