

Bible Notes Micah 4

Overview: Chapter Three concluded its devastating indictment of the Judean elite by promising that the Temple, their ultimate symbol of strength and security and divinely guaranteed order, would be 'ploughed like a field', leaving just a heap of ruins (3:12). That is the short-term future into which Judah steered itself. However, Micah seen see beyond ruin, and in 4:1-4 he offers a vision (did it originate with Micah, or Isaiah? It is repeated almost word for word in Is. 2: 1-4) of God's coming Kingdom where Jerusalem will be restored, and the Temple become the centre of God's world government of peace and justice. When, centuries later, Jesus spoke of God's Kingdom, this was the tradition which shaped his meaning. The remainder of the chapter mixes confidence in this ultimate hope, with terrible warnings of the immediate danger. Strikingly, Jesus also connected the coming of the Kingdom to a prior judgement on and rebirth of the Temple – which his followers came to see as focussed in Jesus' own body (John 2:13-22).

Things to Think About: People often find the notion of the 'chosen people', so central to the world-view of the Hebrew Scriptures, an almost insuperable obstacle to faith. Why should God favour one people over all the rest? Surely, God's care and concern should be for *all* peoples, equally? This is actually a question the Scriptures are very alert to, and Micah 4 is one of several places where it is made plain that God's choice (or, to use the technical term, 'election') of Israel is indeed *for the sake of the whole world*. The biblical hope – at least in many passages - is not that Israel gets to lord it over everyone else, but that through Israel God reaches out and embraces the whole world. Israel is to be a beacon, summoning the warring peoples of the world to unity, peace and justice. The hope is for the Gentiles: 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' (4:3).

A Jew would say that the patently warlike and unjust state of the world is very good evidence that the Messiah has not in fact arrived. These promises remain outstanding. Traditionally, Christians have responded that in some sense, Jesus Christ and his Church are the fulfilment of the promises. Through Jesus, people from all nations have indeed come to worship the God of Israel and to embrace His laws of justice and peace: the early Church used to emphasise the staggering moral transformation involved when pagan individuals

and people became Christian (and that claim is less easy to deride than romantic reconstructions of our pagan past sometimes suggest). However, it would be folly to say that the promise of the Kingdom has been *completely* fulfilled, or even largely fulfilled – which is why Christianity has also always taught that Jesus ‘will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead.’ To ‘judge’ in biblical usage usually has the sense of ‘to set right’, and this confidence in an ultimate setting right of things by Jesus remains a central part of Christian teaching. We do not proclaim the Kingdom of God as a nice idea or even as an ethical imperative, but as a confident expectation.

One of the many thorny questions in contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue is what significance the actual physical places of Israel and Jerusalem retain in the messianic hope. Micah, quite plainly, believed that a restored Jewish capital and Temple would be at the centre of God’s universal kingdom. Most Christian tradition has instead seen city and Temple (and indeed, promised Land) as fulfilled in Jesus: He now is the ‘place’ where communion with God happens, and our relationship with God and each other is healed. Instruction goes forth from Him, rather than from a rebuilt physical Temple. According to this way of thinking, the actual physical land of Israel no longer has any special spiritual significance – after all, did not the prophets say that the glory of the Lord would ultimately fill the whole earth (Habakkuk 2:14 and many others), not just one portion.

This traditional interpretation though has been challenged recently. One challenge has come from a particular style of fundamentalist Protestantism which sees Old Testament prophecy as being fulfilled in the modern State of Israel. This approach has been much mocked. However, in the wake of the Holocaust there has also been a general movement in the Churches to revise the traditionally very negative view of Judaism, insisting that the ‘Old’ Covenant is not obsolete and that God’s promises to Israel are irrevocable. What most Christians making such points have not fully appreciated, however, is that those promises were never just about assuring Jews of eternal salvation. They were more like Micah’s promises: promises of land, in which God’s people could live God’s way and in which no-one would make them afraid. So one tricky question for Jewish-Christian dialogue today is: if God’s promises to the Jews endure, does that mean that in some sense Israel’s political claim to the Land is indeed divinely mandated?