

James Philip Bible Readings

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James Philip Bible Readings

THE BOOK of Micah

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THE BOOK of Micah

Chronologically, Micah follows Hosea, and was his younger contemporary, as Hosea was of Amos. The title verse of his prophecy (1:1) speaks of the reigns of Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah. The sense of imminent doom that pervades the first chapter would seem to indicate that the prophet's words were written very near to the date of the fall of Samaria in 721 BC. This gives the setting of the prophecy: Micah's message to the southern kingdom, Judah, is that a similar fate to that which is about to break on Israel in the north, will overtake her if she is careless of the warning that the ominous events there are proclaiming to those who have ears to hear.

Our original Notes on the book of the prophet Micah were first issued in October 1964, and reprinted without alteration in December/January 1976/77. Since then, we have made a further, extensive study of the book in our Sunday evening services in the spring of 1990 with, we trust, new and fresh insights into its teaching, and the Notes that follow represent the fruit of that study.

1) 1:1

Micah was a younger contemporary of Hosea, as Hosea was of Amos. The title verse of his prophecy (1:1) speaks of the reigns of Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah, which represents a fairly wide span of years, from the mid-eighth century to its end. He was also a younger contemporary of the mighty Isaiah with this difference, that Isaiah ministered in the nation's capital, Jerusalem, while Micah was a country-dweller, from Moresheth-Gath, nestling 'in the range of low hills which lie between the hill country of Judah and the Philistine plain', a green and fertile area which carried the main burden of traffic between Asia and Africa - the Shephelah, as the geographers call that part of Israel, a route which the then Assyrian emperor Sargon travelled in 719 BC in his campaign against Egypt, whom he defeated at Raphia. As such, it was neither remote nor isolated, and Micah could feel the pulse of danger in the presence of marauding armies which made use of the strategic roadway in their forays against one another. Indeed, the sense of imminent doom that pervades the first chapter of the book would seem to indicate that the prophet's words were written very near to the date of the fall of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, Israel, in 721 BC. This gives the setting of the prophecy. Micah's message to the southern kingdom, Judah, is that a similar fate to that which was about to break on Israel in the north would overtake Judah if the southern kingdom persisted in being careless of the warning that the ominous events in the north were proclaiming to those who had ears to hear.

2) 1:1

We said in the previous Note that Micah could feel the pulse of danger in the presence of marauding armies using the strategic roadway near to Moresheth-Gath. In this regard, his position is rather like that of someone living in the channel ports of the south of England during wartime - small towns, and in themselves insignificant, but throbbing with the sense of imminent action. In this respect, Micah presents an interesting contrast to Isaiah, whose ministry was in the capital, Jerusalem, itself, and scarcely ever beyond it, and this may serve to remind us that it is possible to see ominous trends in national life just as clearly when at a distance from great centres of industry, commerce, culture and political activity, as when in the midst of them. At all events, Micah's message is one with Isaiah's, in the warning it gives to the sinning nation. And when the voice of the country unites with that of the capital in prophesying impending doom, it is time to pay urgent heed to what is being said. Nor must such warning voices be lightly dismissed today as mere doom-mongering, as so often tends to be the case. We should not forget the majestic opening words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the Apostle says, "God... spoke in time past by the prophets..." - including Micah! What we have in this book is not only the Word of God, but also a Word from God, remarkable and impressive in its up-to-date relevance for our own time. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!

3) 1:1-4

Impending doom - this is indeed one of the marked characteristics of the prophecy, as of the other pre-exilic prophets. How could it be otherwise, when God's people stood on the edge of disaster? But not at doom, or doom-mongering either, for there are some notable passages of hope and grace throughout the prophecy - which are certainly not to be thought of merely as pious hopes on Micah's part, but inspired utterances from God, and a reminder that evil does not have the last word in the world, and that judgment is God's 'strange work', while His 'proper work' is one of mercy and grace. This may be seen in such passages as 4:1-7, 5:2ff, 6:1-8, 7:7-12, 18-20 (which see). The triumph of grace indeed!

But now to the message of chapter 1. We have already seen that Amos and Hosea both ministered to the northern kingdom, Israel. But Micah, belonging to the south, spoke mainly to the southern kingdom, Judah, although Samaria is mentioned in 1:1 along with Jerusalem. It will be helpful to remind ourselves, with regard to the historical situation, that Israel, the northern kingdom, was attacked by the then world power, Assyria, in 732 BC and again ten years later in 722/1 BC, and taken into captivity. It is to this disaster of 2 Kings 17 that Micah makes reference in this chapter, in language so intense and throbbing in drama that it seems clear that the captivity of Israel was almost at that moment taking place. But the captivity of Judah in the south was as yet a considerable distance away, in 597/586 BC, considerably more than a century later, from the time Micah was prophesying. There are lessons in this, which we shall turn to in tomorrow's Note.

4) 1:1-4

The form of words in 1 is significant for us: "The word of the Lord.... which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem". Which he saw? What does this mean? Just this: the events which the prophet was even then witnessing in the northern kingdom - the advance of the Assyrian hosts and their implacable hostility and their intent to destroy were the word of the Lord to the northern kingdom. It was the prophetic ability to interpret the things that happened in the land as the word of the Lord that make the prophetic ministry such a tremendous reality. It is this that serves to explain the language of 'theophany' in 3, 4 - a familiar enough pattern in the Old Testament, as cf Psalm 18, in the picture of a God Who moves heaven and earth, either on behalf of His people, to protect and succour them, or - as here - in judgment. This is why the prophetic books bear such a relevant word for our own day and generation - as we have seen repeatedly in our Old Testament studies. It is not that we try to make these ancient prophecies relevant to our own time - they make themselves relevant so clearly and unequivocally that they almost make us gasp. The great question is whether we as Christians are able to see in this way, and see the significance of the events of our time. In 1 Chronicles 12:32 it speaks of men who 'had understanding of the times', the quality of discernment to grasp the moral and spiritual significance of what is happening in our world today - in Europe, in what used to be the USSR, in the things that seem to be going so wrong in our own land, in our own society, in government, in Parliament, in industry. Are we able to 'read' the signs of the times as Micah did?

5) 1:1-4

One of the lessons Micah has to teach us is this: he is seeing the disaster that is overtaking the northern kingdom, and the reasons for it, and he is saying to Judah, the southern kingdom, in the words Paul uses in Romans 2:3, "Thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?" Here, then, is a man who, as he hears the tramp of enemy armies, hears also the measured tread of the footsteps of God coming in divine visitation! And he cries to his own people, "O learn the lessons of history, and learn quickly, before it is too late". In this connection, we should not miss the significance of what Micah says in 9, "...the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem". That, even then, was how near the danger came to Judah, at that time. Assyria could so easily have pressed into Jerusalem, even then, and Micah was conscious of the danger that it could happen. Later also, by a few years (in 701 BC) in the reign of Hezekiah, Sennacherib of Assyria besieged Jerusalem, and Isaiah, the prophet predicted the lifting of the siege (2 Kings 18, 2 Chronicles 32). And finally, when all warnings were unheeded, in the reign of Zedekiah, Jerusalem was destroyed, and Judah taken into captivity to Babylon.

Micah's message at this juncture, doom-laden as it was, was scarcely calculated to boost the flagging morale of the people, and his gloomy prognostications would be little welcomed by those who conceive the preacher's function as being to comfort, encourage and uplift. It is a measure of the unreality of the religious life in time of moral and spiritual declension that it demands smooth and soothing words and fails to recognize the inevitability of the judgment that a holy God must pronounce upon sin. As Micah's prophecy unfolds, we shall see just how inevitable that judgment was, and how authentic was this word that he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

6) 1:5-7

These verses tell us why the Lord was coming in judgment upon His people. The capital cities are said here to be centres of sin, and this is true in two ways. For one thing, capital cities - now as then - tend to gather the moral dregs of national life into their vast anonymity, and sin receives every encouragement to breed and proliferate. But capital cities are also the seat of government, and it is this more particularly that Micah probably has in mind. It was corruption in high places, in the royal house, the princes and the nobles, that had poisoned the body politic of the nation. This was what Micah could see, from the standpoint of distance in Moresheth-Gath. And seeing where the corruption of wealth and idolatry had led in Samaria, in the imminent, and perhaps even then actual, sacking of the northern kingdom, he could feel the danger threatening his own capital, Jerusalem. This is a lesson that all history teaches, not only the prophets. It is also one that few great nations have ever taken seriously until it was too late. The decline and fall of great powers, ancient and modern, has been due, basically, to moral rather than political factors, with wealth, prosperity and ease combining to sap moral fibre until collapse and ruin become inevitable. It is a matter for serious and earnest consideration that both our major political parties are concerned so exclusively with economic and social issues and so little with moral principle. Is there not a word for us in Micah at this time?

7) 1:8-9

The important phrase in these verses is "her wound is incurable", and its particular significance lies in the fact that it proved to be a true and realistic assessment of the nation's condition. We should bear in mind that Micah comes in a considerable succession of prophets who have all warned God's people of the nemesis that could fall on continuing sin. Nearly two centuries of moral and spiritual declension have by now marked the downward path of the northern kingdom, and it is no morbid and pessimistic prognostication that he is making, to be swept aside as fanatical, but a sober, clinical diagnosis, as it were, made by one in possession of all the facts of the case who draws the inescapable conclusion that it is a sickness unto death and that there is no hope. Micah's position here is rather like that of a close relative who has been given the shattering news that a loved one is not to get better, and tries in vain to convey it to the rest of the family. He knows that it is true, but he cannot get them to take it in, or believe it. And just as there is something in us that fights fiercer and irrationally and at any cost against the admission of such news into the heart, so also in national life there is an almost incredible capacity for wishful thinking, in face of all evidence to the contrary. In 1914 - and in 1939 - men said "It cannot happen", but it did. The prophets of doom were right and the optimists tragically wrong, and they were wrong for this reason, that they did not face the facts of the situation. We should not miss the logic of Micah's denunciations, nor should we fail to ask ourselves what is the logic of our situation in the world of today.

8) 1:10-16

The place names in these verses are small townships and villages in Micah's district that would feel the first blast of the oppressor on his way to Jerusalem. Micah's concern is almost more for these smaller places than for Jerusalem itself. He weeps over the villages and hamlets of the countryside more than over the capital although he realises that the heart of the nation's sin lies there. There is a parable here for our time, so far as the life of the Church is concerned. The barrenness and spiritual apathy which afflict the life of the Church from time to time do not show their worst and most revealing effects in the larger centres of population but in the rural areas. It is quite possible to be deceived about the spiritual temperature of the Church's life if one confines observation of it to the cities, where at least the tradition of church attendance persists and even a small percentage of a large population means a fairly reasonable crowd. But in the country districts it is very different, where congregations of a handful of people are almost the rule rather than the exception. Rural areas where in the nineteenth century D.L. Moody is said to have preached to crowds of more than ten thousand people are now almost devoid of the habit of worship, and ignorance of the things of God almost as widespread as in pre-Reformation times. All honour to the tiny groups of faithful souls who pray and weep for the spiritual deadness of rural Scotland. Is there not here a mission field as great and needy as any in the darkest places of heathendom?

9) 1:10-16

The reference to Lachish in 13 as being "the beginning of the sin to the daughter of Zion" needs a word of explanation. The IVF commentary says "It was the mistaken policy of both Israel and Judah to purchase large quantities of horses and chariots from the Egyptians. The nation was thereby encouraged to believe that she was becoming a military power, but all the time she was only straining her financial resources. For however suitable chariots might be for the flat lands of the Nile, they were quite out of place in the mountainous terrain of Judah. However, such a panoply of war was causing the nation to look to herself and to her allies rather than to Jehovah. For this reason the prophets of Jehovah viewed the chariots with disapproval and regarded them as a source of error. It is suggested that at Lachish, on the coastal plain, the newly-purchased horses and chariots were halted and rested before finally passing on to Jerusalem. In this way Lachish could be spoken of as 'the beginning of the sin to the daughter of Zion'. The important point to note is that Lachish's complicity in this unhallowed and forbidden traffic brings the divine censure upon her head, even although she herself could have had no part in making the agreement with Egypt. This raises an important issue: How responsible are individuals for the ill-advised and ungodly policies of governmental leaders? It is true, of course, that the nation is carried willy-nilly with the decisions its leaders make, but it is open to individuals and groups to make their emphatic and unequivocal protest in the name of God and of righteousness against godless and morally decadent courses of action. The Church as a whole, and individual Christians in particular, must be held as implicated and responsible if by failing to speak out they seem to acquiesce in evil.

10) 2:1-5

Micah now proceeds to denounce the sins upon which the judgment of God referred to in chapter 1 was to come. One is immediately struck with the difference in emphasis here from that made in the prophecy of Hosea, whose plaint is almost exclusively against the idolatry of the people. That, for the earlier prophet, was the evidence par excellence of Israel's spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness. Micah is preoccupied with the social wrongs that abounded in the country districts of Judah. The problem was this: wealth had accumulated during the prosperous reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, and had produced a class of 'newly-rich' money magnates, hungry for land and unscrupulous in their means of obtaining it. They were apparently buying up and buying out the peasants' smallholdings (see also Isaiah 5:8), and widespread injustice and oppression were the result. Power corrupts, as the saying has it, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, and this became terribly true in Micah's day. The lives of men, their independence, the security of their homes and families, were at the mercy of rich men's whims and fancies. This cold-blooded scheming and planning of the ruin and destitution of so many innocent and hapless victims invited judgment, and with grim irony Micah announced punishment to fit the crime. Their fields in turn will be confiscated (4), and forever, by the invader. "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap" - this is an eternal principle imbedded in the structure of the universe. God is not mocked. Men do not oppress His children with impunity. This is the patience and comfort of the saints.

11) 2:1-5

It is not difficult to see how what was said in the previous Note speaks very much to our own situation in today's world, and raises major issues for us. But while it is true that social, economic and political issues are very much to the fore in the thinking of the Church, this does not necessarily mean that the Church's preoccupation with these 'this-worldly' issues puts it in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament or gives it a 'prophetic voice'. To be sure, matters like social injustice, poverty and oppression are plain on almost every page of the prophetic literature, but the prophets went behind and beyond them to the moral and spiritual issues that lay at their root, in a way that the Church, north and south of the border alike, has not always done. We do not think it is enough for the assumption to be made that since it is the Church that is speaking on these matters, it is by implication speaking from a Christian standpoint. A senior churchman, taking issue with a Church and Nation Report, described it as 'an admirable summary which could have been written by any political party or any humanist group', but regretted that it showed a lack of any distinctive Christian contribution to the problems with which it dealt. It is not enough to assume that of course the gospel is there in the background, informing all the Church's pronouncements; it is only too easy for that gospel to be left in the background, and marginalized - and therefore rendered progressively innocuous. It is not a far cry from this - indeed it is an almost inevitable end-product - to the viewpoint of a prominent Anglican that 'since the gospel is full of absolute demands and statements it is embarrassing for modern clergymen who seek to move on what they take to be a wider national stage. Thus to speak too much of God is thought to be inimical to the Church's influence on society at large. To hold that there is a gospel to communicate, for the lack of which the world is spiritually dying, is to be naive and obscurantist'. This is the fundamental difference between many 'Church' pronouncements and the Old Testament prophets: they spoke from a spiritual standpoint with a spiritual content and foundation for what they said.

12) 2:1-5

The social injustice and oppression of Micah's day has sufficient parallels in our own to prompt some reflection on the issues involved and the possibilities of their redress. While the Christian must necessarily regard himself as committed to every honourable effort - and involved in them - to achieve just and equitable conditions for all men, it still remains an open question whether this commits him to a doctrine of equality. In a situation in which the issues have descended to a dreary struggle between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', it is conveniently forgotten that there is in fact a very real and valid distinction between harsh oppression on the one hand and on the other the existence of some in society who have more than others. The Christian faith recognises the equality of men in dignity before God - and in this sense it is obliged to protest against any violation of that dignity and sanctity of personality - but it does not confuse this to mean that there is also an equality in function or that there should be no such thing as an hierarchical order in which some are called to higher position than others. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Authority exercised with humility and obedience accepted with delight are the very lines along which our spirits live". This perfectly underlines the distinction we are trying to make: it is not the abolition of authority or of obedience, but their rightful exercise that society needs to work to establish. A man may be at liberty to think that one political programme rather than another is best suited to bring this about, but at least he must be clear in his mind about what it is proposed to abolish. There is such a thing as throwing out the baby with the bath water.

13) 2:5-10

At this point Micah's warning of judgment is interrupted by his hearers, who are outraged by his stricture upon them, and they shout him down: "How dare you prophesy like that! Disaster will never overtake us. God would never act like that. Is not He a God of love?" This is the general, almost instinctive reaction of the natural man to the idea of judgment. Nothing is more unpalatable to him, and the prophet who dares to utter it is the most unpopular of men. Yet nothing is so illogical as the attitude adopted here, for it flies in the face of all the known facts of the situation. To any impartial observer judgment would seem inevitable: it is only to those whose actions invite it that it seems ludicrous. And perhaps the most ludicrous thing of all is that they imagine that the subject can be dismissed with the words, "Your idea of God is not ours", or (blasphemously, if they did but know it!), "Your God is our devil". What is of primary importance is not our idea of God at all, but His idea of us! And He happens to have revealed His mind to us in His Word beyond any shadow of misunderstanding, so far as the reality of judgment is concerned. Yet, even when men are silenced by the unassailable truth of this, and at last see God as He has revealed Himself to be, they still refuse to see themselves as deserving of His anger, even when their sins cry out to high heaven. Nothing could underline the blinding power of sin more graphically than this. It is part of the tragedy of man that, having sold himself to sin, he should have become increasingly insensitive to, and in the end unconscious of, its existence in his life. The bondage is so complete that only the operation of the Holy Spirit in his soul can ever awaken him to his real predicament. It is this that lies behind the protests made by Micah's hearers against his warnings of coming doom.

14) 2:11

This verse really belongs to the previous passage, for it explains in part at least how these rich oppressors had become so sunk in their false security. J.B. Phillips translates it, "The sort of prophet this people wants is a windbag and a liar, prophesying a future of 'wine and spirits'!" Hireling prophets had lulled and flattered men into their false security so effectively that they could not stand the real truth when it was preached to them by Micah. How does a prophet become a hireling and false? We suppose there are those who, with an eye to a profitable and comfortable life, begin falsely, but there are those who also begin truly, speaking the word of the Lord, but later from a variety of considerations find the cost of faithfulness too great to pay, and compromise under the stress of temptation to have an easier time. This temptation can surely never be very far away when preaching the unpalatable truth is so unpopular and likely to give rise to bitter opposition. All honour to those who stoutly resist it, and fear the displeasure of God more than the censure, ridicule and contempt of men. And what of those who demand that preachers speak smooth and comfortable words? This also is a temptation which creeps upon even good men unawares, let alone evil. Some begin well in the spiritual life, but the heart-bruising challenge of the word of the Cross brings first dismay then bitterness to the resisting heart, as an easier way, less costly to the flesh and the natural life, is sought. It is the temptation to which the Apostle Peter succumbed so often and which in the end brought him to the disaster of the denial. He was not really prepared to receive the 'hard saying' of Jesus about taking up the Cross and following Him. "Well", says Jesus, "Will ye also go away?"

15) 2:12-13

The startling and complete contrast which these verses present after the grim foreboding of what precedes them has caused scholars to think that they have strayed from another part of the book and should be transposed. But it has been suggested very shrewdly by the Rev. W. Still that since even in the darkest times there has always been a remnant of the faithful, and there would be also in Micah's day, seeking a word of assurance and comfort from the Lord in the midst of the gathering storm of judgment, why, then, should it be thought impossible that these verses could have been spoken at this particular juncture? Why, indeed? There are always some to whom warnings of judgment do not apply.

The prophecy, then, is of events following the judgment, of restoration and deliverance, and is couched in Messianic terms which point forward to the coming of Christ. This is not Micah's only reference to Him, as we shall see later (5:2). Two figures are used, that of a shepherd with his sheep, and that of a 'breaker'. The former is a familiar enough picture in prophetic literature, as in the New Testament also, and have links with our Lord's own use of the metaphor in John 10:1ff. The latter is less familiar, but in Jewish tradition 'the Breaker' is a title for the Messiah. The idea in the word seems to be that of one who removes obstacles and opens up a way for the flock. This is a particularly fruitful illustration in relation to our Lord's passion and victory, for He enters into death for our sakes, and in His resurrection breaks out for us, breaking the dark prison house which holds us, making a way out into freedom and joy, and going before us as our Leader and Lord. The marvel is that Micah could see, so long before His coming, what His coming would be like.

16) 3:1-4

This chapter contains an attack on the leaders of the nation, political and religious. First of all, in 1-4, it is the rulers and princes of Israel. The phrase in 1, 'and I said' is better rendered, with NIV, 'then I said', or even 'but I said', in contrast to what 'they' had said in 2:6, 7 and 11. Micah makes a terrible, scarifying indictment of the social injustices of his day. Those who were supposed to be the guardians of justice (1) were guilty of heartless exploitation of the people. G. Adam Smith says, "While Micah spoke, he has wasted lives and bent backs before him, pinched peasant faces peer between his words and fill the eclipses". The burning sense of such injustice made Micah speak out strongly. We seem to be meant to understand that a prophecy of inevitable doom would fall upon the perpetrators of such injustice, following 3, for 4 gives the rulers' reaction to that judgment. The astonishing thing is that they should cry to the Lord when it overtakes them. This argues a terrifying blindness about their sins, as if they should say, "Why should this calamity have overtaken us? Why has God allowed this to happen to us?" But this is greeted by silence, and an averted face from God. He does not give an account of what He does, but leaves them to discover for themselves the reason why. One is bound to see in this a comment on present day situations, as people ask in perplexity why we have faced recurring economic and political turmoil, with so little real hope of better days. Why indeed: There is nothing like silence on God's part for making men thoughtful and meditative! Indeed, it is not too much to say that silence is one of His most eloquent words in those who have grieved and angered Him by their sin. He fully intends that they should search their hearts and consciences and come to the conclusion: This is for that.

17) 3:5-8

In the previous Note it was the rulers and princes that were indicted, now it is the turn of the false prophets in these verses. This is even more terrible than the previous verses. The central verse is 6, which J.B. Phillips renders thus: "It shall be night for you, night without vision. You shall know darkness in which you can divine nothing...." This must be the most fearful thing of all to happen to one called to be a prophet of God. The man of God has two possibilities open to him: God gives him the Word, and either he can speak that word without fear or favour, regardless of what it may cost him in pain, suffering and opposition, or he can tone it down and compromise his message for fear of men. If this latter happens, God will withdraw His Word from him, and a darkness will descend on his spirit, and a dull deadness engulf him. This is far more frightening than any intensity of pain or even torture that comes from being faithful to God. A man who compromises his high calling and becomes a spiritual diplomatist prophesying smooth things is of all men most contemptible and pathetic. 'Ichabod' is written over his life. But not only can this happen to individuals, it has happened also in the life of the church, when it has prophesied smooth things and been unfaithful to its mandate to proclaim all the truth of God to the nation. One recalls the famine of the Word predicted by Amos (Amos 8:11, 12) which followed the nation's rejection of that word. It is a similar judgment that came to those of Micah's day, and comes when the church compromises the truth of God through fear, cowardice or sheer worldliness. This is the simple, tragic explanation of a great deal of the spiritual barrenness of our time, did we but recognise the truth when we saw it.

18) 3:9-12

These verses gather together princes, priests and prophets in a scathing indictment, with a bald, blunt prophecy of swift and unannounced doom, even as they complacently assure themselves (11b) that all is well and that the Lord is among them, assuring them of safety in the evil day. The 'yet' has a peculiar force, underlining the enormity of that complacency in face of all the evil that they were committing. The Lord does not argue the point with them, nor will He engage in further discussion. His Word to them will be action, and Zion shall be ploughed like a field - proud Zion that had been built with the life-blood of the poor and the oppressed who had been crushed and drained by the ruthlessness of the rich. It still remains true after many centuries - and history has proved it so - that no civilisation or culture that has been built at the expense of the oppressed can hope finally to prosper, for their cries reach the ears of the living God Who pledges Himself to redress their wrongs. When one thinks of the economic injustices in commerce and industry in our own land, and the often sinister powers wielded by gigantic vested interests in the affairs of the nation as a whole - not to say the squalid wheeling and dealing in so much of public life - it becomes, in the light of Micah's warnings, increasingly credible that what contemporary prophets of doom are uttering about the future might well be sober truth. The parallel here is very striking even to the arrogant assumption - 'we have never had it so good!' - that no evil can come. How blind can we be?

19) 4:1-7

We come in this chapter to what is undoubtedly one of the best-known prophecies of the Old Testament - immortalised for us in the paraphrase

"Behold, the mountain of the Lord
In latter days shall rise" -

but the issues that it raises as to interpretation are very considerable and we need to spend some time discussing them. The first point that requires comment is that these words of Micah's repeat almost identically the words of Isaiah 2:2-5; and the question arises as to whether the one prophet borrowed from the other, and if so, which from which; or whether both prophets borrowed from an earlier source (in much the same way as we might quote what another has said, in what we write or preach). Several things may be said about this: for one thing, there is nothing intrinsically impossible in the idea that God gave the two men the same vision independently of one another. Then, since Micah was the younger contemporary of Isaiah it might seem likely that he borrowed from the older man. On the other hand since Micah was the countryman, the metaphor of ploughshares and pruning hooks is more likely to have been used by him than by Isaiah, who was a city-dweller.

We shall probably never know for sure who first uttered these wonderful words, but this does not affect the message of the prophecy itself. And the fact that it is given twice in Scripture has its own importance, and the fact that it was spoken by both Isaiah and Micah in days of national crisis bear witness to their unshakable faith in the ultimate triumph of the sovereign purposes of God in the world, in the establishing of His ideal kingdom. One recalls Paul's words during the terrible storm in the Mediterranean "I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me". The more important issue, however, is how we are meant to interpret and understand this vision, and we shall turn to a consideration of this in the Notes that follow.

20) 4:1-7

Some interpretations of the prophecy are, in our view, plainly wrong. G. Adam Smith, the great Old Testament expositor, for example, in speaking of Isaiah's vision, suggests that what we have in Isaiah 2 is simply the optimistic and rosy-coloured picture conjured up by a young, enthusiastic prophet, and that he changed his tune later, in the light of events. But this would mean that Isaiah 2 is a false picture, with no real relevance, and certainly not a word from God - as if the prophet had said "I used to think like this, but now I am a sadder and wiser man". There seems to be little awareness in such an interpretation of the enormous problems that this raises, not only in relation to the integrity of the prophet but also in the inspiration and authority of Scripture itself. It is a matter of great sadness when a man comes to the point of saying "I used to think like that but..." when what has been abandoned is a position he was once glad and proud to hold, but now holds it no longer. Some of those who are now the most scathing and bitter critics of evangelicals are men who once held office in Christian Unions in our universities.

It would be better to take the prophecy as portraying Jerusalem as it might have been, if she had been true to her calling to be a light to the Gentiles, and the dark passages that follow portraying what came upon her because she was unfaithful to that calling. Then, through the judgment that came, a purging took place, and restoration through the Remnant that emerged out of the crucible of suffering. In this connection it is significant to compare Isaiah 2:1 with Isaiah 6:1: "The word that Isaiah saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem", and "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also..." Were these two visions seen together? Did the second explain the first, or condition the first? And is the message this: the coming of the kingdom through men being raised up and commissioned to preach the Word of the Lord? "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" "Here am I, send me." "And He said, 'Go...'"

21) 4:1-7

The next question that has to be decided is how we are to interpret the phrase 'in the last days' (1). This is not so simple as it seems. It can refer to several things: as the prophets looked ahead to them, the last or latter days would certainly refer to the 'end-time' at the climax of history. Yet, when the New Testament apostles quoted the prophets, they spoke of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost and the birth of the New Testament Church as fulfilling the prophetic vision (cf, for example, Peter's use of Joel 2:28 in Acts 2:17). So, to refer to the gospel dispensation as 'the last days' gives a different connotation to the words, and we therefore have to recognise that the phrase carries this double meaning (cf Hebrews 1:1 ,2, "...hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son", and 1 Peter 1:20, "... (Christ) Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you". For all that, however, the two meanings are linked, and the disparity is more apparent than real. It is a question of perspective. When you view a range of hills from the distance, they may all seem close together; it is only when you approach them that a wide valley separates those in front from those behind. This serves to explain why in the prophetic literature the first coming of Christ and the second are often spoken of as if they were the same event. The gospel dispensation, initiated by the birth of Christ at Bethlehem is in truth the consummation of the prophetic and messianic vision and hope; but the gospel dispensation itself contains a beginning and an end, an inception and a consummation.

22) 4:1-7

To continue where the previous Note left off, we have to say that there is a real sense in which Micah's prophecy in these verses was fulfilled in the coming of Christ in the Incarnation - one readily thinks of all the references in the Bethlehem story to peace and goodwill - but it was a fulfilment in embryo, and in the promise. Only at His coming in glory will the 'earnest' of redemption give way to its glorious fulness. This is why the message of Christmas is so fraught with beauty. For it is not only a foretaste, but a pledge, a guarantee of what one day will be. And the fact that Micah's vision finds its fulfilment in the coming of Christ is an assurance that our vision also, as we look on ahead, is assured of its ultimate fulfilment. The message of Christmas, then, is a foretaste of a Coming Day, a harbinger of something that still lies in the future, just as the snowdrop is a harbinger of spring, telling us, as C.S. Lewis so beautifully puts it in his book on Miracles, that we have turned the corner of the year. Summer is coming, but it is still some way off, and the snowdrops do not last for long. But they prophesy, and even if further snow storms come - they often do - the signs of spring have been seen in their blooming. We are still living in the frosts and cold east winds of the old order, but the everlasting spring of God's love and grace is on the way, and Christmas is His gracious foretaste and reminder that we do not hope in vain.

23) 4:1-7

Next, as a help to understanding we should bear in mind the setting of the prophecy. The nation has failed. Disaster is to overtake her. Sin, continued and unrepented, is destroying her. And this means that the purpose of God in having chosen this nation as His peculiar people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, is frustrated. And the question that the present condition of God's people raises for Micah is, "What of the promises of God to Abraham, that in his seed all the nations of men would be blessed? Are they of none effect?" And now, in this vision of Zion restored as an instrument of blessing to the nations of men, i.e. Zion becoming what in the purposes of God she was designed and intended to be, the question is answered, and we are told that what God does not realise through the nation as a whole He will accomplish through a Remnant. And it is in fact at this point in history that the narrowing down process begins. From twelve tribes they are narrowed down to two, Judah and Benjamin, the other ten being absorbed by the Assyrian Captivity, never more to emerge as a distinctive people. In time, Judah was also to go into captivity in Babylon, and only a remnant of Judah returned to the land under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. So the process went on, until in the fulness of the time, from the 'good of the land', people like Elisabeth and Zacharias, Simeon and Anna, the shepherds on the plains of Bethlehem, and Joseph and Mary, there came forth Jesus, in whom the prophecy finds its fulfilment, for in and through Him and His finished work the law goes forth from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (cf Acts 2ff), beginning there, then Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth - a light to lighten the Gentiles indeed! That there was a realisation of God's plans in the coming of Christ there can be no kind of doubt, although as we have indicated the consummation belongs rightly to His second coming in glory.

24) 4:1-7

But now another issue arises: the interpretation of the prophecy we have given, seeing its fulfilment in its first and second comings of Christ still leaves one problem unanswered: the question of Israel as a people in the continuing history of God's dealings with men. We cannot not look at this question: to do so, and leave it untouched, would be irresponsible. Let it be said at the outset that the question of the future of the Jews as the people of God is one of the major issues in prophetic interpretation. The two main schools of thought differ very sharply in the matter, the so-called dispensational viewpoint maintaining that the Old Testament prophecies relating to Israel's future will be literally fulfilled at the coming of Christ, and that Israel will come into her own again as the people of God; while the so-called classical view avers that the promise made to Israel concerning the Promised Land are all fulfilled spiritually in and to the Church, and that therefore Israel as a people of God will have no further significance. It seems to us, after much painstaking thought and study, that neither of these widely-held views does justice to the biblical teaching on the subject. On the one hand, one fatal objection to the dispensational idea is that it makes Israel, not the Church, the chief centre of the divine activity, whereas in fact the opposite is true. Israel is the shadow, the Church is the substance and fulfilment, not vice versa. On the other hand, the traditional view, which sees no further significance in Israel as a people after the coming of Christ, fails to appreciate the teaching of the New Testament on the continuing significance and function of Israel as the 'shadow' of the Church throughout the entire age of grace until the coming of Christ. We shall say something of this in the next Note.

25) 4:1-7

Paul's teaching in Romans 9-11 makes it impossible for us to dismiss the stubborn fact of Israel's continuance as a people, and history only serves to underline this. The key to an understanding of what is admittedly a difficult and mysterious subject lies in remembering that the gifts and callings of God are without repentance. God called Israel to be a witness to Himself, and to His purposes of salvation in the world; and when she willfully refused that calling, heading up her rebellion against His will in the terrible act of crucifying His Son, a judicial sentence of rejection was passed on her. But this does not mean that the divine purpose and intention for her was frustrated. God still determined to make Israel His instrument of revelation; only, now He uses her rejection of Him and His rejection of her instead of her willing submission to His will. Israel is still, in spite of herself, a witness to His saving purposes in the world, albeit in a negative way. Her sufferings and persecutions down the ages have been, as it were, a 'shadow' of the sufferings of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Does not Paul say (Romans 11:15) that their casting away is the reconciling of the world? And what can this mean if not that their historical sufferings are somehow integrally related to the sufferings of Christ in the reconciliation made on the cross, an unclear 'negative' whose 'positive' delineates the Atonement made in Jesus' blood. This must suffice for discussion of a difficult subject; at least it indicates that we may not on the one hand dismiss Israel as having no significance in the further purposes of God, or, on the other, arrogate to her a position of importance as will be seen in a balanced view of Scripture to be unwarranted.

26) 4:1-7

Before passing to what follows, one or two comments on some particulars. Whatever interpretation be placed on the passage as a whole, we should recognise that it will not do to spiritualise 3 completely, otherwise nonsense is made of the conviction implicit throughout the passage that Christ will establish His rule among men in the world. Pruning hooks and ploughshares would be irrelevant in a purely spiritual regeneration, and while the language is certainly poetic and metaphorical, even metaphor must be relevant before it can illustrate anything and must speak of something related to an earthly kingdom. We should bear in mind that the Christian hope speaks of a new earth as well as a new heaven, whatever the phrase is taken to mean. The establishment of a kingdom of Christ in a spiritual sphere unrelated to anything in this world would not constitute a victory; it would concede the battle to the enemy, which is unthinkable. God has not in fact planned a separate kingdom apart from the world; it is here that the grand enterprise of redemption takes place, and to dismiss wholly any idea of the kingdom of God on earth (of whatever nature) is to deny the Incarnation.

The picture of every man under his own vine and fig tree (4) is one that raises some very thought-provoking ideas in relation to our modern trend towards public ownership on the one hand, and takeover bids by industrial giants on the other! Without entering into needless controversy on these matters, it may suffice to say that this particular biblical insight underlines the sanctity of human personality and the right of individuals to property and anything that denies this right or violates this sanctity is anti-biblical and therefore anti-Christian.

27) 4:8-10

A sharp contrast is presented within these verses. 8 really belongs in thought to what has preceded it, but is linked to what follows in 9 and 10 in that it is to be through travail and sorrow that Israel is to inherit. In this respect the thought is similar to that expressed in Hosea 2:14ff. It is in and through the wilderness experience, the passing through the crucible of testing and discipline that Israel will be brought back to her former glory. This in fact is what happened to God's people; the captivity of Babylon was the fiery and terrible trial in which and out of which a new idolatry-free people was born. And what was living prophecy for the people of God then becomes a relevant spiritual parable for the Church and the believer today. The spiritual pattern is ever: 'out of travail into blessing'. We die to live in the Christian life, and 'life's glory' must be laid in the dust before 'life blossoms red' from the ground where it is laid. It is said that the word 'blessing' derives from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'blood', and this gives graphic meaning to it for the spiritual life. Not that travail always of necessity brings blessing. There is nothing automatic about it. Travail is testing, and it is possible to fail tests as well as pass them, and many do. When this happens, bitterness, not blessing, is the result. This will bear thinking about. A life can be marred as well as made by travail. It is our attitude to it that is all important.

28) 4:11-13

The thought expressed in these verses is one that we have met frequently in our studies of the prophets. The operative words are, "They know not the thoughts of the Lord...". God was certainly using the heathen world-powers as instruments of His chastisement upon His people, but their gloating over the hapless victims boded nothing but evil for them. It was one thing for the Lord to deal harshly with his own, but quite another for the rod of His anger to exult in their distress. This might be thought rather hard on Babylon, being used by God to punish His people and at the same time be punished herself for executing what was after all the divine wrath upon them, but we must recognise the fine balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility here, and also the fact that heathen nations invariably overstepped the bounds of their 'remit' as executors of divine vengeance. What they could not possibly understand was the reality of God's care for His people even when He sent chastisement upon them, and that even in the fiery furnace He stood by them lest the flame burn more fiercely than He willed it to do. If then we see - or think we see - the Lord laying His hand heavily upon His saints in discipline and censure, the emotion it should kindle in us should be one of solemnity and awe rather than satisfaction or gratification. "Stand in awe and sin not" is what such a sight should say to us. We are wise to bear in mind what the 'thoughts of the Lord' are at such a time, both towards them and towards ourselves.

29) 5:1-5

Following upon the vision of the coming kingdom in chapter 4 we go on now in this chapter to a consideration of the King of that coming kingdom. It will be helpful to look back to 4:8 for the beginning of the discussion of the King to come. J.B. Phillips renders the verse thus:

"And you, the Watch-tower of the flock,
Hill-fortress of the daughter of Zion,
To you shall return the rule of former time,
And the kingdom shall be restored to
the daughter of Jerusalem."

But, as 4:9, 10 indicate it is to be through travail and sorrow that Israel is to inherit. In spiritual terms it is always death that leads to life. In this respect the thought that Micah expresses is similar to that in Hosea 2:14ff. It is in and through the wilderness experience, the passing through the crucible of testing and discipline that Israel is to be brought back to her former glory. J.B. Phillips translates the end of 4:10 thus, "It is there that you will be rescued, and it is there that the Lord will set you free from the hand of your enemies". This, then, was a prophecy for the people of God in that age, and is indeed in every age. Reference was made in an earlier Note about the 'shadow' nature of Israel's existence, used, in spite of herself and her rebellion against God, as an instrument of His revelation to the world. This has been true of Israel's whole history down the centuries - until her 'scapegoat' existence as a suffering people is no longer required in the purposes of God, for the fulness of the Gentiles will come in. Her 'casting away' will have become the riches of the Gentiles. By the same token this is a relevant spiritual pattern (and parable) for the church of God and for the individual believer. It is ever 'out of travail into blessing'. We die to live in the spiritual life (cf 2 Corinthians 4:7-12). 'Life's glory' must be laid in the dust before it can 'blossom red'.

30) 5:1-5

Next, we come to the wonderful prophecy in 2-4, in the picture of the coming King. No prophecy in the Old Testament is more impressive than this, or more graphic. Micah's vision emerges from the thought of the previous verses which speak of the travail and discipline of judgment that was to come on the sinning people. The enemy had now come, and Israel's human king (4:9) had been smitten by them but God was still in control (as 4:11-13 indicate) and presently he would turn the tables on the enemies of his people. It is this thought that leads into the vision of the Coming One - and of course, ultimately, it can only be through the coming of that Promised King that right can be established. And it is natural that the immediate gives way in Micah's eyes to the far-off vindication, as he sees the dawning of a new day on the far horizons of time. This, in fact, and we must say this at the outset before considering anything else, is one of the wonderful things about the prophetic literature, that again and again we find in the midst of the darkness and doom-laden utterances these men of God make in the burden of their hearts, wonderful gleams of light and hope breaking upon the darkness. It was so with Amos; it was so in Hosea; and it is so also in Micah. Nor must this be regarded as pious wishful thinking: it is in fact the triumph of light over darkness, and hope over despair.

31) 5:1-5

There are two points in particular in this prophecy that we have to note. The first is the wonderful way in which the Messianic hope developed in the consciousness of Israel. We have already spoken of the development of the idea of the Remnant in Israel, an Israel within Israel, so to speak, comprising the spiritual, faithful company of people who amid the declension of the nation remained true to the Lord. And it was within this remnant that there grew the longing for the deliverance of God. Those with spiritual discernment down the history of redemption began to see that all the religious ordinances given them by God pointed beyond themselves to some greater fulfilment in the future - priesthood, sacrifices, prophets alike simply bore witness to that which lay undisclosed in the unknown before them, and God graciously gave to them intimations of the coming reality, and by and by, as time went on, the 'shape' of things to come began to emerge in the prophetic consciousness. "At sundry times and in divers manners" the King and His Kingdom began to be spoken of - no one pronouncement giving more than a momentary glimpse of the glory that was to follow. The genius of Micah's glimpse was that it focused attention on the very place where the King was to be born, in lowly Bethlehem. How wonderful, and what a comfort to Micah's burdened heart, that out of the travail of his ministry such sweetness should come! For the progression in the ongoing revelation given in the Old Testament of the Coming One, cf the following references: Genesis 3:15, 12:3, 22:9, 28:14, 15, 49:10; Numbers 24:17; Deuteronomy 18:15, 18, 19; 2 Samuel 23:1-5; Job 19:25; Isaiah 7:14, 9:6, 7; Micah 5:2; Daniel 9:25, 26; Haggai 2:7; Zechariah 13: 1; Malachi 3:1.

32) 5:1-5

The second point to note in this prophecy is the witness it bears not only to the fact of the Incarnation, but to its meaning and significance. Scholars have not been slow to point out the connection between the prophecy about Bethlehem and the fact that Micah was a countryman at home with the common folk of the land, and that this would surely bring comfort and encouragement to the oppressed poor to whom Micah wrote. This is true; but there is more to it than that. The full significance of 'lowly' Bethlehem is that the Coming One was to be 'one of themselves', a Man among men, not characterised by distant unapproachability, as the haughty nobles of Jerusalem must have seemed to the countrymen of the quiet villages around Jerusalem, but One who would be 'at home' in a carpenter's workshop, "bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh". This is the real meaning of Incarnation - God with us, down where we are, involved in our common humanity, at both its simplest and its lowest. The real force of the prophecy is not merely, as G.A. Smith suggests, that it emphasises the humanity of the coming King as over against the general apocalyptic idea of a Messiah great in majesty but remote from the common life of man, but that it combines both glory and humility in the figure of a God-Man who was born in a stable in an insignificant hamlet outside Jerusalem, and whose "goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (2). The significance of the Incarnation is not so much that Jesus was human (He was that, of course) but that Deity 'put on' humanity, and that the 'human' Jesus was God. It is this that Micah (wonderful to realise) saw amid the agony of impending doom.

33) 5:1-5

The meaning of 3 is rather obscure. Some think it has a parabolic reference, in the sense that, as the appointed place of the Messiah's birth in lowly Bethlehem, so God's people are to be brought low and humbled until their condition matches the lowly origin of their King. Paul's words, "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty" have significance in this connection, and this gives good sense to Micah's thought here. Others think that the reference to the return of the remnant indicates a time associated with Christ's second coming and that 'give them up' refers to the known historical travail of the Jews down the ages since their rejection and crucifixion of Christ. These differing interpretations need not be considered as conflicting with one another if we realise that the principle underlying both is the same, and that the prophet is looking into the future and seeing the two comings mingling as if they were one. The picture in 4, 5a is of a Shepherd King caring for His flock (cf Isaiah 40:11). The thought is remarkably like that of Psalm 23 with its green pastures and still waters and general sense of well-being. We should note particularly how close to apostolic teaching this stands - (see Ephesians 2:14, where Paul says 'He is our peace'). It is not merely what Christ does in His atoning work that is the basis of our peace with God, but what He is. His person and work can never be separated one from another, and as the living Christ Who once died He Himself is the source of our peace and well-being. It is fellowship with a peace-making Saviour that is the central reality of the Christian experience. Note the word that follows in 5: "He shall be the peace when...". Between us and any harsh circumstances there stands our Shepherd King, assuring us of His presence and undertaking for us. "In the world... tribulation... in Me... peace" (John 16:33).

34) 5:6-9

Once again the near and the far seem blended in this apocalyptic vision of the future, and we may with equal force apply it to both the first and the second coming of Christ. It receives its first fulfilment in the gospel, and in the 'spiritual' Israel. In this first sense, the 'remnant' narrows down to Jesus Himself. He is the representative Jew; He is, in this sense, 'Israel', in and through Whom God reveals Himself to the world as Saviour and Redeemer. It is in Him, and in the Church He brought to birth, that all the prophetic insights here find their fulfilment. One has only to think of His own ministry and that of the early Church to realise how compelling and winsome was the witness borne to the message of grace. We read of the apostles that "great grace was upon them all, and that they had favour among the people". At the same time, however, the figure of the lion in 8 makes us realise that the still greater fulfilment of the second coming of Christ must also be in view, and if this be so, we must needs consider what place any 'remnant' of Israel will have in this. One can only refer to Paul's teaching in Romans 11:12,15, where he associates the restoration of Israel to God with "life from the dead" and with immeasurable enrichment to the Gentiles. While it is probably true to say that these are thoughts which may never be fully understood until the time of their fulfilment draws nigh, it is nevertheless plain that they cannot be 'spiritualised' without making nonsense of them, and it must therefore be conceded that Israel has still her part to play, whatever it may be, in the economy of God for the redemption of the world.

35) 5:10-15

The chapter ends with an avowal by the Lord that He will purge and cleanse His people from all that offends Him in their corporate life. The immediate reference is to the idolatries and false trusts which had adulterated the nation and brought her to the brink of disaster, and the captivity which fell upon her so soon after this was, in fact, such a purging, for after the Exile, idolatry and witchcraft were unknown among the people. In this respect, the passage amplifies the phrase in 3, "Therefore will He give them up", and underlines the oft-echoed truth that blessing comes only through and after travail and suffering. But we should not, and need not, confine the meaning of Micah's words to the immediate future of Israel. We must bear in mind that in the whole chapter there is mingling of the 'near' and the 'far'. God's final establishment of His Kingdom in the hearts of men will not be until the coming of Christ in glory. The Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:24, 25, 28, in which he speaks of Christ putting all enemies under His feet, putting down all rule and all authority and power, echo in the spiritual sense what Micah is saying here. The significant point throughout is the ascendancy and centrality of the Lord - "I will...I will...". Everything then will centre on Him, and He will be, as Paul says, "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). That is salvation.

36) 6:1-8

This chapter has often been regarded as one of the greatest and most magnificent utterances of the whole of the Old Testament, and certainly the high point in Micah's prophecy. Its culmination in 8, in the words "What doth the Lord require of thee...?" may truly be said to crystallise and sum up the essential testimony of the Old Testament prophets. Indeed, most of the characteristic emphases made by them in their ministries are found in the passage. That being said, however, one has to go on to say that it is perfectly possible for these famous words in 8 to be misunderstood, and indeed seriously misunderstood - so seriously, in fact, as to give a totally misleading impression of the deepest things in spiritual life. One commentator says that instead of it being called the high watermark of Old Testament religion, it would be more accurate to call it the high watermark of Old Testament moralism, representing an important summary statement of one variety of Israelite piety, standing over against the emphasis elsewhere on the sacrificial system, and having little or no time for it. The extent of this misunderstanding is such that it requires to be examined with particular care. We have often, in our studies, stressed the essence of the gospel of salvation, and the misunderstanding of it by the Jews of our Lord's day. We have quoted the Shorter Catechism in its statement about justification as being "an act of God's free grace wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone" - and we have set this over against the common attitude of a religion of good works - doing the best you can, living a good life, and trying your hardest for acceptance with God. And we might well imagine someone saying "Well, look at Micah 6:8, which says, does it not, that what the Lord requires of us is that we 'do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before our God'. No word there about justification by faith or the imputation of Christ's righteousness, or conversion, or whatever. What do you say to that?" What we say to that will be the subject of the Notes which follow.

37) 6:1-8

To answer the question at the end of the previous Note we need to look at the setting and context of the well known words in 8. The passage begins with the Lord's controversy with His people (2). The picture Micah presents is of a (heavenly) court scene, in which the mountains and hills are called as witnesses against the people - no mere poetic device this, but an expression of the truth that nature is involved and affected by the sin of man. We should not miss the force of the word 'controversy' in 2, for it indicates that the real seriousness of the situation is on God's side. It is sometimes averred that the alienation of man from God is one-sided, and that there is no need to think of any reconciliation to take place in God in the work of the gospel. But this is false to the whole insight of the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments. Micah is at one here with the Apostle Paul, to whom, as James Denney says, "the estrangement which the Christian reconciliation has to overcome is indubitably two-sided; there is something in God as well as something in man which has to be dealt with before there can be peace. Nay, the something on God's side is so incomparably more serious that in comparison with it the something on man's side simply passes out of view...!'Reconciliation' in the New Testament sense is not something which we accomplish when we lay aside our enmity to God; it is something which God accomplished when in the death of Christ He put away everything that on His side meant estrangement, so that He might come and preach peace."

38) 6:1-8

In view of possible misunderstanding of the famous words in 8, it is important to see the significance of the appeal that God makes to His people in 3-5. There are two points to note in particular. The first is made very forcibly by G.A. Smith when he stresses that religion is neither mechanical nor sensational (as it had become in its corruption in Israel) but rational and moral, a matter of reasonable presentation, in which God pled with His people, "listened to their statements and questions, and produced His own evidences and reasons". The full flowering of this conception of religion is of course seen in the teaching of Christ and His apostles, where 'right living' is seen as the believer's 'reasonable service' in view of the mercies of God. The second point underlines this, for it is on the basis of what God has done for His people in redeeming them out of Egypt, watchfully providing for them, and preserving them against all manner of hazards and dangers, that the great appeal in 8 is made to the people. The structure of the argument is as follows: This, says God, (4, 5) is what I have done for you, My people; therefore the only adequate response to My love is right living (8); outward observance (6, 7) is no effective substitute for this, and will not do. We may take 6 and 7 as the alarmed reaction of the people to Micah's words - "Let us make sacrifices..." But Micah thundered against the empty sacrifices when their hearts were far away from God and their lives were not right in His sight. This is the great contribution of the prophets that they recognised that God required truth in the inward parts, and that without it no religious observance would ever suffice.

39) 6:8

All that has been said thus far in our Notes should be sufficient to prevent any misunderstanding of Micah's tremendous words in 8. They are rightly seen only in the context and against the background of God's mighty acts on behalf of His people, and as the inevitable response to, and outcome of, them. Taken by themselves, as a statement of the nature of true religion, they are not only meaningless but disastrously misleading. To say, as some do, on reading these words, "That is my idea of religion, and I do not hold with all this other emphasis on conversion and spiritual rebirth" is completely to miss the point, for it was precisely to a people who had been redeemed and had entered into a covenant relationship with God as Saviour that the words were spoken. And we may not and must not evacuate the Scriptures of their basic, essential meaning and divorce the prophetic challenge here from the only foundation that can possibly give it meaning. It is not, in fact, religion that Micah is discussing here, still less is he attempting to give us a working definition of true religion; it is the fruit of true religion, in the sense in which our Lord once said "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). And to take Micah's words and set them over against the entire testimony of both Old and New Testaments that acceptance with God is not by any works that we have done or ever could do, however justly, mercifully or humbly we may have walked, but solely by the grace and mercy of God in Christ, is to misunderstand the whole point of the gospel and of Christ's coming into the world to be our Saviour. To interpret Micah as defining the nature of true religion in these words is to render Christ unnecessary and irrelevant. It is as well that men should see clearly what they are doing when they think to be accepted by God on the basis of their own efforts.

40) 6:1-8

Before we leave this passage (which we have looked at in general terms in the last few Notes, dealing with the theological significance of the famous words in 8) we should look at the details of the 'court-scene' presented to us. We have already pointed out that in 1 nature is held to be in some way involved in the sin of man but there may be an additional thought that the mountains and hills are called as silent witnesses of the sin and shame of Israel. In 3 the moving appeal of God to His people almost awes us to silence, in the thought that the Almighty should condescend to plead like this with His people. The question "What have I done unto thee?" might very well - in view of passages like Hosea 11 and Isaiah 5:1-5 - be changed to read "What have I not done unto thee?", for the divine patience and longsuffering towards a sinning people is beyond all understanding. And in this light the next question "Wherein have I wearied thee?" becomes even more challenging, and prompts the question for us, "Do we find God and the things of the eternal world wearisome or boring?" Is there not something very far wrong when men are wearied with God and His Word? Going off your food is a sign, not of an advanced spiritual state, but of sickness! Well might the Lord cry "O My people, remember..."(5). How much there was for this people to remember of His loving kindness and amazing grace down the years. And it is this that is made the basis of His requirement to do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with Him. He has a good right thus to require the consecration of those whom He has bought at such cost (see Romans 12:1, 2).

41) 6:9-16

These verses stand in contrast to what immediately precedes them. The substance of their meaning is: "Instead of doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with Me, I find this, saith the Lord". Instead of a true ethic, in terms of what is said in 8, which would be - to use Paul's words in Romans 12:1, 2 - their 'reasonable service' there is a catalogue of faithlessness, unjust dealing, merciless attitudes, and pride and arrogance in their wilfulness of life. Both the AV translation of 9 and that of the modern versions, is difficult and problematic. J.B. Phillips and the RSV omit any reference to 'the rod, and who hath appointed it' but the NIV includes this phrase, and the reference is surely to the then world power, Assyria, whom the Lord was to use in the chastisement of His people. There can be no mistaking the note of grim warning here and the 'Therefore' in 13 and in 16 underlines the reality of the judgment from the hand of a God Who has been affronted by the sad and tragic contempt of His mercy and grace towards this people. It may well be, however, that there is a further appeal from this longsuffering God in the words 'Heed (NIV) the rod and the One Who appointed it'. One thinks of the words in the old Redemption hymn 'Though your sins be as scarlet', in its moving second verse,

Hear the voice that entreats you!

Oh, return ye unto God!

Tender, solemn warning, indeed!

42) 6:9-16

It is impressive to see how the catalogue of sins mentioned in this passage deals with commerce, business and industry - scant measure, wicked balances, deceitful weights. One has only to think of the sharp practice and the cut-throat competition in modern life to realise how relevant Micah's words are for us today. Who are the real enemies of society at the present time? Capital or labour? The answer to this conundrum does not lie along the line of party affiliation but in the realm of moral issues. The fact is, both capital and labour do the greatest disservice to the well being of the nation when moral corruption sets in. The worker whose aim is to get the largest amount of wages for the smallest amount of work, who scamps and curtails output, cutting it fine, as if it were something to be proud of; and the employer whose sole concern is to get the maximum amount of work out of a man for the minimum wage; both alike are the real foes of equity and justice. And the country today has been brought into straits because of them. Well, this is subject to the inevitable law of cause and effect. Sow the wind and you will reap the whirlwind, says the Scripture. If a person is bent on slipping away from his moral foundations, they must face the consequences of their folly. Israel was obliged to, and so must we.

43) 6:9-16

The phrase at the end of the previous Note, "a people bent on slipping away from its moral foundations" merits some further consideration. One of the disquieting things about the contemporary situation in Britain today is that people do not realise just how far over a period of time the nation has come adrift from its moorings. The words 'slipping away' suggest gradual, even imperceptible, movement, after all, and it is often only after some striking happening that one realises the extent of the drift. Missionaries coming home on furlough after a period of years on the mission field see the change very graphically, and are often disturbed and shocked at what they see in our society after an absence of three or four years. It is not that those at home are not conscious of how things have changed, but their thoughts are generally much more on the economic and political turmoil than on any awareness that this might conceivably have any moral or spiritual basis. There is no mention in Micah of any of the leaders of the people publishing their memoirs for gain but it can hardly be doubted the tawdry and vulgar spirit that breathes in 10-12 provides a strangely relevant echo of our own times. Why, do we suppose, should the many promises and assurances and prospects of recovery so often falter and peter out ere it is well begun? Why, after so many years should problems of law and order be even greater and more intractable than before? Why should sensational cases of scandalous behaviour be not only on the increase but also attain the status of front page coverage in even responsible newspapers and on media headlines if not that 'the people love to have it so', and therefore create a demand for prurience? The real causes of our national decline are not far to seek if only we had eyes to see:

Hear the voice that entreats you!

Oh, return ye unto God!

44) 7:1-6

These verses continue the sorry and tragic catalogue of the sins of the people of God and their inevitable outcome. In 1, Jerusalem seems to be lamenting her desolation, in face of all the ruin her sin has brought upon her. G. Adam Smith suggests that perhaps Micah takes up the dirge in 2 and that the remaining verses are the prophet's comments and mourning on the situation. It may also be, however, that Jerusalem, seeing all these things happening in her midst, in a terrible 'moment of truth', bitter and devastating for her, has at last come to her senses only too late - too late for anything to be done for her recovery, and realising just how great and terrible was her loss, when it could be said that the good were perished out of the land (2) and every man lived for himself. It is a picture of complete moral and spiritual breakdown, the breakdown of all true personal and social values, with the ancient sanctities - the old landmarks - in public and family life alike disputed, violated and ignored. This, then, is the end-product, the inevitable consequence, of departure from God. It is just not possible - whatever the simple moralists or humanists may say - to create and sustain a society that is just and equitable, and maintain basic moral standards of truth, purity, kindness and love, while leaving God out of the reckoning. "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it". And it is always only a matter of time before the truth of this forces itself on men's minds, in the collapse of systems that attempt to do so.

45) 7:1-6

Mention was made in the previous Note of the collapse of all systems that leave God out of the reckoning. We have had ample evidence of this in what has been happening all over Europe in our own day, and we should take very good care that we pay heed to such evidence. If ever a lesson forced itself upon national life this is it, from the prophetic literature of 8th century BC. And it rings out down the centuries to the last decade of the 20th. When God is discounted, and left out of man's reckoning, disaster and nemesis are always the result. This is the criterion by which programmes and manifestos, governments, politicians and statements are to be assessed. George Adam Smith comments: "This is one of the most poignant criticisms of a commercial community which have appeared in literature. In equal relief we see the meanest instruments and the most prominent agents of covetousness - the scant measure, false weights, unscrupulous prince and venal judge. And although some sins are denounced which are impossible for our civilisation, yet falsehood, squalid fraud, pitilessness of the struggle for life are exposed as we see them about ourselves. Through the prophet's ancient and often obscure eloquence we feel those shocks and sharp edges which still break through our Christian civilisation. Let us remember that the community addressed by the prophet was, like our own, professedly religious". And he adds, very significantly, "In our day, nothing can lie like an advertisement. The saying 'The tricks of the trade' has become proverbial. Everyone knows that the strain of commercial life is largely due to the amount of falseness that exists. The haste to be rich, the pitiless competition.... a carelessness of the rights of others.... a capacity for subterfuge.... ours is the sin of the scant measure and the more so in proportion to the greater speed and rivalry of our commercial life...." Smith wrote these words more than sixty years ago - how much truer they are today than then!

46) 7:7-10

In face of such a picture of approaching judgment, penitence must necessarily be the next, and only, step, and now the prophet, along with those who have been gathered to the Lord by preaching, makes confession of the sins of the nation. Men at last turn in contrition and hope to Him who is the only hope of Israel. The following Note from the Bible readings of the Rev. William Still worthily interprets the spirit of Micah's words:

"God is too humble to be vindictive at our shameless 'use' of Him. Mother-love stands humiliation a plenty, and Father-love more. My God will hear me, even if I've neglected Him disgracefully. When I cry He will be at my side, and although the howling dogs of wickedness stand ready for the kill, they'd better take care. They gloat too soon. 'Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: When I fall I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me'. What infinite mercy! What matchless grace! How 'indecently' pitying the love of God! How shamelessly tender His guardian care! How indecorously eager His succouring strength! It is well the Almighty took eternal count of His plan of salvation. Had He not ordained that the Justifier be just in justifying the sinner, it would have gone ill for His Name! In His acts of redemption there is no time for thought of rule or law, but a heart all melted with pure compassion and a soul on fire with saving zeal. Our God is a consuming fire! But there is more than judgment there. There is love that will not be denied its end - to lift the fallen and gently set them on high, even on His own holy throne by His side. How awful and how good!"

47) 7:7-10

The whole of the rest of the chapter, from 7 onwards, expresses the 'hope against hope' that sprang up in the heart of the prophet and the faithful in the land, as they faced the horror of the 'indignation of the Lord' (9), which was the inevitable result of their sin. So that this is no naive or falsely optimistic hope that 'everything will turn out all right in the end', and that judgment will not really come. This is mercy and grace through and after judgment - on the other side of catastrophe. Thus, even in the darkness of the terrible time that was to come upon Israel, we have the words of 8, 'rejoice not against me, O mine enemy'. It is the voice - and the hope - of penitence and contrition that we have in 8 and 9. And indeed it may well be said that this is taking the Lord's side against our - and His - enemies. This is the evidence of a healthful fighting spirit that refuses to lie down, and it is very wonderful in the grim context of this chapter to find it. Here indeed is a word for those who fail: Get up and fight again! All too often we are tempted to say, when we fail and fail again, "Oh, it is no use...." But when we think how grievously and how repeatedly Israel had fallen and failed, we should surely take heart from these words. There is no desire in 9 to escape the consequences of our sins, but rather the attitude of leaving ourselves in the Lord's hands for Him to do what seems good to Him.

48) 7:11-13

The general picture of restoration given in these verses is similar to that in chapter 4, and should be compared with it. V11 should read, "One day thy walls shall be built, that day thy border shall be far flung". The reference is to the widespread influence of a renewed and reconstituted Israel (cf 4:2) in the future. That there was a spiritual fulfilment of this on the day of Pentecost, few would deny, but we have to turn to Paul's teaching in Romans 11:1, 15, for their ultimate meaning (see Note on 4:1-7). In 13, the word 'notwithstanding' suggests a contrast in thought, and if this is Micah's intention, then the reference is to something that was to take place before such a restoration could take place. This echoes the thought of 9, which speaks of the 'indignation of the Lord' which was to come before grace could do its perfect work, and which indeed is part of the work of grace. The 'fruit of their doings' would then mean the sins of Israel which brought divine wrath upon them. Modern translations, however, give the words a different connotation, and refer the words to the people coming to Israel for spiritual succour (12), and this fits in better with the general emphasis of the passage, especially in its similarity to 4:1-7. Both truths are of course clearly proclaimed throughout the section, and neither is dependent on a correct estimation of this particular verse. This is the genius of Scripture; we are not left in the dark about any truth or principle that is essential for us to know, but are given liberal confirmation of it in other parts of the divine revelation.

49) 7:14-20

It is very wonderful to see, in the dark, grim and menacing background of the 8th century situation, with its impending judgment and doom that the last word is one of sheer grace and mercy! It is a glorious testimony to the truth that judgment is 'God's strange work', and that His 'proper work' is mercy and grace. But even more wonderful is the picture this all gives of gospel truth, as it speaks to individual men and women. This is the final lesson of Micah's prophecy (7-20). Here is the sinner, brought to an end of himself, and seeing, alas, often too late, the 'moment of truth' in which the whole of his life passes before him, and he says "I have played the fool, I have erred exceedingly". This in itself is the work of grace, bringing him to such a place spiritually: it is the beginning of things for him, the first step on 'the way home' to the Father's house. For now, he is prepared to have dealings with God on God's terms, prepared also to bear anything the Lord lays upon him (9), for he now realises that God's terms are infinitely better and more hopeful than any other way. The proclamation of good news contained in 18-20 is passing wonderful, and a sevenfold blessing is unfolded. First of all, God is a God Who pardons iniquity. This is the incomparable message of grace and few words could express more movingly this truth than the words of the old gospel hymn:

My sin - O the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more:
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

50) 7:14-20

The second great statement is that God 'passeth by' transgression. This does not so much mean that He ignores our transgressions as if they did not matter, the word rather means 'to step or climb over' in the sense of overcoming an obstacle. The old hymn captures this thought very well in the words "O the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary". The third statement is that He is a God Who 'retained not His anger forever'. This is something that is echoed again and again in the Psalms (cf Psalms 30:5 and 103:9); while in Isaiah 54:8 the disproportion between 'momentary' wrath and 'everlasting kindness' is very wonderful indeed. As one commentator puts it, "the ratio of God's anger to His mercy is as three to a thousand (Exodus 20:5, 6)". Furthermore - this is the next statement - He is a God Who delights in mercy. This, we may say, is what He is happiest at, and what gives Him most pleasure. He takes no pleasure in the death of the sinner. What is next underlined (19) is that He is a God Who has compassion. The Psalmist puts it well: "Like as a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him" (Psalm 103:13). Cowper's moving words express this beautifully:

"Can a woman's tender care
Cease towards the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee."

51) 7:14-20

The last two statements of the sevenfold blessing are seen in 19. He is a God Who 'will subdue our iniquities'. This can be understood in two ways, first in the sense of trampling our sins under His feet. In this connection one readily thinks of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:25ff, "...till He hath put all enemies under his feet" (interestingly, Paul uses language similar to Micah in 1 Corinthians 15:28, 'all things shall be subdued unto him'). But the Apostle uses the word 'subdue' in another sense also, in Philippians 3:21, "he is able even to subdue all things unto Himself", where the word has the force of robbing sin of all its power. Finally, He is a God Who will 'cast all their sins into the depths of the sea'. There may well be an echo here of what is said about the destruction of Egyptians in the Red Sea, in the words "the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more forever" (Exodus 14:13). Whether this was in Micah's thoughts or not, it is without doubt the completeness of the deliverance, in the Lord's salvation that is in view throughout.

Full salvation! Full salvation!
Lo, the fountain opened wide
Streams through every land and nation
From the Saviour's wounded side.
Full salvation! Full salvation!
Streams an endless crimson tide.