

GOD'S LEGAL CASE

Micah 6: 1-8

Judges 2: 1-5 & 6: 7-10

Chapter 1: 1 & 2; Assyrian army invaded Israel and captured Samaria, Note 1: 1-7; they now threaten Judah and Jerusalem.

Chapter 6, the Lord's controversy with his people. Micah begins with formal legal language, a litigation speech preventing Israel from protection in the Temple because they broke covenant obligations. **Verse 1 & 2**, but this is no ordinary courtroom for God is the judge and Micah is prosecuting counsel. He summons the *mountains and hills* and the *everlasting foundations of the earth* to hear the case. When the members of court are formally assembled Micah as counsel announces: *the Lord has a case against his people, he is lodging a charge against Israel*. The Plaintiff's speech **verses 3 - 5**. The evidence is that God has not let them down but his people have chosen their own way. With pathos and tenderness aimed straight at Israel's heart, he twice calls them, *my people*. The speech, full of grace and truth, aims to reprove and woo Israel back to her covenant obligations, not to pronounce sentence upon her with withering words. --- Why have they behaved like that, look at the historical evidence?

Judges 2: 1-5: the Lord faces his people with their infidelity of breaking His covenant. He had been faithful in the fulfilment of His promise, brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. In every aspect of their history the Lord acted in accordance with His own righteous nature and no blame could be directed at Him. Israel was to be loyal to the Lord and obedient to Him: **Deuteronomy 30: 16**. The leaders, priests and people failed to obey, engaged in mixed marriages with the Canaanites, compromised purity of worship and deferred to local fertility gods for their crops and rain. Despite that the Lord is gracious and did not cast his people away because they broke the covenant. He raised up judges and later prophets to call them back from infidelity. In His judgment upon Samaria and Jerusalem He prepared the way for the New Covenant, sealed by the death and resurrection of Christ; **Judges 2: 1**, *I will never break my covenant with you... V2; Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?* Confronted with their sin, Israel wept. But future history shows their tears to be superficial and without repentance. Tears may come because we are found out but God is not deceived and seeks a torn heart not an emotional performance.

Judges 6:7-10; Isaiah 1: 2&3, (Jeremiah 2: 4-13). A summary accusation: Israel is without excuse for not reciprocating the Lord's love. **Micah 6: 3** has no answer. The Lord opens his case by asking two questions. First, *What have I done to you?* Then, *How have I burdened you?*

Let's look at this court room scene from the background of chapter one..

1: 1: *the word of YHWH the Lord* (the essence of true prophecy) ...*came/given...which he saw ... Samaria and Jerusalem*. The word as an event comes and happens, it is real, independent and self-contained with the power to actualise itself. 'The entire book is the

result of the event of the word of YHWH'.¹ The word is also said to have come to Hosea, Joel, Zephaniah, Malachi and others. *The word of the Lord came*, as a dynamic and powerful event. The word of the Lord comes also to us.

1: 2-9: God addresses His people through the prophet; **verse 2.** The advent of God is international in scope, and the whole earth is summoned to listen for God is coming as Lord and Judge of all nations, to witness against them. Therefore the local scene is not confined geographically for YHWH comes to the nations. Micah uses the language of the law courts for as a judge comes to his court so God comes to the nations to exercise judgment, He presents the evidence and declares the accusation. This is more serious than any warning for the witness of YHWH against the peoples and nations comes from His *holy palace/holy temple*. **Psalm 11: 4-7.** His coming is not as some local deity for He is *the Lord God*. Micah's audience might have nodded their approval at first until he addressed his own people and that is too close to home.

The prophet teaches us that behind the local and international crises of our times, the sovereign Lord is working. His audience would have been unsettled by his shift in focus from international to national. **Verse 5** reveals that sin and transgression, ie. breaking covenant (not contract) must culminate in judgment. The proclamation of the coming of YHWH in cataclysmic majesty is to deal with the sin of Samaria and Jerusalem and the nations.²

The historic setting shows that the chain of prophecy identifies Hosea of Samaria as the last prophet of the northern kingdom Israel which was conquered by Assyria and its people transported and intermarried. The first great prophet of the south with Jerusalem as the hub was Isaiah. Between these two men comes Micah who prophesied in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, which meant he prophesied before the fall of Israel and addressed both kingdoms. After Israel fell, Micah gave attention to his own country and saw the same evils of Covenant breaking that brought destruction to Samaria: therefore Jerusalem must fall.

Micah is gripped by an awareness of the living God who is the God of all the nations. A century after his death, Micah's ministry was still remembered in the period of another prophet: Jeremiah (26: 18-19). Like Amos, he could see beneath the polished veneer of society to the underlying and obvious evil. The powerful exploited the poor, the earthly courts were corrupt, rulers and religious leaders failed and feathered their own nests. Religious practices coupled with moral turpitude (vileness) produced more evil and hypocrisy. A righteous God could not overlook rampant unrighteousness from His own people. The Assyrians were feared not just as a powerful foreign enemy but as the instrument of God's judgment. But how could a true prophet declare the coming judgment of God's people and the holy city at the hands of another, later pagan power, Babylon? He perceived that the God of Covenant would exercise judgment on a covenant people who had neglected their covenant obligations.

¹ James Luther Mays, *Micah*, Westminster Press, 1976, 37.

² Mays, 38.

1: 6-8 are first person, God in action. Samaria was an impressive city built on a hill, some 300 feet high and revered for its beauty and military strength, but note its destruction. What Micah saw and his audience did not was that Samaria's fall would be God's doing and the Assyrian armies would be God's instrument. That would be Jerusalem's judgment years later by the Chaldeans (Babylonians).

We can detect the pattern more easily in other lives than in our own. Idols were the tangible symbols of Samaria's pagan world view; (Romans 1: 18-20). God derives no pleasure as the agent of judgment, His grief is rooted in His holy love; (Ezekiel 33: 10 & 11).

Now we turn to the court setting in chapter 6.

The court scene demonstrates from history that the Lord delivered His people from Egypt, redeemed them and provided leadership **verse 4 & 5**. He evokes their memory for Israel crossed the Red Sea in the face of Pharaoh despite his army and magicians, and later crossed the Jordan in the face of Balak with his prophet, Balaam. If Israel's God ruled the floods and conquered Israel's political and spiritual enemies at the beginning, why could he not now deliver Israel from Sennacherib's Assyrians? The evidence before the court substantiates the fact that whatever the reason for Israel's failure, God is not responsible. Too often we can fall into the temptation of playing mental gymnastics with our conscience.

Israel cannot dispute the crime of which she is guilty and in addressing the court asks what she can do to make things right? The speech is developed by the repeated use of *what*, **Verse 6**, with *what shall I come before the Lord and bow down ...?* They twice use his name, *Jehovah*, without any real understanding of its meaning. There is no realisation of the holiness of God, nor the requirement to be a holy people and demonstrate covenant love. God's holiness is an offence to them and his mercy a stumbling block. The defendant (Israel) does not understand what is happening. They assume that the answer to their crime is in ritual activity. After all, God is the problem and we must do something to change His attitude. The language of irony.

If the worshipper has offended, he knows that atonement must be made for his sin; but how serious are God's demands? He wants to find out. This represents an attitude common in the prophet's day, since the same enthusiasm for sacrifice is attested in Isaiah's criticisms (Isaiah 1:10-17). Their response was not unusual then and its irony is prevalent in our thinking. The purpose of Israel's reply is to counter the lengths to which Yahweh has gone for his people with the extent to which the people are prepared to go for him. Yes, God did that but surely we can do some spiritual act to please Him!

They are ready to shower him with gifts to ensure that he receives the honor due his great name. They are willing to sacrifice again and again to restore the relationship broken by their sin. How else can they demonstrate their religious devotion? They must register clear protest against the denunciation directed at them. The accusation that Israel was sick and tired of Yahweh was surely untrue and must be repudiated. How dare God level

against them any charge that they have failed to remember or appreciate all he has done for them? They do not deny that they have made some mistakes but after all we are only human and we've been quick to repair the fault. In fact both parties to the covenant are fairly well matched in their mutual displays of devotion, as they imply by their nervous, excited questions. You see, the people respond in emotional agitation and are offended by the divine attack, which in their opinion is quite unwarranted.

No sacrifice I make is too much for God, even my first-born son, suggesting that God, like man, can be bought. The nation had lost the significance of faith in God and ritual had become an end in itself, not an expression of covenant relationship with the Lord. The sacrificial system and worship in the temple had been debased into a type of spiritual insurance policy. We can sin and worship other gods as long as we appear at the temple or church or Bible conference. The nations defence in court is that hypocrisy can be atoned for by further hypocrisy, religious performance on a grand scale to impress God.

The court is concluded by the words of God's counsel. His requirements have nothing to do with sacrifice and offering. The Lord demands ethical purity illustrated in three inclusive sections; **verse 8**. This command, orientated towards God does not refer to self-effacement but covenant obedience. The prophet does not reject ritual; he reasserts that the moral law has priority over the ceremonial. So, what does the Lord require?

Hang on a minute; why ask what God demands when he has shown very clearly what is good and pleasing to Him. Israel knew that Jehovah was God of holiness, righteousness and justice, the God of grace and mercy who has promised a Redeemer. *He has showed you, O man, what is good.--- Act justly*, literally, establish the norm of justice and judgment, not some human effort, but the given Law of God which demands righteousness. All the law's requirements have been fulfilled and procured by Christ and made ours through faith in him; **Romans 3: 31**.

Love mercy, not religious do-gooders, but given by the Lord of mercy; **Micah 7: 18**. Love as the overflowing expression of the love of God in the Cross.

Walk humbly with your God, remembering we are dust and ashes and any good in us is His gift, never our manufacture. The Lord has showed us his goodness and requirements, so we love and obey. Jerusalem was spared from the Assyrian but more than a hundred years later fell under invasion by the Chaldean army.

How does Micah's story conclude? With a rising crescendo in chapter 7 which reaches a climax in the people's hymn of praise, celebrating the wonder that God can hurl their sins into the sea in order to fulfil his covenantal promises to the patriarchs, **verses 18 - 20**. Micah did not live to see these events, a significant word of hope and faith to us.

The last three verses have striking similarities with Moses' victory song at the Red Sea. Both songs celebrate in similar terms the truth that the Lord saves Israel and vanquishes her enemies, Exodus 15: 1-21. Both hymns ask the question, *Who is a God like you?*, and use the imagery of a God who throws his enemies (Egyptians and sins) into the depths of

the sea. But whereas Moses' song looked back upon the Lord's victory, Micah's song looks forward in faith to an even greater wonder; that God will forgive His people beyond Micah's day through the timeless Cross, and that includes us.

When George Whitfield met Howell Harris he asked, 'Mr. Harris do you know that all your sins are forgiven'? That's a conversation stopper. Do we know that truth personally or only about it?