

GOD, THE EARTH AND HUMANITY IN THE BOOK OF MICAH

Keith Innes

Richard Bauckham has shown that, in the biblical view, the creation is a community.¹ The modest aim of the present study is to explore the nature and limits of this community with reference to one Old Testament book of prophecy.

According to Micah 1:1, Micah of Moresheth² prophesied in Judah, the southern kingdom, during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in the late eighth century BC. Ralph L. Smith tells us that the economic background to this period is the change from a land-based to a merchant economy, and from barter to the use of money transactions. As a result of this process, the gap between rich and poor increased.³

In this paper I shall look in particular at three themes: the involvement of the Earth in salvation and judgment; the significance of reversion to nature; and the status of inanimate things in the Earth community.

1. The involvement of the Earth in salvation and judgment

The life of humanity is inseparably linked to the Earth. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Earth is affected by God's judgment on humanity, and by humanity's salvation. A study of a few passages of Micah shows that this is indeed the case. The very first chapter begins, after an introductory verse placing the book within Judah's history, with a summons to the Earth and all its inhabitants to attend to the Lord's testimony against it.⁴

In the following verses we are given a fearful picture of God's coming in judgment. This prophecy is expressed in terms of the most terrifying of natural events:

For lo, the LORD is coming out of his place,
and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth.
Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open,
like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place
(Micah 1: 3-4).

This is an example of the style of writing known as *apocalyptic*. It is not to be read as a literal forecast of events; but it does assume congruence between the spiritual and natural worlds. This congruence finds its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus' use of natural events in parables, and in the principle of sacraments.

Verse 5 declares that the coming judgment relates to the sins of the twin nations of Israel and Judah and their capital cities. Verse 6 then focuses on the northern kingdom of Israel:

Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country,
a place for planting vineyards.

I will pour down her stones into the valley,
and uncover her foundations.

God's judgment clearly affects the natural environment, and events in nature can be instruments of that judgment.



Vine and Grapes

In Micah 6: 9-16 the prophet, speaking in the name of God, berates the people for their commercial dishonesty. In the world of the text, deliberately inaccurate weights and measures are in common usage. In our world, international trading arrangements that favour the powerful and discriminate against the weak would fall under the prophet's condemnation.

Today, even within privileged, affluent nations, the gap between rich and poor is wide and growing – the rich get richer and the poor poorer. Injustice lurks within the structures that foster such tendencies, and incurs God's judgment. Corruption encourages violence and dishonesty, which in turn breed more corruption (cf. Micah 6:12).

God's judgment leads to hunger and reduced productivity (13-15). We should not be too quick to dismiss this statement as a primitive or even superstitious view of the natural world. Certainly, in describing the causes of hunger and declining resources, an ecological or socio-economic narrative would use different terminology, but a theological account is also valid. The different descriptions need to be brought into dialogue.

Behind the greedy, unjust and unsustainable use of creation is a refusal to submit to God's laws. The pursuit of profit without regard to the proper care of the land and its products leads to the degradation of the soil and the pollution of land, air and waters. The consequences of such abuse are often borne by people geographically remote from the places where it occurs.

In verse 16 King Omri (885/84-874/73 BC) and his son Ahab (874/73-853 BC) are viewed as legendary representatives of a pernicious tendency at the heart of Israel, the northern kingdom, which brought disastrous judgment on them. The story of the expropriation of Naboth's vineyard shows how religious apostasy can bear the fruit of social injustice (1 Kings 16:25-26, 31-33; 21:1-16). The example of these two kings of Israel can serve as a warning to the southern kingdom of Judah: because it follows the same path, it also will be judged.

Therefore I will make you a desolation,
and your inhabitants an object of hissing;
so you shall bear the scorn of my people (Micah 6:16).

Micah 4 shows that the earth will share with human beings in the experience of salvation as well as of judgment. If the people attend to God's ways they will experience true prosperity. God's saving power will bring them life. From Jerusalem the Lord's teaching will act as a magnet for all peoples. His justice will reign, bringing peace and prosperity:

He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more... (Micah 4:3).

Then follows a classic and evocative picture of salvation, sufficiency and security:



A fig tree growing in Israel

... but they shall all sit under their own
vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts
has spoken (Micah 4:4).

In contrast to our world of over-consumption by some and deprivation suffered by others, these words paint a picture of moderation, simplicity and peace. Probably no one in the western nations can achieve total self-sufficiency. But we can all aspire to live a relatively simple life; to moderate our demands on natural resources; and to meet as many as possible of our needs from the fruits of our own labours.

The full implementation of this vision will be part of the renewed heaven and earth promised by God, when the redemption of people and all creation will be complete. But we can live by this vision of peace and sufficiency, as far as possible, even now. Verse 5 opens the door to an awareness of this tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’: we seek to follow the way of discipleship, while recognising that not all live by the same faith.

For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.

According to verses 6-7 the primary beneficiaries of God’s kingdom are the lame, outcast and afflicted. Thus the dissemination of God’s Word is united with the social and ecological aspects of God’s mission.

2. The significance of reversion to nature

Several passages in the Book of Micah refer to situations where human structures give way to untrammelled nature. Immediately after the theophany – the revelation of God – in chapter one, sentence is pronounced upon the northern kingdom of Israel, and Samaria its capital:

Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country,
a place for planting vineyards.
I will pour down her stones into the valley,
and uncover her foundations. (Micah 1:6).

We should note that the destiny of the land here is not to become wilderness, devoid of agriculture, but to be used for viticulture. The judgment is only upon the *urban structures* of Samaria. A similar picture is drawn in a parallel prophecy relating to the southern kingdom of Judah, and its capital Jerusalem:

Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Micah 3:12).

This prophecy contains three elements: availability for agriculture; the destruction of human constructs; and reversion to natural growth. Again the focus is on the Lord’s judgment against the constructions of a corrupt human society.

Finally we may notice Micah 4:10:

Writhe and groan, O daughter Zion, like a woman in labour;
for now you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country;
you shall go to Babylon.

There you shall be rescued,

there the LORD will redeem you from the hands of your enemies.

Since the exile in Babylonia took place nearly two hundred years later than the stated date of the Book of Micah, many have concluded that these words are a later addition.^{5,6} But they may equally well date from the period when Hezekiah foolishly gave a welcome to envoys from the King of Babylon (2 Kings 20:12-19).^{7,8}

The phrase that I wish to highlight refers to ‘camping in the open country’. Those of us who feel a healthy attraction to an outdoor life, interacting with nature, and who are privileged to live in a stable, peaceful part of the world, need to retune our reception at this point. Think rather of the millions of our fellow-humans living in refugee camps, removed from all their familiar surroundings. What is alluded to is the agony of exile.

3. The status of inanimate things in the earth community

The Hebrew Bible contains a number of passages where lifeless objects are cited as witnesses – especially in the type of passage known as the ‘covenant lawsuit’.⁹ Micah contains one of the best examples of this type of speech:

Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,

and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,

and you enduring foundations of the earth;

for the LORD has a controversy with his people,

and he will contend with Israel.

(Micah 6:1-2)

In the verses that follow, the Lord asserts that the Israelites have no grounds for disregarding the covenant or special relationship between them and God. On the contrary, God showed his power and mercy by rescuing them from Egypt at the exodus, and in the events that led up to their possession of the land.

A representative of the people is then heard querying what offerings God wants: amazingly extravagant burnt offerings? even human sacrifice? And the answer is given:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:8)

How do the mountains and hills fulfil their role as witnesses? Bruce K. Waltke is correct in calling the usage found in this passage a ‘literary device’.¹⁰ But what beliefs and assumptions underlie its use? Some have suggested that Old Testament people saw the natural world as possessing a kind of ‘diffused consciousness’ that could be indwelt and used by the Lord.¹¹

Philip Sheldrake, in an exposition of a part of St Patrick’s Breastplate, suggests more cautiously: God’s indwelling Spirit is not merely in humankind or even in animate objects. The Spirit dwells in all things without exception. In that sense the elements such as earth and water are powerful spiritual forces because they have within them the creative energy that is God’s own.¹²

I would like to explore an alternative idea, starting from the fact that objects take on significance from their relationship with humans. Natural entities can have an identity beyond their physical composition. A stone war memorial or gravestone, for example, carries emotional and spiritual significance irrespective of its geological origin. Dwellings can have an association with their inhabitants that long outlasts their occupation.

The idea that natural objects ‘witness’ events that took place in their vicinity, can be seen in connection with this commonly experienced phenomenon. And if natural entities take on significance from their human associations, how much stronger is their link with God who creates them and holds them in being?

4. Conclusion

I have suggested that the connections between God, creation and humanity are not merely metaphorical, but have a spiritual reality. The Book of Micah is comparatively rich in natural imagery, and a glance at other examples confirms this impression.

In Micah 5:7 the ‘remnant’ of Israel, left after a purifying judgment, is compared to dew. The point of this comparison is that God’s people will be present as a result of God’s action, and not as a result of human action.

A startlingly different simile occurs in verse 8:

And among the nations the remnant of Jacob,
surrounded by many peoples,

shall be like a lion among the animals of the forest,
like a young lion among the flocks of sheep,
which, when it goes through, treads down
and tears in pieces, with no one to deliver.

And verse 9, still addressed to Israel,
concludes:

Your hand shall be lifted up over
your adversaries,
and all your enemies shall be cut off.



High Place at Tel Dan in Northern Israel

The New Testament of course rules out
any interpretation that sees these verses
as underwriting violence by the Church.

The best use of them is to apply them to the spiritual powers of wickedness in high places, over
which Christ has won the victory by his cross and resurrection (John 12:31-33; Colossians 2:15).

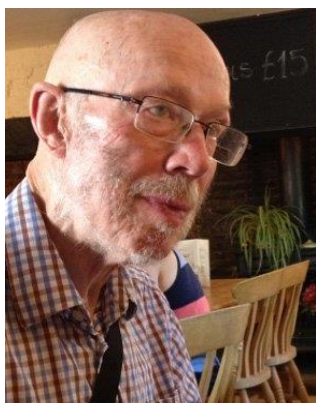
In Micah 7:1 searching for upright people, for those who fulfil God's call to justice and mutual
care, is like searching for fruit on a bare tree: '[The prophet] is like a hungry man in the midst of
stripped vineyards and bare trees, when the fruit has all been gathered and the vintage is over.'¹³

Instead of obeying God's call to justice, the powerful are said to prey on people like hunters or
fishermen pursuing their quarry (Micah 7:2). And rather than opening the gates of uprightness,
the holders of power act as a thorn hedge obstructing the road to justice (Micah 7:3-4).

The prayer in Micah 7:14-15 contains the image of shepherding (compare 5:4). While God is the
shepherd of God's people, God's enemies are reduced to grovelling like snakes and crawling
things (17).

All of these examples reinforce the congruence between the spiritual and natural worlds and
confirm that natural events are of spiritual significance.

5. Biography



Keith Innes

Keith Innes was in parish ministry from 1958 until his retirement in 1997. In the 1980s he wrote a Grove Booklet, *Caring for the Earth* (1987 and 1991). In retirement he obtained an M. Phil. degree at Bristol University on *Wilderness in the Old Testament*. A paper based on this work, *The Old Testament Wilderness in Ecological Perspective*, can be seen at www.ringmerchurch.org.uk/Keith. Other papers on ecotheology are at www.ringmerchurch.org.uk/keith2.

6. References

- ¹ R. Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010; *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012.
- ² Cf Moreseth-gath (Micah 1:14).
- ³ R. L. Smith, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 32. Micah – Malachi*. Waco: Word Books, 1984, 5.
- ⁴ Micah 1:2. Instead of ‘against you’ another possible translation is ‘among you’ (The Revised English Bible).
- ⁵ D.R. Hillers, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, 59.
- ⁶ James L. Mays, *Micah*. London: SCM Press, 1976, 24.
- ⁷ B. K. Waltke, ‘Micah’, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*. Nottingham and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988, 196.
- ⁸ B. K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah*. Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007, 248-249.
- ⁹ Compare Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; 32:1; Job 20:27; Psalm 50:4; Isaiah 1:2.
- ¹⁰ B. K. Waltke, ‘Micah’, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*. Nottingham and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988, 211.
- ¹¹ E.C. Rust, *Nature and Man in Biblical Thought*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1953, 53.
- ¹² P. Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*. Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995. 82.
- ¹³ J. L. Mays, *Micah*. London: SCM Press, 1976, 151.

Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version except where otherwise stated.

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