

# **The Holistic Message of Micah**

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**D Keith Innes**

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The Holistic Message of Micah

D. Keith Innes

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PREFACE

As a young clergyman in the 1960s I decided to choose a book of the Bible as a special focus for my studies. At that time I had a special interest in the Hebrew scriptures, so I looked in the Old Testament and selected Micah for its length and its distinctive features.

I returned to Micah from time to time throughout my life. I am now trying to bring my Micah studies to some kind of conclusion, however modest. The present rather simple offering is the outcome. Its shape reflects to some extent my own spiritual pilgrimage. I was reared and trained within the Evangelical tradition. Notwithstanding some broadening and a little wandering, that background has largely shaped my theology.

Throughout my life I have also been drawn to engagement with the natural world through bird-watching, gardening, and cycling or walking in the countryside. Since becoming a committed Christian in my teens, I have been puzzled by an apparent lack of connection between, on the one hand, ecological awareness and concern and, on the other, Christian spirituality and church life. For some decades I have been seeking to establish this connection in my own thinking and action.

My ecological concerns have been sharpened in recent decades by the alarming and now increasingly urgent signs of the destruction wrought by much human activity on 'the environment'. The latter term in itself suggests that we are somehow separate and distinct from the rest of creation which is, as it were, merely the scenery within which a purely human story is acted out. In fact we belong to the web of life as members of a global community – albeit with special powers, and therefore special responsibility, within that community.

Recent years have seen a burgeoning in some Christian circles of a more holistic world view. Many Christian groups are engaged in practical, theological, political and social activity on behalf of the world God has created. Nevertheless I have failed to find much awareness, at the grass roots of church life, of the desperate ecological crisis that faces us or of the fact that a response in study, prayer and action should be part of the Church's ongoing mission. I wish to include this concern, also, in my study and reflection on God's word.

My personal history has dictated the form of this small book, and the somewhat idiosyncratic order of the chapters. After an introduction to the Book of Micah, chapters two to four follow a traditional pattern, considering what the book has to say about sin, judgment and redemption. I understand this to be the classical structure of the Christian Gospel message. Consideration of the Creation, which logically might have been expected at the beginning, occupies the final chapter.

## **1. MICAH – THE MAN AND THE BOOK**

### *Micah, Man of Moresheth*

Micah lived in one of the settlements in the Shephelah, a lowland area in Judah between the coastal plain in the west and the mountains in the east. Moresheth (Micah 1:1) is probably the same as Moresheth-gath in Micah 1:14. Although Micah was a citizen of the southern kingdom of Judah, his book includes messages also to the northern land of Israel. The opening verse dates his prophetic work to the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah in the eighth century BC. The dating and authorship of Micah's prophetic messages has long been argued over by scholars, but for the present purpose the dating in the text will serve as an adequate working basis.

The Books of Kings and Chronicles give King Jotham a good press in general (see 2 Kings 15:34; 2 Chronicles 27:2). He became co-regent when his father Uzziah was found to be a 'leper' (2 Kings 15:5). During his reign Jotham engaged in extensive building works, as well as subduing the Ammonites (2 Chronicles 27:3-5). But all was not plain sailing. In Jotham's time Pekah, king of Israel, formed an alliance with the king of Aram against Judah (2 Kings 15:37-38), and attacks from this quarter continued into the reign of Jotham's son Ahaz.

Ahaz did not follow his father's good example but, like the rulers of the northern kingdom, worshipped idols (2 Kings 16:2-4). To defend himself against the attacks by Israel and Aram from the north, Ahaz sought help from the mighty Assyrian empire. But this help did not come cheaply: it was bought by pillaging the Temple treasures at Jerusalem. Religious apostasy progressed, with the introduction of a pagan altar even in the Temple at Jerusalem (2 Kings 16:10-20). The prophet Isaiah, Micah's contemporary, had offered Ahaz a better course of action, based on loyalty to the Lord. Sadly the king refused to respond to Isaiah's words with faith, and he brought upon himself a prediction of disaster at the hands of those same Assyrians to whom he had looked for help (Isaiah 7:1-17). Disaster had already befallen the northern kingdom, with the capture of its capital, Samaria, by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The inhabitants were removed and settled elsewhere in the Assyrian empire (2 Kings 17:5-6). A second conquest and mass deportation from Israel took place under Shalmaneser during the reign of Hezekiah king of Judah (2 Kings 18:9-12).

Hezekiah succeeded his father Ahaz as king of Judah and reversed many of his policies. (According to Jeremiah 26:17-19, Micah was instrumental in bringing about this reformation). Hezekiah instituted a far-reaching programme in which he removed the trappings of idolatry (2 Kings 18:1-6). The Chronicler gives a full account of Hezekiah's reforms, including the restoration of the Temple worship (2 Chronicles 29 – 31). Meanwhile Assyrian forces under Sennacherib invaded Judah and threatened Jerusalem in 701 BC (2 Kings 18:13-37). A number of passages in Micah seem likely to have originated at this time. After Hezekiah responded with prayer and consulted the prophet Isaiah, the threat was averted (2 Kings 19). Yet even Hezekiah was not without his frailties. He was condemned by the prophet Isaiah for welcoming envoys from the king of Babylon. Isaiah foresaw that this same Babylon would one day be the instrument of God's judgment upon the southern kingdom, after the Babylonians had succeeded the Assyrians as the dominant power (2 Kings 20:12-19).

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Despite the vast difference in date, culture and technology between Micah's time and our own, our two situations show some uncanny similarities. In both, we see the unbridled pursuit of wealth leading to a growing divergence between rich and poor. Greed and injustice have the power to degrade the good Earth that we share with all people and all creatures. Justice is threatened by the misuse of power, and spirituality can become detached from the discipline of godly living. Both Old and New Testaments bear witness that truth, freedom and discipleship are inseparable:

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

(John 8:31-32 NRSV)

### *The Shape of the Book*

The Book of Micah consists of a series of distinct units. Although scholars differ widely in their detailed analysis, most are agreed that the component sections have been skilfully arranged by the prophet, or by an editorial hand or hands, so as to form an integrated whole. The units are bound together by devices such as identical phrases, and similar or contrasting subject matter. Sometimes a longer passage is composed of shorter units like beads on a string: examples are found in chapter one and in the closing verses of chapter seven (7:8-20).

The book is Micah's file of sermons delivered on different occasions. But his sermon files have been skillfully fitted together like pieces of a rose window in a cathedral, pieced together by catchwords and logical particles.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have long noticed that the word 'Hear', or 'Listen' (the same word in Hebrew) stands at the beginning of sections at 1:2, 3:1 and 6:1. Each of these sections begins with doom and ends with hope. This seems a valuable analysis of the book's structure, and a way in to understanding its overall message.

### *Two Narratives*

In the Hebrew prophets, condemnation and mercy are found in various proportions. In Micah, one follows the other with startling abruptness. The editorial reasoning behind the arrangement of the sections is, quite often, not easy to discern. But we can see in the final work two underlying narratives: the narrative of sin, leading to condemnation and judgment; and the narrative of God's love and mercy, rescuing his creation from the destruction wrought by human sin. Both these narratives are present in the book of Micah, and in the Bible as a whole, as parts of the Bible's 'big story'.

The relation between these two contrasting narratives is not displayed clearly in the Old Testament – though it is hinted at, for instance, in the system of sacrifices, and clearly foreshadowed in the portrayal of the 'Suffering Servant' who 'bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:12). In the New Testament we see clearly that Jesus' death and resurrection brought about a propitiation between God and us, and an expiation for sin. A change of heart in

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<sup>1</sup> Waltke, 2007, 13-14.

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response to God's love brings about repentance from sin and trust in God. Because of the uniquely influential role of human beings within the earth community, this saving work of Christ is also the key to a renewal of heaven and earth. The promised Messiah, God's king, will bring about rescue and transformation. The world will be transformed by the redemption of relationships between people and God, between people and the Earth, between rulers and ruled. The Book of Micah takes its place among the witnesses to this redemption achieved by God in Christ.

### FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

Try to visualise Micah's life at Moresheth. In what respects did it differ from our own? Are there any similarities?

How would the character and lifestyle of the various kings have impacted on ordinary people?

## 2. THE MIRROR

*...to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature (Hamlet, Act III, Scene 2)*

*For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like (James 1:23-24 NRSV)*

### What God requires

Micah is given a clear vision of the way society should be ordered and the way individuals should live. With absolute clarity the prophet shows that what God wants is our devotion, not just our offerings; justice, not mere religious performance.

Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?<sup>1</sup>  
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 6:6b-8)

It was 'not that sacrifice was wrong, but in and of itself without a proper relationship to God and neighbour, sacrifice is useless'<sup>2</sup> Bruce K. Waltke expounds in some detail the 'justice' and 'kindness' that God requires:

...when in a socially superior position, step in and deliver the weaker and wronged party by punishing the oppressor... anyone who is in a weaker position due to some misfortune or other should be delivered not reluctantly, but out of a spirit of generosity, grace and loyalty.<sup>3</sup>

For 'walk humbly' others would translate 'walk circumspectly'.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the two ideas are not far apart, as a comment by James L. Mays seems to show:

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, 1984, 51.

<sup>3</sup> Waltke, 1988, 213-214.

<sup>4</sup> Waltke, 1988, 214, footnote 7, referring to an article by D.W. Thomas.

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It is a way of life that is humble, not so much by self-effacement, as by considered attention to another. The humility lies in not going one's own way presumptuously, but in attending the will and way of God.<sup>5</sup>

### What God sees

In Micah 7:1-7 the prophet reveals with God-given insight the truth about the people's condition. Searching for upright people, who fulfil God's call to justice and mutual care, is like searching for fruit on a bare tree (1). '[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.'<sup>6</sup>

### Religion

Religion can be at the root of good or of evil, of sin or redemption. Micah writes of both good and bad religion. In his society, the Lord's faithful prophet incurs opposition because his words from the Lord are not acceptable to the people. But the fault is in the reception of the message and not in its delivery.

'Do not preach' – thus they preach –  
'one should not preach of such things;  
disgrace will not overtake us.' (Micah 2:6)

The people desire a message that does not challenge the injustice and oppression that are rife in their society. Vulnerable people are being oppressed and exploited. Any preaching – even that which stems from a drunken state – would be welcomed as long as it did not disturb the equilibrium in which the people had settled down (Micah 2:11). In these circumstances the prophet's calling is to disturb – to challenge the people's peace of mind. They were not to find their 'rest' in their present frame of mind or their present pattern of conduct (Micah 2:10). The Lord had given rest to the Israelites in the promised land (Deuteronomy 12:10); but their enjoyment of this rest depended on their faithfulness (Psalm 95:11). As Ralph L. Smith points out, '...it meant more than physical rest. It referred to the accomplishment of the purpose of God'.<sup>7</sup> In the Letter to the Hebrews, this rest includes enjoyment of all the blessings that God loves to give his people in Christ. Faithful living is still the key that opens the way to God's rest (see Hebrews 4:1, 3, 11).

Micah reveals that too many of the prophets have adjusted their message to ensure popularity or other gains for themselves. The second line of Micah 3:5, '...who cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat', is more literally translated 'that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace' (KJV). Waltke comments: 'The prophet crassly illustrates their motives by concentrating on their biting teeth as they eat.' Incidentally the Hebrew word for 'bite' is almost always applied to snakes, so a deadly and vicious motive may be implied.<sup>8</sup>

Mays aptly heads his comment on Micah 3:5-8: 'Those who sell the word shall lose it'. And he remarks that '[t]he "nouveau riche" in Jerusalem had drawn prophet and priest into their own

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<sup>5</sup> Mays, 1976, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Mays, 1976, 151.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 1984, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Waltke, 2007, 159.

environment where money talked louder than God.<sup>9</sup> On verse 7, T.K Cheyne comments: 'The false prophets will be ashamed, because of the non-fulfilment of their oracles; and the true will have no fresh revelation till the old cycle of prophecies has been fulfilled'.<sup>10</sup>

All who have preached and taught in churches are familiar with the temptation to trim their message for personal gain. And the gain may take various forms: it may consist of emotional support and popularity as well as financial advantage. A legitimate need for support and affirmation may easily be satisfied in ways that involve illegitimate compromise. A shrinking from the reputation of being too Green for the congregation's tastes may be one route to such failing. Like Elijah (1 Kings 18:20-41), Micaiah (1 Kings 22:6-14) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 28:1-17), Micah shows how one faithful prophet can stand against an overwhelming crowd of false guides. '... [T]rue prophets mostly stand alone against a majority'.<sup>11</sup> In spite of his isolated situation the true prophet is gifted with inner strength and courage to proclaim God's truth.<sup>12</sup> Micah's stance is not gloating or self-satisfied; the truth that he sees causes him to lament and weep (1:8). But he knows that he is charged with a commission, and his power comes from the spirit of the LORD (Micah 3:8).

### Social Injustice

In Micah 6:16 King Omri (885/84-874/73 BC) and his son Ahab (874/73-853 BC), kings of Israel, are viewed as embodiments of corrupt rule. The story of the expropriation of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-16) shows how religious apostasy can bear the fruit of social injustice and incur the judgment of God. Ahab had demanded the vineyard that was adjacent to his palace, and Naboth refused to part with his ancestral inheritance. At the instigation of Ahab's wife Jezebel, Naboth was condemned to death on a false charge and Ahab took possession of the vineyard. God's sentence of judgment against this injustice was uttered by the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 21:17-29). The example of Omri and Ahab, kings of Israel, stands as a warning to the southern kingdom of Judah: if it follows the same path, it will similarly be judged.

Micah's words bear witness against all who make dishonest gain a way of life:

Alas for those who devise wickedness  
and evil deeds on their beds!  
When the morning dawns, they perform it,  
because it is in their power (Micah 2:1-2).

Such a state of affairs is bound to lead to a widening disparity between rich and poor. The prophet Isaiah exclaims:

Ah, you who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is room for no one but you,  
and you are left to live alone  
in the midst of the land! (Isaiah 5:8)

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<sup>9</sup> Mays, 1976, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Cheyne, 2015, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Waltke, 2007, 171.

<sup>12</sup> Mays, 1976, 85-86.

Archaeological excavations at Tirzah confirm the biblical picture:

...the houses of the tenth century B.C. are all of the same size and arrangement... The contrast is striking when we pass to the eighth century houses on the same site: the rich houses are bigger and better built and in a different quarter from that where the poor houses are huddled together.<sup>13</sup>

In our own day, also, we can observe a process by which the rich get richer because the poor get poorer, both in the affluent parts of the world and the less privileged. Such a process cannot be squared with the message of the prophets; nor can a 'global marketplace' where low-paid labourers work in appalling conditions in the interests of increasing profits for those in richer parts of the world.

Micah's particular focus is on unjust gain: 'scant measure... wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights' (6:10-11). Without our modern, precise regulation of weights and measures, a degree of latitude was expected; deliberate distortion was what incurred the prophets' denunciation. In our world, international trading arrangements that favour the powerful and discriminate against the weak would fall under the prophet's condemnation. Even within privileged, affluent nations, the gap between rich and poor grows as the rich get richer and the poor poorer. Injustice, lurking within economic and social structures, incurs God's judgment. Corruption encourages violence and dishonesty, which in turn breed more corruption (6:12). Waltke remarks: '[t]he biblical authors show no sympathy for the rich and always regard them with hostility'.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of obeying God's call to justice, the powerful prey on people like hunters or fishermen pursuing their quarry (7:2). Official favour can be bought with a bribe, so justice is perverted (7:3). Rather than opening the gates of uprightness, the holders of power act as a thorn hedge obstructing the road to justice. The day of oppression will pass; for the oppressors, power will give way to perplexity and consternation (7:4). But until that day, the disintegration of society will continue: the trust that binds communities together will break down; the corrosion of corruption will extend even to the most intimate family relationships (7:5-6).

In such a situation, the person of faith and integrity cannot rely on merely human resources to resist the flood of faithlessness and corruption. Micah's focus is on God. He waits in faith and expectancy for the Lord to act (7:7). Such a stance involves spiritual conflict, and sometimes political and social action. God's faithful people are not called merely to passive waiting. They are required to play their part. Their calling involves responsibility for other individuals, for society, for other creatures and for the Earth itself. This many-sided responsibility is to shape the lifestyle of those who live now in God's new creation.

### Power Misused

Kingship in ancient Israel was meant to be modelled on shepherding. David, the shepherd who became king, was regarded as the ideal ruler. Micah and the other prophets declared how far from that ideal the rulers had strayed. In Micah 3:1-4, God's sentence on corrupt government is expressed

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<sup>13</sup> De Vaux, 1961, 72-73 (I am indebted to Dr Ernest Lucas for this reference).

<sup>14</sup> Waltke, 2007, 411, referring to a work by R.N. Whybray..

in a series of startling statements. The corrupt conduct of the wielders of power is seen as tantamount to cannibalism! Those of us who are privileged to live under relatively democratic and accountable government may find such imagery incredible or extreme; yet some of the world's peoples would find it both reasonable and true to their experience. The heart of the prophet's accusation is that those who are charged with the administration of justice have become agents of cruelty and oppression.

In a biblical world view the source of 'justice' (Micah 3:1) is the revelation of God and the wisdom and integrity of those who administer God's laws. They are called to 'know' such justice, not only in theory but by personal commitment. In a global economy the rich nations have an obligation towards the relatively poor nations – many of which are former colonies. Those people who are likely to suffer most from the effects of climate change should receive generous aid from the so-called 'advanced' nations which bear the most responsibility for causing it. The obligation of justice also demands consideration for the long-term interests of the earth and of all living creatures. We should note that power is wielded not only by governments, but also by bankers, powerful business interests and all who have the well-being of others in their hands.

Pusey suggests a sobering picture of the process by which people may come to 'hate the good and love the evil' (verse 2):

Man, at first, loves and admires the good, even while he doth it not; he hates the evil, even while he does it, or as soon as he has done it. But man cannot bear to be at strife with his conscience, and so he ends it, by excusing himself and telling lies to himself... At first, men love only the pleasure connected with the evil; then they make whom they can, evil, because goodness is a reproach to them: in the end, they love evil for its own sake.<sup>15</sup>

In such a state, a person is shut off from God's favour and mercy (verse 4). Waltke's comment, unfashionable though it may be, is biblical and salutary: 'Once the time of grace has passed, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God (cf. Prov 1:26; Matt 25:11-13; Luke 16:26; 2 Cor 6:2; Heb 10:31; 12:17).'<sup>16</sup>

The essence of Israel's moral failure is summed up in Micah 3:9-11:

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob  
and chiefs of the house of Israel,  
who abhor justice  
and pervert all equity,  
who build Zion with blood  
and Jerusalem with wrong!  
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,  
its priests teach for a price,  
its prophets give oracles for money;  
yet they lean upon the Lord and say,  
'Surely the LORD is with us!

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<sup>15</sup> Pusey, 2012, 311.

<sup>16</sup> Waltke, 2007, 157.

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No harm shall come upon us.

In the New Testament Letter to the Romans Paul shows, with plentiful references to the Old Testament, that all human beings are affected by the taint of corruption in heart, mind or action. Therefore all are subject to the judgment of God. But Paul goes on to show that God has also provided a path whereby all can be redeemed if they turn from sin and accept the gracious offer of membership in the family of God where there is 'no condemnation' (Romans 8:1). Jesus embodied that same gracious offer from God. It was made possible by his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

### FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

What would be the outward effects in our world of conduct that conformed to God's requirements?

What are some failures to follow God's ways in matters of (a) religion, (b) social justice, (c) the misuse of power, today?

How could our society and nation be reformed according to God's pattern?

### 3. THE SCALES

*...you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting (Daniel 5:27)*

*There is no other god besides me,  
a righteous God and a Saviour (Isaiah 45:21).*

The title, 'A righteous God and a Saviour', is a part of God's self-description in Isaiah 45:21. It is also a fair summing-up of Micah's own revelation of God. To be righteous is to act according to the obligations involved in a relationship. God always acts according to God's own promises. Having graciously undertaken to act in mercy to God's people, and to all that God has made, God will be faithful. Of course God also deals with humanity according to his holiness. Therefore God burns with anger against all that works against God's loving purposes. God is the judge of the whole earth, but the judgment on God's people Israel has an extra dimension. They are the people with whom God has established his covenant. They are in a special relationship with God.

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.  
O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.  
(Micah 6:4-5)

The events involving Balak and Balaam are recounted in Numbers 22 – 24, and the journey from Shittim across the Jordan is recorded in Joshua, chapter 3. The Hebrew Bible sees the Exodus from Egypt, leading to the possession of the promised land, as the foundational outworking of the Covenant – the special relationship between God and the people. This outworking was seen as the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham comprising the gift of the promised land, abundant offspring, and the promise that all people would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-6; 17:1-8).

The final verse in the prophecy of Micah celebrates God's mercy, compassion and forgiveness, promised to Abraham and extended to all who remain faithful to God's covenant.

You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our ancestors  
from the days of old  
(Micah 7:20)

Through Christ the promise of one land is transformed to become the gift of living in the whole creation as God intended:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

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This merciful promise is extended to all who share Abraham's faith in God, and who thus become Abraham's spiritual children (Romans 4:13-25). God's covenant with Abraham will bring blessing to all his descendants, and ultimately to all the people of Earth.

But the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testaments, shows clearly that receiving God's promised gift of inclusion in his covenant people involves turning from sin and trusting in God's promise. We must come, as it were, listening and empty-handed to receive God's gift. Clinging to the actions, aims and ambitions that belong to a mindset of indifference to God or determined disregard of his purposes, will hinder us from receiving God's love. Such a determination will leave us under the judgment of a righteous God.

### Aspects of Judgment

In the Book of Micah, God's judgment takes various forms.

#### *Invasion and Defeat by Enemies*

The God of the Bible is the Lord of history and not just of our own hearts and minds. Micah is in no doubt that God is present in the tragic events taking place in Israel and Judah.

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)

A fate like that of Samaria threatens Judah also:

For her wound is incurable.  
It has come to Judah;  
it has reached to the gate of my people,  
to Jerusalem.

(Micah 1:9)

Sennacherib, king of Assyria, is literally at the city gate. In his own account he claimed to have subdued 46 cities and deported their populations. The prophet laments the fate that has overtaken the villages of Judah. Micah 1:10-16 relates to this invasion by the Assyrian king. This passage contains puns on the various place names, either coined for the occasion or drawn from popular sayings. Lamentation is called for (verse 16). Observers of current affairs today cannot feign ignorance of the pain, suffering and loss incurred by victims of invasion and defeat.

#### *Loss of the Objects of Trust*

Where people claim to be called by God and committed to God, the reality of their commitment can be tested by whether their basic trust is in God. When they rely instead on other resources of their own choosing, they should expect frustration and loss. According to Micah 5:10-15, this is the prospect facing Micah's audience. God will cut off their military power (horses and chariots, verse 10); their civic institutions and technical skills (cities and strongholds, verse 11); alternative spiritualities (sorceries... soothsayers, verse 12); and the human constructs worshipped instead of

Israel's true God (images, pillars and sacred poles, verses 13-14). Judgment will fall on these substitutes for God, in Israel and the other nations alike (verse 15).

Futility

In the prophet's worldview, spiritual rebellion leads to moral corruption. And as a consequence:

You shall eat, but not be satisfied,  
and there shall be a gnawing hunger within you;  
you shall put away, but not save,  
and what you save, I will hand over to the sword.  
You shall sow, but not reap;  
you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil;  
you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.  
For you have kept the statutes of Omri,  
and all the works of the house of Ahab,  
and you have followed their counsels.  
Therefore I will make you a desolation,  
and your inhabitants an object of hissing;  
so you shall bear the scorn of my people.  
(Micah 6:14-16)

According to the prophet, corruption incurs the judgment of futility. Hunger increases and productivity declines (13-15). Is this a primitive, even a superstitious view of the natural world? I believe not. An ecological or an economic narrative would use different terminology from a theological one. But the different perspectives do not contradict each other; they are complementary, and should be allowed to interact with each other. We then see that, behind the greedy, unjust and unsustainable use of creation, is a refusal to submit to God's laws.

Michael S. Northcott shows how, in ancient Israel, materialism and greed led to a failure to respect the land as God's gift. Refusal to observe the attitude of restraint enshrined, for instance, in the various Sabbath laws, led to the exhaustion of the land. Northcott shows how the prophet Jeremiah 'links ecological disaster and exile with unfaithfulness to the laws and worship of Yahweh.' (Jeremiah 5:22-28).<sup>17</sup>

Judgment is not only upon Israel and Judah, but also upon all the nations. Micah 4:11 portrays the 'woman' Zion as an object of profanity and lust on the part of the surrounding nations - specifically, perhaps, the 'international horde of mercenaries that comprised Sennacherib's standing army',<sup>18</sup> that threatened Jerusalem in 701 BC. The aggressors are motivated by their own desires. They do not realise that in God's greater plan they have been gathered for judgment like sheaves on a threshing-floor (verse 12). The threshing – separating the grain from the chaff – was done by the treading of oxen, and Zion is compared to a threshing ox with bronze hoofs (Micah 4:13). The outcome will be the destruction of Zion's enemies and the honouring of their saving God.

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<sup>17</sup> Northcott, 2007, 13 and, more generally, the whole section 8-13.

<sup>18</sup> Waltke, 2007, 258.

## The Holistic Message of Micah

We may struggle with this apparently merciless imagery. An additional problem, when we live in an age of individualism and human rights, is the indiscriminate nature of judgment in the Bible. At a conference where I had given a talk referring to an Old Testament text, I was accosted by a minister who stated that he never used the Old Testament in his work because, he said, it contained ethnic cleansing. We cannot deny that natural disasters and political oppression affect whole populations including the most vulnerable. But to attribute such indiscriminate suffering to God seems a bitter pill to swallow. This is undoubtedly a difficulty in travelling a path of confidence in a loving and omnipotent God.

Yet the alternative idea that God will not judge, and wrong will triumph, is even more appalling. Or does everything in the end rest on human action to secure peace and justice? The overall record of human efforts to seek benevolent and just governance in this world does not encourage optimism. I find a far stronger foundation for confidence in the belief that the world is in the hands of a living God. Where justice and compassion prevail, they are signs that people co-operate with God's kingdom and his redemptive purposes. The final judgment belongs to God and is not the result of human plotting or vindictiveness. God is both a holy God and a loving Saviour, one God of infinite love and holiness. The righteous God is also the one who saves his people. In that confidence I hope to face the unseen future.

Again I return to the Bible's 'big story'. Just as the promised land is given to God's people Israel in the Old Testament, so a share in the renewed creation is God's gift to his people, the spiritual children of Israel, both Jews and Gentiles, when Christ returns in glory. But we are warned, in the Old Testament and the New, that those who hear the promise of the new creation can 'harden their hearts' so that they eventually become incapable of receiving it (Hebrews 3:7-10). So self-examination is always in order.

### FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

Can you discover modern examples of spiritual rebellion leading to moral corruption?

Does God's judgment on wrong conduct operate in the world today? Is righteousness rewarded in this life? Or are judgment and reward only for the future?

How does judgment apply to people who have already been redeemed in Christ?

#### 4. THE LIGHT

*...a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:32)*

Throughout the Book of Micah, passages of judgment and condemnation are repeatedly followed by messages of mercy and deliverance. This striking editorial pattern contains its own message: sin and failure do not have the last word. Although humans are radically flawed and show a chronic tendency to turn aside from God's purposes, God's own love never fails and will ultimately heal the whole creation.

##### *Peace and Safety*

In chapter 2, verses 12-13, after a searing condemnation of social and spiritual corruption, the mood changes to bring a promise of deliverance and salvation. Verse 12 pictures people being gathered in a place of safety. Most likely this place of safety is Jerusalem. Then according to verse 13 those who have been gathered go out in triumph, set free by their King who rules in the power of the Lord. Waltke draws attention to the echo here of the exodus from Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

As E.B. Pusey pointed out long ago, the promise of deliverance finds only a limited fulfilment in Old Testament history; its meaning is more clearly seen in the teaching and saving work of Christ, and will be fully revealed when Christ returns in glory at the end (Romans 11:25-26).<sup>20</sup> Since Pusey's day, more notice has been taken of the promise that redemption will be extended not only to people but to the whole earth community (Romans 8:18-25). God's loving purpose for all creation is abundant life and freedom from all that enslaves it. An essential part of the Church's mission is to co-operate with God's redeeming work by cherishing all that God has made, and to exercise in loving care the power that we have been given in the created world..

The pattern in which judgment is followed by redemption is even more apparent in Micah 3:12 and the opening words of Micah 4:

...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.

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills.  
Peoples shall stream to it,  
and many nations shall come and say:  
Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob:

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<sup>19</sup> Waltke, 2007, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Pusey, 2012, 309.

that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.'  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
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 3:12; 4:1-3)

Micah 4: 1-3 is paralleled in Isaiah 2:2-4, but with numerous minor differences. Waltke (2007, 192) judges that '[t]hese versions represent differing final texts both in style and in substance and for the most part should not be harmonized/used to reconstruct an original text from which both derived.'<sup>21</sup> The links between these verses and Micah 3:12 suggest that they may originate with Micah, rather than Isaiah.<sup>22</sup>

In this passage disarmament is linked with 'agrarian well-being';<sup>23</sup> the two are inseparable. Recent and current events in our own world show plentiful examples of the destruction by war of a healthy land and a healthy people. The connection is emphasised by the addition of Micah 4:4 which does not appear in Isaiah:

...they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,  
and no one shall make them afraid... (compare 1 Kings 4:25; Zechariah 3:10)

In contrast to our world of over-consumption by some at the expense of 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 labour, while also recognizing the needs of others.

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 are called to 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.

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<sup>21</sup> Waltke, 2007, 192.

<sup>22</sup> Waltke, 2007, 213-220

<sup>23</sup> Waltke, 1988, 185.

*The Promised Messiah*

Chapter 5, verse 1 portrays the misery of siege and the humiliation of the nation's ruler. The following verses (2-5a) offer a vision of safety, prosperity and dignity secured by one who rules in the power of God. This ruler comes from Bethlehem, famously associated with the humble origins of King David. In the name Bethlehem of Ephrathah, Ephrathah may have been a name of Bethlehem, or else refer to the district where Bethlehem was situated.<sup>24</sup>

God's King will rule with royal power and dignity, in the tradition of David the shepherd-king. His gifts will be unity and peace. 'She who is in labour' (3) may be connected in some way with the mother of the young child Immanuel in Isaiah 7:14 (compare also Isaiah 9:6), or the phrase may refer to Zion, the City of God that brings forth a renewed people.<sup>25</sup> In either case, the outcome is unity and reunification. The coming, universal shepherd-king will ensure a prosperous and secure future. He will not reign alone, but will incorporate in his reign a limited but adequate number of under-shepherds (5).<sup>26</sup> Thereafter the people will be protected and defended from aggressors. Assyria is here the representative hostile power; the 'land of Nimrod' refers to a region that includes both Babylon and Assyria.<sup>27</sup> The overall message of these verses is that, in a situation of failure and humiliation, God's king will bring salvation. Christians are certainly right in seeing a reference to Christ, whose reign brings true peace and salvation. Verse 2 is loosely quoted in Matthew 2:6.

The primary beneficiaries of God's kingdom are the lame, outcast and afflicted:

On that day, says the LORD,  
I will assemble the lame  
and gather those who have been driven away,  
and those whom I have afflicted.  
The lame I will make a remnant,  
and those who were cast off, a strong nation,  
and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion  
now and for evermore.  
(Micah 4:6-7)

Delbert R. Hillers points out that an injured sheep becomes separated from the flock and needs to be 'gathered'.<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew word for 'lame' is rare, and is used in connection with the incident recounted in Genesis 32:22-32. There Jacob, a flawed but chosen individual, struggles with an angel but ends up with a new identity and a disability. The misfortunes experienced by Israel, Jacob's descendants, have resulted in disappointed hopes and lost possibilities. But as a result of God's rescue, the people who have experienced such suffering will become the 'remnant' who will inherit the promises. Being ruled by God they will find true prosperity.

God's life-giving rule is pictured as a restoration of the splendours of King David's reign:

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<sup>24</sup> BDB, 68b; Waltke, 1988, 199.

<sup>25</sup> Waltke, 1988, 201.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 1984, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Horton, 1904; Mays, 1976, 120.

<sup>28</sup> Hillers, 1984, 54.

And you, O tower of the flock,  
hill of daughter Zion,  
to you it shall come,  
the former dominion shall come,  
the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem.  
(Micah 4:8)

The 'tower of the flock' means literally a shepherd's watch tower, but here represents the city of Jerusalem. And the 'hill' (*cōphel*) of 'daughter Zion' is originally the ridge where the city of David was built; in the later books of Chronicles and Nehemiah it is a particular area of Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> Both titles are therefore ways of referring to Jerusalem. God's purposes of redemption will not fail, even though we cannot see or know how they will be fulfilled. In general, '[w]ith regard to political redemption that future began to be fulfilled with the restoration from Babylon (cf. 4:9-10), but with regard to Israel's spiritual redemption it was fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ'.<sup>30</sup>

#### *A People Renewed After Suffering*

The image of childbirth (4:9-10) on the one hand conveys anguish (verse 9): Judah is in agony because she is seemingly without leadership. But on the other hand labour-pains can lead to a joyful outcome (verse 10). Micah, like Isaiah (Isaiah 39:6), foresees the exile in Babylon. The people of Jerusalem, pictured as 'daughter Zion', are to leave the city that is not only their home but also the place where God's presence is found. They will camp in the open country before being exiled to Babylon. The unforeseen outcome of this disaster is that Babylon will eventually be the place of redemption, when the Persians gain power and give the Jews leave to return.

A pair of striking images portrays the character of God's people ('Jacob', Micah 5:7-8) in relation to the surrounding nations. The image of dew (verse 7) has several applications in the Hebrew Bible. It signifies unnoticed arrival that takes people by surprise (2 Samuel 17:12) – either in a hostile sense, or with benevolent purpose. In Deuteronomy 32:2 it refers to teaching given by God. The point in the Micah passage is that the presence of God's people is the result of God's action, and is not of merely human origin.

The second simile (verse 8) is startlingly different:

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 concludes,

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

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<sup>29</sup> Mays, 1976, 103

<sup>30</sup> Waltke, 2007, 225.

In the light of the New Testament we cannot see these and similar Old Testament passages as underwriting violence by the Church. Our warfare consists of spiritual conflict against powers of wickedness. Christ has done battle with these powers, not by physical violence but by the victory of his cross and resurrection (John 12:31-33; Colossians 2:15).

In chapter 7, once again a portrayal of corruption is followed by a celebration of the triumph of God's purposes of love. Verses 8-20 have been called 'a liturgical hymn... a composite yet coherent liturgy which involves a constant change of speakers'.<sup>31</sup> The first voice that we hear (8-10) is that of Jerusalem. She is viewed as a woman who acknowledges her faults but has confidence that God's final rescue will lead to her vindication. The enemy will be utterly destroyed (10).

In the next paragraph (11-13) the boundaries of God's people are greatly extended, while the earth in general bears the desolation of judgment. The ideal extent of the 'holy land' is referred to in the original promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:18; compare Exodus 23:31; Deuteronomy 11:24). The empire of King Solomon is also said to approximate to it (1 Kings 4:21-25)<sup>32</sup>. The fulfilment of this ideal, elusive in the Old Testament, receives further clarification in the New. The meek will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). We are privileged in being able to see each passage of Scripture in relation to the whole sweep of the Bible's 'big story'. In this wider context we see that all social, national, territorial and ethnic distinctions are done away in Christ. The Old Testament prophecies receive their ultimate fulfilment in the one people of God in whom no distinction of race, culture or gender exists (see Galatians 3:28; Romans 11:25-27).

Verses 14-17 open with the image of shepherding:

Shepherd your people with your staff,  
the flock that belongs to you,  
which lives alone in a forest  
in the midst of a garden land;  
let them feed in Bashan and Gilead  
as in the days of old.  
As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt,  
show us marvellous things.

(Micah 7:14-15)

The passage contains many echoes of the rescue of God's people from Egypt and their journey through the wilderness to the promised land. God, their Shepherd, will lead them to a promised 'garden land' where they will find ultimate security and wellbeing. Meanwhile the nations that refuse to acknowledge the Lord's authority will be ashamed and humiliated (16-17). Micah 7:18-20, the closing verses, celebrate God's mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?  
He does not retain his anger for ever,  
because he delights in showing clemency.

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<sup>31</sup> Waltke, 1988, 221.

<sup>32</sup> Waltke, 1988, 223

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He will again have compassion upon us;  
he will tread our iniquities under foot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea.  
You will show faithfulness to Jacob  
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,  
as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.  
Micah 7:18-20.

The original covenant with Abraham had promised God's blessing to all Abraham's descendants, and ultimately to all the people of Earth (cf Genesis 12:1-3; 15; 17:1-8). In the New Testament, Paul demonstrates that this mercy is extended to all who put their faith in Christ, and so become heirs to Abraham:

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29. cf Romans 4:13-25).

Nor is redemption only for human beings: all creation will be redeemed (Romans 8:18-25). God's loving purpose for all creation is abundant life, and freedom from all that enslaves it. God's church – all who embrace God's saving purposes for themselves and all creation – should therefore follow God by seeking freedom and abundant life for all. In the church's mission, creation care is as important as evangelism and social action.

By and large the Bible does not give us a detailed forecast of future events. In my judgment, to come to the Bible asking for such a forecast distracts us from Christ who is at the centre of true biblical interpretation. The Bible gives us a vision of God's purposes, and we should wait upon him to reveal to us what the vision means as events unfold. What is clear is that God's love is unyielding towards all that God has made, and also that the judgment towards the misuse of God's gifts is unyielding. On the Cross of Christ, God in his love met us in our multifaceted need and failure, and set us free. By God's presence and work in us and in the world, God can enable us to respond to his love, broken and ruined though we are, with penitence and a responsive love.

### FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

How are harmonious human relations, justice, and ecological well-being linked in our world today?

How can we seek true peace as Micah describes it?

What are the characteristics of the reign of Christ (a) now, (b) in the future?

## **5. THE COMMUNITY OF CREATION**

*O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things*<sup>33</sup>

The Bible sees humanity as part of the whole creation. It does not support a faith abstracted from physical existence or removed from the life of the body. Sin and redemption, judgment and deliverance are played out in this physical world as we know it. A peculiarly modern heresy looks upon the Bible as only a collection of texts relating to individual, spiritual experience of God, and offering the hope of personal salvation in the life to come. All of these are true and important aspects of Christianity and of the Gospel, but both Christianity and the Gospel are far richer than these. To see the Bible as only a handbook of personal faith and salvation leads to a strangely two-dimensional form of devotion. The missing dimension is the reality that faith, hope and love are to be lived out in this world of flesh and blood, growth and interdependence, and interrelationship between us and the other members of the earth community – both human and nonhuman. This reality is assumed in Micah as in the other books of the Old and New Testaments. At the risk of some repetition, this chapter is aimed at recalling how these principles work out in the interpretation of Micah.

### *Humanity and the Community of Creation*

References to the non-human creation are quite frequent throughout the Book of Micah. The book is the work of a person (or persons) at home in the family of creation. Here I review some relevant passages that have already been referred to. In Micah 5:7-8 the 'remnant' of Israel, left after the purifying judgment, is compared to dew and also to a lion. According to Micah 7:1, the search for upright people, those who fulfil God's call to justice and mutual care, is like looking for fruit on a bare tree. Instead of obeying God's call to justice, the powerful are said to prey on people like huntsmen 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).

In 4:13 Zion is pictured as an invincible ox, equipped with iron horn and bronze hoofs, treading out grain on the threshing floor. Elsewhere Israel is viewed as a flock shepherded by the Lord (e.g. Micah 2:12-13; 5:4; 7:14). But while God is the shepherd of God's people, God's enemies are reduced to grovelling like snakes and crawling things (7:17).

### *Nature and the Judgment of God*

After an introductory verse (1:1) the Book of Micah begins with a summons to the Earth and all its inhabitants to attend to the Lord's testimony (1:2). This summons is followed by a terrifying picture of the Lord's coming in judgment:

For lo, the LORD is coming out of his place,  
and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth.

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<sup>33</sup> From a prayer attributed to St Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379). Its true origin is disputed. See <http://www.animalsmattertoGod.com/tag/enlarge-within-us-a-sense-of-fellowship> (accessed 15.07.2016).

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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).

In apocalyptic messages such as this, the most striking and awe-inspiring of natural events are used to envisage divine revelation and judgment. Verse 5 then declares that the coming judgment relates to the sins of the twin nations of Israel and Judah and their capital cities. Verse 6 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.

### *Nature as Witness*

The earth itself can be cited as a witness in the Lord's case against Israel:

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)

This is one of a number of passages in the Hebrew Bible where inanimate objects, or heaven and earth in general, are cited as witnesses (see also Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; 32:1; Job 20:27; Psalm 50:4; Isaiah 1:2). After Joshua had made a covenant with the Israelites at Shechem to serve only the God of Israel, he erected a large stone.

Joshua said to all the people, 'See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God (Joshua 24:27).

Stones could also be witnesses in covenants between individual human beings. A pillar and heap of stones were regarded as a witness between Jacob and his uncle and father-in-law Laban (Genesis 31:44-48).

Few would disagree that the physical environment is involved in the consequences of human conduct. On an ecological and historical level, this connection is plain. Economic policies can affect the health of the land and of its inhabitants both human and non-human. The linkages joining the

spiritual, economic, ecological and moral dimensions of life may be far stronger than they are generally seen to be.

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.<sup>34</sup> Philip Sheldrake, in an exposition of the ancient hymn known as 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.<sup>35</sup>

Another approach starts 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 common experience. 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?

#### *Judgment Affects the Natural World*

In Micah 1:6, as already noted, the city of Samaria is to become 'a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards'. The judgment here is against the *urban structures* of Samaria, not against the natural world itself. The same observation applies to the similar prophecy relating to the southern kingdom of Judah, and Jerusalem its capital city:

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).

Here again, judgment is pronounced against corrupt human institutions and not against the natural world as such.

#### *Peace, Wellbeing and Justice*

God's salvation applies to people, and also to their land and all its occupants. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means more than an absence of conflict; it also has a positive connotation of health, wellbeing and prosperity. A full experience of this blessed state is founded on the recognition that God is God: the world and all its inhabitants belong to God, and God reveals the way of life that is open to this blessing. The outcome of such openness is described in Micah 4:1-8. When people are willing to 'walk in his paths', when justice and mercy reign, then human beings will be able to live

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<sup>34</sup> Rust, 1953, 51-55.

<sup>35</sup> Sheldrake, 1995, 82.

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lives of simplicity, sufficiency and security. Thus the physical, spiritual, economic and ecological dimensions of life are brought together in a way of life based on the worship of God as the Lord of heaven and earth.

Enough has been said to remind us that the Bible's view of life is 'earthed'. Human flaws are played out, not only before God and our fellow humans, but also in our relationships with the earth and all living entities. All these relationships are undergoing perhaps unprecedented crises – unprecedented because of the seemingly limitless ability of humans to manipulate their environment, and even life itself. Climate change, influenced by human activity, is a threat to the lives and welfare of all on earth. The disproportionate riches of the few threaten the livelihood and health of the majority.

If this assessment is correct, why do ecological issues form such a small part of the teaching and action of many churches throughout the western world? Many faithful words and actions result in high-value social action, but connections are often missed between social issues and the health and welfare of the Planet. My reflections on the Bible, and specifically the Book of Micah – a book that has specially accompanied my long pilgrimage through a life of thought, prayer and attempts to minister in the church – have confirmed me in the view that, in working out the pattern of our discipleship, the community of creation is as important as the human family and even the Church itself.

### FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

Do you agree that much contemporary church life neglects ecological concern in prayer and action?

Do you think that, in reading and preaching from the Bible, we often pass over applications to our relations with the natural world? If so, what do you think are the reasons?

How should we include non-human creatures, and inanimate objects, in our outlook, prayers and actions?

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