

Eighth Century Prophets to Judah

In this lecture we will deal with Micah and Isaiah, eighth century prophets to Judah, again in the biblical theology context, as we see the progress of revelation with the high point being at David's time. What do the prophets do now? And what do Micah and Isaiah in particular do, who prophesized to Judah which was under the reign of the Davidic house? We know that Micah played an important role in the prophecy of the mediator to come. For, in Micah 5:2, he says, "From you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times." This verse is quoted in Matthew 2:4-6. In Romans 9:7 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality." It is just as Isaiah said previously—"Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah." Micah presents the message, according to these quotes, of the Christ to come. Isaiah, being quoted by Paul, spoke of a remnant. God would keep covenant. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, though He would bring judgment, He would still remember His covenant and there would always be a remnant. Let us now pray:

Lord, our God, we pray that You will open our hearts and minds to further understanding of Your Word. We have two precious prophecies before us this day and God, they played a key role in the revelation of Yourself as a King, as a Lord of the nations, God of Israel. As the God of the mediator who was keeping covenant, whether executing it by curse or by blessing. God, help us this day; keep our minds on our work. Forgive us what is wrong. Give us peace in our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen.

We turn, first of all, to Micah. Now Micah has been in the center of a lot of discussion, not only amongst evangelical scholars, but also by neo-orthodox, critically inclined scholars. The interesting thing is that these various scholars are suddenly discovering that Micah seems to know quite a bit about the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses, and with David. This is contrary to what Welhousen had said previously: "I see absolutely no reference whatsoever to covenant in the earlier prophets, pre-exilic prophets." Here there are real elements of the covenant woven through the whole prophecy in a way that makes it a part of the content of the prophecy, not in the Hittite order or the Assyrian order, but in a homiletic order, if I may call it that. I had a professor of homiletics who told us to exegete a text and then reorganize and beautify the content, making it presentable so that it's meaningful for the people. That's what Micah did. The way that many of the critics want to deal with Micah continues to disturb me because many of them hold that there were three prophets by the name of Micah or there were three sources. I want to make you aware of this literary problem because you will continue to run across such efforts to deny the supernatural character of the Scriptures and of the prophets.

A similar issue to be aware of is exemplified in Robert Oden's essay, *The Place of Covenant in the Religion of Israel* (found in *The Ancient Israelite Religion*). In his essay, Oden references nearly every critical scholar, but ignores evangelical conservative scholars who take the Bible seriously for what it is. This is the prejudice of many of the people that work within the broader Christian community.

The covenantal framework of prophecy found in Micah and Isaiah, with its emphasis on controversy or lawsuit, has been discussed since about 50 years ago, and many were wondering where a couple of prophets got the idea of a covenant lawsuit from. Oden or Nicholson suggested that they had grabbed it out of thin air. But recently Dr. Livingston, a professor at Ashbury Seminary, Wayne Cogus who is professor of Bible at Dart College, and others, have begun to develop the idea that Micah is a classic example of representing the covenant concept as he addresses Judah under the reign of the Davidic

house. Walter Borgeman also, a former professor at Eden Seminary, has been lauded for having discovered certain covenantal concepts in Hosea. What I find ironic is that Vos and others had been referring to this for 60 or 70 years previous to these discoveries by Livingston and the rest.

There is no doubt that Micah speaks of a controversy or a lawsuit, indicated by the Hebrew word *riv* in Micah 6:1. Some evangelical scholars do not like the idea of God speaking through His prophets concerning a controversy and bringing them to court. They argue that it is beneath the dignity and the sovereignty of God. The idea of God bringing people to court—when the Bible says you ought not to take people to court but rather straighten things out amongst yourself—seems to put God in a lower context. This concept comes through again and again, but it is difficult to interpret the word *riv* as anything other than a controversy or lawsuit. God has a controversy; God has a lawsuit. The argument against this being possible can be answered by the understanding that this language is being used to make clear to the people that God really can pronounce judgment on His people. He uses an everyday illustration to show that God can bring a real case against His people because they have not kept their side of the covenant. They have not obeyed the stipulations. They have not carried out what they said they would when they said through their forefathers, “All that the Lord has said, we will do.”

Micah himself says in chapter 6 that they can come with sacrifices, but what the Lord requires of them is to walk humbly with their God, which is a summing up of the whole covenantal demand. The Lord wants them to keep their spiritual relationship and their relationship with their fellow men and live covenantally in the midst of the world, carrying out God’s will. All this is summed up beautifully in chapter 6. Thus we see that it does not detract from God’s sovereignty when the prophets use as an illustration a case from everyday life to show that God will pronounce judgment. In Zechariah three there is another court scene, of God bringing Joshua into the court and finding him guilty.

Eleven elements of the covenant can be found in Micah as God initiates His lawsuit. One of these elements is the call for witness, which Moses had also. There are also the stipulations which we discussed above, in Micah 6:8. It is made evident here that God requires not primarily sacrifices, but that you walk humbly with your God and live properly in the midst of the world with your fellow men. A third element of the covenant which we find in Micah is the curse. There is a tremendous amount of evidence that Micah was very much aware of what God had said through Moses, and Micah was telling these people, “What Moses warned you about concerning the curses of the covenant is surely going to happen, for stipulations have been broken. If you study this for yourself and trace these themes throughout Scripture, I am convinced you will find that Micah was speaking against the entire background of the covenant as laid out in the accounts of creation, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Is there continuity? We read in Micah 2:12-13:

I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob;
 I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel.
 I will bring them together like sheep in a pen,
 like a flock in its pasture;
 the place will throng with people.
 One who breaks open the way will go up before them;
 they will break through the gate and go out.
 Their king will pass through before them,
 the Lord at their head.

The word covenant is not used in this passage, but there is the idea of a remnant and the king, the Lord leading His people. All these are images taken from the past, from the time of the patriarchs, of Moses

and David. What's the goal? The great kingdom of peace and all nations will be involved in this, not just Israel's kingdom, but the kingdom that will include all nations. And the blessings will be many, as we see in chapter four, verses 6-13 and 6:15. Micah is also aware of who will be the agent in carrying out God's will, the Davidic mediator from Bethlehem Ephrathah, who will come forth, one from eternity, and He will shepherd. He is the Davidic one, but that judgment will bring great misery (7:1-6). But there is an eschatological certainty which comes very close to this continuity here. God will fulfill His purposes as the king, as the covenant Lord, as the God of His people and He will do that because He is such an incomparable God. The character of Yahweh is like none other.

The last couple verses of Micah would normally be at the beginning of a covenant making ceremony. In these verses the Lord presents Himself as the suzerain. He describes Himself, what He has done and how He has brought the people together, how He has spared them and how He has been gracious and merciful. But Micah puts that historical resume, that reference to God, as the great climax at the end, a reminder to consider your sins. He seems to be reminding Israel, "You have a formal religion, you come with your year-old calves as burnt offerings, with thousands of rams and 10,000 rivers of oil, the firstborn of your flock; you do all that. But I do not have your heart. I do not have your service. I do not have your love. You are not walking with Me. You are giving me a formality." Against this background, Micah asks, "What kind of a God is this God who brings judgment, who will bring untold misery upon a disobedient people? Who is a God like unto You, who pardons sin and forgives the transgressions of the remnant of His inheritance? Who is this great God, the God who does not stay angry forever? His nature is to be forever loving. His wrath will endure only for a moment, but His love endures forever. He delights to show mercy; that is the very character of our God. He wants to show mercy, but He not only wants to, He delights in it. He is smiling and laughing when He can show mercy even to a disobedient people whom He will bring to repentance. "You will again have compassion on us. You know our suffering and You will suffer with us, and You will bring us through." What a God. And He will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

This passage became so meaningful to me when I was in Australia, teaching my kids to fish off of a pier, and the ocean liners were coming in to the piers there in the city of Jalong in which we were living and where the Reformed Theological College is. One afternoon, we heard that there was a real run of fish out by one of the piers. I told my boys to come on, and I was going to teach them to cast. But I'm not a fisherman and so the line got twisted and the expensive objects at the end of the line broke loose and it cut itself into 40 feet of water. I have never seen those sinkers, hooks and lures again. That's what God does with my sins too. He casts them into the deeps of the sea, never again to be seen, never again to be dealt with. What a God, what a God. Wonderful.

This is a beautiful climax to the Micah prophecy, as he considered the covenantal God who will surely bring in the mediator of the covenant, the descendant of the Davidic house. And He will establish His kingdom forever.

Micah lived about the same time as Isaiah. Micah, ministering in the countryside, summed up his messages in seven chapters. Isaiah needed 66. Sometimes people are wordy; sometimes they overwrite and sometimes they underwrite. I don't mean that Micah underwrote, or that Isaiah overwrote by any means, but Isaiah lived a long time and the first five chapters in a way are the summary and introduction to the whole book. The first five chapters contain the message that Isaiah expands and elaborates throughout the entire book. I took a class on Isaiah with Dr. E.J. Young at Westminster Seminary and he often only went through the first six chapters (Isaiah 6 deals with the call and the character of Yahweh). But in a way, he dealt with the whole book as he carefully, verse by verse, exegeted and showed us how

to exegete in the context of the wider book. Much of his material and comments are in the first volume of his three volume commentary on Isaiah.

I firmly believe that the book of Isaiah is unified. Dumbrell says it reflects three periods. He first of all considers the period of the Syrian-Israelite alliance (see Isaiah 7:1 when Rezin was king of Syria and Pekah was king of Israel), before Assyria really came on the scene. I take that as an introductory segment to the whole period of Assyrian dominance during which Judah witnesses the fall of Samaria, the capital of Israel in 722 B.C. (see Isaiah 28). But as Isaiah prophesied, Assyria (Nineveh) falls to Babylon around 612 B.C. Nevertheless, the last part of the book of Isaiah (chapters 44-47) speaks specifically of Cyrus, King of Persia, judgment against Babylon, and a future hope for the return of God's people from exile (Isaiah 40-66). The prophecy in the first 39 chapters are concerning the time when the Babylonians would come. It is not at all definite that the first 39 chapters are strictly Isaiahianic from the time of Ahaz and Hezekiah, and that the others were written by a second, third and fourth Isaiah way down the line at the time of the exile or even after the exile. I believe we have prophecy here, as well as a clear record of what God said at specific times, such as when Isaiah spoke to Ahaz. That was a historical event which gives the context and the setting of everything that you find in chapters 7-12. The prophecies of these chapters were spoken in the context of Ahaz's refusal to trust in the Lord and his insistence to call on Assyria to attack Israel from behind, as they were coming down from the north. Within that historic context is some of the all-inclusive prophecy. Chapter 11 speaks of the great eternal kingdom. Chapter 9 speaks of the Davidic house ruling. Chapter 7 speaks of the Messiah to be born. So in a few chapters, 7-12, the whole Messianic eschatological kingdom program is laid out. Isaiah 12 is a beautiful song of salvation.

Isaiah was quite a psalmist too, quite a poet as you can see in his prophecy concerning the great days to come: "And then when you consider what God will do, in that day you will say, 'I will praise You, O Yahweh, although You were angry with Me, Your anger has turned away, You have comforted me. Surely, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation.' With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation and that day you will say, "Give thanks to the Lord! Call on His name. Make known among the nations what He has done. Proclaim that His name is exalted. Sing to the Lord for He has done glorious things. Let this be known to all the world, not just to Judah. Not just to Judah in Israel. Not just to Assyria, but to all the nations, to all the world, make it known that this God who had appointed the Davidic house and who addressed Ahaz, asking him to be faithful, is a God who will accomplish His purposes without fail.'" Isaiah was a great prophet.

There are three aspects I want to highlight: the kingdom, the covenant, and the mediator. These three concepts beautifully converge with David as the high point in the revelation. Isaiah understands this and expands it. He is kingdom oriented. Who is more qualified to be so than Isaiah? He is from a royal family. He is also part of the heavenly royal family, for Isaiah 6 tells us that God speaks to him directly, cleans his mouth, and enables him to speak when he sees God and His holiness. Some people think that Isaiah saw God in a palace. Others say the vision came in the temple. I think it was in the temple. It could have been in the palace, but it seems to me that God revealed Himself in all of His glory and in His holiness in His house and the prophets could enter into the courts of the temple.

Isaiah says much concerning the Davidic kingdom. I have already referred to 7:9, but in 55:3 you will notice the invitation:

Come, give ear and come to me;
hear me, that your soul may live. (Listen to the call to salvation!)

I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.
See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander of the peoples.
Surely you will summon nations you know not,
and nations that do not know you will hasten to you,
because of the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.

That last word, splendor, can also be interpreted as election. “Your great splendor is that you are the elect servant of God.” Notice again the reference to the Davidic kingdom in this passage. God will be merciful and gracious to His people, will guide and direct them and He will keep them because of His faithful love that He had revealed to David.

This idea of the Davidic royal house is a key factor in bringing the people, not only Judah and Israel, but the nations, the whole world. It will happen through the royal house; the royalty is strongly emphasized. God is the King. God is the great, royal, sovereign one. But Isaiah does not only speak of the Davidic kingdom; he also ties in the eternal kingdom again and again. Especially in chapters 11 and 35.

Chapter 35 is so meaningful to me. I grew up in central California, which is sort of desert, with the hot California sun beating down, but because of the development of irrigation, the area is all beautiful vineyards, cotton fields and big orchards. It is a beautifully fertile land, and yet it only rains about three or four months of the year. Likewise, the Lord promises that, “The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus that will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.” God can make the desert bloom. When will that happen? When He comes in all His glory and rejuvenates this earth. Modern Israel has also been irrigated, and now the fields are called fields of the morning, right out there in the northern part of the Sinai Desert. Beautiful almond orchards, other kind of fruit orchards, alfalfa, and beans, now grow in Sinai because water came there. Now God is going to provide water for the whole earth. The deserts are going to bloom. That is the picture of the creational renewal that is involved in the eternal kingdom of peace when the Lord comes, as described in chapter 35.

The last couple chapters also speak of that eternal kingdom, chapters 62-66. Isaiah was kingdom oriented. Isaiah exalts and extols the God of the kingdom. Here I want to draw attention to what Vos has written about the nature and attributes of Jehovah, Yahweh. On page 238 Vos discusses the omnipotence and sovereignty of “the Lord of Hosts,” as the NIV translates it. Eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, holy, aloof, majestic – separation lies at the very heart of these concepts. They describe a God who keeps Himself pure and separate from anything that is finite and anything that is sinful. Nevertheless, this holy, righteous God communicates with us. I think Vos has a very good description of God. He refers to Isaiah and Hosea to draw out his description and to give us a good idea as to how the prophets reveal to us God the King, who covenanted with His people, working through the mediator.

There are covenant aspects that Isaiah refers to repeatedly. A legal relationship is referred to in chapter one, saying, much like Micah, “Hear O heavens! Listen, O earth!,” which is the call for the witnesses. Here is the complaint, the lawsuit: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt.” In this passage the legal relationship is set forth. God is speaking as judge. God is the God of the covenant. Vos also correctly

refers to this legal relationship in terms of a marriage. In Isaiah 50, the Lord says, “Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce with which I sent her away, or to which of my creditors did I sell you?” There he uses two legal terms, including the marriage term. Israel, the children, are acting as though God divorced their mother, as if God had let the people go, as though He was the one who divorced. There is no evidence that this had happened. Nor is there any evidence that God sold His people because of their debt. He uses these two illustrations from everyday life to refer to the legal dimension of the covenant. Chapter 54:6 says, “‘The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit – a wife who married young, only to be rejected,’ says your God. ‘For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.’” In this passage he sums up the whole first section of the book of Hosea. He is aware that there is a legal relationship, but he does not spend much time with the law. He speaks of God as a righteous God. He speaks of God as a righteous God.

Isaiah also communicates the role of the Davidic house, for from them shall come the agent of the covenant. In Isaiah 42-49, the word *avdi*, “my servant,” refers to the individual agent as well as to Israel as a collective body. In a real sense, God looked upon all the descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel, as His servants, as in Exodus 19: “You are My kingdom of priests.” “O Jacob,” Isaiah says, referring to all of Israel, “Jacob, you whom he called for, you who were called to be the light to the nations.” Then he switches to the individual servant, who was to come forth from the context and crucible of the collective servant, the communal servant. Israel was a covenant agent. The nation of Israel is set forth as being God’s covenant mediator, a national mediator amongst the nations. We see this to be the case in Exodus 19, where God made His people to be a kingdom of priests, but then there is also the individual servant that comes.

Isaiah also speaks of the sign of the covenant. There is a definite sign. When speaking of the sign, we often think of Genesis 9, where the rainbow was given as the sign of the covenant. But what becomes the sign of the covenant for Isaiah? The Sabbath. Thus 56:4-6 link back to creation, where the sign of the covenant was the Sabbath. God says through Isaiah, “There is one way I can tell whether or not you are My covenant people, whether or not you have time for Me. The time that I have set aside, one day of seven, is for fellowship, for exercising love, for coming into My presence. But you have broken the Sabbath, which is supposed to be a time of joy in the Lord; you have not kept it.” Thus the sign of the creation covenant becomes the sign of the creation redemptive covenant in Isaiah’s prophecy.

The continuity of the covenant is also evidenced in 54:6-8: “The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit – a wife who married young, only to be rejected.” I referred to this passage to talk about the bride of the covenant, but the continuity of the covenant is also found here. And also in 57:3-13: “But you – come here, you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes! Whom are you mocking?” He goes on to say that He will surely continue His covenant with His people, and we see in chapter 64 that He will do that in spite of man’s condition. Chapter 64 says, “All of us have become like one who is unclean and all righteous acts are like filthy rags. We shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind, our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you.” And in verse 8, “Yet, O Lord, You are our Father. We are clay. You are the potter. We are all the work of Your hand.” That continuity is so sure, and this continuity of the covenant is proclaimed and preached by Isaiah all the way through. And there will be a blessed consummation, a great time of peace. Isaiah 61:8 speaks of this, as does 11:35, and other places where he speaks of the great kingdom of peace that will be initiated.

Finally, who is the mediator of the covenant? Isaiah is a prophetic mediator, but he is only a spokesman and in that respect, he is also a type. But as we have mentioned before, the Davidic house is singled out, especially the royal house, the kings who were on the throne. God, through Isaiah, laid that

responsibility on Ahaz, and his knees trembled and the people were afraid (in the first part of chapter 7). Then God, through Isaiah, comes to Ahaz and says, “Do not be afraid. Now be the leader that you should be. Be the mediator of the covenant. Be My representative king. Be strong.” Ahaz argues, “But those two nations up north came in once before, and we had a pretty rough time, and I think Assyria can protect us from those nations better than God can.” I’m paraphrasing, but that was the essence of His response to Isaiah. Ahaz, the descendant of David, refused to be the mediator, the royal mediator, the shepherd, who ought to lead Israel into safety, security, peace, contentment, prosperity, and blessing – the branch of Jesse. Who will be the mediator of the covenant? The branch of Jesse, from chapter 11, of which Micah has spoken also. The branch refers to the Davidic house as a whole, but also and ultimately to the One branch, the One seed, as with the term for servant. I have referred already to the individual and collective servant in chapters 40-52, but it is particularly here in chapter 52:13 that the mediator of the covenant is set forth as the royal one.

Many people believe that chapter 53 contains the whole of the prophecy of the suffering Christ. It is better to begin by reading chapter 52:7, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” Who is the reigning one? “See my servant will act wisely, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (verse 13). The Davidic descendant will be exalted high, raised up. But He who is exalted will at the same time cause people to be appalled because His form will be terribly malformed and disfigured before He is exalted high. Through His blood He will sprinkle many nations, not just Judah and Israel, but many nations. But He will be rejected, He who grew up before Him, will be rejected. He will be despised, and this links back to chapter two—the royal one is the rejected one. The royal one is at the same time the priest who brings the great atoning sacrifice. It is the royal one who brings in peace, for by His stripes we are healed. Healing and *shalom*, peace, come through the royal one’s sufferings. Isaiah brings the mediator as the royal suffering one together so beautifully here in this passage. He is the redeemer and He is referred to as such in chapter 61, where the spirit of the Lord comes upon Him. He is also referred to as the redeemer in chapter 54:5: “For your maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is His name – the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.” God, Yahweh, is the redeemer and He redeems His people through His royal suffering servant.

We have spent just a short time studying the message of Isaiah; it would be possible to spend a lifetime on it. Some people have called Isaiah “the Gospel book of the Old Testament,” and that’s part of what it is. But to really understand Isaiah it is necessary to read everything that comes before him, because Isaiah was steeped in the Old Testament. He knew God the king; he knew God the covenant maker; he knew God the Savior; he knew God the redeemer; and he preached it.