

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MICAH

(Tremper Longman III)

The superscription to the book of Micah situates its oracles during the reigns of three Judean kings: Jotham (750- 735 BC [including a co-regency with Uzziah]), Ahaz (735- 715 BC), and Hezekiah (715-686 BC).

In the period just prior to these years Israel and Judah had risen to heights of economic affluence but had fallen to depths of spiritual decadence. Under the able leadership of Jeroboam II of Israel (786- 746) and Uzziah of Judah (783- 742), the territories of both kingdoms became almost as extensive as they were during the reign of Solomon. It was a time of great economic prosperity, fostered for a time by the absence of international crises and by the mutual cooperation of both kingdoms. Excavations at the site of the ancient city of Samaria have yielded ivory inlays that attest to the accuracy of Amos's description of the luxurious life enjoyed by the prosperous citizens of this city (Am 6:4).

While Israel and Judah appeared to be strong externally, an internal decay was sapping their strength and threatening to destroy the social fabric of these two kingdoms. A burgeoning wealthy class was becoming richer at the expense of the poorer classes. The prophets saw this situation as a violation of the covenantal requirements and thus a hindrance to God's blessing and a guarantee of the dissolution of the nation.

But the internal sickness of Israel involved more than social wrongs. Canaanite religion also had extended its influence among some of the people. While Micah attacked the idolatry that accompanied the acceptance of Canaanite worship, it was not this aspect of Israel's condition that he emphasized most. It was rather the social injustices of the ruling classes to which Micah gave the greatest attention. (The extent of the intrusion of Canaanite influence at this time may be seen in the Samaria Ostraca, which contain many Hebrew names compounded with the name "Baal," a Canaanite fertility god.)

The halcyon days of peace were destined to come to an end, and they did during the time period that Micah functioned as a prophet. In the first place, Assyria arose from a state of quiescence to occupy a threatening posture on the national scene. Under Tiglath-pileser III (745- 727), Assyria experienced a remarkable resurgence of power. At the same time Israel was being torn by internal strife and dissension. Finally, under the leadership of Shalmaneser V, Assyria occupied Israel the northern kingdom; and several years later the city of Samaria fell to Sargon II (722 BC).

Under Ahaz's leadership, Judah refused to enter an anti-Assyrian alliance with Israel (under King Pekah) and Syria (under King Rezin). As a result, Syria and Israel went to war against Judah in order to depose Ahaz and put a more amenable king on the throne. This war, commonly called the Syro-Ephraimite War lasted from 734-732 BC. While the prophet Isaiah made it clear that it was God's will for Ahaz to resist these kings' overture (see Isa 7), Ahaz should not have appealed to Tiglath-pileser to intervene. His pro-Assyrian policies made Judah little more than a satellite of Assyria. Not until Hezekiah came to the throne (715 BC) were sweeping religious-and most probably social-reforms instituted. Assyria continued to threaten Judah under Hezekiah's reign, but an attempt by Sennacherib to take Jerusalem was frustrated (2Ki 19:32-36; 2Ch 32:21; Isa 37:33-37). Not until about a century after the death of Hezekiah did Jerusalem finally fall to the Babylonians.

