

Micah on True and False Worship

Based on commentary by John Calvin¹

Micah 1:5

“All this is for the transgression of Jacob And for the sins of the house of Israel. What *is* the transgression of Jacob? *Is it* not Samaria? And what *are* the high places of Judah? *Are they* not Jerusalem?” (NKJ)

This is the reason why the Prophet says that the wickedness of Israel was Samaria, that from there arose all iniquities. But we must at the same time bear in mind, that the Prophet speaks not here of gross crimes; but, on the contrary, he directs his reproof against **ungodly and perverted forms of worship**; and this appears more evident from the second clause, in which he mentions transgressions in connection with the high places. We hence see, that all sins in general are not here reproved, but **their vicious modes of worship, by which religion had been polluted among the Jews as well as the Israelites**. But it might seem very unjust, that the Prophet should charge with sin those forms of worship in which the Jews laboriously exercised themselves with the object of pacifying God.

But we see how **God regards as nothing whatever men blend with His worship out of their own heads**.

What Protestants Protested regarding the Worship of Rome

And this is our principal contest at this day with the Papists [the followers of the Pope]; we call their perverted and spurious modes of worship **abominations**: they think that what is heavenly is to be blended with what is earthly. We diligently labor, they say, for this end—that God may be worshipped. True; but, at the same time, **ye profane His worship by your inventions; and it is therefore an abomination**.

We now then see how foolish and frivolous are those delusions, when men follow their own wisdom in the duty of worshipping God: for the Prophet here, in the name of God, fulminates, as it were, from heaven against all superstitions, and shows that **no sin is more detestable than that preposterous caprice [whim, absurdity] with which idolaters are inflamed, when they observe such forms of worship as they have themselves invented**.

The worship of the Jews (southern kingdom) and Israelites (northern kingdom) were both corrupt. Such is the case today among evangelicals / Protestants and Roman Catholics, whenever they add to and take away from what God has prescribed in His Word.

Now with regard to the *high places*, we must notice, that there was a great difference between the Jews and the Israelites at that time as to idolatry. **The Israelites** had so fallen, that they were altogether degenerated; nothing could be seen among them that had an affinity to the true and legitimate worship of God: but **the Jews** had retained some form of religion, they had not thus abandoned themselves; but yet they had a mixture of superstitions; such as one would find, were he to compare the gross Popery of this day with that middle course which those men invent, who seem to themselves to be very wise, fearing, indeed, as they do, the offenses of the world; and hence they form for us **a mixture**, I know not what, from **the superstitions of the Papacy and from the Reformation, as they call it**. Something like this was the mixture at Jerusalem.

¹ From John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. III, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 164-167, 356-359, emphasis added, some updated English.

Protestants / evangelicals should not presume that God is pleased with what they invent and create in the worship of God, regardless of how good their intentions might be.

We however see, that the Prophet pronounces the same sentence against the Jews and the Israelites and that is, that **God will allow nothing that proceeds from the inventions of men to be joined to His word.** Since then God allows no such mixtures, the Prophet here says that **there was no less sin** on the high places of Judea, than there was in those filthy abominations which were then dominant among the people of Israel. But the remainder we must defer until tomorrow.

PRAYER.

Grant, Almighty God, that, since to a perverse, and in every way a rebellious people, You did formerly show so much grace, as to exhort them continually to repentance, and to stretch forth Your hand to them by Your Prophets—O grant, that the same word may sound in our ears; and when we do not immediately profit by Your teaching, O cast us not away, but, by Your Spirit, so subdue all our thoughts and affections, that we, being humbled, may give glory to Your majesty, such as is due to You, and that, being allured by Your paternal favor, we may submit ourselves to You, and, at the same time, embrace that mercy which You offer and present to us in Christ, that we may not doubt but You will be a Father to us, until we shall at length enjoy that eternal inheritance, which has been obtained for us by the blood of Your only-begotten Son. Amen.

LECTURE EIGHTY-TWO

Micah 1:6: ““Therefore I will make Samaria a heap of ruins in the field, Places for planting a vineyard; I will pour down her stones into the valley, And I will uncover her foundations.”

Though Micah intended especially to devote his services to the Jews, as we have said yesterday, he yet, in the first place, passes judgment on Samaria [the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel]; for it was his purpose afterwards to speak more fully against Jerusalem and the whole of Judea. And this state of the case ought to be born in mind; for the Prophet does not begin with the Israelites, because he directs his discourse peculiarly to them; but his purpose was briefly to reprove them, and then to address more especially his own people, for it was for this purpose that he was called.

Now, as he threatens destruction to Samaria and the whole kingdom of Israel on account of their corrupted forms of worship, we may hence learn how displeasing to God is superstition, and that He regards nothing so much as the true worship of His name.

There is no reason here for men to advance this position—that they do not sin by design; for God shows how He is to be worshipped by us. **Whenever, then, we deviate in anything from the rule which He has prescribed, we manifest, in that particular, our rebellion and obstinacy.** Hence the superstitious ever act like fools with regard to God, for they will not submit to His word, so as to be thereby alone made wise.

And he says, *I will set Samaria as an heap of the field*, that is, such shall be the ruins that they shall differ nothing from the heaps of the fields: for husbandmen, we know, when they find stones in their fields, throw them into some corner, that they may not be in the way of the plough. Like such heaps then, as are seen in the fields, Samaria would be, according to what God declared. He then says, that the place would be empty, so that *vines* would be *planted* there; and, in the third place, that its *stones* would be *scattered* through the *valley*; as when one casts stones where there is a wide plain, they run and roll far and wide; so would be the scattering of Samaria according to what the Prophet says, it was to be like the rolling of stones in a wide field. He adds, in the fourth place, *I will uncover her foundations*, that is, I will entirely

demolish it, so that a stone, as Christ says, may not remain on a stone (Matthew 24:2). We now perceive the meaning of the words; and we also perceive that **the reason why the Prophet denounces on Samaria so severe a judgment was because it had corrupted the legitimate worship of God with its own inventions**; for it had devised, as we well know, many idols, so that the whole authority of the law had been abolished among the Israelites.

Micah 6:16 “For the statutes of Omri are kept, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and ye walk in their counsels; that I should make thee a desolation, and the inhabitants thereof an hissing: therefore ye shall bear the reproach of my people.”

There is however another view, and one more generally approved and that is—that the Jews, having forsaken God and despised His Law, had turned aside to the superstitions of the kingdom of Israel. Hence he says, that *observed were the decrees of Omri, and every work of the house of Ahab*. Omri was the father of Ahab, who was made king by the election of the soldiers, when Zimri, who had slain the king, was rejected. When Omri bought Samaria, he built there a city; and to secure honor to it, he added a temple; and hence idolatry increased. Afterwards his son Ahab abandoned himself to every kind of superstition. Thus matters became continually worse.

Hence the Prophet, by mentioning here king Omri and his posterity (included in the words, “the house of Ahab”), clearly means that the Jews who had purely worshipped God, at length degenerated, and were now wholly unlike Israelites, as they had embraced all those abominations which Omri and his son Ahab had devised.

True religion as yet prevailed in the tribe of Judah, though the kingdom of Israel had become corrupt and filthy superstitions had gained the ascendancy. But in the course of time, the Jews became also implicated in similar superstitions. Of this sin the Prophet now accuses them; that is, that they made themselves associates with the Israelites. *Observed then are the edicts of Omri, and the whole work of the house of Ahab*. Ye walk, he says (the future here means a continued act, as often elsewhere), *ye walk in their counsels*.

. . . he adds “the counsels” of the kings of Israel. But yet this is in no way stated as an excuse for them; for though men may not only be pleased with but also highly commend their own devices, yet the Lord abominates them all.

The Prophet no doubt designedly adopted these words, in order to show that **those pretenses were frivolous and of no account, which superstitious men adduce, either to commend or to excuse their own inventions**. They ever refer to public authority—“This has been received by the consent of all; that has been decreed; it is not the mistake of one or two men, but the whole Church has so determined. And kings also thus command; it would be a great sin not to show obedience to them.”

Hence the Prophet, in order to show how puerile are such excuses, says, “I indeed allow that your superstitions are by you honorably distinguished, for they are approved by the edicts of your kings and are received by the consent of the many, and they seem not to have been inconsiderately and unadvisedly but prudently contrived, even by great men, who were become skillful through long experience.” But how much soever they might have boasted of their statutes and counsels, and however plausibly they might have referred to prudence and power in order to disguise their idolatries, yet all those things were of no account before God.

By counsels, the Prophet no doubt meant **that false kind of wisdom which always shines forth in the traditions of men**; and by statutes, he meant the kingly authority.

We hence see that it is a vain thing to color over what is idolatrous, by alleging power on the one hand in its favor, and wisdom on the other—How so? Because **God will not allow dishonor to be done to Him by such absurd things; but He commands us to worship Him according to what is prescribed in His Word.**

And now a denunciation of punishment follows, *That I should deliver thee to desolation and its inhabitants, etc.* There is a change of person; the Prophet continually addresses the land, and under that name, the people—that I should then deliver thee to exile, or desolation, *and thine inhabitants to hissing.* It is a quotation from Moses: and by *hissing* he means the reproach and mockery to which men in a miserable state are exposed.

At last he adds, *Ye shall bear the reproach of my people.* . . . there is, as I think, something ironical in the expression “my people”; as though he said, “The confidence, that ye have been up until now My people, hardens you: but this false and wicked boasting shall increase your punishment; for I will not inflict on you an ordinary punishment, as on heathens and strangers; but I shall punish your wickedness much more severely; for it is necessary that your punishment should bear proportion to My favor, which has been so shamefully and basely despised by you.” Hence, by the reproach of God’s people, I understand the heavier judgments, which were justly prepared for all the ungodly, whom God had favored with such special honor, as to regard them as His people: “for the servant, who knew his master’s will and did it not, was on that account more severely corrected” (Luke 12:47).