EXEGESIS OF MICAH CHAPTER THREE

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The book of Micah belongs to a larger collection of prophetic books that date from the eighth century. With all the competing theories of the prehistory and composition of the text, we are left with nothing more than conflicting theories which has buried the book in "academic derbis (Childs, 431)." The only form of the book of Micah we possess is the current form. Unlike the Gilgamesh Epic, which has many forms throughout its development, we only have on form of the book of Micah which suggests the possibility that Micah has basically existed as a written document basically unaltered (Andersen, 20).

There is good evidence that Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah at one time formed an independent collection (Freedman, 9). All of the headings in these books have similar style and form which suggests that they had a common editorial history. Unlike Jeremiah, which includes a conjunction between each king in its list of kings, these four books use the conjunction only once for an entire list of kings in the introductions. This indicates that the editors of the book of Micah considered the reigns of these kings as a single period of history. All four books begin with different kings, but all of them stop with Hezekiah.

Based on this, it is reasonable to assume that these books were written into a single collection during the time of Hezekiah, around the time of Sennacherib's invasion as a theological interpretation of contemporary events (Freedman, 24). The overall form of Micah alternates between oracles of doom and judgment, which are tied together with catchwords or phrases. Thus Micah appears to be a "collection" of oracles (Hillers 1984, 8).

The only thing we currently know about Micah the man is from the small amount of information about him in the book of Micah. He was from a city called Moresheth. This may be the same city as Moresheth-Gath (Harrison, 919).

All of chapter three contains standard 8th century poetic prophecy (Andersen, 344), which makes it reasonable to date the writing of the oracle to this period of time.

Most scholars believe chapters 1-3 to be authentic words of Micah (Hillers 807). Chapter three begins with "And I said" *waomar*, which seems to connect it to the previous section, but at the same time begins a new sub-section. Chapter three can begin a new section based on the use of the word *sim`u*, which also can begin two other sections at 1.2; 6.1 which have a similar form (Willis, 52). Each section is similar, beginning with a doom section and ending with a hope section.

On the other hand, chapter three may go with the chapter before it. The support for this is that the content of chapter three is somewhat similar (Hagstrom, 13). If this were the case, the book would still have three sections, but the first section would be chapters one to three because of similarity in content. The second section would be chapters four through five because of the feelings of hope these oracles convey. Finally the last section would be chapters six through seven which contain both threat and promise. There are other proposals for the structure of Micah, but there does not seems to be an overall consensus among scholars. As far as I can see, the only thing that is clear is that Micah alternates between oracles of doom and oracles of hope.

As far as chapter three goes, not everyone is in agreement as to the function of *waomar*. Some see it as nothing more than a remnant of an older prophetic narrative that was removed (Zvi, 73). Others see it as a redactional link or break to the previous section (Hillers, 41).

I am not sure if it is beneficial to make a sharp break with the previous chapter, or to tie it too closely to it. Chapter three begins with *waomar*, which not only seems to begin a

new section but also ties what follows to the previous section. Maybe it would be better to say that chapter three begins a new "sub-section."

Chapter three is made up of three sections (1-4; 5-8; 9-12). The first and third sections are marked by a summons to hear *semu*. The second section is marked by a "Thus says Yahweh" *koh omar yahweh*. Each of the three sections are parallel to each other in form and function as a condemnation to one of the groups of officials in Israel. Verse eight begins with "on the other hand," and then contrasts Micah to the prophets and seers he just had condemned. Verse eight could be viewed as a parenthesis. However, it seems better to view it as part of the middle section of the chapter since it is designed to show the contrast between Micah and the prophets who were leading the people astray.

Each section has the same basic layout. They consist of an identification of individuals the prophet condemns, the accusation, the development of the accusation, and the description of the judgment as a result of the accusation (Zvi, 70-71).

The form of chapter three is prophetic judgment speech (Dempsey, 124). It contains four parts. The first part is directed at the political leaders, the second is directed at the prophets, the third part is an interlude, and the last part is directed at Israel's leaders.

Micah's pattern here is to use incomplete synonymous parallelism (A,B,C::B,C) with a tendency to develop lists (Andersen, 344). Micah also uses participles to describe the perpetrators. This does not imply that they are doing it now, but are used as titles.

As far as a date for this particular oracle, one possibility might be the time period around the Syro-Ephraimite siege of Jerusalem around 728-725 BCE. (Shaw, 126). The references to butchering the country and building Jerusalem by bloodshed are not references to oppression of the poor and weak, but references to those who did not abide by Ahaz's

decision not to align with Pekah and Rezin. They wanted to align with them and to do so would have meant building Jerusalem by bloodshed and war. The problem that I see with this is that the references in chapter two clearly refer to oppression of the weak in the land. Whatever the original historical context of these oracles, their canonical context suggests that the problem was a lack of justice through oppression. The only thing we can say for sure about the date of this oracle is that it came sometime during the reign of Jotham Ahaz, or Hezekiah (Mic 1:1).

v1-4. Verse one begins with "And I said." It is curious that while the Masoretic text has a first person perfect verb, the Septuagint has a third person plural verb in the future tense. "And I said" is quite different from "And he will say."

It is not altogether clear why there is a difference between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint. One possibility is that the consonantal Hebrew text was mistranslated into Greek as a third person. This is highly possible given the fact that it appears that the Greek and Syriac versions are the only ones that renders *'mr* as a third person verb, according to the apparatus of BHS. The weight this evidence tends toward the reading of the Masoretic Text rather than the Septuagint.

Mays emends this first section by putting the latter half of verse 2 at the end of verse three (76-77). His reasoning is that the pronouns in verse 2 have no antecedent previous to it. It seems obvious that the antecedent is "my people" in verse three, so he puts the phrases with the pronouns in verse two after that. However, these oracles were originally oral instead of written, so it is perfectly acceptable to accept the current arrangement of the text (Hagstrom, 30).

The summons to hear is directed to the "heads" *r's* of Jacob and the "rulers" *qsyn* of the house of Israel. "Heads" is an imprecise general term for leaders (Shaw 110) It is used a number of times with the meaning of a "chief" or "leader" (Judg 10:18; Deut 1:15; 2 Chr 20:27). It is used in 2:13 of God.

"Rulers" is an old word for a tribal military leader that may have been elected (Andersen, 349). What is interesting is that the king is not specifically mentioned here, though he may be implicated by the parallel references to "rulers" and "heads."

It is curious that the Septuagint renders the second parallel phrase as "remaining ones" of the house of Israel rather than "rulers." Since the Hebrew words that could be rendered "remnant" are *ytr, s'r*, there appears to be no textual explanation for this. It is possible that *kataloipoi* is a theological interpolation to highlight a remnant theology. It seems best to retain the wording of the MT because of the synonymous parallelism of "rulers" to "heads.

It is difficult to know whether Israel and Jacob were meant to refer to the Northern kingdom, or to the people in general. The references to Judah, Jacob, and Israel are somewhat ambiguous due to the redactional history of the text (Biddle, 850).

The lack of specific reference to the monarch is common in prophetic literature (Zvi, 86). The king is the highest level of justice in the land. He is the "ultimate court of appeal" for the citizen. It is possible that the judicial situation in chapter three is a reflection of the judicial reforms that Jehoshaphat initiated during his reign (1 Chr 19:4-11). This reform shows that the judiciary in the land became more centralized, and that there was more control over the system by the priests and Levites (Andersen, 350). Therefore the condemnation

includes all of the rulers and priests. Since the king is the highest court of justice in the land,

he would be implicated in these condemnations.

It is possible that if this oracle were spoken during the time of Hezekiah's reign, that

the reason the king is not mentioned is because he initiated a reform. But this does not seem

likely because the amount of injustice this chapter seems to portray would still implicate the

king since he has ultimate responsibility in the land. It would be best to see this as a blanket

condemnation of all rulers in the land who were responsible for justice, including the king.

The heads and rulers are "haters of right" and "lovers of wrong." We could

understand these participles as titles. There are similar ideas in other eight century prophetic

literature, though the wording is not identical (Amos 5:15; Isa 5:20).

The condemnation begins with, "Is it not for you to know justice (*mspt*)?" The word

justice is used in each of the three sections in this chapter. Justice is an overarching theme in

these oracles. Indeed, justice is an overall theme in the entire book. In one high points of the

book, the word justice is used again (Mic 6:8). In the end, it is Yahweh who will execute

justice (Mic 7:9).

Micah further develops the accusation by portraying the leaders as cannibals. The

words for flesh and bones are used repeatedly to heighten the atrocities of their injustice.

The immediate context gives no indication as to the specific nature of their faults. However,

in the larger context, social injustice seems to be the root of the problem (Mic 2:1-11).

In this last section, it is curious that the oracle moves from addressing the recipients

from the second to third person. It seems unlikely that this is making reference to a different

group of people since there is no new accusation in the text. It is better to think of the

condemnation as being pronounced "on" the leaders instead of "to" them (Andersen, 348).

The prophet uses irony to portray the resulting justice that will come as a result of the injustice. "They" in verse 4 refers to the heads and rulers. They will "cry out" *s`q*. This is a judicial term (Simundson, 557), which seems to indicate that the heads and rulers will cry out for justice in the future. Since they, who were responsible for justice, did not hear those suffering injustice, the time will come when God will not hear them either.

v5-8. In the second section of chapter three, the oracle against the prophets are in the form of a judgment oracle (Andersen, 359). As in the first section of chapter three, the text alternates between second and third person addresses. However, the order is different in the second section of chapter three. The address begins in the third person, then moves to the second person in verse six, then back to the third person in verse seven. A possible explanation for these alternations could lie in the fact that the text contains the perspective of telling *about* the prophets and the words of Micah spoken *to* the prophets. The text preserves both perspectives side by side. The text preserves the prophets as characters in the distant past, but part of the message to them as a direct address in the second person. The effect of this makes the message of verse six timeless for future generations (Andersen, 371).

There is a possibility that Micah saw himself as a true prophet, while he viewed the other prophets to be false prophets. Hence the apparent disputes in the book of Micah are between *prophetes* and *pseudoprophetes* (Van Der Woude 244). Expressions of confidence in chapters 1-3, then, are not from Micah, but quotations from these false prophets whom Micah opposes.

On the other hand, there is also a possibility that Micah does not view himself as a *nabi* at all (Carroll 75). *Nebiim* likely arose during the monarchy as a person in an official capacity who was to advise the king on the will of God (Simundson, 558). Micah condemns

the *nebiim* without exception and without identifying himself as a "true" *nabi*. In this sense, Micah may be like Amos who claimed not to be a prophet nor the son of a prophet (Amos 7:14). The issue is not whether a person is a true prophet or a false prophet. One group's "true" prophet may be another group's "false" prophet. 1 Kings 13 illustrates the shifting qualities of "true" and "false" when applied to prophets (Carroll 79). So we should not think in terms of true or false prophets, but in terms of true or false prophecies.

Carroll builds his case that Micah was not a prophet even though he prophesied by the *ruah* of God (81). According to Joel 2.28-29, everyone will be able to prophesy which would render prophets a "redundant entity". Not all who preach are prophets, and not all who prophesy are prophets.

This leaves a question unanswered. If Micah, Amos, and others like them were not prophets, what were they? There were those who obviously viewed their oracles as being from an authentic spokesperson of God, otherwise they would not have preserved their messages. Granted, there were those who engaged in *naba* who were not considered prophets, such as Saul (1 Sam 10:10). However, Saul's activity led the people to ask whether he was "among the prophets" since he himself was prophesying.

I believe that there is some validity in both theories. There were prophets who were prophesying for personal gain and abusing their role, which led to the conflict between Micah and those prophets. Because of the connotation that may have arisen behind *nabi*, those such as Micah and Amos may have wanted to distance themselves from it. However, the text makes it clear that Micah communicated the word of the Lord (Mic 1:1). Therefore, this may be nothing more than a case of nomenclature, not description of function.

Micah uses three different terms for the prophets in these verses. They are prophets *nebiim*, diviners *qosmim*, and seers *hozim*. It is not clear whether these refer to the same people, or a "type" of people. *Nebiim* and *hozim* are apparently interchangeable terms with the latter being an earlier one (1 Sam 9:9). Divination appears to be something like prophecy (Num 22:7), but it is typically used of foreign prophets with a clearly negative connotation (1 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 17:17; 2 Chr 33:6). It is clearly a prohibited activity (Lev 19:26).

In the accusation against the prophets, Micah denounces them for abusing their prophetic abilities for nothing more than personal gain. The messages of the prophets are based on nothing more than the amount people paid them for their services. They prophesied peace, or well-being *slm* to those who gave them food, but they declared war against those who gave them nothing. Literally, the text says that they "sanctified" *qds* war. As a result, they were leading Yahweh's people astray.

The judgment against the prophets would involve a loss of the ability to be able to prophesy. Micah describes it poetically as night without vision, a doubly dark time. It is curious that he parallels vision with divination *qsm*. Divination was a pejorative term used of the activities of foreign cults (Mays, 84). Is it possible that the prophets were prophesying by something other than or in addition to the power of Yhwh? If that were not the case, then Micah is using this pejorative term to highlight that they are no better than pagan prophets.

Micah prophesies that there will be two results from the loss of vision. The first is shame, and the second is a covering of the mouth. This is a gesture of mourning (Hillers 1984, 46), which suggests that the prophets will not only lose their prophetic ability, but their source of income that came from it. It could also be an anticipation of the judgement in verse twelve.

In verse eight, Micah contrasts himself with the prophets. Unlike the prophets, Micah is filled with four things. He is filled with power. This suggests that the prophets he speaks against were not filled with power. There is an apparent thought that the words of a prophet do not just predict disaster or peace, but can actually bring it about (Amos 7:10). The fact that Micah views himself as an authentic spokesperson for God may be where the idea of being filled with power comes from. The words of the prophets will not stand, but Micah's words will because they are filled with the power of Yahweh. He is also filled with the spirit of Yahweh. In the form of the text, the idea behind being filled with the spirit of Yahweh is parallel to being filled with power. Micah is also filled with justice *mspt*. This is the same word used in 3:1. Justice is an overarching theme in this chapter. What contrast if Micah did not view himself as a *nabi*! Those in the land who had the specific duty to oversee justice in the land were failing, and Micah, not an official is the lonely voice of justice in the land! Micah states his purpose in verse eight, which was to make the rebellious acts of the people known.

v9-12. The third and final section of this chapter begins in nearly identical words as the beginning of the chapter. It is interesting to note that the condemnation of the heads and rulers seem to be more extreme then the condemnation against the prophets. Whatever the specific infractions were, the heads and rulers of the land seemed to bear more responsibility than did the prophets. In this section the priests are added to the list of those whom Micah condemns (Mic 3:11).

As in verse one, the LXX renders "rulers" as "remnant" in verse nine. The accusation is more acute in this second round against the heads and rulers. Instead of merely not knowing justice (v.1), Micah now accuses them of abhorring justice and twisting everything

that is straight. Those who should have been upholding and loving justice actually detested justice. The accusation begins to build to a crescendo here.

The text switches from second person in verse nine to a third person singular participle (*boneh – builder/one who builds)* in verse ten. Some individual is building Zion with bloodshed. This should not be understood as sacrificial, but as oppression or even murder because "violent injustice" is parallel to bloodshed. It may have some connection to 6:7, which seems to indicate that human sacrifices were not ruled out during this time period.

It is possible that verse ten could have been directed to the king (Andersen, 379). Support for this can be found in the quotation of a portion of this oracle in Jeremiah where it says that Hezekiah was a recipient of this oracle and repented (Jer 26:18-19).

Verse eleven develops the accusation against the heads even further. Their brand of so-called justice came with a price. They only pronounced justice for a bribe. Their justice was really no justice at all because it went to the highest bidder. The same type of accusation extends to the priests and prophets who only exercised their role for profit.   In a single verse, Micah paints all those who should have been preserving justice and instructing the people in the way of the Lord as being nothing more than greedy, evil people who were interested in nothing more than personal gain.

Micah mockingly quotes the leaders in verse eleven. He shows them in verse twelve that their confidence in Yahweh was nothing more than false security. They did not realize that Yahweh was a God of justice (Mic 4:3).

In the description of the resulting judgment, Micah paints a picture of an utterly destroyed Jerusalem. Micah apparently describes the destruction in terms of typical

international treaty curses on vassals (Shaw, 112). This suggests that the leaders of the land had broken covenant with Yahweh by the way they were treating their fellow Israelites.

The book of Jeremiah quotes the oracle in verse twelve (Jer 26:18-19). The context in Jeremiah seems to indicate a previous narrative context for this oracle because it includes details concerning Hezekiah and his repentance (Hillers 1984, 9). As a result of Hezekiah's repentance and reform, this prediction did not come to pass. What is interesting is that the book of Jeremiah sees the oracle as conditional. The text of Micah gives no indication that it is conditional. This is not unusual. Jonah's message gave no indication that it was conditional (Jonah 3:4). However, when the king and the people mourned and repented, God relented (Jonah 3:10). It may be a safe assumption to say that all prophecy is conditional whether it is termed as a prediction or a conditional prophecy.

Even though chapter three seems to be a new sub-section, it clearly has a thematic link to chapter two. Chapter three expounds on 2:1-11. The preservation of these oracles obviously served as a reminder and explanation of the reasons why Israel suffered at the hands of the nations around them. If there was an original narrative context to these oracles, the editors did not preserve the specific details. This gave these oracles a more timeless quality for the community of faith, Israel. The applications of chapter three for future generations would have been obvious. Those who were responsible for justice were to be impartial and upright in upholding justice. Those who were responsible for instruction in God's word were to carry out that role faithfully.

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