A Study Commentary on Micah

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EP

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are the author's own translation.

In memory of
JORDAN,
whom Yahweh gave—and took

Contents

Abbreviations

ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts,* 3rd edition.
AV	Authorized Version (King James Version)
BDB	*Brown, Driver and Briggs,* Hebrew and English Lexicon
CSB	*Christian Standard Bible*
DCH	*Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (ed. D. J. A. Clines)
ESV	English Standard Version
G-K	Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*
IDB	*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
ISBE	*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
JB	Jerusalem Bible
K–B	Koehler & Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*
NASB	New American Standard Bible (updated edition)
NBD	*New Bible Dictionary*
NBV	New Berkeley Version
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible

NJPS   Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures
            according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (1985)
NKJV   New King James Version
NRSV   New Revised Standard Version
REB   Revised English Bible
RSV   Revised Standard Version
TDOT   *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
TEV   *Today's English Version*
TLOT   *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*
TWOT   *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
ZPEB   *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*

Introductory matters

Did Micah leave us Micah?

My father served as a United Presbyterian pastor from 1927 until his retirement in 1971. Imagine that shortly after his retirement he had written a brief synopsis of his ministry, indicating the years served and then a sketch of the locations of his congregations: about four years at Sheakleyville, Pennsylvania; nine months in Beaver, Pennsylvania; thirteen more years in his first charge in Sheakleyville, Pennsylvania; three and a half years in Newton, Kansas, in the mid-1940s; eleven years in Harrisville, Pennsylvania; and eleven years in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. Imagine too that we had bumped into one of my father's former parishioners who remembered how deeply moved he had been by a sermon my father had preached from Ephesians 1.

How would the average Old Testament critic tend to look at data like that? First, he might say that it's very rare for any pastor to stay only nine months in a charge—that piece must be an intrusion; it looks very suspicious, after all, because he went back, allegedly, to his previous pastorate. That is very unusual, not likely. Instead, he must have simply had a long ministry (maybe eighteen years) in Sheakleyville. Second, almost all his pastorates seem to have been in western Pennsylvania. This means it's improbable that he had

one in Kansas for three years or more; after all, who would move 1,200 miles from western Pennsylvania while the Second World War was still going on and certain wartime restrictions were in place? Third, the last two pastorates are said to consist of eleven years each. That is suspicious. How often would that actually happen? More likely, what took place was that there was only *one* pastorate of eleven years (either my father's memory was fuzzy or some of his friends may have tinkered with his written summary). Fourth, sadly enough, my father never preached from the Old Testament. Well, that one fellow had been so impressed with a sermon on Ephesians 1, and that's in the New Testament, so obviously my father never preached from the Old! Our critic then concludes that, contrary to the written summary, it is likely that my father had a ministry of perhaps thirty years, all in western Pennsylvania—contrary to the explicit testimony he had been given.

There's a reason for this bit of foolishness. Critics tend to deal with Micah and other prophetic books in the same way. We have Micah's genuine prophecies in chapters 1–3—well, except for the promise of 2:12–13 (Fohrer) or half a dozen interpolations that have also wormed their way in (Wolff). Chapters 4–5 obviously cannot be from Micah because they consist of promises, and we know (from the episode in Jer. 26:18) that Micah was remembered for his message of judgement—hence he couldn't have spoken the positive messages in chapters 4–5.[1] Chapters 4–5 presuppose the fall of Jerusalem (4:8), the exile and dispersion (4:6–7) and the demise of the Davidic dynasty (5:1)—one couldn't speak of such things unless they had already taken place (i.e., there's no such thing as 'predictive' prophecy). For the same reason the prophecy of 4:1–5 could not have arisen until after the rebuilding of the temple in the post-exilic period, 200 years after Micah's own time (Wolff). The bits and pieces in chapters 6 and 7 come from the 400s BC from various groups of prophets; scholars cannot be very sure how they originated—the one thing they are certain of is that

they did not come from Micah. So chapters 1–3 contain the only genuine preaching we have from Micah—except, of course, for later additions that have crept in even there.

Read a critical discussion on the book of Micah. See if it doesn't read like pages of chaotic guesswork.[2] After summarizing scholarly study of Micah, Brevard Childs concludes that 'the growing confusion over conflicting theories of composition has increasingly buried the book in academic debris'.[3] One can hardly blame folk for being turned off towards the Old Testament; scholars have done their best to make it dull, boring and complicated.

A map of Micah

Let's leave the 'How much of Micah comes from Micah?' issue for the moment and look at the book as we have it. Just take a naïve view. How is the book put together? Maybe things are not as complicated as some people think.

There seem to be three major chunks in Micah's prophecy, each of them introduced with the imperative plural 'Hear' (*šimʿû*, 1:2; 3:1; 6:1).[1] Hence chapters 1–2, 3–5 and 6–7 form the primary divisions of the prophecy. Each of these divisions contains a section of judgement followed by a small, or even a larger, section proclaiming hope:

A.	1:2–2:13	1:2–2:11	=	judgement
		2:12–13	=	grace/hope
B.	3:1–5:15	3:1–12	=	judgement
		4:1–5:15	=	grace/hope
C.	6:1–7:20	6:1–7:7	=	judgement
		7:8–20	=	grace/hope

Now I am not claiming that there are no difficulties in Micah; on the contrary, there are plenty of grammatical conundrums and perplexing hermeneutical questions. But when one looks at the overall layout of the whole book, it seems to have a coherent

structure. One might be forgiven for thinking this may have been *intentional*; someone with a scrap or two of intelligence must have planned it this way. And, in spite of smiles or sneers, 1:1 provides the only objective clue we have to the identity of the planner—Micah of Moresheth.[2]

Sticking with this structural breakdown and holding to the judgement-hope pattern in it, we can summarize Micah like this:

I.   Through judgement to preservation   chs. 1–2
II.   Through judgement to peace   chs. 3–5
III. Through judgement to pardon   chs. 6–7

In order to provide more detail and a bit of a road map, let me fill in the skeleton outline above:

I. Through judgement to preservation (1:1–2:13)
   1. The coming of the Lord (1:2–9)
   2. The lament of the prophet (1:10–16)
   3. The propriety of the judgement (2:1–5)
   4. The problem of the preacher (2:6–11)
   5. The hope for the future (2:12–13)

II. Through judgement to peace (3:1–5:15)
   1. The approaching ruin (3:1–12)
   2. The stubborn future (4:1–7)
   3. The encouraging hope (4:8–5:5a)
   4. The messianic age (5:5–15)

III. Through judgement to pardon (6:1–7:20)
   1. The presentation of Yahweh's case (6:1–16)
   2. The lamentation of Yahweh's prophet (7:1–7)
   3. The endurance of Yahweh's remnant (7:8–20)

Section 1

Through judgement
to preservation
Micah 1:1–2:13

1

What, who, when
(Micah 1:1)

1:1. The word of Yahweh that came to Micah the Morashtite in the days of Jotham, Ahaz [and] Hezekiah, kings of Judah—the word he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Here is Micah's own introduction to Micah.[1] He begins with a claim and a fact. What he is putting forth in his book is the word of Yahweh. It is not a word the prophet himself dredged up. Moreover, this word of Yahweh 'came' to him—literally the text reads, 'the word of Yahweh that was to Micah'. That is, it was just there, present, imposing itself.[2] There is such *sovereignty* about Yahweh's word. The prophet does not control it; God presses it upon him. Yet this divine word does not shrink from using a human instrument.

The word comes to Micah the Morashtite. 'Morashtite' refers to Micah's home town, apparently Moresheth-gath, some twenty-five miles south-west of Jerusalem, among the lowland hills of western Judah.[3]

There is mystery about Yahweh's word, then; it 'comes' or is simply 'there', and we may wonder how it comes. The only hint we have here about the 'how' is that Micah says that Yahweh's word is what he 'saw'. This verb (*ḥāzâ*), as used here, refers to seeing in a prophetic vision (cf. Num. 24:4,16), one of the ways Yahweh conveyed his word to the prophets (cf. Num. 12:6–8); it seems to indicate that there is a visual component in the receiving of Yahweh's word which then results in the verbal communication of that word.[4] All of which relieves little of the mystery about the matter.

Our verse tells us next to nothing about Micah himself (only his previous mailing address); we are given, however, the *circumstances* in which God's word came to him: 'in the days of Jotham, Ahaz [and] Hezekiah, kings of Judah'. Obviously this does not require us to assume that Micah prophesied from the very beginning of Jotham's reign to the very end of Hezekiah's; it only means that he prophesied during the reigns of these three kings, perhaps from about 735–700 BC. When we read 'Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah' we should also read another name, though it's not actually in the text—Assyria. These three kings ruled during the Assyrian decades. True, Assyrian pressure and assaults initially affected the northern kingdom (Israel) more than Micah's Judah (one thinks especially of Tiglath-pileser III's invasion in 734 BC and Shalmaneser V's clean-up of Samaria in 723–22 BC); but the big red Assyrian machine came running into Judah in 701 BC, bleeding Hezekiah's kingdom within an inch of its life.[5] In short, Micah served in fearful times. But don't miss the (ultimately) comforting word to be found here: even in scary times Yahweh does not cease bringing his word to his people.

Application

First, consider the import of 'the word of Yahweh came …' That is to say, consider *the kindness and grace of having a God who speaks and is not silent.* There is a pathetic pagan prayer in

which the petitioner confesses that he does not know which god or goddess he has offended, and he does not know what sin or offence he has committed; in fact, he says, mankind as a whole wallows in this misery of agnosticism—one doesn't know whether one is committing sin or doing good.[6] How kind, then, Yahweh is, who does not allow his people to walk in darkness, but rather causes his word to come to his servant Micah, so that they will clearly know his will and his assessment of things! Grace provides clarity.

Secondly, ponder *the gratitude we owe for this digest of Micah's proclamation*. Calvin nails the point so well:

> Thus what took Micah some thirty-eight to forty years to preach, we can read within an hour. How immense our ingratitude, then, if, seeing that Micah laboured all of his life to exhort the people of his era, and that God has so graciously provided such a brief summary of his teachings for us, we should fail to esteem them, or neglect to cast our eyes upon them.[7]

Calvin means that when church members salivate over *People* magazine and slurp up the latest titbits about Madonna or Britney Spears and yet never get to grips with the book of Micah, they are guilty of gross unthankfulness to God.

Thirdly, observe *how little detail Micah provides about himself*. It's very different from the way we bill a speaker for one of our church Bible conferences: we provide the biographical details of family, education and degrees awarded, positions held and books written. But we have none of that for Micah—only his name, date (in reference to the three kings) and postcode. That's it— nothing about his lovely wife Jeanette or his precious little Jimmy, nothing about his hobbies or how he loves apple strudel. The focus stays on the message, not the messenger—a refreshing emphasis, especially for our day, when Christians tend to fixate on their favourite evangelical gurus. 'What, after all, is Apollos?

And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe' (1 Cor. 3:5, NIV).