



Reflections on Micah, the Prophet of the book Micah

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Abstract

In this article, the aim was to scrutinize the book of Micah in search of clues on how the prophet Micah is portrayed in the book named after him. The perspective is therefore on the book of Micah in the final form as contained in the Masoretic Text. For this purpose, attention was given to Micah 1:1, which reveals certain details of Micah's location and context, but also to 3:8 and 7:7, because these last two mentioned texts by way of contrast with other people provide some understanding of how the prophet of the book should be viewed. The conclusion reached is that it is the prophetic tradition as reflected in the Old Testament that recognises Micah as a prophet. In the book of Micah, the person and the message he conveys seem to be intertwined. The book contains judgement oracles against the leadership in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. and also oracles of salvation.

Keywords: Micah 1:1, Micah 3:8, Micah 7:7. biography, false religious functionaries, lament, Judah

Introduction¹

The point is clearly acknowledged nowadays, that we should distinguish between the historical context presented in the book, the prophet named as the author of oracles and the finalized version of the book. It is therefore very difficult to determine who the real prophet of the book is and the material in the book now ascribed to this particular person. This is also true when it comes to the prophet Micah. In this article, an attempt will be made to discuss some of the biographical elements the book of Micah offers to us as readers. The argument promoted in this article is that image of the prophet is deliberately constructed. It is probable that the constructed image of the prophet is not totally out of sync with who the "real" prophet was. It seems reasonable to assume that the compilers of the oracles in the book of Micah would add material that would reasonably correspond with existing oracles of the prophet or complement his thoughts and ideas. For the purpose of this article, particular attention will be given to Micah 1:1, 3:8 and 7:7. In both Micah 3:8 and 7:7 the prophet in the first person singular is contrasted to other entities. Much is learned about the prophet Micah in the conflicts reflected in the Micah text. The aim is to discuss the three mentioned verses in the context of the passages in which they occur, but also in the context of the book as a whole. It is believed that this will provide insight in both the person of the prophet of the book Micah and his belief system. Micah offered three important messages, and every one

¹ This article is a reworked version of a paper presented at the Internal Society of Biblical Literature Conference held in Rome, 1 to 5 July 2019. The theme of the session in which the paper was presented concerned *Prophetic Biography*. The National Research Foundation rendered financial support for attendance of the conference.



of them began with the sanction, “Hear” (Micah 1:2, 3:1; 6:1). The first message was addressed to “all people,” while the second message was addressed to the leaders of Israel. The third message was basically a personal word of pleading to Israel to repent and atone with Yahweh. The core theme of the book of Micah is God’s judgment and redemption. Micah attacks the “chiefs of the house of Israel” “who eat the flesh of my people” and “build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong,” probably referring to building done with forced labour (Micah 3:9;3:3; 3:10).

It is clear that we know very little about the prophet of the book besides the prominence given to Moresmeth in chapter 1. It is hardly possible to determine what is original to the person Micah in the book, and what was later associated with a person named Micah (cf. McKane, 1998:7). It is possible that he orally spoke in Jerusalem during a period of Assyrian threat and that his utterances were later put in writing and that later material was added that resonated with the general trend of his utterances.² The trend nowadays is to date the book of Micah in the Persian period (Ben Zvi, 2000:9-10).³ Julia O’Brien’s commentary is an example of this as well (O’Brien, 2015:xl-lv). My own view resonates more with that of Matthew Coomber as quoted by O’Brien (2015:li):

I see the book of Micah as finalized, if not largely written, in the Persian period: but I also believe that the text has roots in the earlier Assyrian period in which the text is set. However, when it comes to exploring Micah’s attacks on corruption among Judah’s rulers, religious elites, and the populace-at-large, the actual time-scape of its prophecies may not be as important as some might think. Whether the authors addressed corruption under Assyrian or Persian rule – since later authors might have used earlier Judean rulers as targets so as to not have directly challenged and incurred the wrath of contemporary rulers who were guilty of the same offenses – the issue of corruption is not limited to a particular era but affects people across time and culture.

What we are left with is a book dedicated to a person named Micah, placed in the time of Assyrian domination in the international socio-political arena and associated with kings of Judah (Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah) that acted during these times of threat (cf. 1:1). The common thread in the book seems to be the condition or state of the Judean society in terms of the people’s perfidious relationship with Yahweh and the resulting social injustices on various levels in society. Micah 3 is an excellent example of the injustices done by leaders, prophets, priests and judges. These injustices entailed acts of violence, false prophecy and bribery. The material in the book may have originated with Micah, but in the end, we have a redacted text related to this person Micah from Moresmeth and a message relevant to more than one generation and historical setting (O’Brien, 2015:3). What we therefore have is more words and utterances associated with Micah, giving us some insight into what the final redactors wanted us to associate with the person Micah. In the tradition, as we learn from Jeremiah 26:18, Micah is regarded as a prophet who delivered a message of potential doom to the people of Jerusalem to which they have responded positively and averted the destruction of Jerusalem. Micah is then considered to a prophet of judgment and his first three chapters stress judgment and denounce sin, the last four chapters are basically consolatory.

In this article, besides Micah 1:1, the focus is on two verses namely 3:8 and 7:7 where Micah speaks in the first person singular. By doing this, we will gain some insight into the person Micah as presented in the book of Micah.

² Chalmers (2015:27-30) offers a helpful discussion on the way books were formed from the oral phase up to the final written document.

³ Persian period 539-333 BCE (Scheffler 2001:139-147).



Micah 1:1

'The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem' (NRSV).

דְּבַר-יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֶל-מִיכָה הַמֶּרְשֵׁתִי בַיָּמִי יוֹתָם אֶתִז וְחִזְקִיָּה מֶלֶכִי יְהוּדָה
אֲשֶׁר-חָזָה עַל-שָׁמְרוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַם:

The introductory verse of the book Micah is similar to a number of prophetic books in the Old Testament.⁴ The general view is that it should be ascribed to editorial activity (Jenson, 2008:103). The sentence makes it clear that the message handed down to the prophet comes from Yahweh. This introductory verse not only makes it clear that the prophet Micah is the one receiving the words, but that they concern both Samaria and Jerusalem. Very little is revealed about the prophet Micah, except that he comes from Moresheth, most probably Moresheth-Gath if 1:14 is considered, a town 40 kilometres southwest of Jerusalem in the Shephelah region.⁵ Micah 1:1 also does not reveal the identity of his father. The opening verse does not indicate that Micah is a prophet, but the verb 'see' (*hāzā*) appears here, a technical term often used to indicate a divine revelation (cf. Jenson, 2008:104).

Besides identifying Micah's place of origin, several Judean kings are mentioned. Although King Jotham (ca.742-735 BCE) is listed, Micah's prophecies rather relate to the reigns of Ahaz (735-715 BCE) and Hezekiah (715-687 BCE; cf. Smith-Christopher, 2015:9).⁶ These kings were from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which is also the location of Micah's activity.

As mentioned already, the message of Yahweh to Micah concerns the capital of the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, but also Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern Kingdom. Although Micah 1:1, as already mentioned, should probably be ascribed to editorial activity, it contains important information in that it links the person Micah to a specific location and links the book to a specific historical period. The superscription, therefore, sets the context in which the book should be understood (Nogalski, 2011:532). This verse has triggered some interesting views of which a few will be highlighted in the ensuing discussion.

Theories about who Micah was

The Book of Micah does not provide the reader with much information regarding the person of Micah. His name in Hebrew probably means: 'Who is like Yahweh?'.⁷ As was the case with many of the prophets, he disappears behind the message he bore. Micah 1:1 indicates that he came from Moresheth, probably Moresheth-Gath (1:14), a small town to the southwest of Jerusalem.

⁴ Cf. Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:1-3; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 1:1 and Zeph. 1:1.

⁵ Allen (1976:265) relates this city to Tell ej-Judeideh, 10 kilometres northeast of the important Judean city of Lachish. Cf. also King (1988:60).

⁶ There is a difference of opinion of when to date the rule of the various kings. See the dates suggested by Jenson (2008:103) and Nogalski (2011:523).

⁷ The name *mikā* is an abbreviated form of *mīkā'ēl* - 'who is like Yahweh' (cf. Andersen and Friedman 2000:108)



Who exactly he was, is uncertain. Besides the reference in 1:1, there is his claim in 3:8 that he was empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh, he had knowledge of what is right and wrong and was courageous. Since he is not referred to as a prophet in the Book of Micah, several theories arose about the person Micah. Jeremiah the prophet quoted from Micah, so the latter must have been very important in his era. Micah was also a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. Like Isaiah 1–39, the Book of Micah focuses on Jerusalem, Zion, and specifically the Judean leadership.

One proposed view is to take the silence about his background as deliberate and as intended to hide his humble origin. This is pure speculation and fails to convince, since this could equally apply to some of the other prophets. It is possible to consider him to have been a small farmer or cattle raiser because he came from a rural town and was concerned about land. However, this is only scant evidence for such an inference.

A view from a sociological approach to the text of Micah suggests that Micah is a member or possibly even a leader of an organized group or movement (a 'revitalized' or 'millennial' movement) who worked for better social conditions for the people of the land (Hillers, 1984:5-8). This casts an interesting light on the identity of Micah and takes social issues into serious consideration. However, the 'movement' is too vaguely defined, and there is just not enough evidence to make this view convincing.

Still another approach is to regard Micah to have been an elder who represented his Moresbeth constituency in Jerusalem (Wolff, 1981:3-16). It was his responsibility to take up matters which affected his people in the rural areas when summoned to do so by the authorities in the capital. From this view, Micah does not fit the typical profile of a prophet, for he does not refer to a specific event when he was called. This is further supported by mainly speaking in his own name and not in the name of Yahweh. When he speaks of himself in 3:8, it is to contrast himself with the prophets, and he presents himself as the spokesperson who is equipped to fight for the rights of the oppressed. The expression 'my people' would then be a reference to his 'constituency' in Moresbeth. Although this view is interesting, it does not explain the wide spectrum of Micah's concerns in his book. He was not only concerned about social injustice, but also religious deterioration. There are indications that he was not indifferent to cultic matters nor a total stranger in the cultic arena. It would, however, diminish his significance to see him only as a rural representative.

Those who argue that the book of Micah is a product of the Persian period are not interested in the question whether Micah was a historical figure, but simply regard him as a literary character who the so-called literati has placed in the Assyrian period (O'Brien, 2015:xliv).

In 2015, Smith-Christopher also published a commentary on Micah in the Old Testament Library Series. He is quite forthright in his approach by saying:

I propose reading the book of Micah as an ancient Israelite "critical populist," whose attitudes were fuelled partially by his location as a "lowlander," specifically from a village (Moresbeth, about 23 miles south-west of Jerusalem) of the Shephelah (the food deals, what I am calling the "lowlands"), and partially by his fury criticism of the Jerusalem elite.

He continues by saying:

...central to Micah's critique is his anger at the war policies of the Jerusalem elite surrounding King Hezekiah,

and



part of defending this ancient Hebrew “populist antimilitarism” involves locating the book of Micah in a tradition of prophetic condemnation of war policies before my cost time as well as of Micah’s time (Smith-Christopher, 2015:1).

Smith-Christopher (2015:2) states that he writes his commentary from a historical-critical perspective, but also says that he is not claiming to provide an ‘objective’ interpretation, admitting that the context of the interpreter plays a crucial role. Smith-Christopher (2015:3) allows for several contexts that should be taken into account in the process of interpretation, of which two very important ones are the socioeconomic contexts of Micah the prophet and that of Micah the book.

I do not disagree that what we now have is a portrayal of Micah as presented in the final composition of the book, but I still believe, as I have stated, that a person Micah at some stage did exist and that the author of the final composition relied on sources to the author’s disposal. What I realise is that we have a difference of approach in that scholars such as Ben Zvi and O’Brien are interested in the final composition, whilst others are still interested in the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts by the tradition of which there are definite examples in the prophetic literature (e.g. Jer. 23:5-6 and 33:15-16). This article, as mentioned, focuses on how Micah is portrayed by the book of Micah.

In the next part of the article, the focus is on Micah 3:8 and 7:7 in their respective contexts.

Micah 3:8

‘But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin’ (NRSV).

וַיִּמְלֵךְ אֲנִי מִלְּאֵת יְהוָה וְעִי
^{WTT}מִיֹּדֶעַץ אֲנִי מִיָּדְעַת אֵל
וּמִיִּשְׁרָאֵל חָטְאוֹ: ׀

The verse of interest is Micah 3:8. Chapter 3 can be subdivided into the following sections, namely 3:1-4; 5-8 and 9-12. All three of these passages contain judgement proclamations concerning civil as well as religious leaders in society. Whereas the focus in 3:1-4 is on the political leaders who lack a sense of what is right and just, even blaming them for loving injustice and hating what is good. Micah thus reproached his people to return to God. He was specifically acrimonious towards the ruling classes, who in essence abused their positions of power to augment themselves at the expense of the poor in society.

The next section in 3:5-8, a judgement pronouncement, focuses on the religious leaders in the Judean society. In verses 5 and 6 the prophets are under scrutiny, whereas in verse 7 the prophet takes aim at the seers and the diviners. The prophets are blamed for proclaiming a false message of peace to those who offer them a reward, but destructive messaging for those who refuse something in return. To quote verse 5: ‘Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry ‘Peace’ when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing in their mouths’ (NRSV). Verse 6 conveys the outcome of the falseness by means of synonymous parallelism which compares night without vision and darkness without revelation. This implies that in the very essence of their function as prophets, they would fail because of their



deceit.

Verse 7 interestingly refers to the seers that will be disgraced and diviners that will be put to shame, again failing to live up to what they claim their function is, namely offering some revelation from the divine. In plain words, as Micah expresses it, there will be no answer from Yahweh. To conclude then, similar to the political leaders, the religious leaders have failed the society with their falseness and deceit. As a result, Yahweh will humiliate them in society by denying them to deliver what they profess they are able to do – to provide revelation and guidance from Yahweh. This now brings us to Micah 3:8.

Whereas in the previous three verses Micah served as the mouthpiece of Yahweh, he now in verse 8 speaks in the first-person singular on behalf of himself. In this verse, he clearly contrasts himself with the so-called religious leaders in society. He states the following: ‘But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of Yahweh, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin’ (NRSV). Commentators have weighed in on this verse for many different reasons. Some regard the wording ‘the Spirit of Yahweh’ as superfluous, as disturbing the rhythm of the verse and as a later addition to the original text that should be omitted. I am hesitant to easily omit sections in a verse just because it is in our rational approach to the text not fitting and problematic. I, therefore, side with those who argue that the verse should remain intact. The *nota accusative*, *rûah Yahweh*, should be taken as the object of the verb מלא (be filled), which is linked in verse eight with three nouns, namely power, justice, and might. Waltke acknowledges that there are difficulties with the grammar of this verse, but he is of the view that the accusative הַכֹּחַ (power), complements the verb מלא (Qal -filled). This verb on its part is again connected with the word combination *rûah Yahweh* (Waltke, 2007:166). He also regards the nouns מִשְׁפָּט (justice) and גְּבוּרָה (might) as accusatives complementing the Qal verb מלא (filled). It is an interesting phenomenon that power is associated with the performance of a prophet. It is, however, not strange for prophets to be associated with the *rûah Yahweh* (cf. 1 Sam. 10:6; 1 Kgs. 18:12; 22:21f; 2 Kgs. 2:9, 16 and Isa. 61:10).

Scholars have expressed a variety of meanings for the concept ‘power’ (כֹּחַ). These include suggestions such as ‘energy’ or ‘vigour’ (Waltke, 2000:166), a concept that describes the whole dynamic of the performance of a prophet (Renaud) or a way to express the physical and psychic strength shown when the prophet, as in Micah’s case, is facing opposition and discouraging circumstances (Wolff, 1981:73). In combination with the other two nouns mentioned in verse 8, Kessler’s view seems appropriate when he says that the concepts of power, justice and might are characteristics one would expect from a person who has been endowed with authority and has a leadership role (Kessler, 1999:157).

We can speculate or be creative when it comes to the meaning of the nouns mentioned in verse eight, but we should not lose sight of the fact that what we learn about Micah in 3:8 should be understood in contrast with the preceding verses (cf. Jenson, 2008:137). The leadership referred to in 3:1-4 is left in the dark with no answer or any kind of revelation to them because of the lack of knowledge of justice (מִשְׁפָּט).

The religious functionaries referred to in 3:5-7 are left powerless in terms of their basic revelatory function, because of their unjust behaviour and deceit (cf. Nogalski, 2011:548). In contrast to this, we learn that Micah is empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh, able to discern what is just and equipped with strength and courage to take a stand against people in leadership positions in his society. In this passage and in particular in 3:8, Micah is portrayed as a person of character, strength and courage.



Micah 7:7

'But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me' (NRSV).

וְאֲנִי בִּיהוָה אֶצְפֶּה **Micah 7:7**
אוֹחִילָה לַאלֹהִי יִשְׁעִי
יִשְׁמַעֲנִי אֱלֹהִי:

The next verse for consideration is Micah 7:7. This verse forms part of the passage 7:1-7, which is situated in the main section in the book of Micah chapters 6 and 7. Some regard these chapters as secondary additions to the book of Micah (McKane, 1998:7, 14). Andersen and Freedman (2000:23) are of the view that there is an undeniable major gap between chapters 1-5 and 6-7. Whether this is true or not, is not that important for the reasoning of this article, since in the final version of the book these passages are associated with the prophet Micah.

Views differ on what constitutes the section to which verse 7 belongs. Andersen and Freedman (2000:563) regard 7:1-6 and 6:7-12 as units and Smith-Christopher (2015:206, 208 and 214) from his side 7:1, 2-6 and 7-13. Waltke (2007:415) also takes 7:1-6 as a separate passage, but then discusses 7:7 separately stating 'The conjunction *wa'ānī* (*but I*) functions as a disjunctive to contrast the prophet's salvation with the nation's perdition' (Waltke, 2007:429). I agree with Waltke that verse 7 presents a contrast between the prophet and the nation, but I take 7:1-7 to be a unit, as does Nogalski (2011:578), with verses 1 and 7 forming an *inclusio*. Micah 7:1-7 differs in tone and content with the previous passage and is regarded as a lament. The seven verses can be subdivided into verses 1 (1st person and simile), 2-4a (3rd person), 4b (judgement proclamation), 5-6 (direct address) and verse 7 (1st person singular). Dempster (2017:173) has also observed that both verses 1 and 7 have a 1st person reference and thus reinforces the view that 7:1:7 is a distinct passage.

A brief summary of the content of this passage is necessary. Verse 1 is introduced with an interjection, setting the tone of a lament. There is some disagreement between scholars who the speaker in this regard is. O'Brien (2015:103) argues that the 1st person lamenting in 7:1-10 is the voice of the Daughter of Jerusalem. Dempster (2017:174) also interprets the lament as the prophet voicing Jerusalem's mourning. For Smith-Christopher (2015:206), it is the farmer-prophet lamenting in 7:1. The view taken in this article is that it is the prophet lamenting the dire conditions in Jerusalem and Judah, but also stating that Elohim is the source of salvation for him and by implication for Jerusalem and her people. The confession of the prophet in verse 7 might serve the purpose of indicating to the people of Jerusalem and Judah that a new dawn of hope is possible if they put their trust in Yahweh, their God (cf. Andersen and Freedman, 2000:577).

The prophet uses a simile of an orchard that has been gleaned, with no grapes or figs left to be eaten. He uses this to indicate the moral decay that has occurred in the Judean society, mentioning that there are no longer faithful people, that murders occur, that people hunt each other, leaders encourage people to do evil, judges ask for bribes and powerful people dictate their desires. All these people conspire to create a society of corruption and moral decay. This results in a toxic society, with the so-called upright people worse than a thorn hedge (4a). Verse 4b announces a day of judgement which will result in a time of confusion. Verses 5 and 6 shift the focus to the inner circle where there will be distrust between friends and even a lover should not be trusted. To make matters worse, sons will show contempt for their fathers and there will be animosity between a mother and a daughter, a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. Even worse, a man's enemies will be the people of his own household.



It should be clear from the content referred to in this passage, because of the moral decay at all levels of society – reaching from leaders to influential people in society to the most intimate relationships in households – that the issue of trust or the lack of it, is central.

With this in mind, Micah in the first person singular responds by contrasting himself with what was described in verses 2-6 (Jenson, 2008:182). The prophet states that whereas there is a lack of trust in his society that will have far-reaching consequences, his trust is solely in Yahweh, and that he is waiting expectantly on Elohim who is his saviour. He is convinced that Yahweh, his God, will hear him and come to his rescue in the midst of a society that has morally disintegrated. Verse 7 is, therefore, a confession of trust in Yahweh (cf. Nogalski, 2011:578) in a society where distrust is running rife. While he is lamenting the decay in the Judean society, he relishes the fact that he is in a trust relationship with Yahweh.

What this verse conveys regarding the person of the prophet Micah, is that he is steadfast in his relationship with Yahweh and that he is able to survive in a morally destructive society because he knows that Elohim is the one who will safeguard and rescue him. Most of all he knows that Yahweh will hear his lament and will come to his rescue. He is aware that patience will pay off in the end, because unlike people, Yahweh can be trusted. This verse is, therefore, a testimony to the character of Micah.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable to regard Micah as a person who was recognised, by tradition, as belonging to the prophetic tradition of Israel. He showed concern for the whole of his society. He is portrayed as a person with strong convictions, a strong sense for justice and the courage to speak out what he believed to be the word of Yahweh. According to Micah, God requires human beings to be just, love goodness, and walk humbly with God (6:6–8; cf. Brueggemann 2010:14).

The three passages discussed in this article only give us a sneak peek into the person who the book portrays as the messenger of Yahweh. He is a rural figure with a mission in Jerusalem. He does not form part of the city elite, instead, he is concerned about the abuses of the elite who do not champion justice, but abuse their power. They do not even spare the weak, but exploit them and steal their land (2:2). The issue of the unjust obtaining of land would surely have affected those in rural areas. It is therefore perhaps not by chance that the rural origin of this messenger of Yahweh is stated, but a deliberate attempt to give credence to his cause.

Micah 3:8 has also highlighted his confidence to address not only the political leadership in Judah, but also to oppose the religious leaders who are people of influence, but fail the people with their deceit. It is clear that Micah related his confidence in his mission and message to opposing parties to Yahweh's Spirit as the source of his strength. We learn from Micah 7:7 that Micah, in spite of the dire state of ethical demise and distrust in his society, has anchored his hope and trust in Elohim of Israel. It is his relationship with Yahweh that serves as his strength not to despair, but to rely on Elohim to be his saviour. It is tradition that recognizes Micah as a prophet, not the book of Micah. In the book of Micah, the person and the message he conveys seem to be intertwined. The focus is therefore not so much on the prophet, but on the message.

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