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Kessler, Rainer

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Micah in the Book of the Twelve

Rainer Kessler

In the Hebrew text of the book of the Twelve Micah marks the center of the collection. According to the full final masora at the end of the book of the Twelve (cf. BHS), the central verse of the book as a whole is Mic 3:12, the announcement of the destruction of Zion. This verse cannot be read without the verses which follow, namely the vision of mount Zion as the central place where the nations will receive torah from Yhwh (4:1). Zion destroyed and Zion reconstructed forms the middle of the book of the Twelve.

Before we have a look on the consequences to be drawn from the central position of the book two preliminary remarks are necessary. The first concerns the form of the text. Micah is the center of the Twelve *only in the Hebrew tradition*. The Greek translation has a different order. It places Micah at the third position after Hosea and Amos so that Micah no longer is in the central position.¹

The second remark is of hermeneutical character.² Reading the Twelve as a unity is possible on two different levels. One is the *level of the reader*. The reader is able to read any text as a unity; he or she constructs the unity. This needs not happen without hints within the text, but they are not decisive. What is decisive is the recipient who has the intention to read the text as a unity even if the text were the result of the mere juxtaposition of isolated books. The other *level* is that of *the author* or authors or compilers of the text. They may have had the intention to form a unity out of their material making intentional allusions between the books. The reader's task then is not to construct unity but to find out how the author(s) or compilers formed it.

The two levels are more or less identical with synchronic or diachronic reading of a given text. In the first section I will concentrate on synchronic reading. I do not insinuate that any author had the intention that the text should be read as I do it. I just note my observations as a reader.

1. Synchronic Approach

For a synchronic reading of the Twelve one can draw several consequences from the central position of the book of Micah.

1.1 Samaria's End and Jerusalem's Future

The central position of Micah highlights a fundamental difference between the two capitals Samaria and Jerusalem. In the first part of the book of the Twelve Samaria plays a prominent role. The first two books, Hosea and Amos, are dedicated to the Northern kingdom and

¹Some considerations on the position of Micah in the LXX and in other traditions can be found in Andersen and Freedman, *Micah*, 6–7.

²For the hermeneutical question cf. Kessler, "Twelve", 216–219.

mention its capital Samaria several times (Hos 7:1; 8:5–6; 10:5, 7; 14:1; Amos 3:9, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 8:14). Though Jonah does not mention the Northern capital he is supposed to be a prophet from the North who like Hosea and Amos prophesied in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash (2 Kgs 14:23–25). However, the end of Samaria comes in the first chapter of Micah, i.e. before we reach the center of the book: “I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards. I will pour down her stones into the valley, and uncover her foundations” (Mic 1:6).³ Micah’s oracle announces the definitive destruction of the town. “Uncovering her foundations” means that there is no hope for Samaria. It is effaced for ever.

Jerusalem is also mentioned in the first half of the Twelve but only in a marginal position (Amos 1:2; 2:5; Obad 11, 20), with the exception of Joel (3:5; 4:6, 16–17, 20; English 2: 32; 3:6, 16–17, 20). In the first part of Micah the question remains open whether Jerusalem will face the same fate as Samaria. The verses directed against the two capitals are formulated in nearly identical words. Samaria is threatened with becoming “a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards” (Mic 1:6), and Jerusalem will be “ploughed as a field” and become “a heap of ruins” and a “wooded height” (3:12).

The difference between the destinies of the two capitals can only be seen after passing from the first half of the Twelve which ends with Mic 3:12 to the second half. It begins with the upheaval of mount Zion whereas Samaria is never mentioned again in part two of the book of the Twelve. Only once, Mic 6:15 refers to Omri and Ahab, two Northern kings, but they are nothing but a warning for Judah not to behave like they did. After her destruction announced in Mic 1:6–7, Samaria has disappeared from the literary map of the book of the Twelve. That this is a merely literary device can be seen from the fact that historically Samaria was rebuilt soon after her destruction and played an important role in the Persian period. For the book of the Twelve, however, Samaria has come to an end in Mic 1.

1.2 Jerusalem’s Future and Her History

Samaria's fate is sharply contrasted by that of Jerusalem. At the center of the book of the Twelve, i.e. in Mic 3:12, we only know that both capitals will be devastated. However, passing from Mic 3:12 to 4:1–5 —in a piece of music one would say: after a general pause—, it seems clear that Jerusalem’s future shall be glorious. Zion will be the center of the world, the nations will stream to her and will receive torah from the God of Israel. The former Davidic dominion shall come to Jerusalem (Mic 4:8), Zion herself will “beat in pieces” the nations who threaten her (4:13), she will repent and be brought “out to the light” by Yhwh (7:9).

Jerusalem’s glorious future will not be achieved in a straight line. Mount Zion will be on the top of the mountains only “in the last days” (KJV) or “in the latter days.”⁴ Before this happens Jerusalem can be threatened again (Zef 1; 3:1–4). However, Jerusalem will not come to an end. She will be purged (Zef 3:9–20), the temple will be rebuilt (Haggai and Zech 1–8), and

³If not indicated otherwise English translations of biblical texts are taken from the NRSV.

⁴Waltke, *Micah*, 191.

after an act of purification “the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years” (Mal 3:4).

It is the book of Micah in the center of the Twelve where the different fates of Samaria and Jerusalem are decided.

1.3 The Fate of the Nations

Micah in the center of the Twelve is surrounded by two books which deal with the fate of Niniveh. In the book of Jonah, Niniveh is saved. The book of Nahum on the other side of Micah announces the final destruction of the Assyrian capital. The book of Micah is able to explain the apparent contradiction concerning the fate of Niniveh. Micah begins with a summons to the nations to listen: “Hear, you peoples, all of you” (Mic 1:2). In the book of Jonah Niniveh is ready to hear, so she can be saved. However, the composition of Mic 1–5 ends with the announcement of Yhwh's vengeance to be executed “on the nations that did not obey” (Mic 5:15). In Nahum Niniveh is portrayed as a city which did not obey and consequently is effaced.

The book of Micah in the center marks and gives reasons for the transgression from the sparing to the final destruction of Niniveh.

Observations noted until here exclusively refer to the final form of the text of the Twelve. They do not ask whether any layer had the intention to connect the texts and to formulate a certain message. The message taken from the text is the result of the recipient's construction. This, however, is not the last word.⁵ In the next section, I am going to collect hints that indicate intentions of authors or redactors to place Micah within the collection of the Twelve.

2. Diachronic Approach

As it is not possible to discuss all the proposals made during the last decennaries I will concentrate on the most obvious ones.

2.1 The Superscription

The superscription to the book of Micah shares mainly two characteristics with the headings of other books within the collection of the Twelve. Firstly, it is introduced as “The word of the LORD that came to Micah” (1:1), as it came to Hosea, Joel, and Zephaniah. And secondly, Micah is situated within the chronology of the kings of Judah and Israel in the same style as Hosea, Amos, and Zephaniah. These observations lead James Nogalski to the “tentative” conclusion “that Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah experienced a protracted transmission

⁵To come back to the last point 1.3: for Zapff, *Studien*, 241–279, it is a post-exilic layer of *Fortschreibungen* (FSM = *Fortschreibungsschicht im Michabuch*) which is responsible for the integration of Micah in the midst of Jonah and Nahum.

as part of a single corpus.”⁶ The thesis that a so called “book of the Four”⁷ formed one of the precursors of the book of the Twelve was widely accepted by a great number of scholars.⁸ Though questions about the character of the redaction remain open —is it “deuteronomistic,” and what does this mean?— it is highly probable that the similarity of the superscriptions is due to the will of a redaction which formed a smaller collection than the book of the Twelve.

2.2 The End of Samaria in Mic 1

Synchronic reading of the Twelve has shown that Samaria plays a role only in the first half of the book. The northern capital is mentioned last in Mic 1:2–7 where her definite end is announced. Within these verses we find two references to the books of Amos and Hosea which probably were placed here to deliberately allude to the two books of the northern prophets. Mic 1:3–4 describes a theophany of Yhwh who is “coming out of his place.” The next words are literally identical with one of the so called hymn fragments in Amos, Am 4:13: “and treads on the heights of the earth.” The same God who in Amos threatened the northern kingdom —Amos 4:1–4 explicitly mentions Samaria and the northern sanctuaries at Bethel and Gilgal— in Mic 1 comes to announce the end of Samaria.

The reason why Yhwh will destroy Samaria for ever is given in Mic 1:5a. The indictment speaks of “the transgression of Jacob” and “the sins of the house of Israel” (Mic 1:5a) without indicating in what they consist. The reader is expected to have read Hosea and Amos to understand why Yhwh has come to put an end to Samaria. Later in the text a list of transgressions and corresponding punishments is given: “All her images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste; for as the wages of a prostitute she gathered them, and as the wages of a prostitute they shall again be used.” It is difficult to understand the verse without having read Hosea before. Not only the accusation of idolatry, but nearly the whole vocabulary is taken from the first book of the Twelve: the “images” (Hos 11:2), the “wages” (2:14; 9:1), the “idols” (4:17; 8:4; 13:2; 14:9), and especially the central metaphor of the “prostitute” (1:2; 2:6–7; 3:3; 4:10–15, 18; 5:3–4; 6:10; 9:1).

Scholars have made different proposals to explain the diachronic history of Mic 1.9 But nearly all agree that the respective verses were formulated to connect the beginning of the book of Micah with Hosea and Amos, be it by the author of Mic 1, be it by a redactor who introduced the allusions.

2.3 Micah's Critique

Many of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible are critical against their contemporaries and their religious, economic, social, and political behavior. In the book of the Twelve, this is especially

⁶Nogalski, *Precursors*, 278. Cf. Corzilius, *Rätsel*, 47–48.

⁷Albertz, *Exilszeit*, 165–167; Wöhrle, *Sammlungen*, 51–284.

⁸But cf. Levin, “Vierprophetenbuch,” who fiercely contests the thesis.

⁹See the short summary in Corzilius, *Rätsel*, 30–32.

true for Amos and Hosea as well as for Micah and for Zephaniah (perhaps another hint at a former “book of the Four”). Hosea's religious critique against Samaria was alluded to or even quoted in Mic 1:7. Amos' social critique also reappears in Micah, especially in two places.

Mic 3:1–4 is an accusation of the “heads of Jacob” and the “rulers of the house of Israel.” Micah here “is inveighing against wicked and cruel government.”¹⁰ After having summoned them to listen, the text says: “Should you not know justice?— you who hate the good and love the evil ...” (3:2b–3a). Three characteristics of these few words are identical with Amos 5:15a: “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.” Both texts have the oppositions of love and hate as well as good and evil, and both substantiate loving good by knowing or establishing justice. There can be little doubt that there is mutual influence between the two texts¹¹ though it must remain open whether the compilers of the text of Micah knew the formulation of Amos 5 or, vice versa, the author of Amos 5 already had the text of Micah in mind.

The second example also displays verbal similarities between Micah and Amos. Like in the first case, we must leave it open whether the text of Amos is influenced by Micah or vice versa. The oracle in Mic 6:9–16 accuses the rich in a “city” —probably Jerusalem, but no name is given (6:9). The vocabulary of the next verses is very close to that of Amos 8:4–7, words also directed against rich people. In both texts we find the “ephah” as a measure adulterated by the rich, the false “balances,” and the noun *mirmāh* (“deceit”) for “deceptive” balances and weights (Amos 8:5 and Mic 6:10–11). Both texts probably are part of a later redaction within their respective books. The redactors follow a tendency to bring the two prophets into line with each other.

2.4 The Last Verses of Micah, the Book of Amos and the Beginning of Nahum

A last example for the strategy to anchor Micah within the Twelve can be found in the last verses of the book. Mic 7:18–20 is full of allusions to the so called grace formula of Exod 34:6–7a. In Exodus it reads: “The LORD, the LORD, a God (Hebrew: *’ēl*) merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...” The last verses of Micah also use *’ēl* for “God,” they speak of his “anger” which he does not retain for ever (v. 18), they mention God's mercy (v. 19) and attribute “steadfast love” and “faithfulness” to him. There is no doubt that the author of these verses knows and cites the grace formula from the book of Exodus.

One formulation in Mic 7:18–20 has no literal correspondence in Ex 34:6–7. Whilst the Exodus text says: “*forgiving* iniquity and transgression and sin,” Mic 7:18 uses “*passing over* the transgression.” What seems to be a mere variation of words in fact is of high significance. For the Hebrew phrase for “passing over,” *’ābar ’al*, is prominent in Amos 7:8; 8:2 where God says that he will “never again pass them by.” The God who once did not spare the

¹⁰McKane, *Micah*, 100.

¹¹Schart, *Entstehung*, 185.

northern kingdom of Israel is going to pass over Judah's transgressions.¹² It seems clear that by the choice of these words the author of Mic 7:18–20 deliberately links Micah with Amos.

Obviously, the author of the last verses of Micah stops his quotation of the grace formula at a certain point. He omits the negative part of the formula: "... yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Exod 34:7b). However, this part of the formula, at least its theology, is taken up by the first verses of Nahum: "A jealous and avenging God is the LORD, the LORD is avenging and wrathful ... The LORD is slow to anger but great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty" (Nah 1:2–3).

The end of Micah and the beginning of Nahum read together contain the full grace formula with both its positive and negative parts. Only the reading of the two books completes the formula. So we can conclude that the reception of the grace formula at the end of Micah and the beginning of Nahum forms *one* text out of the *two* books.¹³

3. Allusions to Micah in the Twelve

Micah is (the central) part of the Twelve not only by a reading strategy. The book is linked to the Twelve not only by references within Micah to other books of the Twelve. Micah is also integrated into the Twelve by allusions or quotations made in books other than Micah.

3.1 Joel and Micah

A clear allusion to Micah is Joel 4:10 (Engl. 3:10). A heavenly voice calls to prepare war: "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears." According to the text weapons are necessary to overcome the "great wickedness" of the nations (4:13, Engl. 3:13). God who dwells on Mount Zion is a stronghold for his people. No enemy will ever again pass through Jerusalem.

The verses are at the same time complementary and a contrast to Mic 4:1–4. Here too, Yhwh dwells on Mount Zion and his people live in absolute security: "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." Yet the nations will not come to fight Israel but to learn torah from Yhwh. So there is no more need of weapons: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks."

Both texts speak of the future. Read in sequence, however, Joel 4 aims at a nearer future to come before the "end of the days" (Mic 4:1). First, the nations must be tamed, then they can come to Zion to receive instruction from Yhwh. The two texts clearly refer to each other and form a logical sequence in time. However, although the literal allusion between the two texts is unambiguous the reading strategy depends on the text basis. In the Greek tradition where Joel follows Micah quite a different interpretation is needed.

¹²Kessler, *Micha*, 52, 310.

¹³Cf. Baumann, *Gewalt*, 94–102.

3.2 Micah and Zephaniah

As evident as the allusion of Joel 4:10 (Engl. 3:10) to Mic 4:3 is that of Mic 4:6 to Zeph 3:19. In Mic 4:6 Yhwh announces that he will “assemble the lame and gather the outcast,” Zeph 3:19 repeats that he will “save the lame and gather the outcast.” At the end of the book of Zephaniah, the author or redactor reminds that God's final will is to save his people in spite of the announcement of the terrible “day of the LORD” in Zeph 1. Micah and Zephaniah are linked together. It is hardly possible to decide whether this occurred on the level of an assumed “book of the Four,” or whether this is a device to underline the unity of the Twelve.

3.3 Micah and Habakuk

A last link should be mentioned though it is not of great weight for the composition of the Twelve. Mic 3:10 accuses the one who builds “Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity.” Hab 2:12 uses the same words in a woe-oracle: “Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity!” (RSV) In Micah it is clear that the accusation is directed against the leadership of Judah. Habakuk is much more ambivalent. The town has no name. It could be Jerusalem, but also Babel —note the Chaldeans mentioned in Hab 1:6. Perhaps Hab 2:12 has a distributive meaning: whoever builds a town with blood and iniquity is going to perish like Jerusalem was destroyed in the center of the book of the Twelve (Mic 3:12).

4. A Final Warning

I hope I could demonstrate that Micah is the center of the Twelve not only by pure coincidence. The book is well integrated in the context. Reading strategies to read Micah as part of the Twelve are not based on arbitrariness.

Yet two warnings are necessary. The first was already uttered in the course of this paper: nearly everything depends on which text we read, the Hebrew tradition or the Greek text. The Greek text not only by the diverging order of the books but also by the vocabulary used offers perspectives which are not identical with those of the Hebrew tradition.

Secondly, it must be added that some of the intertextual allusions between Micah and other books of the Twelve are not exclusive. The opposition of good and bad and their perversion shared by Amos 5:15 and Mic 3:1–4 also appears in Isa 5:20. As the vision of Mic 4:1–4 of the nations coming to Mount Zion has a nearly literal parallel in Isa 2:2–4 the link between Mic 4:3 and Joel 4:10 (Engl. 3:10) should be extended to a possible redactional layer covering Isaiah and the Twelve. Besides, Micah has some more parallels with Isaiah that lead Gary Stansell to conclude “that fairly early in the tradition and redaction of their sayings, their (i.e. Micah's and Isaiah's) prophecy was understood as standing in the closest possible relationship.”¹⁴ Later layers of the book of Micah have significant similarities with texts

¹⁴Stansell, *Micah and Isaiah*, 135. – Zapff, “Book of Micah,” 134 even speaks of “an 'Isaianization' of Micah.”

from Jeremiah.¹⁵ A common tradition within the same group of scribes or even a common redaction cannot be excluded.

Micah is a well integrated part of the book of the Twelve. However, Micah is also part of the corpus of the later prophets. There is still much work to do to trace a redaction history of this corpus.¹⁶

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¹⁵Cf. the short summary in Kessler, *Micha*, 49–50.

¹⁶I underline the words of Zapff, „Book of Micah,“ 144: „When concentrating on the relations between Micah and the Book of the Twelve, interpreters should not neglect its relationship to the tradition of Isaiah,“ adding myself: ... and that of Jeremiah.

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