



The Book of the Twelve Micah

Micah Introduction

The Book of Micah presents another 8th-century BCE prophet from the Book of the Twelve, but unlike Amos and Hosea, Micah prophesizes concerning both the northern and southern kingdoms. The content feels very reminiscent of Amos: YHWH coming down to tread on the high places in 1:3, the mountains melting in 1:4, all because of Israel's sin as shown in 1:5. Micah is rife with archetypal 8th century BCE prophetic material, from the scenes we have become accustomed to from Amos and Hosea to the very clear focus on social justice. Where this text begins to distinguish itself, however, is in the target of its ire: rather than aiming its critique at the wealthy and elite in general, it very specifically calls out the priestly and prophetic leaders of the time.

Speaking truth to power

If there's one thing prophets do, it's speak truth to power – but power in the ancient world didn't always simply mean monarchy. In Micah we see very clearly the notion of competing rival schools or camps of prophets: Micah is on one side of the debate, critiquing and condemning the other side. He does not blame the common people for the misdoings of the nation, but rather their leaders; this is clearly a dig at the professional courtly prophets whose job Micah sees is only to prop up and support the wealthy and powerful. Chapter 3 even contains accusations of literal cannibalism: the rich are eating the poor, an unintentionally ironic twist to a phrase we know well from our modern era. Whether this is textual hyperbole or a claim that had actual weight behind it is unclear, but in either world Micah levies a heavy criticism at those in leadership roles who are benefiting economically from their positions, but who are not actually helping the people. His message forms a powerful indictment of Israel's leaders, and especially of those who prop them up.

Conflicting prophetic authorities

It is easy in the modern day to look at the biblical prophets, such as those from the Book of the Twelve, and to say that because we receive them from thousands of years of transmission it's obvious that they were the right prophets. But imagine these prophets in their historical contexts, before they had texts attributed to their names, before they had centuries and centuries of time to prove them legitimate. The situation was far from simple in antiquity: Micah, as is clear from 2:6 and 3:5 for example, was just one of several prophets operating in Israel at that time, and obviously had a message that was deeply contrarian to these other schools of prophecy. Micah, it seems, much like Amos, did not belong to a prophetic institution – how would he have been received? As a nobody

yelling from a street corner? It is important to remember the spotlight that history places on the people whom, at the time, could never have benefited from such highlighting.

It is also important to remember that there were many more prophets than we have texts for – the vast majority of prophets and their words are lost to us, even their names. Even the actual texts that make up the individual works of the Book of the Twelve – are they the actual words of the prophets they claim to be? Is the Book of Micah the actual words of the prophet, or are these prophecies that came to be associated with Micah's name later on? There is a prophet by the name of Micah mentioned in Jeremiah, but is this even the same Micah? In truth, we simply have no way of knowing. The gap of time and culture is incredibly hard, many times impossible, to cross. We don't even really know what an ancient prophet would actually have been doing day-to-day – would they have been writing? Probably not; are these texts the result of someone transcribing their message? Are they the writings of later schools inspired by an original prophet? It is, unfortunately, hard to know anything with any degree of certainty.

The Book of Micah

As previously mentioned, Micah is fairly typical for an 8th-century BCE prophet, particularly in chapters 1 to 3. However, suddenly, in chapter 4, Micah suddenly starts to sound like Isaiah – Micah 4:1-3 is almost word-for-word identical to Isaiah 2:2-4. This passage begins to talk about being assembled, which is an odd thematic thread for an 8th-century BCE prophet to pick up; it becomes apparent that, almost certainly, Micah is speaking as though the exile has happened already. 4:9 speaks about former Israel's former monarchy, an odd thing to say if originally written in the 8th century BCE when both Israel and Judah had kings, and from 5:7 onward there is explicit language of restoration. This is a clear example from the Book of the Twelve of a text that has been very openly expanded in the later exilic and/or post-exilic period. What can we learn from this apparent fact?

A composite work

What is true of the Book of the Twelve as a whole, that is to say, a collection that features multiple authors, written across multiple times periods, can also be said of the individual texts found within, such as Micah. This helps us to understand how we should be reading these works – there is no one single author sitting down to write one single full book to completion, as we expect from modern authors. Indeed, even the claimed or traditional author is not necessarily the actual author or authors of a text. These expanded sections, such as in Micah, are additions to older traditions. Earlier prophets criticized Israel and prophesied doom; these later communities subsequently read these texts post-doom, post-exile, and perhaps added on to them to include new messages of hope and restoration to speak to their own time and communities. These texts are most often expanded and reconfigured in order to address new situations: people read these texts, and see the immense value they hold, but they also need them to speak to their own situations and circumstances. Thus, they are expanded, and reinterpreted by a new community for new times.