Jacobs, Mignon R.

*The Conceptual Coherence of the Book of Micah*

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Jacobs’ thesis is that “the final form of the Book of Micah exhibits a conceptual coherence discernible through its structure and generated by its conceptuality.” (p. 11) In contrast to earlier research on the Book of Micah and the prophetic books in general, which saw the texts as disunified based on the discovery of inconsistency, Jacobs carries out a sustained analysis of the text in order to discern the book’s conceptual coherence.

Part I is titled “History and Method.” In her review of prior research (Chapter 1), she chronicles and analyzes the ways in which scholars have viewed the coherence or lack thereof in the final form of the text. There has been a shift over the years. Scholars of the late Nineteenth Century through the first half of the Twentieth were more concerned with traditional historical-critical questions, while in recent decades analyses of the book have tended to focus more on literary unity and coherence. This newer trend raises the challenge of defining coherence and analyzing the text’s conceptuality. Jacobs demonstrates that authors’ presuppositions about the book’s conceptuality are determinative for how each explains the book’s structure and coherence. She provides a perceptive framework for analyzing their conclusions. This chapter is stimulating and makes an original contribution in a way that few histories of research do.

In Chapter 2, “Methodological Concerns,” Jacobs seeks to extend and deepen the work of three others who have tried to understand the nature of the coherence of the Book of Micah. Between recounting the details of these studies in Chapter I and her analyses of their work in this chapter, Jacobs builds her foundation on J. T. Willis (“The Structure, Setting, and Interrelationships of the Pericopes in the Book of Micah,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1996; see also “The Structure of the Book of Micah,” *SEA* 34 (1969), pp. 5-42.); D. G. Hagstrom (*The Coherence of the Book of Micah: A*

Jacobs gives careful attention to focusing the question and defining crucial terms. She is especially concerned with the nature of conceptuality, as the overarching idea that accounts for what is said and controls the selection and crafting of the text (pp. 48-49). The conceptual framework generates the thesis (the intent of the work) and will demonstrate itself by means of discernible textual features such as structures and concepts. In the different structural levels and units of a book there may be many conceptualities. Our task is to discern these conceptualities, the coherence they each exhibit, and their interrelationships within the whole. Coherence is the “conceptual interrelationship of the parts of a work.” (p. 51) Conceptual coherence refers to the “interrelationship of the various conceptualities toward an overarching conceptuality.” (p. 49) According to Jacobs, the proper realm of coherence is the conceptuality of the whole, and not of the individual units. We must seek the larger purpose for which the smaller elements were brought together. (p. 52) Jacobs takes the types of coherence suggested by Cuffey (1987)—internal linkage, structural linkage, perspective, and theme—and describes them as essential aspects of a single complex phenomenon, rather than different types of coherence. Most importantly, she links thematic coherence with her conceptuality of the text. (p. 53) Her work employs “concept-critical analysis,” which complements both form criticism and literary criticism. The objectives of the concept-critical process include 1) identifying the form of the extant text; 2) discerning the various concepts within the whole; 3) discerning the text’s particular conceptualities; and 4) discerning the conceptuality of the text by distinguishing between the governing concept and its supporting concepts. (pp. 54-56)

This raises the issue of terminology. Jacobs uses a number of similar, even overlapping, terms to discuss the phenomenon of coherence—coherence, cohesion, theme, unity, concept, conceptuality, conceptual framework, conceptual interrelationships, concept-criticism, and conceptual coherence (see especially pp. 48-52). In and of itself, this is confusing. The number of similar, but distinguished, terms makes the discussion difficult to follow at a number of points. Further illustration and simplification would help. Although there is a conscious effort to give definitions, there is a need for more concrete illustration through textual examples of exactly what each of these (slightly) different ideas is referring to. As I read, I wished that there had even been an introductory section with complete definitions prior to Chapter 1, since the definitions were assumed in the discussion of the history of research (e.g., in the treatment of Weiser, p. 24 or Lescow, p. 29).

Part II is devoted to “Analysis of the Text.” Chapter 3 addresses the structure and coherence of the Book of Micah. Jacobs examines proposals for understanding the book’s structure and evaluates the assumed (or explicit) ideas of coherence—both what it is and what constitutes it in an ancient Hebrew text. A scholar’s understanding of the conceptuality of the text determines the proposal made concerning the structure of the
whole book. An analysis of both the macrostructure and the microstructure of the whole book is necessary. The macrostructure is the result of redactional activity and can be discerned through study both of the interrelationship of the varied indicators of coherence and of the thought progression in the book (pp. 60-64).

Jacobs suggests that the book is to be understood in two larger units, chapters 1-5 and 6-7. The focus of 1-5 is on Israel’s fate in the light of her sin and God’s response to that sin. Chapters 6-7 feature the particular relationship between Israel and God. She also offers a detailed outline of the microstructure of the book in order to show the conceptual flow of the whole and to demonstrate the various levels at which the text exhibits coherence. For example, the development and flow of thought in chapters 1-5 can be traced from a focus on the fates of Samaria and Jerusalem in 1, to an explanation of the reasons for God’s displeasure in 2-3, with an announcement of promise for the future beyond the judgment in 4-5 (pp. 65-76).

A detailed analysis of the text of the Book of Micah is found in Chapters 4 and 5. Jacobs considers the different levels and spheres of conceptual coherence that can be found in the structure and the compositional history of the text. Her goal is to uncover the conceptual coherence of the final form, and show the various levels of coherence indicated by the extant structure of the book. Each smaller unit that is a part of the whole may exhibit its own coherence, the coherence of certain units being more discernible than others. Chapter 4 is devoted to a detailed textual examination of the conceptual coherence of Micah 1-5; Chapter 5 focuses on Micah 6-7.

There are problems with the structure proposed. Certain textual indicators of coherence make it difficult to maintain the structure of 1-5/6-7 for the final form. The presence of a section of promise in 2:12-13 breaks up 2:1-3:12 as a unit. To regard 4:1-5:14 as a whole does not adequately account for the thematic link (leadership) between 3:1-12 and 4:1-8, ignores the break between 4:8 and 9, and the patterns of intermixing of doom and hope in 4:9-5:14. Nor is the presence of four strategically located passages which mention the remnant factored into the overall picture (cf. p. 227).

Part III, “Discerning Conceptuality,” includes the final two chapters. In Chapter 6, “Concepts and Conceptuality,” Jacobs suggests that structural indicators and conceptual elements contribute to coherence. She turns to the analysis of the conceptual elements in the text. The “concept-critical method” sees texts as multi-conceptual units with concepts operating on different levels. Her proposal is that “the interrelationship of the indicators within the text and their conceptual presuppositions are essential for understanding the conceptuality and thus the conceptual coherence of the text.” (p. 196) An analysis of four main concepts—justice, sin, judgment, hope—and the quantity, typicality, and salience of their indicators (both explicit and implicit) allows Jacobs to pinpoint the conceptuality of the Book of Micah as concerning the fate of Israel. The people have sinned and face the threat of judgment for that sin. Yet the final word is not judgment, but hope in a future that lies beyond the judgment (p. 223).

Chapter 7 provides “Synthesis and Conclusion.” The conceptual coherence of the final form of the text reflects the concerns of the final redactors, who may have reconceptualized the message of the text from that which Micah had originally
proclaimed. Here Jacobs makes a clear statement of the coherence of the whole. The text’s coherence is generated by the conceptuality of God’s justice and mercy as significant determinants of Israel’s fate. This accounts for the presence of both judgment and hope sections. The next subsection reflects on the nature of coherence—it can be found at different levels of the text, in units of differing sizes, and depends on the clarity of the indicators. She closes by suggesting areas for further study. The Appendix (pp. 231-59) offers the author’s translation of the Book of Micah and explanations of text-critical matters.

In the overall presentation many helpful features have been included, which aid in following both Jacobs’ discussion and the text of the Book of Micah—e.g., tables and charts (pp. 43, 62), a detailed outline (pp. 76-80), or a diagram of the conceptual framework of justice (p. 203). There are proof-reading concerns (e.g., “God is patient, low to anger,” p. 121). Some of the references would be more easily found if full information, especially page numbers, were included (e.g., p. 99, note 5; or a reference to an earlier chart, p. 144).

Jacobs has treated coherence in a consistent and meticulous manner. Her insights into the biblical text and the nature of coherence will prove helpful to many other scholars and discussions. However, it would be helpful to incorporate her results into a broader definition of coherence that would open research to additional features of the text. Throughout the book, the definition of coherence is too restricted and hence, restricting in the study of the text. To focus the discussion of coherence on concepts (pp. 51-52) seems to allow little room for the connectedness that arises from links that may not tie everything together under one theme. Levels of linkages less than the panoramic view of the whole, as well as connections effected by literary features, all should be taken into account in a study of coherence.

The implications and program for further study which Jacobs enunciates are commendable. It will prove beneficial to push for a broader use and application of coherence theory (pp. 225-227). The ongoing discussion calls for analyses of the coherence found in other prophetic books, in the Book of the Twelve as a whole, and in other parts/genres of the Old Testament, as well as in other (extrabiblical) works. Comparative studies of the process of determining coherence in large as opposed to small prophetic books may disclose significant insights about the levels on which coherence operates (p. 228). The excellent parallels Jacobs points out between deriving a biblical theology from the text and searching for coherence can be explored with great benefit by biblical theologians (p. 229).

This is a thoughtful piece of scholarship that has advanced the discussion of the coherence of the Book of Micah significantly. Jacobs has taken a rather more narrow view of coherence than others and developed a rigorous approach to finding its indicators in the text. Her thorough analysis of the book’s final form delves into the minute details and at the same time considers the overarching picture. In discussing conceptuality, she has developed a detailed and sophisticated approach to doing a topical/thematic study, refined in methodology and conclusions. The data from the final form of the text and from studies of crucial concepts are integrated together into a discussion of the overall
conceptual coherence of the book. Jacobs’ work is a prerequisite for methodology and theory for further study of the nature of coherence and its expressions in Micah, the other prophetic books, and beyond.