Ben Zvi, Ehud

*Micah*

The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 21B


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Volume XXIB in the series The Forms of the Old Testament Literature presents a form-critical study of the Book of Micah. In accordance with the aim of the series the volume examines the structure, genre, setting and intention of both the individual units and the book as a whole. Ben Zvi argues that the Book of Micah presents itself as an authoritative writing that was composed to be read and reread time and again. The primary readership of the book was a group of literati who were competent to read and thus became the intermediaries or brokers of divine knowledge for their illiterate or less competent contemporaries. The importance of the social identity, the world of knowledge, the theology and ideology of the primary readership for the message of the book calls for the identification of this readership. The historical setting of the authorship and readership of these texts is characterized by the social and historical circumstances that allow for the training and maintenance of the cadres of literati and the production, reading and rereading of their works. The emphasis on the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem, the exile and salvation, the Jerusalem-centered theology that permeates the book as well as the social and economic resources necessary for the production of such literary works all point to the temple community in the late Persian period. The world in which the book was composed, read and reread thus differs from the world evoked by the text: the monarchic period. The readership was invited to read the book against the background of the circumstances of the monarchic period, but at the same time they were asked not to historicize the text in such a way that their reading was influenced by any particular event in their recollection of the past. The fulfillment of the announcement of judgment and destruction from the monarchic period as seen from the perspective of the
postmonarchic readership served to enhance the authority and validity of the oracles of salvation that had not yet been fulfilled. The primary intention of the book was thus to explain the punishment of the past and to express hope for the future.

The approach adopted by Ben Zvi has serious consequences for the form-critical classification of the whole book and its individual units. The presence in the text of multivalent expressions, multiple connotations, puns and networks of various readings informing each other which can only be understood by competent literati entails that the predominant genre in the book is the ‘prophetic reading.’ Apart from the book as a whole and the introduction or superscription all the units and subunits in the Book of Micah are in fact characterized as ‘prophetic readings.’ A ‘reading’ may be defined as ‘a literary unit within a larger text written to be read and reread that show textually inscribed markers that were likely to suggest to the intended readership of the book that they were supposed to read and reread these sections of the book as cohesive reading units’ (Glossary). The traditional form-critical categories as ‘law-suit’, ‘dirge’, ‘prophetic announcement of judgment’ or ‘disputation speech’ thus have to give way to the uniform classification of these units as ‘prophetic reading.’ Ben Zvi readily agrees that the various units are written so as to evoke the genre in question, but he hastens to add that the genre is also defamiliarized, as the text does not meet the expectations and associations of the readers familiar with that particular genre. In the ‘prophetic announcement of judgment’ in Micah 2:1-5, for example, the addressees of the accusation in vv.1-2 are not identical with the persons against whom the judgment is delivered in vv. 3-5. Whereas the indictment in vv.1-2 addresses a small group of evildoers, the announcement of judgment in vv.3-5 is directed against the people as a whole, as may be clear from the expression ‘al hammispahah hazzot in v. 3a and the reference to the people in its entirety in v. 4ab, ba and perhaps also in v. 5. Moreover, the execution of the sentence is postponed to a later day and time by means of the phrase ki ‘et ra’ah hi’ in v.3bb and the subsequent bayyom hahu’ in v. 4aa. In the traditional historical-critical commentaries the parts that cause these discrepancies are normally attributed to a later editor who applied the prophecies of the eighth century prophet to the fate of the entire people in the days of the Babylonian exile. Ben Zvi, on the other hand, considers the tensions in the present text as a deliberate ploy so as to create a multiplicity of readings, which create a tapestry of meanings for the literati who composed, read and reread the book.

The exegesis offered by Ben Zvi may be appreciated as a serious attempt to make sense of the present text of the Book of Micah. However, the question may be raised whether an author can really be attributed with the composition of this type of incoherent texts so full of ambiguity and polymesy. The ‘literary competence’ necessary to understand written and spoken texts first and foremost implies the ability to recognize the genre of the text in question. The communication between writer and reader cannot but fail without at least a common recognition of the genre to which a text belongs. The ‘defamiliarization’ of the genres observed in the texts nevertheless presents a problem. Ben Zvi stresses that the texts offer no indication that they should be read against the
background of their proposed redaction history. Be that as it may, the shift from an accusation addressed at a small group of evildoers to an announcement of judgment directed at the people as a whole, may rather be understood as a conscious attempt to apply the oracles of an eighth century prophet to the fate of the entire people about a century later, than an incoherent utterance of the late Persian period that tends to function as a secret code aimed at a small circle of initiates competent to decipher the numerous clues hidden in the text.

The substitution of the traditional form-critical categories by the uniform genre designation ‘reading’ may work out disadvantageous in more than one way. The volume turns out to be quite repetitious as the discussion of the genre, setting and intention of the individual units in the Book of Micah time and again yields the same results. Moreover, the use of the traditional form-critical categories may also have something to contribute to the correct interpretation of the individual units. The conclusion of the first ‘prophetic announcement of judgment’ in Micah 2:1-5 may well be considered as a succinct characterization of the punishment: ‘you will have no one to cast the measuring line by lot’, which refers to the redistribution of land either among those who were not taken into exile or the foreign invaders (cf. Amos 7:17: ‘your land will be redistributed by the measuring line’). The verse may, therefore, hardly convey a message of hope as Ben Zvi would have it (p. 47). The transition from the quotation of the objections raised by the audience to the refutation of these objections by the prophet/YHWH in the ‘disputation speech’ in Micah 2:6-11, may rather be perceived in the expression halo’, “Is it not ...?” in v.7b, as is more often the case in a disputation speech (e.g. Isa 40:28; Mal 1:2b), than at the beginning of v.8. A traditional form-critical analysis would thus render obsolete the ‘fluid identification of the speaker’ in v.7 as discourse of both the evildoers and YHWH, assumed by Ben Zvi (pp. 58-59). The oracle directed against Migdal-Eder in Micah 4:8 is just as its counterpart in Micah 5:1 addressed to a small town in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The two oracles whose format may have been derived from the tribe sayings address the town in the second person masculine singular, followed by a short specification and a prepositional phrase that introduces a statement about the leadership of Israel. Whereas Micah 4:8 envisages the flight of the former king to the last stronghold at the south flank of Jerusalem, Micah 5:1 announces the arrival of a new king from Bethlehem-Ephrathah. A traditional form-critical analysis thus stands in marked contrast to the interpretation favored by Ben Zvi who argues that the oracle in Micah 4:8 is directed against the city of Jerusalem, which is addressed in the second person masculine singular in v.8 instead of the second person feminine singular as in vv.9-10, 14 on account of the context, i.e. the link created by the personal pronoun ‘atta, ‘you’, in v.8 and the adverb ‘atta, ‘now’, in vv.9, 11, 14 (109-110). Etc., etc. ... Although this volume offers many interesting thoughts, the uniform classification of each and every unit in the Book of Micah as ‘prophetic reading’ ultimately questions the decision to include it in a series which is devoted to the determination of the typical forms, setting and functions of Old Testament texts.