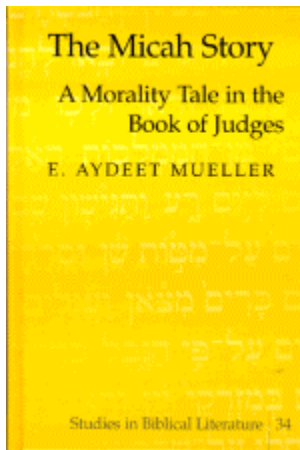


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Mueller, E. Aydeet

The Micah Story: A Morality Tale in the Book of Judges

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This book is based upon Mueller's dissertation, "Commending Covenant Morality: The Narrative and Function of the Micah Story in the Book of Judges." It investigates the interests served by Judg 17:1–18:31 and claims that this story has to be regarded as a morality tale in the Deuteronomic tradition that polemicizes against covenantal disobedience as well as against a king who fails to exhort his people to covenantal behavior (2).

Chapter 1 (7–50) gives a historical survey of scholarly contributions to the Micah story, concentrating on the questions of its formation and authorship, its literary character and its major themes, leading to critical observations. Mueller divides this overview of the story's history of research into three sections: (1) from Julius Wellhausen to Martin Noth, (2) from Moshe Weinfeld to Robert H. O'Connell, and (3) from Baruch Halpern to Marvin Sweeney. At the end she states rightly that a multicolored palette of conflicting arguments and interpretations is offered, and this without any neglect of new questions raised (32). Nevertheless, she misses considerations on the moral purpose of the Micah story and the view of its author as a teacher in the Deuteronomic tradition (33)—which is her own thesis.

Chapter 2 (51–102) offers Mueller’s own examination of Judg 17:1–18:31. Thus she subdivides the text into eight parts: 17:1–6, 7–13; 18:1–6, 7–10, 11–14, 15–20, 23–27, 31 (51). Unfortunately, 18:21–22 is missing. Then the story is analyzed in three “steps”: 17:1–6, 7–13; 18:1–31.

According to Mueller, in 17:1–6 the author is critical not only of Micah but also of his mother, who sets him on the path of idolatry (54). The repetition of verbs is noticed in 17:2–4 and explained as serving a didactic purpose: readers are invited to identify themselves with Micah’s struggle whether or not to tell the truth (55). This and also the growing number of cultic items in 17:4–5 mirrors the increasing estrangement between Micah and YHWH. Mueller lets this passage conclude with verse 6. But in my opinion, this verse opens the next section, just as 18:1, with wording close to 17:6, opens chapter 18. The equal endings of 17:5 and 17:13 also point to the subdivision 17:1–5, 6–13.

Commenting on 17:7, Mueller argues that the contradicting descent of the young man (“of Judah” versus “Levite”) intends to equate his hazy background with the hazy motives of his actions (62). The entirety of 17:7–13 (or 17:6–13) shows Micah’s alienation from YHWH in his improper search for guidance and security (63).

Judges 18:1–31 also depicts Micah’s estrangement from YHWH, but now on the side of the Danites. There is a lack of communication and, consequently, an absence of YHWH’s involvement (67). But according to Mueller, the author of these verses also enjoins readers not to act like Micah. They should rather repent and put their trust in YHWH alone (72).

In the next section Mueller throws light upon the Deuteronomic tradition as background of the Micah story. This is indicated by changing the name Micayah (17:1, 4) to Micah (17:5, 8, etc.), omitting its theophoric nature (76), and, above all, by the long list of Deuteronomic commands disobeyed in the whole story—reaching from the Shema to the Decalogue and finally to specific directives (e.g., Deut 27:15 [77–82]). In sum, the Micah story plays out a scenario emphatically forbidden in Deuteronomy (82) and shows covenantal misbehavior as its major theme (84). Its aim is to encourage an educated audience to refrain from behaving in the same way as the depicted persons.

Turning to 17:6 and 18:1, Mueller concludes that the author of the Micah story is also critical of the king's failure to uphold a covenantal behavior among his people (103). Thus, these verses are not editorial comments (104); they may possibly refer to a particular king who missed guidance to covenantal behavior and failed to keep from idolatry (105–6). Although this is a potential interpretation, it may also overemphasize the role of these two verses within the whole story.

Chapter 3 (103–24) illustrates skillfully how masterly the Micah story fits into the entire book of Judges. Here other kings are also depicted negatively (cf. Abimelech in 9:1–57; Adoni-bezek in 1:1–7; Cushan-rishathaim in 3:8–10; Eglon in 3:12–30; Jabin/Sisera in 4:17–23 and 5:2–28; the king of the Ammonites in 11:4–33 [108]). Some of the judges show covenantal misbehavior like that of the protagonists of 17:1–18:31 (e.g., Gideon in 8:24–27; Jephthah in 11:30–39; Samson in 13:4–5, 7–14; 14:1–9). Last but not least, the repeated phrases “the people do what is right in their eyes” (cf. 17:6; 19:24; 21:25) and “the people do what is evil in the eyes of YHWH” (cf. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1) refer altogether to Deut 12:8, as Moshe Weinfeld has previously shown (113–14).

In this way Mueller succeeds in demonstrating convincingly that the Micah story originated from a Deuteronomic author with a strong moral concern to challenge the audience to reconsider their actions according to covenantal behavior (116–17). The given date of the story's formation (close to 587 B.C.E., also due to the author's familiarity with the prophecies of Jeremiah [126]) depends on the general view of the origin of Deuteronomy. It could also be later. But nonetheless Mueller's book is a further scholarly contribution to an interesting canonical reading and interpretation of biblical texts.