

Metaphor and Disunity: Tensions between Metaphors in Micah 3–5

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Abstract

This paper uses metaphors from the book of Micah as an example of how disunity in a literary text can be caused by competing ideologies. Some metaphors in this book appear to contradict one another; verse 3.12 says that Zion will be ploughed up like a field, but 4.1-5 sees a new Zion lifted up on the mountain. The metaphors of ploughshares and pruning hooks in 4.3 speak of peace with other nations, but the metaphors of threshing and Daughter Zion in 4.11 – 13 describe preparations to annihilate other nations. Similarly, the metaphors in 5.6 – 7 variously describe Jacob's remnant as refreshing like dew and belligerent like a lion. Previous scholars suppressed the tensions between these metaphors and even attempted to reconcile them, but this paper argues that we should recognise the tensions between metaphors as reflecting the authors' competing ideologies and attitudes towards Israel and other nations.

Keywords: Metaphor, Ideologies, Disunity, the Bible, Frame of Reference.

Micah is a relatively short book, but it is nevertheless of special interest because of the various creative metaphors it uses to describe Israel and other nations. A quick browse allows us to observe how the metaphors employed are strategically located within the book. Some metaphors can be found clustered together in a section; for example, the first chapter contains eight different metaphors.¹ Other metaphors diffuse, meaning that they are used a number of times, but in different ways, such as the metaphor of 'Daughter Zion', who is first portrayed in triumph as her kingdom is restored to her (4.8), but then suffers as she goes to exile (4.10), and finally rises up again to summon her troops for war (4.13).

However, a closer look at the metaphors in Micah reveals a most intriguing observation: metaphors do not only attract each other into clusters or diffuse throughout the book, they also develop tension with one another. This article² will present three examples of conflicting metaphors in the middle chapters of Micah, 3 – 5, and argue that the tension arises as a result of the differing ideologies of the book's authors.

Metaphor and ideology

According to Benjamin Harshav (2007), a literary text is made up of multiple frames of reference that interact with each other. These frames can be drawn from different semantic fields and may appear to be unconnected, but readers are encouraged to look at their possible relations and construct their “hypothetical continuum” (*ibid.*: 6) and work out their integration. Harshav does acknowledge, however, that some frames of reference may not achieve full continuity and that some can create parallel and contradictory relationships. Harshav defines frame of reference as:

[A]ny continuum of two or more referents to which parts of a text or its interpretations may relate: either referring directly and describing or simply mentioning, implying, or evoking. It may indicate an object, a scene, a situation, a person, a state of affairs, a mental state, a history, a theory; it may be real, hypothetical, or fictional. It may appear in reality or in the reader's network of knowledge, or projected uniquely in a given text. Its ontological status is immaterial to semantics: it is anything we can talk about, no matter whether and how it exists. (*ibid.*: 40)

A metaphor is one example of how two frames can interact in a dynamic manner. In the classic shepherd metaphor in Psalm 23, for example, the statement ‘*The Lord is my shepherd*’ establishes two frames of reference, namely ‘the Lord’ and ‘my shepherd’. The two frames exist independently, but the metaphor brings them into a relationship where they have a shared identity: the shepherd stands for the Lord and vice-versa. Different metaphorical frames can complement one another within the same text; Psalm 23 goes on to metaphorically present the Lord not only as a shepherd, but as a host who prepares a table for his guest. However, metaphors in the same poem may also contradict one another. The metaphor of ‘worm’ in Ps 22.2-12, for example, suggests a self-image that is weak, helpless and marginalized, whereas the metaphor of ‘lion’ in vv. 13-22 portrays a confident, ideal, strong and powerful self-image.³ It is the contradictory metaphors which this author would like to focus on in this paper.

The term ‘ideology’ has various definitions in biblical studies and the humanities; Terry Eagleton (1999), for example, has identified sixteen that are currently in circulation, and offers six of his own. The present author will use ‘ideology’ to refer to the idea, worldview, outlook, interest or theology of an individual or a group of people, and to ideas which are connected to particular social and historical conditions. Scholars now acknowledge that metaphor is not simply ornamental language, but can be used to serve ideological interests.

Lakoff and Johnson, for example, remark that “whether in national politics or in everyday interaction, people in power get to impose their metaphors” (1980: 157).

Disunity of metaphors in Micah 3–5

Brevard Childs notes that ‘there are tensions within the text at numerous places’ (1979: 433) in the book of Micah. Unfortunately, he does not indicate where they might be, so this author has made it his task to locate and articulate them. Three examples of tensions between different metaphors in the text will be examined in detail.⁴

The metaphor of the Old Zion in 3.12 vs. the New Zion in 4.1–5

Micah 3

¹² Therefore, because of you,
Zion will be ploughed up like a field;
Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins,
and the temple mount will become a high place in a forest.

Micah 4

¹ But in the last days,
the mountain of the Lord’s house
will be established on the top of the mountains,
and will be lifted up above the hills.
Peoples will stream to it.
² Many nations will come and say:
“Come, and let us go up to the Lord’s mountain,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
For from Zion will go forth the Torah,
from Jerusalem the word of the Lord.
³ He will judge between many peoples,
and decide for mighty distant nations.
They will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn war.
⁴ Every man will sit under his vine
and under his fig tree.
There will be none causing fear,
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.
⁵ Though all the peoples walk,
each person, in the name of his god,
we will walk in the name of the Lord our God
forever and ever.

In 3.12, the prophet predicts that Zion will be ploughed up like a field, using the harvest metaphor to emphasise the “total annihilation of the city, palace, temple and all” (Stansell, 1988: 52). Zion will be trampled on the ground and reduced to a heap of rubble.

Immediately after this, however, we see Zion elevated on the top of the mountains (4.1 – 5), undercutting the magnitude of judgment just pronounced. This appears to vindicate the corrupt leaders in 3.11 who believed that Zion

would never be destroyed, saying: 'Is it not the Lord in our midst? Disaster will not come upon us!' Indeed, Zion does remain inviolable. Additional metaphors feed in to support the immortal Zion: the metaphors of divine judge, of the ploughshares and pruning hooks and of the vine and the fig tree. Yahweh sits as a judge between mighty nations, war is abolished, and every man sits under his vine peacefully.

John Willis, the pioneering American scholar who defended the coherence of the final form of the book of Micah, argues that the hope sections in chapters 4 – 5 'describe the present condition and announce the future promise, but make no attempt to explain the reversal of circumstances' (1966: 215). Willis wrote this partly in opposition to the redaction critics who had separated the prophet's original sayings in chs. 1 – 3 from the secondary materials in chs. 4 – 5, which they believed had been added later to nullify the prophet's message of catastrophe. Although Willis recognises some contrasts between the metaphors, he argues for 'continuity of thought between 3:9 – 12 and 4:1 – 5' (*ibid.*: 318).

Mignon Jacobs on the other hand, proposes a sub – division between chs. 1 – 3 and 4 – 5 which she bases on the temporal transition formula 'in the last days' in 4.1, which indicates a shift from announcement of judgment in the present (3.12) to expectation of hope in the future (4.1 – 5) (2001: 70 – 71). At first, Jacobs argues that the formula functions as 'adversative, reflecting the contrasting between the preceding [3.12] and the following [4.1 – 5]' (*ibid.*: 71). However, she then goes on to argue that the unit of chs. 4 – 5 'is not a contradiction of the previous unit nor is its placement suggestive of any intent to contradict or reverse the announcement of judgment found in the immediate preceding unit' (*ibid.*: 143). A discrepancy must be noted here, because Jacobs makes no prior subdivision between the doom oracle in the present (1.2 – 2.11) and the hope oracle in the future (2.12 – 13). She does not apply the same logic there as she does for 3.12 and 4.1 – 5. Furthermore, while it may be possible to argue for a transition from present judgment in 3.12 to future hope in 4.1 – 5, such a linear reading denies the force of the tension between the metaphors and the different underlying ideologies of the texts' authors.

This author argues that 3.12 was the word of the eighth century prophet, who believed that the only fitting outcome for a Jerusalem in which leaders ruled with bloodshed and wickedness (3.10) and where injustice and hypocrisy were rampant, was, as Gerhard von Rad puts it, '[the] complete blotting out of Jerusalem from the pages of history' (1965: 121). The post-exilic author of 4.1 – 5, on the other hand, appears to have held a strong nationalistic ideology which excluded any negative impressions of Zion. He was concerned to preserve the existence of Jerusalem and for it to be a centre of peace and religious pilgrimage for people of all nations.

The metaphors of the ploughshares and pruning hooks in 4.3 vs. the metaphors of threshing and daughter Zion in 4.11–13

Micah 4

¹¹ Now many nations are gathered against you,
saying, "Let her be desecrated
and let our eyes gaze upon Zion with gratification."

- ¹² But they do not know
the thoughts of the Lord
or understand his plan,
that he has gathered them like sheaves on a threshing floor.
- ¹³ Arise and thresh, O daughter Zion,
for I will make your horn iron
and your hoofs bronze;
you will pulverise many nations
and devote their gain to the Lord,
even their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.

The metaphors of the ploughshares and the pruning hooks in 4.3 envisage a peaceful world where people of different nations crush their swords and spears and transform them into farming implements. They will no longer rise up against other nations and are free to approach Zion to receive instructions from the Torah, the religious book of Israel.

However, later in the same chapter, the metaphors of threshing and Daughter Zion emerge to shatter the utopian vision. The text says that many nations gather against Zion to pervert and ridicule her, but they do not know the thoughts of the Lord, who plots to gather them like sheaves to the threshing floor (4.11 – 12). Daughter Zion then receives an order to attack and destroy many of her enemies (4.13). The references to horn, iron, and bronze on the one hand, and sheaves on the other, depict Zion as strong and mighty⁵ and the enemy nations as fragile. Thus, Zion, who has just been affirmed in her benevolence to the peoples that flock to her mountain, suddenly turns so bellicose that she crushes and grinds them like sheaves on a threshing floor; the other nations are to be completely removed from existence.

Similarly, the passage gives conflicting accounts of other nations' attitudes to Israel. The nations' pilgrimage to Zion in 4.1 – 5 suggests submission to the teaching and lordship of Yahweh and harmony with Israel. However, their assembly in 4.11 to plot against Zion indicates a deep antagonism towards Israel and a desire for its downfall.

Willis remarks that 'we may expect to find striking parallels in form and ideology within the three sections of doom on the one hand and within the three sections of hope on the other' (1969: 13) [Micah 4 – 5 being one of the hope sections]. This hypothesis, however, is not supported by the contradictory metaphors.

Jacobs recognises the contrast between 4.3 and 4.13 but insists that 4.11 – 13 'be seen not as a characteristic of the future, but as part of the present that forms the path to that future' (2001: 152). She argues that 4.11 – 13 deals with the present distress as indicated by the temporal transition 'now' (*ibid.*: 150). Jacobs therefore assigns the first pair of metaphors to future events and the second pair to present events. Many scholars, however, do not agree that 4.11 – 13 depict present distress. Wellhausen (1892: 142), von Rad (1965: 293 – 294), Fohrer (1973: 342), McKane (1998: 137) and Smith et al. (1912: 98) have all argued that these verses in fact refer to the eschatological victory of Israel over her enemies. Others regard the temporal transition as a rhetorical and literary device.⁶ Kronholm points out that the 'precise definition of ["now"] for time remains difficult and can be

approximated only by comparison with other temporal expressions' (2001: 438).

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This author believes that the tensional metaphors above point toward the composite nature of the book of Micah; new material which reflected the situation in Israel at their time was added by later authors, and so the final version of the book contains influences from various traditions. Furthermore, the metaphors reflect the different eschatological views of the post-exilic authors on the place of other nations in Israel's future. One author renounces bloody wars and seeks peace with the nations, whereas the other author, who holds a military and anti-pagan ideology, wants Israel to dominate and destroy the other nations in the firm belief that such action would be supported by the Almighty.

The metaphor of dew vs. the metaphor of lion in 5.6 – 7

Micah 5

⁶ The remnant of Jacob
will be among many peoples
like dew from the Lord,
like showers on the grass,
which do not depend upon people
or wait for the sons of man.

⁷ But the remnant of Jacob will be among the nations,
in the midst of many peoples,
like a lion among the beasts of the forest,
like a young lion among flocks of sheep,
which will trample and tear down when passes over,
and there is no rescue.

The tensional images of Israel appear in close proximity in 5.6 – 7. Jacob's remnant is first described as dew among the nations, an image which has particular resonance in a hot climate. Although this may have more than one interpretation, the benevolent influence of the dew appears chiefly to refer to the moral and religious influence of Israel among the nations, in parallel with 4.1 – 5 where nations come to Zion for religious instruction.⁷ Jacob's remnant, however, is then immediately described as a lion among the nations, presenting a self-image which is not only powerful but also fierce and threatening. Israel is capable of trampling and dismembering its enemies, which are in comparison like defenceless sheep.

Willis again denies the tension, saying that 'v. 6 has nothing to do with Israel's relationship to the nations, either to bless them or to destroy them. Instead, it announces that the power of Yahweh alone can deliver Israel from her hopeless circumstances' (1966: 228). He argues that the dew metaphor refers to the fertility of the remnant, which will grow abundantly in number and so be able to overcome its enemies (*ibid.*). Such an attempt to reconcile contradictory images may be clever, but nonetheless fail to convince. Jacobs, meanwhile, assigns 5.6 – 8 to exilic time and argues that the concern of the text is 'to give the remnant victory over its captors while it is living in exile' (2001: 91), then goes on to say that the presence of the remnant among the nations will be a 'brief' but 'ravaging and destructive one' (*ibid.*: 155). However, neither of these descriptions of the concept and experience of exile is supported by the most recent scholarship on the subject. Rainer Albertz refers to 'the seventy-seven

long years of the exilic period' (2003: 435) and Muhammad Dandamaev has found that some slaves during the Babylonian period were 'treated essentially as free persons with respect to society' (1984: 467) and could rent and own houses like ordinary citizens (*ibid.*: 242).

Fortunately, some scholars have recognised the antithetical character of the metaphors, describing Jacob's remnant as 'a source of benediction and a fomenter of misfortune' (Waltke, 2007: 317) or 'benevolent and belligerent' (Andersen and Freedman, 2000: 487). This author argues that Micah 5.6 – 8 represents a post-exilic condensation of the positive and negative aspects of Israel's relations with other nations, preserving the competing ideologies of the authors of 4.1 – 5 and 4.11 – 13 rather than favouring one over the other.

Conclusion

We have seen how a number of metaphors in the middle chapters of the book of Micah contradict one another, and why this is likely to reflect their authors' diverging perspectives on issues such as nationalism, war and international relations in Israel 2,700–3,000 years ago. If this reading is correct, then these tensions ought to be recognised rather than suppressed, because they provide an inner dynamic to the book which stimulates critical thinking and promotes dialogue between varying viewpoints, rather than simply reducing them to homogeneity.

The lack of ideological unity in the book of Micah suggests that the book is the work of more than one author, in contrast with the traditional claim of the single authorship of a prophet called Micah. The conflicting metaphors also mean that the book is not free from contradictions. The final editor appears to have decided to preserve these tensions rather than attempting to iron them out, which reflects the complexity of ideas and experiences in Israel during that period and lends Micah a particular richness as prophetic literature.

Endnotes

- 1 The metaphors of divine witness (vv. 2-7), harlot (vv. 6-7), jackals and daughters of ostrich (v. 8), wound (v. 9), daughter Zion, a weeping mother, and a bald vulture (vv. 10-16).
- 2 The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Philip Hannan for proofreading this paper.
- 3 Cf. Eidevall 2005: 55-65.
- 4 All translations from Hebrew to English are mine unless otherwise stated.
- 5 Cf. Hillers, 1984: 61.
- 6 Cf. Mays, 1976: 105 and van der Woude, 1969: 244-260.
- 7 Cf. Smith, Ward, and Bewer, 1912: 111.

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Biography

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