CHAPTER 7

The Nations in Micah

Despite their prominence in the book of Micah, surprisingly little has been written on the role of non-Israelite nations in it. Within the last few decades, only Zapff, Roth, and a few others have touched upon the subject in a concentrated way, and their studies suggest that a robust understanding of that theme in Micah requires further research. Zapff’s careful analysis of Micah’s perspective on the nations reflects well where current research on the question stands.

Because of the sins of Israel the nations march against Zion, which is devastated and humiliated (cf. Mic 1–3; 4:10–11, 14; also Mic 6:1–16; 7:1–7, especially 4b). But with the punishment of Zion, Yahweh rises at the same time against the nations and destroys them (Mic 4:11–13; cf. Mic 7:10). The destruction has the consequence of the return home of the dispersed persons of Israel (Mic 4:6f.; Mic 7:11), which entails the pilgrimage of the nations to Mount Zion (Mic 4:1–3; cf. Mic 7:12ff.). This brings about an acknowledgement of Yahweh by (some of) the nations. The nations, however, who still show themselves hostile to Yahweh will be destroyed ultimately (Mic 5:7–14; cf. Mic 7:13).

Zapff’s identification of the nations’ various roles and fates draws attention to the difficulty of interrelating them (rather than simply juxtaposing them) in the book of Micah. While semantic differences allow us to identify diversity

4 While it is related to the theme of the nations, I will not address the identity and role of Judah/Israel in Micah in equal detail; see esp. M.E. Biddle, “ ‘Israel’ and ‘Jacob’ in the Book of
in Micah’s theology of the nations, the question of how we should analyze those differences is controverted. Zapff’s interrelation of Israel/Judah and the nations is based on a diachronic reconstruction of the book’s formation in which an older Deuteronomistic core which did not contain chapters 4, 5, and 7 was modified to produce a two-sided message on the fates of Israel/Judah and the nations. On his view, the cycle in 1:2–5:14 puts judgment and salvation forward in relatively simple ways, while that in 6:1–7:20 wrestles with the attendant question of how distressed Zion can be forgiven and delivered.5 But if both cycles contain material deriving from different periods, the basis for understanding them as internally heterogeneous ‘cycles’ rather than incoherent pastiches of older and newer material disappears.6

To broach a related issue, it is often suggested that Micah 1–3 focuses on history while Micah 4–5 turns to contemplate the eschatological future.7 The reality is more complex, as Micah’s careful use of adverbs and other temporal modifiers shows. In 3:9–5:15, for example, the author alternates between the present and the future, with a future perspective already apparent in 3:12.8 This need not indicate two (or more) periods of creation for this material, however.9 These issues and others like them require us to consider synchronic/holistic and diachronic/compositional issues as they relate to the theme of the nations in Micah. This chapter will explore the possibility of thematic coherence in Micah’s treatment of the nations in concert with its significant dynamism and diversity.

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6 Zapff goes on to argue that the diversity of Micah’s perspective is a “systematization” of the views in Joel, Jonah, and Nahum, most evidently in addressing the apparently divergent views of Jonah and Nahum on Nineveh/Assyria, and that it may also be related to Zechariah 14.
7 E.g., Biddle, “‘Israel’ and ‘Jacob’,” 154.
8 This is helpfully schematized in Biddle, “‘Israel’ and ‘Jacob,’” 155.
9 The post-exilic period (which some favor to the point of excluding other periods) was no more appropriate a milieu for the creation of the ‘Then Sayings’ than was the monarchic period. Cf. B.D. Sommer, “Dating Pentateuchal Texts and the Perils of Pseudo-Historicism,” in The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research (ed. T.B. Dozeman, K. Schmid, and B.W. Schwartz; FAT 78; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 85–108.