Religious Polemics in the Book of Micah

Bob Becking*

1 Divine Incomparability Assumes Monolatry

The doxology at the end of the Book of Micah\(^1\) contains a praise of the incomparability\(^2\) of YHWH:

Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity
   And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?
He does not retain His anger forever,
   Because He delights in unchanging love.\(^3\)

A few remarks need to be made. The doxology at the end of the book was most probably added by the final redactor of the Book of Micah. This view is, of course, in need of an argument. It is, however, not the aim of this contribution to sketch the redactional and compositional history of the Book of Micah or to discuss the question whether or not the redactional process concurred with

* It is with great pleasure that I dedicate this essay to Hans Barstad. Out of our first discussion over a pizza in Louvain 1989 grew friendship and an exchange of ideas. Hans’s communications—both written and oral—have always urged me to rethink my position(s) and to improve the methodological fabric of my argument.

1 Mic 7:18–20.
the emergence of the “Book of the Twelve.” Suffice it to make two observations. (1) Micah 7:18 contains a pun of the name of the prophet—as has often been remarked. The words mîʾēl kāmōkā, “who is a god like you,” resemble the name of the prophet: mikā, which as such is a shortening of a theophoric name mikāʾēl / mikāyā, “who is like God / YHWH.” (2) Micah 7:18–20 contains a variety of theological evaluations of Israel’s history with God that are expressed in a register of language different from the rest of the Book of Micah.

In this doxology, the incomparability of YHWH is not only testified to, but the statement is argued with reference to his character: YHWH is a God of exemplary forgiveness. This attribute makes him different from other deities. It should be noted that proclaiming YHWH’s incomparability assumes (1) the acceptance of the existence of other deities and (2) a denunciation of these deities and their veneration.

Almost fifty years ago—that is before the discussions on the Jahweh-allein Bewegung and before the discovery of the inscriptions referring to “Yahweh and his Asherah”—Labuschagne made an important remark: “The fact that Israel did as a matter of fact compare its God with other gods confirms that they took the existence of other gods seriously.” This observation brings him to the conclusion that the religion of ancient Israel cannot be construed as expressing intolerant or absolute monotheism. This view is now—after the great discussion on monotheism in the 1990s—almost universally accepted. In my view the incomparability of YHWH implies a form of monolatry: It was only YHWH