

Micah 1, an apt introduction to power talks

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ABSTRACT

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Power and the abuse of it, is often an integral part of discussions in any society. The prophets of the Old Testament felt strongly about this issue and often spoke out against the abuse of power and the suffering caused by it. Micah particularly addresses this issue in chapters 2 and 3. He blames the leaders in society, who should look out for the ordinary people, that they in particular are guilty of this transgression. In chapter 1 Micah proclaims Yahweh as the sovereign power who they should take note of. On the very basis of Yahweh's sovereign power he then proclaims oracles of judgment on the people of Judah. Micah 1 seems to form an apt introduction to the talks of the abuse of power in the society of Judah.

1 INTRODUCTION

When reading prophetic literature with an awareness of power and the misuse of power, it is clear that the prophets have much to say about the issue. To have such an awareness in the current context of the South African history is not such a strange phenomenon. The concept of power politics is well known in this society. To focus on the power issue, when reading prophets, can therefore be an enlightening experience.

The book of Micah is an excellent example to pursue. It is difficult not to take cognisance of the abuse of power that is the focus of prophetic judgment in chapters 2 and 3. In both these chapters the leaders in the Judean society are brought to justice for their misconduct and misuse of their positions of power. The most scaring aspect of the abuse of power is the underlying theological motivation for their confident attitude and arrogance.

Whereas chapters 2 and 3 address the power abuse with regards to the internal social setting of the Judean society, Micah 1 moves one step backwards, showing very aptly where the real focus should be when it concerns the issue of power. Real power lies with Yahweh, who is the Supreme Power.

In this article the endeavour is to focus on Yahweh as the Sovereign Power, showing that chapter 1 forms an apt introduction to talks on power.

This discussion will show that Yahweh's power is universal and encompasses both the international and the national scenes. His Sovereign Power forms the basis for the prophetic proclamations of judgment, but also for his ability to bring salvation to his people by exercising his power of change. Micah 1 aptly addresses the question where the real source of power lies.

To argue the point of the true source of power, an exposition of Micah 1 is presented. The aim is to show first of all how Yahweh is portrayed, then also to highlight his use of Assyria in bringing judgment to the very gates of the people who are to be blamed for their abuse of power. The seat of power in Jerusalem is under threat of judgment. In an attempt to emphasise this very fact, Yahweh's handling of Samaria is also raised. The line of argument presented in chapter 1 serves the purpose of pointing the people of Judah and especially the leadership in Jerusalem to the real power which they should hold in esteem. Following the exegetical exposition, conclusions will be drawn and related to the proposed thesis of this article.

2 MICAH 1 IN THE BOOK OF MICAH

Micah has been subjected to critical research for more than a century, and although valuable insights have been gained, many unsolved questions remain, which need to be answered. Several scholars have proposed solutions for the composition of the book; what material can be regarded as authentic to Micah; what sections were added; what redactional processes the book underwent and how the book is structured. Much of the debate has reached a "stalemate" and several proposed solutions are now more a matter of preference and emphasis.

Regarding authenticity most scholars regard chapters 1-3, with perhaps the exception of 2:12-13, as from Micah. However, there are differences of opinion when it comes to chapters 4-7 and even chapters 6-7. The strong contrast between 3:12 ("...Jerusalem (shall become) a heap of ruins...") and what follows in chapters 4 and 5 about the restoration and importance of Zion and salvation for Israel, makes it difficult to accept that Micah could be responsible for these parts. The ascribing of the collection of the material and arrangement of the text as it now stands to others does not necessarily deny Micah as the author. The majority of scholars have either worked with a two-part division of chapters 1-5 and 6-7 (Mays), or with a three-part division: chapters 1-2; 3-5 and 6-7 (Allen and others) or 1-3; 4-5 and 6-7.

A more recent approach that should be mentioned is that of Shaw¹. His approach is a form of rhetorical criticism that works with the presupposition that the book of Micah consists of several persuasive prophetic discourses. The objective is to warn, and to change the views and the attitudes of his audience by pointing out the consequences of their deeds. Shaw is also interested in the "rhetorical situation" which would help to determine a possible historical situation when the specific discourse was delivered. He acknowledges that we have no account of the situation which gave rise to each of the discourses, but that we have to attempt to reconstruct possible situations. Shaw finds the following six discourses in the book of Micah: 1:2-16; 2:1-13; 3:1-4:8; 4:9-5:14; 6:1-7:7 and 7:8-20. Regarding Micah 1:2-16 as a discourse as Shaw has proposed seems feasible. By also regarding the current organising of the chapters or discourses as deliberate, it then seems reasonable to also relate them to each other. In this article chapter 1 is regarded as an apt introduction to the power issue that is raised in the next two chapters in particular. In the section to follow an exposition of Micah 1 will be attempted to highlight the issue of power as it relates to Yahweh.

3 MICAH 1:1-16: IMPENDING JUDGMENT FOR JERUSALEM

The first verse of the book begins with an introductory sentence similar to the other prophetic books in the Old Testament², and is most probably the work of an editor of the book. This introductory sentence emphasizes that the words to follow are from Yahweh. It is followed by two relative sentences. The first refers to Micah who has received these words and the second refers to those to whom these words apply. In this regard Micah is the one entrusted with what Yahweh wishes to communicate. Not much is said about Micah himself, except that he comes from Moresheth (cf Moresheth-Gath in v 14), a small town 40 kilometres southwest of Jerusalem in the Shephelah region³. No reference is made as to the identity of his father. Although he is not identified as a prophet in the heading of the book, this verse uses the word "see" (*chaza*), often used in the technical sense for receiving a divine revelation, which is not limited to visions alone.

Besides reference to his place of origin, mention is made of the Judean kings to whom his prophetic ministry is linked. Although king Jotham (ca. 742-735 BCE) is mentioned, Micah's prophecies are rather to be associated with the reigns of Ahaz (735-715 BCE) and Hezekiah (715-687 BCE). These three kings were from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the location of Micah's activity.

The second relative pronoun informs us as to who were to receive the words of Yahweh.

It concerns the capital of the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, and also the capital of the Southern Kingdom, Jerusalem.

3.1 Verses 2-16: Incurable wounds

These fifteen verses form a structural as well as a material unit and they are an announcement of judgment on Samaria and Jerusalem with its neighbouring Judean cities. This section can be subdivided into smaller units for purposes of discussion, namely vv 2-4, 5-7, 8-9 and 10-16.

3.2 Verses 2-4: Manifestation of Yahweh

Verses 2-4 is a theophany⁴ which introduces an oracle of judgment. It commences with a universal call to heed, involving not only the people of the Lord, but also the nations of the earth. By using vocabulary from the juridical world⁵, a call is made to people to witness as Yahweh acts as both plaintiff and judge regarding certain transgressions of his people. From what follows it is clear that he has judgment for the people of Israel and Judah, represented or personified by their capitals, Samaria and Jerusalem.

Yahweh is depicted against the background of his heavenly abode, coming from his holy temple⁶. Perhaps one should see this as a deliberate allusion to the earthly temple which the Lord, the Sovereign One, transcends. The awesome reality of his presence in judgment is declared by employing typical theophanic language⁷. His presence will not pass unnoticed. Micah 1:2-4 makes it clear that the act of Yahweh in judging his own people should cause all the people on earth to take note of his mighty power. He is the Sovereign One and will, therefore, not tolerate people who act with indifference towards him. His might and power should be recognised in all the universe. He is not a passive, uninvolved God, but one who acts with power in this world.

3.3 Verses 5-7: Judgment on Samaria

Following this more general description of his presence, verses 5-7 focus on the effect of his presence on account of the transgressions of Israel and Judah.

Verse 5: The introductory particle (be) here linked to a noun (followed by the words "all this" which refers back to the awesome appearance of Yahweh) serves to link that notion with what is to follow. This is again followed by a particle linked to a noun which makes it clear that the reason for the appearance of the Lord is on account of the transgression

and sin of Jacob and the house of Israel. In all probability this should be taken to refer to the whole of Israel, both the Southern and the Northern Kingdoms. This would help to resolve the apparent break in parallelism and explain the references to Jacob-Samaria and Judah-Jerusalem which together form the whole of Israel⁸.

By means of two questions focus is shifted onto the two capitals Samaria and Jerusalem. Since these two cities were the seats of both the political and the religious power, they were, therefore, the focus of his wrath. Verses 6-7 express the fate of Samaria. The two terms translated with "transgression" and "sin" probably have political overtones, and thus connote "rebellion", although this is not stated explicitly in verse 5. Samaria is the embodiment of this rebellion. Interestingly enough when it concerns Judah, there is reference to "high places" probably alluding to the temple in Jerusalem⁹. These so-called "high-places" were usually places of pagan worship, unacceptable to true worship of Yahweh.

Verses 6-7: As a result of the rebellious nature of Samaria, verses 6-7 describe Yahweh's intent to destroy the city. This is done in the first person singular to emphasize his own personal involvement. By means of a vivid description, this city situated on a hill, is depicted as becoming a heap of rubble. It will no longer be a place fit for dwelling, but a piece of land where vineyards may be cultivated. Although the intended use of the words is to express the serious nature of the judgment of Samaria, it fittingly describes the destruction of the buildings, with stones rolling down the slopes, tumbling into the valleys and laying bare the foundations. This actually did not happen to the city, but nevertheless, is an apt metaphor, describing the fate the inhabitants of this city suffered when deported into the international political arena¹⁰.

Verse 7 continues to describe the destruction. By means of three short clauses introduced in the same way, it depicts the full extent of the destruction. All idols and images associated with worship in Samaria will be destroyed and all the gifts assembled at the sanctuaries, will be burned with fire. Striking imagery for expressing unfaithfulness towards Yahweh, is employed. The infidelity of the people of Samaria is expressed by alluding to sacred prostitution associated with the fertility rites of the Baal worship. The prophet Hosea, an earlier contemporary of Micah, who operated in the Northern Kingdom, is especially known for the use of the imagery of prostitution. Although it appears that Micah addresses the infidelity of the people as reflected in their religious life, one should also see this as an allusion to Samaria's unfaithfulness with regard to foreign political and economical alliances and associations¹¹. According to Micah,

the people will not benefit from the gain acquired by their infidelity; it will come to nothing¹².

What is clear from these two verses, is that Yahweh will act in his wrath against Samaria, because of their rebellion and unfaithfulness. He will not tolerate it. He will not only destroy the means of their physical existence, but also their religious practices. This should serve as an earnest warning for Jerusalem and its inhabitants, and also for future generations. Although Micah is better known for his concern about social issues and not so much for his criticism of idol worship, yet here his criticism of religious practices, foreign relations and reference to the destruction of Samaria expresses the denouncement of the sources of their trust. Yahweh should be the sole source of their trust.

3.4 Verses 8-16: Threat to Judah and Jerusalem

The next unit is verses 8-16, which is a lament. In a sense verses 8 and 9 are bridging verses between the previous and the following section in verses 10-16. Verse 8 is introduced by the words “over this or because of this” which links with the preceding¹³ theophany and the oracle of judgment on Samaria. “My people” in verse 9 indicates the beginning of an ensuing address, which concerns the fate of Jerusalem and the towns of Judah.

Verse 8: “I” in verse 8 is refers to the prophet. This verse reflects Micah’s personal feelings about the fate of Samaria and what is to befall his people in Judah. Showing emotional concern is not unique to Micah, for prophets like Jeremiah (8:23) and Isaiah (22:4) also showed their emotional involvement concerning the fate of their people. Micah’s involvement with his people was not restricted to the announcement of judgment alone, he was disturbed emotionally by their misery. He showed his concern and compassion. Thus he mourned and wept and went barefoot and naked¹⁴ complying with the signs customary in mourning. He even simulated the sounds of mourning made by the jackal and the ostrich¹⁵.

Verse 9 is a key verse. It both describes the sad condition of the people of Samaria - her wounds are incurable - and it also shifts the focus to Judah. Jerusalem, the centre of political and religious life in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, is called the “gate” of the people. “Gate” is sometimes used as a synonym for city (cf Is 14:31), but perhaps here it alludes to Jerusalem as a gate to the cities of Judah. What happened to Samaria is like an incurable disease, it can no longer be prevented. Rebellion and infidelity lie at the root of this incurable situation. Now it looms at the gates of Jerusalem and it will affect the towns of Judah. The fate of Israel and Samaria should serve as a warning to Judah and Jerusalem.

Whereas verses 8 and 9 serve a bridging purpose in the discourse, the actual lament is contained in verses 10-16. The state of preservation of the Hebrew text is extremely poor, which makes it very difficult to translate and explain the meaning of this section. However, although a satisfactory interpretation of these verses may evade us, the general intent and tenor of the section is, nevertheless, clear. It appears that the southern towns of Judah may have been threatened by a military campaign which caused the tone of lament. Verses 10-16 testify of a situation of confusion, threat and panic¹⁶. Several names of towns are mentioned. Some can be located easily, whilst determining the geographical position of others causes difficulty. In the Hebrew there is a pun on the names of some of the towns by means of paronomasia, wordplay and alliterations¹⁷. The purpose of this is to accentuate the tragic consequences. However, this is not over-exploited by Micah.

Verse 10 begins with a possible allusion to the lament of David over King Saul and his son, Jonathan (2 Sam 1:20) after their defeat at the hands of the Philistines. The hortation (in the imperative) is to deny the enemy in Gath the opportunity of delighting in the humiliation which the people of Judah are about to experience. Gath was situated on the edge of the plain of Philistia and was the nearest foreign city to the so-called Shephelah region in the foothills of Judah. Their enemy should be oblivious of the misery of Judah and should be kept from witnessing their weeping. Quite the opposite advice is given to the inhabitants in the Benjaminite city, Beth-leaphrah, which was probably on the eastern side, not under the eyes of the enemy. They should roll in the dust and thus express their deepest feelings of distress.

Verse 11-12: Continuing the lament, verse 11 states, in the imperative form, that the inhabitants of Shaphir shall go out like prisoners, naked and ashamed, in contradiction with the beauty of their city. Those staying in Canaan will remain indoors and will not emerge to assist their neighbours, because of fear. Beth-ezel will be so occupied by their own mourning, that they also would not be of any assistance to their neighbour. Maroth (the name alludes to bitterness) was eagerly awaiting the sweetness of relief, instead disaster came to the gates of Jerusalem, the so-called city of peace. Although the threat was caused by an invading enemy, it was actually Yahweh who was the cause of the impending disaster.

Verse 13 concerns Lachish. This town is singled out for harsh condemnation for it was this city which seduced Jerusalem and Israel to rebellion. It was Lachish who inculcated the rebellious attitude in the people of Samaria and Israel causing them to rely on their own strength and those of

foreign powers rather than on Yahweh. Lachish was an important fortified city which played a key role in the defence structure of Jerusalem. At one stage it fell to the Assyrian, Sennacherib, when he invaded Judah. Verse 13 is a call to the inhabitants of Lachish to harness the team to the chariot. The reference to the chariot was probably an indication of something military, cynically intended, calling the people to harness the chariot horses in retreat, not in battle¹⁸. This could also be a possible allusion to the burdening and even the impoverishment of the people, as well as the debilitating effect possibly resulting from an over-involvement with arms and fortifications, while also maintaining everyday life. The people of Lachish, Jerusalem and Judah were suppose to rely exclusively on God, but instead, they put their trust in other sources. They relied on structures of violence and military strength, thus damaging the religious, political and social identity of the society.

Verse 14: Here the sense or notion of threat, instilled from verse 10 onwards, is resumed. There is reference to the threat endangering the fortified towns in the Shephelah, which would have caused an impending problem to the defense of Jerusalem¹⁹. The first town to be mentioned is Micah's hometown. It appears as if the fate of Moresheth-Gath would be to become the property of another, probably that of the invader. Therefore parting gifts should be given to her, as was done when a girl left home to be with her new husband in marriage. The nearby town of Achzib, whose name sounds like the Hebrew word for "deceitful, disappointing" would prove to be a problem to the kings of Israel. What is meant by "houses" of Achzib is not clear, but a probable understanding is that it refers to leading families of the city, who were a disappointment to the leadership of Israel²⁰.

Verse 15: Another of these fortified towns, Mareshah, would fall into the hands of a new heir who would conquer it. Once again it is stressed that Yahweh will cause this to happen. The verse refers to the "glory of Israel". This is probably a reference to the army²¹ or the aristocracy of the neighbouring towns who will come to Adullam. This town is known for the cave where David took shelter from Saul to save his own life (1 Sam 22:1-2). Several outlaws and outcasts joined him there to form an army. It is of note that an allusion to David was made at the beginning of this section, as well as, at the end of the section.

Thus it is said that the "glory of Israel" will be concealed in the place of the indigent and the poor, Adullam²².

Verse 16: The conclusion of the lament once again focuses on mourning rites, in this instance the shaving of heads as an external sign of

sorrow and desperation²³. The call is made to Jerusalem to engage in these rites because of what happened to her children in whom she delights. These children are the people of the aforementioned towns, who fell into the hands of a conqueror and are now facing deportation. At this point of climax, Micah applies the so-called prophetic *perfectum*: “they have gone into exile from you”²⁴. Although they do not yet realize it, there is no doubt, they shall go into exile; thus expressing absolute certainty.

To pinpoint a specific historical situation for the threat posed by a conqueror to the people of Judah and Jerusalem does not seem possible from the vague clues given in this chapter. If the time indications for the ministry of Micah are taken seriously, then it possibly refers to a time of military campaigning by the Assyrian, Sennacherib, a round about 701 BCE, when Jerusalem was sieged and the towns of Judah lost to the enemy²⁵. However, the vagueness concerning the circumstances leaves open the interpretation about the historical situation and perhaps allows more flexibility for universal application.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This section begins with a universal call on people everywhere, moves to Samaria and finally narrows down to focus only on the people of Judah, more specifically Jerusalem. Some of the important keywords are: “witness against you” (v 2), “transgression and sin” (vv 5,13), “incurable wound” (v 9), “gate of Jerusalem” (vv 9,12), “disaster” (v 12), and “exile” (v 16).

The aim of this section is to warn Jerusalem as the seat of political, economic and religious power of impending judgment on them, because of their rebellious attitude towards Yahweh. This attitude is reflected in their political alliances which had an influence on both the religious and the social aspects of their society. Rather, they should be faithful to Yahweh alone, who is the universal Sovereign and Mighty One, their covenant God. He is the Lord who controls the destiny of people, therefore the God of history, who will not refrain from using another nation to inflict judgment on his unfaithful people.

Disaster would firstly strike Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom and the outcome is compared to an incurable wound. This should alert the people of Judah, because the threat is no longer a distant one. In fact it has reached the very gate of Jerusalem. To give expression to the gravity of the situation and to create tension in the discourse, the fate of six towns in the region of Judah is mentioned, using the names of the towns as

puns. Then it is reiterated that the threat is imminent. It is at the very gate of Jerusalem. Moreover this threat will be disastrous since Yahweh is its author. To create a climactic tension, the fate of several other towns which formed part of the defense strategy of Jerusalem and were therefore of great importance to Jerusalem, is mentioned. This will result in exile of the people of these towns, people who are dear to Jerusalem. In the section (vv 8-16) words expressing a tenor of lament are effectively employed to sustain the threat of an impending judgment on Jerusalem, symbol of power in the Southern Kingdom.

Leaving no doubt to who the real source of power is, and what his (Yahweh's) intentions are, the stage is set to address the internal injustices mentioned in chapters 2 and 3. The power the leaders in Jerusalem have, is derived power and stem from the source of real power, namely Yahweh. It should therefore serve the purposes of fairness and justice. The way they exercise power is suppose to reflect the goodness and care of the covenant God. He will however not tolerate their abuse of power. Jerusalem is not undestructable. His presence in not unconditional. It is because of their ignorance and arrogance that judgment will follow. Chapter 1 therefore paves the way for power talks. Yahweh, the Sovereign, calls for their repentance and the change of their hearts and ways. Micah 1 forms an apt introduction to the prophetic proclamations to follow in the book of Micah.

NOTES:

- 1 C S Shaw, *The speeches of Micah*, Sheffield 1993.
- 2 Cf Is 1:1; Jer 1:1-3; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 1:1 and Zeph 1:1.
- 3 L C Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, Grand Rapids 1976, 265, relates this city to Tell el-Judeideh, 10 kilometres northeast of the important Judean city of Lachish. Cf also P J King, *Amos, Hosea, Micah - An Archaeological Commentary*, Philadelphia 1988, 60.
- 4 Shaw, *op cit*, 37 refers to a study of L M Luker, *Doom and Hope in Micah: The Redaction of the Oracles Attributed to an Eighth-Century Prophet*, Dissertation, Vanderbilt 1985, 140-170, who has shown instances where a lament is followed by a theophany. In chapter 1 we have a reversal of this, where a theophany is followed by a lament. Shaw calls this an "artistic transformation" of this pattern in 1:2-16 due to the creativity of the prophet.
- 5 Allen, *op cit*, 268.
- 6 J Jeremias, *Theophanie: Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1965, 11, 12, showed the resemblance in composition of the theophany in Micah with those in Jdg 5:4-5 and Ps 68:8-9. It comprises two sections: Yahweh coming forth from his abode and the destructive effect of his coming on nature.
- 7 Cf examples of theophanic descriptions in Ex 19:16-18; 2 Sam 22:8-16.

- 8 Some consider the references to Judah and Jerusalem at this position in the section as secondary, and regard it as work of the editor. The reason would be that what follows concerns judgment on Samaria, while nothing in this regard is said about Jerusalem. This need not be the case if one agrees with J I Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty. A Commentary on the Book of Micah*, Grand Rapids 1989, 16, that the reference to Jerusalem creates a suspense in the reader now anticipating an announcement concerning judgment.
- 9 D R Hillers, *Micah*, Philadelphia 1984, 20. He also refers to the endeavours to reform, by Hezekiah (cf 2 Kg 18:1-6), such as the removal of "high places".
- 10 Allen, *op cit*, 273.
- 11 J L Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*, London 1976, 48 takes the term "hire" (*'etnan*) to characterize gifts or profits. He refers to Ezek 16:31 vv for the political application of the term, and to Isa 23:17 v for its use in economic relations.
- 12 Allen, *op cit*, 274; Alfaro, *op cit*, 17 and Hillers, *op cit*, 21 mention the possibility of enemy soldiers that will plunder the treasures of the sanctuaries and then squander these with the prostitutes. Hillers is possibly nearer the truth when he says it is perhaps better to leave the sense vague, since Yahweh is the real destroyer.
- 13 Hillers, *op cit*, 23 also refers to Jer 31:26; Ps 32:6; Is 57:6; 64:11; Jer 5:9; 29; 9:8 and Amos 8:8 for similar uses. See also Shaw, *op cit*, 37-38.
- 14 Cf Ezek 24:17-23; Is 20:2 and 2 Sam 15:30.
- 15 Cf Job 30:29; The KJV and the NIV translates "owl" instead of "ostrich".
- 16 N A Schuman, *Micah*, Kampen 1989, 22, argues that the nature of the text with its short sentences, unusual grammatical structures and syntax, serves the purpose of endorsing the sense of threat, confusion and panic to be detected.
- 17 For more detail concerning the names of the towns, see Hillers, *op cit*, 25-28; Alfaro, *op cit*, 18-19.
- 18 Cf Allen, *op cit*, 281.
- 19 2 Chron 11:6-10 lists the towns in Rehoboam's defence system.
- 20 Shaw, *op cit*, 43. The possibility that "houses" refer to factories producing royal pottery is mentioned by Hillers, *op cit*, 282, but although it is a possible solution, it does not carry real weight.
- 21 Mays, *op cit*, 59 who points out that "glory" can refer to the military might, prestige and the power of the nation.
- 22 A S van der Woude, *Micha*, Nijkerk 1976, 57, points out the wordplay between the name Adullam and the verb "*dalal*", meaning: *to be weak or insignificant*.
- 23 Cf 1 Kg 13:30; Jer 22:18; 34:5.
- 24 Allen, *op cit*, 28.
- 25 Hillers, *op cit*, 30. He also mentions Lindblom's proposal of an invasion by Sargon in 712. Shaw, *op cit*, 56-67, argues against these two possible dates, and proposes the reign of Jeroboam the second as the most plausible. This he bases on his particular view of the role that the towns played (showing their disloyalty towards Jerusalem) and also on the close relationship between the fates of Samaria and Jerusalem. Although he argues a strong case, he admits that his reconstruction is far from certain. Most scholars would admit the same about their proposals.