

WORDPLAYS IN MICAH 1:10-14

(Tremper Longman III)¹

Micah intensifies the prediction of Samaria's desperate plight in a poem in which his masterful use of the pun is again evident. In historical retrospect, we can see that these cities are chosen because they are likely the ones subdued by the Assyrian king Sennacherib during his campaign in Palestine in 701 BC as he worked his way toward Jerusalem. They are located in the southern foothills (Shephelah) as one moves from the coast toward Jerusalem. The prophet employs wordplay between the names of the cities and their reactions in order to make his point (see notes NIV text).

(10) The play on words begins in v.10 with Gath (gat), which is somewhat similar in sound to the Hebrew word "tell" (nagad). The Hebrew of the second clause reads "do not weep at all". These towns appear to be clustered in the *Shephelah* (Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967], 339). The phrase "Tell it not in Gath" is reflective of David's lament at Saul's death (2 Sa 1:20). It warns the people not to weep lest the inhabitants of Gath, a Philistine city, learn of their impending destruction. In Beth Ophrah ("house of dust") the inhabitants are to roll in the dust as a sign of mourning Jos 7:6; Job 16:15; Isa 47:1).

(11-12) The people of Shaphir ("beautiful, fair, pleasant") are to experience something quite the opposite of what the name of their town means; they will be reduced to shame and dishonor. Those who live in Zaanan ("come out") will not be able to come out from their city.

Beth Ezel is unknown to us. The word ezel means "beside, contiguous to" (BDB, 69). It is difficult to be certain what Micah intends in this wordplay, but it is likely that we have a clue in "emdato" ("standing place"). We may paraphrase the name "Beth Ezel" as "nearby house." Perhaps the town was in close proximity to Jerusalem. That its "standing place" is to be taken away may indicate that this town standing nearby will cease to exist. Thus a buffer ("standing place") between Jerusalem and the invading armies will be removed. The wailing will signify the destruction of the town as its citizens mourn their fate. In the Massoretic Text "Beth Ezel" is followed by the causative particle *ki*. The reason Beth Ezel will do so is "because" Maroth ("bitter") will also endure God's punishment (v.12). The causal particle is again used. All this will happen because God will punish his people, including Jerusalem.

(13-14) The inhabitants of Lachish (v.13) are to harness the team to the chariot. Assonance is achieved by pairing Lachish with *rekes* ("steed"; "team," NIV). The citizens of Lachish are to flee the coming destruction like steeds. [Lachish was also where the Judean Kings kept their horses].

The significance of Moresheth is difficult to determine. Its name is somewhat similar in sound to *m^eorasa* ("betrothed"), and since "parting gifts" were given to brides as dowries (1Ki 9:16), it is possible that the designation is intended to convey that the town of Moresheth Gath is soon to be parted from Judah as a bride parts from her family.

Aczib ("deception") will prove to be a deception ('akzab) to Judah. The word is used of a stream that has dried up (Jer 15:18), so this city will cease to exist.



¹ This article is from *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.

(15-16) The name "Mareshah" (v.15) is somewhat similar to nominal forms based on the root *yara* ("to possess"). The wordplay is achieved by pairing this name with *yores* (a participial form of *yara*), which occurs in the first part of the clause. The word *yores* denotes a possessor or conqueror (Jer 8:10). Thus this town, whose name may have engendered associations with the word "conqueror" will be conquered. The glory of Israel, that is, the people (cf. Hos 9:11-13), will be forced to flee as David did to Adullam. This thought continues in v.16, where the people are to mourn because of the depopulation of the country.

This section (vv.10-16) begins with words that recall David's lament at the death of Saul and ends with the name of the cave where David hid from Saul. These dark moments in David's life form a gloomy backdrop to the description of the fall of the towns Micah speaks of. Though he is never directly mentioned, the figure of David appears hauntingly in the tapestry of destruction—not a David standing tall in triumph, but a David bowed down by humiliation. It is as though Micah sees in the fall of each town and the eventual captivity of the two kingdoms the dissolution of the Davidic monarchy. Like David's glory, that of Israel will come to Adullam.

James Moffatt's paraphrase gives the sense of Micah's wordplays:

"Tell it not in Tellington!
Wail not in Wailing!
Dust Manor will eat dirt,
Dressy Town flee naked.
Safefold will not save,
Wallchester's walls are down,
A bitter dose drinks Bitterton."



Eugene Peterson captures the whole gist in *The Message*:

*Don't gossip about this in Telltown.
Don't waste your tears.
In Dustville,
roll in the dust.
In Alarmtown,
the alarm is sounded.
The citizens of Exitburgh
will never get out alive.
Lament, Last-Stand City:
There's nothing in you left standing.
The villagers of Bittertown
wait in vain for sweet peace.
Harsh judgment has come from God
and entered Peace City.
All you who live in Chariotville,
get in your chariots for flight.
You led the daughter of Zion
into trusting not God but chariots.*

*Similar sins in Israel
also got their start in you.
Go ahead and give your good-bye gifts
to Good-byeville.
Miragetown beckoned
but disappointed Israel's kings.
Inheritance City
has lost its inheritance.
Glorytown
has seen its last of glory.
Shave your heads in mourning
over the loss of your precious towns.
Go bald as a goose egg—they've gone
into exile and aren't coming back.*