

Bad Economics 2020 Draft

Preface:

Today we're looking at a passage whose main point has basically been the same since it was written. It's a warning passage, a passage that speaks to the decline of God's People, Israel, and shares the symptoms of that decline.

We're in the book of Judges, today. Lean on what you know with this book. It's well after the Exodus and Israel's wandering in the wilderness. Moses has died, and now Joshua has, too. The Israelites are supposed to drive out the Canaanites from the land, yet they haven't, and by the second chapter of the book the angel of the Lord is rebuking them. We learn an entire generation has grown up without any knowledge of what God has done for Israel. It's a mess, what one author calls "social and religious disintegration" (NIB).

The only real hero in the book of Judges is God, for not giving up on His People when they consistently and deliberately ignore everything faithful.

Let's pray, and jump into it.

Prayer:

vv1-4:

So. 17:1:

17:1 Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim 2 said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels [a] of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse—I have that silver with me; I took it."

Then his mother said, "The LORD bless you, my son!" 3 When he returned the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, she said, "I solemnly consecrate my silver to the LORD for my son to make an image overlaid with silver. I will give it back to you."

4 So after he returned the silver to his mother, she took two hundred shekels [b] of silver and gave them to a silversmith, who used them to make the idol. And it was put in Micah's house.

So. Micah has stolen his mom's money, after he had heard her lay a curse on it (NIB). He hauled away 30 pounds of silver; and for some reason he fesses up—probably because no one likes to be cursed. And his mom (they've got a dysfunctional sort of relationship) blesses him for returning the silver instead of reprimanding him (NIB). His mom decides, after consecrating her money to the lord, to take a tiny little bit of what she consecrated and have an idol made up.

This is bad news. We tend to remember the Ten Commandments. We know that we aren't supposed to make idols. We remember Aaron, making that golden calf while Moses was on the Mountain writing down "You shall not make for yourself an idol." We remember that God wasn't too pleased about it.

But this is how far God's people have gone astray; they've forgotten the most basic of things. This gives us some context for Micah; his life of faith, we know already, may not be exemplary. What's ironic is that Micah means "Who is like the Lord"—a name that implies no one is, so don't bother making little idols, because they aren't worth your time (NIB). But our story continues:

vv5-6:

5 Now this man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and some household gods and installed one of his sons as his priest. 6 In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.

His mom consecrated the silver to the Lord, and took a little bit of it to make a small idol. And Micah decides to set up his own little temple—he already had a shrine—complete

with the right outfits, somebody to stand around and say the things that should be said for every thing to be proper.

Have any of us played house? Built forts, and pretended to be adventurers? Dressed up your siblings and bossed them around? Micah is playing church, here. Only he's not 10, or 11, or 12. He's not playing pretend; he's an adult, with grown sons, and he's trying to make a little church for himself, his very own. Well, playing temple, right?

And here, for the first time in Judges, we find the phrase, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." This phrase functions as a sort of parallel to the phrase "The Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord" that we find throughout the book of Judges (NIB). People do what they see fit—and what they see fit is evil in God's eyes. Let's keep going.

vv7-13:

7 A young Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, who had been living within the clan of Judah, 8 left that town in search of some other place to stay. On his way [c] he came to Micah's house in the hill country of Ephraim.

9 Micah asked him, "Where are you from?"

"I'm a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah," he said, "and I'm looking for a place to stay."

10 Then Micah said to him, "Live with me and be my father and priest, and I'll give you ten shekels [d] of silver a year, your clothes and your food." 11 So the Levite agreed to live with him, and the young man became like one of his sons to him. 12 Then Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in his house. 13 And Micah said, "Now I know that the LORD will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest."

We've met Micah already; here, we met another character, a Levite. In a few verses the Bible names this Levite Jonathan "the gift of God"; so. Micah and Jonathan. First let's look at Jonathon. He's a Levite—one who God said should be a priest, the one whose portion in the Land of Canaan was God himself. The Levites didn't get a plot of land to farm, or a house from some Canaanite; instead, they got God. That's it; leftovers from the Temple, and a place to sleep. But for Jonathan, this wasn't enough. He's tired of this; Bethlehem's too crowded, too filled up with priests, maybe. He wants more. So he leaves town; he abandons his place and duty, and sells himself to Micah for 4 ounces of silver a year; less weight than your cell phone; less silver used in the idol he's guarding. He sells his position as a priest. He trades the call of God, to be a Levite in

Bethlehem, for security, for cash, for the ability to be a yes-man to a rich guy named Micah.

And I know Jonathan's profession. Jonathan is a dealer.

He's a dealer in God; a dealer in access to the holy. If I were speaking only to pastors, I'd highlight just how much pastors can think they can deal out the same thing Jonathan thinks he can deal out. I'd remind those who are professional Christians, paid to work for the Lord, how they can't be brokers of the presence of God or traders of the Lord's favor and blessing. You can't act like Jonathan, selling ten-shekel bags of holiness so you can have some security, and prosperity, and status.

And yet, we can all wonder how this translates to those of us who aren't paid for some matter of our faith. Maybe we simply promise to offer prayers for someone, knowing the offer grants us honor, even if we never pray at all. Or maybe we discern some other way we privatize what is public for our own benefit.

But let's go back to Micah for a moment. With Jonathan on his payroll, Micah has legitimized business! He's not playing church anymore; he's got his very own! And Micah points out his whole hope for this little operation in v.13: "Now I

know that the Lord will be good to me, since this Levite has become my priest.”

Micah wants what so many of us want. What I want, at least, all the time: He wants security. He wants guarantees. Micah wants to be guaranteed that God will be on his side—that God will have his agenda. He looks to God and he sees God’s utility—God’s usefulness, the ability for God to make life easy.

Hold this in your mind: If Jonathan is a dealer, Micah is a user.

18vv2-6:

Then some time passes, and the tribe of Dan gets a little impatient for some land. They’ve already lost the land that God gave them—the only tribe to do so (NIB). The Amorites, a people Israel was supposed to drive out, have trapped them up in Ephraim’s hill country. And so they decide to go get some more land. They send a group of people ahead of them, to spy out some places, get a feel for things, and this group stumbles upon Micah’s house and the Levite, who tells them to go ahead with their task. This is an awkward scene; they don’t tell him what they are doing, he doesn’t ask, and it’s almost as if the Priest is just trying to get rid of them. We’re in Chapter 18, now. This wasn’t read to us:

18:2b: So they--the Danite land-stealers--entered the hill country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah, where they spent the night. 3 When they were near Micah's house, they recognized the voice of the young Levite; so they turned in there and asked him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? Why are you here?"

4 He told them what Micah had done for him, and said, "He has hired me and I am his priest."

5 Then they said to him, "Please inquire of God to learn whether our journey will be successful."

6 The priest answered them, "Go in peace. Your journey has the LORD's approval."

I struggle with this passage. Can this priest, who is so far outside the bounds of what's appropriate, really hand out favorable judgments on the Lord's behalf? I don't know. One way to translate this has Jonathan saying, "The mission you are on is under the eye of the Lord," which is a little ambiguous, and kinda scary, honestly. What I know is this: I don't want to find myself ever being a yes-man to other people's self-interested goals, especially when those goals are claiming something for themselves that God has already allowed someone to lose. Are we willing to be people others come to for "yes's" only? How can we have the courage to say no to people who want a yes? Especially in faith matters?

18vv14-21:

And what happens next in the text is hard. The Danites find a great neighborhood; good land—it “lacks nothing whatsoever”—the people are unsuspecting and far away from anyone who could help them—and so, they decide to go ahead and take it “in the name of the Lord.” They tell the rest of the tribe, and they happen to march by Micah’s house on the way to their military invasion. So we read in v.14:

14 Then the five men who had spied out the land of Laish said to their fellow Danites, "Do you know that one of these houses has an ephod, some household gods and an image overlaid with silver? Now you know what to do." 15 So they turned in there and went to the house of the young Levite at Micah's place and greeted him. 16 The six hundred Danites, armed for battle, stood at the entrance of the gate. 17 The five men who had spied out the land went inside and took the idol, the ephod and the household gods while the priest and the six hundred armed men stood at the entrance of the gate.

18 When the five went into Micah's house and took the idol, the ephod and the household gods, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?"

19 They answered him, "Be quiet! Don't say a word. Come with us, and be our father and priest. Isn't it better that you serve a tribe and clan in Israel as priest rather than just one man's household?" 20 The priest was very pleased. He took the ephod, the household gods and the idol and went along with the people. 21 Putting their little children, their livestock and their possessions in front of them, they turned away and left.

"The priest was very pleased" another translation puts it. Of course he was, right? He was on the fast track; his was a life of upward mobility. And all he had to do to get here was to say the right thing at the right time. And bam—he's a hero. He's the one who carries the ephod, the idol, and other household gods with him. He's the religious authority now—not of a large family, as before—but of a whole tribe, filled with people, all of whom will want the God that only he is the gatekeeper of.

Again, I think of pastors. I can't help myself. Famous pastors who buy and trade either in the power and influence their position offers them. They use their status as brokers of God's utility for homes with fences and pools, cathedrals of glass, endorsements of things and people that they have no business endorsing. And I know I'm nothing like them. The worst I do is say a few well-timed "amens" or hold my

tongue when I should speak or volunteer for the task-forces that get all the credit. Or maybe I don't. But I can imagine it.

But we all know the right times to drop names now and then, whether the name of God or the name of another person who whoever we're dealing with respects. We all know how to talk a little more about Jesus when the pastors around. We all know what it's like to want to trade up, to feel like if we don't say yes to this good opportunity, then...well, then, what are we? We know what it's like to exchange a bit of our integrity for the respect of others and better job security.

Or maybe we don't. But we can imagine it.

Micah's name and Jonathan's name meant nothing to them, apart from markers of desire. Micah, "Who is like the Lord?" wanted more of the Lord for his own success. Jonathan, "The gift of God," wanted God's gifts for himself. My name is Richard Gregory Hagopian, and is meaningless if I forget that before my name comes Jesus', who claims me and has claims on me, whose names is "Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End...the Root and the Offspring of David, the bright Morning Star." Son of David, Son of God Most High, Pioneer, Priest Most High. All the reminders in the world--even our own names--won't be

reminders to us of God's goodness if all that we care about is God's utility, God's usefulness for us.

18vv27-31:

Micah of course, tries to get his stuff back, but the Danites have a lot of swords, a lot of men, and he doesn't press the issue. The passage ends with this epilogue in vv 27-31.

27 Then [the Danites] took what Micah had made, and his priest, and went on to Laish, against a peaceful and unsuspecting people. They attacked them with the sword and burned down their city. 28 There was no one to rescue them because they lived a long way from Sidon and had no relationship with anyone else....The Danites rebuilt the city and settled there. 29 They named it Dan after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel—though the city used to be called Laish. 30 There the Danites set up for themselves the idol, and Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, [d] and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land. 31 They continued to use the idol Micah had made, all the time the house of God was in Shiloh.

This is not a heroic tale. The peaceful city is destroyed. Dan sets up a religious shrine, headed up by Jonathan. That

shrine will become the center of the Northern Kingdom's religious idolatry, will lead to Israel's division, and the loss of most of God's People to exile. Micah is forgotten, except for this story.

Monopoly and "Utilities"

Remember Monopoly? I used to play monopoly with my brother all the time. I was the banker, because it's easier to cheat. And I would always try to get the utilities—water works and the electric company. They are called utilities because—ta da—they have utility. They're useful. They enable you to get what you want.

"Commodities"

And they are limited. We are only really reminded of this when things like power outages happen. SO in some real sense they are commodities, too. Limited access things, that you can trade for whatever you want. I'll give you a bushel of corn, which you don't have, and you can give me a cow, that I need. And hooray, we're both happy.

Of course it's too heavy to carry around cows, so we simplify things by using cash: You give me your cow for ten dollars, and you can just go buy some corn. Easy. This is the main reason we don't get paid in vegetables. Or cows.

The Economists

We need to know this because Jonathan and Micah do. Jonathan and Micah are expert economists. Micah looks to God and sees his utility—sees the usefulness of having God around. Jonathan exploits his nature as a commodity—as someone who has access to God when few other people do.

And I wonder if we do the same? Do we treat the lord as a utility—as gas, electric, or power? Do we forget that God is the covenantally faithful, ever-loving, always longing to save God, bearer of sins and giver of grace, the hero of Judges for not giving up on us? Or do we treat God as a power source? “I’ve got some big decisions coming up, so now I’m going to go pray, even though I never do.” “I spent all night playing video games, so please, Jesus, help me get these chores done.” Jesus is not an energy drink. Jesus is not a double espresso. Jesus is the God who deserves worship, and service, and sacrifice; the same things he gave.

Jesus (Utility)

And, in case Judges isn’t enough, Jesus’ own life reminds us that this is pretty bad idea. Remember when God came down? Remember when Jesus was in the wilderness. The devil comes to him and reminds him of all that God can do—the devil reminds Jesus of how useful God is. How much utility God has. The enemy tempts Jesus to treat God and

God's promises as things to be used up whenever they are needed.

Jesus (Commodity)

And not only that, But the devil tries to get Jesus to be Jonathan as well. He tries to trick Jesus into treating his position as God's son as a commodity to be bought and sold. He tries to get Jesus to name-drop for the Lord, and get a little blessing for it. But Jesus rejects this. Maybe he knows that if he follows through, if he doesn't give into the same temptation Micah and Jonathan gave into, then he can make it so that all God's people have the same access to God that he has.

Scarcity

See another thing about commodities is that they depend on scarcity. I can charge you \$50 for a bushel of corn because nobody else got any and you want it. We need to remember this; this is our protection when we begin to treat our position as brokers of influence in the Kingdom of God as something special to be used. We need to remember that we are not the only ones who have the Holy Spirit. We need to remember Pentecost, and the fact that God will not allow himself to be bandied about like a ten dollar bill.

Because if there is a thing that we learn from Micah and Jonathan it is that dealers end up users.

Call to Avoidance

So. Let's not be Micah.

Let's not turn to God only for the blessings we think closeness to God will get us, because when we do that we just end up people with an empty, play-house church. God will not let himself be bought.

And let's not be Jonathan. Let's not use our position as people of influence in the community of Christ to get what we want. God shut this option down when he gave his whole family the Holy Spirit anyway. God will not allow himself to be sold.

So reject the economics of Micah and Jonathan. Their story is a warning to us that treating God as something to be bought and sold, using God for our stability, our success, or to get the esteem of others only ends poorly for our legacy and for God's People. It's not worth the risk.