Micah is a book for serious Christians who want to grapple with how God wants men and women to live, those searching for God’s ideal rubrics for the *good* life on earth. It is a small book among the Scriptures, one of the “Minor” Prophets, but it zooms to the heart of biblical faith. Biblical faith, Micah clarifies, entails allegiance to a *covention*, a mutually committed, binding relationship between humans and God. To enter into this covenant is to accept God’s freely bestowed love and grace, and it is also to respond to God’s grace by committing oneself to a life of allegiance, discipleship, and obligation.

Human obligation, biblical faith maintains, is a crucial, fitting response to God’s saving love. Moses was God’s premier spokesperson of covenantal obligation, firmly reminding Israel that God “declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe” (Deuteronomy 4:13). Echoing Moses’
words, Micah proclaims that God “has declared to you, human, what is good” (Micah 6:8). The “good” of which Micah speaks is God’s good instructions for a covenantal life of faithfulness. Micah proceeds immediately in 6:8 to summarize these instructions in a rich dictum well worth memorizing: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus’ way of putting things was little different (Luke 10:27).

Micah’s prophetic message of binding covenantal loyalty to the one God is the same faith that later flowered with Israel’s great spiritual reformations at the times of Kings Hezekiah and Josiah. Indeed, Micah advocates the theology that now dominates the Scriptures as they have come down to us.

Micah of Moresheth, for whom the book of Micah is named, prophesied in the Israelite southern kingdom of Judah in the eighth century B.C.E. While
Hosea, his contemporary, denounced apostasy in worship, Micah decried the social injustices of his time—particularly those perpetrated against the countryside, that is, the rural parts of the land. Micah traveled from his hometown of Moresheth in the country to Judah’s urban capital, Jerusalem, where he castigated the elites of the nation for abandoning and oppressing the Judean people of the land. His countryfolk, he protested, were experiencing Jerusalem’s policies of militarization and socioeconomic “progress” as nothing short of state-sanctioned cannibalism. He prophesied that God would not allow this tyranny to continue, but would surely punish Judah and set things right.

Approach the book of Micah as a collection of prophecies, that is, an anthology of divine messages channeled to various target audiences on many different occasions. Be prepared to come up against God’s revelatory word, confronting humanity with divine
reality, challenging alternative realities. Prepare yourself also for breaks in continuity within the book and even some jerky transitions from prophecy to prophecy.

Among the Bible’s books of prophecy, Micah stands out because of its particularly masterful poetic language. The artistic form of its prophecies, in fact, accounts for much of their spiritual power. These texts largely lack rhymes and any strict meter, but they more than make up for it in their compact, imaginative expression.

Micah 2:4 is a good example of zesty Mican language. It uses patterns of Hebrew sound to drive home its message. As Micah enjoins society’s abusers and exploiters to prepare to “sing the blues,” the very Hebrew words he uses make the sound of a mocking taunt—a sound similar to “na na, na na na.”
Micah’s book intersperses two types of messages. One presents firm words of judgment against society’s leaders, who use their position, power, and authority to perpetrate socioeconomic injustices with seeming impunity. This officially sanctioned injustice, Micah reveals, is creating a crisis of covenant and community in Judah. The other Mican message holds out hopes for a marvelous future of promise. The hopes will culminate in the birth at Bethlehem of an ideal messianic ruler.

The two messages of Micah’s book do not counteract one another. Micah holds that God’s promised messianic future will come only after the downfall of the evil officials of society. Further, it helps show how deep is the current crisis of covenant and community to see an ideal vision of the way God’s earth will be one day.
The Crisis of Covenant and Community

The covenant between God and God’s people enacted at Mount Sinai emphasized the permanency of Israel’s land holdings. As part of the settlement of the promised land, God’s territory was to be allotted to Israel’s tribes, clans, and households, and was to be held by them as a permanent inheritance throughout their generations. Deuteronomy 19:14 sums up this covenantal principle: “You must not move your neighbor’s boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.”

The Sinai covenant’s system of permanently allotted land lent a strong material infrastructure to Israel’s communal fellowship. The people’s assurance of inherited land provided a concrete basis for the care and nurture of family members and neighbors.
Landowners were able to redeem kinfolk sold into slavery or to buy forfeited land to keep it in the local clan. They could use the agricultural bounty of their land to care for widows, foreigners, the poor, and the helpless. In these, and numerous other ways, permanent land holdings gave actual social and economic structure to covenantal community in ancient Israel.

Fellowship among today’s Christians is the modern analogue to ancient Israel’s system of permanent land holdings. Our contemporary churches would do well to emulate the solid, socioeconomic backbone that characterized biblical Israel’s covenantal ideal. Fellowship among God’s faithful people of every era should entail involvement and sacrifice, not mere warm feelings and well wishes.

Many of Micah’s judgment prophecies respond to a contemporary disregard of the covenant’s stipulations protecting inherited land. They indict Jerusalem’s lords and barons for
destroying covenantal community in Judah through practices of land grabbing. Micah 2:1–5 is an example. The passage pictures Jerusalem’s nobles lying awake at night plotting how to drive country farmers off their ancestral lands. They can then use these lands to build up huge commercial estates that will earn them a fortune. Micah is explicit about their scheming: “They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress…people and their inheritance” (2:2).

Lacking any sense of obligation to the guidelines of the Sinai covenant, the land-grabbers act simply because “it is in their power” (2:1). Still today, amazingly, there are leaders who decide on questionable actions merely because it is within their power to perform them. Micah believes this attitude to be ludicrous. He holds the land-grabbers guilty of such unfaithfulness they will soon be kicked out of God’s covenantal community. They are about to lose all
their accumulated lands, Micah warns, and find themselves without representation in “the assembly of the LORD” (2:5).

Tragically, the land grabbing practices of Micah’s era are of more than mere antiquarian interest today; they are a present, cold reality in many parts of our world. Further, they remain just as destructive of community as they were in ancient times. In contemporary Guatemala, for example, a few families own vast tracts of coastal land that produce specialized cash crops for export, such as coffee and cotton. Native farmers have been pushed back from the rich coasts to live in infertile mountain regions, such as the Altiplano. Since they can barely grow enough maize and beans to survive in the mountains, they must endure hardship and exploitation for months at a time as contracted laborers on the commercial plantations of the wealthy.

Micah 3:9–12 is another central judgment passage of Micah. This pas-
sage too condemns Jerusalem’s lords for tyranny against the countryside. Through violence, injustice, and bribery, they are building up Jerusalem and its satellite military fortresses in the countryside while breaking down the country folks’ covenantal social networks.

In this passage, Micah balks at how Jerusalem’s rulers rely on a “cheap grace” to defend their tyrannous actions. To rely on *cheap* grace is to accept the blessings of God but to disavow any sense of reciprocal obligation. The officials of Jerusalem claimed God’s protection yet failed to honor the divine concern for justice. How outrageous, Micah exclaims, that state officials “pervert all equity” yet “lean upon the LORD and say, ‘Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us’” (3:9, 11).

Micah blasts this false religious perspective as nothing more than “alibi religion.” He makes plain that humans cannot oppress those around them and
continue to remain within divine favor. There is a judgment sentence from God, he announces, for the tyrants of Judah’s capital, one that will leave them dumbfounded.

Jerusalem and the temple are no mighty fortress, Micah declares—not for those who pay God no more than lip service. Rather, they are just another piece of real estate. The capital’s rulers and barons will see their self-serving, alibi religion debunked by God, the prophet announces, when they find Zion “plowed as a field,” Jerusalem “a heap of ruins,” and the temple mountain “a wooded height” (3:12).

**Promises for the Future**

Micah 4:1–5 is one of Micah’s central passages of promise, well-known to many. You may immediately recognize it for its prophecy that some day earth’s peoples shall all “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” Indeed, at that
time, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (4:3). Despite all contemporary obstacles and human selfishness, God is at work, the passage announces, planning a world where everyone will live together in peace. Fascinatingly, a parallel version of the same passage occurs in Isaiah 2:1–5.

Micah’s version of this prophetic promise passage differs from that of Isaiah in at least one crucial way. The verse Micah 4:4 does not appear in Isaiah. The editors of Micah’s book have grafted it into the passage, giving the prophecy a special spin that it does not have in Isaiah. The verse declares that in God’s ideal future, people “shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.” This engrafted verse emphasizes the special Mican theme that in God’s ideal world, each family must be able to enjoy the results of its own labor on the land.
The editors who added 4:4 to Micah 4:1–5 wanted to be sure that future readers would fully understand the cost of achieving the ideal vision of the passage. Such a vision will require concrete economic and ideological change. Zion’s dream cannot rest on a foundation of local oppression. If all are to give up swords and spears, everyone must possess, and remain content with, their own simple homestead—their own vine and fig tree. That means radical changes in the tax structure and profit system that drives military aggression. It means adopting the covenantal lifestyle that Micah himself promoted.

Perhaps an even better known prophecy of promise occurs in Micah 5:2–4. The passage speaks of a coming true judge who will arise out of Bethlehem and replace Judah’s failed leadership. He will be no ordinary king but a Messiah, “great to the ends of the earth” (5:4).

According to Matthew 2, Micah was the prophetic Scripture that ultimately
guided the magi in their search for the Christ child. Jerusalem’s chief priests and scribes knew from Micah the proper location of the Messiah’s birth. Bethlehem, not the historic capital, Jerusalem, was where the wise men should be looking.

The Scriptures often picture the Messiah as a king of Jerusalem, a powerful royal figure, but Micah 5:2–4 cautions against misunderstanding such a portrait. The true, future judge of Judah, it informs us, will be far from just another proud tyrant. Rather, he represents the antithesis of the ruling monarchs of Micah’s time. Rejecting the standard, worldly trappings of royalty, he will derive his authority from somewhere other than a hierarchically organized system of control and a militarized array of defense.

Micah understands God’s Messiah to be a humble, peripheral figure from an overlooked sector of society. He will rule in complete dependence on the
strength and majesty of his God and be concerned only with nurturing God’s flock (5:4), not with personal enrichment and aggrandizement. According to Psalm 78, King David was originally such a figure. God took him from the rural countryside, “from tending the nursing ewes,” and “brought him to be the shepherd of his people.” Thereafter, “with upright heart he tended them,” and “guided them with skillful hand” (78:71–72).

**Micah’s Background**

From between the lines of his book, the prophet Micah emerges as one of Israel’s leading elders, perhaps a clan head. Such local, village-based leaders were key players in Israel’s societal organization before the rise of the monarchy and its new tyrannical ways. Elders were the senior members of the various extended families in an Israelite village, presiding over three to four different generations (twenty-five to forty family members). For their part,
clan heads held authority over larger blocks of kinfolk, descent lines numbering only two to three per entire village. Micah traveled to Jerusalem neither as an impoverished dirt farmer nor as a self-appointed revolutionary, but as a traditional village leader bravely defending the covenant rights of his own kith and kin.

Micah emphasized that *justice* and *might* sustain his prophetic work: “I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might” (Micah 3:8). His use of Hebrew terms is instructive. In old Israel, before the rise of the monarchy, people considered *elders* to be the special custodians of justice. They were the ones who pronounced verdicts in village courts. Elders were also filled with might, wielding clan influence, commanding special respect in their lineages and clans. Judges 6:12 thus associates might with the judge Gideon, a member of the rural aristocracy; and Ruth 2:1 ascribes
might to Boaz, a village leader within Judah’s Ephrathite clan.

Micah did not act alone but was a member of a pro-covenant faction among the leaders of old Israel’s society. The values and ethics of this group had their roots in past ways of life. They found it practically impossible to defend their covenantal convictions without sounding hopelessly anachronistic, that is, behind the times. Jerusalem’s lords and barons had moved on to new ways and new rules that allowed for land grabbing, a royal judiciary, and a standing army. This discovery about Micah’s social roots means that we must consider him a conservator of covenant tradition, not a religious innovator.

Beware of popular lecturers and authors who may try to convince you that the biblical prophets were innovators, accomplishing evolutionary breakthroughs within a supposed ascent of Israel toward monotheism. Far from that, prophets such as Micah were
activist traditionalists. They preserved a venerable theology of covenant loyalty amid confusion and conflict as Israel’s older village society regrouped and entrenched itself as a centralized monarchy.

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