

Judges 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Judges chapter 18. In those days there was no king in Israel, and in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them. So the people of Dan sent five able men from the whole number of their tribe, from Zorah and from Eshtael, to spy out the land and to explore it. And they said to them, Go and explore the land. And they came to the hill country of reframe to the house of Micah and lodged there. When they were by the house of Micah they recognized the voice of the young Levite. And they turned aside and said to him, Who brought you here?

What are you doing in this place? What is your business here? And he said to them, This is how Micah dealt with me. He has hired me, and I have become his priest. And they said to him, Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether the journey on which we are setting out will succeed. And the priest said to them, Go in peace. The journey on which you go is under the eye of the Lord. Then the five men departed and came to Laish, and saw the people who were there, how they lived in security after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing that is in the earth and possessing wealth, and how they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone.

And when they came to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtael, their brothers said to them, What do you report? They said, Arise and let us go up against them, for we have seen the land, and behold, it is very good. And will you do nothing? Do not be slow to go, to enter in and possess the land. As soon as you go, you will come to an unsuspecting people. The land is spacious, for God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is in the earth.

So six hundred men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtael, and went up and encamped at Kiriath-Jerim in Judah. On this account that place is called Mehanedan to this place. Behold, it is west of Kiriath-Jerim. And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah. Then the five men who had gone to scout out the land went up and entered and took the carved image, the ephod, the house of the land.

[2 : 41] And the metal image, while the priests stood by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war. And when these went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household guards, and the metal image, the priests said to them, What are you doing?

And they said to him, Keep quiet, put your hand on your mouth, and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel? And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household guards and the carved image, and went along with the people. So they turned and departed, putting the little ones and the livestock and the goods in front of them. When they had gone a distance from the home of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house were called out, and they overtook the people of Dan. And they shouted to the people of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, What is the matter with you, that you come with such a company? And he said, You take my gods that I made, and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How then do you ask me, what is the matter with you? And the people of Dan said to him, Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life with the lives of your household. Then the people of Dan went their way, and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home. But the people of Dan took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, and they came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, and struck them with the edge of the sword, and burned the city with fire. And there was no deliverer, because it was far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth Rehob. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it, and they named the city Dan, after the name of Dan their

ancestor, who was born to Israel.

But the name of the city was Laish at the first. And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites, until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh. The story of Judges chapter 17 to 18 is a surprising one. It begins with an unknown woman's curse upon a stolen sum of money, 1,100 pieces of silver. Unbeknownst to her, the thief is her own son, Micah, a man of the hill country of Ephraim. When Micah discloses the fact that he was the thief, his mother seeks to take back her curse, declaring a blessing over him instead. Further to avert the effect of the curse, she expresses her intention to dedicate the return money to the Lord for the sake of her son. However, she only uses 200 pieces of silver, with which money she gets a silversmith to produce a carved image and a metal image. The images are placed in the house of Micah, who produces a shrine for them, with an ephod and household gods. Micah ordains one of his sons to minister there, and in the second half of chapter 7, we read of a young unnamed Levite from Bethlehem and Judah, who is wandering north looking for a new position. Micah hires him to be a priest of his idolatrous shrine. When reading biblical narratives, we need to pay close attention to the ways that they are told, the details that are and are not given to us, the ways that other stories are recalled or anticipated, the ways that the figures within them are characterised, and other such features. We also need to consider the very different ways that one could narrate the same underlying events. In Judges chapter 18, when the Danites come on the scene, a story of one family's false dealings and private idolatry becomes a story with direct ramifications for the wider people. If we were telling this story, we would likely exclude Micah and his mother as just unnecessary prologue, and jump straight to the events with the immediate bearing upon Israel as a people, with the northern migration of the tribe of Dan. The fact that the story begins where it does and with whom it does, however, suggests that the author of Judges wants us to trace the rot of idolatry, which moves here from a private family and individual actions to a whole tribe and the national stage. The book of 1 Samuel is another story of national significance, which begins with the domestic drama of a woman in the hill country of Ephraim. There, however, Hannah's prayer for a son is presented as the seed for the establishment of the kingdom. Here, Micah and his mother sow poisonous seeds of idolatry and betrayal, which will bear bitter fruit for them and for the entire nation. Sin doesn't always begin at the top. It can spread up from the roots. As James Jordan argues, in Judges chapters 17 and 18, we have a replay of certain themes from Israel's history, but in a perverse and parodic form. In chapter 17, a false house of gods was built, and a false priesthood was set up, much as there was a tabernacle set up in Exodus, and a priesthood for it set up in Leviticus. In chapter 18, there is the spying out of a false land, followed by a conquest in which the first city is burnt, reminiscent of the city of Jericho in the book of Joshua. In Joshua, the territory of the tribe of Dan is described in chapter 19, verses 40 to 48. The seventh lot came out for the tribe of the people of Dan, according to their clans, and the territory of its inheritance included Zorah, Eshtael, Er-Shemesh, She'elabin, Ijelon, Ithla, Elon, Timna, Ekron, El-Tekah, Gibethon, Baalath, Jihad, Beni-Birak, Gath-Rimon, and Mejarkon and Rakon with the territory over against Joppa. When the territory of the people of Dan was lost to them, the people of Dan went up and fought against Leshem, and after capturing it and striking it with the sword, they took possession of it and settled in it, calling Leshem Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor. This is the inheritance of the tribe of the people of Dan, according to their clans, these cities with their villages. We also read of Dan's failure in

Judges chapter 1 verse 34. The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. Dan wasn't successful in maintaining control of their allotted portion in the land, so they sought out a different land for themselves. Depending on our dating of this passage, this might be referring to an earlier period of the history recorded in the book of Judges, or to some period after the death of Samson, the most famous Danite in scripture. [9 : 15] If the latter were the case, we might speculate that Samson stirred up so much trouble for his tribe with the Philistines, without successfully driving the Amorites and Philistines out, that a large contingent of the Danites sought to relocate. The Danites here are setting out from a location strongly associated with Samson in the preceding chapters. The five Danite scouts head north, where they stop off at the house of Micah. While there, they hear the voice of Micah's Levite, and recognise it. Some commentators believe that this is because the Levite was famous, and indeed later we learn that he likely had notable ancestry. However, another possibility mentioned by Trent

Butler is that they recognised the Levite's accent. He presumably had a Bethlehemite accent, which would have been strange to hear in that region of Ephraim, arousing the Danite's curiosity. When the Danite spies questioned Micah about his reasons for being in such a place, about what his situation was, Micah told them his story. They asked Micah to enquire of God concerning the success of their mission for them, and Micah gave them a favourable response. When they went up and spied out the region of Laish, the Danite scouts were impressed by their peaceful life and sense of security. This was a very good sign. The security of the people of Laish suggested both that they were easy pickings for Danite invaders, but also that the region was a relatively untroubled one, in stark contrast to their own tribal territory, which was heavily contested by various peoples.

Returning to the Danites at Zora and Eshtial, they bring a positive report, exhorting them not to delay, but to invade the region immediately. Their description of the land, a land not apportioned to them by the Lord, even though part of the territory of Israel more generally, is reminiscent of the ways that the Lord described the promised land to the people. This land could be seen as a false parody of the promised land. Dan is taking a territory that is not its own. The 600 Danite armed men are reminiscent of the 600,000 Israelites who first conquered the land. Military companies are connected with the number 5 or 50, and 600 suggests a military company of Israel, 120 groups of 5 men, or 12 groups of 50. In Exodus and Joshua, we learn that the Israelites were ordered in 5s or 50s, both as they left Egypt and as they entered the promised land. In a few chapters' time, we will encounter another company of 600 military men who were trying to escape a region where they were under threat. The Danite armed men camped near Kiriath-Jerim at a site that came to be known as

Mahenadan, a location also mentioned in the story of Samson. The reference to this location is another connection back to the story of Samson the Danite, the preceding story in the Book of Judges.

On their way north, they passed by the house of Micah again, and the five scouts tell the rest of the company about Micah's shrine and his gods, suggesting to their brethren that there was an opportunity to be taken here. They turn aside to the house of Micah and the 600 armed men standing at the entrance of the gate. They steal all of Micah's images, his ephod and the teraphim from his idolatrous shrine.

The Levite, here spoken of as a priest, stands with the 600 men and asks them what they are doing. They refuse to heed his protests, but tell him to join them as a father and a priest, the same invitation that Micah had given to him in the preceding chapter. Recognising that serving a whole tribe as priest, even if a small one, is a step up in the world from serving merely one man's household, the Levite jumps at the opportunity and joins the Danites. We should consider the ways that Micah's sins are coming back upon his own head here. He had betrayed and stolen the money from his mother, and now he himself is betrayed by the Levite, someone he considered as his son, and his silver images that were constructed with the return stolen money are themselves stolen. We should also recall that the 1,100 pieces of silver was money for betrayal in chapter 16. Perhaps there is some significance to the fact that the Danite group, 600 armed men and 5 scouts, makes up 605 persons. That is 11 squared times 5, once again reminiscent of the 1,100 stolen pieces of silver and a five-fold sum of that money in chapter 16. There are several subtle reminders of the sum of silver taken from Micah's mother in the chapters that follow, suggesting that the sum of money is a hint to a deeper level of meaning in the text. James Bajon has done extensive work on the numbers of the book of Judges, and sees in the repeated elevens of these concluding chapters of the book, a repeated troubling indication that something is missing. Israel is supposed to have 12 tribes, but these recurring numbers related to 11 suggest that something is badly wrong in the nation. This tallies well with the surface reading of these narratives. Chapter 18 is a story of one tribe's apostasy, and a sort of false exodus conquest and establishment of worship. Chapters 19 to 21 describe the near death of another tribe, Benjamin. We might also consider other associations that related numbers have. Both Joseph and his descendant Joshua die at the age of 110, and the death of Joshua is associated with the burial of Joseph's bones at the end of the book of Joshua. Joseph's age comes at the completion of the numerical sequence of the ages of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's a positive number in that context. However, while the completion of this sequence, Joseph is also the great lost son, and the nation will only be made whole as he is restored, his bones being returned to the land. At the end of the book of Judges, with these parts or tribes of the nations seemingly being lost to it, perhaps we have a return to the same sorts of themes. Leaving

Micah's house with the stolen items from his sanctuary, the

[14:59] Danites adopt an unusual formation, sending the more vulnerable parties ahead and positioning the military men as a rearguard for the company. Presumably they are braced for trouble from Micah and preparing themselves for a pursuit. Indeed, Micah and his neighbours assemble and pursue the Danites. However, when they overtake the Danite company, the Danites threaten them with lethal violence. Micah should just accept his loss, and seeing that he is greatly outnumbered, he stands down and retreats. The attentive reader is probably quite justified in recognising similarities between this story and the story of Jacob, Rachel and Laban. In both stories, household gods are stolen. In both cases, a defrauder is defrauded.

In both cases, there is a pursuit, but the gods are not recovered. In both stories, weaker parties are sent ahead of the rest of the company. In both stories, a parent unwittingly curses their child concerning a theft. Themes from the tragic story of Rachel and her children seem to be near to the surface in the concluding chapters of this book. Once again, a matriarch who is flirting with idolatry and her children are under threat. In this recollection of the Genesis narrative, something about the state of the nation as a whole is being characterised. Coming to Laish, the Danites burn the city with fire, much as Israel had done with Jericho at the first invasion.

However, in contrast to Jericho, here the city is immediately rebuilt and inhabited. Commenting upon the description of the forefather Dan as born in Israel, Jordan sees a subtle insinuation that the Danites are abandoning Israel at this time. There are a number of recollections of the earlier chapters of Judges in these concluding chapters. It is possible here that we should hear an echo of chapter 1 verses 20 to 26 in the account of Bethel, which was formerly called Luz. Dan would come to be a focal point of idolatrous worship in the north, and in this narrative we have a story of its origins. Later, after the division of the kingdom, Jeroboam the son of Nebat would establish one of his two golden calves at Dan. Jeroboam's intention was to protect the northern kingdom from the centripetal force the temple would exert by establishing a new religious cult for his kingdom. The Danites here, in establishing their own cult, are turning their backs on one of the things that held the tribes together as a single people, a common sanctuary at Shiloh. Finally, at this point, the author reveals the identity of the Levite. The identity of the

Levite is important. It turns out that he is a grandson of Moses himself. Some translations read Manasseh, but I think we should favour Moses as the reading here. This is yet another indication of how far the nation has fallen. However, the fact that the identity of the Levite is not given to us at the beginning of the story is worthy of note. Why is it left until this point? The Levite of the story is significant, not merely as the descendant of a notable line, but also as typical of the Levites more generally. This is a Levite who represents the role that the Levites were playing or failing to play within the whole period represented by the book of Judges. Such unfaithfulness among the Levites and the priests can also be seen at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel.

The adulterous worship established by the Levite with the stolen images of Micah persists in the region of Dan until the captivity of the land. It's not immediately clear what captivity might be in view here. Is it the Assyrian invasion of the north in 722 BC, or is it something earlier? Given the reference to the period of time that the house of God was at Shiloh in the final verse, I think it makes most sense to see this as the period of time prior to the Philistine victory at the Battle of Aphek.

[18:39] A question to consider. Where might we see instances of irony within the story of Micah and his images?