

Judges 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 March 2022

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 17. There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said to his mother, The one thousand one hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears. Behold, the silver is with me, I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be my son by the Lord. And he restored the one thousand one hundred pieces of silver to his mother. And his mother said, I dedicate the silver to the Lord, from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image. Now therefore I will restore it to you. So when he restored the money to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image and a metal image, and it was in the house of Micah. And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Now there was a young man of Bethlehem and Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. And the man departed from the town of Bethlehem and Judah to

Sojourn, where he could find a place. And as he journeyed, he came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah. And Micah said to him, Where do you come from? And he said to him, I am a Levite of Bethlehem and Judah, and I am going to Sojourn, where I may find a place. And Micah said to him, Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, and a suit of clothes, and your living. And the Levite went in. And the Levite was content to dwell with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. And Micah ordained the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then Micah said, Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because I have a Levite as priest.

The concluding chapters in the book of Judges are some of the most puzzling and troubling chapters in the whole of the Bible. While chapters 17 and 18 are not as troubling as the chapters that follow, they still raise many questions for the reader, not least concerning the reason for the story being included in this particular form. If we pay close attention to the details that we are given later on in chapter 18, the narrative seems to be dyschronologised, out of chronological sequence in the events in the book of Judges. If we were going to put it in its proper place, it would be very early on in the book. Then there is the strangeness of the story.

Why the reference to the mother's curse and the very specific sums of money? Why is the story told from the perspective that it is told? Micah doesn't seem to be that important to figure at all. He's not a leader of the people, and he's more acted upon than acting.

Why, given the specific details that we receive on some fronts, do we not have details on other fronts, such as the name of the mother? What happens to the money? Only 200 pieces of the silver that are promised seem to be given, leaving us with the question of what happens with the rest.

[3 : 03] We should also ask how this narrative relates to the narratives around it, to the Samson narratives, and also to the story of the Levite and the concubine. We can see many points of contact between the story of chapters 17 and 18 and the chapters that precede the story of Samson and Delilah. Delilah was given five sums of 1,100 pieces of silver, one for each of the lords of the Philistines. In chapter 18, the Danites come on the scene, and in the preceding chapter, the story of Samson was a story of a Danite. In chapter 18, the Danite spies come up from their brothers between Zorah and Eshtael, which is the location where Samson was buried at the end of chapter 16. Both stories also mention Mahanadan. There are very few stories of Danites in scripture.

There are only two narratives that make a reference to 1,100 pieces of silver. The twin locations of Zorah and Eshtael are only mentioned on a handful of occasions, and Mahanadan is only mentioned in the story of Samson, and in the story of Micah and the Levite. It seems to me that there is evidence here for some connection between the two stories. As Tammy Schneider notes, some commentators have argued that the mother of Micah is none other than Delilah, and Micah had stolen one of the sums of money that was given to her by the Philistine lords. Such an identification, however, would run contrary to details in the text in chapter 18 that would suggest an earlier date for the events of this chapter.

Looking closely at the story of chapters 17 and 18, and the story of chapter 19 to 21, we can also see a number of points of contact. Both of the stories involve a man from the hill country of Ephraim, and someone from Bethlehem. In both cases, one of them is a Levite. There is seemingly a grandson of Moses in one of the stories, and a grandson of Aaron in the other. As we will see when we study it, the many numbers of chapters 19 to 21 also connect with the sum of Micah's mother's money in all sorts of different ways. Both stories also contain several details that are reminiscent of the curse upon and the death of Rachel. Tragic events take place near to the site of her death near Bethlehem.

There is the pursuit of stolen teraphim. There is the near death of Benjamin. There is an unwitting curse upon a child concerning a stolen item. There is tarrying at the house of the father-in-law, and just as silver was prominent in the stories of Rachel's two sons, Joseph being sold for 20 pieces of silver, and Benjamin seemingly taking the pieces of silver in his sack, and also the silver cup, so silver is prominent in the relationship between the mother and the son here. Both stories also have an emphasis upon the threshold or the doorway. Both stories are also stories of extreme violation of hospitality.

We might also recognise ways in which this story reminds us of previous stories within the book of Judges. The rash curse of Micah's mother that ends up falling upon her son might remind us of the rash vow of Jephthah which ends up costing him his daughter. Paying attention to all of the strangeness of the narrative then, there seems to be good reason to believe that this is an account that serves a secondary parabolic or allegorical purpose, in addition to being a historical record. We have similar accounts to this in places like 1 Kings chapter 13, with the old prophet of Bethel and the man of God from Judah, a story in which the two figures represent the northern and southern kingdoms respectively. Micah confesses to his mother his theft of the sum of money from her, yet she had declared a curse concerning it, and that curse would seem to rest upon him. So in response to his confession, she seeks to reverse the curse. First of all, she declares a blessing upon her son, in verse 2, and then as Micah restores the money to her, she seeks to dedicate the money to the Lord for her son, in order to avert the curse falling upon him. Yet of the 1,100 pieces of silver, she only takes 200 pieces of silver, gives that to the silversmith, and he makes a carved image and a metal image with it.

[7 : 02] These two images were in the possession of Micah. For the images, Micah built a shrine, and ephod and household gods. He created a false house of gods, with an image of the Lord being surrounded by teraphim, in a sort of polytheistic pantheon. Judges here returns to its common refrain, In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

This statement seems to come from Deuteronomy chapter 12, verses 8 to 9. You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes. For you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you. The reference there seems to be about the right form of worship of the Lord, in a central sanctuary, in ways that avoid the sort of idolatry that Micah represents.

We might also see in Micah something similar to the story of the golden calf. His silver images play a similar role to the golden calf made by the Israelites in Exodus chapter 32.

In the second half of the chapter, a new figure comes on the scene, a Levite who comes from the region of Bethlehem and Judah. Although not a Judahite, he was dwelling in that region, presumably as one ministering to Judahites as a Levite. He wanders away from Judah looking for a new place and as he journeys he comes to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim.

When the Levite makes known his intention to Micah, Micah invites him to stay with him and to become a father and a priest to him. He will be paid every year with 10 pieces of silver, be provided with room and board and also be given a suit of clothes. The Levite is pleased with this offer and takes him up on it. Though a young man, we are told that the Levite was originally to become like a father to Micah.

[8 : 46] The Levites were supposed to be overseers to give direction to the people of Israel. Yet in verse 11, the Levite becomes as one of his sons. Micah ordains him to his office and the young man serves him as his priest. Rather than being a minister of the Lord, the Levite has become a servant of Micah.

There is a sort of serious inversion that has taken place here. Micah is also confident that since he has this mercenary Levite in his employ, the Levite replacing one of his own sons, who he had earlier ordained to the ministry of this sanctuary that he had set up, that the Lord would bless and favour him.

Micah, whose name ironically means who is like the Lord, was seemingly unaware of the severity of his idolatry. At the end of this chapter then, we have a false house of gods that had been set up, and also a false priesthood. As the author notes in saying that everyone did what was right in their own eyes at this time, this is representative of the larger spiritual state of the nation.

As I noted earlier, the prominence of the relationship between the mother and her son might make us think back to the story of Rachel and her two sons. In that story in Genesis, the fate of the mother and her two sons was powerfully shaped by the father's unwitting curse of his daughter concerning the stolen teraphim and the silver for which her sons were nearly taken from her. Genesis chapter 35 begins with burying household gods beneath the tree, and then ends with the death of Rachel giving birth to Benjamin. All of this recalls the curse or judgment of Laban in chapter 31, giving the death sentence to the person who stole the teraphim. Rachel's two sons also live under the shadow of this death sentence. Camels from Gilead, Rachel having been seated upon a camel at Gilead when she was confronted by her father, come down and take Rachel's oldest son Joseph into Egypt in chapter 37 of Genesis. There there's an allusion to the teraphim in the statement of the father that Joseph is surely torn. In chapter 44, there's another recollection of this story. As Joseph engineers a situation where

Benjamin and the brothers are pursued and searching their possessions from the oldest to the youngest, as the possessions had been searched in chapter 31 of Genesis, Joseph's men find the silver cup, the instrument of divination, in the possession of Benjamin. Another recollection of the story of Rachel and the stolen teraphim, not least because there's a similar death sentence declared on this occasion. In the story of Micah and his mother, we might have a recollection of this story from Genesis.

[11:13] Once again, a curse hangs over the child, and as we see in this story, it represents the state of the nation more generally. The sons of Rachel, men of Ephraim, such as Micah, and also the men of Benjamin in the chapters that follow, are also facing a sort of death sentence. Perhaps beyond the recollection of the story of Genesis, there is an anticipation of a story that is yet to come, a story with similar figures, but with a very positive outcome in contrast to this one.

There, another mother from the hill country of Ephraim makes the dedication to the Lord. Hannah dedicates her son Samuel to the Lord, and he serves as a Levite in the house of the Lord. Every year she makes him a new garment, and he also wears an ephod and serves as a son to Eli, one who replaces Eli's unfaithful sons. In many respects, we might see this as the reversal of the story of Micah, his mother, and the Levite from Bethlehem. While the story of Judges chapter 17 is the story of a woman from Ephraim and her son taking a Levite to serve as a false priest, the story of the opening chapters of 1 Samuel is the story of a woman from Ephraim giving her son to serve as a true priest of the house of the Lord, not of a false house of gods.

A question to consider. The 1,100 pieces of silver might well remind us of the preceding chapter where Samson is betrayed for five such sums of silver. What other associations in scripture do we have with numbers that are related to 1,100? Numbers, for instance, like 11 or 110? Do any of these numbers potentially shed light upon the meaning of the 1,100 pieces of silver?