

DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 13

JUDGES 17 & 18

INTRODUCTION

A new division of Judges begins from chapter 17 to chapter 21. The preceding chapters of the book account for the series of cycles of Israel's history since they entered the Promised Land. This new and last section of the five remaining chapters of the book is a supplement to Israel's history at this time. The events are not given in chronological order. Apparently, the writer selected two events which were representative of what life was like in Israel at this distressing period of its history. These selected events show the reason and the extent of the spiritual degeneracy of the children of Israel narrated in the earlier chapters.

A refrain – “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” – appears four times (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25). This message emphasizes that Israel was in danger of being destroyed as the chosen people of God. Each subsequent judge was more “flawed and failing” than the previous one. They had rejected the LORD God to rule over them, and it seemed that they needed a godly king

to rule over them and bring them back to God. Chapters 17 and 18 deal with the religious and spiritual degeneracy of the nation exposed to Canaanites' idolatry. Chapters 19 to 21 focus on the moral chaos of the children of Israel manifested in their behaviour. Chapter 17 presents us with an account of how a man named Micah turned his home into a centre of idolatrous worship. Chapter 18 relates how the tribe of Dan, having failed to expel the Canaanite tribes from the territory allotted to them; sent a five-man delegation to look for alternative land.

The following is an outline of chapters 17 and 18:

1. Judges 17:1-6 – Micah the Idolater
2. Judges 17:7-13 – The Levite who Compromises
3. Judges 18:1-6 – The Tribe of Dan Seeks Alternative Land to Settle
4. Judges 18:7-21 The Tribe of Dan Takes Micah's Idols
5. Judges 18:22-31 – The Tribe of Dan Takes the Town of Laish

STUDY THE WORD

Micah the Idolater

Micah, whose name means “who is like the Lord” was an Ephraimite living in the hill country of Ephraim. It is obvious that he came from a very wealthy family. Although he had a good name, his character and conduct do not correspond to it. He confessed to his mother that he was the culprit who had stolen the 1100

shekels of silver from her. He confessed to her because he had heard his mother cursing the thief who stole her money. The mother acted even more strangely. Instead of chiding her son for stealing her money, she blessed him probably to cancel the curse she had pronounced earlier. That's outright superstition. But his mother was also a thief who did not do what she said she would do. She was happy that her son returned the money and declared that she would dedicate all the money to the LORD for her son. But when she had the money, she took out only 200 shekels of silver to the founder to make idols for his son. She must have kept the remaining 900 shekels of silver.

This is a very sad and sinful happening. Micah stole from his mother, but he did not receive any discipline or correction. It shows that there was a lack of discipline on the part of the parents in the home. And the reason for this lack of discipline was because the mother herself was not a godly woman. She blatantly disobeyed the commandments of the LORD not to make graven images and worship them.¹ In addition she led her son into idolatry. Micah had many idols in his home. He made an ephod

¹ Exodus 20:4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

(a breastplate designed by the LORD God and only for the high priest to use to communicate with Him); a teraphim (usually a small idol in human shape which was possessed for prosperity), and he made one of his sons to become a priest! This act was also in direct violation of the commandment of God that worship of Him was to be carried out in the Tabernacle, the place which was appointed by God.² And he had also established a priesthood not according to God's instructions.³ The religion of the children of Israel had sunk to such a low level. They still professed their allegiance to the LORD (YAHWEH) but clearly they were manipulating theology for their own interests. The divine writer gives his comment that *in those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes* (17:6). The children of Israel had rejected the rule and authority of the LORD their God; and they had no King, and so every man did as he liked. Micah displayed the spiritual mood of those days in Israel.

² Deuteronomy 12:14 But in the place which the LORD shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee

³ Exodus 40:13 And thou shalt put upon Aaron the holy garments, and anoint him, and sanctify him; that he may minister unto me in the priest's office. 14 And thou shalt bring his sons, and clothe them with coats: 15 And thou shalt anoint them, as thou didst anoint their father, that they may minister unto me in the priest's office: for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations.

The Levite who Compromises

The young Levite mentioned in 17:7 lived in Bethlehem, Judah. The phrase “of the family of Judah” does not mean that the Levite was a Judaeen. But it means that he only lived in the city. He decided to relocate and depart from Bethlehem looking for another place to live. He came to the cool hilly country of Ephraim and to the house of Micah. They had their usual exchange of felicitations. The Levite told Micah his identity. His name was Jonathan (18:30) and he wanted to find a place to live. This Levite who had not been faithful to his calling had been travelling from place to place. God had given a special calling to the Levites to serve Him. They were to live in specific designated cities and not to roam around to seek for another place. This Levite, therefore, was not satisfied with the arrangements God had made for him. Hence, this explains his reason for moving from place to place.

Micah seized upon the opportunity and offered him to live in his house. He could now have a proper Levitical priest. He made it attractive to the Levite by compensating him with an annual income of ten shekels, a suit of clothes, plus board and lodging. It was too good to refuse, and the Levite was “content to dwell” with Micah. The Levite knew better that idolatry was against God’s Law which was given to the children of Israel through Moses. The priesthood was the responsibility

and duty of the descendants of Aaron.⁴ But he wanted to please himself more than to please God. He was looking for a job and a place to live, and here was an offer which he could not resist.

The Tribe of Dan Seeks Alternative Land to Settle

Chapter 18 narrates in detail the migration of the tribe of Dan, and we shall see how it was related to the account about Micah. In those days when there was no king in Israel, the Danites were seeking a place to settle. The tribe of Dan numbered 64,000 when the census of the nation Israel was taken by Moses as commanded by the LORD (Numbers 26:1, 42-43). In spite of their large number, they were unable to occupy the territory which was allotted to them (Joshua 19:40-46). They were forced out of their territory into the mountains by the Amorites (Judges 1:34).

The Danites then sent a five-man spying mission to search for a land. The five men came to the hilly country of Ephraim and to the house of Micah where they stayed. They recognized the Levite Jonathan through his accent (18:3) and apparently had contact with him. When they asked about him, he told them how Micah had hired him as his priest. The spies then asked Jonathan the priest to seek advice from God

⁴ Exodus 28:1 And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office, *even* Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.

where they should go and whether their mission would be successful (18:5). The priest gave them his assurance that God would prosper their mission. Would God prosper their mission since they were disobedient to Him, and this blessing was given by a priest who was not appointed by God?

The Tribe of Dan Takes Micah's Idols

The five Danite spies soon left and continued in their search. They came to Laish, a city of the Zidonians in the extreme north of Palestine. It lay near the sources of the river Jordan. They found the place serene and secure. There was no magistrate in the land to prosecute any person. They found that the inhabitants of Laish lived a carefree life like the Zidonians who lived far away and had no dealings with them. The spies returned and reported to their brethren (18:8). They urged their people to take Laish; a good land for them to possess where the land had "no lack of anything". They even attributed this to God's direction for giving the land to them.

Accordingly, they mobilized an army of six hundred soldiers. They proceeded to Kirjath-jearim, a city in Judah, and pitched at a place behind the city and called it Mahaneh-dan. Then they moved on to the hill country of Ephraim and came to Micah's house. The five men, who previously went out to spy the land, told their six hundred soldier-brethren about the shrine of idols that was in Micah's house. They planned to steal all the

idols in the house. Their intention was to bring all these religious paraphernalia with them to Laish which was far north of Shiloh where the Tabernacle was. They wanted to set up their place of worship of the LORD in Laish, a direct rebellion against the commandment of God.

The six hundred men stood guard outside Micah's house, while the five men went in. When the Levite priest questioned their action, they told him to shut up and to go with them to be "a father and a priest" (18:19). They persuaded him that it would be better for him to be a priest to a whole tribe in Israel than to only a man. This offer looks like a promotion for the priest who gladly accepted the offer and assisted the five men to take the ephod, the teraphim and the graven image. The Levite priest was clearly an opportunist. He had no sense of loyalty to Micah. Surely, he was a mercenary priest who would give his services to the highest bidder. They then proceeded with their journey to Laish.

When Micah returned home, he was horrified to find that his idol-gods were missing and his priest too. With his neighbours they pursued the children of Dan. They caught up with the thieves. Micah and his friends protested and the Danites challenged them. Micah mildly said that they had taken away his "gods" which he had made and the priest too had gone with them. He was left with nothing. The Danites told Micah plainly that he should not continue to protest or else

some angry fellows of the children of Dan might kill him and his family. The Danites just ignored him and went on their way. Micah could not retaliate because he and his friends did not have the strength to overcome the enemies. So he returned to his house. How strange it is for Micah to save his “gods”, which were made by him. Just imagine, he made the gods and he worshipped them! He should consider himself greater than his gods!

The Tribe of Dan Takes the Town of Laish

The children of Dan continued in their march to Laish with the idols stolen from Micah and the Levite priest who followed them. On reaching Laish they slaughtered the peaceful and unsuspecting inhabitants, and burned their city. The city under the jurisdiction of the Zidonians could not deliver them from the Danites because they were too far away. The children of Dan then rebuilt the city and renamed it Dan after the name of their father. The children of Dan set up their own worship of God with the stolen idols. Jonathan and his sons became their priests. This they did in opposition to Shiloh the place where the LORD God had chosen for the rightful worship of Him.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly and successfully in favour of the children of Dan. They had a place of their choice, a place which was not given by God. They were contented to worship God in their own idolatrous way instead of making the yearly

pilgrimage to Shiloh. Their deeds were an abomination to the LORD. Now we can understand why in 1 Chronicles the tribe of Dan was left out from the list of tribes of the nation Israel. In the New Testament in the book of Revelation, the tribes from which the 144,000 witnesses were to be drawn, the tribe of Dan was omitted. God had given the tribe of Dan over to their idolatry and sins. The Danites brought these judgments upon themselves and there is no one who can deliver them.

PRACTICAL VALUE

We view with disbelief that the mother of Micah did not discipline her son for stealing her money but she blessed him instead just because he returned the money to her. This is an example which parents today should not emulate. Children must be firmly taught that stealing things which belong to others is breaking the Eighth Commandment of God. God condemns such acts. Teach a child when he is still young to fear God and that stealing is wrong, so that he will not steal when he is older.

Like mother like son because she was also a thief when she stole from the LORD. She openly said that she would dedicate the whole eleven hundred shekels of silver to the LORD when Micah returned the money to her. But she took only two hundred shekels and that she took to make a graven image to encourage Micah to commit the sin of idolatry. Micah and his mother did not worship the

Canaanite gods. In fact they professed to worship the LORD God but in their own abominable way. Today, some people may be guilty in a similar way. They professed to worship the living and true God and the Lord Jesus Christ but in reality they trust their good financial standing and jobs as better means of security. We should be aware of these things that we do not fall prey to such temptations to sin. *If people do what is right in their own eyes they will end up doing what is wrong in the eyes of God*⁵

The practice of idolatry in any form is not only an abomination to the LORD God but it will also lead us to the downward spiral of immorality, injustices, lying and cheating.

The Levite abandoned his God-appointed responsibility and duty in search of better things. In the process, he became mercenary and offered his services to the highest bidder. This is sin against God. He may seem to be well materially, enjoying the temporal comforts of life. But how miserable he would be, having to dance to every tune of his benefactors. He becomes a person without character, respectability and integrity of his own. This is a lesson particularly for pastors, missionaries, evangelists and full-time workers who are exposed to such temptations and can become mercenary.

AMEN

⁵ Donald K. Campbell, Judges, p.148.