



Judges - Chapter Seventeen

Summary of Chapter Seventeen

Micah returned an amount of silver to his mother that he had taken from her and, although she said she would consecrate it to the Lord, she actually had an idol made from it and dedicated it in the name of her son Micah, who then set up his own shrine and appoints one of his own sons as a private priest. When a travelling Levite came by Micah hired him also to be his private priest.

III Judges 17:1-21:25 - The Depths of Israel's Apostasy

The Book of Judges closes with two sections (Chapters 17-18 and 19-21) characterised by the statements: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel*>> (17:6, 18:1, 19:1, and 21:25) and: <<*all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (17:6 and 21:25).

Whereas Chapters 2-16 describe external threats to Israel, Chapters 17-21 describe internal threats to religious worship and tribal unity. The most sordid and tragic stories in the book are found here, for the ultimate depths of Israel's apostasy have now been reached. The message is that if Israel had had a godly king functioning as a king should: <<*When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel*>> (Deuteronomy 17:18-20), things would have been better.

III.a Judges 17:1-18:31 - Religious Corruption

The first concluding section depicts Micah's establishment of his own private shrine, featuring an attendant priest, and tells of the Danites' migration, during which they took Micah's priest and the symbols of his shrine away from him.

III.a.i Judges 17:1-13 - Micah and the Levite

Refer to the chapter summary above.

III.a.i.1 Judges 17:1-6 - Religious Corruption of a Household

These verses depict a thieving son and an unusually forgiving mother who commit apostasy together.

¹ There was a man in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. ² He said to his mother, 'The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and even spoke it in my hearing – that silver is in my possession; I took it; but now I will return it to you.' And his mother said, 'May my son be blessed by the Lord!'

Judges 17:1-2

There was a man. Judges Chapters 17 and 18 present a detailed example of the spiritual confusion and sin in Israel during the days of the Judges. These two chapters reveal just how bad things were, and that there were probably many similar stories that could have told.

In the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. Micah, from the tribe of Ephraim, had stolen eleven hundred pieces or shekels of silver from his mother and then returned them, most likely because she had cursed it. His mother blessed her son for returning the money, even though he had originally taken it. This account reveals a lot about the character of Micah, his mother, and the general spiritual state of Israel during this period.

Verse 10 indicates that ten shekels a year plus board and lodging was an adequate wage. Therefore, eleven hundred shekels would have been a great fortune.

May my son be blessed by the Lord! This was an adaptation of the priestly blessing: <<*The Lord bless you and keep you*>> (Numbers 6:24).

³ Then he returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother; and his mother said, 'I consecrate the silver to the Lord from my hand for my son, to make an idol of cast metal.' ⁴ So when he returned the money to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver,

and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into an idol of cast metal; and it was in the house of Micah.

Judges 17:3-4

I consecrate the silver to the Lord is a righteous thought and intention, but her subsequent actions were anything but.

An idol of cast metal. Some believe this was an image of a false god such as Baal or Ashtoreth. Others believe that it was an image representing Yahweh. Either way, God had strictly forbidden such an image, whether it was meant to represent the true God or not. Such images were normally carved from wood or chiselled out of rock but sometimes made from metal cast in a mould: <<*An idol? – A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains*>> (Isaiah 40:19), and: <<*Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good?*>> (Isaiah 44:10). Micah's mother approved the making of these images, showing how God's people sometimes are tempted to mix elements of true worship with practices unacceptable to God. This is another consequence of the Israelites' lack of good leadership.

The golden calf that Aaron made was actually meant to represent Yahweh but did not: <<*He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord'*>> (Exodus 32:4-5). However, this violated the second commandment: <<*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me*>> (Exodus 20:4-5). In similar fashion, the ten northern tribes set up similar images to rival worship in Jerusalem: <<*They rejected all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves; they made a sacred pole, worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal*>> (2 Kings 17:16).

By his fallen nature, man wants to make God into his image. Many religious people carve their own concept of God and assume that this is the God of the Bible. It takes effort to understand and accept the God of the Bible. The sense of this passage is that Micah did all this easily. It was not hard to have an idol made in Israel at that time. This shows how Israel's society was bent towards idolatry.

The house of Micah was a compound consisting of multiple housing units for travellers and relatives as indicated in Judges 18:2. Similar complexes, including

two or more attached houses, have been uncovered by excavations at Ai and Khirbet Raddana.

⁵ This man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and installed one of his sons, who became his priest.

Judges 17:5-6

A shrine is literally ‘a house of God.’ It was a sort of a small temple, a place where others came to worship these idols. This was a perversion of the true sanctuary where worship was to take place; at that time the tabernacle, the true house of God, was at Shiloh (Judges 18:31).

Micah also made an ephod, as had Gideon in Judges 8:27, and teraphim or various household gods, similar to those taken by Rachel from her father’s house in Genesis 31:19, thus imitating the worship at the true tabernacle of God; these are later condemned as idolatry: *<<And Samuel said, ‘Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king’>>* (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

Micah further violated the Mosaic Law by appointing one of his sons as his private priest, an office meant not for private but for public service. Furthermore, he was not descended from Aaron, as the priests were supposed to be: *<<So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers that had been presented by those who were burned; and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar – a reminder to the Israelites that no outsider, who is not of the*



The High Priest's clothing including the Ephod

descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before the Lord, so as not to become like Korah and his company – just as the Lord had said to him through Moses>> (Numbers 16:39-40), nor was he even a Levite.

All of this came from Micah and not from God. This was a completely man-originated and man-centred religion. Therefore the purpose of the shrine, the beautiful ephod, the attractive idols, and the established priesthood was to serve and please man, not God. This pattern of man-pleasing religion continues to be common with many religions and churches today.

⁶ In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes. The verse is an editorial comment on the nation's apostasy. People were doing whatever they wanted, as opposed to what was right in the Lord's eyes. This verse also concludes the Book of Judges (21:25).

In those days there was no king in Israel. There was, in fact, a King in Israel, Israel should have recognised the Lord God as their King. However, since Israel rejected God as King, they were without any good and effective leadership.

All the people did what was right in their own eyes. This refers to the radical individualism that marked the time of the Judges. People looked to self for their guide to morality and ethics. The people genuinely felt that they did what was right, but they measured it only by their own standards and not by those of God. This was again a breach of the covenantal commands in Scripture: <<***You shall not act as we are acting here today, all of us according to our own desires***>> (Deuteronomy 12:8).

This is very much like the modern, 'follow your heart' or 'let your conscience be your guide,' i.e. Jiminy Cricket in Pinocchio, thinking. Modern culture regards this as the ideal state of society. Yet the Bible and common sense state that this kind of moral, spiritual, and social anarchy brings nothing but destruction:

- It seemed right to the eyes of Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, but God said it was wrong.
- It seemed right to the eyes of the sons of Jacob to sell Joseph into slavery, but God said it was wrong.
- It seemed right to the eyes of Nadab and Abihu to offer strange fire before the Lord, but God said it was wrong.
- It seemed right to the eyes of King David to commit adultery with Bathsheba and cover it with murder, but God said it was wrong.
- It seemed right to the eyes of Judas to betray Jesus, but God said it was wrong.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death: <<***There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death***>> (Proverbs 14:12). When someone follows their own instincts - apart from the redeemed nature of the converted person - it leads to ruin. It is the ways of God that need to be followed, not the ways of self.

III.a.i.2 Judges 17:7-13 - Religious Corruption of a Levite

Micah meets a Levite and tempts him into serving as a private priest by offering him a salary and a safe house.

⁷ Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the clan of Judah. He was a Levite residing there. ⁸ This man left the town of Bethlehem in Judah, to live wherever he could find a place. He came to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim to carry on his work.

Judges 17:7-8

A Levite of Bethlehem. This Levite had been living as a sojourner, a resident alien, in Judah. The Levites did not have their own tribal territory, but they had forty eight towns, scattered among the other tribes; refer to Joshua Chapter 21. However, Bethlehem was not one of those cities, and this Levite was only too happy to settle in Micah's household in Ephraim and become his private priest, probably displacing Micah's son in the role.

He came to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim to carry on his work. This man, as a Levite, had cities to live in and a place established by God for him to minister. Instead, he wanted to do what was right in his own eyes and went about offering himself as a priest for hire, wherever he could find a place. This explains how this particular Levite and the previously mentioned Micah crossed paths and this inappropriate relationship established.

⁹ Micah said to him, 'From where do you come?' He replied, 'I am a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to live wherever I can find a place.' ¹⁰ Then 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, a set of clothes, and your living.' ¹¹ The Levite agreed to stay with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons.

Judges 17:9-11

Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest. Micah wanted this Levite to stay with him and work as a priest for him. He did this because he wanted to legitimise his personal shrine by having an officially recognised priest serving there. Deep down he knew that his idolatry was false and meaningless, and he hoped that having a Levite as priest would make it legitimate.

I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a set of clothes, and your living. The Levite hired himself out to the idolatry of Micah. The Levite was a perfect example of a hireling, someone who served God, or an idol come to that, for what he could get out of it, instead of serving to glorify the Lord. There are many different ways

that hirelings get what they want. The monetary hireling is obvious, but there are also emotional hirelings who get into the ministry because of their insecurities and their need for approval, or just for the authority and status it provides.

The Levite agreed to stay with the man; and the young man became to him like one of his sons. The arrangements seemed perfect to everyone and Micah felt he had gained a son. Micah was attempting to maintain his relationship with God by violating the commands of God. The Levite degenerated morally and spiritually in an attempt to secure his own material comfort by compromise. In fact, the charge against him could be similar to that made against those involved in Korah's rebellion: <<*He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you; yet you seek the priesthood as well!*>> (Numbers 16:10).

¹² So Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. ¹³ Then Micah said, 'Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because the Levite has become my priest.'

Judges 17:12-13

So Micah installed the Levite. This was his own form of consecration. Micah's consecration meant nothing at all. He had no authority from God to declare a renegade Levite as set apart, i.e. consecrated, by God to the service of this idolatrous shrine. In this tragic account, each person is guilty of terrible sin. Yet it could be said that the Levite was more guilty than Micah was. This is because the Levite was at least supposed to know the Word of God.

Now I know that the Lord will prosper me, because the Levite has become my priest. Micah's confidence was just as false as his consecration was. They were both based on superstition, not on God's Word: <<*But you and your sons with you shall diligently perform your priestly duties in all that concerns the altar and the area behind the curtain. I give your priesthood as a gift; any outsider who approaches shall be put to death*>> (Numbers 18:7).