



Judges - Chapter Eighteen

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

III.a Judges 17:1-18:31 - Religious Corruption (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Eighteen

The story of Micah's apostasy continues from the previous chapter. A band of treacherous men from the tribe of Dan offer Micah's Levite more money and prestige to be their priest, so he joins them. In addition, they stole the religious artefacts that belonged to Micah, threatening him harm if he protested about it. A whole tribe now sins just as Micah's family had done.

The tribe of Dan were looking for a land of their own and they spied out the people of Laish, a peaceful and prosperous town, with no allies close by, so the Danites went up with six hundred warriors and took the land for themselves.

III.a.ii Judges 18:1-31 - Religious Corruption of a Tribe

Refer to the chapter summary above.

III.a.ii.1 Judges 18:1-26 - The Migration of Dan

Five spies from Dan came upon Micah's home and recognised the Levite. Being a Levite, they asked him if their mission would have God's blessing and he confirmed it would, so they went and spied out the town of Laish. Seeing that it was a good land they returned to join the main fighting men. They also told them of Micah's home, where they went, persuaded the Levite to become their priest and stole Micah's artefacts. In the resulting confrontation, Micah was warned he would be harmed if he pressed his case.

The final chapters of Judges record the migration of the tribe of Dan to the north, and Israel's war with Benjamin for deeds committed against a Levite passing through Gibeah. After refusing to surrender the perpetrators to

judgement, the Benjaminites were defeated by the other tribes, and the remaining Benjaminites fled to the rock of Rimmon. In order to rescue the Benjaminites from being completely wiped out, the other tribes provided wives captured from Jabesh-gilead and Shiloh.



Dan's Migration and Israel's War with Benjamin

¹ In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking for itself a territory to live in; for until then no territory among the tribes of Israel had been allotted to them.

Judges 18:1

In those days there was no king in Israel. This is a repeat of the statement made in Judges 17:6. 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.

The Danites was seeking for itself a territory to live in. The tribe of Dan had been unable to settle in their allotted territory as they had failed to capture it from the Amorites earlier. The details of the allocation and their failure are recorded in Joshua 19:40-47 and Judges 1:34-35.



The original tribal allocation gave land to Dan in the west

Judges Chapter 17 was the story of compromise and self-willed carnality in the lives of a few individuals. Judges Chapter 18 shows how these individual sins made entire tribes wicked and rebellious against God.

² So the Danites sent five valiant men from the whole number of their clan, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to explore it; and they said to them, ‘Go, explore the land.’ When they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, they stayed there.

Judges 18:2

Zorah and Eshtaol were towns were located in the Judæan lowlands approximately 15 miles or 24 km west of Jerusalem.

They came to the hill country of Ephraim. Looking for easier land to conquer and make their own, the Danites came to the land of the tribe of Ephraim and the house of Micah.

³ While they were at Micah's house, they recognised the voice of the young Levite; so they went over and asked him, 'Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What is your business here?'

⁴ He said to them, 'Micah did such and such for me, and he hired me, and I have become his priest.'

Judges 18:3-4

The fact that the Danites send men who lodged at Micah's house to spy out the land, recalls similar events with Rahab and the spies in Joshua 2:1.

They recognised the voice of the young Levite. It may be that the spies from the tribe of Dan knew the renegade Levite personally. It is also possible that they simply recognised his accent as being from the southern part of Judæa.

⁵ Then they said to him, 'Inquire of God that we may know whether the mission we are undertaking will succeed.' ⁶ The priest replied, 'Go in peace. The mission you are on is under the eye of the Lord.'

Judges 18:5-6

Inquire of God. This shows what a spiritually confused time this was in Israel. These Danites on a sinful mission met with a sinful Levite, and wanted to know from a righteous God if their mission would be successful. Then the sinful Levite sent the sinning men on their way with God's blessing. Their request, regarding whether the mission will succeed echoes the language of Joshua, where the prosperous way is defined in terms of devotion to God's Word: <<***This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful***>> (Joshua 1:8). Given the highly negative tone of Judges Chapters 17-21 and future events in this particular narrative (v.30), it is difficult to take seriously their desire to inquire of God.

The statement under the eye of the Lord captures the ambiguity of the priest's response. The future actions of the Danites may have been seen by God, but that does not mean that they were approved by God.

⁷ The five men went on, and when they came to Laish, they observed the people who were there living securely, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing on earth, and possessing wealth. Furthermore, they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with Aram. ⁸ When they came to their kinsfolk at Zorah and Eshtaol, they said to them, 'What do you report?' ⁹ They said, 'Come, let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and it is

very good. Will you do nothing? Do not be slow to go, but enter in and possess the land. ¹⁰ When you go, you will come to an unsuspecting people. The land is broad – God has indeed given it into your hands – a place where there is no lack of anything on earth.’

Judges 18:7-10

Laish was located about 25 miles or 40 km north of the Sea of Galilee, making the migration of the Danites from Zorah and Eshtaol to Laish about a hundred miles. Laish was renamed Dan (v.29), and it was here that Jeroboam set up one of his golden calves: *<<He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan>>* (1 Kings 12:29-30). The site was occupied throughout the Roman period.

Dan mentioned here is not to be confused with the town of the same name in their original tribal allocation: *<<When the territory of the Danites was lost to them, the Danites went up and fought against Leshem, and after capturing it and putting it to the sword, they took possession of it and settled in it, calling Leshem, Dan, after their ancestor Dan>>* (Joshua 19:47).

Living securely, after the manner of the Sidonians. The Danites found a city nearby that was not occupied by Israelites, but by a colony of the Sidonians. This was a people group that God told Israel to drive out of the land of Canaan in Joshua 13:1-7.

In his sermon titled *The Danger of Carnal Security*, Charles Spurgeon used the description of the Sidonians in v.7 and vv.27-28 as a description of the false security of the carnal believer. They are, like the Sidonians:

- Free from all internal struggles or conflicts.
- Free from rulers such as the governor of conscience.
- Free from ties and concerns to other people.
- Free from the fear of invasion.

We have seen the land, and it is very good. Seeing that the land was good and the city was not heavily defended, the Danites believed this would be a good city to conquer and take as their own territory.

God has indeed given it into your hands. They had taken the words of the Levite at face value without any attempt to seek the will of God for themselves. It is always easy to accept the things people say if they are in line with one’s own mindset and will, but the prophet later warned: *<<For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, ‘Do not see’; and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions,*

leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel'>> (Isaiah 30:9-11).

A place where there is no lack of anything on earth. Their motivation was clearly worldly and not godly. Paul would have advised them: <<*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect*>> (Romans 12:2)

¹¹ Six hundred men of the Danite clan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, ¹² and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan to this day; it is west of Kiriath-jearim. ¹³ From there they passed on to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.

Judges 18:11-13

Six hundred men of the Danite clan, armed with weapons of war. Curiously, they assembled an army of six hundred men to fight for the city of Laish in the land of the tribe of Ephraim; yet they could not fight for the land of their own tribal allocation. For some reason to them, and often to the church, a distant battle seemed easier than a battle closer to home. They would have been heartened to find that the people of Laish were not warlike but peaceable, unlike the Amorites. Yet had they obeyed the will of God and fought for their land then he would have assured them the victory.

Kiriath-jearim, a chief city of the Gibeonites according to Joshua 9:17, was located approximately 8 miles or 13 km northwest of Jerusalem, although debate continues regarding its precise location.

¹⁴ Then the five men who had gone to spy out the land (that is, Laish) said to their comrades, ‘Do you know that in these buildings there are an ephod, teraphim, and an idol of cast metal? Now therefore consider what you will do.’ ¹⁵ So they turned in that direction and came to the house of the young Levite, at the home of Micah, and greeted him. ¹⁶ While the six hundred men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate, ¹⁷ the five men who had gone to spy out the land proceeded to enter and take the idol of cast metal, the ephod, and the teraphim. The priest was standing by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war. ¹⁸ When the men went into Micah’s house and took the idol of cast metal, the ephod, and the teraphim, the priest said to them, ‘What are you doing?’ ¹⁹ They said to him, ‘Keep quiet! Put your hand over

your mouth, and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?' ²⁰ Then the priest accepted the offer. He took the ephod, the teraphim, and the idol, and went along with the people.

Judges 18:14-20

The five men who had gone to spy out the land proceeded to enter and take the idol of cast metal, the ephod, and the teraphim. This was a strange combination of low morality and strong religious feeling. It is like someone wanting to study the bible and stealing several copies to do so, along with any items of value lying around inside the church building. Micah's collection of cultic objects was quite impressive and were first listed in Judges 17:3-5. Rather than offering condemnation, the Danites took the cultic objects for themselves.

Keep quiet! Put your hand over your mouth. This was a threat: <<*If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!*>> (Job 13:5). They commanded the Levite to stop objecting or be attacked. So much for their desire for him to be their priest!

Be to us a father and a priest. The Danites' words to the Levite were the same as Micah's earlier in Judges 17:10. The Danites' offer of more money and prestige, and the Levite's acceptance, are further indications of the period's apostasy. They used violence and theft to supposedly advance a religious cause, and the priest allowed them to by standing aside without objection as they did so. Their plundering of another tribe fulfils Jacob's prophecy that Dan would deal viciously with others, like a serpent or a viper: <<*Dan shall be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider falls backwards*>> (Genesis 49:17).

Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel? The logic is sound but the theology is completely wrong. God had set up a template for the Levites to serve the people and it was a service to be given willingly, not one given under duress or through the lure of wealth.

Then the priest accepted the offer because he was filled with mercenary ambition. The Levite did not care about Micah, only for the pay and status that he might get by being the priest for a whole tribe instead of a mere family. It should also be noted that it was the priest who took the ephod, the teraphim, and the idol, thus he was complicit in their theft and apostasy.

There are many examples in history of people satisfying a religious impulse in a completely immoral way. In Europe in the 14th Century unemployed soldiers often became small armies of bandits, and robbed and burned towns and villages all over Europe, killing and raping as they did so. These brutal criminals

often negotiated with a town before attacking it. If the town agreed to give the criminals a large amount of money, the army left them alone. If the town refused to give the money or could not give the money, they attacked. These were done with formal negotiations and contracts. They have discovered that when these horrible men came to a monastery, they insisted on money as well, but they also demanded that the priests of the monastery give them a written document saying that all their sins were forgiven.

²¹ So they resumed their journey, putting the little ones, the livestock, and the goods in front of them. ²² When they were some distance from the home of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house were called out, and they overtook the Danites. ²³ They shouted to the Danites, who turned around and said to Micah, 'What is the matter that you come with such a company?' ²⁴ He replied, 'You take my gods that I made, and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How then can you ask me, "What is the matter?"'

Judges 18:21-24

As the Danites resumed their journey, they placed what they had stolen in front of them along with their own children and livestock, with the warriors bringing up the rear, as protection against pursuit from Micah's household or neighbours.

You take my gods that I made. This is powerful irony. Micah had to rescue his own gods. Obviously, his gods should be able to care for themselves. One may wonder if Micah saw the foolishness of this, as one might wonder whether Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus noted his own folly and the wisdom of Paul when he said: <<*You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods*>> (Acts 19:26). All people either worship a god of their own making or they worship the true God who created everyone and everything. However, the made up gods are always less than the person who made them. Idol worship is just another way of worshipping self and God strongly objects: <<*And I will cut off your images and your pillars from among you, and you shall bow down no more to the work of your hands*>> (Micah 5:13).

And the priest. Micah was foolish enough to have a priest who could be taken away, a reminder of how wonderful it is to have a High Priest who cannot change, and who can never be taken away. As F.B. Meyer wrote, "Whatever can be taken from us has the mark and signature of man upon it. Yet Jesus Christ, our High Priest, can never change; will never leave us out of a concern for someone else; and our sins and failures cannot rob us of Him."

What have I left? This shows how empty Micah's idolatry was. His false gods did not bring him any lasting good. How could they?

²⁵ And the Danites said to him, 'You had better not let your voice be heard among us or else hot-tempered fellows will attack you, and you will lose your life and the lives of your household.'²⁶ Then the Danites went on their way. When Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home.

Judges 18:25-26

You had better not let your voice be heard among us or else hot-tempered fellows will attack you, and you will lose your life and the lives of your household. This event and these words illustrate the general lawlessness in Israel during this long period of the Judges. The children of Dan stole Micah's idol simply under the principle of might makes right. Yet, in all of this, Micah could still have called on the Lord for justice, even if he were in the wrong to start with: <<*Today I am powerless, even though anointed king; these men, the sons of Zeruiah, are too violent for me. The Lord pay back the one who does wickedly in accordance with his wickedness!*>> (2 Samuel 3:39), and: <<*He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me; for they were too mighty for me*>> (Psalm 18:17).

When Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home. They were too strong for both Micah and his gods. Although this might have seemed to be the sensible course of action, one should never have a god that needs protection.

III.a.ii.2 Judges 18:27-31 - The Danites Settle in Laish

The Danites killed the people of Laish and destroyed the town before rebuilding it to live in for themselves. They set up the religious artefacts they had stolen from Micah as a place of worship to rival the tabernacle at Shiloh.

²⁷ The Danites, having taken what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, put them to the sword, and burned down the city.²⁸ There was no deliverer, because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with Aram. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. They rebuilt the city, and lived in it.²⁹ They named the city Dan, after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was formerly Laish.

Judges 18:27-29

The Danites came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting. There was no deliverer. This is written in a way meant to make the reader at least a little sympathetic for the people of Laish. The people of Israel were instructed to take the land from the Canaanites, but this seemed like an unprincipled attack from wicked men of the tribe of Dan upon a people living in peace.

They named the city Dan. The city of Dan will become the most prominent northern city in Israel. The phrase from Dan to Beersheba, used in both Judges 20:1 and 1 Samuel 3:20, became an expression meaning from the north to the south indicating the full extent of Israel.

³⁰ Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time the land went into captivity. ³¹ So they maintained as their own Micah's idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.

Judges 18:30-31

Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. This was the beginning of established idolatry in Israel in the Promised Land. There was individual idolatry in Israel long before this, but this is official idolatry. Through a strange chain of events, this began with a son stealing eleven hundred shekels from his mother, as recorded in Judges 17:1-2. It ended with an entire tribe of Israel led into established idolatry.

The Levite's name is revealed for the first time as Jonathan son of Gershom, a direct descendant of Moses: *<<Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, 'I have been an alien residing in a foreign land'>>* (Exodus 2:21-22); apostasy has even infected the house of Moses.

The time the land went into captivity could refer to the Babylonian captivity in 587 BC, or more likely, since Dan was in the north, to the Assyrian captivity of 722 BC, or even earlier when Dan passed into Assyrian control. In any case, the Danites' priest and his descendants served in that role for centuries, and only exile ended the arrangement.

Shiloh was destroyed at the end of the period of the judges, circa 1050 BC: *<<He abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mortals>>* (Psalm 78:60), and: *<<Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you,*

you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh>> (Jeremiah 7:12-14).

So they maintained as their own Micah's idol that he had made. It can be supposed that Micah had no idea how far-reaching the effects of his sin would become. His personal idolatry became the idolatry of an entire tribe, setting up a rival centre of worship to the house of God at Shiloh.