

### The Book of Judges

#### Lesson 25 - Chapters 17 and 18

We just began our study of the so-called appendices of the book of Judges that are chapters 17 through the end of the book. From a chronological standpoint these chapters belong at the beginning of the book of Judges, probably around the time of the first Judge Othniel.

The purpose of the chapters following the story of Samson is to give us a better understanding of the condition of the tribes of Israel generally, a few years or decades following Joshua's death. It is also to help us understand the migration of the tribe of Dan out of their officially allotted territory, into one of their own choosing (near the Lebanese border region), and what it is that led to their nearly complete abandonment of Yehoveh. The consequences of their rebellious actions and rather extreme apostasy led to yet another eventual migration of Dan to avoid their extinction (some of it forced by the Assyrians and some it as a means of escape from foreign regional powers) to Northern Africa where the bulk of the known remnants of Dan currently live.

There are 3 observations that we gained from the first 4 verses of Judges 17, which gives us insight into the spiritual climate of the times. First is how quickly religious and cultural syncretism overtook the tribes of Israel. Undoubtedly it was uneven: some tribes easily abandoned the Law of Moses and others made more of an effort to adhere to it. But all 12 tribes (and Levi in addition) were heavily influenced by the many Canaanites who remained in the Promised Land, and the Hebrews' propensity to make allies and friends of them rather than driving them out or eradicating them (per God's instructions) as one would termites infesting a house.

The syncretism I speak of simply means primarily a mixing of religious beliefs, in this case Hebrew with the Canaanite Babylon Mystery Religions. It's amazing how quickly this happens, and how equally quickly a society (even one created and set apart by God) adopts new ways and forgets where it came from and who it owes its exist to. Invariably there is a reason for this; it doesn't just happen on its own. It can be for economic reasons, a desire to end conflict and have peace, or simply because the new ways look more attractive to the newest generation than the older ways practiced by their parents. Don't think political correctness and the need for each generation to part company with their parents' generation is modern; it began with Adam and Eve's kids. From the standpoint of the fallen human condition, it is totally natural to mix or dilute our religious beliefs with whatever seems expedient and popular. After a short time this new platform of beliefs and behaviors becomes the standard and few even question it.

Those of you who have followed Torah Class for a while know my love for the Church and also

my criticism and sadness at how we have gone so far astray from the principles and teaching of Messiah Yeshua, the Torah he taught from and the bible in general. As the Israelites of the time of the Judges sought comfort, prosperity, and spiritual independence above all else so do we have the same tendency. The motto of the era of Judges is well stated in these latter chapters of the book of Judges: “every man did what was right in his own eyes”. The Christian motto today is: “ I know what the bible says, but I believe what I believe”. Those are exactly the same words, with exactly the same meaning, spoken 3000 years apart. Why is it that we can instantly see how wrong the Israelites were, but are so blind to our own condition?

The second observation I'd like to make about the story of Micah, as an example of the general condition of Israel in that era is that the Laws of Moses were being violated on a regular basis. We can easily identify a number of direct trespasses against the Lord's commandment by Micah. Micah stole money from his mother, in doing so failed to honor his parents (his mother), obviously had other gods, and made an image of Yehoveh.

Third is that Micah's mother showed the same ambivalence as did her son towards God's commandments by first vowing to donate the recovered 1100 pieces of silver to the God of Israel, but instead keeping the bulk of it for herself and using less than 20% of it to honor God. But even that was used in a perverted way by giving 200 pieces of silver back to her thieving son to go and have an image of the Lord God manufactured by a silversmith. This idol would then be used in an unauthorized manner by bowing down to it as an object of worship, placing it in an unauthorized sanctuary, and officiated over by an unauthorized non-Levite Priest (Micah's son).

Let's re-read a portion of chapter 17.

### **RE-READ JUDGES CHAPTER 17: 7 – end**

Things were back to normal at Micah's house. His mother lifted the curse against her son and their home sanctuary was operating with the new silver image of Yehoveh at its center.

A traveler shows up at Micah's house; a young man from the territory of Judah. A kind of confusing identification of this young man is given to us: it says he's from the family of Judah, but he is a Levite and for now he remains anonymous to us. While there can be some small doubts about it, probably the man is fully a Levite; it's only that he was sojourning in Beit-Lechem in the territory of Judah, and probably living with a family of Judahites. Here's the thing: we know that the tribe of Levi was given 48 cities evenly distributed throughout the 12 tribal territories as a place for them to live and carry out their religious duties, however Beit-Lechem was NOT one of those cities. The extended reference to the city as “Beit-Lechem of Judah” is necessary because there were several Beit-Lechem's scattered around the Promised Land; this one is the one we're mostly familiar with as Yeshua's birthplace.

This young Levite was but a temporary resident of Bethlehem and this indicates the sad state of the priestly tribe at this time. They were not being supported by the 12 tribes, as they should and so many of them left their designated cities and sought to make a living elsewhere. But the Levites were equally at fault being filled with apostasy and self-interest that trumped their

calling and duty to serve only the God of Israel. While it can't be stated with absolute certainty, there is really only one compelling reason for this young Levite to leave Bethlehem, and the Rabbis confirm it: the young man couldn't practice an idolatrous form of the Hebrew religion there and sought a place where he could. Judah was perhaps the one territory and tribe who at least gave a concerted effort to stay near to the ways of the Lord. While by no means perfect in this, nor did every Judean clan or family feel the same way about it, we will see throughout the next several books of the bible that of the 12 tribes Judah was the least to be tempted into syncretism and the last to be conquered by foreigners as a divine consequence for their rebellion against Yehoveh.

I've pointed out to you for some months and years that the division of loyalties within Israel between Judah and Ephraim (as the lead and dominant tribes) began very early on, almost as soon as the territory was divided up and allotted. We don't see a final falling out between the two until shortly after King Solomon's death (around 925 B.C, about 400 years after Joshua), but it was always inevitable that this hostile separation occur. Thus we see that this young Levite leaves Judah and goes to the hills of Ephraim; a place that he knew was more receptive to his personal agenda and beliefs.

This traveler would have stayed in several homes during his journey, and undoubtedly some family or another finally directed him to Micah's. Staying in people's homes was a customary hospitality opened to travelers in that day, as only in the largest cities were there rooms for hire.

Upon arriving at Micah's residence, Micah discovers that the young man is a Levite and the young man says he's looking for a place to settle down and engage in something suitable to his heritage. Micah offers this Levite employment, and says, "come and be a father and a priest for me".

The part about being a father has nothing to do with him taking on the role of an elder or parent. Rather it is simply that the term **Av** or **Avva (Abba)** can mean father in the sense we typically think of it or it can be a term of respect for their wisdom especially as a spiritual advisor, which is the case here. What ought to raise our eyebrows and bring up some questions is this job opportunity as a priest; one that the Levite jumped at. Micah was looking to fire his son, and replace him with a priest of more stature.

There is absolutely nothing right about what Micah or this Levite was doing. Although all priests are Levites, not all Levites can be priests. Only from the clan of Aaron (one of the 3 main subdivisions of the tribe of Levi) could one rightfully be a priest. All the other clans of Levi were assigned certain religious duties, but NEVER as a priest. Thus we'll see the use of the terms Levite and Priest in the bible, and they denote two different duties, lineages, and status levels. This young man was NOT of the line of Aaron, and was only an ordinary Levite. That he was looking to operate as a "priest", and that Micah offered it to him, is ridiculous. How do I know that this Levite was not of the authorized priestly clan? I'll tell you next week.

But the insult and injury to the Word of God doesn't end there; under some strange veil of authority we're told in verse 12 that Micah consecrated the Levite to become a priest! Micah

carried no such authority of course, except that of age-old Middle Eastern traditions and customs.

Let's remember that while in Egypt, Israel generally operated in the way that we read about here concerning Micah. It was standard operating procedure for the father to more or less be the family priest, a duty that he usually passed along to his firstborn son at some point. Before Mt. Sinai during their exodus, Israel had no priesthood, but all religions of that day revolved around priests and rituals. So every Hebrew family had their own private family priest (so to speak), and the rituals they performed took place in the home and consisted of whatever they preferred (within the some hazily defined set of cultural traditions).

We also read from the end of the book of Exodus onward that there was a real and ongoing power struggle within the Moses-led Hebrews to give up this standard family tradition and instead turn all priestly duties over to one clan within one particular tribe: the clan of Aaron within the tribe of Levi. This was very much at the bottom of the rebellion that Korah led, when so many Israelites died as the leaders of the clans who didn't like this new reality came to the Wilderness Tabernacle with their fire pans, only to be burned up by the anger of God; and then their families killed as the earth opened beneath them. The Israelite fathers and firstborns generally did not like the requirement of the Law to give up that position of honor (that of being a family priest). And while apparently most complied some did so only grudgingly, and others apparently didn't at all. Thus once Moses was dead, and then Joshua after him, many Israelites simply turned back to the old ways, which also more closely aligned with what their Canaanite neighbors practiced. That's what we're seeing here with Micah and his private Beit-Elohim, house of God, now to be officiated over by this Levite man.

The last verse of chapter 17 says, "Micah said, now I know that Adonai will treat me well, because I have a Levi for a cohen (a priest)". This was not divine reality; it was but ancient superstition. Micah honestly thought that God was now obligated to bless him and his household merely because he had hired a Levite to become a private priest for his family sanctuary. This belief was not biblical faith; it was manmade doctrine. It was a well-accepted and popular doctrine, but when it comes to Judeo-Christianity what we believe and operate under cannot ever be about democracy or majority rules (although indeed it seems we have arrived at that point in our Christian and Jewish institutions).

This is also an excellent example of something I haven't talked about in a while: that the bible is full of false statements and lies made by men. Now before you have a heart attack, let me explain. We find many situations and characters in the bible stories that are telling lies, operating on false assumptions, or rationalizing their poor behavior. A classic one is the story of Balaam the sorcerer, who says all kinds of things about how the God of Heaven must operate, but he's wrong. King David was infamous for rationalizing away some of his darkest moments. These words of Micah about how God would now especially bless him are another. God does not bless us for breaking His commandments or perverting His rituals and observances despite our sincerity. Thus recorded Scriptural words uttered by God or His designated prophets and messengers are factual and accurate and represent truth, but many of the words as spoken by ordinary men (although recorded accurately in the bible) are words that do **not** reflect divine truth or Godly principle. Most of these cases are obvious, but some fly

over our heads if we don't diligently study the Torah of God to establish a firm foundation for our understanding. I hope this is clear to you and you do not think I'm telling you the bible is full of error, which it is not. But it is full of the statements and actions of men who are in error.

Let's move on to chapter 18.

### **RE-READ JUDGES CHAPTER 18 all**

Here again are those words; "there was no king in Israel". We need to take this NOT as a biblical editor merely informing his readers that from a purely factual historical standpoint that Israel didn't have a king at that time (which was common knowledge); rather the point is to explain WHY the things that were about to occur, happened. It is to explain that without a king, without a person of strong authority over them, men will do as they please. Israel was in a state of spiritual anarchy and the only restraints they placed upon themselves (since there was no strong or central human authority over them) were mostly manmade philosophies and those behaviors and beliefs that most nations in that era considered "moral".

As I stated early in today's lesson, the timeframe of this is placed very early in Dan's migration from central Canaan to the north at the Lebanese border; thus this story of chapter 18 occurred a couple of hundred years before the days of Samson. And this further explains why Samson (who was of the tribe of Dan) did not live in his own tribal territory but rather inside (or on the border of) the tribal territory of Judah, even though the village he lived in consisted of Danites. Let me flesh that out just a bit: it is not so simple as to think that within the territory of Judah that only people who lived there were members of the tribe of Judah, or that in the territory of Asher the only people who lived there were members of the tribe of Asher, etc. Individuals, families and clans moved into various territories for all kinds of reasons; there was no law of God that prohibited that. And generally speaking provided that family or clan was of no bother to the tribal prince, and didn't represent some large migration of another clan belonging to a different tribe into a territory that they weren't assigned (and thus represented no threat), it was allowed (and it happened with regularity).

Verse 2 says that the reason that Dan was on the move was that they hadn't been given any territory of their own among the tribes of Israel. That is a strange statement that is puzzling and contradictory because the other tribes were in place, and before Israel even entered the Promised Land each tribe was given a territory by Moses. Later still Joshua set the boundaries (the size) of each of these territorial allotments, and we're at a time after Joshua was dead and gone.

However it is one thing to be assigned a territory and it is quite another to be able to wrest it away from the Canaanites that held it (which was the expectation laid upon every tribe). Recall that while on the surface this allotment of territory seems like a modern day lottery (we buy a ticket, and if our number is selected we simply show up for our prize) that is not at all what was contemplated for Israel. The land lottery of Moses served two purposes: one to divide up the land so that the tribes wouldn't be constantly squabbling over who should live where; and two, because they were each held responsible to deal with the Canaanites residing within the area they were given. In other words, each tribe was given a portion of Canaan and they were duty

bound to eject the Canaanites from it. The consequence for NOT doing that was that you lost some or all of your territory (or better, you simply never gained that territory). Dan was up against the Philistines, who proved to be the toughest enemy Israel would face over the long haul. And Dan finally threw in the towel and moved away to territory not allotted to any of the other Israelite tribes. Dan's view of it was that they "had not been given" territory, and to them that probably meant that from a spiritual viewpoint God had not vanquished the Philistines ahead of Dan's army and thus the conclusion that Yehoveh had not given the territory over to them (that was the very typical ancient thought pattern regardless of what culture was involved or which god was worshipped).

The 5 men sent as scouts to look over some territory to the north that the leaders of Dan thought might be a good place settle, were from the cities of **Tzorah and Eshta'ol**. These were the only two cities the tribe of Dan controlled at this time. And even then they were on the border lands of Judah, and most likely these 2 cities were actually within the territory of Judah. No doubt Judah (a very dominant and powerful tribe at this time) was gracious to allow small and weak Dan this little bit of autonomy to give them some place to call their own.

Obviously Dan was not satisfied with the current state of affairs and sought to find another place for their people to call their own. As the 5 scouts moved north they arrived at the area in the hill country of Ephraim where Micah lived, and sought out hospitality on their journey; but this happenstance led to some longer term consequences.

As they were relaxing at Micah's house (with his blessing, of course), they met Micah's young private priest and noticed that he had a different but recognizable accent from Micah and those who lived in the hills of Ephraim. They wondered what he was doing here. I think it's pretty interesting that already dialects and discernable accents had developed within Israel. Most Rabbis think that since it is not recorded, they probably did not ask the Levite his name because they already knew him. And this was because the young Levite had probably stopped for a while in either **Tzorah or Eshta'ol** and he was known well enough for his voice to be recognizable.

They were a little surprised to find him at Micah's and so they asked Micah's new priest 3 questions: 1) What brought you to this place? 2) What do you do here? And 3) what have you here (what is your circumstance, what do you possess)? These are reasonable questions that would come up in normal conversation and so the Levite says that Micah hired him and pays him a wage, and so he acts as Micah's priest. These Danites have reverted to the typical superstitions of the pagans and they're past days in Egypt and so ask the Levite to divine the future and tell them how their scouting expedition will turn out. The priest tells them what they want to hear; that the Lord will be with them. Right. As though this fellow has contact with God or that God would give him a vision of Dan's future.

Everything was quite satisfactory and normal; they stayed (probably just overnight), and then fed and rested continued their northward journey until they arrived a place called Layish.

Layish was a tranquil city full of content and peaceful people. The residents probably were originally citizens of Sidon (**Tzidon**) who moved out for some reason, probably not unlike folks

in the US that took covered wagons westward for adventure and a better life. The comment that no one in the land was exercising authority over them that would bring them to shame simply meant that apparently they weren't on some king or potentate's land as his guests; rather they were a fully independent colony. There was no external power to rule over them. Recall how Jacob had settled down outside the city walls of Shechem, in full agreement with the king of Shechem, but still it was precarious because the king could change the terms of their agreement or tell them to move on at any time because it was HIS land. To have to bow down to such a king could bring shame and humiliation, and thus the meaning of that phrase.

Although they apparently were from Sidon, the people of Layish didn't have an alliance with Sidon nor were they considered an official outpost of Sidon. Thus even if the nation of Sidon had some sympathy and attachment to the people of Layish, they were so far away as to be a non-factor and unable to protect or rescue them if need be. This was the perfect set-up for Dan. The location was well watered, fertile, and substantial in size and far from anyone who might try to rule over the place.

I have taken many of you to this very spot; and it is gorgeous. It is right at the headwaters of one of the several sources of the Jordan River. We've hiked along its banks, and lunched under the shade of its many trees. The scouts from Dan must have thought they'd found paradise and all the people of Dan had to do was attack and take it from an unsuspecting and unprepared people who seemed to have no allies to help them. So when they returned to their cities of **Tzarah and Eshta'ol**, the 5 scouts reported with great excitement what they found and urged the leadership to move on Layish at once.

Like Micah thought when the Levite agreed to be his family priest, the scouts of Dan assumed that the God of Israel had led them to Layish and arranged for its taking from a people who would offer little resistance. And like Micah, the scouts were acting mainly on superstition not on Godly principle; it was the oracle of prophecy from this same Levite telling the scouts that their mission would be blessed by God and be successful that caused this false assumption.

Verse 11 describes the strike force that the men of Dan sent to take Layish and it was actually very modest in size, about 600 soldiers. That tells us how little regard Dan had for the military capability of Layish. This was not the total size of Dan; it was only the amount of men who would be used to both guard the column of Danite migrants and attack the city. Accompanied by their women and children they set off for Layish and stopped at a place in the territory of Judah called **Kiriath-Yearim**, which they subsequently called **Mahaneh-Dan** that merely means "the camp of Dan". From there they went along a path that took them into the hills of Ephraim and right by Micah's house. But hospitality was not what they were necessarily seeking this time.

The 5 men of course intentionally brought the camp of Dan along this route because of what they had seen and heard from Micah and the Levite in his employ. So the 5 scouts talked among themselves and decided that since Dan would need gods and images to worship at their new tribal home in Layish, and also a priest to preside over it all, so why not simply take what was easily available? It is interesting that in addition to the silver graven image of Yehoveh in Micah's house there were also **Teraphim**. **Teraphim** were other household gods

that served all kinds of purposes, including acting much like the **Urim and Thummim** that gave yes or no answers to questions directed at God or (in this case) the gods. **Teraphim** were strictly pagan items, outlawed by the Law of Moses but Micah AND the Levite used them as part of their worship. Also notice that the term “houses” in verse 14 is used instead of the singular “house”. The Hebrew word is **bayith** and it is written in the plural masculine syntax that means more than one house. This meant that the Beit-Elohim (the private sanctuary of Micah) was a separate building. This was a very well to do family and that probably had something to do with the Danite scouts’ rationalization of what they had in mind.

But here we again see a demonstration of these Israelite tribes’ having so quickly gone off the reservation. As I asked you in the last lesson: do you think any of the players in this story THOUGHT of themselves as purposely doing something against Yehoveh, God of Israel? Do you think they thought of themselves as intentionally doing something wicked in the Lord’s eyes but did it anyway? Not a chance; all the characters mentioned here simply were following common doctrines and practices that everyone did and no one questioned, not even (apparently) Israel’s Priesthood. They didn’t bother to check with Scripture, and I suspect that is because they either firmly believed that what they were doing would be found in it as authorized, or they preferred to remain ignorant and not have to deal with having to justify their wrong thinking and actions with the truth.

I wish I had a dime for every Christian that told me that the bible says that God helps those who help themselves. Or that God instructed Israel to kill all Canaanites. Or that drinking wine is prohibited. Or that being in debt is a sin. Or that the Jews were required to ritually wash before eating. I could go on and on. But in fact the bible says no such things, they are just long held erroneous beliefs that are so imbedded in Christian (and some cases Jewish) culture that I don’t know that short of Jesus returning they’ll ever be wrung out. We live our lives often by imitating those who we consider righteous or pious or those “who ought to know”, and just assume that what we’re thinking or doing is divine truth.

Let me tell you something: Micah, his young Levite, and those leaders of Dan weren’t given any slack by Yehoveh just because it seems they didn’t know any better than to act as they did. They were given a means by the Lord to know better; they were given the Torah but weren’t interested in inquiring of it. I can’t tell you that I know all the divine consequences for a modern Christian that has the means to find out the truth at his fingertips, with no danger of persecution for it, and practically no cost whatsoever to be taught, but prefers not to and only relies on traditions, customs, and what other people tell them. But I am certain there is an eternal cost as well as an earthly cost, and perhaps we should face that and do something about it considering what the signs of our times are pointing to: the imminence of the end of days and our standing before the Lord with our lives laid bare.

We’ll continue with chapter 18 next week.