

## **Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 29**

### **Judges 17-18, first appendix, Micah and the Levite**

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 29, Judges 17-18, first appendix, Micah and the Levite.

Greetings again and we are continuing with our discussions of the book of Judges and we are now on the homestretch.

We are going to be looking at chapters 17 to 21, the final five chapters of the book. We'll be doing that in two segments, most immediately right now chapters 17 and 18 and then 19 to 21. Those are two different stories but just to set the stage, the commonalities between them, we've mentioned the sort of the downhill spiral of moral and spiritual conditions in the land and we certainly see that coming to fruition in the story of Samson, the final judge.

In these final stories, 17 and 18 and then 19 and 21, we don't have any more judges. So, these are stories about different people. And there's evidence that the stories here might have taken place chronologically earlier in the period than let's say Samson lived.

So, this may be out of place chronologically. But I think if that's the case, I think nevertheless, the author of the book of Judges when it's all said and done, the author was wanting to make the case that Israel was suffering this moral apostasy and that there was a need for a godly king going forward. And that would be the major point that I would see the author of Judges trying to make.

The author decided to place these stories at the end of the book because they are some of the most sordid and tawdry stories in the entire book. And so just to make that point, the way the book reads as a literary document, this is sort of the nadir, the lowest point of the book. I tell my students that I often feel like I need to take a shower when I finish reading the book of Judges and certainly these last chapters contribute to that.

This is a section where four times we are told that there is no king in Israel, chapter 17, verse 6, 18, verse 1, 19, verse 1, and 21, verse 5. And in the first and the last of those instances, we are also told there's no king in Israel. I'm sorry, everybody was right in their own eyes. So, four times there's no king in Israel, the first and the last time, everybody did right in their own eyes.

And the flip side of that is that they should have been doing right in the Lord's eyes and if there had been a godly king in place, the chances are that the godly king would

have been a leader, a model in leading people toward the Lord instead of this decentralized worship, everybody doing whatever they pleased and whatever they wanted. In chapters 2 to 16, we see what we might call external threats to Israel, whereas the conflicts in 17 to 21 are internal to Israel and the problems are festering from within, not from without. So even there, sort of the external threats we can understand to some degree, but you hope that there would be some sort of spiritual integrity in the nation, but by the end, the nation is rotting from the inside out, from the core itself.

So, in chapters 17 and 18, we have the first, sometimes people call these the appendices to the book. If so, we would call this the first appendix and it shows a great religious corruption and the lead character is a man named Micah, certainly not the prophet Micah that we learn about later, years later in the Bible. This is a different man and he wants to establish, for whatever reason, he wants to establish his own private shrine, his own private place of worship.

He wants a priest to be his private priest and then he's kind of a by the way, it tells about the tribe of Dan, who originally, their land was allotted to them along the seacoast here, but they were not able to drive out the Canaanites there and so we find them migrating through the land and ended up settling up here and as they do, they come past, they encounter this Micah and they find out the shrine that he's built, the things that he's added to this, and his own priests and they find that they covet that and they like this and so they just take it with them and as they migrate north, they take all the carved images that he's made and his priest and he's, of course, unhappy with that, but they all go with the Danites and it's a sad story of the Danites because we are told at the end that these remained with the Danites, these instruments of false worship, for many, many years after this. So that's kind of the brief summary of the story and it's not a happy story. So let's begin by looking in chapter 17 we see that, first of all, there's a man whose name is Micah.

He's from the hill country of Ephraim in the center part of the land and he has talked to his mother and talks about some money that was stolen from her and he wants to restore it because he was the one that actually took it. So she blesses him and he restores the money to her and she decides to dedicate this silver to the Lord from the hand of her son and the end of verse 3 says she's doing this to make a carved image and a metal image and the word carved image here is the exact same word that's used in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, verse 4, where it says you shall not make any graven image, any carved image of anything of these gods outside or anything in the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters below the earth. So right from the get-go, this woman seems to be trying to have the best of both worlds.

She wants to do something for the Lord, dedicating this silver to the Lord, but she's doing it in a way that's totally inappropriate and essentially totally wrong, sinful. I'm

reminded of the story of the citizens, the inhabitants of the place in northern Sinai called Qutilet Ajrud. In a separate segment, we talked about the syncretism of the Israelites throughout much of Israel's history and there's in 1975, there was a very spectacular series of finds at a city in northeastern Sinai, southern Judah, where there was an inscription that said, I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah, his Asherah.

And this shows the desire of these people. If you'd asked them, do you worship Yahweh? They would have said, of course. We actually have his picture here.

There was the depiction of Yahweh as a bull and then we have given him a wife here. So, they are trying to have the best of both worlds, including worship of Yahweh, who we know, of course, is the true God, but they wanted to also mix worship of him with other things. Here, the mother of this man named Micah is also wanting to do the same thing.

So he restores the money to her and they take the silver and make a carved image, a metal image, verse four, and it's in Micah's house. And he has a shrine, he makes an ephod there, verse five, a household of gods, ordained one of his sons who became his priests. All of those are abominations to the Lord, according to earlier scripture.

And now for the first time, we have the author of the book telling us that in those days, there was no king in Israel. Everybody did what was right in their own eyes. Now that's kind of an editorial comment.

It's kind of as if the author is placing the pause button on the narrative flow of things and saying, I want to say a word about this. Namely, this is happening because there's no king. Everybody doing whatever they wanted.

This is a prime example of that. And again, the subtle point is that if there had been a godly king, this kind of thing would not have been happening. So that's the introduction to the story.

Interestingly enough, in verse five, when it says the man Micah had a shrine, the word there literally is just the house of God. And that's interesting because that's the term used to talk about the tabernacle in other places. We find that at the end of this episode, at the end of chapter 18, the last verse of chapter 18 says, so they set up Micah's card image that he had made, this is the Danites doing that, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.

So, in other words, as long as the tabernacle, the true house of God, was at Shiloh, this was happening. But here, this man named Micah has his own private little house of God that becomes a snare to him. So, in verse seven, we are introduced to another character.

And this is a young man from Bethlehem in Judah and says that he is a Levite. Now, if you remember from the book of Joshua, the Levites did not have any tribal territory assigned to them, but they had 48 Levitical cities scattered throughout the land, usually averaging about four per tribe, of the 12 tribes. He's from Bethlehem, but Bethlehem is not listed in the Levitical cities lists as one of the Levitical cities.

So, he's from Bethlehem, he's in Judah, but somehow he is becoming Levite. So he's maybe traveled somewhere to be part of one of the Levitical cities. But it feels like he's kind of aimless, because now in verse eight, it says, he departed from the town of Bethlehem in Judah to sojourn wherever he could find a place.

He's just saying, I'm going to be the happy wanderer and go backpack and find a youth hostel somewhere and see what I can if I can make my fortune or find something exciting to do. And as he's journeying along, he comes to the house of Micah, and Micah asks him who he is. He says he's a Levite, and Micah would like him, he wants to add this man to his already growing accumulation of the shrine and the gods and the images and so on.

And he thinks it would be great to have his own private priest with him. So he asked him to stay with him, verse 10. And he said I'll pay you for this.

So, verse 12, Micah ordained the Levite and the young man became his priest. And it was there in the household of Micah. And Micah must either be a complete idiot or know nothing about the true religion of the true God, because in the last verse of chapter 17, he says, now I know that Yahweh, the Lord, will prosper me because I have a Levite as a priest.

There's no provision anywhere in the law about people having private priests for themselves, let alone all these images that he's created and the shrine that he has there. But that's, here's another example of this kind of mixing of the various kinds of religious elements that, and it's coming to no good here. Chapter 18, verse one, reminds us again that there's no king in Israel, in case we'd forgotten.

And then it says, it kind of changes the scenery and it takes us to a whole different place, to the tribe of Dan. And Dan had originally been allotted a territory near the sea. And let's kind of look at that.

If we turn back to the book of Joshua to understand where the tribe of Dan was to settle. Joshua chapter 19. The final inheritance in the book of Joshua of the grouping here in chapters 18 and 19 is for the tribe of Dan.

And it gives the list of the cities there. And they're essentially up against the seacoast and sort of down, not quite in Philistine territory, but long in here. But we are told,

verse 47, Joshua 19, verse 47, it says, when the territory of the people of Dan was lost to them, so somehow they weren't able to settle there, they weren't able to drive out the Canaanites, and they apparently not only weren't able to drive out the Canaanites, but the Canaanites drove them out.

So when the territory of the people of Dan was lost to them, the people of Dan went up and fought against Leshem. After capturing it and striking it with the sword, they took possession of it and settled there, calling Leshem Dan after the name of their ancestor. Well, Dan in the historical period of Israel was a city up here.

This passage tells us that the previous name was Leshem. So they're migrating from here up through the central hill country and ended up in the far area. We learn more about the details of that migration in Judges chapter 18.

But just to kind of set the stage, that's the backdrop. Joshua, the book of Joshua is tells the story of that migration. Must have come years after the stories here in the book of Judges.

The writing of that in the book of Joshua must have come after that period of the Judges, because Judges 18 tells us a story in more detail of that migration. So again, the writing of these books may not have been immediately after the events of the books. But if we understand and accept the idea of God's Holy Spirit inspiring the writing of these words, it doesn't really matter how soon after the events they were written, they would have still been recorded accurately.

So, let's go back to Judges chapter 18 and see what's happening with the tribe of Dan. So, 18 verse 1 tells us that in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in. For until then, no inheritance among the tribe of Israel had fallen to them.

Now it had been a portion to them back under Joshua and the others, chapter 19, Joshua. But apparently they're unsettled enough yet they're not able to drive out the King of Knights. This is taking place before the story in chapter 19 of Joshua is told about them actually having to be forced to leave, to go north.

So this tells us more details. So verse 2 and the following says that the people of Dan sent five able men to kind of explore the land, and find a place to settle in verse 2. So they came along and what do you know, they ended up encountering Micah in the hill country of Ephraim in the central part of the land, and they stayed there. And in the process, of course, they meet the young Levite.

And apparently there had been some contact before. We don't know about what it was, but it says in verse 3 that they recognized the voice of the young Levite, and said, who brought you here? What are you doing here? So, this Levite may have

been, we've seen earlier, he's kind of setting out to find his fortune, to search for adventure. And maybe he had already tried coming to Dan and now he was going somewhere else.

Anyway, he tells them that Dan has done very well for me and he's treated me well. Verse 4, and so they said, well, okay, if you've become the priest, then we would like to know, if you would so inquire from God if the journey we're on is going to have success. And so, the priest replies to them, verse 6, yep, everything's going to be fine.

Go in peace. The journey is going to, under the eye of the So they departed and they came to a place called Laish. Now it turns out that Laish is just another variant of the name Leshem.

So basically, the same city. The term Laish is mentioned back in the book of Genesis as the early name of the later city of Dan. So that part of Genesis also reflects events centuries later.

But here we have it called Laish, in Joshua, it's called Leshem. They got up there and they saw this as a wonderful place to live. They lived in peace and security after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing.

This is verse 7, possessing wealth. How they were far from the Sidonians, and had no dealing with them. Sidonians were on the coast farther north, but this is a place where there's not a whole lot of conflict.

And they decided that they would like to settle there. So, they come back and tell their brothers about this wonderful place and they're going to go take it. So, in verse 11 following, we have the Danites sending out 600 armed men to go up and capture the area.

And they settled at a place called Kiriath Jiram in Judah, still farther south. It's called Mahane Dan. Mahane is the word for camp, so sort of the encampment of Dan.

But they pressed on further north. Ephraim came back to the house of Micah again. And the five men who had gone out earlier tell their brethren in verse 14, did you know that there's really good stuff here in the house of Micah? The ephod, household gods, carved image, metal image.

So, think about what you'd like to do about that. That's essentially what they're asking for, what they're telling you in verse 14. And so, they turned aside, they came there and asked them about the welfare and the 600 men showed up, rather threatening force for just the household of one person.

And so, verse 17, the five men who had gone out to scout the land came and took these things, carved image, Ephod, household gods, metal image. All the priests stood by the entrance of the gate. So you can imagine sort of in a modern-day mafia kind of a movie, you've got all the strong men, the Muslim men around, and then somebody goes to take it.

And you just know that the victims are being helpless. Here's the guy standing, making sure this happens. That way, but to add insult to injury, besides taking Micah's things that he had so lovingly assembled with his mother's money and so on, to add insult to injury, they say that they want to take away his priest, take away this Levite with them.

And so, they ask the priests, the priest, first of all, says, what are you doing here in verse 18? And they said, shut up. Come with us. Be a father to us and a priest.

Is it better for you to be the priest for one man or to a whole tribe? And so, he follows sort of the career trajectory of advancement now promoted to a bigger company, I suppose you could say. And the priest's heart was glad. He took the Ephod and the household gods, the carved image, and went with the people, verse 20.

And they turned to pursuit and went north. The man, Micah, doesn't like this. And he realizes what's happening.

And he shouts after them. And in verse 24, he says, you take my gods that I have made and the priests go away. And what have I left? How then do you ask, what's the matter with me? And the Danites just responded with rather rough words saying, you better, you better just chill.

Otherwise, you're going to lose your life along with the life of your household, verse 25. So, the Danites migrate to the north. The man of Micah sees that they're too strong.

He goes back home. Verse 27, the Danites take what Micah had made. The priest, came to Laish, the place up north.

It's a quiet and unsuspecting place. And the Danites, in a rather savage way, attack them, put them to the edge of the sword, and burn the city. And there's no defense for the city of Laish.

And so, they rebuilt the city. The Danites did. In verse 29, they renamed the city Dan after their ancestor.

The city originally was called Laish, as we were told in verse 29. And they set up the carved image for themselves. And a man named Jonathan, the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land.

Now, this is one indication that this may have happened earlier in the period of the judges because it sounds like this is a grandson of Moses. If that's the case, it's not happening hundreds of years later. It's happening maybe earlier in the period.

But these people, this strand of the descendants of Moses, function as priests to the tribes of the Danites. Now, again, these are not legitimate priests. All legitimate priests were from the Levite tribe, and they were centralized around the worship of the Tabernacle.

Here, this is a private set for one tribe. That's not certainly sanctioned at all in the law. But apparently, that persisted until, as we see at the end of verse 30, until the day of the captivity of the land.

And that would be centuries later, in the 500s, when the Babylonians took the Israelites into exile out of Jerusalem to the land of Babylonia. So, this is many centuries that the Danites have had this private setup for tribes in their land, and it has its roots in the desire of this one man, Micah, to have his own little private shrine and attendant objects with it, and an attendant priest. So, we're at a lower level, morally and spiritually, than we even have been earlier on.

Before the Lord seems to be involved here, God does not speak at all. The closest we get is Micah's mother, who wants to dedicate the shrine to the Lord, but then she makes these graven images. So, at the end of Samson's story, remember when his hair was cut, it said the Lord had left him, or the Lord was not with him.

That continues here. God's not part of this story. And it's a rather tangled story, but a perverse story of worship being perverted all over the place, savagery being committed on different levels against Micah and his household, against the people of Laish.

And it sets the stage for an even worse story in the chapters to come.

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