

Judges 17:1-13 and Judges 18:1-31

Micah's Idol

This story is placed after Samson's story presumably because both mention 1,100 pieces of silver - "the wicked silver, which was an equal amount in both of them, and by their both being silver of misfortune," according to Rashi. Also, both stories concern the Danites.

Another reason for its placement here is to take the first corruption of true Israelite religion which occurred with Micah of the hill country of Ephraim and contrast it with Samuel, the first reformer of the faith, also of Ephraim.

Louis Ginzberg's classic "The Legends of the Jews" further mentions that Micah's mother was none other than Delilah, and that the 1,100 silver pieces Micah stole were the same that the Philistines had bribed her with for divulging Samson's secret.

(The rabbis always tried to tie the villains together somehow).

But Rashi and Josephus (Antiqu. I. 5. c. 2. sect. 8) both say this took place early, in the years between the death of Joshua and the elders and the first of the judges. One of the heretical priests for the tribe of Dan is said to be a grandson of Moses (**Judges 18:30**), although the Masoretic text attempts to hide this by inserting the letter nun to make it Manasseh instead of Moses (see below).

Amazingly this idol continued to be worshipped until the Philistines captured the ark (**1 Samuel 4**), and the descendants of the Levite priest carried on with idolatrous worship until the Assyrians forced them into exile in 722 B.C. (**Judges 18:30-31**)

Finally, the story fleshes out the details of the Danites move into the northern area of Laish or Leshem, which is first described earlier in **Joshua 19:47**, after the death of Joshua, and again in Judges 1:34. In fact, Deborah refers to Dan as remaining "in his ships" and thus already dwelling securely in the north (**Judges 5:17**). So this story happened in the early days of the judges.

The Idolatry of the Danites

One reason for the reference of Dan as a "serpent" in Jacob's blessing (Genesis 49) was because of their betrayal of the faith in setting up an idol in Laish. Dan later became one of the two places Israel set up a golden calf in the days of Jeroboam - the other was in Bethel (**1 Kings 12:28**).

These apostasies were not thought of as a worship of other gods, but a worship of the true God - but under unauthorized conditions, and with forbidden images.

Nearby Laish (called Caesarea Philippi in the New Testament) in a cave was located the "Gates of Hell" - a famous pagan shrine mentioned by Jesus (Matthew 16:18). Dan

succumbed to it. Jesus would assault it at the cross, and promised His church that they would also overcome it, that it would not prevail.

(See notes on Joshua 19 -

https://www.communityoncolumbia.org/pdf/Readings_Notes/Joshua19_Notes.pdf)

Ascribing God's Name to Our Idols

Judges 17:1-2 - "And there was a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah. And he said unto his mother, The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou cursedst, and spakest of also in mine ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it. And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son."

Micah = *Micayehû*, "Who is like Jehovah" After his apostasy, he is referred to simply as Micah. Scripture did not think it worthwhile to add the name of his father, or to mention the family from which he sprang.

The Talmud (Sanhedren 103, b) says that he lived at Garab, not far from Shiloh, but the name ("a blotch") is probably a term of scorn (**Deuteronomy 28:27**).

Judges 17:3-4 - "And when he had restored the eleven hundred shekels of silver to his mother, his mother said, I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and a molten image: now therefore I will restore it unto thee. Yet he restored the money unto his mother; and his mother took two hundred shekels of silver, and gave them to the founder, who made thereof a graven image and a molten image: and they were in the house of Micah."

When the mother of Micah discovered that the money had been stolen, she cursed the thief and further consecrated the money to Yahweh. It's not clear if she suspected her son was the culprit. Micah seems to have been impelled to make this confession by the fear of his mother's curse.

Why?

- **Ecclesiasticus 3:9** - "The curse of a mother rooteth out foundations."

A curse was held to possess a living, potent efficacy (cf. **Zechariah 5:3**); it called upon the offender to come forward; and whoever heard it was bound to make it known, as we learn from the law in **Leviticus 5:1**, cf. **Proverbs 29:24**. To augment the curse in the present case the money was solemnly consecrated to Jehovah; it became taboo, and the thief could not make use of it without incurring the Deity's retaliation. The curse could not be withdrawn, but it might be neutralized by a blessing. - *Cambridge Bible*

A similar case can be seen with Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts 5**. They dedicate a certain amount to God, but keep back part of it. When this is revealed, the curse inherent in the act of vowing "finds" them, and they die from what sociologists studying

primitive cultures call "voodoo death." They expect to die, and so they do, probably from a heart attack.

"now therefore I will restore it unto thee" - may possibly mean "use it for its original purpose for thy advantage."

But although she had consecrated it to the Lord, the silver was not taken to Shiloh, where the Tabernacle was located, and where official priests and Levites ministered. Instead, they agreed to a more convenient solution - take only 200 pieces of silver and have a silversmith create a molten idol with the Lord's name engraved upon it.

Alternately, the 200 silver pieces could be the trespass-money of one-fifth, which by the law Micah had to pay for his theft (Leviticus 5:24), reserving nine hundred either for the ephod, or teraphim, or other things relating to this worship. Or possibly Micah just pocketed the rest of the silver for himself.

The word used for a graven image is *pesel*, and for a molten image is *massecah*. They are the very words used in the curse against idolaters in **Deuteronomy 27:15**.

This image could have been a small calf, the same image Israel made in the wilderness (Exodus 32:1) and which Jeroboam made later. Josephus explains that a calf was considered to be an emblem of the true God (Antiq. viii. 8, § 4).

Golden bull-calves symbolized Yahweh at Dan and Beth-el, **1 Kings 12:28, cf. Exodus 32:4** (*egel massechah*, a molten calf); see the prohibition of molten gods (*massçkah*) in **Exodus 34:17**.

The sun rose in Taurus the bull at the equinox, and it was the dominant constellation of the age, and it would seem reasonable to glorify God by putting His name on such an image.

Some propose the calves were seen as merely the seat or pedestal upon which the invisible God was thought to stand. Nevertheless, they were obviously forbidden by God's law.

Judges 17:5-6 - "And the man Micah had an house of gods, and made an ephod, and teraphim, and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest. In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

Or "a house of God." He still considered he was worshipping the one true God.

"there was no king in Israel" - there was not even a central authority or governing system except the theocracy centered at Shiloh with the High Priest, which was being ignored.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes - like Adam and Eve, they were deceived by their eyes to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The

powerful guidance of the Torah and even the counsel of the High Priest and the oracle of the *urim* and *thummim* were forgotten.

The Hireling Levite

Judges 17:7-8 - "And there was a young man out of Bethlehem-judah of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there. And the man departed out of the city from Bethlehem-judah to sojourn where he could find a place: and he came to mount Ephraim to the house of Micah, as he journeyed."

The Levites had been granted 48 cities throughout the tribal territories. But with the neglect of the Tabernacle worship and bringing sacrifices, first fruits, tithes and offerings, the Levites would have had no income to feed their families. No doubt this would have caused some to leave and go out on their own. It was a ripple effect of the general apostasy. This Levite is said to be from Bethlehem, but that was not one of the Levite cities. He had left to sojourn there apparently.

Jesus warned about the difference between a true shepherd and a hireling like this Levite:

- **John 10:12-13** - "He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep."

Judges 17:13 - "Then said Micah, Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest."

The process of falling away from God is apparent in this first part of the story:

- First, Micah is a thief, His original motivation was greed and self-seeking. Perhaps like Eve (Genesis 3:6) he was "*ta'ăvâh* - charmed" by the silver.

[The Hebrew word translated as "a delight" shows that when something catches our attention and causes dissatisfaction and inordinate longing, the experience contains a forbidden magical aspect].

- He returns the silver out of fear of the curse, but also for both their mutual "advantage."

- Then, the vow to dedicate the silver to the Lord is compromised. Like Ananias and Sapphira, both he and his mother "lie to the Holy spirit" and dedicate only 200 pieces of silver for creating the idol. (See Acts 5:1-11) The fear of the curse was enough to cause Micah to return the silver, but was not strong enough to keep them from self-justifying their little compromise.

- Further, around this one idol, Micah builds a complete religious system - an ephod and *teraphim*, which were household idols probably depicting ancestors. He consecrates his

son as a priest.

"Micah had an house of gods" - or "a house of Elohim." Elohim was also another name for God Himself. Micah still saw his worship as honoring the true God, although it was completely contradictory to the Torah commands.

Rabbinical tradition expands on this: "The sanctuary which Micah erected harbored various idols. He had three images of boys, and three of calves, one lion, an eagle, a dragon, and a dove. When a man came who wanted a wife, he was directed to appeal to the dove. If riches were his desire, he worshipped the eagle. For daughters born, to the calves; to the lion for strength, and to the dragon for long life. Sacrifices and incense alike were offered to these idols, and both had to be purchased with cash money from Micah, even two drachmas for a sacrifice, and one for incense." - *Legends of the Jews*

- Then Micah hires a Levite to join his household priesthood, which would give it an extra note of legitimacy.

The final act comes in chapter 18, when the heavily armed troop of 600 Danites shows up, hears about the valuable idol and take it by force. The Levite shows total disloyalty and decides to accompany the stronger Danites - who promise him a wider audience for his priestly ministry, which will mean more income and status.

In the end, Micah - who started out with covetousness and a theft - has had everything stolen from him.

Taking the Name of the Lord in Vain

The warning here is about placing the name of God on our idols, and breaking the commandment against taking the name of the Lord in vain.

- **Exodus 20:7** - "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."

Recall the times of Seth in **Genesis 4:26**: "...then began men to call upon the name of the LORD."

The Targum of Jonathan gives a different translation - "That was the generation in whose days they began to err, and to make themselves idols, and surnamed their idols by the name of the Word of the Lord."

It is easy to begin to justify our own agendas by putting God's name on them - on our political opinions, our business or career goals, our sports team, our country, our race, our social tribe.

If we really want to "baptize" these areas, then remember what baptism means - our death.

Covetousness is the starting point of idolatry.

- **Colossians 3:5-6** - "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience"

The cure for covetousness - wanting more than you have - is contentment.

- **Philippians 4:11** - "...I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

Paul "learned" it through suffering and "dying daily" - looking instead on the welfare of others, and trusting in God rather than his own senses.

- **1 Timothy 6:6** - "Now there's great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we can't take anything out of the world."

Rabbinical Commentary

The Rabbis said Micah's name could be interpreted to mean "the crushed one," derived from an interesting Haggadah midrash on the Exodus story:

"When the enslaved Israelites did not fulfill the quota of making bricks, the Egyptians immured the Hebrew babies in place of the missing bricks. When Moses complained to God, He answered by saying that the Egyptians were merely ridding the nation of thorns (of future sinners). Moses tested God's word by removing one baby out of the wall. Moses wrote down the Name of God, and put the words on the baby's body. The dead boy came to life, and Moses drew him out of the wall of which he made a part. Micah did not show himself worthy of the wonder done for him. Even before the Israelites left Egypt, he made his idol, and it was he who fashioned the golden calf. At the time of Othniel the judge, he took up his abode at a distance of not more than three miles from the sanctuary at Shiloh, and won over the grandson of Moses to officiate as priest before his idol."

The rabbis also saw a connection between the phrase "And the Levite was content to dwell with the man" in **Judges 17:11** and Moses' vowing to "dwell" with Jethro in Midian in **Exodus 2:21**.

It's one of those far-fetched rabbinical connections, but their explanation clarifies the mysterious incident of God threatening Moses until Zipporah circumcises their son in **Exodus 4:22-25**.

The Mechilta, a compilation of halakhic midrash on Exodus, tells us that when Moses asked to marry Jethro's daughter, Jethro agreed but with one condition: Moses had to vow that his firstborn would be dedicated to idol worship.

Later, when God sent Moses to speak to Pharaoh, He instructed Moses:

- **Exodus 4:22-23** - "And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn."

The rabbis interpret it like this: "So I (the Lord) say to you (Moses), send out My son that he may serve Me, but you have refused to send him out. Behold I shall kill your firstborn (Gershom)."

But Moses could not circumcise his son because of his vow to Jethro. (Another reason not to enter into a vow).

- **Exodus 4:24-26** - "And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision."

Because of Zipporah's circumcision, Moses' son Gershom could not fulfill the vow to Jethro. But it would be fulfilled later by his grandson Jonathan.

In **Judges 18:30**, the "Levite" of the story who continues as priest of Micah's idol, is identified as "Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh." The letter *nun* in Menashe is elevated to indicate, via the unelevated letters, that Manasseh (Menashe) is Moses (Moshe). The Septuagint also understands Manasseh to be "Moses."

Rashi - "Because of the honor of Moses was the *nun* written so as to alter the name. The *nun* however is suspended to tell thee that it was not Manasseh but Moses."

Furthermore, by changing the name to "Manasseh" here, the rabbinical scribes were referring not to the ancestor of the tribe of Manasseh but to the later evil and idolatrous king of Judah in the 7th century B.C., whose character was like that of Micah's priest.

[See <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-fateful-vow/>]

The import of this story is to emphasize the depth of the apostasy in Israel during the time of the judges, if Moses' grandson could end up worshipping and even serving as priest to an idol.

The fact that the Levite mentioned in this story comes from Bethlehem is even more sinister. (Events in the next story of the Levite and his concubine also center on Bethlehem). If the Messiah born in Bethlehem is the epitome of righteous ministry as our high priest after the order of Mechizadek, these Levites express the epitome of unholiness and self-seeking in their service as hireling shepherds.

And the tribe of Dan - where Micah's idol finds its final home - is the only tribe not listed among the 144,000 saved in Revelation 7:3-8.

The next and final story of this time of apostasy is even worse.