

LESSON 18: JUDGES 17-21 (Part 3 Overview)

OVERVIEW: HIGH-LEVEL PASS (Who, What, Where, When)

Part 1 (Judges 1:1–3:6) sets up the focus on believers who are positionally in the Kingdom, but have not pressed on to claim the full inheritance and put away the enemy. They battle the enemy to a certain extent, but for various reasons, they become weary and unmotivated in pursuing the goal. They drift away from inquiring of God and slip into the habit of doing what was right in their own eyes and begin cultic practices.

Part 2 (Judges 3:7–16:31) **unpacks the external warfare.** It covers the narratives of the judges from Othniel to Samson, and the continuing cycle of occupation, oppression, and war with external enemies that Israel has allowed to remain in their lives.

Part 3 (Judges 17:1–21:25) **unpacks the internal corruption.** It begins with Micah's idolatry and goes through the near-self-destruction of the tribe of Benjamin. There is moral corruption, civil war with the body, and a disintegration of priestly role. A rootlessness takes over when Israel begins to seek an identity and place apart from what the Lord provided for them and sets up rivals to Him in their lives.

LITERARY STRUCTURE:

Inclusio: Judges 17:6 and 21:25. *“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* This critical comment encapsulates the narrative of Part 3.

- The phrase *“there was no king”* is repeated four times (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25), suggesting that the remedy for Israel's condition is the establishment of a king over the people. This sets the reader up for the transition from theocracy into monarchy in 1 Samuel.
- The phrase *“everyone did what was right in their own eyes”* invokes that sense of returning to a wilderness existence. There is an unsettling character in the events—a lack of vision and purpose, a lack of contentment, and subsequent rootlessness.

CHANGE IN NARRATIVE between PARTS 2 and 3:

Part 2: Judges 3:10 – 16:31	Part 3: Judges 17:1 – 21:25
There is a heavy focus on individuals and names	Micah, Phineas, and Jonathon are the only names mentioned
There were judges but no Levites mentioned	There are Levites but no judges mentioned
The Baals and Ashtoreths are mentioned by name	Only generalized cultic practices are mentioned
There are outside invaders mentioned	No outside invaders are mentioned. The only battle with Canaanites is the one the Danites initiate with Laish and they are the aggressors.
The congregation of Israel is scattered. Events and judges appear localized.	The congregation of Israel comes together in totality to deal with Benjamin. <i>(Note: this end picture of Israel coming together nationally also sets up a logical progression toward monarchy.)</i>

Part 3 only notes Micah (Judges 17:1), Jonathon (Judges 18:30) and Phinehas (Judges 20:27-28) by name. Why are they significant?

1. Micah means **“Who is like God?”**
 - What different meanings can that question have depending on the tone of voice used?
 - What is the view of God in Isaiah 40:18-25.
2. Phinehas gives us a time marker. When in the timeline are the events of Part 3 taking place?
3. Why put events that happen at the beginning of the timeline at the end of the book?

KEY FIGURES and PEOPLE GROUPS

The absence of names forces a focus on people groups and relationship dynamics. Notice the progression in the people relationship as events unfold. What begins as a problem at an individual level then creates a ripple effect as it expands to greater interpersonal relationships.

Chapter 17-18:	People relationships
Micah	Individual
Micah's house (his mother, the Levite)	Family
Danite tribe	Tribe
Canaanite city of Laish	Outsiders
Chapter 19-21:	
Levite and his concubine	Individual/Family
Levite's father-in-law	Family
Men of Gibeah	City/Tribe
Congregation of Israel	All Israel
Remnant of Benjamin	Tribe
Daughters of Shiloh	Family
Every man to his tribe/family/inheritance	Individual

Question for Reflection:

- Do you ever rationalize an issue in your life by saying “This is just a problem with me or my family. It doesn't impact anyone else”?

MICAH'S IDOLATRY **Read Judges 17.**

4. Consider the people and their actions. What is wrong with this picture?
 - Why does Micah return the stolen money?
 - What is wrong with his mother's response?
 - His mother said she would return the 1,100 pieces of silver to her son in the form of idols, but what does she do in practice? (v4)
 - How does Micah get into the practice of idolatry?
5. What is wrong with the picture of the young Levite? (v7-13)
6. What is wrong with Micah's assumption in verse 13?

Question for Reflection:

- How much does our worship experience rely on the trappings we give it? It just doesn't feel like worship without . . . ?
- Can our dependence on the physical setting and elements of worship hinder our relationship with God? (For instance, what if we had no church to meet at?)
- Does having a priest to preside over you guarantee a relationship with the Lord?

THE DANITES SEND OUT SPIES **Read Judges 18:1-9.**

7. If the Danites' tribal holdings have already been established by Joshua, why hasn't their inheritance fallen to them? (Judges 1:34, Joshua 19:47)

"And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountains, for they would not allow them to come down to the valley." - Judges 1:34

"When the territory of the people of Dan was lost to them [slipped from their grasp], the people of Dan went up and fought against Leshem [Laish] . . ." Joshua 19:47 ESV
8. Where on the timeline does this episode take place?
9. ". . . Go, search the land . . ." (v2) What were they looking for, really?
10. Didn't Moses already send out spies to search the land? Let's compare the two accounts:
 - **Both spied out the length of the Land. Moses' spies end up at Rehob.**

The Danite spies end up at _____.

- **Moses' spies run into the giants and fortified cities in the land.**

The Danites found a people who _____.

- **Moses gets a mixed report:**

Caleb: *"Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."*

Joshua: *"If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them."*

The Danite spy: *"We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we. . . The land is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. We were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."*

The Danite spies go back to the same land and this time report back:

11. Where do the Danite spies begin their journey?
12. Interesting that they should head the opposite direction as Samson toward Eshtaol ("entreaty"). The Danite spies asked the Levite to inquire of God for what purpose?
13. Did the Danites inquire of God before or after they decided to leave their inheritance?
14. What does Laish mean?
15. How did the Danites recognize the young Levite?
16. What did the Levite tell them was God's response? (v6)

Questions for Reflection:

- When we are faced with a severe trial, oppression, or a very strong enemy as we press on toward our reward, how tempting is it to convince ourselves that the roadblock in our way is really the Lord telling us "find another place?"
- Do we seek escape from the struggle or slog through it and let it refine us?
- When we make the decision to seek escape, do we then ask the Lord's blessing in our new venture?
- What do we lose in our relationship with God when we do this?

THE LAISH CAMPAIGN **Read Judges 18:11-31.**

17. Where do they begin?
18. What is the crime that is committed? (v14-17)
19. When the Levite priest questions them, the Danites tell him to **charash**. *Charash*-ing is a Philistine tactic that we studied in Samson. What other Philistine tactics do the Danites use?
20. What is Micah's response when he finds out he has been robbed (v22-24)?
21. This pattern of outcry and assembling for war has happened repeatedly throughout the cycles of oppression – Israel cries out against an oppressor, God raises a leader, the leader assembles the people and goes to war (Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, Jephthah). When they cry out to God and assemble under His appointed leader, they have victory. Why doesn't the same pattern play out for Micah?
22. What is the irony of Micah's complaint?
23. The Danites respond with the warning *"Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry [bitter of soul] men fall upon you, and you lose your life, with the lives of your household!"* (v25) Why are the Danites bitter of soul and how does the bitterness work itself out?

"Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land." - Judges 18:30 NKJV

24. What is the identity of the young Levite? (Judges 18:30)

Jonathon, the son of Gershom, the son of (Mⁿsh) . . . Manasseh or Moses?

The Levite's identity as a descendant of Manasseh is questioned because the "n" is a suspended letter – it is there but elevated from the rest of the text which indicates the word may be read without it. Thus it can be read as MNSH (Menashe or Manasseh) or MSH (Moshe or Moses).

The problem is that a Levite would not be a descendant of Manasseh, and he was previously identified as being associated with the tribe of Judah. He could be a descendant of Moses, who did have a son named Gershom (1 Chr 23:15). Whether Jonathon was a son of Gershom or not cannot be verified. To think that a son of Moses would be an apostate priest is appalling.

מִנְשֵׁה
HS^NM

The Rabbis propose that this Levite is called the grandson of Manasseh, not because he was of blood ties to that tribe, but because he was of the *character* of that tribe. Manasseh was known of their wicked practices and idolatry, which this young Levite had adopted.

This kind of relationship – where a son is identified with a father not by blood but by character or condition – is also found in formulaic statements such the “man . . . son of man” phrases (Num 23:19, Job 25:6, Job 35:8, Psalm 8:4, 80:17, 144:3; Isa 56:2)

“God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. . .” - Numbers 23:19

“How much less man, who is a maggot, and a son of man, who is a worm?” - Job 25:6

“What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?” - Psalm 8:4

Jonathon means “whom God has given”

Gershom means foreigner (*“I have been a stranger in a foreign land.”* Exodus 2:22)

Manasseh means “one who forgets” (*“For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father’s house.”* Genesis 41:51)

“Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.”” - Judges 18:30 NKJV

The city of Dan is mentioned again in 1 Kings 12. Jeroboam, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, sets up a golden calf in Dan for the people to worship. Dan becomes a center for cultic practices in the north and is taken into captivity by a people who are just like themselves (only worse). The Danites here are very much of the same nature as the future Chaldeans:

“For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. . . . They all come for violence; Their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand.” - Habakkuk 1:6-7, 9

Questions for Reflection:

- When we are faced with a severe trial, oppression, or a very strong enemy as we press on toward our reward, how tempting is it to convince ourselves that the roadblock in our way is really the Lord telling us “find another place?”
- Do we seek escape from the struggle or slog through it and let it refine us?
- When we make the decision to seek escape, do we then ask the Lord’s blessing in our new venture?
- What do we lose in our relationship with God when we do this?
- How can our expectation of the “kingdom” and the reward cause us to become bitter and lose faith in God?
- If we had asked the Danites “Who is like God?” what might their response have been?

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Levitical-Cities>

LEVITICAL CITIES. Forty-eight cities allotted to the Levites by Moses and Joshua (Num 35:1-8; Josh 21). The tribe of Levi did not receive any part of the land of Canaan as an inheritance (Num 18:20-24; 26:62; Deut 10:9; 18:1, 2; Josh 18:7). To compensate them for this, they received the tithes of Israelites for their support (Num 18:21), and forty-eight cities were allotted to them out of the inheritance of the other tribes. Of these cities the priests received thirteen (Josh 21:4), and six were cities of refuge, to which men who had accidentally killed someone could go for protection (Num 35:9-34; Deut 4:41-43). The Levitical cities were made up by taking four cities from each of the twelve tribes. The apparent purpose of thus dispersing the Levites throughout the land was to enable them, as the official representatives of the Heb. faith, to instruct the people throughout the land in the law and in the worship of Jehovah. The description of the measurements of the cities and the pasture lands connected with them as given in Numbers 35:4, 5 is difficult to understand and has given rise to many different interpretations.

The Levites were not the sole possessors or occupiers of these cities. They were simply allowed to live in them and have fields for the pasture of their herds. These cities did not cease to belong to the tribes within which they were located. The Levites could sell their homes, but could redeem them at any time, and if they failed to do so the homes automatically returned to them in the Year of Jubilee. Their fields, however, could not be sold (Lev 25:32ff.).

The Levites did not live only in Levitical cities. They appear to have been regarded, in some respects at least, as belonging to the tribe within which they resided, even if it did not happen to be a Levitical city; hence the statement in Judges 17:7, "Now there was a young man of Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he sojourned there." Thus also Elkanah, the father of Samuel, who undoubtedly was a Levite, is called an Ephraimite (1 Sam 1:1). The Levites are never regarded as a thirteenth tribe.

These cities were allocated to the Levites by anticipation, to be occupied by them only to the extent that they required them and the Israelites possessed them. It is unlikely that the Levites ever dwelt in all of them, or even most of them, for some of them did not belong to Israel until long after the time of Moses and Joshua. 1 Chronicles 6:54-81 also gives a list of the Levitical cities, but the list is smaller than the one in Joshua, and there are changes in names, perhaps because there was a change to a new city due to the unsuitability of the old one, or because some of the older ones were no longer in use. Levitical cities mentioned in Jewish history after the time of Joshua are Beth-shemesh (1 Sam 6:13-15), Jattir (1 Sam 30:27), Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26; Jer 1:1; 32).

Bibliography W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (1941), 131; W. F. Albright, "The List of Levitic Cities," *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (1945), 49ff.; M. F. Unger, *Archaeology and the OT* (1954), 210, 211; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (1961), 366, 367.

