

# Apostasy and Lawlessness

## *Judges 17-18*

### Introduction

Chapters 17-21 serve as an appendix to the Book of Judges, featuring materials not presented in chronological sequence. The text contains clues that suggest the events described in these chapters occurred shortly after Joshua's death, even before Cushan's invasion of the land (3:8). The inclusion of these chapters aims to depict the widespread apostasy, lawlessness, immorality, disunity, and legalism that defined much of the 324-year Judges period.

### **Judges 17 - Micah the Ephraimite**

Judges 17 presents what appears to be the earliest explicit instance of idolatry during the time of the Judges, as referenced in Judges 2:11–23. This chapter focuses on an Ephraimite named Micah, detailing his interactions with his mother, his shrine, and a particular Levite.

#### ***17:1-3 – The Incident with Micah and his Mother***

Micah stole eleven hundred pieces of silver from his mother. Unaware that her son was the thief, she cursed the perpetrator. Upon returning the silver, the repentant Micah prompted his mother to replace the curse with a blessing. She then dedicated the silver to Yahweh “for her son,” likely aiming to lessen the dangers linked with her initial curse.

Believing she performed a devout act, she created “a graven image and a molten image” for worship. This directly contradicts the instructions in Deuteronomy 27:15, which curses anyone making such an idol. But, in trying to counteract a human curse, Micah’s mother inadvertently subjected her son to a divine curse!

#### ***17:4-6 – Micah Builds a Shrine***

Two hundred shekels of the stolen silver were used to create an idol by a silversmith, which Micah then housed in his home in the hill country of Ephraim. Micah's illicit worship practices gradually expanded. He built a shrine, crafted an ephod (a garment for priestly service), and made "household idols" (teraphim) in addition to the graven images. He even appointed one of his sons as a priest for his shrine. These idolatrous practices went unchecked due to the lack of centralized authority in Israel, as "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." A proper king, faithful to the covenant, would have prevented such idolatry from taking root.

#### ***17:7-13 – Micah Hires a Levite***

A wandering Levite enhanced the prestige of Micah’s idolatrous shrine when he arrived at Micah’s house in Ephraim after traveling from Bethlehem in Judah. Discovering that the Levite was unattached to any

sanctuary, Micah quickly offered him a job, proposing an annual salary of ten silver pieces, a new suit of clothes, and food in exchange for the Levite acting as a spiritual advisor and priest at his shrine.

Accepting Micah's offer, the Levite became embroiled in sin, taking on the priestly role at Micah's idolatrous setup. Over time, Micah treated him increasingly like a son, delighted to have a member of the priestly tribe enhancing his shrine's status. Micah believed this arrangement would bring him prosperity and favor from Yahweh as the Levite took charge of worship activities.

Micah believed worship was personal, thinking sincerity could override strict adherence to divine commands. He did not completely forsake God but adopted pagan worship practices to supplement his own, thinking it enriched his devotion. This reflects a broader, timeless issue where individuals prioritize personal preference over God-centered worship. Worship should focus solely on pleasing God, adhering strictly to His instructions, and not fulfilling personal desires or innovations that stray from His commands.

## **Judges 18 – Lawlessness in Dan**

Chapter 18 continues to provide details of illicit worship in the hill country of Ephraim, introducing the lawlessness prevalent in Israel before the monarchy was established. This chapter focuses on the tribe of Dan, particularly on a spy mission by certain Danite families.

### ***18:1-10 – Searching for a New Location to Settle***

Those in Dan could not secure their designated land shortly after Joshua's death. Because of this, tribal elders sent five men to scout for a new territory that could serve as their inheritance.

### ***18:1-6 – The Spies Come to Micah's House***

The spies stopped at Micah's house, recognizing the Levite's voice from a distance, and were surprised to find him there. When they learned he was serving as Micah's priest, they asked him to seek God's guidance regarding the success of their mission. The Levite confirmed that God approved of their path.

### ***18:7-10 – At Laish***

The scouts continued north to Laish (also known as Leshem in Josh 19:47), a Phoenician city near the Sea of Galilee and distantly affiliated with Sidon. Due to its considerable distance from Sidon and lack of a strong military, Laish was effectively independent and vulnerable. After assessing the area, the spies reported the feasibility of conquering this unprotected and abundant region. The Danites promptly decided to seize Laish, confident in their abilities as formidable warriors.

### ***18:11-26 – The Danites Begin to Move to Laish***

Six hundred armed Danites and their families set out towards Laish, passing through the hill country of Ephraim. The five scouts approached Micah's residence and informed their group about the religious artifacts there. They decided to seize these objects and persuaded the Levite to accompany them as their tribe's priest, offering him a more prestigious position than serving just one man. The Levite happily accepted and even helped take the religious items, before setting off with the Danites to Laish. Here we

see the religious degradation within the nation, demonstrating misguided beliefs in the protective power of sacred objects. Moral character of religious figures or the legality of their actions no longer mattered. The end justified the means. This would have certainly been influenced by Canaanite practices.

Expecting a violent reaction from Micah upon discovering the theft, the Danites strategically positioned their vulnerable members and valuables at the front of their procession, with the armed men at the rear. When Micah and his community caught up, he accused them of stealing his religious objects and priest. Here we see the absurdity of idolatry. What power has a god that can be physically stolen? When Micah protested, the Danites threatened him, forcing him to retreat due to their superior force, effectively leaving him to suffer the same fate he had once imposed on his own mother through theft.

### ***18:27-29 – Laish Captured***

After their encounter with Micah, the Danites and their newly appointed priest continued to Laish, they attacked and destroyed the isolated town, which was too distant from Sidon for timely aid to arrive. The reasons for burning Laish are not explicitly stated, but it might have been due to superstitious fears of the town's guardian spirits. Following the destruction, the Danites rebuilt the town and renamed it Dan, after their tribal ancestor, establishing it as the northernmost Israeli settlement in Canaan.

The morality of the Danites' attack on Laish is questionable. Although the town was within the Promised Land's borders and potentially within Israel's rights for conquest, it was technically within Naphtali's tribal area, not Dan's. The Danites bypassed the conflict within their designated territory, choosing instead to conquer a peaceful, undefended town. This action violated the protocol described in Deuteronomy 20:10–15, which advises offering peace before engaging in conflict.

The writer of Judges highlights the Danites' actions negatively, exposing their unethical behaviors: They seized what wasn't theirs, had a corruptible priest leading them, attacked a defenseless town, and established a shrine that rivaled the legitimate tabernacle in Shiloh.

### ***18:30-31 – A New Danite Religion***

After settling in the newly constructed city of Dan, the Danites established a religious shrine and placed the graven image they had taken from Micah in the hill country of Ephraim. The Levite who served as the priest of this shrine was finally revealed to be Jonathan, a descendant of Moses, either his grandson or great-grandson. This connection provides a timeline, situating the events of the Danite migration shortly after Joshua's death.

This prestigious Levitical lineage continued their service at this unauthorized and idolatrous shrine until "the captivity of the land." This term likely refers not to the Assyrian captivity of Israel around 745 BC, but to an earlier period dominated by the Philistines, marked by the capture of the Ark of God and the destruction of Shiloh as recorded in 1 Samuel 4–5, around 1080 BC. The narrative concludes by noting that the worship of Micah's graven image persisted as long as the tabernacle stood at Shiloh, highlighting that the shrine at Dan served as a continual rival to the legitimate worship center until its destruction.

## What's In This for Us?

**The Importance of Accountability in Leadership:** The lack of centralized authority in Israel led to chaotic and unethical behavior. Leaders should be held accountable for upholding God's law and ethical standards and guiding those they lead toward morally sound actions.

The Dangers of Idolatry in Modern Forms: Micah's story of idol creation and the consequences it brought upon him illustrates the dangers of modern idolatry, such as materialism, power, or fame. These pursuits can lead to ethical compromises and personal downfalls, just as literal idolatry did for Micah and those in Dan.

**Consequences of Compromising on Ethical Principles:** The narrative of the Danites, who manipulated religious objects and ignored the established protocols for warfare and settlement, demonstrates the long-term consequences of compromising ethical principles for short-term gains. It underscores the need for steadfast adherence to God's values and laws, even when circumventing them might seem beneficial or easier.

### **The Impact of Cultural Influence on Religious Practices:**

The adoption of neighboring pagan practices by the Israelites serves as a caution about the influence of surrounding culture on religious practices and beliefs. It calls for vigilance and discernment to maintain the purity of one's faith traditions and values in the face of external pressures and influences.

## Conclusion

What we discover in Judges 17-18 reminds us of the need for ethical leadership, the dangers of prioritizing material or secular gains over spiritual values, and the importance of resisting negative cultural influences. These chapters highlight the consequences of ethical compromises and the necessity of adhering to a moral compass in all areas of life. Let's ensure our actions align with our deepest values and contribute to a just and upright church and society.

## For Discussion

1. How do the actions of Micah and the Danites reflect the consequences of a society where "every man did what was right in his own eyes"? How can this be applied to understanding the role of law and ethics in our society?
2. What does the story of Micah's idolatry and the consequences he faced teach us about the dangers of compromising spiritual or ethical beliefs for personal or communal convenience?
3. How do the characters in these chapters react to divine and human leadership? What does this say about the importance of leadership in maintaining societal order and ethical standards?
4. Here we see a blending of cultural practices influenced by neighboring peoples. What are some examples of similar influences in modern religious practices, and what can be the impact of such influences?
5. How does the story of the Danites' conquest of Laish and their treatment of Micah reflect on the concept of "might makes right"? Discuss how this philosophy manifests in modern contexts.
6. Discuss the implications of the Levite's role in the idolatrous practices at Micah's shrine. What lessons can be learned about personal responsibility and integrity in religious or spiritual leadership positions?
7. What can the modern church or religious communities learn from the Israelites' struggles with idolatry and ethical lapses as described in these chapters of Judges?
8. Considering the narrative's emphasis on the consequences of actions, discuss how the principle of "what goes around comes around" is illustrated with Micah.
9. How does the appendix of Judges contribute to the overall message of the Book of Judges? What does it reveal about Israel's historical and spiritual state during this period?