

Chapters 17-19 of Judges describe a dark time in Israel's history. They had wandered from the LORD and the inevitable moral decline had set in. We can see similarities between this period in Israel's history and our own day where we see a mixture of pagan and sacred ideas in our worship as well as people following their carnal desires into blatant sin with little accountability for their actions.

Judges 17

1 And there was a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah. 2 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.

We are introduced to a man named Micah who had apparently stolen 1,100 shekels of silver from his mother. He had listened to his mother complain and place a curse on the thief until his conscience apparently caused him to confess and return the money. She then blesses her son, perhaps happy that he confessed and/or that the silver had been returned. She invokes the name of the LORD in her blessing, which is odd considering what she had planned to do with the silver. We will see that Micah and his mother had mixed elements of the worship of the LORD with elements of pagan beliefs, reducing their worship to superstition.

3 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.

Micah returns the silver to his mother and she states her original intent for the silver. She had dedicated the silver to the LORD for the purpose of creating a pair of images to be given to her son (one graven, the other molten), so now that she again possesses the silver, she gives it to her son so that he can have the images made. Apparently her idea was that dedicating the silver to the LORD would make it holy and suitable for the purpose of creating the images of worship. However, the creation of such images was contrary to the will of the LORD and a blatant violation of the second commandment (Ex. 20:3-6).

4 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. 5 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.

Micah leaves the silver in the hand of his mother, and she apparently uses 200 shekels of it to create the images. Some commentators suggest the possibility that the 200 shekels was the money paid to the founder for the labor of forming the images using the remaining 900 shekels. Micah then makes a "house of gods" (a shrine) along with an ephod and teraphim (household idols) to be used in his shrine. Micah then consecrates one of his sons as a priest to lead the worship in his shrine.

6 In those days *there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*

The book of Judges must have been written when Israel did have a king and the writer is calling attention to the fact that the events concerning Micah and his mother occurred when there was no king in Israel, leaving men to follow their own ideas of what was right. This period was evidently a time in-between judges and the writer explains that the moral and spiritual decay was because there was no spiritual leadership in Israel to lead the people in the true ways of the LORD. Without such leadership, the people were like "sheep having no shepherd" (**Matt. 9:36** "*But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd*") and did what they thought was right according to their own sinful reasoning instead of following God's will.

Verses 7-13: A man from the tribe of Levi was passing through the area and Micah offers him a job being the priest of his house. The man accepts and Micah is pleased with himself as he says "Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest" (Judges 17:13). Since Levites were the tribe that the LORD had chosen to serve around the tabernacle and priests were Levites, Micah believed that the LORD would bless the ministry of a Levite serving as priest in his house. Neither Micah nor the Levite understood anything about the things of God because Micah thinks that the LORD will bless his superstitious mixture of pagan and sacred elements and the Levite apparently does not understand that he was not qualified to be a priest if he was not a descendant of Aaron. The Levite was also willing to endorse Micah's idolatrous shrine, demonstrating that he was not right with the LORD.

Judges 18:1-29: At this time the people of the tribe of Dan had not yet acquired land for an inheritance and so they sent out five men as scouts to find land where they could dwell. These men happened to come by Micah's house and recognized the Levite that Micah had employed as priest. The five men continue on their mission and discover that the Canaanite town of Laish is a city that they could easily take for themselves. The people of Dan send an army of 600 men and as they pass near Micah's house on their way to Laish, the five scouts point out that Micah had a shrine with an ephod, teraphim, a graven image and a molten image. The men take these items and convince the Levite to come with them and be their priest. Micah assembles a small band of men from his neighbors and goes after the men of Dan to confront them, but realizes that he is outnumbered and returns home. The Danite army continues on and takes Laish, renaming it Dan after their ancestor.

Judges 18

30 And the children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. 31 And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.

“And the children of Dan set up the graven image” – The children of Dan take the graven image and the other items they stole from Micah and set up their own shrine.

“and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan” – Apparently the Levite originally hired by Micah (Judges 17:10) was named Jonathan and is further identified by his father and grandfather. This man and his descendants become the priests of the tribe of Dan. Some ancient Hebrew texts list “Moses” instead “Manasseh” in this verse, and Moses had a son named Gershom. If the Hebrew word translated “son” here indeed means “son” and not “descendant” then it would place this account perhaps only a hundred years after Joshua’s time. If this Jonathan is indeed a descendant of Moses, then we are faced with the surprising fact that a descendant of Moses led a whole tribe of Israel in idolatry.

“until the day of the captivity of the land” – It is unclear which captivity is being referring to here. If Samuel was the author, as many commentators believe, then he would not have been aware of the Babylonian or Assyrian captivities. Thus this captivity may refer to the one by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11) when the ark was temporarily captured.

“And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh” – The writer puts things in perspective with this statement. The children of Dan set up the worship of a graven image that had been made by a man (Micah) during the whole time that the tabernacle of God was at Shiloh. It wasn't a lack of choices that compelled them to create a house of worship for Micah's image because the tabernacle was in Shiloh available for legitimate worship of the LORD.

Judges 19:1-25: This chapter and the next tell of a series of events that serve as another example of the moral decline in Israel. A Levite had a concubine that had cheated on him and ran away to her father's house. The Levite had gone to retrieve her and was returning with her when they stopped for the night in the city of Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin. An old man had shown them hospitality by giving them lodging for the night but some evil men of the city came beating on the door and insisting that the old man bring out the Levite so that they may homosexually molest him. In a scene reminiscent of Lot in Sodom, the old man offers his own daughter and the concubine to satisfy their sexual desires in order to protect his guest. When they refused, the concubine was brought out and these wicked men sexually abused her until morning.

Judges 19

26 Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, till it was light. 27 And her lord rose up in the morning, and opened the doors of the house, and went out to go his way: and, behold, the woman his concubine was fallen down at the door of the house, and her hands were upon the threshold.

This poor woman, beaten and battered, makes her way back to the house where the Levite was spending the night. She is apparently so weak from the abuse that she has suffered that she passes out at the threshold of the door. Either she was too weak to open the door or the door was locked to protect the occupants inside. The Levite gets up that morning, evidently unconcerned with the concubine's welfare. As he exits the house, ready to continue his journey home, he sees her lying on the ground at the door.

28 And he said unto her, Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her *up* upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place.

The man's lack of concern is evident since he does not help her or attend to her wounds but instead commands her to get up so that they can continue their journey. However, the woman could not respond because she was dead. The Levite throws her dead body across one of his pack animals and continues his journey home.

29 And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, *together* with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel.

Once home, the Levite takes a knife and dismembers the body of the concubine, cutting her into twelve pieces (one for each tribe of Israel) and sends the pieces to each tribe. His intent was apparently to make known what had happened to this woman. However, love for the woman does not seem to be the motivation for the Levite's action. He seems to be treating her as property since she did not get a proper burial but was cut up like someone would cut up a livestock animal.

30 And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak *your minds*.

It's possible that the Levite's complaint was more about the threat against his person (the men of Gibeah wanted to sodomize him) and his property than over the assault and death of the woman. However, the body parts being sent to all tribes certainly stirred up outrage against the men of Gibeah.

Judges 20-21: The leaders of the tribes of Israel gather and ask the Levite to explain what happened. The Levite does seem to exaggerate the offense against himself in his description of the events. When confronted with the accusation, the leaders of Benjamin refuse to turn over the guilty men and instead assemble an army to fight against the other tribes. After three days of battle, the LORD gives victory to Israel over the Benjamites and all the men and women of Benjamin are killed except for 600 men who had escaped the slaughter. Faced with the extinction of an entire tribe of Israel, Israel comes up with an unusual solution to the problem of finding wives for the 600 remaining men of Benjamin in order to preserve the tribe. Before the battle Israel had vowed that they would not give their daughters as wives to Benjamin, so in order to not violate that vow they advised these 600 men of Benjamin to capture women dancing at the annual feast in Shiloh (Judges 21:16-25).