

Judges 17-18, Diagnosis: Spiritual Weakness

Overview

We have completed the central portion of the book, the histories of the judges (Figure 1, chart). This outline shows one change from the version we considered when we began our study: it separates out the history of Abimelech as a major section of the book, in keeping with its length. We will see that recognizing seven major “judges” (even though Abimelech, along with Ehud and Gideon, are not said to “judge” Israel) is critical to some points that the writer wants to make (see note).

Before we study these stories individually, we should pay careful attention to the time period at which they occur, the two institutions that they reflect, and their common geographical features.

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| Judges: Between Conquest and Kingdom |
| 1:1-3:6, Prolog 1:1-2:5, Social Disintegration 2:6-3:6, Spiritual Departure |
| 3:7-16:31, The Judges 3:7-11, Othniel 3:12-32, Ehud and Shamgar 4:1-5:31, Deborah and Barak 6:1-8:32, Gideon 8:33-10:5, Abimelech, Tola, Jair 10:6-12:15, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon 13:1-16:31, Samson |
| 17:1-21:25, Epilog and Diagnosis 17:1-18:31, Spiritual Weakness—Michah's Idol 19:1-21:25, Social Strife—Civil War |

Figure 1: Overview of the Book of Judges

When did they Happen?

The last five chapters record two stories of moral and spiritual failure throughout the nation. Because they come at the end of the book, it is tempting to see them as describing the end-point of the deterioration we have seen as we move from one judge to the next. But in fact they appear to record events soon after the conquest (thus Block and Wood). This is seen most easily in the individuals named in each story, who are second cousins to each other.

The Levite in the first story is identified as the grandson of Moses (chart):

Jdg 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.

The Hebrew scribes very carefully marked the name “Manasseh” to show that it is a euphemism for “Moses.” They added the letter ‘n’ to avoid dishonoring the great lawgiver, changing “Moses” into the name of a noted idolater,¹ but elevated it to indicate that it is a deliberate change (Figure 2). Moses’ grandson would not have been active three hundred years after the conquest.

The second story involves Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, who also would have been long dead by the time of Samson.

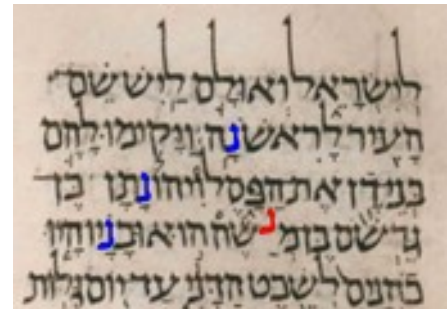


Figure 2: Elevated nun (red) showing alteration of “Moses” to “Manasseh.” Blue instances of the same letter show normal position. (Leningrad Codex, ca. 1008 AD)

1 Usually understood to be the son of Hezekiah, who introduced idols into the temple at Jerusalem (2 Ki 21:1-18), though Weitzman (CBQ 61:3, 1999, 448-460), developing an observation by G.F. Moore (ICC p. 402), suggests it may refer to the first priest of the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim (Josephus *Ant xi*. 8, 2 ff), who also abdicated from the south to support an Ephraimite cult.

Jdg 20:27 And the children of Israel enquired of the LORD, (for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, 28 And **Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron**, stood before it in those days,)

Figure 3 (chart) allows us to estimate when Jonathan and Phinehas were active.²

The actions of Phinehas in Numbers 25 show that he was an adult at the end of the wanderings. The conquest took seven years, and Joshua and the elders lived at least eight years after that. So it is unlikely that Phinehas lived beyond the 40 years of rest that followed the judgeship of Othniel, if he lived that long.

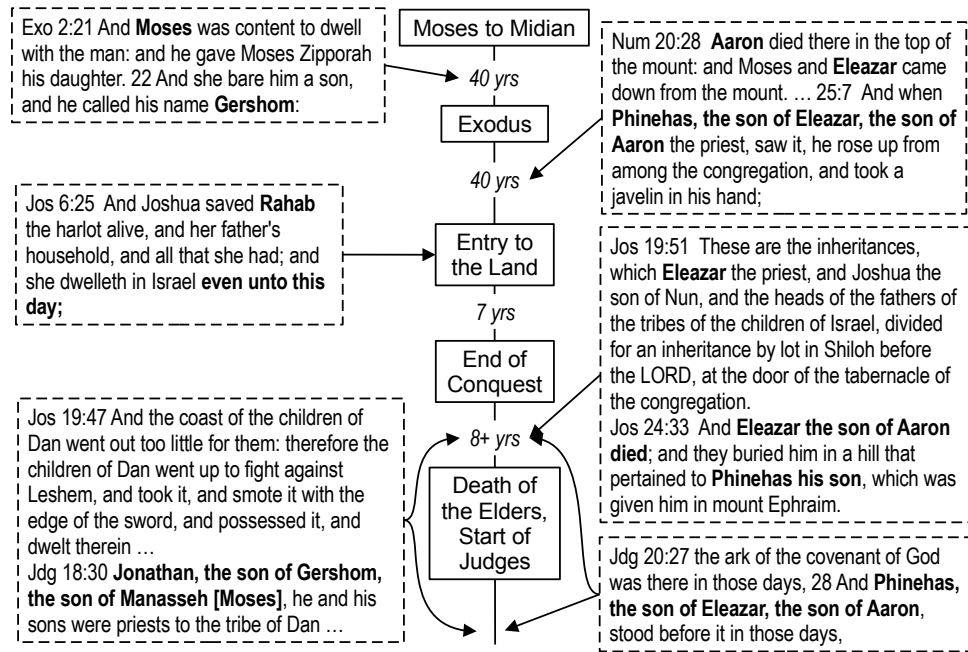


Figure 3: Chronology of Jonathan and Phinehas

Jonathan’s dates are less clear. He might actually have been born in the land, and remained active for many years (though certainly not to the time of Samson 300 years later). But we can do better. The history we are about to read associates him with the northward migration of Dan, which is recorded in the book of Joshua (19:47). That book was written during the lifetime of Rahab (Josh 6:25).³ She, like Phinehas, was an adult when Israel entered the land, so Dan’s migration must have happened during 40 years or so after crossing the Jordan, making Jonathan a contemporary of his cousin Phinehas.

Thus these stories record events early in the period of the judges. By naming Jonathan and Phinehas, neither of whom is central to the plot, the author emphasizes their early date. Because these stories are early, they show, not the end-point of the nation’s decline, but its the underlying causes. The author seems to be saying, “You’ve seen the disintegration of Israel during the time between the conquest and the kingdom. Now let me show you the reasons behind that decline.”

There is a lesson for us in his desire to trace the causes for the decline he has documented. Paul after recounting Israel’s history in the wilderness, tells us why God has recorded these things:

1Co 10:11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

The prior experiences of God’s people are not just entertaining stories. God has preserved them to teach us the consequences of certain attitudes and actions. If we want to avoid their sins, we need to avoid the influences that led them into sin.

² See notes to exposition of ch. 10-12 for details on the chronology.

³ Noted by Wood

What Institutions do they Reflect?

The failures reported in these chapters are linked to the failure of two offices that God established in Israel, the king and the priest. The first is emphasized by its absence, the second by its abuse.

The King

The last five chapters are punctuated with the statement that “there was no king in Israel” (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The first and last of these are supplemented with the note that “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” The implication is that if there had been a king, these disasters might have been controlled, and the author is making the case for the institution of kingship in Israel. But at the same time, it offers a puzzle, for the book records repeatedly that in fact there *were* kings in Israel, of two kinds.

The first are the kings of the various nations that sought to extend their control over Israel—Adoni-Bezek (1:7), Chushan-rishathaim (3:8), Eglon (3:12), Jabin (4:17), Zebah and Zalmunna (8:5), the unnamed king of Ammon (11:12), and in historical recollection, the king of Edom (11:17) and Sihon king of the Amorites (11:19). None of these was able to stand against Israel, even though Israel had no king. God overthrew each of them by the power of his Spirit, working through a local judge (in the last two cases, Moses).

The second kind of king is in chapter 9, which recounts how Abimelech tried to establish a kingship over Israel. But it failed due to his corruption, and disintegrated into civil war.

And we know from Israel’s later history that the establishment of the monarchy did not solve the problems that we have seen throughout Judges, and that are emphasized in these last five chapters.

Perhaps the refrain is referring, not to the historical kings of Israel, but to the Lord as Israel’s king (chart).⁴

Ex. 15:18 **The LORD shall reign** [as king] מֶלֶךְ H4427 for ever and ever.

Num. 23:21 He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: **the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them.**

Deut. 33:5 **And he [the Lord] was king in Jeshurun** [or: there was a king in Jeshurun], when the heads of the people and the tribes of Israel were gathered together.

In fact, David, whom most people understand to be the king anticipated in this refrain, goes out of his way in the Psalms to emphasize that the Lord is the true king:

Psa 24:10 Who is this King of glory? **The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.**

So the diagnosis of the problem is that the people have not submitted to their true king, the one who all along has been defeating the kings of the nations around them. Deut 33:5 is a clue to this: Jeshurun is a title for Israel, meaning “the upright one,” and as long as they are upright, there is a king among them. But when they turn away from the Lord, he abandons them. This last section of the book shows that in fact the period of the judges ends in this way.

The notion that the Lord is our king is central to the gospel. Our Savior preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt 4:17). Salvation involves submitting to the Lord Jesus as

⁴ G. Wong and D. Block emphasize this possibility.

the king whom God has ordained for his holy hill of Zion (Ps 2:6), in which case we will not do what is right in our own eyes, but will seek to be subject to him.

The Priests and Levites

The other institution that is in focus in these chapters is the priests and Levites. These chapters contain the only references to Levites and to the tabernacle in the entire book. Each narrative focuses on an unnamed Levite, moving between Mount Ephraim and Bethlehem.

The priesthood was the repository of the law of God:

Mal 2:7 For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

The Levites, who served periodically under the priests at the tabernacle and later the temple, conveyed this knowledge to the people. They figure in this role in each of the revivals that the Lord gave from time to time. Consider Jehoshaphat's revival about 867 BC:

2Ch 17:7 Also in the third year of his reign he sent to his princes, ... to teach in the cities of Judah. 8 And **with them he sent Levites**, ...; and with them Elishama and Jehoram, priests. 9 **And they taught in Judah**, and had the book of the law of the LORD with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and **taught the people**.

Or that under Hezekiah, about 716 BC:

2Ch 30:22 And Hezekiah spake comfortably unto all **the Levites that taught the good knowledge of the LORD**:

Or again, under Josiah, about 622 BC:

2Ch 35:2 And he set the priests in their charges, and encouraged them to the service of the house of the LORD, 3 And said unto **the Levites that taught all Israel**, which were holy unto the LORD,

And after the return from Babylon, they continued in this role:

Neh 8:9 And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and **the Levites that taught the people**,

This responsibility of the Levites explains the function of the Levitical cities, scattered throughout Israel, from which the six cities of refuge were selected. The law was kept at the central sanctuary, where they served periodically, and could learn its contents (and perhaps make personal copies). Then they were to be the local sources of the knowledge of the Lord throughout the country. But as the two stories in this section make clear, they badly failed in their duty.

The regular teaching of the word of God was essential to Israel's spiritual health, and when the Levites failed in their duty, the nation collapsed, a situation that Amos described as "a famine ... of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). God's people today must guard against such a famine. Those who are preeminent in the church must "give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Tim 4:13). Parents also have a responsibility concerning God's words:

Deu 6:7 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Let us not be like the Levites whom we will meet in these chapters.

So the theme of these five stories is the failure of these two institutions: the nation has rejected the kingship of the Lord, and the Levites have abandoned their teaching responsibility. The consequences are complete spiritual and civil collapse.

The first two instances of the refrain divide ch. 17-18 into three parts, while the last two form an inclusio around ch. 19-21. Each narrative concerns an unnamed Levite—the first from Bethlehem who travels to Mount Ephraim, the second from Mount Ephraim who visits Bethlehem—during a period in which Israel is not subject to the King, the Lord of Hosts.

Where do they Take Place?

Both stories deal with the movement of a Levite between Mount Ephraim and Bethlehem (Figure 3, chart). Recall the importance of these locations.

Mount Ephraim

“Mount Ephraim” includes not only the tribe of Ephraim, but the highlands of Manasseh as well.

Like the other tribes in chapter 1, Ephraim fails to expel the Canaanites from its territory:

Judg. 1:29 Neither did **Ephraim** drive out the Canaanites that dwelt in Gezer; but the Canaanites dwelt in Gezer among them.

As the cycles of ch. 3-16 unfold, Ephraim is at first at the center of the action, but then becomes more alienated. When Ehud routs the Moabites, he musters his troops in Mount Ephraim:

Judg. 3:27 when [Ehud] was come, ... he blew a trumpet in **the mountain of Ephraim**, and the children of Israel went down with him from the mount, and he before them.

Ephraim is Deborah’s home base (4:5). It supports Deborah and Barak in expelling the Midianites, though the writer notes their continuing toleration of pagan elements:

Judg. 5:14 Out of **Ephraim** was there a root of them against Amalek; [whose root is in Amalek]

They complain about not being included in Gideon’s army, probably due to sibling rivalry:

Judg. 8:1 And the men of **Ephraim** said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply.

But he calms them by reminding them how he invited them to overcome fleeing Midianites at the fords of the Jordan (7:24).

The only judge to come from Ephraim is the minor judge Abdon (12:15), who appears to be a self-promoter. When they need a judge internally, God brings in Tola from Issachar (10:1).

Ephraim is oppressed by the Ammonites (10:9), leading to the judgeship of Jephthah. But later they complain against Jephthah, another instance of rivalry between them and Manasseh:

Judg. 12:1 And the men of **Ephraim** gathered themselves together, and went northward, and said unto Jephthah, Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon,



Figure 4: Geography of Judges 17-21

and didst not call us to go with thee? we will burn thine house upon thee with fire.

He is not successful in defusing the situation as Gideon was, but engages in a terrible civil war that slays 42 thousand of them (12:6).

So the tribe shifts from being Ehud's home base to tensions with its brother Manasseh (via Gideon and Jephthah). This schismatic trend continues in later history. When Jeroboam leads the northern tribes in rebellion against Rehoboam and the Davidic dynasty, his first capital is at Shechem, described as "in mount Ephraim," even though the city is in Manasseh:

1Ki 12:25 Then Jeroboam built **Shechem in mount Ephraim**, and dwelt therein;

This shift reflects Ephraim's leadership over the rebellious northern tribes. When Isaiah exhorts Ahaz not to seek an alliance with Assyria, the enemy that Ahaz fears is a confederacy between Syria and the northern kingdom, which is now called "Ephraim":

Isa 7:2 And it was told the house of David, saying, Syria is confederate with **Ephraim**. And his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind. ... 9 And the head of **Ephraim** is **Samaria**, ...

Samaria (Shamir), like Shechem, is in Manasseh, but the name Ephraim is used of the entire kingdom. Later, Jeremiah compares the fate of the southern kingdom with that of the north:

Jer 7:15 And I will cast you [Judah] out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of **Ephraim**.

Hosea uses the name 37 times to describe the northern kingdom, also called Israel:

Hos 5:3 I know **Ephraim**, and **Israel** is not hid from me: for now, O **Ephraim**, thou committest whoredom, and **Israel** is defiled.

So Ephraim is a shaky tribe, ultimately disloyal to the nation and to the Lord.

Bethlehem

The other pole of activity in these chapters is Bethlehem in Judah, south of Jerusalem. Unlike Mount Ephraim, Bethlehem is not in focus earlier in the book, named only as the home of the minor judge Ibzan (12:8, 10). But it will become prominent as the home of David. The author may have this association in mind, if the book took its present form during the monarchy or later.

Ephraim was Jeroboam's capital after the northern tribes turned away from the house of David, and in the prophets "Ephraim" is frequently used to designate the northern kingdom, as "Judah" is used to designate the southern. So this northward movement of Levites with southern connections in Bethlehem may anticipate the apostate religion set up under Jeroboam as the nation descends even further into apostasy.

Both stories involve Levites, but Bethlehem is not one of the Levitical cities in Joshua 21.

Structure of ch. 17-21 (Figure 5)

These five chapters form two distinct stories. In spite of their common themes (the prominence of Levites, the involvement of Mount Ephraim and Bethlehem, the involvement of the second cousins Jonathan and Phinehas), they focus on different sins (idolatry in 17-18; sexual abuses

and civil war in 19-21), and draw attention to different tribes (Ephraim and Dan in 17-18, Benjamin in 19-21).

Both stories repeat the refrain “In those days there was no king in Israel,” which probably refers, not to the lack of a human king, but to the neglect of Jehovah as the nation’s true king. The refrain functions structurally in different ways in the two stories. Two instances are internal to 17-18, dividing the first story into three sections. The remaining two instances form an inclusio around ch. 19-21, leaving the internal structure to other mechanisms.

17-18, Spiritual Weakness

The first story, in ch. 17-18, highlights three irregularities that contribute to the spiritual weakness of Israel in ch. 3-16: irregular sanctuaries, irregular Levites, and irregular tribal behavior.

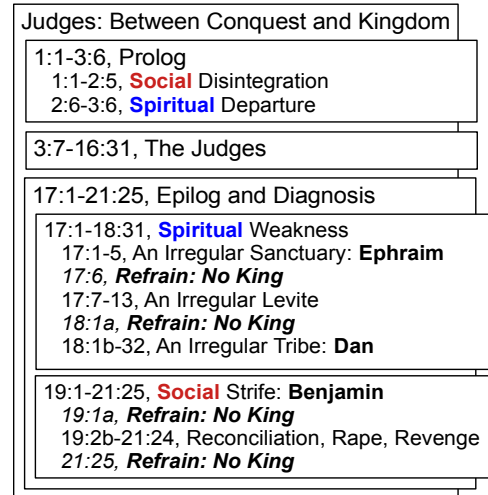


Figure 5: Structure of Judges 17-21

17:1-5, An Irregular Sanctuary

The first scene of this story shows an interesting rhetorical strategy. Up to the middle of v. 3, the writer builds up our hopes that finally we have found a godly family in Israel, only to dismantle those hopes systematically in the last two and a half verses. The story warns us against the danger of superficial spirituality.

1-3a, Superficial Godliness

17:1 And there was a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah.—His name means “Who is like Jehovah?” Such a name suggests a man with a spiritual compass, whose parents have named him and raised him to follow the Lord.

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.—This verse is a terse summary of some prior events.

- Micah’s mother had a cache of 1100 shekels.⁵
- Micah stole it from her.
- She then proclaimed a curse on the thief, and told her son about the curse.
- He now comes to confess that in fact he took the silver.

It is likely that his repentance is motivated by the curse. Here is our first insight into his character. He is a spiritually sensitive man, another positive sign.

And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son.—His mother’s blessing is probably intended as a formal retraction of the curse, neutralizing it. Her statement indicates that she thinks of herself as a worshipper of Jehovah. So we can understand how she would name her son, “Who is like Jehovah?” This is a third positive indication.

⁵ The 1100 shekels that she set aside for the Lord may shed some light on the bribes that the lords of the Philistines brought to Delilah in 16:5. Perhaps this was a customary amount for a religious offering, and perhaps there was a spiritual dimension to their transaction with her.

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,—Now she reveals that she saved the silver for spiritual purposes. It was to be an offering to the LORD, to be managed by her son. Our hopes in the character of the family grow even further.

So far we have a man with a godly name, a sensitive conscience, and a mother who honors the name of Jehovah and dedicates her wealth to his service. Everything looks good.

Similarly, many bear the name of Christ and think of themselves as his servants. They have parents who named them in ways that honor the Lord, they are spiritually sensitive, and their parents seem to honor the Lord in their actions. But suddenly the story takes a bad turn.

3b-4a, A False God

to make a graven image and a molten image:—Nine verses in the OT use these terms together,⁶ and five of them are in this story. Only one comes earlier. Moses instructed Israel to gather at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim (Figure 6, chart) when they entered the land. Half the tribes were to assemble on each mountain, to agree to a series of curses and blessings that the Levites would recite. Our phrase appears in the first of the curses:

Deut. 27:14 And **the Levites** shall speak, and say unto all the men of Israel with a loud voice, 15 Cursed be the man that maketh any **graven or molten image**, an abomination unto the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place. And all the people shall answer and say, Amen.

The children of Israel conducted this ceremony of cursing and blessing (Josh 8:30-33). But apparently they did not remember what they heard. Contrary to the first curse, this woman thinks that she can honor the LORD, Jehovah, with an image. This is the first failing that unravels the hopeful picture the author has given us.

In the mind of Micah and his mother, there is no conflict between worshipping the Lord and an idol. They do not think of this image as a different god, in competition with Jehovah. Rather, she thinks of the idol as representing the Lord, in direct violation of Moses' clear instruction:

Deu 4:15 Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for **ye saw no manner of similitude** on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: 16 Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, 17 The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air, 18 The likeness of any thing that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth:

Israel blurred the distinction between the Lord and pagan gods. For example, the goddess Asherah was the consort of the Canaanite god Baal. Archaeologists have found inscriptions dedicated “to YHWH and to his Asherah,” dated to around 800 BC (the time of Jehoash in Judah and Jehoahaz in Israel). The YHWH of the Bible has no consort, but Baal does, and the writers



Figure 6: Ebal and Gerizim, from the east. Van and Anita Parunak, November 1974

6 Deut. 27:15; Judg. 17:3–4; 18:14, 17–18; Is. 42:17; Nah. 1:14; Hab. 2:18. 18:17-18 suggests that these were two distinct items, probably a set representing Baal and Asherah (see note).

of these inscriptions identify Jehovah with Baal.⁷ That's what Micah's mother has done. She thinks her idol will honor Jehovah, but in fact she is fostering the worship of a pagan god.

This error is a direct violation of the commandment not to take the name of the Lord in vain (Exod 20:7, literally, "lift up the name of the Lord to vanity"). We usually think of this commandment as forbidding the casual use of God's name in swearing, but there is a deeper significance. The term "vanity" is sometimes used in the OT to represent idols, for example,

Jer. 18:15 my people hath forgotten me, they have burned incense to **vanity**,

Micah's mother is violating the third commandment by using God's name to refer to a pagan god, a "vanity."⁸ Satan has always sought to perpetuate pagan worship by rebranding it with biblical names, but that doesn't change its pagan nature, or the Lord's abhorrence of it.

now therefore I will restore it unto thee.—Since she intended her son to administer the offering, she proposes to let him keep it.

4 Yet he restored the money unto his mother;—But he, to be absolutely sure that he is out from under the curse, insists that she undertake the administration of the funds.

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:—She has no difficulty finding a silversmith ("founder," someone who works with molten metal) who knows how to make an idol. Instead of condemning the Canaanite idolatry, she patronizes it.

Recall the opposition that Paul faced from the Ephesian silversmiths, fearful that new Christians would stop buying their products (Acts 19:23-27). He would have had a much easier time if he had encouraged the believers to buy some "Christian" idols from them, but then he would have denied the gospel. This transaction is a second step down in our estimate of the family.

She originally dedicated 1100 shekels "to make a graven image and a molten image." Now she sends only 200. What happened to the other 900 shekels? It appears that she has had second thoughts about her offering to the Lord, a further mark against her. Her action recalls the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, two members of the early church (chart).

Acts 4:34 Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, 35 And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. . . . 5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 2 And **kept back part of the price**, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

They wanted the approval that others were receiving for selling their goods and contributing them to the poorer brethren, and pretended to give the entire value of their sale to the Lord, but in fact held back part of it for themselves. The principle goes back to the law of Moses, which Micah's mother should have known:

7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuntillet_Ajrud . Hos 2:16 (MT 18) probably reflects this custom of calling the Lord by the name Baal.

8 W.Staples, JBL 58 (1939) 327-329, discussed by Durham in WBC on Exod 20:7. The rebranding of pagan deities with biblical names goes beyond the Lord. Those who pray to "the queen of heaven" and "the mother of god" are honoring, not Mary of Nazareth, but the pagan tradition of a great female deity (including Babylonian Ishtar, Anatolian Cybele, Roman Magna Mater) who originally bore these titles (Ishtar "queen of heaven" in Jer 7:18; 44:17ff, 25; Cybele = Magna Mater was "mother of the gods"). Similarly, prayers to "saints" continue the pagan practice of prayer to the *manes* (shade, spirit) of a deceased person.

Deut. 23:21 When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, **thou shalt not slack to pay it:** for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. 22 But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee. 23 That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth.

4b-5, A False Sanctuary

and they were [ייהי, strictly “it was”] **in the house of Micah. 5 And the man Micah had an house of gods,**—The term “house of gods” means a sanctuary. The temple of Baal Berith in Shechem was called “the house of their god” (9:27); the “house of the LORD” is called “the house of our God” (Psa 135:2). Micah has established a separate sanctuary from the tabernacle.

It was permitted to offer sacrifices in different places before the construction of the temple (see discussion on Gideon’s sacrifice in 6:28), but setting up a sanctuary to honor multiple gods is another matter. Gideon’s first task from the Lord was to destroy such a sanctuary (chart):

Judg. 6:25 And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Take thy father’s young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down **the altar of Baal that thy father hath**, and cut down **the grove that is by it:**

Gideon’s father, like Micah’s mother, may have thought that Baal was just another title for the Lord, but the Lord rejects this worship.

In spite of this early experience, late in Gideon’s life, he falls into the same snare. He asked his army to contribute to him the golden earrings from their Midianite victims,

Judg. 8:27 And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house.

and made an ephod,—An ephod is a tunic worn by a priest (Figure 7). The ephod was also a feature of Gideon’s sinful sanctuary, and indicates the desire to establish, not just idols, but also a rival priesthood that does not meet the qualifications that God has laid down.

and teraphim,—Teraphim H8655 are family idols. They have a long history in Israel, and unhappily among many who call themselves Christian, in the form of devotional statues or images kept in the home or car, or worn personally. We meet them first in the OT when Jacob and his family leave Laban unannounced to return to Canaan (chart).

Gen. 31:19 And Laban went to shear his sheep: and Rachel had stolen **the images H8655** that were her father’s. 20 And Jacob stole away unawares to Laban the Syrian, in that he told him not that he fled.

Laban pursues Jacob, and accuses him of the theft:

Gen. 31:30 And now, though thou wouldest needs be gone, because thou sore longedst after thy father’s house, yet **wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?**

Jacob does not know what Rachel has done, and invites Laban to search the camp.



Figure 7: Ephod: tunic under the breastplate.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c6/LEV_8-_High_priest_in_robos_and_breastplate.jpg

Judges 17-18

Gen. 31:34 Now Rachel had taken the **images H8655**, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found them not. 35 And she said to her father, Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me. And he searched, but found not the **images H8655**.

When Jacob returns to Canaan and God calls him back to Bethel, he has learned that some of his family are harboring idols, and he has housekeeping to do:

Gen 35:1 And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother. 2 Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, **Put away the strange gods that are among you**, and be clean, and change your garments: 3 And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went. 4 And they gave unto Jacob all **the strange gods which were in their hand**, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.

After the Exodus, some still persist in this custom. Remember Joshua's farewell address:

Jos 24:22 And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. 23 Now therefore **put away**, said he, **the strange gods which are among you**, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.

Micah's family may have obeyed Joshua in discarding the traditional images they were covertly carrying during their wilderness wanderings. But he apparently regrets the loss of the family tradition, for he now reconstructs them, along with the ephod, to accompany the silver image that his mother has sponsored, probably in Canaanite style.

and consecrated one of his sons, who became his priest.—Here is a final indication of the corruption of the family. Only descendants of Levi, and of Aaron in particular, could be priests of the Lord. His welcome of the Levite in the next scene shows that he is aware of this provision, but it doesn't stop him from violating it by setting up his son as priest. The family that looks so spiritual at the outset, turns out to be a disaster.

Micah's name (Hebrew "Micayahu," "Who is like Jehovah?") emphasizes the uniqueness of Israel's God. But it proves ironic. He does not appreciate Jehovah's uniqueness, but is in fact the patron of a house of idols, much as Gideon's father Joash ("Jehovah is mighty") was the patron of a sanctuary of Baal. In fact, the history in this chapter, occurring before the time of Gideon, helps us understand how Joash could have tolerated that sanctuary, and how Gideon could have set up his ephod in an idolatrous context. It was common practice. Everybody was doing it.

Our House of God

Micah's "house of gods" was an abomination to the Lord. Yet Israel also had a "house of God," a term commonly used to describe both the tabernacle (e.g. Ex 23:19; 34:26) and the temple (e.g., Joel 1:14; Ezr 1:3). Our Lord twice rebuked the merchants in the temple, once calling it "my Father's house" (John 2:16) and once (Matt 21:13 and parallels) quoting Isa 56:7 where God calls it "my house of prayer." Dedicated "houses of god" were also common among pagans (Jdg 9:27; 2 Ki 19:37), right down to the time of the New Testament. We read of the temple of Diana in Ephesus (Acts 19:27) or the idol temples in Corinth (1 Cor 8:10). The mystery religions had their sanctuaries, and ancient Rome was famous for its temples.

Today, many Christians refer to a building dedicated to Christian worship as “the house of God.” They expend great resources on such buildings, and describe their gatherings as “going to church.” The prominence of dedicated sanctuaries in pagan religion (such as Rome and the house of Micah) should make us cautious about this practice. At the same time, the fact that Israel had a “house of God” might suggest that such a structure is an important resource for the people of God. What place should the “house of God” have in our worship today?

God told Moses the purpose of the tabernacle when he commanded him to build it (chart):

Exo 25:8 And let them make me a sanctuary; **that I may dwell among them.**

Ever since God walked in Eden in the cool of the day and called for Adam (Gen 3:8-9), he has desired to dwell among his people. Eden had no separate “house of God.” God would come into the garden and fellowship directly with his creature. But that relation was broken by man’s sin. As a result, man was excluded from the garden by special angels, called “cherubim” (Gen 3:24).

When God entered into covenant with his people at Sinai, he described in great detail the sanctuary that would enable him to dwell among them. That tent, like the building that Solomon constructed to replace it, was designed to remind them of Eden.⁹ The lampstand was carved to look like a blooming almond tree (Exod 25:33), and the interior of Solomon’s temple was decorated with palm trees and open flowers (1 Ki 6:29).

Eden was guarded by cherubim, and throughout the OT these creatures reappear only in describing the tabernacle and temple. Both the outward curtains of the tabernacle and the veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies were woven with cherubim, and the walls of Solomon’s temple had cherubim also. Within the sanctuary God “dwelt between the cherubim” (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Is. 37:16; Psa. 80:1; 1 Chr. 13:6), referring to ark of the covenant. But he was not directly accessible to his people. Only the priests could enter the tabernacle at all. Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, the throne room of God, and that once a year, on the day of atonement. The cherubim in the house of God, as in Eden, excluded guilty sinners from the consuming presence of a holy God.

Why did God need a sanctuary to dwell among his people? In Eden, he could walk directly with them. But as sinners, they would be consumed by his immediate presence. The sanctuary functioned as a glove box does in the laboratory (Figure 8): it allows dangerous materials to come close to the people, by providing a safety barrier between them. The writer to the Hebrews spells this out when it describes the elaborate ritual of the day of atonement:

Heb 9:8 The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing:

The tabernacle and temple allowed God to dwell in the midst of his people without consuming them. It enabled his presence, but at the same time reminded them not to get too close. And when some, like Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2) or Uzziah (2 Chr 26:16-21), sought to break through that barrier, God brought judgment upon them.

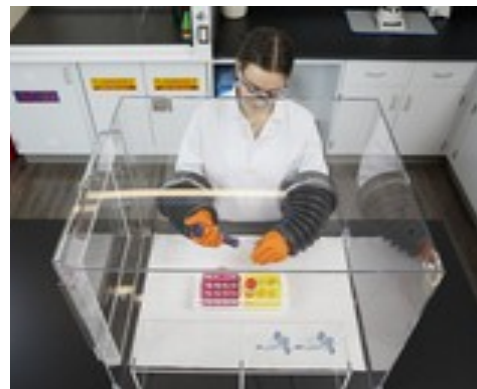


Figure 8: A glove box

(<https://www.belart.com/sidentry-glove-box.html>)

⁹ The parallels are developed extensively by G.H.K. Beale, *The Temple*.

Judges 17-18

This background explains the significance of an event that the first three gospels all associate with the death of the Lord (chart).¹⁰

Mat 27:50 Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. 51 And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom;

The throne room of God was torn open. The glove box was smashed. The barrier was no longer necessary. The sacrifice of Christ makes possible a new relation between God and his people.

Heb 10:19 Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest **by the blood of Jesus**, 20 By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, **his flesh**;

Once again, as in Eden, he walks with his people and communes directly with them.

While the temple was still standing, the Jewish believers honored it with their presence.

Act 3:1 Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.

It was a convenient, accessible gathering place, where the Lord himself had often gone to teach. But after the Lord removed the sin barrier between man and God, God destroyed it in AD 70:

Mat 24:1 And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. 2 And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

We have no record of the churches ever dedicating a physical building as a “sanctuary.” They gather in private homes to remember the Lord:

Act 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread **from house to house**, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people.

They met in the temple as long as it stood, following the Lord’s example of preaching there (cf. Acts 2:42), but when they broke bread to remember the Lord, they did so in homes. We find numerous other references to this practice, for example,

1Co 16:19 Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with **the church that is in their house**. (cf. Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Phm 1:2)

If a group is too numerous for a private home, the Lord may provide a larger space, which however continues to be designated by its secular name:

Act 19:9 But when divers were hardened, and believed not, but spake evil of that way before the multitude, he departed from them, and separated the disciples, disputing daily in **the school of one Tyrannus**.

This does not mean, however, that we as believers have no sanctuary. The epistles repeatedly remind us that God’s house now consists of the believers themselves, gathered together into the church. The earliest references are probably in 1 Corinthians (chart). In ch. 3, after using the image of the believers as a garden (vv. 6-8, perhaps recalling Eden?), he develops the parallel between the church and the temple: (see note for context in 1 Cor.)

¹⁰ Matthew and Mark place the rending of the veil immediately after the Lord expires; Luke reports it immediately before. Probably the two were concurrent; as he expires, the veil is torn.

1 Cor 3:9 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, **ye are God's building**. 10 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. 11 For **other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ**. 12 Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; 13 Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. 14 If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. 15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. 16 Know ye not that **ye are the temple of God**, and that **the Spirit of God dwelleth in you**? 17 If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, **which temple ye are**.

We often quote vv. 12-13 to emphasize the importance of our service to the Lord, but note the context: we are building the temple of God, by edifying the other believers. The service in view is specifically our ministry in the church.

Paul is particularly concerned that this temple, the assembly of believers, would be defiled (3:17). His concern comes into focus in ch. 5.

1 Cor 5:1 It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife.

Such conduct violates not only the OT laws of incest (Lev 18:8; 20:11), but also accepted standards of the Gentile world. He exhorts them

5:5 to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. . . . 11 But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.

In other words, they are to put him out of the church, lest the temple of God be defiled.

Chapter 6 continues the same theme. It tells how to judge such a case, and concludes with two exhortations against impurity. The first is based on the impact of this sin on the individual, the other (as in 3:17) with its impact on the church. Note the shift from the plural "your bodies" in v. 15 to "your body" in v. 19. The plural pronoun "your" naturally takes the plural "bodies," one per person, but in v. 19 they all have one body.

1 Cor 6:15 Know ye not that **your bodies** are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. 16 What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. 17 But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. 18 Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. 19 What? know ye not that **your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost** which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? 20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

My individual sin not only defiles my own body, but also the spiritual temple of which I am a part. Paul repeats this picture in Ephesians, fleshing out the architectural detail (Figure 9, chart):

Eph 2:19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 20 And are built upon the foundation of [laid by] the

apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto **an holy temple** in the Lord: 22 In whom ye also are builded together for **an habitation of God** through the Spirit.

“The foundation of the apostles and prophets” does not contradict 1 Cor 3:11. The cornerstone is the historical fact of our Lord’s coming. The foundation is not the apostles and prophets themselves, but the foundation they laid (subjective genitive), describing his life and work.

Peter picks up the image and adds more architectural details, quoting OT texts that lie behind the image:

1Pet. 2:4 To whom coming, as unto a **living stone**, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, 5 Ye also, as **lively stones**, are built up a **spiritual house**, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. 6 Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture [Isa 28:16], Behold, I lay in Sion a **chief corner stone**, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. 7 Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but [Ps 118:22] unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made **the head of the corner**,

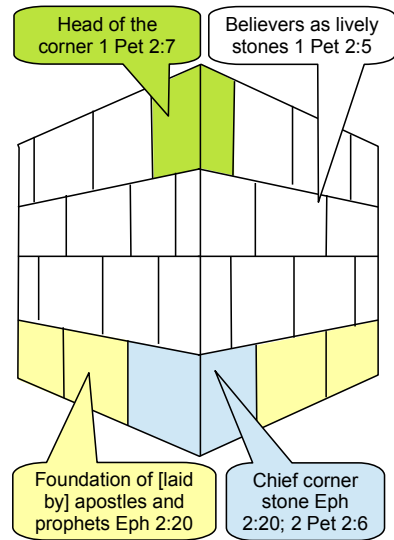


Figure 9: Architecture of the House of God today

Note Peter’s description of both the Lord and us as “living stones” (same Greek word in both places). Christ can only serve as the corner stone and head stone because of his resurrection, and we are only fit to be built into this temple because we share his life.

So in this present age, God’s house consists of the believers. We are “a spiritual house,” “an holy temple in the Lord,” “an habitation of God,” “the temple of the Holy Ghost.” Consider four implications of this insight.

First, it is wrong to describe the physical gathering place of believers as “the house of God” or a “sanctuary.” We are the sanctuary. We are the house of God. Believers in the first century knew this, though the pagans among whom they moved insisted on their physical temples. Just as Israel failed to drive out the Canaanites but rather assimilated with them, so nominal Christianity did not clearly break from paganism, but assimilated with it. The believers, in the course of their secular lives, were sometimes tempted to “sit at meat in the idol’s temple” (1 Cor 8:10). So-called Christians reused many of the pagan temples in Rome as sanctuaries.¹¹ In doing so they are showing that they are not truly Christian, but merely rebranded pagans. The notion of a physical sanctuary is not Christian. It is pagan. It denies our direct access to God, and our privilege and responsibility to constitute the house of God ourselves. We should reject it.

Second, as Paul exhorted the Corinthians in the matter of fornication, let us remember that our conduct affects the glory of God’s temple. When we sin against the Lord, as did the man in 1 Corinthians 5, we deface the precious stones that adorn the sanctuary of God, and hinder the worship of our brethren that takes place in this spiritual temple.

¹¹ One prominent example is the Pantheon, originally built by the pagan emperor Hadrian, but now the Catholic Basilica of St. Mary and the Martyrs.

Third, this insight lends new urgency to our assembling. Israel was expected to gather at the house of God for worship. We gather, not *at* the house of God, but *as* the house of God. It is when we are together that we can offer up the prayer and praise that God desires in his house (Isa 56:7). Believers

| | The Body of Christ Eph 4; 1 Cor 6, 12 | The Temple of the Holy Spirit 1 Cor 3, 6; Eph 3; 1 Pet 2 |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Christ | Head, Eph 4:15 | Foundation, 1 Cor 3:11 Cornerstone, Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:6 Head of the corner, 1 Pet 2:7 |
| Apostles & Prophets | Eph 4:11 | Layers of the foundation, Eph 2:20 |
| Other Believers | Members, 1 Cor 6:15; 12:12 Joints, members, Eph 4:16 | Lively stones, 1 Pet 2:5 |

Table 1: The Church as Body and Building

who forsake the assembling of themselves together (Heb 10:25) are marring God’s temple.

Fourth, the metaphor of believers as stones in a temple parallels the metaphor of the body of Christ (Table 1, chart). Both emphasize the complementary functions of different believers in the church. In the body of Christ, each part has a special role: Christ the head, apostles as the feet to go and plant new churches, pastors and overseers as the mouth and eyes to guide and nurture the churches, others with the word of wisdom to encourage individuals, or gifts of helps to assist weaker brethren. Similarly, each stone in the building has a function, and these are again associated with different people. Our Lord has two roles, the cornerstone and the head stone. The apostles are responsible for laying the foundation, the NT teaching about the Lord. Others form solid walls for stability, or lintels for doors and windows to bring in light, or edge stones that unite those who face in different directions. Again, different people have different functions that work together.



Figure 10: Stonecutters preparing specific stones for a building (Van and Anita Parunak, Apr 1975)

In Israel, each stone for a house is pre-cut for its final position, often miles from the construction site (Figure 10, chart), and then delivered to be assembled (Figure 11). The architect specifies each type of stone in advance for the function it is to fulfill. In the same way, God has designed each of us for our place in his temple.¹²



Figure 11: Pre-cut stones delivered to house under construction (Van and Anita Parunak, Apr 1975)

Both bodies and buildings require each part to do its role. We must not just “go to church.” Guided by the Lord and with the input of our brothers and sisters, each of us should seek to understand the function God has for us—in the body of his Son, in the temple where he dwells—and devote our energies to serving him and our brethren.

¹² The notion of our Lord as the stone that the builders rejected (Ps 118:22) reflects this practice. The Lord prepared his Son as the top stone for the corner, which would fit nowhere else. The Jewish priests, not understanding God’s intended architecture, set it aside, but when the building is complete, it will fit perfectly.

“The man Micah had an house of gods.” How thankful we should be that we do not *have* such a house, but that through the sacrifice of his Son and the gifts of his Spirit, we *are* his house. Let us conduct ourselves daily as stones in that temple, and let us treasure the gathering of the saints as times when we particularly enjoy the unmediated presence of our great God.

17:6 Refrain

6 In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.—The first instance of the refrain marks the end of the first scene. We have suggested that the “king” in view here is the Lord. Micah’s collection of idols shows how Israel has set aside Jehovah as their king, replacing him with other gods.

The supplement, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes,” occurs here and with the final refrain in 21:25. In Deuteronomy 12, God told the people that when they entered the land, they were not to tolerate the local sanctuaries of the heathen, or indeed the relaxed practices during the wilderness wanderings (chart):

Deu 12:8 Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man **whatsoever is right in his own eyes.**

Instead, they were to do what was right in the eyes of the Lord:

Deut. 12:28 Observe and hear all these words which I command thee, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee for ever, when thou doest **that which is good and right in the sight [eyes] of the LORD thy God.**

But Samson followed “his own eyes” in choosing his Philistine wife:

Judg. 14:3 Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for **she pleaseth me well [is right in my eyes].** ... 7 And he went down, and talked with the woman; and **she pleased Samson well [was right in Samson’s eyes].**

Samson, along with Gideon, is an example of how the diagnosis of ch. 17-20 illuminates the detailed history that is recorded earlier, but that happened after Micah’s time.

Even more pervasively throughout the book of Judges, we read repeatedly that Israel “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (Judg. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1). Indeed, when we do what is right in our own eyes, we inevitably do evil before the Lord:

Pro 16:25 = 14:12 There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

The ultimate solution to this problem is the coming of the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah:

Isa 53:6 we have turned every one to his own way, and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

When we read of these errors, we naturally ask, “Didn’t anyone tell Micah that this was wrong?” God had an institution to guard the nation against errors like those of Micah and his mother: the Levites, distributed throughout the land in the levitical cities to ensure that knowledge of the law of God was available everywhere. The next scene shows that this institution has become dysfunctional.

17:7-13, An Irregular Levite

So far, Micah's story shows us two results of syncretism that we should seek to avoid: rebranding paganism to make it look orthodox (false gods), and reliance on a physical sanctuary. The next scene shows a third: professionalism in the leadership of God's people.

7 And there was a young man out of Bethlehemjudah of the family of Judah, who was a Levite,—We later learn that this Levite is Jonathan, grandson of Moses, thus of the tribe of Kohath. Kohath (other than the descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother) was supposed to live in Ephraim, Dan, or western Manasseh (Josh 21:4, 20-26) (Figure 12, chart).¹³ Bethlehem wasn't a Levitical town at all (Josh 21:9-16), much less one where Moses' grandson should have lived.

and he sojourned there.—Three times the narrative uses the word “sojourn” גור H1481, which refers to a stranger in a town, not one of the usual residents. Even while living in Bethlehem, he was already a nomad.¹⁴ He was not satisfied with the territory that the Lord appointed for him, but was seeking something better.

We might hope that in coming to Ephraim, he is returning to his proper Levitical territory. But we will see that his motives are quite different:

8 And the man departed out of the city from Bethlehemjudah to sojourn where he could find a place:—He is not returning to his home town, but still “sojourning” as an itinerant. He is seeking an opportunity to advance himself. We would say that he was “looking for a position.”

and he came to mount Ephraim to the house of Micah, as he journeyed. 9 And Micah said unto him, Whence comest thou? And he said unto him, I am a Levite of Bethlehemjudah,—He thinks of Bethlehem, a non-levitical city and not even in the appropriate tribe, as his home town, contrary to the law.

and I go to sojourn where I may find a place.—Again, we are reminded that he is seeking an opportunity, not returning to the place to which God called him and his family.

10 And Micah said unto him, Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest, and I will give thee ten shekels of silver by the year, and a suit of apparel, and thy victuals. So the Levite went in.—The proposal (chart, Bilson's sketch) is clearly a commercial transaction. Just



Figure 12: Territories of Levitical families: Kohath (Aaron), Kohath (other), Gershon, Merari. Original image from <http://dailytruthbase.blogspot.com/2011/10/numbers-32-36-do-to-others-or-god-will.html>, colored to show Levitical families

¹³ See Chisholm, following Younger.

¹⁴ The verb appears three other times in Judges: the Levite of the second part of the epilogue (19:1), Dan in ships in the song of Deborah (5:17), and the Levite's host in Gibeah in 19:16. The verb is most common (0.59 hits/1000 words) in Leviticus, where it always appears in the phrase “the stranger who sojourns among you.” It is not the role that God anticipated for his covenant people in the land.

as Micah's mother thinks she can buy a god from the silversmith, he thinks he can buy a priest, for room, board, a suit of clothes, and ten shekels a year of spending money, an amount comparable to the annual wage for an unskilled laborer (see notes). (Then, as now, most clergy were low on the pay scale!)

The deal was totally inappropriate. The Levites were God's special possession, taking the place of the firstborn of Israel, whom God claimed as a result of the final plague on Egypt (chart):

Num 3:11 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 12 And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore **the Levites shall be mine**; 13 Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: **mine shall they be**: I am the LORD.

They are not for hire. They belong to the Lord, to serve at his tabernacle.

As God designed the work of the priests and Levites, they were supported for the most part by their own work, and not by the tabernacle or temple. Their cities included the grazing land around them to support their flocks (Josh 21:2, "suburbs"). Only while they were on duty at the sanctuary were they supported from the offerings. But this story shows that already, as soon as Israel settled in the land, some Levites preferred a more commercial model for their services, a situation that persists throughout Israel's history, as attested by a later Micah, about 700 BC:

Mic. 3:11 The heads thereof [of Zion and Jerusalem] judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the spiritual leaders of God's people are supposed to support themselves.¹⁵ In spiritual matters they answer to God alone, not to men. Consider the instruction that our brother Paul gives to the leaders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20 at the end of his third missionary journey, on his way back to Jerusalem where he would be arrested. He calls them by all three biblical terms for church leaders: they are elders (v. 17) and overseers, responsible to feed (pastor) the flock of God (v. 28).

Acts 20:17 And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the **elders** of the church. 18 And when they were come to him, he said unto them, ... 28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you **overseers**, to **feed [pastor]** the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

He exhorts them to support themselves:

20: 33 **I have coveted** no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. 34 Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me. 35 I have shewed you all things, how that **so labouring ye ought to support the weak**, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Paul's instruction to the leaders at Ephesus is not an anomaly. Peter echoes it in his first letter:

1 Pet 5:1 The **elders** which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: 2 **Feed**

15 For a fuller discussion of the NT teaching on remuneration of church leaders, see my paper "Them that Have the Rule Over You," at <https://www.cyber-chapel.org/Elders.pdf>.

[**pastor**] the flock of God which is among you, taking the **oversight** thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; **not for filthy lucre**, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

Again, all three common titles for church leaders are covered, and again, they are not to view their ministry as a means of income.

Two NT passages are commonly adduced to justify salaries for church leaders: 1 Corinthians 9, and 1 Timothy 5. Let’s consider these briefly.

In 1 Corinthians 9 (chart), Paul is responding to challenges that he and Barnabas are not a true apostles because they support themselves:

1 Cor 9:3 Mine answer to them that do examine me is this, 4 Have we not power to eat and to drink? 5 Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? 6 Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working?

He goes on to justify the principle of supporting apostles:

1Cor. 9:11 If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? 12 If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. 13 Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? 14 Even so hath the Lord ordained that **they which preach the gospel** should live of the gospel.

Then he goes on to explain that he refuses such support, to avoid conflicts of interest.

The entire discussion in this chapter concerns apostles, or more generally “they which preach the gospel” (v. 14), the verb form of the noun “evangelists.” The gifted men whom God has given to lead the church fall into two categories, mentioned in Eph 2:20 and 4:11: apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers. The first two titles are found early in Acts, while the later two characterize the subsequent history of the church (Table 2). The case that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 9 concerns the apostle or evangelist, not the pastor-teacher. Those who travel abroad to plant new churches often cannot maintain employment, and so may be supported, though Paul’s personal example gives a strong incentive even to evangelists to support themselves. But the chapter has nothing to do with resident pastor-teachers.

| | Planting new churches | Shepherding existing churches |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| First generation | Apostles | Prophets |
| Later generations | Evangelists | Pastors and teachers |

Table 2: Two Classes of Church Leaders

1 Timothy 5 (chart) does concern pastor-teachers. How are we to understand Paul’s words?

1 Tim 5:17 Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of **double honour**, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. 18 For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward.

Consider first the expression “double honour.” It is often thought to require payment, based on the similar expression in v. 3 of the same chapter,

1Tim. 5:3 **Honour** widows that are widows indeed.

Judges 17-18

Some think that this instruction refers to supporting widows from the church treasury. But we should not neglect a third reference to honor that follows soon after:

1Tim. 6:1 Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of **all honour**, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.

Clearly, servants are not expected to pay their masters a salary—the payment goes in the other direction! This sequence of “honor, double honor, all honor” shows that Paul’s instructions to Timothy are not in conflict with Acts 20 or 1 Peter 5. Widows, elders, and employers all deserve our respect and honor. But the term does not in itself justify a stipend.

How about the two quotations in 5:18?

The first is from Deut 25:4. Farm animals were used to pull a threshing sledge around on grain to break off the husks and cut away the straw (Figure 13), and the animal might want to take a bite or two of the grain. He is not to be hindered in sharing in the fruit of his labor. And the elder is not to be set on a pedestal, separated from the ministry that the members of the body are to bear to one another. He is to share in the Spirit-led life the body. But there is no reference to a salary here.



Figure 13: Using an animal to tread out grain (Van and Anita Parunak, Jordan, June 1975)

The second quotation occurs nowhere in the OT. Paul is quoting a saying of our Lord, recorded in Matt 10:10 and Luke 10:7.¹⁶ But consider the context. The Lord is instructing the disciples on how to conduct their preaching tour of the cities of Israel.

Luke 10:4 Carry **neither purse**, nor scrip [bag] ... 5 And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. 6 And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again. 7 And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for **the labourer is worthy of his hire**. Go not from house to house.

They are to stay with one family during their time in the town, and accept room and board. But there is no suggestion of a salaried contract between the pastor and the congregation, and in fact they are forbidden to carry a purse to gather such a salary. Even if the preacher doesn’t care for the food at one house, he is not to go to another. Notably, the Lord forbids them to seek a better position if they don’t like the food they’re getting at the first house they choose. How different this instruction is from the career-building church-hopping trajectory of some modern clergy.

When our Lord presents himself as the good shepherd, he contrasts his care for the flock with that given by a hired shepherd (chart):

John 10:11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. 12 But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. 13 The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.

¹⁶ This verse, like 2 Pet 3:16, shows that early parts of the NT were considered as Scripture even in NT times.

Recall that during his first visit to the temple as an adult (John 2:13-22) and his return there during passion week (Matt 21:12-13), our Lord rebuked the commercialism that pervaded the institution, casting out the merchants who operated under the sponsorship of the priesthood.

Church leaders who desire to be like the Lord Jesus will preserve their independence from any financial consideration, and seek to support themselves.

If, then, the biblical writers criticize professional clergy, where does the idea come from? Like the practice of rebranding pagan gods with Scriptural names and the use of a physical sanctuary, clerical professionalism goes back to paganism, where priests were regularly remunerated, and might serve several different cults to increase the scope of their market.¹⁷

11 And the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man was unto him as one of his sons. 12 And Micah consecrated the Levite; and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah.—There are two problems here. The first is the notion that he becomes a priest. God told Aaron that only he and his sons could serve as priests; anyone else who drew near to the holy things would be put to death:

Num 18:6 And I, behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel: to you they are given as a gift for the LORD, to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation. 7 Therefore **thou [Aaron] and thy sons with thee shall keep your priest's office** for every thing of the altar, and within the vail; and ye shall serve: I have given your priest's office unto you as a service of gift: and **the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.**

Hebrews emphasizes this exclusive privilege:

Heb 5:4 And **no man taketh this honour unto himself**, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.

The second problem is that Micah has no authority to consecrate him. Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons, and when Aaron died, his garments were simply transferred to his son (Num 20:25-28). The Jewish rabbis taught that later priests inherited the consecration of their ancestors.¹⁸ But Micah takes upon himself the authority to set up a new order of priests, contrary to the law.

In the church, as in Israel of old, God appointed people to serve in specific ways. Each of us has a spiritual gift. We should exercise it diligently to build up the temple of God, and recognize the contribution of the gifts that God has given to others.

13 Then said Micah, Now know I that the LORD will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest.—Micah's statement shows two more errors.

First, he thinks that the priest has some intrinsic power that can compel the Lord (Jehovah again) to bless him. This error is called "sacerdotalism." If the Levite had been qualified to be a priest, there might be some truth in this, though the blessings conveyed were only carnal (Heb 9:13). But only one Priest has true sacerdotal power, our Lord Jesus.

Second, he describes the Levite as "my priest." The OT uses the construction "priest of X" in two ways (see note). Pagan priests are typically described in terms of the place where they serve, but true priests under Israel's law are "priests of the Lord," and do not belong to any man.

17 Angus, *The Mystery Religions*, reports that a priest might officiate for half-a-dozen deities (p. 278), comparing Simon's desire to add the name of Jesus to his profitable practice (p. 249, Acts 8). Compare also Sceva, Acts 19:14, a Jew who was "chief of the priests," clearly priests of a pagan cult.

18 Edersheim, *Temple*, p. 96

Micah and his Levite present a good case study of false religion, and highlights errors that continue to plague those who call themselves Christian. Let's summarize:

1. Confusing the worship of the true God with the worship of pagan deities, as Micah's mother did with her idol "for the LORD." We are to worship and serve the Lord God alone. Any attempt to associate him with other deities (Baal) or add others beside him (teraphim) violates the first three commandments, and invites his jealous wrath.
2. Setting up a sanctuary, a "house of gods," other than the one that God has ordained. During the OT, this was the tabernacle, succeeded by the temple, but since Pentecost, it is the spiritual temple that shows itself when believers, living stones, gather together in worship. To focus on a physical sanctuary now is as bad as Micah's house of gods.
3. In both the OT and the NT, leaders of God's people belong to God, and are supported by him. They are not for hire by a congregation. The next section shows a consequence of this error, the tendency to tell people what they want to hear, rather than the truth of God.
4. God has appointed people to different functions (in the NT, spiritual gifts). We should seek to exercise our gifts diligently, and respect the gifts God has given to others.
5. We should not think that our spiritual well-being depends on the functions of some human priest with man-made credentials.

18:1a, Refrain

18:1 In those days there was no king in Israel:— Micah's priesthood, like his gods and his sanctuary, rejects the Lord's commands, and shows that he is not subject to Jehovah as his king.

18:1b-31, An Irregular Tribe

1b-10, Seeking an Inheritance

and in those days the tribe of the Danites sought them an inheritance to dwell in; for unto that day all their inheritance had not fallen unto them among the tribes of Israel.—We have already noted that the events of Judg 17-21 occur early in the period covered by the book. Joshua already records the migration of Dan from their territory to the far north (Figure 14, chart):¹⁹

Jos 19:47 And the coast of the children of Dan went out too little for them: therefore the children of Dan went up to fight against Leshem,²⁰ and took it, and smote it with the



Figure 14: The Migration of Dan

19 Laish must have been beyond the borders of Naphtali, and is probably distinct from Dan-Jaan, at the sources of Jordan, 100 miles or more further north. W. Wood, Expositor 2nd Series, 3.3 (March 1882): 233-240.

edge of the sword, and possessed it, and dwelt therein, and called Leshem, Dan, after the name of Dan their father.

This accords with the brief notice in Judges 1:

Jdg 1:34 And the Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain: for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley:

Just as Micah's Levite was not content with the role that God gave him, so the Danites are not content with the territory that God assigned them. Both cases illustrate the opposite of the spirit of contentment that the Lord desires us to exhibit:

1Cor. 7:17 But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches. . . . 20 Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.

Heb. 13:5 Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

God has given each of us a work to do. Sometimes the flesh covets the role that God has given to others. But our ministry is assigned to us by the Lord, and we must honor his appointment:

1Co 12:18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

2 And the children of Dan sent of their family five men from their coasts, men of valour, from Zorah, and from Eshtaol,—These cities bound the home territory of Samson (13:25; 16:31). The early migration of Dan sheds additional light on the history of Samson, in four ways.

1. It explains why the Philistines control the area. The Danites have abandoned it.
2. It explains why the Philistines interact directly with Judah rather than with Dan.
3. It marks the godliness of Samson's parents, "of the family of the Danites" (13:2), who apparently refuse to follow other Danites in leaving the land that God has assigned them.
4. It emphasizes Samson's godliness, trying to carry out Dan's responsibility to possess their territory without support from his countrymen.

to spy out the land, and to search it; and they said unto them, Go, search the land:—

Compare Numbers 13-14 (the whole land); Josh 2:1 (Jericho); 7:2 (Ai). Samson follows this strategy in Gaza in 16:1-3, in an attempt to subdue the land that God originally gave Dan, but this story shows that they had earlier abandoned it for a new territory not assigned to them.

who when they came to mount Ephraim, to the house of Micah, they lodged there.—Like Samson in Gaza, the Danite spies recall the two spies of Joshua 2.²¹ But the Danites differ from Joshua's spies in two important ways:²²

1. Joshua's spies take refuge with Rahab, an alien woman who puts her trust in the Lord. The spies of Dan take refuge with Micah, an Israelite who sponsors idol worship.
2. Joshua's spies deal honorably with Rahab, delivering her and her family from the destruction of the city. The spies of Dan return to rob and threaten Micah.

20 Apparently an earlier name for the city.

21 See verbal parallels noted by Block and Wong.

22 Wong (55-57); Bauer, JSOT 88 (2000) 37-47.

3 When they were by the house of Micah, they knew the voice of the young man the Levite:—How did they recognize him? Three possibilities have been suggested: a) he had picked up the dialect of Judah (cf. 12:6 sibboleth vs. shibboleth) during his extensive residence there; b) since he only “sojourned” in Bethlehem, perhaps he had previously spent time in Dan, where they had met him; c) (Cassel) the “voice” may be the “sound” of the priestly bells on the ephod (chart):

Ex 28:34 A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about. 35 And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound קול shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place before the LORD, and when he cometh out, that he die not.

and they turned in thither, and said unto him,—Curious, they decide to investigate. They turn aside from their journey, to meet the Levite and ask him three questions:

Who brought thee hither? and what makest thou [what are you doing] in this place? and what hast thou here?

4 And he said unto them,—Micah answers their questions, reversing his answers to the last two. His answers highlight his spiritual weakness.

Thus and thus dealeth Micah with me,—In answer to “Who brought you here,” he names Micah. But he belongs to the Lord, and should tell how the Lord has dealt with him.

and hath hired me,—In answer to “What do you have here,” he answers, “I have a job.” But his true possession was elsewhere, in his own city, where he should be tending his flocks.

and I am his priest.—In answer to “What are you doing,” he answers, “I am serving as Micah’s priest.” As in 17:13, there are two problems here: 1) he is not qualified to be a priest, and 2) the notion that a priest belongs to a person rather than to the Lord is pagan (see note). He should recognize his distinctive role as a Levite, to teach Micah, and in this case rebuke him, not support his pagan version of Yahwism.

It would have been well if he, as a Levite responsible for teaching the word of God, had asked them the same three questions:²³

1. Who brought you here? They were sent by the tribe of Dan, but should have followed the Lord and claimed the portion God assigned them. Recall the attitude of godly Jephthah:

Jdg 11:24 Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? So whomsoever the LORD our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess.

2. What are you doing here? They are looking for a place to lodge for the night, but under the terms of Deuteronomy 13, they should come with other Israelites to judge Micah’s apostasy.

Deut 13:6 If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; ... 9 ... thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. 10 And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; ... 12 If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, which the LORD thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, 13 Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known; ...

23 Thus Block

15 Thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is therein, and the cattle thereof, with the edge of the sword.²⁴

3. What do you have here? They are seeking a possession, but they should go back and take control of the land that God has already assigned them.

Jos 18:3 And Joshua said unto the children of Israel, How long are ye slack to go to possess the land, which the LORD God of your fathers hath given you?

The conversation should have stimulated the men of Dan to invoke Deuteronomy 13 against Micah. Instead, it persuades the Danites that the Levite is a qualified religious functionary from whom they can seek counsel.

5 And they said unto him, Ask counsel, we pray thee, of God, that we may know whether our way which we go shall be prosperous.—Recall that the book began with the nation asking counsel of the Lord (chart):

Jdg 1:1 Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass, that the children of Israel asked the LORD, saying, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to fight against them?

And in the second story in the epilog, the nation will again seek his counsel (20:18, 23, 27). In itself, seeking the Lord's guidance is a good thing. But two things are strange about this request.

1. Why didn't they ask counsel before they started their journey? They have made up their minds what they want to do, and now ask for his guidance.
2. They ask the Levite to ask counsel, not of the LORD (YHWH), but of God.

Note the eagerness of those who have abandoned the true faith to find a substitute. Humans are made to worship. Only the fool denies that there is a god (Ps 14:1). Because of sin, they fear the true God, and want a deity whom they can control, but they still want something to worship, some sense that they are in touch with the deity.

6 And the priest said unto them, Go in peace: before the LORD נכח יהוה is your way wherein ye go.—He does not assure them of the Lord's blessing, but simply reminds them that their way is "before the Lord." Compare

Gen. 17:1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me לִפְנֵי, and be thou perfect.

Prov. 5:21 For the ways of man are before the eyes of the LORD נכח עיני יהוה, and he pondereth all his goings.

He makes a generic statement of the Lord's omniscience, but says nothing about the Lord's approval. He should send them back to claim their possession. But paid clergy are naturally more concerned with pleasing their clients than with helping them to please the Lord. Isaiah warns,

Isa 30:9 That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: 10 Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, **speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits:** 11 Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.

The problem extends to the time of the NT:

24 O'Connell (pp. 230-231) points out the relevance of Deuteronomy 13 to the epilog, since it (13:18) along with ch. 12 appears to be the basis for the idiom "to do what is right in the eyes of someone" (13:18; cf. 12:8, 25, 28).

2Ti 4:3 For the time will come when they **will not endure sound doctrine**; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having **itching ears**;

Recall from 2 Thessalonians that one characteristic of those who are led away after the Antichrist is that “they received not the love of the truth” (2 Thes 2:10). People want religion, but they want it on their terms, to give them, not God’s revealed truth, but what they want to hear. That weakness was active among Israel when they entered the land of promise, it continues today, and will be what allows Antichrist to gain a following in the final days before our Lord’s return.

This oracle is the final detail of the writer’s description of spiritual failure. We have read of a false view of God (mixing pagan idolatry with the worship of the Lord), establishment of a false sanctuary, and ordination of a false priest who is not qualified and who serves for money rather than out of obedience to the Lord. Now we learn of a false message, crafted to please the hearers rather than warn them of their sin and encourage them to follow the Lord.

7 Then the five men departed, and came to Laish, and saw the people that were therein, how they dwelt careless [without care], after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure;—Sidon was a city of merchants, not warriors.²⁵ The people of Laish adopted this manner of life as well, giving little attention to military matters.

and there was no magistrate in the land, that might put them to shame in any thing;—The phrase is obscure, but probably²⁶ indicates the lack of a strong central authority that could coordinate their defense. The parallel in 18:28 is “there was no deliverer.”

and they were far from the Zidonians,—Even if Sidon had been inclined to defend Laish, it was too far away. The conventional identification with Tel Dan, at the foot of Mt Hermon, is about 26 miles as the crow flies from Sidon, which does not seem far for defenders to come.²⁷ But that Dan is part of Naphthali (1 Ki 15:20), and if the Danites had taken claimed land within Naphthali, given the inter-tribal tensions clear throughout Judges, we would certainly have heard about it. It is likely²⁸ that Laish is farther north than Dan of Naphthali,²⁹ truly “far from the Zidonians” and even farther from Zorah and Eshtaol. It would constitute a city “very far off from thee,” in the terms of Deut 20:15, to whom they should have offered peaceful submission (chart):

Deut 20:10 When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it. 11 And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. 12 And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it: 13 And when the LORD thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: ... 15 Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee, which are not of the cities of these nations. 16 But of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: 17 But thou shalt utterly destroy them ...

and had no business with any man.—In summary, they lived lives unto themselves.

25 K&D, Webb

26 Macintosh, VT 1985

27 Joshua came from Gilgal to defend the Gibeonites, nearly 20 miles away (Josh 10:6), and Saul came from Gibeah to deliver Jabesh-Gilead (1 Sam 11, 48 miles as the crow flies, or over 60 by route; the troops mustered in Bezek, 12-17 miles from Jabesh Gilead, depending on identification, 11:8).

28 W. Wood, Expositor 2nd Series, 3.3 (March 1882): 233-240

29 Dan of Naphthali is called “Dan-Jaan” (2 Sam 24:6) to distinguish it from tribal Dan (2 Sam 24:3).

| | Five Danites, Judges 18 | Joshua and Caleb, Numbers 13-14 |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Exhortation to go | 9a And they said, Arise, that we may go up against them: ... 9d and are ye still? be not slothful to go, and to enter to possess the land. | 13:30 And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. |
| Eye-witness | 9b for we have seen the land , | 14:7a And they spake unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, The land , which we passed through to search it , |
| A good land | 9c and, behold, it is very good טובה מאד: | 14:7b is an exceeding good land טובה הארץ מאד מאד. |
| Condition of the people | 10a When ye go, ye shall come unto a people secure, | 13:28 Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great: and moreover we saw the children of Anak there. 14:9b neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not. |
| A good land | 10b and to a large land: ... 10d a place where there is no want of any thing that is in the earth. | 13:27; 14:8b a land which floweth with milk and honey. |
| Depend on the Lord | 10c for God hath given it into your hands; | 14:8a If the LORD delight in us , then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; ... 9a Only rebel not ye against the LORD, |

Table 3: Positive Spy Reports

8 And they came unto their brethren to Zorah and Eshtaol: and their brethren said unto them, What say ye?—Their report to the whole tribe is modeled on the minority report of Joshua and Caleb in Numbers 13-14 (Table 3, chart), with minor but significant changes.

9a And they said, Arise, that we may go up against them: ... 9d and are ye still? be not slothful to go, and to enter to possess the land.—In both cases, the spies encourage the people to take possession ירש of the land.

9b for we have seen the land,—The recommendation is based on their eye-witness account.

9c and, behold, it is very good:—Both summaries of the land’s virtues use the same phrase.

10a When ye go, ye shall come unto a people secure,—Echoing v. 7, they represent the men of Laish as unlikely to offer much resistance. Joshua and Caleb were also confident of victory, but for a different reason. They recognized the strength of the adversary (Num 13:28). But they also recognize that a nation’s strength depends on its deity: “their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us.”

10b and to a large land: 10d a place where there is no want of any thing that is in the earth.—In both cases, the land is represented as very attractive for settlement.

10c for God hath given it into your hands;—Like Joshua and Caleb, they claim divine help, but with two differences.

1. They are trusting generically in God, not YHWH.
2. They omit the condition of pleasing the Lord.

The contrast between the two reports and the actions of the hearers is instructive. Joshua and Caleb acknowledge the strength of the adversary, but urge the people that their covenant God Jehovah is stronger, Jehovah. The men of Dan speak only generically of God, but report that the target is a push-over. The nation refuses to overcome a mighty foe in the name of the almighty Lord. Dan eagerly mobilizes against a defenseless foe, with whom God is an afterthought.

The two attitudes are seen in Goliath and David, respectively (chart). Goliath despises David for his apparent weakness, and relies on his generic gods:

1 Sam 17:42 And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him: for he was **but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance**. 43 And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David **by his gods**. 44 And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field.

David recognizes the strength of his adversary, but trusts in Jehovah:

1 Sam 17:45 Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with **a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield**: but I come to thee in the name of **the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel**, whom thou hast defied. 46 This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. 47 And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the LORD'S, and he will give you into our hands.

The men of Dan have become no better than the Philistines, who came to dominate their territory. Let us see to it that we encourage one another, not like the five spies, but like the two. Let us not play down the power of our adversary the devil, but let us trust in the even greater power of our Lord Jesus, who is above all principality and power (Eph 1:21).

11-26, Capturing a Cultus

11 And there went from thence of the family of the Danites, out of Zorah and out of Eshtaol, six hundred men appointed with weapons of war. 12 And they went up, and pitched in Kirjathjearim, in Judah: wherefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan [the camp of Dan] unto this day: behold, it is behind [to the west of] Kirjathjearim.—The detail of



Figure 15: The Route of the Danite Army by Mahaneh-Dan

their first encampment, to the west of Kirjath-Jearim (Figure 15, chart), is apparently given to explain the location named earlier in the history of Samson,

Judg. 13:25 And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in **the camp of Dan** between Zorah and Eshtaol.

His home territory was called “the camp of Dan” because was the place from which the armed men of Dan set out in their ungodly conquest of Laish. Later, the Spirit raises up Samson, alone,

to begin what the whole tribe should have undertaken, the suppression of the Philistines. And he begins where they began.

13 And they passed thence unto mount Ephraim, and came unto [עַד, as far as] the house of Micah.—Their journey brings them to the vicinity of Micah’s house. It is not a destination for them,³⁰ until the spies speak up.

14 Then answered the five men that went to spy out the country of Laish, and said unto their brethren, Do ye know that there is in these houses an ephod, and teraphim, and a graven image, and a molten image?—Once more we are told the items in Micah’s sanctuary.

now therefore consider what ye have to do.—Recall from Deuteronomy 13 that the tribes were to hold one another accountable in the matter of idolatry. What the men of Dan “have to do” is

Deu 13:15 ... smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is therein, and the cattle thereof, with the edge of the sword.

But far from condemning Micah’s idolatry, they covet his collection for themselves.

15 And they turned thitherward, and came to the house of the young man the Levite, even unto the house of Micah, and saluted him.—So they take a detour from the main highway, ostensibly to visit their friend the Levite.

16 And the six hundred men appointed with their weapons of war, which were of the children of Dan, stood by the entering of the gate.—This time, though, the five spies are not alone. The Danite army stands ominously just outside the gate of the household compound. They make it clear that they expect to have their way.

17 And the five men that went to spy out the land went up,—So the five spies take action.

At this point, the Hebrew grammar changes from a flowing narrative to a series of snapshots.³¹

and came in thither, and took the graven image, and the ephod, and the teraphim, and the molten image: and the priest stood in the entering of the gate with the six hundred men that were appointed with weapons of war.—Literally,

- They came there.
- They took the four items.
- As for the priest, he stood at the opening of the gate.

The narrator can’t wait to get the story out, but must spill all the facts as quickly as possible. “Look! I can’t believe it! They went there! They took the things! The priest just stood there!”

18 And these went into Micah’s house, and fetched the carved image, the ephod, and the teraphim, and the molten image מַסַּכָּה H4541.—Now the writer returns to narrative grammar.

Here and in v. 17, the graven or carved image and the molten image are two separate items. Micah’s mother dedicated both of them “to the Lord” (17:3). Why would she think that two idols would honor the Lord? Three facts clarify the situation; see note for further discussion. (chart)

1. In the OT, “molten image” appears first to describe the molten calf that Aaron fashions at Mount Sinai, and later passages use it to describe either this calf or the idols that Jeroboam set up to honor the Lord.

³⁰ The preposition עַד means “as far as,” not “to” as a destination.

³¹ 18:17 is a series of disjunctive clauses—asyndetic perfect verbs. 18:18 returns to *waw*-consecutives.

Ex. 32:4 And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a **molten H4541 calf**: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

2Kings 17:16 And they left all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made them **molten images**, even two **calves**, and made a **grove [Asherah]**, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal.

2. The bull calf was a common image of the god Baal, the dominant deity among the Canaanites, whom many Israelites sought to identify with Jehovah (note 2 Ki 17:16).
3. In Canaanite worship, Baal is commonly associated with a fertility goddess called either Asherah (Jdg 3:7; cf. 2 Ki 17:16) or Ashtoret (Jdg 2:13; 10:6). Forms of this deity are revered across the ancient world. In Babylon she was known as Ishtar, the queen of heaven, and in Anatolia, as Cybele, the mother of the gods. As Israel fell into apostasy, they worshipped her along with Baal:

Judg. 2:13 And they forsook the LORD, and served **Baal and Ashtaroth**.

Judg. 3:7 And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God, and served **Baalim and the groves [Asherahs]**.

Judg. 10:6 And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and served **Baalim, and Ashtaroth**,

Archaeological remains from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm (ancient Makkedah) show that Israelites in the tenth and eighth centuries honored “YHWH and his Asherah,” rebranding Baal as YHWH but retaining Asherah.³² So it is likely that the graven image is of the goddess, and the molten image is a calf representing Baal, whom Micah identifies with the Lord.

Then said the priest unto them, What do ye?—Finally someone in Micah’s household speaks up. The priest, responsible for the private sanctuary, wants to know what they are doing, though the fact should seem clear enough.

19 And they said unto him, Hold thy peace, lay thine hand upon thy mouth, and go with us, and be to us a father and a priest: is it better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel?—In fact, what they are doing is offering him a promotion.

20 And the priest’s heart was glad, and he took the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven image, and went in the midst of the people.—He is delighted at his good fortune, sweeps up most of the sacred items, and hastens off with his new flock.

v. 20 doesn’t mention the molten image (chart). If indeed the two images represent Baal/YHWH (the molten image) and his consort Asherah (the graven image) (see note), in his haste he grabs Asherah but leaves YHWH behind! In later years, when Jeroboam endorses the calf as the image of the Lord, he installs one not only in Bethel in the south, but also at Dan in the north:

1Ki 12:28 Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two **calves of gold**, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 29 And he set the one in Bethel, and the other put he in Dan.

If the Levite does forget the original molten image, Jeroboam replaces it.

32 See articles on these sites in New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations, pp. 1233ff, 1458ff.

Perhaps it is not surprising that in the rebranded paganism that masquerades as Christianity in many quarters today, the mother goddess known as the Queen of Heaven and the Mother of God receives far more attention than the father deity.

21 So they turned and departed, and put the little ones and the cattle and the carriage before them.—Thus the armed men take up the rear, in case Micah tries to overtake them.

22 And when they were a good way from the house of Micah, the men that were in the houses near to Micah's house were gathered together, and overtook the children of Dan.—In fact, that's just what Micah does. He gathers supporters from his village, suggesting that his little sanctuary served others beyond his own family.

23 And they cried unto the children of Dan. And they turned their faces, and said unto Micah, What aileth thee, that thou comest with such a company?—When they reach the Danites, Micah's group accosts them. The Danites, fully in character as bullies, pretend that nothing is wrong.

24 And he said, Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and ye are gone away: and what have I more? and what is this that ye say unto me, What aileth thee?—Micah spells out the obvious: they have taken away *his* gods, and *the* priest. Note the difference. The gods are “my gods,” but his priest (17:13) is now just “the priest.” He grudgingly recognizes the priest as a free agent. If he could hire him, so could the Danites. But the gods at least are his property.

Both statements highlight the errors involved in this history.

The Levite is not a free agent. He should be serving the Lord, to whom he belongs.

And when a deity belongs to us, it is powerless to help us. Micah acknowledges this when he says that he has made his gods. The Old Testament repeatedly emphasizes that manmade gods are powerless to save their creators.³³ Isaiah expresses it most eloquently (chart). First he mocks the builders of idols for thinking that something they build can deliver them:

Is 44:10 Who hath formed a god, or molten a graven image that is profitable for nothing? ...
12 The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals, and fashioneth it with hammers, and worketh it with the strength of his arms: yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth: he drinketh no water, and is faint. 13 The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house. 14 He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress and the oak, which he strengtheneth for himself among the trees of the forest: he planteth an ash, and the rain doth nourish it. 15 Then shall it be for a man to burn: for he will take thereof, and warm himself; yea, he kindleth it, and baketh bread; yea, he maketh a god, and worshippeth it; he maketh it a graven image, and falleth down thereto. 16 He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: 17 And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god.

Then he contrasts the idols, who must be carried in their processions, with himself, who carries his people.

33 e.g., Deut 4:28; Ps 115:4; 135:15; Isa 44:9-20; 45:20; 46:7; Jer 10:3-9

Isa 46:1 Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, **their idols were upon the beasts**, and upon the cattle: your carriages were heavy loaden; **they are a burden** to the weary beast. 2 They stoop, they bow down together; they could not deliver the burden, but themselves are gone into captivity. 3 Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, which are **borne by me** from the belly, which are carried from the womb: 4 And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: **I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.**

Many people today trust in gods that they have made to deliver them. Today, these idols are often technologies: facing C19, our political leaders will not call on us to repent before God, but urge us to trust in vaccines. God does enable us, as creative beings made in his image, to devise technologies that make our lives easier and safer. But our trust must be, not in the technologies that we have made, but in the God who has made us, and to whom we submit as his subjects.

25 And the children of Dan said unto him, Let not thy voice be heard among us, lest angry fellows run upon thee, and thou lose thy life, with the lives of thy household.—The Danites do not respond to the substance of his complaint, but instead threaten him with injury.

26 And the children of Dan went their way: and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back unto his house.—So the sanctuary is effectively transferred to Dan, and Micah returns home with nothing.

27-31, The Conquest of Laish

27a And they³⁴ took the things which Micah had made, and the priest which he had,—We are reminded of two ungodly characteristics of the system of worship that they have stolen:

1. The things (now not even called “idols”) were man-made. Dan has just proven the impotence of these artifacts to protect their worshippers, and now they are adopting it themselves.
2. The priest is not a priest of the Lord, but a priest under the control of men.

We have considered Isaiah’s critique of the impotence of man-made idols. What happens when we accept a priest who is not the Lord’s priest? A priest represents the people before God:

Heb 5:1 For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:

He brings their worship to God, and deals with the problem of their sin. To be successful in these duties, he needs to have access to God. If you’re shopping for a priest, how can you be sure that he has this access, and isn’t just pretending? You want someone who meets the qualifications that God has established, someone who is a priest of the Lord. There is no hope in a priest who is set up by men, in violation of the standards that God has established. Such a priest is like the cargo cults of the south Pacific, where people go through the forms of activity that they think will bring good things on them, utterly ignorant of the true mechanisms responsible for the results.

The report of the conquest in vv. 27b and 28b alternates with a recollection of the report of the spies from 18:7, reminding us of the nature of the people whom the men of Dan overthrew to highlight Dan’s unreasonable treatment of them (Table 4, chart). “Do you remember those people who were quiet and secure? Dan smote them and burned their city. Do you remember those people who minded their own business? Dan built a new city in their place and dwelt there.”

34 The independent pronoun deliberately shifts our attention from Micah to the Danites. “As for them, ...”

and came unto Laish, unto a people that were at quiet and secure: ... 28a And there was no deliverer, because it was far from Zidon, and they had no business with any man; and it was in the valley that lieth by Bethrehob.—These verses (A in Table 4) recall the description of the people of Laish, living peacefully and far away (thus candidates for an offer of peace according to Deuteronomy 20).

27b and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire. ... 28b And they built a city, and dwelt therein.—In spite of Deuteronomy 20, the men of Dan kill the people, burn the city, and build a new one.

| | 18:7 | 18:27, 28 |
|------------|--|---|
| A: Echo | Then the five men departed, and came to Laish , and saw the people that were therein, | 27 ... they ... came unto Laish , |
| | how they dwelt careless [without care], after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure ; | unto a people that were at quiet and secure : |
| B: Action | | and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and burnt the city with fire. |
| A: Echo | there was no magistrate in the land, that might put them to shame in any thing; | 28 And there was no deliverer , |
| | and they were far from the Zidonians , | because it was far from Zidon , |
| | and had no business with any man . | and they had no business with any man ; |
| (location) | | and it was in the valley that lieth by Bethrehob. |
| B: Action | | And they built a city , and dwelt therein. |

Table 4: Recalling the Spies' Report

Why would they burn the city and build a new one? This was not the pattern of conquest that Joshua followed (chart). God promised Israel on the eve of entering the land,

Deut 6:10 And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, 11 And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; 12 Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

The book of Joshua records the burning of only three cities: Jericho (6:24), Ai (8:28), and Hazor (11:11). Otherwise, the book expressly states,³⁵

Josh. 11:12 And all the cities of those kings, and all the kings of them, did Joshua take, and smote them with the edge of the sword, and he utterly destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD commanded. 13 But as for the cities that stood still ~~in their strength~~ upon their tells, Israel burned none of them, save Hazor only; that did Joshua burn. 14 And all the spoil of these cities, and the cattle, the children of Israel took for a prey unto themselves; but every man they smote with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, neither left they any to breathe.

35 The statement concludes the northern campaign (ch. 11), and thus does not mention Jericho and Ai, which were conquered earlier. But the record of earlier conquests mentions burning only for Jericho and Ai. I owe the argument to B. Waltke, Bib Sac 129:513 (1972), 47. "Cities burned to the ground do not yield to their captors houses filled with all kinds of goods" (p. 35).

Dan's practice violates not only the law of Deuteronomy 20, but also the entire spirit of the conquest. They are simply behaving like marauding pagans.

29 And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born unto Israel:—The writer emphasizes Dan's place as one of the patriarchs, drawing our minds to the hopes and predictions that were expressed concerning him. There are three: by Rachel when he was born, by Jacob shortly before his death, and finally by Moses. All three align well with this story, and our writer may well emphasize Dan's lineage to remind us of these ancient prophecies that he now fulfills (chart).

Rachel was barren, and Dan was the first son borne in her name by her handmaid Bilhah. At his birth, Rachel declared,

Gen 30:6 And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan.

The name "Dan" is from one of the two Hebrew words that are often translated "judge" (דן H1777). It is not the verb from which we get the name of our book, "Judges" (שפוט H8199). The verb used in Judges means generally "to rule," and is often used to describe the work of a king or magistrate. Dan's word means to plead one's cause, to contend with someone (as in a court), to execute judgment. Rachel gave him this name because of her ongoing contest with Leah in trying to please Jacob, and his people show this contentious spirit in the conquest of Laish.

Jacob pronounced a blessing on his sons before he died, and said of Dan,

Gen 49:16 Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel. 17 Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward. 18 I have waited for thy salvation, O LORD.

Again he emphasizes the pun on Dan's name, which points to his contentious spirit. He follows this up with a description of Dan as a poisonous serpent that causes chaos, certainly an apt prediction in the light of Judges 18.

Jacob recognizes that his blessings are being given him by God, and he appears to be a bit dismayed by what he has just predicted for Dan, leading him to ask God in v. 18 to bring deliverance from this ungodly attitude.

Similarly, Moses before his death blesses each of the tribes. Of Dan he says,

Deu 33:22 And of Dan he said, Dan is a lion's whelp: he shall leap from Bashan.

Bashan is now called the Golan Heights (Figure 14). It is the area to the east and north of the Sea of Galilee, far from Dan's original territory next to Judah and Benjamin, but close to the region where they finally settled.

howbeit the name of the city was Laish at the first. 30 And the children of Dan set up the graven image:—Again, the molten image appears to have gone missing, or at best is not the center of attention in the new sanctuary. Jehovah will not share the loyalty of his people with anyone else. If they insist on coupling him with Asherah, he will abandon them completely.

and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh Moses, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.—Finally we are told the identity of the wandering Levite. As we noted at the beginning of this section, this detail is one indication that these events happen early in the period of the judges. (Two others are the fact that

the migration of Dan appears to have happened before the end of Joshua, Josh. 19:47, and the naming of Mahaneh-Dan in 18:12 so that the name is available in 13:25.)

31 And they set them up Micah’s graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.—The molten image is still missing, until it is restored by Jeroboam.

Micah’s Levite as Background for the Book

The events of Judges 17-21, though reported at the end of the book, are dated by the references to Jonathan (16:30) and Phinehas (20:28) to the early part of the period, and show us weaknesses in the nation that explain behavior seen during the cycles of ch. 3-16. Their significance is enhanced by the structure of the central cycles (Figure 16, chart). We include Abimelech as a major hero because of the length of his story, and its similar beginning to the other six:

Judg. 8:33 And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god.³⁶

When we compare the episodes chiastically, Gideon emerges as the central character.³⁷

The themes of two stories in the epilog align not only with the prolog, but also with Gideon’s history (Table 5, chart).³⁸ In particular, Gideon, like Micah, set up a private sanctuary that distracted people from the tabernacle at Shiloh.

The episode of Micah and his Levite provides background for other details as well. The idea that one can worship Jehovah using two idols explains how the people went astray after Baal and Asherah or Ashterah (2:13; 3:7; 10:6). They thought they could participate in the local religion by rebranding Baal as YHWH. And when we are reminded that Dan left their territory to settle in the far north, we better understand the piety of Samson’s parents in remaining between Zorah and Eshtaol, and the heroism of Samson, setting out by himself to do what the entire tribe should have undertaken.

| | |
|--|--|
| Judges: Between Conquest and Kingdom | |
| 1:1-3:6, Prolog | 1:1-2:5, Social Disintegration 2:6-3:6, Spiritual Departure |
| 3:7-16:31, The Judges | |
| 3:7-11, Othniel | <i>good marriage</i> |
| 3:12-32, Ehud and Shamgar | <i>messages, fords</i> |
| 4:1-5:31, Deborah and Barak | <i>woman breaks skull of villain</i> |
| 6:1-8:32, Gideon | |
| 8:33-10:5, Abimelech, Tola, Jair | <i>woman breaks skull of villain</i> |
| 10:6-12:15, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon | <i>messages, fords</i> |
| 13:1-16:31, Samson | <i>bad marriages</i> |
| 17:1-21:25, Epilog and Diagnosis | |
| 17:1-18:31, Spiritual Weakness—Micah’s Idol | |
| 19:1-21:25, Social Strife—Civil War | |

Figure 16: Overview of the Book of Judges

| | | |
|------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| Prolog | A: Fighting | Israel Fights Enemies (1:1-2:5) |
| | B: Idolatry | Israel Faces Idolatry (2:6-3:6) |
| Center of Cycles | B: Idolatry | Gideon Faces Idolatry (6:1-32) |
| | A: Fighting | Gideon Fights Enemies (6:33-7:25) |
| | A: Fighting | Gideon Fights Israel (8:1-21) |
| | B: Idolatry | Gideon Forges Idolatry (8:22-32) |
| Epilog | B: Idolatry | Israel Forges Idolatry (17:1-18:31) |
| | A: Fighting | Israel Fights Israel (19:1-21:25) |

Table 5: Gideon as synopsis of prolog and epilog

36 In the other six cases, the expression is עשה הרע בעיני יהוה. The reference to the death of the previous judge recalls 4:1 (“when Ehud was dead ...”).

37 Structure due to Gooding, *Eretz Israel* 16 (1982) 70*-79*.

38 Adapted from K.Way. *The Literary Structure of Judges Revisited*. In Arnold, Erickson, and Walton, Editors, *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus*, 247-260. Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, 2014. Chart on p. 254. This alignment is challenged by Tanner’s analysis of Gideon. See note for discussion and possible reconciliation

Notes

Overview of 1 Corinthians

Where do the references in 1 Corinthians about the church as building and body fit into the overall structure, as indicated by the headings? Two sets: “now concerning” *περι δε*, and “Now I ... you, brethren,” *Is* verb of speaking + *δε υμας αδελφοι*

1:10 Now I beseech you: plea for unity

ch. 3-6, image of the temple and need for purity in it

7:1 Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote

7:25 Now concerning virgins ...

8:1 Now as touching things offered unto idols

11:2 Now I praise you for keeping the ordinances

12:1 Now concerning spiritual things

ch. 12, image of the body of Christ

15:1 Moreover I declare unto you

16:1 Now concerning the collections for the saints

16:12 As touching our brother apollo

16:15 I beseech you to submit to those who labor for the Lord

The Graven Image and Molten Image (17:3, 4; 18:14, 17-18)

In 17:3-4, the “graven and molten image” are presented as a single object (cf. v. 4, *ויהי בבית מיכיהו*, “it was in the house of Micah”). In 18:14, they are part of a list with the ephod and teraphim, and in 18:17-18 they are clearly distinct. Were they a single object, or two? Two clues help us understand their nature.

The first clue is the use elsewhere of “molten image” *מִטְּכָה* H4541. This word is first used in the OT in Ex 32:4, 6, to describe the golden calf that Aaron made at Mount Sinai, and is often used to refer either to this incident or to the calves that Jeroboam set up in Dan and Beersheba (2 Ki 17:16). The calf was the symbol of Baal, and Jeroboam at least probably understood his calves as reflecting the Canaanite deity. Since Micah’s mother engaged an experienced maker of idols to cast her molten image, it is likely that this item was a silver statue of a bull.

The second clue is the offering tablets from Kuntillet Ajrud, “to YHWH and to his Asherah.” The reading is also attested at Khiret el-Qom, probably ancient Makkedah, 8 km west of Hebron (New Encyclopedia v. 4 p. 1234). In Canaanite religion, Asherah was the consort of Baal, and the worshippers at KA appear to be adopting Baal worship, simply renaming Baal as YHWH. One inscription on a jar shows a picture with two figures, a male one clearly representing YHWH, and a female one representing Asherah. (Some early drawings of the image show two characters with male features, but according to the excavator in

<https://www.facebook.com/haaretzcom/posts/did-god-have-a-wife-a-surprising->

[developmentnir-hasson-who-wrote-the-piece-title/10156158461956341/](#), this was a misreading due to soot on the pot, and only one does.)

I suggest that “carved image and molten image” are a pair of idols, a silver bull representing YHWH and a carved image representing Asherah. They are closely associated, and thus in 17:4 can be described as a single item, but constitute two distinct items, as 18:17-18 makes clear.

The Levite’s Stipend (17:10)

How does 10 shekels a year fit into the economy of the time? See TDOT 14:132. The Code of Hammurabi §273 puts the annual wage of a laborer at 10 shekels. This is compatible with the statements in Ex 31:32 that a slave cost 30 shekels, and in Dt 15:18 that six years of labor from a slave was double the wages of a hireling. So this is a minimal wage, but given that he also receives clothing and food, perhaps not unreasonable.

Priest of X

What appears in construct with כֹּהֵן in the OT?

Place of Service

This may be a city, or a particular sanctuary.

Foreign

Gen. 41:45 And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphnathpaaneah; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Potipherah **priest of On**.

Gen. 41:50 And unto Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, which Asenath the daughter of Potipherah **priest of On** bare unto him.

Gen. 46:20 And unto Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, which Asenath the daughter of Potipherah **priest of On** bare unto him.

Ex. 2:16 Now the **priest of Midian** had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock.

Ex. 3:1 Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the **priest of Midian**: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.

Ex. 18:1 When Jethro, the **priest of Midian**, Moses’ father in law, heard of all that God had done for Moses, and for Israel his people, and that the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt;

Northern Kingdom

1Kings 12:32 And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah, and he offered upon the altar. So did he in Bethel, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed in Bethel **the priests of the high places** which he had made.

1Kings 13:2 And he cried against the altar in the word of the LORD, and said, O altar, altar, thus saith the LORD; Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and

upon thee shall he offer the **priests of the high places** that burn incense upon thee, and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee.

1Kings 13:33 After this thing Jeroboam returned not from his evil way, but made again of the lowest of the people **priests of the high places**: whosoever would, he consecrated him, and he became one of the priests of the high places.

2Kings 17:32 So they feared the LORD, and made unto themselves of the lowest of them **priests of the high places**, which sacrificed for them in the houses of the high places.

2Kings 23:9 Nevertheless the **priests of the high places** came not up to the altar of the LORD in Jerusalem, but they did eat of the unleavened bread among their brethren.

2Kings 23:20 And he slew all the **priests of the high places** that were there upon the altars, and burned men's bones upon them, and returned to Jerusalem.

Amos 7:10 Then Amaziah the **priest of Bethel** sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, Amos hath conspired against thee in the midst of the house of Israel: the land is not able to bear all his words.

Judah and Jerusalem

When this construction is used of Judah and Jerusalem, it is almost always negative.

Jer. 1:18 For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the **priests thereof**, and against the people of the land. *They are viewed as corrupt, and Jeremiah is to speak against them.*

Mic. 3:11 The heads thereof [Zion, Jerusalem, v. 10] judge for reward, and the **priests thereof** teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us.

Zeph. 3:4 Her [the oppressing city, v. 1] prophets are light and treacherous persons: **her priests** have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law.

Psa. 132:16 I will also clothe **her [Zion's, v. 13] priests** with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy. *Unusual positive instance, but perhaps the promise is that in spite of their previous apostasy, he will bring them back to himself.*

Lam. 1:4 The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate: **her priests** sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness. *As throughout Lamentations, the city is under God's judgment.*

Lam. 1:19 I called for my lovers, but they deceived me: **my priests** and mine elders gave up the ghost in the city, while they sought their meat to relieve their souls.

Lam. 4:13 For the sins of her prophets, and the iniquities of **her priests**, that have shed the blood of the just in the midst of her,

The Person or Community whom they Support (like Micah)

2Kings 10:11 So Jehu slew all that remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, and all his great men, and his kinsfolks, and **his priests**, until he left him none remaining.

Jer. 2:26 As the thief is ashamed when he is found, so is the house of Israel ashamed; they, their kings, their princes, and **their priests**, and their prophets,

Jer. 32:32 Because of all the evil of the children of Israel and of the children of Judah, which they have done to provoke me to anger, they, their kings, their princes, **their priests**, and their prophets, and the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Jer. 49:3 Howl, O Heshbon, for Ai is spoiled: cry, ye daughters of Rabbah, gird you with sackcloth; lament, and run to and fro by the hedges; for their king shall go into captivity, and **his priests** and his princes together.

Ezek. 22:26 **Her priests** [of the land] have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.

Psa. 78:64 **Their priests** [of the Lord's people] fell by the sword; and their widows made no lamentation. *Result of the Lord's wrath on Shiloh, vv. 59-60*

Ezra 9:7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and **our priests**, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.

Neh. 9:32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on **our priests**, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

Neh. 9:34 Neither have our kings, our princes, **our priests**, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.

Neh. 9:38 And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and **our** princes, Levites, and **priests**, seal unto it.

The Deity Served

This construction can refer either to pagan gods, or to the Lord. One text combines them both:

2Chr. 13:9 Have ye not cast out **the priests of the LORD**, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and have made you priests after the manner of the nations of other lands? so that whosoever cometh to consecrate himself with a young bullock and seven rams, the same may be a **priest of them that are no gods**.

Pagan

1Sam. 5:5 Therefore neither the **priests of Dagon**, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.

2Kings 10:19 Now therefore call unto me all the prophets of Baal, all his servants, and all **his priests**; let none be wanting: for I have a great sacrifice to do to Baal; whosoever shall be wanting, he shall not live.

2Kings 11:18 And all the people of the land went into the house of Baal, and brake it down; his altars and his images brake they in pieces thoroughly, and slew Mattan **the priest of Baal** before the altars.

Jer. 48:7 For because thou hast trusted in thy works and in thy treasures, thou shalt also be taken: and Chemosh shall go forth into captivity with **his priests** and his princes together.

2Chr. 23:17 Then all the people went to the house of Baal, and brake it down, and brake his altars and his images in pieces, and slew Mattan the **priest of Baal** before the altars.

The Lord

1Sam. 14:3 And Ahiah, the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, **the LORD'S priest** in Shiloh, wearing an ephod.

1Sam. 22:17 And the king said unto the footmen that stood about him, Turn, and slay the **priests of the LORD**; because their hand also is with David, and because they knew when he fled, and did not shew it to me.

1Sam. 22:21 And Abiathar shewed David that Saul had slain **the LORD'S priests**.

Is. 61:6 But ye shall be named the **Priests of the LORD**: men shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.

Psa. 99:6 Moses and Aaron among **his priests**, and Samuel among them that call upon his name; they called upon the LORD, and he answered them.

Psa. 132:9 Let **thy priests** be clothed with righteousness; and let thy saints shout for joy.

2Chr. 6:41 Now therefore arise, O LORD God, into thy resting place, thou, and the ark of thy strength: let **thy priests**, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, and let thy saints rejoice in goodness.

2Chr. 13:12 And, behold, God himself is with us for our captain, and **his priests** with sounding trumpets to cry alarm against you.

Priestly Order to which they belong

2Kings 23:4 And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest, and **the priests of the second order**, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the grove, and for all the host of heaven: and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them unto Bethel.

High Priest כהן הראש

2Kings 25:18 And the captain of the guard took Seraiah **the chief priest**, and Zephaniah the second priest, and the three keepers of the door:

Jer. 52:24 And the captain of the guard took Seraiah **the chief priest**, and Zephaniah the second priest, and the three keepers of the door:

2Chr. 19:11 And, behold, Amariah **the chief priest** is over you in all matters of the LORD; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king's matters: also the Levites shall be officers before you. Deal courageously, and the LORD shall be with the good.

2Chr. 26:20 And Azariah **the chief priest**, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hastened also to go out, because the LORD had smitten him.

2Chr. 24:11 Now it came to pass, that at what time the chest was brought unto the king's office by the hand of the Levites, and when they saw that there was much money, the king's scribe and the **high priest's** officer came and emptied the chest, and took it, and carried it to his place again. Thus they did day by day, and gathered money in abundance.

Major and Minor Judges

Figure 17 shows the number of verses allocated to each character in the book. The description of Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon as “minor judges” is clearly justified on the basis of length—but what about Othniel, who at 5vv is almost as short as Jair, Ibzan, and Abdon at 3?

The difference there is the presence of the cyclic structure of Rebellion, Retribution, Repentance, and Restoration, sometimes with Rebuke and Rest. But these are not consistent: Samson has only Rebellion and Restoration, and Shamgar and Tola are said to deliver Israel.

The feature that sets the Seven apart is the presence of the introductory statement of rebellion. The statement that the children of Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord appears in Judg. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1. But something close appears with Abimelech,

Judg. 8:33 And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god. Judg. 8:34 And the children of Israel remembered not the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side:

Gooding vs. Tanner on Gideon

Gooding and Tanner³⁹ offer different analyses of the Gideon story, which affects the validity of Way's ring analysis of the whole book. How do these analyses differ in the balance among sections?

How do these align? The real issue is in the assignment of 8:1-21, which includes both fighting against the remaining Midianite leaders (emphasized by Tanner) and violence against Israelites (emphasized by Gooding). Could the ABC-ABC noted by Tanner in this section (p. 187) be seen as transitional between Gooding's two sections? Tanner emphasizes the similarity of pattern on the two sides of his overall ABCBA, but there are many cases where corresponding panels do *not* have the same structure.

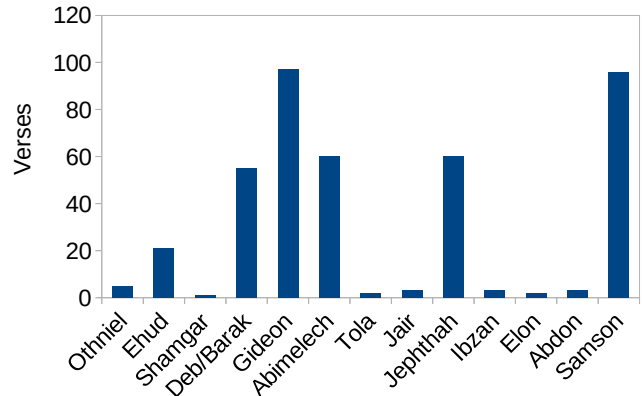


Figure 17: Verses allocated to each major character

39 Gooding. The Composition of the Book of Judges. Eretz Israel, vol. 16, 70*-79*. 1982. Tanner. Textual Patterning in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Case Study in Judges 6-8. Ph.D. Thesis at The University of Texas at Austin, 1990.

Judges 17-18

Another observation: “Effecting deliverance” deals with conflict with Midian, but it has two parts, the second involving conflict with Israelites as well as Midian. “Call to deliver” deals with conflict with Baal, and also has two parts, the second involving conflict with the men of Ophrah. Recognizing this parallelism (Table 7) warrants the split between ch. 7 and 8, and allows a concurrent reading as by Gooding. Perhaps the lesson is that the structure is not “either-or.”

| Gooding: | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|-----|
| Ref | Subject | vv. |
| 6:1-32 | Stand against idolatry | 32 |
| 6:33-7:25 | Fight against the enemy | 33 |
| 8:1-21 | Fight against his own people | 21 |
| 8:22-32 | Lapse into idolatry | 11 |

| Tanner: | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|-----|
| Ref | Subject | vv. |
| 6:1-10 | Introduction to Gideon | 10 |
| 6:11-32 | Call to Deliver | 12 |
| 6:33-7:18 | Gideon’s Struggle to Believe | 26 |
| 7:18-8:21 | Effecting Deliverance | 29 |
| 8:22-32 | Conclusion to Gideon | 11 |

| Ref | Gooding | Tanner |
|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 6:1-10 | Stand against idolatry | Intro: Oppression, apostasy |
| 6:11-32 | | Call to deliver |
| 6:33-7:18 | Fight against the enemy | Struggle to believe |
| 7:19-25 | | Effecting deliverance |
| 8:1-21 | Fight against own people | Conclusion: Deliverance, apostasy |
| 8:22-32 | Lapse into idolatry | |

Table 6: Comparison of Gooding and Tanner

| Ref | Gooding | Tanner |
|-----------|--------------------------|---|
| 6:1-10 | Stand against idolatry | Intro: Oppression, apostasy |
| 6:11-32 | | Call to deliver |
| 6:28-32 | | Call to deliver: opposition of Ophrah |
| 6:33-7:18 | Fight against the enemy | Struggle to believe |
| 7:19-25 | | Effecting deliverance |
| 8:1-21 | Fight against own people | Effecting deliverance: opposition of Succoth and Penuel |
| 8:22-32 | Lapse into idolatry | Conclusion: Deliverance, apostasy |

Table 7: Another analysis