

Reformed Theological Seminary

Itching Ears:
The Tragedy of Micah and the Levite

Submitted to Dr William Ross
OT510 / Judges to Esther

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May 16 2019

Introduction

It's hard to compete for attention with gang rape, murder and body parts in the mail: it is therefore no surprise that, of the two lengthy stories in the Judges epilogue, the story of Micah, the Levite and the clan of Dan has been somewhat overshadowed by its gorier neighbour. But though the story is drawn in subtler colours, it is a tragedy in its own way no less poignant – and no less revealing.

In this paper, we will consider the particular contribution of 17:7-13 to this unfolding story. As we do so, we will see that Micah brings his downfall on himself by inviting an anti-Moses figure to be his father. The tragedy of false worship, which is simultaneously the responsibility of false leaders and the responsibility of the falsely led, becomes clear: like all true tragedies, it is self-wrought.

Setting

The book of Judges begins with a two-part prologue and ends with a two-part epilogue. The prologue views Israel's failure first through the lens of warfare and then through the lens of worship. In the epilogue, the bitter fruit of this failure is seen, first with a tale of false worship and then with a tale of fraternal warfare. The whole book of Judges is probably chiastic; in any case, chapters 17-18 mirror 2:6-3:6.¹

The story itself is split into three unequal parts by the famous formula “in those days there was no king in Israel” (17:6; 18:1).² Each section begins by introducing a new player into the drama: first Micah (17:1), then the Levite (17:7) then the tribe of Dan (18:1). The third part, with all three “characters” introduced, is by far the longest, as each story arc comes to its

¹ Michael J. Glodo, “Judges,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 179–80.

² OT translations are my own; NT translations are ESV.

conclusion.

In this account, we first of all meet Micah, whose name (a shortened form of Micaiah) means “who is like Yahweh?” (The irony will become evident: nobody in this story has the faintest idea what Yahweh is like.³) Micah is a superstitious thief, who returns a colossal quantity of stolen silver to his mother in fear of her curse. In an effort to avert the curse, the two make an idol out of part of the silver and appoint one of Micah’s sons to act as the household priest.

Then we meet the Levite, as yet unnamed; as he wanders through the hill country of Ephraim, Micah meets him and sees the opportunity to upgrade his religious system. The Levite moves in and becomes the household priest in place of the son.

Finally, we meet the Danites, looking for an inheritance. En route to seize the city of Laish, they come across Micah’s household; both they and the Levite see the opportunity for some mutual benefits, and the Levite packs up the household idol and goes with them. Micah attempts to confront the tribe, pleading with them that they have taken everything from him. The Danites do not care, and Micah loses his religion. The Danites go to the far north of the country, take Laish, and set up the Levite as priest with the idol as centre of worship. Finally it is revealed that the Levite in question is none other than the grandson of Moses.⁴

3 Clinton McCann, *Judges* (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 120.

4 Or at least a descendant of Moses: “Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Moses” (18:30) may possibly omit generations.

Some have argued that the Levite may not in fact be this Jonathan, since the text doesn’t “explicitly” identify the two (David Z Moster, “The Levite of Judges 17-18,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 4 (2014): 731.) This is a true statement, and also frankly ridiculous on the face of it. It is the sort of thing that can only be rendered remotely plausible by an approach which assumes the story is an amateurish collation by a hapless editor. Why on earth would the story focus on the Levite for so long and then switch, with no mention of the switch, to speak of a different character, in the same role, for a single line? But a more detailed look renders the claim even more unbelievable. The Danites’ invitation to the Levite in 18:19 is to be a priest to the tribe, *כָּהֲן לְשָׁמֶן*. In 18:30, this is exactly what Jonathan and his sons are: *כָּהֲן כָּנָנִים*. The vocabulary is identical. To see 18:30 as merely an unrelated note, rather than the fulfilment of the suggestion in 18:19, shows more about the reader’s competence than the author’s intention.

Moster goes on to claim that even if the Levite *is* Jonathan, the fact that he is unnamed until 18:30 shows that his identity is “not necessary for understanding the story, at least not until the very end.” At this point one despairs and gives up scholarship entirely, retiring to the Yukon and growing a long beard through which one can mutter phrases such as “death of civilisation”.

Thus our passage, 17:7-13, is part of the build-up to the climactic episode of chapter 18 and cannot be understood apart from it. Micah's triumphant assurance of blessing in 17:13 can only be seen properly in the light of his despairing final line in 18:24. Nevertheless, the structure of the passage means that this pericope is also to some extent a self-contained unit.

Passage Overview

Structure

Although the passage is brief, for structural purposes we can divide it into two: the action (v7-12) and the interpretation (v13).⁵ The first half has something of a chiastic structure:

A. Location, v7 (“and he sojourned there [Bethlehem]”; first verb **וַיֵּשֶׁב**)

B. Movement, v8 (“and the man went”)

C. Micah speaks, v9a

D. The Levite replies, v9b

C’. Micah speaks, v10a

B’. Movement, v10b-11a (“and the Levite went in”)

A’. Location, v11b-12 (“and he was in the house of Micah”; last verb **וַיֵּשֶׁב**)

It readily appears that the story as a whole is about the movement of the Levite from Bethlehem in v7 to Micah's house in v12,⁶ and centres on the Levite's statement of v9b. And that statement reinforces the emphasis on location: “I am from Bethlehem, Judah, and I am going to sojourn wherever I can find.” In fact, this is the third reference to “Bethlehem, Judah” in as many verses. Thus considering the Levite's relationship to the crucial locations of Bethlehem and Micah's house look set to provide us with the key to the passage.

⁵ Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 427; Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 256–57.

⁶ In the Hebrew the two locations are more obviously parallel: Beth-Lehem and Beth-Micah.

The Action

So then, when we are introduced to the Levite in v7, it begins as though he is simply a native of Bethlehem: he is a youth (אֶנְיָג) “from the clan of Judah”. But then there are two quick-fire clauses that upend this impression: “and he was a Levite; and he sojourned there”. In what sense, then, “from the clan of Judah”? Evidently by location not descent. Describing him as from the tribe of Judah, and yet a sojourner in Judah, creates an impression of rootlessness and instability that the Levite will more than justify in the following events.⁷

We can dig deeper, however. Why is he living in Bethlehem? That is not one of the Levitical towns (cf. Josh 21). We are thus reminded of the incomplete conquest; Levites are presumably living in the wrong places because the right places are unavailable.⁸ More than that, the phrase “he sojourned there” followed by the Levite’s journey in v8 reminds the reader of Deut 18:6, where the identical phrase (מַשְׁנֵן־גָּדָה) is found; in that law, the Levite who wishes to leave may go to the central place of worship in Israel.⁹ The Levite’s upping and going to the “hill country of Ephraim” (v8) excites hope in the reader that he may be about to do exactly that, for the tabernacle is at Shiloh in that same hill country (18:30). But no: he is wandering “to sojourn wherever he could find.”¹⁰

The repeated emphasis of v7-9, then, is that *the Levite leaves Bethlehem*. This focus on that particular place deserves attention, particularly when we come to chapter 19 and find that terrible story also contains a Levite leaving Bethlehem. The moral would appear to be that

7 Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 386.

8 Butler, 385. Once we learn that this Levite is descended from Moses, and hence a Kohathite, the problem becomes more acute: the Kohathite towns were not in Judah at all. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002), 338–39.

9 Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 486.

10 It is interesting, also, that מַשְׁנֵן־גָּדָה has the same consonants as Gershom, the Levite’s father. Cundall suggests that this was the original referent, but that seems to undervalue the skill of the author, who is laying in this first introduction to the Levite an allusion to the Big Identity Reveal to come. Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, TOTC (Leicester: IVP, 1968), 186.

Levites shouldn't leave Bethlehem – which is on the face of it a curious one given that it's not a Levitical town in the first place. But the matter becomes clearer when we notice that in chapter 19 the Levite leaves Bethlehem and finds his disaster at Gibeah. These are David's and Saul's hometowns respectively. This is symbolic; the point is that for Israel's worship (represented by the Levite) to abandon the house of David leads to disaster.¹¹

Following the Levite's central confession that he has left Bethlehem, Micah proposes a deal that should suit them both. The youth is to be to him “a father and a priest”, in exchange for “ten pieces of silver a year, and a suit of clothes, and [his] board”. Several things are worth mentioning here.

The idea that the youth (**נָעַז**) could be a father (**בָּאֵךְ**) to a householder like Micah seems a polite fiction on the face of it, and the narrator in v12 notes with characteristic compression that the Levite does indeed become a priest to him – but there is no mention of him being like a father; instead he becomes “like one of his sons”. The satire is deliberate; the whole situation is farcical.¹² In fact there is a silence here which strikes a darker note than farce, for what has become of the son who was ordained earlier? The silence reflects the attitude of the characters: Micah does not care.¹³

Moving on from the family details, however, it is striking how utterly this set-up disregards

11 Block, rather oddly, thinks that the fact the Levite leaves Bethlehem makes a pro-Davidic slant unlikely; Butler correctly points out that the Levite is seen as rootless even when in Bethlehem. The point is not that Bethlehem is a bad place, but that it's a bad place to leave. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 485; Butler, *Judges*, 385. The question of monarchy raises the interesting question of the date and authorship of Judges, beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, however, the reference to “captivity of the land” in 18:30 is usually taken to imply a final editing after Northern exile in 783. (cf. e.g. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 420.) Some, however, suggest emending “land” to “ark”, which might allow for a very early date to the book – and even, possibly, the traditional authorship of Samuel. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 135.

12 Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges, Berit Olam* (Michael Glazier, 2016), 236; Butler, *Judges*, 375; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 488. Remarkably, Cundall sees the passage in the opposite light: Micah is a father to the Levite and vice versa, and “many minister-congregation relationships would be improved” if such mutual fathership was common! This is exegesis cheerfully unmoored from the actual concerns of the text. Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, 187.

13 Barry Webb, *Judges and Ruth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 220.

God's law; and how it does so in multiple ways. Priests were not allowed to serve before age 30 (Num 4:3,30), which rules out a **לְשִׁבְתָּה**.¹⁴ This Levite turns out not to be from Aaron's line (18:30) and thus not qualified for the priesthood anyway. The Law had already provided stipulations for the living of the Levites (Deut 18:1-5), and later prophets were to condemn priests selling their services (Hos 4:4-10, Mic 3:5-8).¹⁵ Worship was to be at God's house, not Micah's, and the priests were to serve God, not private individuals. Idols were to be destroyed not ministered to.

The religion demonstrated by Micah and the Levite, then, is one which still retains some recognisable outward trappings of genuine Yahweh-worship (Micah clearly knows that Levites are associated with worship) and yet utterly misses the mark. (One might reflect, for example, on the relationship between Micah and his mediator; if the mediator is beneath him, like one of his sons, what does that say about the God he is attempting to worship?) To the reader of Judges, this is all too familiar – recall Gideon's ephod and Jephthah's vow.¹⁶ The difference here is that these elements are not part of a wider story of warfare and conquest; the religion of Micah's house has received the entire focus of chapter 17.

In v11a there is a phrase which I believe helps unlock an important aspect of the whole story in chapters 17-18. “And it pleased the Levite to dwell with the man.” The interesting thing about this phrase is that it nearly an exact quote of Exod 2:21: “And it pleased Moses to dwell with the man.” The only change is that the Levite takes the place of Moses.¹⁷

This seems to me extremely suggestive; it forces us to look at the Levite and ask whether

14 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 485.

15 McCann, *Judges*, 122; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 486–87.

16 Butler, *Judges*, 389.

17 In Hebrew the phrases are **וַיַּזְאֵל מֹשֶׁה לִשְׁבַּת אֶת-הָאָישׁ** and **וַיַּזְאֵל כָּלֹוי לִשְׁבַּת אֶת-הָאָישׁ**.

there are Moses parallels. As soon as we ask, the answer is evident. The Levite goes to Micah as Moses went to Jethro. But Moses was leaving Egypt; the Levite was leaving Bethlehem, the heartland of God's people. Moses was a sojourner ("Gershom") when away from Yahweh's people; the Levite is a sojourner amongst Yahweh's people. Moses comes to a pagan priest, who through his influence turns to Yahweh; the Levite comes to a member of Yahweh's people, and becomes to him a pagan priest. Moses led Yahweh's people from Egypt to Canaan, the land of inheritance; in chapter 18, the Levite will accompany some of Yahweh's people out of Canaan to claim an "inheritance" apart from the promise.

The Levite can thus be reasonably called an anti-Moses figure. As such, the revelation in 18:30 is far more than simply a shocking twist. The Anti-Moses is a direct descendant of Moses. Perhaps more than any other detail in the book of Judges, this highlights the *generational* element at the heart of Israel's failure (2:10,19). Moses had pressed upon Israel the duty of teaching all God's words to their children (Deut 6:7), that the fear of Yahweh might be passed down from generation to generation (Deut 6:3). But Moses' own grandson does not fear Yahweh, and indeed does not appear to really know anything about him.

The Levite is an anti-Moses in one further way: he never shows a single sign of leadership. Other than drifting out of Bethlehem, every action he takes is suggested to him by someone else; all his choices are dictated by simple self-interest. Moses led the people of Israel, but the Levite merely potters along complacently with the Danites, telling them what they want to hear. He manages single-handedly to strip Micah of everything and to egg the Danites on to throwing away their inheritance, and he accomplishes all of this apparently without possessing a spine. Such is the amazing power of the false teacher; his sting is the sting of a jellyfish.

The Interpretation

Micah's speech in 17:13 stands out in the whole of chapters 17-18 as the only soliloquy, marked off between the chiasm of 17:7-12 and the refrain of 18:1. In this verse we get Micah's interpretation of the preceding events and his prediction for the future. Chapter 18, of course, will show the prophecy to be utterly unfounded.¹⁸

Micah's delight, however, is worth considering. Here is a man who desires Yahweh's blessing, and is overjoyed when he thinks he has it. But his reasoning ("for I have a Levite as a priest") is purely pagan. It has nothing to do with seeking to worship as Yahweh has commanded; there is no apparent interest in even knowing what that is.¹⁹ Instead, effective worship is seen as the accumulation of amulets; the more Yahweh-related things Micah amasses (an idol of Yahweh, a man of Yahweh's priestly tribe), the more confident Micah can be of Yahweh's blessing. His mother's curse threw him into a panic (17:2); now, finally, he is assured of blessing instead. He has worked hard and paid handsomely for his religious reformation; and yet it is all a mirage. In Micah, genuine religious desire is allied to a Yahwist veneer, but the beating heart of his religion is thoroughly Canaanite. On this there can be no real blessing.

Micah's tragedy

The Levite abandons Bethlehem, the house of David; the Levite is a spineless anti-Moses; Micah is an opportunist who wastes no time in installing his own private priest. What unites these themes? The answer is leadership. The Levite is the terrible leader of Judges 17-18, who does no leading and brings destruction on everything he touches. But Micah is also

18 Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 429.

19 Lest we become too sympathetic to Micah, it is worth remembering that the tabernacle is just down the road in Shiloh (18:31). He could know what Yahweh commanded and do it if he really wished.

implicated, as he is the mover in getting the Levite into his household; he leads his leader into leading him. And of course in the Levite leaving Bethlehem, we see foreshadowed the great tragedy of Israel to come: that their leaders will forsake the house of David, and that even the house of David will in a sense forsake the house of David. These aspects of disastrous leadership will continue to interweave themselves throughout the Deuteronomistic History. How often, as with Ahaz, the worst leaders are simply cowards. How often, as with Ahab's introduction of Baal, false leaders lead falsely because the people love to be falsely led. How often, as with Saul, those who live amongst the promises seem to be strangers and sojourners there.

This devastating problem receives no real solution in the Old Testament. But it makes us long for the leader who has the courage to stand against the whole world and face the cross; the leader who lives by faith in the promises, and who is at home with his God; the leader who condescended in love for sinners and yet never accommodated himself to sin. This story should stir the heart of the believer to great gratitude for Christ.

And this side of Christ, the passage contains a serious warning. "These things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor 10:6). It remains the case that those like Micah, who desire the form of godliness without its power (2 Tim 3:5), will gather teachers around them who say what their itching ears want to hear (2 Tim 4:3). The story of Micah demonstrates the tragedy of such an action; it always ends with a cry of emptiness (18:24). Those in Christ's church given the responsibility of teaching must not be cowards, but must stay in Bethlehem at all costs. And every member of his church must look to it that they worship in God's way, by God's word, in the clear light of Christ.

Soli deo gloria.

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