

MANIPULATING GOD

(Judges 17:1-18:31)

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If Samson did what was right in his own eyes, so much more the Israelites in the double conclusion. Each conclusion is full of admonitions of what not to do, given through example after example. None of the activities of chapters 17-18 is sanctioned by God. In fact, quite to the contrary.

From the beginning we are confronted with one evil after another, all done by a person whose name means "Who is like Yahweh?" (Micah):

- disregard for parental well-being
- theft (from a parent)
- magical curse
- magical blessings (made in the name of Yahweh!)
- homemade idols of pilfered silver
- production of a private shrine
- making of a personal priest (son)
- adopting of a personal priest (Levite)
- self-made religious paraphernalia

Micah evinces an ignorance of God's Law and covenant in their most basic teachings. His confident assertion (17:13) that Yahweh will prosper him because he has a Levite for a priest reveals the false confidence that people often have that they know God and that they can manipulate him by cultic and institutional means and so secure their own futures.

The Danites make essentially the same error as Micah, and their shrine eventually suffers an even worse fate (2 Kings 15:29). The treatment of this theme is satirical throughout the story. This issue of a human attempt to manipulate Yahweh links the first conclusion with the cycles section, especially the out-group judges' attempts to manipulate the Lord (see esp. Gideon and Jephthah).

It is ironic that the Danites even bother to inquire of God's will when God had already revealed his will in the allotments to the tribes. There is no need for another inquiry. Micah's illicit ephod and the *teraphim* (household gods) with their inherent ties to divination determine that the inquiry will automatically be considered unauthorized and unlawful. And while the Levite's oracle declared in the name of Yahweh is what they want to hear, it is patently not from Yahweh, who condemns these practices. Modern interest in the future, especially as secured through divinatory means, has increased significantly in the last few decades. The growth of the use of psychics and horoscopes are just two examples.

It is clear that the Levite is totally motivated by material concerns. The fact that later he accepts an even more attractive offer (18:19-20) confirms his materialistic impetus. In this he is a continuation of the motif of the person who can be bought (cf. comments on Delilah, esp. in 16:1-31).

The Danites, who properly should have destroyed Micah's cult shrine (according to Deut. 12:2-3), instead find it worthy of acquisition, even if by means of theft (18:15-17). They have no more integrity than Micah. Thus, the syncretism and paganism that permeates this first conclusion determine its moral bankruptcy.

