

"IDOLS, A RENEGADE LEVITE, AND A RIVAL CULT"

(excerpt from *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth*)

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Thematic Emphases

Because of persistent paganism combined with a leadership void, Israel became spiritually polluted and torn apart by social anarchy. During the time period depicted in chapters 17-18 Israelites maintained a semblance of religion. They prayed in the Lord's name (17:2), dedicated money to the Lord (17:3), desired the Lord's favor (17:13), inquired concerning the divine will (18:5), and pronounced oracles in the Lord's name (18:6). It is a telling commentary, however, that the Lord is mentioned only in quotations, not in the narrative framework of the story (Davis 1984, 159). He is essentially absent from the story as a character. Though the characters speak of him, their actions do not honor him (McMillion 1999, 242-43). The account is marred by (1) a mother who overlooked her son's greed, thought she could manipulate the Lord with solemn formal statements, and believed the Lord was pleased with idols, (2) a man (Micah) who was obsessed with idols and thought he could gain the Lord's favor by having his very own shrine and priest, (3) a Levite who sold his services to the highest bidder and proclaimed oracles without genuine divine authority, and (4) a group of very angry Danites who, though unable to take their divinely appointed land, believed might made right, justified their violent deeds by appealing to a bogus divine oracle, and launched a conquest of territory nowhere near their allotted inheritance.

Marais aptly summarizes the story as follows: "The story of Micah and his Levite thus represents the apostasy and the degeneration of Israelite society as it influences family life and cultic institutions. It is a world where everything is free for the taking by either those who can afford it or those who have the most power. With no eyes to behold and to measure, other than their own, chaos reigns in the world of the judges. Yahweh is absent except for the thwarted visions the characters might have had of Him. He did not act, nor did he speak. He was a mere memory within a curse or a blessing" (1998, 138).

Exegetical Idea: *As Israel persisted in paganism and quality spiritual leadership was absent, spiritual confusion and chaos overtook the covenant community as a corrupt and superficial form of religion replaced genuine worship.*

Theological Principles

James 1:27 states that pure religion in God's sight has two basic components: concern for the weak and vulnerable (that is, an ethical dimension that makes the best interests of others a priority) and spiritual purity (defined as keeping oneself unstained by the pagan world and its standards). Judges 17-18 depicts the antithesis of pure religion. The main characters in these chapters are motivated solely by self-interest and greed and approach God in a thoroughly pagan manner.

In this story and the following one, the need for theocratic kingship emerges (17:6; cf. 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). These editorial comments envision the kingship ideal depicted in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 and anticipate the rise of the Davidic monarchy. (For further discussion, see the "Theological Themes" section for 19:1b-21:25 below.)

Theological Idea: *When God's people persist in paganism and quality spiritual leadership is absent, spiritual confusion and chaos can overtake the covenant community as a corrupt and superficial form of religion replaces genuine worship.*



Homiletical Trajectories [Preaching Applications]

(1) As noted above, God is present in this story in name only. His absence from the narrative per se is striking. Though we know from the book's prologue and stories that God was active throughout the Judges period, his absence here reminds us that his rebellious people forfeit the blessing of God's presence in their experience.

(2) This story illustrates how corrupt the covenant community can become when they embrace a pagan worldview. Selfishness, greed, intimidation, and violence become the order of the day. A renegade, pagan form of religion emerged in Israel at this time. Renegade, paganized religion is characterized by:

(a) a view of God that is pagan to the core (17:1-6). (Micah's mother devalued ethics, the core of genuine worship of the Lord, and tried to manipulate God for her own benefit.)

(b) a greedy spirit that tries to manipulate God for material benefits (17:7-18:1a). (Micah and the Levite are greed personified. They use their religion for financial gain.)

(c) a self-centered attitude that uses power to further its own interests (18:1b-31). (The Danites, while desiring God's stamp of approval on their self-serving efforts, reject God's purposes and ethical standards, and resort to violent methods that have no place for the rights of others.)

(3) The story also reminds us of the importance of godly leadership for the covenant community. The narrator's comment in 17:6 (cf. also 18:1; 19:1) informs us that the paganism evident in the story could have been curtailed or prevented if there had been a leader who promoted covenant fidelity by word and example.

Preaching Idea: *When we persist in the paganism of our culture and quality spiritual leadership is absent, a renegade form of religion can replace genuine worship, bring spiritual confusion and chaos with it, and prevent us from experiencing the blessing of God's presence.*

One can definitely develop the second trajectory at the homiletical level, focusing in detail on the characteristics of renegade religion, in contrast to the twin pillars of genuine religion as stated in James 1:27. A preaching idea for this might be: *We must avoid falling into the trap of renegade religion, which is plagued by (a) a pagan view of God that devalues ethics and attempts to manipulate God, (b) a materialistic attitude, and (c) a self-centered and self-serving use of power.*