

SUMMARY REFLECTION OF JUDGES 17:1-18:31

Judges

Barry Webb

There's no doubt that the story as a whole is a telling critique of the shrine at Dan, and could serve, or even been better written originally, as an attack on the religious policies of Jeroboam I and his successors. But here, as part of the epilogue to the book of Judges, it serves a purpose that is both more particular and more general than this. First, it proves more deeply the "evil" (*hāra*) that Israel did again and again in the period of the judges. The introduction has described it generally as "forsaking Yahweh" and "serving the Baals" (2:11-12). The body of the book has given some particular instances of this: Gideons "ephod" (which ended up functioning just like a Baal altar; 8:27), the worship of "Baal-Berith," especially by the citizens of Shechem (8:33; 9:4; cf. 9:46), and the worship of the gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, the Ammonites, and the Philistines (10:6). The worship of Gideon's ephod and Baal-Berith (covenant Baal) may have been corrupt forms of Yahweh worship, while the worship of the gods of the foreign nations such as Aram and Moab could hardly be constructed as the worship of Yahweh at all. Against the backdrop of the Sinai covenant, which is referred to repeatedly in the speeches of rebuke in the book of judges (2:1-6; 6:7-10); 10:11-14), all such worship involved unfaithfulness to Yahweh tantamount to spiritual prostitution (8:33). In practice, what is common to all these deviant practices is idolatry in one form or another. What the present narrative does is to lay aside for a while, all the other matters that the episodes in chapters 3-16 have been about, and focus on this particular one so that we can understand it at a greater depth. It shows the shape that the religious life of every day Israelites took among members of the post-Joshua generation, when apostasy began to take hold (2:10-12).

It is precisely being so focused in this way, however, that the story of Micah and the Danites is able to transcend its particular context and speak to worshipers of the God of Israel in whatever age they live, including our own. For from beginning to end it is a story about the folly of idolatry, which is a universal and perennial problem. It shows how it arises from ignorance. The characters in the narrative from beginning to end (Micah's mother, Micah himself, his Levite, and the Danites) are all ridiculously unaware of the incongruity of their actions. Micah's mother consecrate some money to Yahweh for the making of an idol. Micah whose name means "who is like Yahweh?", creates "house of gods." The Levite is happy to serve at Micah's idolatrous shrine, and Micah thinks that Yahweh is sure to bless him because he has acquired the services of this Levite. And the Danites repeat all the sins of Micah, only on a grander scale! What we are being shown is how people behave who have a background of covenant faith, but have lost touch with the saving acts of God that brought it into being and the word of God that prescribed how it should be lived out (2:1-3). It is a story of "another generation" that has only a vague awareness of where it came from, and is no longer moored



securely to its gospel foundations. It shows us how people behave when they are still religious but no longer know what truly pleases God. They do "whatever is right in their own eyes" and expect Yahweh to bless them for doing so (17:13). In such a confused environment religion becomes merely a means of self advancement, and provides fertile soil for a host of other evils to take root and flourish: lying, theft, the buying and selling of religious services and offices, and unwarranted violence. The grim humor of the story reinforces the message that such religion is both absurd and tragic.

In its fundamental subject matter and message, then, the story of Micah and his idols is one with the accounts of Aron and the golden calf, the syncretism of Jeroboam I and his successors, and the prophetic denunciations of idolatry that arc right across the Old Testament and continue (via the intertestamental literature) into the New, from Exodus 20 to Romans 1, and on through 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 to the very end of the Canon. The last book, Revelation, speaks of idolatry as an evil that rebellious human beings will persist in down to the very end (Rev. 9:20). And the church is no less immune to it than Israel was if it loses touch with its gospel foundations. Hence the warning of the aged apostle John, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21 NIV). It would serve just as well as a closing reflection on the story of Micah and the Danites.