

Week 20 - Danite Decline - Judges 18:1-31

Scripture Reading: Joshua 19:40-48

Introduction

As we begin our study today, I want to address something that we haven't talked about yet - when these events we are looking at took place.

The normal tendency is to read the accounts in the Bible the way we would read a novel and to see the events that occur as if they were on a timeline, with each one happening after the preceding one in sequential order.

But that often isn't the case as the human authors sometimes grouped the events they related with other purposes in mind.

And I believe that's the case with these final chapters and the accounts they contain.

What happened with Micah and the Levite in chapter 17 and the events we'll be looking at this morning concerning the tribe of Dan didn't occur after Samson's judgeship.

They actually occurred much earlier - very early in the period of the judges.

The events almost certainly occurred no later than Othniel's judgeship and might have happened while Joshua was still alive.

Likewise, the events recorded in chapters 19-21 also most likely took place earlier in the timeline of the book of Judges - perhaps after Othniel but before Ehud.

We won't be going into all the evidence and rationale behind how to date the different accounts, but suffice it to say that the timeline is disputable and unsettled to any significant degree of certainty.

However, this early dating seems to be the best option I have seen in my studies.

None of this should cause us any problems as we recognize that the author's point in sharing these accounts is to show what the people of Israel were like and how they were becoming Canaanized.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of an early date for these accounts is just how quickly and thoroughly they became like their neighbors.

Last week we looked at the account of Micah and the Levite, and we saw how, despite his Yahwistic name, Micah proved to be idolatrous and, for the most part, ignorant of even the most basic tenets of God's Law.

In fact, there wasn't anything we could point to about Micah, his mother, or his priest that was positive.

They were all despicable people - thieves, idolaters, and opportunists - with nothing to commend them.

Yet they were comfortable, confident, and happy with their lives, and the image of Micah we were left with was of a man who was sure that God would prosper him because he had hired a Levite as his personal priest.

Because there was no king in Israel, and everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes.

Like on the reality show, *Survivor*, the people had, in effect, voted God off of his throne and put themselves on it.

But, unlike on *Survivor*, God won't surrender his rule simply because his people reject him, and he wasn't done with Micah, as we will see in our passage today.

In Judges 18 the focus of the narrative moves away from Micah to portray a tribe of Israel venturing out entirely as a matter of human initiative and effort to find a place to live -and, surprisingly, we see them achieve perfect success.

Nothing in this chapter is as it should be as we will see the people's values and behavior are contrary to what God wants and yet, in the end, they have a territory they can call home.

And the fact that their sin succeeds, at least in the "short" term provides us with a warning today - as we will see.

Let's begin by first looking at the reason the Danites take the initial action we see related in chapter 18.

I. The rationale of the Danites

Look with me at verse 1 [Judges 18:1]:

In those days there was no king in Israel. And in those days the tribe of the people of Dan was seeking for itself an inheritance to dwell in, for until then no inheritance among the tribes of Israel had fallen to them.

From our reading of Joshua 19:40-48, we know that God had allotted Dan a portion of the land.

But in that passage we saw that the territory God had assigned to them was lost to them and in **Judges 1:34** we read a bit more detail about what exactly happened:

The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain.

So we come away with the understanding that what was wrong wasn't that no land had fallen to them by lot, as it had with all the tribes except Levi who as a special case, but that their allotment hadn't fallen to them in battle.

They hadn't conquered the people who were dwelling in the land and were forced to remain in the hill country.

They had not been able to possess the land God gave them so they were seeking a more convenient place to live.

And, since they had repudiated God and his rule over them, notice how our passage begins with the statement about there being no king in Israel - human or spiritual - they were left to rely on their own estimation.

So, instead of looking to God for his assistance in taking the land, they did what was right in their own eyes and set out to find territory they could claim for themselves.

And we can't allow the irony of them calling this anticipated territory their "inheritance."

The land that God had originally set aside for them and for the other tribes was an inheritance but that word isn't appropriate for land that is seized at the expense of another tribe.

And God had given the land they ultimately take for their home to Naphtali.

The Danites found themselves in the midst of a crisis, confined to two cities in the hill country on the edge of the land God had allotted to them, and desperate for a solution.

They needed a home of their own and their solution was a purely natural but humanistic one as they sent forth spies, or scouts, to find a place they were strong enough to take.

II. The reconnaissance of the spies

So in verse 2 we see them select five able men who they sent on a reconnaissance mission to find a place for them.

This action is reminiscent of the twelve spies who were sent to scout out the conditions in the land back in Joshua's day. The mission the spies, or scouts, were given is rather vague as we read they were to "spy out the land and to explore it" which literally means to wander through the land check it out.

But the way our author reports their arrival and lodging at Micah's home makes it seem like they headed straight for it.

This too parallels the account of the spies in Joshua's day and their lodging at Rahab's house making it possible that our author is making Micah's home the equivalent to the house of the prostitute.

It appears that the young Levite was the one who met the scouts when they arrived because we are told that they recognized his voice immediately - but not what it was about his voice that was recognizable.

Still, we remember that he came from Bethlehem and so he likely had a southern accent or spoke in the dialect of that region and it could have been that they had encountered him in his previous wanderings as he looked for employment.

And when they recognized him the scouts began to fire questions at him:

"Who brought you here?" "What are you doing in this place?" "What is keeping you here?"

Those are all natural questions and, as a Levite, he should have answered them thus:

“Yahweh brought me here.” “I am instructing Micah’s household in the ways of Yahweh.” “I am faithfully fulfilling my call as a Levite.”

But those aren’t his answers as we see him instead give Micah full credit for his current condition.

“Micah has been really good to me.” “Micah has employed me.” “Micah has made me his personal priest.”

Clearly the Levite’s primary obligation is to Micah and not any deity - let alone the God of Israel.

Had he been fulfilling his rightful spiritual role, he would have asked the same questions of the Danite scouts that they asked him.

And, if they were honest, they would have had to said, “The tribe of Dan has sent us on a mission.” “We are here to spend the night.” “We’re scouting for a suitable land we can claim as our inheritance.”

And if he was properly fulfilling his priestly role he would have rebuked them and told them that they should go where God had sent them, they should be stoning Micah for idolatry and not enjoying his hospitality, and they should go and fight for the land God had allotted to them.

But the young Levite wasn’t a proper priest and he was just as humanistic as the Danite scouts he was talking with.

Like Micah, the scouts readily recognize their good luck in meeting a true Levite so they ask him to inquire of God on their behalf to see if their mission will be successful.

And, like Micah, who believed his cultic shrine would enjoy a divine stamp of approval by the presence of the Levite, they believe that the Levite can give their mission divine authority through the pronouncement of a positive oracle.

So, believing that a Levitical priest had special access to the mind of God, they breathlessly ask him to inquire of *Elohim* to see if their mission will be a success.

Their sincerity in seeking an oracle makes the Levite’s response odd.

First, he doesn’t appear to actually inquire of God at all and yet he immediately answers.

We aren’t told how the Danites expected him to make his inquiry but we can presume that it would involve the use of the ephod and the household gods of divination and some ritual.

But the young Levite seems to instinctively know the answer as he speaks for Yahweh seemingly without hesitation as he begins with the weak and formulaic pronouncement that they should “go in peace.”

And then he gives a very vague answer to their question saying literally, “The course you are on is before the Lord.”

In other words he is simply saying that God has his eye on them which could be taken positively or negatively.

After all, God could be watching with an eye of approval or with a critical eye of disapproval.

However, people typically tend to hear what they want to hear and so it is with the scouts as they interpret the Levite’s pronouncement positively and continue on with their mission.

Eventually, they came to Laish which is the same place referred to as Leshem in Joshua 19:47 at the northern extreme of the land far from the territory God had allotted to them and in the allotment of Naphtali.

The area they found was among the most productive in the region.

It was relatively remote and it boasted a pleasant climate and was watered by copious springs.

And the scouts discovered that it was populated by a tranquil, unsuspecting people who, while they lived under the general umbrella of the rule of the Sidonians, were far enough removed from them to be inconvenienced by them.

That kind of idyllic life was just what the restless people of Dan were looking for and they saw that the people would be easy to defeat making it the perfect solution.

Our author seems to be in a bit of a rush to relate what happened next as he telescopes the narrative dramatically. He abruptly has the scouts return to the breathless inquiry of their tribesmen as to what they had discovered. Actually, our English versions add a good bit to the inquiry just to make it more readable because all they actually got out in the original Hebrew was, "What did you..?" before the scouts butted in to give their report. And the scouts were enthused to the point of impatience as they prodded and encouraged and even asked why their tribesmen weren't already on the move. And they, of course, added in a pinch of piety saying that God had already as much as delivered the land into their hands.

The next section of the account begins in verse 11 where we see the relocation of the tribe.

III. The relocation of the tribe

Or at least a portion of the tribe relocated as we see only 600 armed men head out to take the new territory.

Later on we will see that they also had their wives and children in tow so there was probably somewhere around 2,400 people altogether that made the move.

But that's still a very small number and suggests a limited response to the report of the scouts and history will show that the rest of the Danites will ultimately disappear.

Once more, we are left with the impression that the home of Micah was an intentional waypoint on the journey as we are told the migrants again stopped there and had another, significant encounter with the young Levite.

Our author relates the events in a way that is rather humorous as he shows the five scouts go to the others to relate the fact that there is a complete set of religious and cultic items there.

And they basically tell their fellow tribesmen, "You know what to do."

Now, what they should have done is taken Micah and his personal priest out and stoned them to death.

That was the penalty God prescribed in Deuteronomy 17.

But that's not what they had in mind and when they arrived at Micah's house they entered his shrine and took his idols. And when the Levite challenged them they made clear that it was in his best interest to keep quiet and come along with them.

And, in the parlance of the Godfather, they made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

But, while they had 600 armed men standing by to enforce their actions, they didn't actually need to use force to get the Levite to come along with them.

They simply offered him a promotion and he jumped at the opportunity.

Our text says "his heart was glad" meaning that he was tickled pink to have been given a better position.

And we are shown once again that he was an opportunist with no loyalty to anyone but himself.

We aren't told how Micah missed the fact that there were 600 armed men along with women, children, and animals on his property but it seems his discovery that they had absconded with his idols and his priest was slow in coming.

But, when he did eventually discover what had transpired, he rallied his neighbors and took out after the Danite clan eventually catching up to them.

And the conversation that takes place when he does is classic.

He shouts at them to halt and the Danites turn around and ask him what his problem is and why on earth he has come after them bearing arms as if to fight them.

It's a taunting, insulting question meant to humiliate Micah.

And humiliate him it does as Micah's response can only be characterized as pitiful.

He cries out that the Danites have stolen his gods that he had made with his own hands and taken his priest leaving him with nothing.

Think of the irony involved in that utterance.

First of all, Micah was from a wealthy family and was still a rich man.

Second, he is upset over gods - gods that he had made - gods that couldn't defend themselves let alone him.

Third, the Levite, who had come to him on a mercenary quest has now proven to be a true mercenary and the reason he had stayed and served Micah in the first place was the reason Micah couldn't hang on to him.

Micah has been robbed and betrayed.

He has lost his shrine and his Levite that he thought guaranteed God's favor so it's little wonder he now felt himself naked, alone, and vulnerable to the forces of evil.

We can't help but feel a bit of sympathy for Micah, wrong as he was because the Danites are bullies.

And they ratchet up their brutality by responding to Micah's complaint telling him he had best shut up because he has a nice family back home and it would be a shame if someone were to come along and harm them.

Micah realizes that he and his neighbors are no match for the Danites and the last image we have of Micah is of him turning to slink back home without saying another word.

And once more our author compresses the narrative as he quickly states that the Danites took the gods that Micah had made and his priest and traveled on to Laish where they slaughtered the people and burned the city with fire.

Then the Danites rebuilt the city, renamed it after their patriarch, and set up Micah's idols and installed his priest to serve in their cultic shrine.

And the account closes with revelation of the Levite's name and his lineage and the fact that he and his descendants continued to serve as priest to the tribe of Dan until the time the Assyrians deported them in 734 B.C.

In other words, God permitted their idolatry and allowed their cultic shrine to exist for roughly 600 years.

Conclusion

I think you would agree that this is a compelling, well-told narrative.

But, at the same time, it makes us a little uneasy because there is no one in the narrative that is praiseworthy.

No one displays any sort of devotion to Yahweh; no one behaves with integrity; no one shows even a hint of spiritual understanding - and yet the Danites are successful.

Only Micah suffers any setback that we could understand as God's judgment for his idolatry and that's something that we have to read between the lines to see as our author doesn't chalk it up to God's activity.

Everything in the narrative is put forth as being of human origin and activity.

So what are we to make of this account and what lessons can we take from it and apply to our lives today?

Let's begin by looking at the people and what we can learn from their example.

The first thing we see is what I would call the common denominator or where people regress to when they aren't guided by God's Word.

People will naturally adopt some sort of standard by which to order their lives and their societies and when, they don't look to God's Word, the result is some human-engineered, culturally acceptable system.

People default to doing what is right in their own eyes and substitute their judgement for God's wisdom.

That's the behavior demonstrated by everyone in this two-part account from chapters 17-18.

Every last character was serving themselves and their own interests with no regard for God or what God desires.

Another thing we need to take note of is the compounding nature of sin.

We all want to believe that our pet sins are personal, private matters that only concern us as individuals.

But, as we see in this narrative, Micah's theft impacted his mother first and then exploded into full-blown idol worship that corrupted at least three generations of his family before it infected the priesthood and, ultimately, tribe of Dan for hundreds of years.

Sin that is unacknowledged and unrepented tends to spread - perhaps slowly and imperceptibly at first- but it will spread and grow beyond our wildest imaginations.

A third tendency we should note is illustrated by the actions of the Danite migrants when they came to Micah's home and engaged with his priest.

It's one that we could easily miss because so many of us tend to do just what they did.

The Danites inquired of the priest to know God's will when God had already clearly revealed his will to them.

There was no question about the boundaries of the territory allotted to Dan and there was no question that God would help them possess it.

But it had proven to be difficult; the Danites hadn't enjoyed instant success so they were looking for a way out.

And in making their inquiry to Micah's illegitimate priest they were trying to manipulate the situation in a way that they could disobey God while pretending they were justified in doing so.

People are still doing this - people who claim to be followers of Christ still do this, local churches and denominations do this.

It seems the desire to convince ourselves that our course is right and proper and sanctioned by God knows no bounds so we should look at the Danites as a cautionary tale for our times.

There is much we can learn from the ancient people in this narrative but we also learn something about God.

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of the account concerning the Danites is that they were successful in spite of their disobedience, self-direction, and brutality to those who were weaker than themselves.

Even Micah was successful to some extent because he suffered no consequences we are told about for his theft, idolatry, and corruption of the priesthood.

We could perhaps stretch things a bit to say that he ultimately lost all he had illicitly gained but we can't say that it was the result of God's justice - God's Word simply relates it as a bully preying on a weaker victim without mentioning any involvement in the matter by God.

The shiftless, opportunistic Levite certainly wins out in the temporal sense as he lands a cushy gig serving in the Danite cultic shrine.

The Danites who have completely failed to trust God in possessing their allotted territory wound up taking a really great territory in their own strength and they prospered there for some 600 years.

It can be difficult for us to understand why God would permit any of this.

A popular saying in the world of church consultants is, "Healthy things grow!"

And while that is a truism it's also true that unhealthy things can also grow for a time.

After all, cancer often grows at an alarming rate until it ultimately kills its host.

So, one of the big lessons we should learn is that being successful is no guarantee that you have been faithful.

If our estimation of an early date for these events, within two generations of Moses if Johnathan the young Levite was truly Moses' grandson, tells us just how quickly spiritual cancer can grow.

And the reality is that forgetting God and even openly rebelling against God can be sustained for a time and even show some apparent success - especially when what you are doing appeals to the culture around you.

But God doesn't always respond swiftly and he most often permits us to pursue our own desires for a period of time and sometimes for an extended amount of time like he did with the Danites.

And that can lead us to wrongly convince ourselves that we are doing well after all - even in spite of what God has said in his Word.

But we need to understand that, in spite of appearances, even in spite of apparent success over a long period of time, God isn't asleep at the switch and he hasn't changed his mind.

God simply doesn't strike people down with a lightning bolt the instant they go astray - he often allows opportunity and often prolonged opportunity for repentance.

At the same time, God is also allowing those who refuse to repent time and opportunity to pile up evidence of their offenses so that they will have no possible defense when his judgment comes.

As Peter wrote in **2Peter 3:9** - God isn't slow, he's patient, his judgment always arrives and it arrives right on time as we see in the mention of the exile in verse 30 of our passage.

There is a warning here for the church in all times and places because the allure of self-direction is so strong in us.

As Paul writes in **Romans 12:2** we must always be working toward knowing and understanding God's Word because that is the way that we will know God's will.

Amanda and I were talking this week and we discussed how nature abhors a vacuum and how, if we aren't continually filling our minds with God's thoughts as we find them in his Word, our natural inclinations will rush in to fill the void.

And the end result will be the condition found in the first half of Romans 12:2; we will be conformed to the world around us just like the Israelites in the time of the Judges.

Next week we will be looking at what may well be the most bizarre account in the Bible as we look at Judges 19

The story it contains is as brutal and disturbing as it is weird and it is easy to read it and completely miss the point of it

So, as you read through the chapter this week, be prepared to be shocked by it and then come to hear the sermon where I will try to explain why God included it in his Word and what we should learn from it

Let's pray