

Judges 17-18 • How to Start a False Religion

Introduction

Have you noticed how often cults and false religions are started by the simplest of people, usually in the shadow of Christianity? Those who later grow into the lead spokespersons display a common pattern of behavior that is often rooted in taking something that was originally outright opposing Christianity, and redefining it to give it all the appearance of legitimacy necessary to bring it into the church itself. Here we have the textbook example of this process beginning with Micah's mother that eventually establishes itself within the very physical and spiritual boundaries of Israel itself. In New Testament terms, this is known as "the spirit of antichrist" with which every generation of Believer has had to fend off.

¹Now there was a man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. ²He said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse in my hearing, behold, the silver is with me; I took it."

And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD."

³He then returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother, and his mother said, "I wholly dedicate the silver from my hand to the LORD for my son to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore, I will return them to you."

⁴So when he returned the silver to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the silversmith who made them into a graven image and a molten image, and they were in the house of Micah. ⁵And the man Micah had a shrine and he made an ephod and household idols and consecrated one of his sons, that he might become his priest. ⁶In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

[Read 17:1-3]

Q: What is the most obviously, blatant thing wrong with Micah's mother?

A: She uses the name of the Lord in her speech, but her actions misapply His name in regards to her actual beliefs and behavior.

Q: Why isn't Micah's action to return the money—although morally admirable—actually an action that can be attributed to a right relationship with God?

A: He returns the money, motivated by the curse he had heard his mother bring, not out of any fear of not following or listening to God.

Q: What is wrong with Micah's mother's actions?

A: In the name of the Lord she breaks the foremost commandments of the Lord's Laws and makes a graven image to worship in place of the Lord Whose name she invokes.

Q: What is wrong with Micah's spiritual heritage—his spiritual upbringing?

A: His mother uses the name and expressions of God to lend credibility to her completely false beliefs and practices. It has resulted in his mother replacing God's proper place of authority in his life so that he fears and reveres **her** rather than the One True God.

Point: A false religion begins with false teaching, most often using the very terms and name of God as if such tricks of vocabulary can give them legitimacy. As with the example of Micah returning the silver, they will often hold up moral examples of behavior which, in reality, are not good spiritual examples, but have the air and feel of respectability.

[Read 17:4-6]

Q: Taken as a whole, what have all these actions combined to create?

A: A false religion, duplicating the essential elements of the one true faith. There is a false god, false spirits, a false temple, and a false priesthood.

Q: What is really meant by v.6? Is this a "plug" to illustrate that such things never happen in the presence of earthly kings?

A: It's a way of stating that there was no accountability, no one enforcing or reinforcing God's Law. Everyone was a law unto themselves.

Point: A false religion duplicates the structures, organization, and even many of the practices of Christianity for a single, bottom line purpose: To do what is right in their own eyes, to satisfy self—not God.

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⁷Now there was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, of the family of Judah, who was a Levite; and he was staying there. ⁸Then the man departed from the city, from Bethlehem in Judah, to stay wherever he might find a place; and as he made his journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim to the house of Micah. ⁹Micah said to him, “Where do you come from?”

And he said to him, “I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to stay wherever I may find a place.”

¹⁰Micah then said to him, “Dwell with me and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten pieces of silver a year, a suit of clothes, and your maintenance.” So the Levite went in.

¹¹The Levite agreed to live with the man, and the young man became to him like one of his sons. ¹²So Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in the house of Micah. ¹³Then Micah said, “Now I know that the LORD will prosper me, seeing I have a Levite as priest.”

¹In those days there was no king of Israel; and in those days the tribe of the Danites was seeking an inheritance for themselves to live in, for until that day an inheritance had not been allotted to them as a possession among the tribes of Israel. ²So the sons of Dan sent from their family five men out of their whole number, valiant men from Zorah and Eshtaol, to spy out the land and to search it; and they said to them, “Go, search the land.” And they came to the hill country of Ephraim, to the house of Micah, and lodged there.

[Read 17:7-13]

Q: From the Levite’s behavior, what might we determine about the quality of his spiritual relationship in v.7-9?

A: He does not appear to be seeking a place in which to serve God in his role as a Levite, but rather to seek a place for himself. His priority is to please himself first.

Q: Are all Levites priests? Where should a Levite go to serve the Lord?

A: Only a small group of Levites are specifically designated as priests; most Levites serve the priesthood and, at this time, the operation of the Tabernacle currently located at Shiloh. This further testifies to what is spiritually wrong with him, how he is not personally satisfied.

Q: So what is the affect of the Levite accepting Micah’s offer?

1. He is accepting a way to become something he would never normally attain—to be a priest rather than just a servant of the priesthood. In other words, his pride has won him over.
2. He is further won over by his own greed.

Q: What does Micah continue to do in the spirit of what he has been taught by his mother?

A: He uses the appearance and practices of God’s Laws to lend legitimacy to his misapplication of same by appointing and consecrating his own priest, creating the basic elements of true religion, and incorporating a “legitimate” servant of the priesthood so that everyone will visibly see a credible relationship between the right things of God as misapplied to his false worship and practices.

Q: How do we know for sure, from Micah’s own lips, that he is not really seeking to please God?

A: Because according to v.13 he states, “Now I know that the Lord will prosper me”, he is seeking personal gain—not God’s ways.

Point: False religion loves to incorporate people with an established pedigree or well-known for their heritage in the true church so that they can display the image of legitimacy and further claim the things and name of God for their own purposes, which are always motivated by pride and greed.

[Read 18:1-2]

Q: What was the allotment of land given to Dan? What is their current situation?

A: They were given an inheritance west of Judah and south of Ephraim. Their southern border actually came into contact with the land of the Philistines. Their situation is that they have never followed through God’s original command to rid the area of the people God devoted to destruction, and therefore have not achieved either earthly or spiritual peace. So part of Dan has made the decision to seek land other than that which was originally assigned to it and goes searching. Ephraim being just to the north, it’s not surprising that they first encounter Micah’s false religion.

³When they were near the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young man, the Levite; and they turned aside there and said to him, “Who brought you here? And what are you doing in this place? And what do you have here?”

⁴He said to them, “Thus and so has Micah done to me, and he has hired me and I have become his priest.”

⁵They said to him, “Inquire of God, please, that we may know whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous.”

⁶The priest said to them, “Go in peace; your way in which you are going has the LORD’S approval.”

⁷Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were in it living in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and secure; for there was no ruler humiliating them for anything in the land, and they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone.

⁸When they came back to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, “What do you report?”

⁹They said, “Arise, and let us go up against them; for we have seen the land, and behold, it is very good. And will you sit still? Do not delay to go, to enter, to possess the land. ¹⁰When you enter, you will come to a secure people with a spacious land; for God has given it into your hand, a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth.”

¹¹Then from the family of the Danites, from Zorah and from Eshtaol, six hundred men armed with weapons of war set out.

¹²They went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. Therefore they called that place Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim.

¹³They passed from there to the hill

[Read 18:3-6]

Q: According to Old Testament Law, what should have been the Danites’ response upon finding the Levite and the false religion?

A: They should have put the Levite to death and destroyed both the shrine and all that was in it.

Q: What is wrong with what they do instead?

A: They treat it like a true religion, even asking the Levite to inquire of the Lord on their behalf. They act like there is nothing different between Micah’s false religion and the operation of God’s Tabernacle in Shiloh.

Q: What in their request betrays the root spiritual problem of the Danites?

A: They don’t seek to know whether or not they’re within God’s will but “*whether our way on which we are going will be prosperous*”. Their priority is self motivated by greed. They’re a kindred spirit to Micah and the Levite.

Q: Did the false priest actually inquire of God on their behalf?

A: When we compare other Scriptural instances of people inquiring of the Lord, it does not appear that he actually did so, but instead told them what they wanted to hear.

Point: *False religion attracts kindred spirits that are just as eager to please self and satiate greed as their own self. They attract significant numbers because they’re good at telling people what they want to hear, people disposed to pleasing their self rather than God.*

[Read 18:7-13]

Q: Is this what God originally commanded? Are these people on God’s list of nations devoted to destruction for their rejection of Him in favor of false gods?

A: This is neither the original allotment of land, nor does it appear that this is a people group originally identified by God to be destroyed and their land absorbed into that of Israel’s.

Q: But like Micah’s mother and the Levite, what do the Danites have no hesitation in doing to give their efforts the appearance of legitimacy?

A: “...for God has given it into your hand...” (v.10) They use God’s name to justify their own purposes.

Q: How can we see that this is the fulfillment of their personal greed and desire?

A: Because the justification given in v.10 is that this territory is “a place where there is no lack of anything that is on the earth”.

Point: *False religion destroys the innocent in the name of Christ, even claiming that it is His will that they do so. Their true motivation, however, is to enrich themselves and satisfy their greed.*

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country of Ephraim and came to the house of Micah.

¹⁴Then the five men who went to spy out the country of Laish said to their kinsmen, “Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod and household idols and a graven image and a molten image? Now therefore, consider what you should do.”

¹⁵They turned aside there and came to the house of the young man, the Levite, to the house of Micah, and asked him of his welfare. ¹⁶The six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the sons of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate. ¹⁷Now the five men who went to spy out the land went up and entered there, and took the graven image and the ephod and household idols and the molten image, while the priest stood by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war.

¹⁸When these went into Micah’s house and took the graven image, the ephod and household idols and the molten image, the priest said to them, “What are you doing?”

¹⁹They said to him, “Be silent, put your hand over your mouth and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be a priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?”

²⁰The priest’s heart was glad, and he took the ephod and household idols and the graven image and went among the people.

[Read 18:14-20]

Q: Do the men mis-identify the attributes and features of Micah’s false religion?

A: No, they clearly identify them in terms which, according to Old Testament Law, would mandate their total destruction.

Q: What is the subtle thing that the five men have done to the rest of the group?

A: They have used the right terminology to identify things which are **NOT** of the One True God, the true religion to which they all belong. By doing so, and allowing the others to make up their own minds what to do, the five men can either side with a decision to destroy the false religion, or be justified in their continued support of it by the decision of the majority.

Point: *False religion comes about by free will and choice on the part of its followers. A big part of the process is to allow people to use the terms and properties of true religion as part of their own personal, redefinition of choice. It’s called “being deceived”, and it comes about by false teachers making false representations, but in the end is embraced by each individual’s choice to reinterpret their pride and greed as being something from God.*

Q: What is the further evidence of the presence of spiritual weakness on the part of everyone involved?

A: The Danites don’t seek to destroy the false religion but to embrace it exclusively for themselves. The Levite, enticed by being recognized as “priest” by the very people over whom he would normally never be allowed to become a priest, embraces the ever growing appetite of his own pride and greed.

Q: What has transpired? What has been the path and growth of this false religion?

A: Having begun as one woman’s false teaching to her son, it has grown from infecting just a household and then a town, to being embraced by one of the very tribes of Israel. It has gained a significant foothold in the same house as true religion.

Point: *False religion is not content with creating something for itself alone; it always seeks to become part of the established and recognized legitimate church of Christ. This is because it originates with Satan who desires to destroy the things of Christ.*

²¹Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones and the livestock and the valuables in front of them. ²²When they had gone some distance from the house of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house assembled and overtook the sons of Dan. ²³They cried to the sons of Dan, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter with you, that you have assembled together?"

²⁴He said, "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away, and what do I have besides? So how can you say to me, 'What is the matter with you?'"

²⁵The sons of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, or else fierce men will fall upon you and you will lose your life, with the lives of your household."

²⁶So the sons of Dan went on their way; and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house.

²⁷Then they took what Micah had made and the priest who had belonged to him, and came to Laish, to a people quiet and secure, and struck them with the edge of the sword; and they burned the city with fire. ²⁸And there was no one to deliver them, because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with anyone, and it was in the valley which is near Beth-rehob. And they rebuilt the city and lived in it. ²⁹They called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father who was born in Israel; however, the name of the city formerly was Laish.

³⁰The sons of Dan set up for themselves the graven image; and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. ³¹So they set up for themselves Micah's graven image which he had made, all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh.

[Read 18:21-26]

Q: Does Micah ever claim that his religion worships the One True God?

A: No. As he states in v.24, "You have taken away my gods which I made..." As the originator of all this mess, he is actually most truthful about what he is doing, not trying to legitimize his actions with the terms and practices of the One True God; those are accomplished by his mother, the Levite, and the Danites.

Q: When confronted with the truth, how do the Danites respond?

A: With physical intimidation and threats.

Point: Every false religion can have its roots traced back to a source of outright false teaching and/or practices that made no original claim of affiliation with Christ. False teachers are the one that add the terms and appearance of conformity to Christianity to justify themselves. They take—usually with no apologies—from their original source and redefine it as their own, resorting to threats and intimidation of anyone seeking to expose them.

[Read 18:27-31]

Q: What is strategically, geographically, and even spiritually significant about Dan's new location to the furthest point north of Israel?

A: They are in direct contact with the nations there bordering Israel and will not only be the first line of defense politically, but the most visible representatives of Israel spiritually. They will not serve as a very good witness of either Israel's strength of character or devotion to the One True God. And since they were never a good defense against the Philistines in the south, they have not taken the steps necessary to being a good defense against forces and influences that will come from the north.

Q: What has most likely been the affect of Dan's pilgrimage to the north?

A: Along the way they spread the influences of their false religion to most of the tribes that would eventually comprise the "Northern Kingdom", those tribes that permanently separate from God and consistently practice false religion without every turning back.

Q: What is the only period of history when it appears that Dan will properly serve the One True God?

A: Only during Solomon's reign when the Tabernacle at Shiloh is replaced with the Temple in Jerusalem. But after Solomon's fall and the kingdom divides, Dan will continue to foster and bolster the practice of false religion.

Q: Who is the very first tribe carried away into captivity according to God's judgment?

A: Dan, conquered and carried away by the Assyrians.

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Q: What happened to the Danites that remained behind and did not migrate north?

A: They appear to have been absorbed into Judah, an illustration of being absorbed into the body of Christ rather than giving one's self over to the enemy.

Q: What will become of Dan?

A: In the official enrollment of those that came back to Israel after Assyrian and Babylonian captivity, Dan is not listed. In the listing of the 12 tribes of Israel in Revelation 7, Dan is not listed.

Overall Application

Observation: *Just as Judas was one of the original 12 and had to be replaced, so Dan appears to have betrayed his master and had to be replaced. Judas and Dan are probably illustrations not just of how false religion works within the church, but of the work and person of the spirit and person called "antichrist".*

- *Go through the sequence of events listed above. What are the identifying characteristics of false teaching and worship?*
- *Why is false religion not content to keep to itself? Why does it always seek to enter and establish itself in the church?*
- *Beginning with Micah's mother and moving forward, identify the correct measures that should have been taken at each point with each person or group. What is your role in the defense of the church? Of your own personal beliefs?*
- *The root of false religion is exploitation of pride and greed. What is the nature of your own struggles in these areas? Do you see the danger of not addressing them properly? How will you ensure that they're not used against you?*