



## Micah's Improvised Religion Judges 17

### Introduction

What was it like to live during the time of the judges? We are given three vignettes in the closing chapters of Judges. The first illustrates religious confusion and the decline of relationship to God in an average household. The second describes the harsh struggle for survival in communities. And the third portrays the gradual disappearance of the knowledge of God's law. These things inherently led to the breakdown of moral standards and the fragmentation of society.

Violence increased, people became separated and alienated from one another, and religion became a sham, a shallow form lacking either reality or relevance. As society degenerated, human relationships became devoid of any depth of feeling or commitment.

These pictures of life in the time of the Judges give concrete examples of the sad reality that, *In those days there was no king in Israel* (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) and *everyone did what was right in his own eyes* (Judges 17:6 and 21:25).

God had designed Israel to be a theocracy. He had given them His Law, led them to the Promised Land, and established them in the land. He had called his people to, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength* (Deuteronomy 6:5). This love was to be lived out in each individual life through close obedience to His commands. Before his death, Moses had called the people of Israel to, *Choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days* (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

But we have seen in the Book of Judges that Israel did not love, honor, and obey God as their King. They did not drive out the pagan inhabitants of the land as God had commanded (Judges 1:27-34) nor did they separate themselves from the pagan people and tear down the altars to the pagan gods (1:2). Instead, they *Did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods* (2:11-12).

The Israelites set themselves up as kings of their own lives, for *everyone did what was right in his own eyes*. Who is king of your life? How do your actions show this?

The first portrayal of the people doing what was right in their own eyes is in Chapter 17, Micah's makeshift religion and the wandering Levite. The second is the migration of the Danites (Chapter 18). The third is the Levite's concubine (Chapters 19-21).

### Outline of Judges 17

- I. Micah's Household Idols - Judges 17:1-6
- II. Micah's Household Priest - Judges 17:7-13

#### I. Micah's Household Idols - Judges 17:1-6

##### A. The Setting - Judges 17:1

The scene is set in the mountains of Ephraim. The head of a particular household was a man named Micah. His mother lived with him and he had at least two sons.

##### B. The Situation - Judges 17:2

His mother had been robbed of eleven hundred pieces of silver. She pronounced a curse on the guilty person and Micah heard it. She may have deliberately spoken in his hearing, for he confessed having taken the money and she immediately gave him her blessing, *May you be blessed by the Lord, my son*.

##### C. The Slide into Idolatry - Judges 17:3-4

###### 1. A subtle suggestion

Micah's home had the appearance of a godly home; the entrance of idolatry into his household was subtle. His mother explained her intended use of the money, *I had wholly dedicated the silver from my hand to the Lord for my son, to make a carved image and a molded image; now therefore, I will return it to you*. This was a mixture of good intentions with not so good intentions. She had planned to dedicate the money to the Lord, but she also interjected the possibility of making an idol. By saying the money would have been dedicated on behalf of her son, she put Micah in the place of being the one to have the idols made.

###### 2. A powerful hold

A little of the money may have been put aside for the Lord, but the immediate use of much of it was for two idols, one carved and one made from a mold. These were "teraphim" ("household gods"). Earlier in Israel's history, Rachel had absconded with her father Laban's teraphim, unbeknown to Jacob, her husband.

This incident took place when they were leaving her homeland, and it nearly caused a calamity (Genesis 31:32). It seems these household gods exercised a powerful hold even over people who knew about the true God, as in Rachel's case. She easily packed up and left her home, but not without her gods.

People who try to break a habit are often surprised to find that it has a powerful hold on them. Behind the figure of an idol there may exist a real demon. The apostle Paul warned against any fellowship with demons (1 Corinthians 10:19-21). Do you have "household gods" such as certain TV programs, books, magazines, music, art, which compete with God for your interest, time, and affections? Could it well be discarded, as the Ephesians voluntarily discarded their magic books after Paul's powerful preaching (Acts 19:19)?

### 3. An ignored commandment

The encroachment of Canaanite religion into one Israelite home shows the influence of paganism and idolatry as an ever-present and pervading threat to God's commands for holy living.

God gave commandment to Israel, *You shall have no other gods before Me*, the first commandment (Exodus 20:3). The second is, *You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God* (Exodus 20:4-5).

Today, in many countries, teraphim are commonplace. In this country, too, many homes have objects that promote the occult, exalt mankind apart from God, or portray a godless universe (Romans 1:25). These convey pagan, or ungodly, concepts. Often they are not displayed for artistic value but in rebellion against the Holy God, Creator of the Universe, who has revealed Himself in nature and in His word.

### D. The Accompaniments of Idolatry - Judges 17:5

Micah then brought in a shrine and added an ephod and more idols. Next, he consecrated one of his sons to act as priest. Idolatry is not a simple worship. It is complex. The idols needed a place, some adornment, and someone devoted to carry out a ceremony.

NOTE: An ephod was a vest-like linen garment designed as part of the official dress of Israel's high priest (Exodus 28:5-12; Leviticus 8:8). It contained a pouch to hold the urim and thummim which were used by the priests for discerning the will of God (Numbers 27:21; Deuteronomy 33:8). The pagan ephod which Micah made was apparently not a garment but a portable

image. However, it may have been designed to be used for a similar purpose.

Some people shrug off pagan idolatry as if it were empty superstition. They know the idols are worthless, as Psalm 115 says. *They have mouths but they do not speak, eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears but they do not hear ..... hands but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk. Our God, by contrast, is in heaven, He does whatever He pleases* (Psalm 115:3-7). He lives. He is real.

Others want the comfort of some kind of supernatural involvement. Like Micah and his mother, they chose to cover their bases by mixing pagan practices with the true worship of God. Do you add superstition or practices from other religions to the pure worship of God?

### E. Statement of Judges Theme - Judges 17:6

#### 1. *There was no king in Israel*

A major theme of the book is introduced here. It has been illustrated all along in the continuing need for deliverers. The people of Israel would soon make demands for a king (1 Samuel 8:19). When God's ultimate King appeared, they refused to acknowledge Him and clamored for His death (Luke 19:14; John 1:11).

#### 2. *Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

When everyone is a law unto himself and does whatever he pleases without restraint, anarchy results. The Book of Judges reveals the results of both these facts.

## II. Micah's Household Priest - Judges 17:7-13

### A. The Levite - Judges 17:7-8

A Levite, from Bethlehem in Judah, found the living meager and struck out for greener pastures. He came to the mountains of Ephraim and to Micah's house.

It is ironic that he was from the city where God's ultimate Deliverer, Jesus Christ, would be born to be both Priest and King. This would be prophesied in the book of a different Micah (Micah 5:2; John 7:42).

### B. The Arrangement - Judges 17:9-12

Micah, upon meeting the young man, inquired where he came from and learned that he was a Levite, looking for a place to stay. This was convenient, for Micah wanted a priest to conduct services for him. God had separated the tribe of Levi from the other tribes to be the priestly tribe. They had not been given an inheritance in the land, but were designated to do their work by living

among the other tribes and being supported by them. Joshua had named cities within each tribe where the Levites were to live and minister (Joshua 21:1-42). They had lodging and fields to tend for their food, and they were supported by gifts to the altar. Evidently, for this young priest, God's provision was not adequate in Bethlehem for he sought another place to live.

Micah offered him lodging, food, clothing, and ten pieces of silver a year. The arrangement seemed advantageous for both of them and they agreed. The Levite moved in, was consecrated as Micah's personal priest, and became like one of his sons (17:11). This was definitely not of God, for Levites were to be available to all. They were not for anyone's exclusive use, nor were they for hire.

#### C. Micah's Conclusion - Judges 17:13

*Now I know that the Lord will be good to me since I have a Levite as priest.* Micah wanted the comfort of religious formalism and wanted it in a convenient way. In devising his own plan, he moved out of God's will. Do you sometimes devise your own plans without submitting them to God's will?

Micah thought that he had procured God's favor by hiring a resident priest. He was like many who think that religion and prosperity are linked. But God does not owe us anything. The good that we receive from Him is of His grace and goodness, not ours (Titus 3:5). Arrogance and superstition are not faith.

#### Applications

1. Are you mixing worldly influences, objects, or practices with true worship of God? Will you simplify and purify your worship to be what God wants according to the New Testament (John 4:24)?
2. What practices or habits are like idols in your home? Will you put them away for good, out of your mind and home? What is the first step you will take in doing this?