

# JUDGES—WEEK 15

## DAN'S APOSTACY



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)  
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Dan's "scouts" find a vulnerable people in Laish and they kill them all so they can take their land. On the way, they rob Micah of his household gods and his priest. It's evil top to bottom.

Lastly, we begin what looks to be a heartwarming love story. It won't end that way though.

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T. M. Moore, Principal  
[tmmoore@ailbe.org](mailto:tmmoore@ailbe.org)

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Joshua, Week 15 — Dan's Apostacy  
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1 Judges 18:7–13 (ESV)

*Then the five men departed and came to Laish and saw the people who were there, how they lived in security, after the manner of the Sidonians, quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing that is in the earth and possessing wealth, and how they were far from the Sidonians and had no dealings with anyone. And when they came to their brothers at Zorah and Eshtaol, their brothers said to them, “What do you report?” They said, “Arise, and let us go up against them, for we have seen the land, and behold, it is very good. And will you do nothing? Do not be slow to go, to enter in and possess the land. As soon as you go, you will come to an unsuspecting people. The land is spacious, for God has given it into your hands, a place where there is no lack of anything that is in the earth.”*

*So 600 men of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan to this day; behold, it is west of Kiriath-jearim. And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.*

On a map of ancient Israel, the land of Dan is near the middle. Zorah and Eshtaol are on the eastern edge of Dan, about mid-way between the north end of the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean coast. The city of Dan is way up at the north end. That city was originally Laish.

<https://mapcollection.wordpress.com/2012/09/01/map-of-the-12-tribes-of-israel/>

So, this is a long scouting mission—over 100 miles each way. It makes no sense given the LORD's allotment to the tribe of Dan. The beachfront property in their original allocation is totally premium, while the city they're now scouting out is nothing special (except that their residents are easy prey).

But they couldn't drive out the Philistines from the coastal plain because they had “chariots of iron”.

It's chilling to read the word “unsuspecting” twice in this passage (and it appears again in Judges 18:27). The Hebrew word translated as “unsuspecting” (בִּטְחוֹן, Bo-tay-kha) is based on the word for trust or security. The people in Laish think they're secure. The Danites are taking advantage of their trust.

But no one is secure in a land where everyone does whatever is right in their own eyes.

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“Chariots of iron” appears to be a euphemism, since chariots made entirely of iron would be too heavy to be pulled by horses.

But some parts of a chariot, namely the axles and rims, are points of high stress that are more subject to failure. By making just those parts out of iron, the Philistines could make their chariots much more durable and reliable. That would give them an advantage in battle, though not a decisive one.

The Danites failure to drive out the Philistines wasn't because it was impossible. It was a failure of will.

So, they decide to pick on someone weaker.

2 Judges 18:14–20

*Then the five men who had gone to spy out the country of Laish answered and said to their brethren, “Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod, household idols, a carved image, and a molded image? Now therefore, consider what you should do.” So they turned aside there, and came to the house of the young Levite man—to the house of Micah—and greeted him. The six hundred men armed with their weapons of war, who were of the children of Dan, stood by the entrance of the gate. Then the five men who had gone to spy out the land went up. Entering there, they took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image. The priest stood at the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men who were armed with weapons of war.*

*When these went into Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the molded image, the priest said to them, “What are you doing?”*

*And they said to him, “Be quiet, put your hand over your mouth, and come with us; be a father and a priest to us. Is it better for you to be a priest to the household of one man, or that you be a priest to a tribe and a family in Israel?” So the priest's heart was glad; and he took the ephod, the household idols, and the carved image, and took his place among the people.*

The wording here is odd. “Do you know that there are in these houses an ephod, household idols, a carved image, and a molded image? Now therefore, consider what you should do.” The Hebrew idiom doesn't translate well to English.

But the action makes it clear. It must mean something like the English idiom, “You know what to do.” The “brethren” automatically know to be on the lookout while their five buddies rob Micah.

Forget the Ten Commandments; stealing Micah's stuff is intuitive to these guys. That's how far they've sunk.

But Micah's priest sees what they're doing and questions them. They respond like the thugs they are and suggest that the priest would be better off being the priest of a band of thugs.

And the priest jumps at the offer.

That's how far he's sunk.

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“A fish rots from the head first.”

If the priests have no ethics, then there's nothing left. There's no moral compass.

That's why the last part of the book of Judges says, over and over, “*In those days there was no king in Israel.*” They were leaderless.

It only occasionally adds, “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes,*” but that's what it means.

3 Judges 18:21–26

*Then they turned and departed, and put the little ones, the livestock, and the goods in front of them. When they were a good way from the house of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house gathered together and overtook the children of Dan. And they called out to the children of Dan. So they turned around and said to Micah, "What ails you, that you have gathered such a company?"*

*So he said, "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you have gone away. Now what more do I have? How can you say to me, 'What ails you?'"*

*And the children of Dan said to him, "Do not let your voice be heard among us, lest angry men fall upon you, and you lose your life, with the lives of your household!" Then the children of Dan went their way. And when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his house.*

Micah is totally wrong when he says, "You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you have gone away. Now what more do I have"

He needed to get rid of all that junk anyway. The household gods (which Matthew Henry calls "dunghill deities") just take up shelf space. If he does anything with them, they're even worse. Everything the Danites took is harmful. It's like they stole something that's radioactive. All it can do is harm them.

Meanwhile, the priest they removed was costing Micah *ten shekels of silver per year*. Now he isn't.

That's like getting out of a bad cell-phone contract without penalty.

But Micah can't think straight, and so he chases down the Danites. It's almost funny that Micah thinks he can reason with these clowns. Their response is totally predictable. If Micah wants to do something about it, he needs a bigger army.

So, Micah heads back home, where he and/or his mother still have ~900 shekels of silver. (The Danites didn't know about that). That silver is the literal answer to the question, "Now what more do I have?"

Meanwhile, the priest (who was making ten shekels per year) thinks he's gotten a promotion. Before, he was well paid but wasn't famous. Now he gets to minister to a great many Danites. Surely those guys will appreciate his talents. They're bound to give generously of their own wealth to support him, right?

Now that is funny.

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As dumb as everyone seems in this passage, we're just as bad. This is just the universal stupidity of sin. Our competitiveness locks us into the perspective of whatever we're competing over.

The classic example of this is when competitive people lose track of the fact that "it's only a game". I've seen this effect play out quite embarrassingly in church-league softball.

Even a terrible call by the umpire isn't worth getting all worked up over. (Except for that one time ... !)

4 Judges 18:27–31

*So they took the things Micah had made, and the priest who had belonged to him, and went to Laish, to a people quiet and secure; and they struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. There was no deliverer, because it was far from Sidon, and they had no ties with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth Rehob. So they rebuilt the city and dwelt there. And they called the name of the city Dan, after the name of Dan their father, who was born to Israel. However, the name of the city formerly was Laish.*

*Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. So they set up for themselves Micah's carved image which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.*

Laish has no alliances, thus almost no defense, so they're simply wiped out—no mercy. Then the Danites rebuild and rename the burned down city.

That's bad enough, but the real disaster is in the second paragraph. The new city of Dan is set up with its own worship center, complete with non-Levite priests and a carved image.

The passage then concludes by noting that Shiloh is still the location of the house of God. That's where Joshua set it up and where it remains.

*Now the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled together at Shiloh, and set up the tabernacle of meeting there. — Joshua 18:1*

*This man went up from his city yearly to worship and sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. Also the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there. — 1 Samuel 1:3*

Scripture concludes the story about the founding of the city of Dan by noting that Shiloh is still the true worship center. This is to highlight the great evil of what they've done.

Dan is now established as something akin to a rebellious counter-tabernacle.

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Rebellion is not always wrong. The United States was founded in rebellion. So was the Protestant Reformation.

But those two things had an essential difference—articulated logic. The Reformation was kicked off by Luther's 95 Theses (though that was preceded by many writings of Patrick, Hus and others). The US began with the Declaration of Independence, which is an amazingly thorough defense of that rebellion.

Hillsdale College has a fascinating video series on the Declaration of Independence as the first part of its on-line course titled "Introduction to the Constitution." It's free, but you might need to register.

<https://online.hillsdale.edu/>

5 Judges 19:1–9 (ESV)

*In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. And she brought him into her father's house. And when the girl's father saw him, he came with joy to meet him. And his father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days. So they ate and drank and spent the night there. And on the fourth day they arose early in the morning, and he prepared to go, but the girl's father said to his son-in-law, "Strengthen your heart with a morsel of bread, and after that you may go." So the two of them sat and ate and drank together. And the girl's father said to the man, "Be pleased to spend the night, and let your heart be merry." And when the man rose up to go, his father-in-law pressed him, till he spent the night there again. And on the fifth day he arose early in the morning to depart. And the girl's father said, "Strengthen your heart and wait until the day declines." So they ate, both of them. And when the man and his concubine and his servant rose up to depart, his father-in-law, the girl's father, said to him, "Behold, now the day has waned toward evening. Please, spend the night. Behold, the day draws to its close. Lodge here and let your heart be merry, and tomorrow you shall arise early in the morning for your journey, and go home."*

The Hebrew word translated as concubine (פִּי־לֶגֶשׁ, pee-leh-ge-sh) is confusing. The BDB lexicon lists concubine as the translation, but the passage goes on to clearly imply that she's the Levite's wife. Then the passage says she *was unfaithful to him*, which sort of certifies her as a concubine.

Thus, it's clear from the Levite's great effort to win her back that this is a love story. His heart wants her more than it wants justice. Something powerful is going on here. The rest of the story should be understood in that light.

One other feature is worth nothing though—the absence of names. That's not normal. The names are left out because the lesson isn't about a few individual people. It's meant to be general.

So he pursues her and *she brought him into her father's house. And when the girl's father saw him, he came with joy to meet him. And his father-in-law, the girl's father, made him stay, and he remained with him three days.* Obviously, her father is on board with his taking her back. All seems well.

But all is never well *when there was no king in Israel* (and everyone does what is right in their own eyes).

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What could possibly go wrong?

Everything. The rest of the book of Judges (the next fifteen DEEPs) will recount Israel's decent into incredible wickedness. Some of the most nauseating passages in the Bible are coming up.

But take heart, after you've managed to stomach all that, Jesus's crucifixion can make more sense.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. When have you seen a failure of will lead to meanness?
2. Who is an ethical leader in our culture?
3. When has someone lost track of the insignificance of what they're worried about?
4. What are the four references to God in the Declaration of Independence? (Lesson one in the Hilldale series answers this.)
5. What makes a great love story great?

*Items for prayer:*