

Right in Their Own Eyes

Part Two--The Rise of False Religion

Our last issue surveyed the general contents of the book of Judges and noted that the last five chapters of the book form a sort of "appendage" to the rest of the book. Further, we determined that the four sagas contained in this section, though found at the end of the book, must have actually occurred in the time-frame recorded near its beginning. We are now prepared to begin our study of the first of the four events in this section, found in Judges 17.

Micah & His House of Gods

We are introduced to a man named Micah, living in Mount Ephraim, who has robbed his own mother of 1100 shekels of silver. She curses the thief -- a serious matter -- and Micah confesses his crime. His mother then blesses him for his honesty and confesses that she had vowed to dedicate this money unto the Lord in the name of her son. So she hires a silversmith with 200 of the shekels, who, presumably, from the remaining 900 fashions both a graven (or carved) and a molten (made from metal poured into a mold) image. Micah sets up these idols in an "Elohim" house (vs. 5). He makes an ephod, part of the priest's garb, and ordains one of his own sons to function as his priest. Further, he incorporates "terraphim" -- the common household gods of the Canaanites -- into this collection of religious paraphernalia. Micah seems to be somewhat pleased with his setup but was ever looking for ways to improve upon it. He is able to add a crowning touch when an out-of-work Levite wanders through the area, looking for "a place". Micah offers him a salary of ten shekels a year, plus food and raiment, if he'll stay and work for him as his priest. The Levite accepts, and the story ends with Micah confidently boasting, "Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite as my priest."

False Origins

We are observing the origination of a counterfeit religious system. It's clear that, in Micah's mind, he's worshipping Jehovah and not some heathen deity. The silver, from which these idols were manufactured, was dedicated to Jehovah (vs. 3), and it is Micah's confidence that Jehovah will bless him (vs. 13) because of them. Yet, to any thinking person, he is clearly departing from the worship of Jehovah.

Whenever evaluating any religious teaching, it's always a good idea to check out its origins -- i.e. how did it begin? The system imposed by God on Israel during this period had its origins in a revelation given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Every detail of that system was meticulously spelled out, and any deviation from it was strictly forbidden. Micah's system, on the other hand, is in truth a do-it-yourself project! It arises from Micah's thievery and from his mother's ridiculous idea of fulfilling her vow. Never mind that graven images and the like were forbidden by God! In her mind, she had vowed to use this silver for God, even if it meant doing something absolutely abhorrent to God in the process.

This is subjective religion taken to the extreme, and manifests the theme of this section, namely, "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." As we pointed out in our last issue, this statement, falling as it does at the conclusion of the description of Micah's

system (vs. 6), does not speak of moral degeneracy, but of men deciding for themselves when, where, and how they will worship God, of which Micah is a prime example. Idolatry always has its beginnings in man's imaginations as man fashions for himself a god and decides for himself how he is to be worshipped.

False Systems

False ideas of worship inevitably give rise to religious systems that spring up around those ideas. Such is certainly the case here. Clearly, Micah is aiming at an imitation of the Mosaic system.

The ephod was often associated with those mysterious stones, the "Urim" and the "Thummin", which were used in ascertaining God's will. A.W. Pink speculates that these two stones were kept in a kind of pocket in the High Priest's ephod. As a question regarding God's will arose, the High Priest would reach into that pocket, pulling out one or the other of these stones. The selection of one stone would mean "yes", whereas the other stone meant "no". Although this is mere speculation, I strongly suspect that the process worked something like that. Micah thereby was providing the same functionality in his system as that found over at the Tabernacle where the true worship of God was taking place.

Notice the incorporation of the "terraphim" into his system. Not only does Micah imitate what God had revealed to Moses, he also embraces the out-and-out paganism of the Canaanites! This is religious syncretism at work, i.e. a blending and co-mingling of truth and error, right and wrong, God's revealed way and man's imagined way. Lest you think this a singular event, it's precisely what can be observed in Mexico where Roman Catholicism has merely covered over the old Indian superstitions, myths, and practices with a thin veneer of Christianity!

The man-made quality of this system reaches its height as Micah consecrates one of his sons, and then this out-of-work Levite, to preside over his system. It's interesting to note that Micah's offer was for this Levite to be to him "a father" (vs. 10), but, in practice, the Levite was "unto him as one of his sons" (vs. 11). How could it be otherwise? Micah is calling the shots, paying the wages, and clearly running the show!

False Assurance

Notice the smug sense of security which pervades Micah. He just "knows" that all will be well with him now. A false religious system always gives its adherents a false sense of assurance. So it was with Micah, and so it is today. Lost men in our society do not conduct their lives permeated by the fear and dread of judgment to come. They nod off to sleep at night with nary a qualm or care. Why? Because their hearts, like Micah's, tells them that all is well. They just "know" that, in the end, everything will turn out alright. The simple truth is this: men's hearts lie to them (Jer. 17:9)! Their hearts tell them "Peace, Peace" when there is no peace. Their hearts testify that "All is Well" when they stand upon the very brink of Hell. And should they become troubled in their soul concerning their eternal destiny, there are plenty of religious "hirelings" out and about who will be more than happy to dish out a little assurance for the asking.

Certainly there is a genuine assurance which accompanies true salvation. There is, praise God, the inner witness of the Spirit testifying to the heart of the saint that he is the child

of God. But beware if that inner, subjective witness does not agree with the outer, objective witness of God's Word concerning what a Christian is, believes, and does. Should the inner witness not agree with the outer witness, most likely, the inner witness is not the Spirit of God at all!

How could Micah be so sure? Perhaps the answer lies in the identity of his priest. The writer delays telling us his name until the end of the second story. Then, in Judges 18:30, he drops his name like a bombshell: "Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh." What's the matter? Are you a little "underwhelmed" by that disclosure? Well, so was I, until I learned of a textual gloss in this location of the text.

The word translated "Manasseh" is a Hebrew word containing four letters, transliterated into our alphabet as "MSNH" (of course, Hebrew is actually written in reverse order to the way we write words, but I'll use our ordering for the purposes of illustration). The problem is this: The letters "MSH" are all on the line of the text, whereas the "N" (or "nun" in Hebrew) is suspended over the line between the "S" and the "H". Some commentators speculate as to the reason for this suspended letter. They suppose it was inserted into the text by a scribe wishing to disguise the identity of Micah's priest, and that later scribes faithfully copied this insertion even to the detail of suspending the "N" over the rest of the text as the inserting scribe had done. Whatever the case, without the suspended "N", the name reads, not "Manasseh", but "Moses"! In fact, it is translated thusly in the NIV version of the Bible. The evidence for this is even more compelling when we learn that Moses' first son was indeed named "Gershom" (Cp. Ex. 2:22), whose son would probably have been living during the time frame of our text. Now, perhaps, you can appreciate why Micah was so thrilled to have this particular man as his priest and why he felt so certain that he would be the object of God's blessing.

The Counterfeit

The counterfeit is now complete and begins to function. Note the proximity of the counterfeit. Over at a place called "Shiloh" a grandson of Aaron ministers and serves a system of worship wholly ordered and arranged according to the pattern which God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai. And over here, at Mt. Ephraim, scarcely ten miles away by my reckoning, a grandson of Moses ministers in a Satan-inspired counterfeit! The counterfeit is always nearby the true.

Note also the similarity of the counterfeit. Does that system over at Shiloh claim to serve Jehovah? So does this one! Does that system have a High Priest? So does this one! Does that system's High Priest have an ephod? So does this one's! I doubt if anyone has ever counterfeited \$3 bills on pink paper! Why not? The goal of counterfeiting is to come as close as possible to the real thing. So Satan doesn't send us ministers saying, "Hi, I'm from the Devil, and I have a message which, if you believe it, will damn your soul!" Rather, he sends his ministers as "angels of light" (II Cor. 11:15), masquerading as the real thing, pretending to have the truth.

Lastly, notice the importance of the counterfeit. Most counterfeiters don't bother counterfeiting \$1 bills. Why not? It's not worth the bother. Counterfeiters go for the big money! And so does Satan. What's going on at Micah's "Elohim" house is not some minor, hair-splitting matter. It involves absolute apostasy from God's revealed way of worship.

Conclusion

May we learn from this our desperate need of an objective standard concerning Who God is and how He is to be worshipped, approached, and propitiated. May we come to value and submit ourselves to what God Himself has revealed in His Word. May we honor those ministers and ministries which seek to abide by that standard and align themselves with its truth. For here is the consequences that result when men "do what is right in their own eyes!" Tell men, in the area of religion, to take the ball and run with it, and here's where they'll run: Into blatant apostasy!

Yet some say, "Preacher, you go to Heaven your way, and I'll go to Heaven my way." Friend, it's not a question of my way or your way, but of God's way! Surely, some were probably saying then, as men say now, "but what difference does it make how men worship, just so long as they worship God!" Just the difference between right and wrong, between life and death, between Heaven and Hell!