

“Micah and the Danites”

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“So Micah said, ‘You have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and you have gone away. Now what more do I have?’” (Judges 18:24)

The story of Micah and the Danites appears at the end of the book of Judges, at a time when things are somewhat chaotic for the children of Israel. It was a time in between the leadership of the judges and the leadership of the kings. *“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6).*

In that context, we find the character of Micah, living in the mountains of Ephraim. The name “Micah” in Hebrew means “Who is like God?” and I like to take that as a little bit of direction for how to understand this story. All the characters in the stories in the Word represent parts of us. But which characters best represent the qualities of God? Is it Micah’s hospitality to the Levite? Is it Micah’s mother’s forgiveness of him? Is it the Levite, trying to be of service? Is it the Danites and their removal of Micah’s idol?

Idolatry is something that the Lord warns us against (see Exodus 20:1-6). It’s not that most of us are tempted to worship silver statues, but we *can* very often fall into the “idolatry” of making something in our life more important than living the life of love the Lord teaches us.

The Writings say that “idols” in the Word can represent either truths or falsities that we believe in:

“The teraphim were idols which were used when people consulted God or asked Him something. And because the replies which they received were to those people Divine truths, truths were therefore meant by them.... [In the opposite sense] *‘the teraphim’* stands for replies, but in that state iniquitous [immoral, false] ones. And because *‘the teraphim’* had this kind of meaning, some also had them in their houses, even though this was forbidden. One such person was Micah, in the Book of Judges.” (Secrets of Heaven 4111:5-6)

The word “idol” is etymologically connected to the words “ideal” and “idea.” All three words are related to the concept of having a “mental image” of something which could be either true or false. And the ways that we hold our “mental images” can either be healthy or unhealthy, useful or not useful. But whether they are true or not, useful or not, “idols” represent the things that we believe in, and put our faith in, and perhaps put up on pedestals. And amazingly, the Writings teach us that even ideas that are not completely true can still be connected to goodness:

“People who are governed by good yet possess unauthentic truths, and even people who possess falsities because they know no better (of whom there are very many within the Church, and also very many outside it, called gentiles), do indeed regard their falsities as truths. But since these falsities proceed from good and those people bend them towards good, there is nothing harmful about them, as there is about falsities that arise from evil. And since falsities arising from good are gentle and yielding, those people are capable of receiving truths, and do indeed receive them when given instruction by angels.” (Secrets of Heaven 9192.7; see also 1043, 2053, 3993.8, 6765; TCR 398.8)

In this story, Micah initially made a mistake in stealing his mother's silver, but he repented of that mistake, which was good. He also showed kindness and hospitality towards the Levite, even if he could have also been in a state of *intermediate* goodness as he thought about the benefits the Levite could bring to himself. The situation in this story of Micah being a good person and yet having idols in his house, could represent the very common situation in our own lives in which we have ideas or ideals that bring us comfort, even if they might not be completely true, and yet we are also trying to live a good life. Micah said to the Levite, "*be a father and a priest to me*" (Judges 17:10). "Father" and "priest" in the Word both represent states of goodness (see AC 2803, 3704.2; AR 854). So we could imagine that the Levite represents the goodness that dwells with us, despite the false ideas that we might also have.

And then there are the Danites. The Danites were the last of the twelve tribes to receive their allotment of land in the land of Canaan (see Joshua 19:40-48), and apparently they were not satisfied with their inheritance. It appears they may have been jealous of the tribes that received larger territories, so they went searching for more land, which they found and conquered in the north. As we heard in our lessons:

"*Dan*' means those who are guided by truth but not as yet by good.... The essential nature of those guided by truth but not as yet by good was also represented by the Danites who were to spy out the land in which they were to live (Judges 18). It was represented by their removal of the Levite from Micah's house and their making off with the ephod, teraphim, and carved image." (Secrets of Heaven 6396)

The behavior of the Danites represents our own behavior when we are guided by truth rather than goodness. We might believe we are acting righteously, but if we are not compassionate then we are not living the life of heaven. The Danites lived on the *outer* perimeters of Israel, which shows that when we are guided by truth over goodness, then we too live in the outer, or "*the lowest parts of the Lord's kingdom*" (Secrets of Heaven 6396). Whereas Micah lived in the *mountains* of Ephraim, in the *center* of the land. And his good nature represents living in the center of heaven. The Writings also say:

"The lot to Dan did not fall among the inheritances of all the other tribes but beyond their boundaries, (Judg. 18:1). ... For those who merely affirm truth and also good, but go no further, are not within the Lord's kingdom.... Even very wicked people may know truths and goods, and may also affirm them; but the true nature of their affirming is recognized from the life they lead." (Secrets of Heaven 3923:9)

And even though they were members of the children of Israel, the life the Danites were leading represents the behavior we want to avoid.

When I read this story, I crave a happy ending for Micah. But unfortunately, that is the last we hear of him. It seems that the Danites got away with their theft, and Micah remained a victim without justice. But fortunately, the memorable relation we heard in our lessons from *Heaven and Hell* offers a bit of the happy ending I crave for this story.

When Swedenborg was reading this story about Micah, he witnessed a non-Christian spirit in the spiritual world who was deeply pained because of what the Danites did to Micah. This non-Christian spirit had worshipped an idol during his physical life, and so he could very easily empathize with the pain Micah must have experienced. Some nearby Christian spirits were perhaps a little bit like the Danites, in that they were prioritizing truth over goodness. They couldn't see beyond the fact that this non-Christian was an idolater and therefore a sinner. And yet the end of that story showed that the non-Christian spirit was much closer to heaven than the Christian spirits, because of the compassion that he felt for Micah. *"There was a loving mercy about him and in his ignorance an innocence"* (HH 324). Those are the qualities of heaven and angels. He didn't know all the truths, or get everything right in his life, but his heart was in the right place, and that allowed him to learn the truth and find his home in heaven.

I think these two stories represent a fairly typical journey that we take in our spiritual lives. We tend to start out focusing on the truth. And that's an important thing for us to do. We need to know what is right and wrong; what hurts people and what doesn't hurt people; what is selfish and what is not selfish. And we have to start to learn to make *judgments* about those things. The name "Dan" means "judge," and this story appears in the book of *Judges*. But when we start to put the truth above goodness too much in our life, then we start to become a little too *judgmental* in the judgments that we're making, and we can become more like the Danites at the end of this story.

And we can sometimes end up doing exactly what the Danites did, which is that we look at other people's "idols" - other people's ideas that may or may not be correct - and we say: "You shouldn't have that!" We invalidate other people's ideas. And maybe those ideas are not completely true, but maybe they also bring someone comfort, like Micah's idols brought him comfort.

So then, in our journey towards heaven, I think we can begin to recognize that we need to turn things around. We need to have goodness be the priority, and truth be what supports that. And that state is described by the story in *Heaven and Hell* of the non-Christian spirit who had compassion for Micah. It didn't matter as much that this non-Christian spirit had worshipped an idol during his physical life, what mattered was his compassion for Micah. That is what put him with the angels in heaven. That is what allowed him to eventually see the truth more clearly.

There's a saying that goes like this: "Be kind, because everyone is going through something you know nothing about." As we pass by each other on the journey of life, it can be very easy for us to make judgements about other people; what they believe, and how they behave, just as it was very easy for the Danites to steal Micah's idol. But when we do that, when we prioritize truth over goodness, we often end up becoming the very thing we're criticizing. And that's what happened with the Danites. They ended up worshipping Micah's idol. Prioritizing truth over goodness pushes us out to the outer edges of the Lord's kingdom. But prioritizing goodness, like the non-Christian spirit did, is what brings us into the center of heaven.

I know there are times when I'm like the Danites in this story. I might look at another person's religious beliefs, or political beliefs, or cultural beliefs, and I can get into a "judge" mode, or an evaluator mode. I end up picking apart the correctness or incorrectness of other people, like the Danites ransacking Micah's home. I can end up feeling superior in my beliefs, like the Christian spirits looking down on the non-Christian spirit for being an idolater. I can end

up doing and saying things that invalidate another person's point of view, which probably feels to them like I've stolen something precious from them. Maybe their idea is not completely correct, but maybe it is attached to some genuine goodness. Maybe it brought them comfort in some way. I want to try to be aware of when I do that, and try to *not* do that. I want to try to repent of those thefts, like Micah repented of his theft.

I think there are other times when I'm more like Micah in this story, where I have an idea that may not be totally correct, but it brings me comfort. And I hope that, when I get to the next life, just like the non-Christian spirit, I will be able to have the humility to reexamine my beliefs, and put away any of the idols or ideas that don't actually provide me with goodness and truth. I hope I can be surrounded by people with compassion, like those good spirits, who can help me to do that in a way that is not too painful. Too often, when I'm listening to someone else's pain I can end up pointing out the ways I think they could have avoided that pain, or the ways I think they are expressing their pain inappropriately, rather than just feeling their distress, and listening compassionately, like the non-Christian spirit, and the good spirits in this story. I think the Lord summed it up nicely when He said:

“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.... And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me remove the speck that *is* in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the plank that *is* in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck that is in your brother's eye” (Luke 6:37-42).

So, these two stories together - from *Judges* and *Heaven and Hell* - illustrate some of the different ways that we can interact with other people. There are times we can be like the Danites, prioritizing truth over goodness. We might invalidate other people's ideas, stealing their “idols,” and perhaps not even care about how that might hurt them. But there are also times that we can be like the non-Christian spirit or the good spirits who look past other people's idolatry, and who act with compassion towards other people's pain. And I love thinking about *that* as the happy ending to the Micah story, which could be the happy ending to our story as well.

In closing I want to quote a different Micah in the Word. The *prophet* Micah is not the same as the Micah in *Judges*, but he perhaps captures a similar quality in what he said about prioritizing goodness: “*The Lord has shown you, people, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8; see also Micah 4:3-5, 7:18-19).

Amen.

Lessons:

Judges 17 & 18

Secrets of Heaven 6396

Heaven and Hell 324