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“A Metaphorical Etiology in Judges 18:12”

A Metaphorical Etiology in Judges 18:12

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I

- 1.1.** Judges 17 tells of a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim, who establishes an idolatrous cult with a graven image, a molten image, an ephod and teraphim. Micah first installs one of his sons as his priest, and then hires a Levite drifter. This account is followed in Judges 18 by the story of how the Danites set off in search of conquest and establish their own cult. The Danites first send a reconnaissance party of five men from their original settlement around the cities of Zorah and Eshtaol in the southwest part of the country. On their journey these men come to Ephraim, where they encounter Micah, his idols and his Levite priest. They then continue through the country until they reach the peaceful city of Laish located in the Huleh Valley plain in the extreme northwest part of the country.
- 1.2.** After the spies return with a promising report on the territory to be conquered, the entire Danite tribe sets off. While on their way to the northeast, the Danites steal Micah's idols and his priest, and continue on towards Laish. Meanwhile, Micah and his neighbors pursue them in a vain act of desperation. The Danites ultimately conquer the city of Laish, essentially banish its inhabitants, and establish Micah's cult as their own after rebuilding the city and renaming it Dan.
- 1.3.** Having now briefly summarized Judges 17-18,¹ I would like to discuss chapter 18, verses 11-13. These verses describe the first stage of the Danite conquest, i.e. the journey from Zorah and Eshtaol to the Ephraim hill country and the house-of-Micah:

11 And six hundred men
 of the tribe of Dan, armed with weapons of war,
 set forth from Zorah and Eshtaol,
 12 a and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah.
 ba On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan, “Dan's Camp,” to this day;
 bb behold, it is beyond of Kiriath-jearim.
 13 And they passed on from there to the hill country of Ephraim,
 and came to the house-of-Micah

In this short scene, it is the place information in verse 12 that draws our attention. Verses describing both the reconnaissance journey as well as the actual Danite conquest otherwise mention only the departure cities of Zorah and Eshtaol, the house-of-Micah, and the destination of Laish, later named Dan. Here in verse 12, however, we suddenly read of an encampment at Kiriath-jearim and how this camp is named Mahaneh-dan.

1.4. The traditional explanation for this unusual passage is that this is an etiological note that was added to the text at a later time. As Boling writes, “A late etiological and extranarrative note identifying as Dan’s Camp a place near better-known Qiriat-jearim ...”² In my estimation, however, this fails to appreciate the function of verse 12. The passage is neither an etiological note in the true sense, nor was it added to the narrative at some later point in time. In the following I would like to attempt to present the actual meaning of Judges 18:12.

II

2.1. At first glance, verse 12, particularly 12ba, does, in fact, appear to be an etiology, because etiologies serve to explain or legitimize a preexisting phenomenon. Mentioning the Danite encampment at Kiriath-jearim would appear to explain why this place near Kiriath-jearim was known as Dan's Camp at the time in which the author or editor of the narrative lived.

2.2. According to the criteria that J. Fichter³ worked out in 1956, verse 12 is even a classic example of a place name etiology, because the actual etiological formulation in 12ba is introduced by על-כן קראו, “on this account X is called” and concluded with the standard phrase עד היום הזה, “to this day”.

- 2.3.** At this point, however, I would like to consider P. J. van Dyk's 1990 article "The Function of So-Called Etiological Elements in Narratives,"⁴ in which he clearly demonstrates that passages considered to be etiological are frequently rhetorical devices and not etiologies at all. He surmises that the purpose of these presumed etiologies is often not to legitimize preexisting phenomena, but rather just the opposite: Presumed etiological texts served as rhetorical devices aimed at legitimizing narratives by invoking preexisting phenomena. According to van Dyk, this is especially true in the case of generally well-known phenomena, which can be used as a means of significantly enhancing the credibility of a narrative.
- 2.4.** If applied to Judges 18:12, van Dyk's approach would mean that the author mentions Mahaneh-dan in verse 12 to lend credence to the story of the Danite conquest. To put it another way, the recipient of the narrative would interpret the reference to this town near Kiriath-jearim as follows: If a city was even named after a camp the Danites used during their conquest, then the story is most likely true.
- 2.5.** There is, however, no known town by the name of Mahaneh-dan, a fact that would contradict both the classical interpretation of verse 12 as an etiology, as well as the interpretation of this verse as a rhetorical device as defined by van Dyk. Apart from Judges 18:12, Mahaneh-dan is only mentioned one other time in the entire Hebrew Bible. In Judges 13:25 it is referred to as a town between Zorah and Eshtaol where Samson was moved by the spirit of God: "And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol." Extra-Biblical sources provide no external evidence of the existence of Mahaneh-dan.
- 2.6.** Were this an etiology, why would the author have taken pains to explain the name of this non-place? And why would this non-place serve as a suitable rhetorical device for lending credibility to the story of the Danite conquest? Clearly, the solution to this problem lies elsewhere.

III

- 3.4.** I will begin my deliberations with a discussion of the geographic situation and theological significance of the city of Kiriath-jearim. The city was located on the 750 m peak of Mount *tell el-Azhar* near Abu Ghosh in the Judean hills,⁵ about 15 km northwest of Jerusalem and a few kilometers to the northeast of Zorah and Eshtaol, which were located in the northern Shephelah. Kiriath-jearim is also mentioned in passages of the Book of Joshua in which the author describes the boundaries of the tribes of Judah (Joshua 15:9, 60) and Benjamin (Joshua 18:14-15). These descriptions indicate that Kiriath-jearim

belonged to the tribe of Judah, but lay in the northwest corner of that tribe's territory on the border with the territory belonging to the tribe of Benjamin.

- 3.5.** In the context of this paper it is significant that the city lay on the border between the future kingdoms of Judah and Israel. While the divided kingdom and all of its repercussions had not yet been foreseen during the time when the Book of Joshua takes place, Joshua is a retrospective narrative written during the exilic and post-exilic period. As a result, the location of a city on the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin is more than simply a matter of local interest. The city's theological significance would not be worth mentioning were it not for references in I Samuel 6:21-7:2, naming the city as the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept for 20 years after being returned by the Philistines. As a consequence of being a city that temporarily housed the Ark of the Covenant—which, according to the Deuteronomistic History, contains the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments—Kiriath-jearim may be associated with God's commandments for Israel.

IV

- 4.1.** Keeping these thoughts in mind, we can now return to the question of the significance of Judges 18:12. The Danites depart from Zorah and Eshtaol and camp at Kiriath-jearim. To better understand the function of this encampment, it would be worth taking a look at the role that geography plays throughout the entire 18th chapter.
- 4.2.** Our attention is drawn to the fact that the Danites cross the Northern Kingdom diagonally, starting in the extreme southwest near Zorah and Eshtaol, crossing the Ephraim hills to the extreme northeast to Laish. In other words, they cross the entire Northern Kingdom. To fully understand the symbolism of this route, it must be made clear that Judges was written from a Judean perspective. The characters in Judges were intended to illustrate the political and religious downfall of the tribes of the Northern Kingdom and to legitimize the Davidian kingdom as the coming ruling power.
- 4.3.** To achieve this aim, the Book of Judges was given a climactic structure, a feature particularly evident in its main body (Judges 3:7-16:31), where we see certain themes reinforced with increasing intensity:
- * Political and military incompetence of individual judges, whose character is always questionable
 - * An expanding civil war directed inward rather than a successful war of liberation directed

outward

- * Mixed messages from God
- * Negative treatment of women
- * Idolatry gone out of control (especially important in the context of this paper)

These themes go hand in hand with a north-south divide: The further north a tribe of Judah finds itself, the worse the situation becomes.

- 4.4.** This north-south divide reaches its climax in Judges 18. The Danites have no judge at all when they set out from Zorah and Eshtaol in the extreme southwest. They unapologetically steal Micah's idols in the Ephraim hill country; they brutally conquer the peaceful city of Laish in the extreme northeast of the country, and establish Micah's cult as their own in the rebuilt and renamed city of Dan. That the route of the Danites passed through the entire Northern Kingdom serves to discredit the north as a whole. The Danites act *pars pro toto* as it were for all of the tribes of the Northern Kingdom.
- 4.5.** In this context it is interesting to note that the Danites are described as camping *at* (א) or *beyond of* Kiriath-jearim and not in the city. Because the Book of Judges is written from a Judean perspective, *at/beyond of* Kiriath-jearim means northwest of this border town. The Danites therefore explicitly camp outside of Judah. This symbolism has a double meaning: By camping *at* and *not* in Kiriath-jearim, the Danites distance themselves first of all from God's commandments which would be associated with the city of Kiriath-jearim. Secondly, by camping *beyond of* and not *in* Kiriath-jearim, they distance themselves from Judah, i.e. the "one true" Israel, which lives in accordance with God's commandments.

V

- 5.1.** The encampment *at* or *beyond of* Kiriath-jearim is thus given the name Mahaneh-dan, or "Dan's Camp". An interesting clue to the meaning of this name can be found in *Me-Am Lo'ez*, an 18th century Sephardic commentary. Here we read "To emphasize the fact that Judah had no part in the battle fought by Dan, the place where Dan had encamped in Judah's territory was called 'The camp of Dan'."⁶
- 5.2.** The first difficulty with this statement is that the Danites camped outside of Judah, and not within it. Secondly, exonerating Judah is at most only an indirect purpose of the text. The author of the commentary does rightly emphasize, however, that there is a connection between the name "Dan's Camp" and the brutality of the Danite conquest. The entire narrative of conquest and idolatry is

permeated with military terminology. The Danites send out warriors as spies, and the Danites themselves are described as men who are armed with weapons of war and who take everything they want by brute force. They smite Laish with the edge of the sword and burn the city with fire. Rather than living according to God's commandments, they live exclusively according to the theory of might makes right. According to Judges 18:26, Micah resigns himself to this fact: "Then the Danites went their way; and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home."

5.3. Referring to the town where the Danites camped at or beyond of Kiriath-jearim as Dan's Camp therefore says something about the nature of the Danites. That the only town ever named after them is a military camp reveals the Danites for what they really were "brutal desperadoes," despite the fact that the name Dan calls up associations to the word יָדָן, or "Just".

5.4. This is not the only significant aspect of the name Mahaneh-dan, however. As indicated earlier, Mahaneh-dan is also mentioned in the story of Samson. Because the name is explained much more naturally in Judges 18:12 than in chapter 13 verse 25, we may assume that Mahaneh-dan was transplanted from Judges 18 into Judges 13 in order to establish a link between the two stories. The intended effect was one of contrast: In Judges 13:25 we read that Samson the judge was moved by the spirit of God in Mahaneh-dan ("And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol."). That was precisely what did not happen for the Danites in Mahaneh-dan. They went their own way entirely. A way that no longer bore any resemblance whatsoever to that of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

VI

6.1. This brings me back to my initial question about the function of Judges 18:12.

12 a and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah.

ba On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan, "Dan's Camp," to this day;

bb behold, it is beyond of Kiriath-jearim.

This verse is neither a true etiology explaining the name of a geographical location known as Mahaneh-dan, nor is it a rhetorical device which, according to van Dyk's definition, would lend credibility to the story with the aid of a well-known place name. The narrative technique is instead much more refined, revealing verse 12 to be an integral component of chapter 18. The literary form of a place-name etiology

is used as a guise for expressing something completely different, namely to characterize the Danites as brutal desperadoes following a path other than that which Yahweh, the God of Israel, had commanded.

6.2. For this reason I would like to refer to verse 12 as a metaphorical etiology. Harald Weinrich defines a metaphor as a “word within a context that shapes it in such a way that it refers to something other than what it literally means.”⁷ If we replace the term “word” in this definition with the term “verse”, then the purported etiology in verse 12 is recognizable as a metaphor. It is a verse within a context that shapes it in such a way that it refers to something other than what it literally means.

¹ See U. F. W. Bauer, “*Warum nur übertretet ihr SEIN Geheiß!*” *Eine synchrone Exegese der Anti-Erzählung von Richter 17-18*”, BEATAJ 45, Frankfurt, Germany et al., 1998, p. 463 and U. F. W.

Bauer, “Judges 18 as an Anti-Spy Story in the Context of an Anti-Conquest Story: The Creative Usage of Literary Genres,” *JSOT* 88 (2000), 55-65.

² R. G. Boling, *Judges*, AB, Garden City, 1975, p. 264.

³ “Die etymologische Ätiologie in den Namengebungen der geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments”, *VT* 4 (1956), p. 372-396, esp. 378ff.

⁴ *ZAW* 102 (1990), 19-33.

⁵ O. Keel, M. Küchler, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel. Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zum Heiligen Land II*: Zürich et al., 1982, 793f.

⁶ A. Fishelis and. Sh. Fishelis, *Judges: A New English Translation: Translation of Text, Rashi and Commentary*, (ed. A. J. Rosenberg), New York, 1983, p. 145.

⁷ Quoted from O. F. Best, *Handbuch literarischer Fachbegriffe. Definitionen und Beispiele*, revised and expanded edition, Frankfurt a. M., 1994, p. 338.