

# VIOLENCE AND HOLINESS IN BIBLICAL DAN

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## INTRODUCTION

My topic this evening is violence and holiness in biblical Dan. Now we **do** have violence – a lot of it – at the beginning of our story. And we **do** have holiness with the violence; beginning with it, while it lasts, and long after the violence has stopped. I am not sure there is any connection between the two, but we cannot escape either of them in telling our story.

But first (always first!) there is geography. Israel, as we know, is a long narrow country on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. The sea is its western border and the Syrian-African Rift Valley – going down from Turkey through Syria and Lebanon, through Israel in the Jordan valley and the Aravah, out the Gulf of Elath, down the Red Sea, into Africa as far as Lake Victoria – has usually been its eastern border. There are, for the most part, never more than 50 miles between the two. Mount Hermon comes down from the east at the very top of the Land of Israel almost to meet the hills of the Galilee on the west. There, in the pinched waist of the Rift Valley, only two-three miles wide, right in the middle of the narrow pass, sits the ancient city of Dan.

Now, this is obviously a very good commercial location. We are therefore not surprised to have found substantial layers of occupation in Dan from the Early Bronze Age (EB II), which was about 2700 BCE. There are also pottery remains from both the Chalcolithic Period (Fourth Millennium BCE) and the Neolithic before that. The Rift Valley has always been a famous trade route up to the Lebanon, Syria and Turkey. There are great cities along the way. Ba'albek, Byblos and Hama are there, and Antioch is not far away. So the excavators of the city of Dan have found pottery from Cyprus, an exqui-

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site (and rare!) painted vase from Mycenae, alabaster and scarabs from Egypt, glass from the Middle Bronze Age (about 2000 BCE) – which is very nearly the oldest glass ever found – and bronze, in a sort-of recycling plant, for Dan was a center of its production. Tin was imported tin from Mesopotamia (the Mari tablets tell of that) and copper from Egypt and the Negev to produce the metal. And excavators have even found gold there which may have come from Britain. Dan was, it seems, always a wealthy city.

Dan was also a good geographical marker. It was simply the farthest north point, located at the natural barricade of the Rift Valley. We are not surprised that the Bible defined the borders of the Land as going *from Dan to Beersheba* no fewer than 10 times. And when the writers of Genesis 14 wanted to say that Abraham chased Lot's captors all the way up to the top of the country, they said that he went *as far as Dan*, even though the use of that name was an anachronism because – as we shall see – the city was not called "Dan" in Abraham's time.

Dan is, in addition, the most beautiful tel in most beautiful area of the country, especially as you need to walk through a nature reserve of oaks, terebinths, poplars, and rushing waters to get there. Water indeed! Dan's river supplies half of the water of the Jordan River; 240 million cubic meters of water flow here in an average year, which translates to two-thirds of a million cubic meters a day.

Finally, Dan is surely the most authentic tel in the country. Real ancient walls lead to a real gatehouse, with plazas inside and out. We are walking on real paved streets, sidewalks, doorsteps and through gates of the time of the Bible. At Dan, as at no other archaeological site, however important – Megiddo, Hazor, Gezer, Beth Shean, Lachish, or elsewhere – walking there is like walking through a city rather than an excavation.

#### THE TRIBE OF DAN

My introduction is over, and now we come to the substance of our discussion: the extraordinary tale of the tribe of Dan.

Dan was Jacob's first son with Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant. (Naphtali was the second). He became a tribe in Israel, like the others, but there the resemblance ends. In the first place, Dan was by far the smallest in the number of clans, in that he had only one clan, and its name got mixed up in the Bible.

The clan is called Hushim in Genesis 46, but in Numbers 26 the letters are transposed into Shuham. Dan also – unlike all the other tribes – had desperate territorial problems, because when Joshua divided the land among the tribes, Dan got the short end of the stick. He got stuck in the area around Beth She-mesh, squeezed from all sides. The Philistines and/or the Amorites on the coast were a menace: *The Amorites pressed the Danites back into the hill country; they did not allow them to come down to the plain* (Jud. 1:34). Judah dwelt in the mountains to the east, and Benjamin and Ephraim closed the area on the north. To add insult to injury, four of Dan's 17 cities – Ayalon, Gibbethon, Eltekeh and Gat Rimmon – were given to the Levites. That is 4 out of 17, which is 23 percent. No other tribe except Judah/Simeon gave more cities (nine between them) and no tribe at all gave a higher percentage of cities. Other tribes gave four cities or fewer, and they were all much larger than Dan.

One final note on this matter of cities. One of the 17 cities on the Dan list (Josh. 19:40) is Ba'alalah, also called Ba'al Yehudah (the Ba'al of Judah!) and Kiryat Yearim. It is where the Ark rested for 20 years, from the time the Philistines returned it to the time David brought it up to Jerusalem. Now if this is true, if Ba'alalah was at any time a city in the tribe of Dan, then our subject of holiness already makes its first appearance in connection with Dan in early history of the tribes in Israel.

The plot thickens. Dan's situation was becoming intolerable. That territory was impossible to live in and the tribe had to move. So our story will shift from the south to the north, and we will not come back to the southern territory of Dan again. Any part of the tribe that remained down there doubtless assimilated into Judah and/or into the Philistines, for it disappeared from the history of that part of the country. And we will leave "south Dan" with memories and names: Samson the Danite, Gush Dan, the Dan Bus Company, the Dan Hotel, and so forth.

We do need to say that they left the south with some ambivalence. Jacob was wary. *'Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel,'* he said. That was the good news: though small in size and numbers, Dan will be a regular tribe. *'Dan shall be like a snake by the roadside,'* he continued, *'a viper along the path that bites the horse's heels so its rider falls backwards'*

(Gen. 49:16-17). That is the bad news: Dan will be a tribe all right, but he will always be trouble for the others.

When Moses, as quoted in the Book of Deuteronomy, stated: '*Dan is a lion cub that leaps from Bashan*' (33:22), he was clearly relating to Dan already settled in the north. Deborah was completely obscure. Only four words: *And Dan, why does he live/abide/linger in ships?* [וְדָן לָמָּה יִגְוֹר אֲנִי־וַיִּת] (Jud. 5:7) (unless *Oniyot* is the name of a place, as the NJPS translation suggests in a footnote). We will come back to this point later on.

#### MOVING NORTH

Moving north meant sending scouts out first, as Moses had done from the Sinai and Joshua had done at Jericho. Our story is told in Judges 17-18, coming right after the death of Samson. The introduction to this tale is difficult and obscure, because Chapter 17 begins in the middle of the story. It seems that a woman of Ephraim – un-named – was upset about having lost 1100 pieces of silver (a lot of money). We do not know where she had gotten the money, or how it was lost, but she apparently had put a curse on whoever took it. Her son, who was named Micah (sometimes Michayahu), now told her that he had taken her money and would give it back. The mother was so pleased that she reversed her previous anger and actually blessed him by the Lord.

Then she took 200 of the pieces (we do not know what she did with the rest) to a silversmith who melted them down and cast her an idol. Son Micah took the idol and set up a shrine for himself (we do not know whether she approved of this move or not; the mother disappears from the story at this point), with an *ephod* and *teraphim*, and installed one of his sons as the household priest.

That was the situation until a young, unemployed (and un-named) Levite from Bethlehem wandered in, and Micah offered him a position as his priest – presumably a Levite from Bethlehem was more "kosher" as a priest than his own son – which offer the Levite accepted without hesitation.

With that as an introduction, we now turn to one of the most unpleasant chapters of Holy Scripture, Judges 18. We note:

1) how the first verse tells us another version of Dan's dilemma; that he had never been given any territory at all.

2) that on the name "Moses," a small "*nun*" was added by the Masoretes to make the name "Manasseh" (v. 30).

3) that the 600 armed men stopped at Kiryat Yearim, in Judah, on their way up north.

Violent men committed acts of brutality, kidnapping, extortion, robbery and slaughter, then set up a cultic center with a hereditary priesthood from the family of Moses! And all of this is summed up in a laconic verse in Joshua 19:47:

*When the territory of the Danites was lost to them the Danites went up and fought against Leshem [Judges calls the place "Laish"], and after capturing it and putting it to the sword, they took possession of it and settled in it, calling Leshem Dan, after their ancestor Dan.*

This is yet another new twist, a third account. The previous accounts in Joshua and Judges said nothing about Dan having held and then lost territory.

#### A HOLY CITY

The resulting situation was quite extraordinary. There was a cultic center at Dan with a hereditary priesthood descended from Gershon, son of Moses, which lasted *until the land went into captivity* (Jud. 18:30), with Micah's idol still there *as long as the house of God was at Shiloh* (v: 31). There is some inconsistency here, but the conclusion is the same: as long as the Northern Kingdom of Israel existed, the shrine at Dan was functioning and flourishing, parallel to and contemporaneous with the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.

With or without the idol of Micah, the holiness stuck. For it was precisely at Dan that Jeroboam I, having separated the Northern Kingdom from Judah, and trying to wean the people from dependence on Jerusalem as cultic center, decided to set up one of his golden calves. Yet Kadesh Naphtali, which was nearby, might have been a more obvious choice, for it was a levitical city of refuge, or else Shechem, the old cultic center, that was also a city of refuge and where the King lived.

*Then Jeroboam said to himself, 'Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.' So the*

*king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, 'You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.' He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan (I Kg. 12:26-30).*

The high place of Jeroboam is still there, and may be seen when visiting Tel Dan. And the holy shrine will occupy most of the rest of this talk. I am going to be concentrating on this place, but I did not want to leave Dan's violence without offering at least a try at explaining what made this small tribe so rough.

I have found two suggestions in the commentaries. One is from the author of the article on Dan in my old *Encyclopedia Britannica*. He suggested that since "Dan" and "Dinah" are so similar etymologically, Dan's attack on Laish/Leshem is meant to parallel Simeon's and Levi's massacre at Shechem to avenge the rape of their sister. The other suggestion is from Yigael Yadin. Taking his clue from the Song of Deborah, *why should he stay in ships?* [לָמָה יִגוֹר אֲנִי בַיָּם] he suggested that the tribe of Dan may not have been Israelite, or even Semitic at all. Rather, it was related to the Danaoi, a Greek tribe of Sea People, related to the Philistines and the Tjeker. The Egyptians knew about them. Yadin suggested that the original center of the Danaoi/Dan was Jaffa, and that gradually at least some of them merged into Israel and became "the tribe of Dan."

#### THE EXCAVATIONS

Avraham Biran and the Hebrew Union College have been digging Tel Dan for more than 30 years. It is the longest archaeological excavation in the history of the country, and Biran is now past 90! He has found the High Place which Jeroboam set up, with a nine-meter-wide staircase going up onto the platform. He found that the platform had been expanded by Ahab, and then expanded again – built and rebuilt three times in the biblical period! – until it reached its present dimensions of some 20 meters on each side. The archaeologists believe that there must be an older altar, Israelite and/or Canaanite, underneath the present one but they cannot remove what is there to look for it.

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They have not found the Golden Calf – at least not yet – but they have found a horned altar and a sacrificial place, with bowls for incense, ashes of burnt offerings and burnt animals; clear signs of the activities of the cult in that place. And they found priestly rooms at one side of the compound, with tables and altars in them, and an iron incense shovel and a bronze bowl, and a pit next to the sacrificial place full of animal bones. Jeroboam was a sinner for setting up idols, but not a complete sinner because he did not sacrifice pigs to them. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the archaeologists also found a jar there inside of which were little statuettes of Egyptian deities. That is odd: Egypt is a long way away. What were Egyptian gods doing at Dan? It is Jeroboam again. Because the Bible says that Jeroboam had organized some kind of revolt against Solomon while the King was still alive (I Kg. 12). The revolt failed and Jeroboam fled to Pharaoh in Egypt. He stayed in Egypt till Solomon died, and then he came back. And apparently he brought something of Egyptian religion back with him.

As if this is not enough, Biran found a cultic installation from the same period (10th Century BCE) unlike anything previously found in the Middle East. It is a square plastered tub sunk into the ground. Its top is at ground level, with slabs tilting down to jars at either end, buried in the ground with large open mouths at the level of the slabs. It is probable that this whole apparatus served as a place for water libation; one takes water out of the basin, pours it onto the slabs, and it goes down into the jars. Now that fits what little we know from the Bible about pouring out libations. David did it (II Sam. 23:16), Ezekiel knew about it (20:28), and Samuel had the people do it: *Then Samuel said, 'Gather all Israel at Mizpah and I will pray to the Lord for you.' So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord.* (I Sam. 7:5-6). The fact that the Egyptian statuettes were found near the jars seems to suggest that Jeroboam may also have brought back the libation cult from Egypt.

## THE CULT LASTED A LONG TIME

Whatever was going on at Dan lasted a long time. The ancient city was finally destroyed by the Assyrians in the Eighth Century BCE, more or less at

the same time as the destruction of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And then?

After the destruction, the city of Dan moved about a mile to the east, out of the middle of the road on the main highway going up the valley and into the shelter of a shoulder of Mount Hermon. The Jews continued to call the new city Dan right into the Middle Ages, but the pagan Greeks, who were now the majority of the population, gave another name to the place. A religious name (naturally). They called it "Paneum," sacred to the god Pan, god of the forests, the god who plays his pipes, and puts you into "panic."

Herod the Great chose this new city as a place to build a temple to Augustus Caesar (religion again). That was odd, because Herod built only four temples in the Land of Israel; one for the Jews in Jerusalem, and three for the pagans in Caesarea, Samaria, and at Dan. Once Dan had a temple to Caesar it also had a new name, another Caesarea.

Paneum/Dan was the city Herod's son Philip inherited when the old man died. Philip built more and added his name, so the place became Caesarea Philippi, which we know from the Gospels. Caesarea Philippi was the place where believers saw in Jesus the messiah of the Jews (Matt. 16:13ff). So the religion which permeates Dan has even spread into Christianity.

Meanwhile, what about the old tel? Nobody ever lived there again. But the sacred area remained in use. Biran has found extensive building in the cultic area from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and a Roman fountain house at the headwaters of the Dan River from the Roman period, still in use until the Fourth Century CE.

The people came to that altar from the new city of Paneum and from the Galilean countryside all around. They repaired the walls, added to the steps going up to the platform, prayed and offered sacrifices, made contributions and offerings and pledges and vows. For 500 years at least after the tel itself was abandoned.

One of these devotees was a man named Zoilos, and he lived in the Hellenistic period, about 200 BCE. Zoilos left us a stone plaque, a limestone slab about ten inches by six inches, with three lines written in Greek and one line in Aramaic. The slab says "Dedicated by Zoilos to the god who is in Dan." Now, finding an inscription of any kind – especially one that identifies the place – is, of course, the archaeologist's dream. It's like finding "The Rotary

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Club of Nineveh meets on Thursday afternoon." This find, by the way, is unique in Israel and precious.

The trouble is that Zoilos, good old ecumenical Zoilos, does not say which god he has in mind. (That is very unusual, by the way). The sacred area remained, but we are left with the question: Sacred to whom? Was Zoilos a Jew? A Greek? A Syrian?. We do not know to which god he was devoted, but we do know that the Greeks and later the Romans kept, maintained, and used the temple area, praying and sacrificing there, until the establishment of Christianity by Constantine in the fourth century, when all of these places went out of business. The Christian, then Muslim, city of Paneum/Caesarea Philippi existed there for 1000 years more, well into the Middle Ages. But the old place of "the god who is in Dan" was finally abandoned forever.

## CONCLUSION

The roughneck Danites are dead and gone. The god who is in Dan – whoever he was – has died at last. But he had had a good run for it; from at least 1200 BCE to the 350s CE, and that is more than 1500 years. The violent history of Dan has come back to meet us, however. For the first "excavations" at the site – the first discovery of antiquities – were carried out in the 1950s by the Israeli Army, digging trenches for defense on the Lebanese border. The border is right there at the edge of the tel and the Parks Authority has even put up a viewing platform behind the sacred area.

You should come to visit the site. I cannot guarantee you will find the god who is in Dan, but you will see the trenches and a lookout over a modern battlefield. And I can guarantee you will find one of the most beautiful and most interesting historical and archaeological places in the entire Land of Israel.

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