

WHO WAS JONATHAN SON OF GERSHOM IN JUDGES 18:30?

JOSIAH DERBY

According to Judges 18, the tribe of Dan, or perhaps only a part of it, decided to leave its place of settlement in the foothills of the Judean mountains and relocate elsewhere in the land of Canaan. For this purpose, the Danites traveled to the north of the country, beyond the settlements of other Israelite tribes, found an isolated but prosperous and defenseless city called Laish, burned it down, killed its inhabitants, and built a new city on its ruins which they named Dan.

On the way to the north, they stopped in Ephraimite territory at the home of a man named Micah. He had a private temple to the God of Israel, with a graven image and other required cultic artifacts, and an unnamed young Levite served as the priest [*kohen*]. The Danites proceeded to steal Micah's idol and the other cultic artifacts and also persuaded the Levite to join them, so that they could establish their own House of God wherever they would settle. Judges 18:30 then informs us that they *set up the idol* [i.e., they built a temple] *and Jonathan the son of Gershom the son of Manasseh* [Hebrew: *Menashe*], *he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the exile of the land.*

From this verse, we cannot logically deduce that this Jonathan is the same as the Levite the Danites had taken away from Micah. To the rabbis of the Talmud, the later classical Jewish exegetes as well as modern scholars, the appearance of the name in the same chapter with the story of the Levite is sufficient proof that they are one and the same person.¹ The thrust of the present essay is to cast doubt upon this equation, and to suggest a different answer to the question of who this Jonathan may have been.

No one reading Judges 18:30 can fail to be puzzled by the graphological anomaly in the word *Menashe*: the letter "nun" is superlineal; that is, it does not rest on the line with the other letters but seems to be suspended half-way above them.²

Josiah Derby has B.S. and M.A. degrees in mathematics from Harvard University, and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He was the rabbi at Rego Park Jewish Center, NY, for 42 years, and is now rabbi emeritus.

The rabbis of the Talmud, knowing that Moses had a son named Gershom, easily assumed that the original text was indeed *Moshe* [Moses] rather than *Menasheh*, so that this Jonathan was his grandson. It was supposed that at a later time a scribe decided to change the name to *Menashe* by inserting the letter "nun." His reason for doing so was to spare our greatest prophet the embarrassment and humiliation of a grandson who was an idolater, since it was assumed that Jonathan was the name of the idolatrous Levite whom the Danites had taken with them.³

The rabbis were most likely unaware of the chronological problem with their conclusion. If Jonathan the grandson of Moses were alive at the time of the Danites' migration, he would have been a very old man, while the Levite was young. The commentators do not agree on the timeframe of this episode; some argue for a setting early in the period of the Judges and others see it as having occurred later in that era. The latter view seems more likely, for the Philistines appeared on the southern coast of Canaan about 1187 BCE, and slowly pushed their way inland, exerting strong pressure on the Israelites which resulted in the series of wars between them and Israel. Their expansion and the creation of their pentapolis must have taken at least a century. The move by the Danites (as well as the actions of Samson) must be seen as a response to the beginning of this conflict. Hence, we could date the Danite move at about 1075. Now, Gershom was the older of the two sons of Moses who were born in Midian (Ex. 2:22), before Moses began the struggle with Pharaoh for the liberation of the Israelites from their bondage. Jonathan would have been born in the wilderness.

Consequently, at the time when the Levite was a young man, Jonathan would have been over 150 years old. Even if the rabbis were aware of this anachronism it did not concern them, for in their view history was not an end in itself but rather the handmaiden of theology.

To extend this anachronism further, the commentators assumed that the scribe who deliberately changed "*Moshe*" to "*Menashe*," had in mind the apostate King Manasseh of Judah, who reigned in the first half of the Seventh Century. He was the most idolatrous of all the kings of Judah and Israel, so a grandson of his might also be an idolater. (The only grandson of King Manasseh who is known to us is King Josiah, one of the most pious of all the kings after David.) This was 400 years after the time of the Levite.

If this is not absurd enough, a modern scholar catapults Jonathan into the Third Century, by suggesting that the intended Manasseh was the high priest at the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. The objective of this very late scribe who made the change was to disparage and delegitimize the Samaritan temple and its high priest by associating them with the idolater Jonathan.⁴

It is clear that historically a Jonathan who was a grandson of Moses could not be Micah's Levite. There is another problem in identifying him: he is not found in any of the genealogies, neither of Moses nor of King Manasseh. In I Chronicles 23:16, we find only the name Shebuel for a son of Gershom son of Moses.⁵

It might be argued that the Chronicler deliberately omitted Jonathan to safeguard Moses' reputation, but by the time of the Chronicler in the Fifth Century, the change from "*Moshe*" to "*Menashe*" had probably already been made, so there was no fear of linking this Jonathan with Moses. Besides, we cannot know that the Chronicler's contemporaries were already identifying this Jonathan with the idolatrous Levite.

In summary, there is no evidence for this Jonathan, other than a single mention in Judges 18:30. The question should be asked: If this is the name of the young Levite, why is it not stated when the Levite is initially introduced into the story in Judges 17:7? None of the commentators raises this question, but Yehezkel Kaufman⁶ offers a rather lame answer: The narrator wished to indicate that the Levite became the founder of the priestly dynasty that served at Dan, so he saved the name for the end of the story.

I propose that this Jonathan is a fiction, created by Jeroboam I, the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. At the death of King Solomon, about 930, the great schism took place in which the northern two-thirds of the nation turned its back on Jerusalem and its Davidic dynasty and became the Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam. He feared that the people would go to Jerusalem on the festivals as they had been accustomed to do, and there be persuaded to rejoin the Southern Kingdom of Judah, so he established two new sanctuaries. One was in Bethel, at the southern end of his domain, and one in Dan, at the northern tip, each with its own golden calf (I Kg. 12:26-29). He was certain that the people would be attracted to Bethel because it had a tradition of sanctity, associated with the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 28:19, 35:1,7). But Dan had no such connection with any of the patriarchs. The story

of the founding of Dan, that had occurred more than 200 years earlier, was probably well known, including the unnamed Levite who was the first priest at the sanctuary the Danites established there. Jeroboam, I suggest, conceived the idea of identifying this Levite as the grandson of Moses. By associating the sanctuary at Dan with Moses, he hoped that it would acquire a sufficient degree of sanctity to lure the people away from Jerusalem. These two cities could compete with Jerusalem for the religious loyalty of the people because at that early stage in the history of Jerusalem as an Israelite city it had not yet attained the holiness it acquired in the course of time. As Yairah Amit wrote:

The preference of Jerusalem over other cities such as Beth-el which had a background of old historical traditions, was a long drawn-out process entailing a difficult struggle, and in order to determine the outcome, it was necessary to employ different types of offense including open polemic as well as hidden polemic.⁷

One might add here that perhaps the most powerful of the various "open polemics" found in the Bible is the numerous repetitions of the phrase referring to Jerusalem as *the place which the Lord has selected to cause His name to rest there*, beginning with Deuteronomy 12:5. It is not coincidental that the story of the rise of Jeroboam is peppered with reminders that Jerusalem is God's *chosen city* (I Kg. 11:13, 32, 36), and in I Kings 14:21 we read after Jeroboam's death, as a final assertion, that God's chosen city was Jerusalem; as if to say, in spite of Jeroboam's efforts.

It is in this light that Jonathan, son of Gershom son of Moses, is seen as a bigger player in Israel's history than had heretofore been thought.

NOTES

1. For a list of places in rabbinic literature where this identification is made, see: Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. VI (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1939) p. 210, note 130.
2. This is the only instance of the letter "nun" suspended, but there are three instances of the letter "ayin":suspended (Ps. 80:14; Job 38:13, 15) as well as several other graphological anomalies.
3. Bava Batra 109b.
4. Steve Weitzman, "Reopening the case of the suspended nun," *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 63 (3) (July 1999) pp. 448-460.
5. The fact that Jonathan is not listed here forces the rabbis to equate him with Shebuel (Bava Batra 110a). A Shebuel lived in the time of King David, who appointed him as an overseer (I

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Chr. 26:24), and the rabbis also made an anachronistic connection here. The nature of rabbinic thought is reflected in the answer to the obvious question: How could David have given an idolater official recognition? Jonathan, by that time, had repented and returned to God. For additional rabbinic references to Jonathan, see: *Encyclopedia of Biblical Personalities* (Brooklyn: Shaar Press, 1994).

6. Yehezkel Kaufman *The Book of Judges* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1968) p. 276.

7. Yairah Amit, "Hidden polemic in the conquest of Dan, Judges XVII-XVIII," *Vetus Testamentum*, 1990, 40(1) pp. 4-20.

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