As the name of a particular location the Camp of Dan (Mahanéh-Dan) appears only twice in the Bible, on both occasions in the Book of Judges. In xiii 25 it describes a spot between Zorah and Eshtaol where the spirit of Yahweh began to stir Samson, and according to xviii 12 there is a place of the same name just west of Kiriath-jearim where six hundred Danites from Zorah and Eshtaol encamped on their way to the north, having set out to seek a new home.

These two places are connected by eight miles of sunken road which follows the course of the wadi el-Hamar and at one time formed part of the boundary between the territories of Benjamin and Judah 1). The short distance between them, together with the fact that they are on the same road, seem to make it very unlikely that we are dealing here with different villages both with the same name, and it is for this reason that Burney assumed the name to be erroneously inserted in the Samson narrative 2). Nevertheless Biblical writers are usually very particular about topographical determinations so that we ought to work on the assumption that there were indeed two sites called Mahanéh-Dan, eight miles from one another on the same road. For Alt this peculiar fact provides further evidence for his interpretation of Israel’s early history. He argues that the name dates back to the time when the originally nomadic Danites began to settle as farmers. They may have erected a few service buildings but nevertheless continued to live in tents. In this way they retained a certain mobility which suited their primitive agriculture, for when the summer drought hit the fields down below in the valley they could all move to a camp high

1) Josh. xv 9-10; xviii 14. Kiriath-jearim fell within the area of Judah so that the boundary must have run west of this city. It has been suggested that this boundary was marked off by the procession of the Ark so that the Ark must have called on the two Mahanéh-Dans. (E. Nielsen, “Some Reflections on the History of the Ark”, VTSup VII 1960, p. 63.)

up in the mountains 3). However, this interpretation does not reckon
with the fact that, according to the Samson narrative, Manoah came
from Zorah and did not live in Mabaneh-Dan, and since Manoah was
a Danite we must assume that the Danites were living in the village
and not in the camp.

So, if the two Mabaneh-Dans were not settlements, what else could
they have been?

The narratives with which we are concerned are rather different in
character. The one about Samson is among the collection of stories
relating to the ‘judges’, local heroes from the time of the settlement,
and these stories have been kept more or less intact without much
effort on the part of the compiler to re-arrange them according to his
own point of view. On the other hand the second story, that of the
migration, belongs to an appendix which is far more polemical in tone.
The material has been deliberately chosen to encourage the recogni-
tion of the Davidic monarchy and the supremacy of Jerusalem over
all other sanctuaries in the land. Here the time of the settlement is
disapprovingly characterised as “the days in which there was no king
in Israel and everyone did as he wanted”.

The main target of the narration of the Danite flight to the north
appears to be the popular attachment to Shiloh, that is if we are correct
in identifying Micah’s shrine in the hill country of Ephraim with
Jerusalem’s powerful rival 4). Although one of Micah’s sons had been

3) A. Alt, Kleine Schriften I, München 1959, p. 152.
4) We may presume that the first hearers of the narrative knew exactly where
to locate Micah’s shrine. Not calling the place by its name may be an expression
of sarcasm. In Jdg. xxi, belonging to the same appendix, we are told that Shiloh
lay “north of Bethel to Shechem and south of Lebonah.” To describe somewhere
as renowned as Shiloh in terms such as these is like saying that Canterbury lies
south of Whitstable, which cannot but show contempt for the archbishop’s
seat. The statement suggests a deliberate intention to discredit the focal point
of Israel’s former life. In the same vein the migration story does not mention
Shiloh by name as if there were not more to it than Micah’s miserable house.
The story does not deny, however, that Micah’s house was a temple (xvii 5),
even possessing a gateway (xviii 17). That there were only a handful of neighbours
to come to Micah’s assistance against the Danites does not mean that the sanctuary
could not have been the one at Shiloh. In 1 Sam. iv 12 ff. we are told that the
news of the loss of the Ark was first brought to the people of Shiloh and that
only when Eli, who was at the sanctuary, heard their lamenting from a distance
did he know that something had gone wrong. It seems therefore that the shrine
was outside the city.

The narrator does not persist in his obscure references, however, and at the
end of his story he gives the game away with the cryptic remark: “So they set up
Micah’s graven image which he made as long as the house of God was at Shiloh”,
that is to say, the new cult in Dan had some power behind it just so long as the
shrine from which it originally came remained a true centre of Gods’ presence.