HIDDEN POLEMIC IN THE CONQUEST OF DAN: JUDGES XVII-XVIII

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1. Introduction

Polemic is manifest throughout the diverse writings of the Old Testament. Ideological battle is waged in the scriptural corpus against the world of beliefs and outlooks within which the Bible was created and for the shaping of a new Weltanschauung. Moreover, since this literature was written over a period of approximately a thousand years, it is obvious that ideological debates appear in the Bible itself. The various types of scripture—whether historiographic or law-giving, wisdom literature, psalms or prophecy—are all clearly polemical in nature. For the reader it is evident what the author of a particular text prefers and what he opposes.

The authors of the Old Testament literature did not limit themselves to open polemic. Alongside that overt polemic, they employed the technique of hidden polemic. This article will concern itself chiefly with the formulation of tools for uncovering the implicit polemic in the biblical literature.

I shall use the narrative of the conquest of the city of Dan to illustrate the phenomenon of hidden polemic. My intention is to show that, along with the openly levelled criticism against the city of Dan and its ritual, this story constitutes, at the same time, in a hidden fashion, a severe indictment against Beth-El and its cult.

2. The Open Polemic in Judges xvii-xviii

The reader of Judg. xvii-xviii will have no difficulty in noting the open polemic which appears in these chapters. The polemic is directed against the regime at the time of the judges. Occurrences
in the hill country of Ephraim and the instance of the conquest of the city of Dan and its establishment as a ritual centre constitute a concrete example illustrating the negative character of the period. The deeds of Micah and the Levite and the exploits of the tribe of Dan are, according to the story's author, a direct result of the lack of a king; and the author finds different ways in which he protests against this situation.

2.1 The Direct Design

The shaping of the polemic against the regime of the period of the judges was accomplished directly by including a judgemental statement of the narrator at transition points in the chapter. The critical character of this statement is achieved not by its content but by its context, i.e., by means of the examples which the author uses in order to illustrate the statement.

The unit consists of three episodes or three stories: (1) the establishment of Micah’s sanctuary; xvii 1-5; (2) the appointment of the Levite as priest in Micah’s sanctuary: xvii 7-13; (3) the conquest of Dan and the establishment of its shrine: xviii 1b-30. In the transition from the first to the second episode, the judgemental utterance appears in its complete version consisting of two parts: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what seemed right in his own eyes” (xvii 6). The inclusion of this verse at that juncture affords it the character of both a summation and an opening at one and the same time. On the one hand, it serves as a critical summary of what had been described previously; and at the same time, it constitutes an introduction, casting a negative light on the events to come. The repetition of the judgemental state-

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1 For a detailed discussion about the structure of the story and the place of Judg. xvii 6 and xviii 1a see my work, The Art of Composition in the Book of Judges (dissertation, Tel-Aviv University, 1984), pp. 107-10 (Hebrew); and my article, “The Ending of the Book of Judges”, Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies (Division A; Jerusalem, 1986), p. 79, n. 7 (Hebrew).

2 The second episode ends with v, 30, and v, 31 is attached to ch. xviii to provide a connection with what follows. See Y. Zakovitch, “The Associative Principle in the Arrangement of the Book of Judges and Its Use in Examining the Stages in the Book’s Evolution”, in A. Rofé and Y. Zakovitch (ed.), Isaac Leo Seeligmann Volume: Essays on the Bible and the Ancient World 1 (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 179 (Hebrew). See also my Art of Composition, pp. 121-2, esp. n. 49.