

The Flying Nun
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Judges 18:30

(BHS)	(NKJV)
וַיִּקְיְמוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי־דָן אֶת־הַפֶּסֶל וַיְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן־גֶּרְשׁוֹם בֶּן־מָנַשֶׁה הוּא וּבָנָיו הָיוּ כֹהֲנִים לְשִׁבְט הַדָּנִי עַד־יוֹם גְּלוֹת הָאָרֶץ:	Then the children of Dan set up for themselves the carved image; and Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land.

Line 1 just needs a bit of rearranging. Note “Dan.” Of course, *ben* is “son;” NKJV glosses, “children.” Line 2 references a *pesel*, the sort of cultic image Moses absolutely forbade (Exod 20:4). You may readily recognize Jonathan, Gershom, and Manasseh—but there, thrust before your eyes, is something found in none of remaining Scripture. The *nun* is suspended in “Manasseh.” Although various ornamentations and marks waft throughout the Bible, only here does a *nun* defy gravity. Line 5 of course ends with “the Danite.” Line 6 shows that Judges was edited long after its recorded events.

Bible software generally doesn’t float the *nun*. But the Masoretic Text does. See any printed Hebrew Bible. (I lunched at noon with an executive of the J. Alan Groves Center for Advanced Biblical Research and complained that the Westminster morphology does not lift the *nun*. He did a quick calculation and told me what it would cost to raise it. But then he eyed me suspiciously and asked, “How many are there?” I replied, “Just one.” He practically spit out his mouthful and exclaimed, “ONE!” And that, as they say, was that. I foresee no flying *nun* any time soon in the electric Bible.) Forth we sally ...

Field an explanation if you can: Moses is spelled *Msh*; Manasseh is spelled *Mnsh*. We get none of these, but rather *Mⁿsh*. The Hebrew is oddly non-committal as to which is named. Some versions treat ך as valid; most think it fly-by-night. Hold on to your habit, Mother Superior, what a predicament!

Gershom is Moses' son (Exod 2:22). The grand climax to Judges 17 – 18 is that the Lawgiver's own grandson and descendants were false priests, leaders of forbidden idolatry in Dan (where they later served a golden calf, 1 Kgs 12:29). What a twisty-turny! We didn't see that coming! That *gasp!* is the import of reading "Moses" there. (Remember that none of Judges 17 – 21 happens in the "period of the judges" per se, but hovers around the lifetime of Joshua son of Nun. Israel flew after *pesels* almost immediately.)

King Manasseh later boosted idolatry more than any other king. He was worse even than the Canaanites had been. His over-the-top effrontery was the last straw that doomed Judah (2 Kgs 21:10 – 16). I imagine that to save Moses' reputation and associate the exile with Manasseh's idolatry habit, a scribe tentatively proposed altering the name with a probationary *nun*. For whatever reason (I have a theory) subsequent texts kept it half in and half out. I wonder if the plucky *nun* catches a postexilic scribe with his hand in the cookie jar, a snapshot of how some redactions breezed in before the text stabilized.

Anyway. Regardless of whether you believe in the flying *nun*, the haunting end of the Micah cycle (our verse) references the captivity. Throughout its history, Israel sinned with idols. From the days of Moses' grandson to King Maⁿasseh, from righteous Abel to martyred Zechariah (Matt

23:35), flighty Israel had rejected the true God and proved they “always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51). This inevitably led to their captivity. And herein is a lesson for us.

Whoever sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). To say that sinners sail free by doing what they want is like saying that heroin addicts are free. Instead, they are captive to their habit. Sin works like that. In his flesh, Paul did what he would rather not, and could do none of what he idealistically wanted to do. Self effort isn't enough for one held captive by sin (Romans 7).

But in God's time (at noon in fact), a great light illumined Paul—and Jesus revealed himself (Acts 22:6). To know Jesus is to be free (John 8:32, 36). Free to daily examine yourself, discover what promise or truth you have been ignoring—what “idols” you serve—and then renew your convictions accordingly.

Do you serve the love of money? Live for people's praise? Bow to envy or anger? Do you sin for pleasure? In Christ you can become aware of how these idols captivate, and find the biblical way out. This daily struggle, this ongoing cycle of faith and repentance, will continue from now (vōv) until the Day when we soar in the clouds with Jesus.

Until then we press on. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!