

## Introduction

If you enjoy edgy and cool new restaurants, or if you watch lots of cooking shows, you may be aware of fusion cuisine. You marry two completely different types of food to come up with something even better. You can have a *sushi burrito*. Or a *Ramen burger*. Maybe a *kimchi quesadilla*. A *bulgogi taco*.

Fusion isn't something that just happens in food. Some of the latest award winners in country music are such folk as Shaboozy. Post Malone. Jelly Roll. Beyoncé won the Grammy for Best Country Album. I'll be honest: I haven't heard a single song from any of these artists. I know they're all hip-hop artists who have crossed over to country music—at least for an album. I only know about this because my wife listens to WOOD radio in the morning which means I'm forced to hear it, too.

The truth is some things just don't mix. We all get oil and water don't mix but other things don't mix. For example, "country" and "music" don't mix. Other things don't mix. I love ice cream. I also love bacon. No; don't mix these two things. This one might be controversial, unless you're an Iron Chef: don't mix pineapple and pizza. These don't go together. These don't mix.

There are some things you should *never* mix, like vinegar and bleach. That would be very dangerous as it would release toxic chlorine gas. Some people advocate mixing baking soda with vinegar as some concoction for cleaning. These react giving you mostly water and sodium acetate, which is a type of salt—but mostly water. When you mix them you get a cool reaction. Ever make a volcano with it? It's pretty cool, but the carbonic acid the reaction produces very quickly breaks down into carbon dioxide and, well, *water*. To be fair, water is a great cleaning agent! There are better ways to get water for cleaning your kitchen.

I remember a few years ago talking to a man named DD. We were talking about poverty food—the stuff you eat when you're poor and don't know better. In my mother's house it was this thing she called "goulash". It was just stewed tomatoes and elbow macaroni. To this day there are two things that *never* mix: J-T and goulash. DD mentioned one of his favorite dishes growing up was hot dogs and oat meal. As in hot dogs *in* the oat meal.

Ketchup and meat should never mix. I love making my wife a delicious burger at home and my heart always sinks when she asks for ketchup. We all know, of course, that ketchup belongs on potato products, whether French fries or delicious tater tots. We put ketchup on hash browns and steak fries. We put ketchup on *mashed potatoes*. Yum!

Of all the things that do not mix, the most un-mixable thing is the worship of God and the worship of anything else. In our text we will see this was Israel's problem during the time of the judges. Even those who did not bow to false gods bowed down to YHWH God of Israel as if he were one of the gods the Canaanites worshiped, and that is something that must not be—cannot be—mixed. We're in Judges 17.

Jdgs 17:1 There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was

Micah. <sup>2</sup> And he said to his mother, “The 1,100 pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it.” And his mother said, “Blessed be my son by the LORD.” <sup>3</sup> And he restored the 1,100 pieces of silver to his mother. And his mother said, “I dedicate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a carved image and a metal image. Now therefore I will restore it to you.” <sup>4</sup> So when he restored the money to his mother, his mother took 200 pieces of silver and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a carved image and a metal image. And it was in the house of Micah. <sup>5</sup> And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and household gods, and ordained one of his sons, who became his priest. <sup>6</sup> In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Judges 17:1–6

## Who Is Like YHWH?

With the death of Samson recorded for us in chapter 16, we’ve come to the end of the judges. The author told the story of the judges in the way he did to show the depth of depravity even the leaders of Israel would go to. Over these final five chapters we see the depth of evil of the ordinary folk in many ways exceeded that of the judges.

Our text takes place quite early in the time of the judges. As we’ve seen, the book is out of order. The author organizes his material to tell a story, not to build a timeline. As we will see clearly in a few weeks, what is taking place in chapters 17 and 18 happen within a generation or so of Israel entering the land of Canaan. We will see how immediately the nation God rescued from Egypt and chose to be his people, the very people upon whom he poured out his favor, abandoned him.

In verse 1 we’re told that in the tribe of Ephraim there was a man named Micah. Ephraim is where Joshua himself was from. Given how early this is, the memory of Joshua would have been quite strong. In fact, the story probably takes place within 50–100 years of Moses’ death. *Moses*.

From Joshua’s tribe comes a man named Micah. His name means “Who is like YHWH?” The answer, of course, is no one is like YHWH. YHWH is holy; therefore no one is like him. This is what it means to be holy: set apart, different, “other than”. Other than what? Yes! God is distinctly other than everything else. God is in a class by himself. If we divided everything that exists into two categories there would be God and then there would be everything else.

Paul Washer once asked a crowd which of these was more like God: the highest archangel in glory, beautiful and surrounded by glorious light, or bacteria in your toilet? Which is more like God? Neither! The greatest angel has more in common with toilet bacteria than either has with God. God is *holy*—he is one of one. There is literally God and *everything else*.

This is why the instructions to the people of Israel were so strong. In Deuteronomy 7 God instructed them when they entered the land of Canaan they were to devote the people to destruction. This does not mean genocide. It was an Ancient Near Eastern way to say they were not to engage with them and participate with them. Specifically, they’re told to destroy their religious furniture—their altars and carved images and idols and such. It was

so important that just a few chapters later God reminds them of what it means for them to take the land of Canaan.

Deut 12:1 “These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. <sup>2</sup> You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. <sup>3</sup> You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.

Deuteronomy 12:1–4

That last command is powerful: you shall not worship the LORD your God in that way! The Lord God of Israel is not like Baal and Asherah. He is not like Dagon and Molech. He is not to be worshiped the way the gods worshiped in Canaan are worshiped because YHWH is holy. The gods the people in the land worshiped are not lesser versions of YHWH. They are utterly unlike him. He is holy. They are not. He must not be worshiped like they are worshiped.

Names in the ancient world were often theophoric. That is, names would often reflect something of the character of God. The name Theodore means “God’s gift”. Jonathan means “YHWH has given”. Timothy means “one who honors God”. Israelite names were like this, too. Joshua means “YHWH is my help” which carries the idea “YHWH saves”. Interestingly, that is the name of the Lord Jesus: YHWH saves.

When the reader comes to chapter 17, after a long litany of failures in Israel, with judges depicted as increasingly broken and flawed, the name Micah might summon some hope. Suddenly we come to a man whose name means, “Who is like YHWH?” No one, of course! The Lord is holy. Surely a man whose name means this is going to offer us some hope, for in these sordid stories of depravity and wickedness we could use some hope.

## Curses and Blessings

We’re thrust into the middle of a story. This man from Ephraim, whose name means, essentially, God is holy, confesses something to his mother. It turns out that she lost 1,100 pieces of silver. That is, 1,100 pieces of silver were stolen from her. That’s a lot of money but we have to understand that the Israelites were incredibly wealthy at this time.

When they left Egypt just a few generations prior to this story, they left with incredible wealth. The Egyptians gave them gold and silver and clothing. They left with massive flocks and herds, which provided them not only with wealth right then, but the ability to produce wealth for flocks and herds meant food and leather and wool, etc. In fact, Exodus tells us the Israelites *plundered* Egypt after having been enslaved by them. The reparations for their slavery made the people incredibly wealthy.

Since our story takes place early in Israel’s time in the land, not long after the initial conquest under Joshua, they still had their incredible wealth. It is not surprising this woman had 1,100 pieces of silver to steal, but why would her son steal it? No father is mentioned

so it's likely she's a widow, but why would her son steal from her? What was he lacking? Nothing!

We enter the story when he confesses his crime to his mother. He gives us his real motivation in confessing: she cursed whomever stole it, and uttered the curse in front of him. We don't feel the weight of an uttered curse. Daniel Block shares that today, in modern Bedouin culture, if someone loses something of value, there is a curse they utter:

“I hold the person who finds this thing responsible for it. If he keeps it may Allah cut him off from his property and his family.”

Bedouin curse cited by Daniel I. Block, ZIBBC

He then explained that in Bedouin culture, no one would dare keep the item if it were found. American culture has no such sense of communal responsibility so if an item were found we would just keep it. As with modern Bedouins, so it was with ancient Israelite culture. Micah's fear of his mother's curse compelled him to confess his crime.

His mother recognizes she has cursed her own son. Even though he is a thief, she regrets cursing him, but she can't just say, “Psyche!” and think that the curse magically goes away. How does one reverse such a curse? Well, you pronounce a blessing! His mother said, “Blessed by my son by the LORD”. She invokes the name of YHWH to bless her son, the thief who steals from his own mama.

You can almost hear the author laughing at this. There is a sense of mocking the Israelites in this bizarre story. She invokes a blessing from YHWH for her son, whose name is “Who is like YHWH?”, because her son feared the curse she had already invoked on him.

After he returned all 1,100 pieces of the silver, she said, “I dedicate the silver to the LORD”. She is free to keep the silver, of course. One can only assume she has given her tithes and offerings already. She has paid the tax for the tabernacle. She is also free to give the silver to the Lord out of gratitude for its return. It's entirely up to her! She dedicates all of it to the Lord. But she didn't stop there.

She said, “I dedicate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, *to make a carved image and a metal image*”. Um. What, now? To express her gratitude to the Lord for her son returning that which he has stolen, she determines to give all of the silver to the Lord and make a carved image and a metal image. You know, the very things God told them to destroy? She's trying to worship him in the very way he has expressly forbidden Israel to worship! *You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.*

The text says she then took 200 of the 1,100 pieces of silver she dedicated to the Lord and gave it to a silversmith who made a carved image and a metal image. It's likely the image was first carved from wood and then overlaid with the silver. It's probably not two images, but one. Micah then keeps this carved image, that was expressly forbidden by the Lord, in his own house—the house of Micah, whose name means, “Who is like YHWH?” He seemed to think the carved image was the answer. He also seems to care far more about his mother's curse than he does about the Lord's curse.

Deut 27:15 “‘Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.’ And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’

Deuteronomy 27:15

## False Worship

Micah fears his mother's curse, but not the Lord's curse. In Deuteronomy 27 Moses was instructing the Israelites about their upcoming entrance into the land. They were to assemble at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, with half the tribes on each mountain. They were to recite the curses and the blessings of the law of Moses. Any man who makes a carved image or a cast metal image was cursed by the Lord. He specifically said such a thing was an *abomination* to the Lord. The Lord despises idols and carved images and cast metal images. He told them very clearly, "*You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way*".

Such worship would come with a curse. Notice that he wasn't merely forbidding worshipping false gods here. YHWH God of Israel must not be worshiped in the way the Canaanites worshiped their gods. Israel must never bow down to YHWH before a carved image. Israel must never bow down to YHWH before a cast metal image. Israel must never bow down to YHWH before a pagan altar, even if the sacrifice on that pagan altar were made to YHWH.

Micah received the carved image and the metal image from the silversmith and made a shrine in his home. He would bow down before this shrine. Further, he made an ephod. An ephod is a linen garment worn by priests. Why would Micah make such a priestly garment? In verse 5 we're told he ordained one of his sons to be his priest.

We need to understand the instructions God had given Israel for worship. The tribe of Levi was set apart for the nation. They did not receive a tribal allotment when Joshua divided up the land. Instead, they were given cities throughout the land, for they would serve the people of Israel. The Levites would receive tithes and offerings from the people and would have some farmland near their cities, but their main support would be the tithes and offerings of the Israelites.

Not all Levites were priests. Only those who descended from Aaron could serve as priests. Here's God's instruction to Moses about this:

Ex 28:1 "Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. <sup>2</sup> And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty.

Exodus 28:1–2

Among the holy garments were ephods. These priests, descendants of Aaron—but not of Moses!—would offer sacrifices, burn incense, bless the people, oversee the showbread and menorah in the tabernacle, and would teach all Israel about the Lord. The high priest would enter directly into the Lord's presence each year on the Day of Atonement.

Most of the Levites, including Moses and his descendants, would not be priests, but would have priestly functions. The Kohathites would carry the sacred items such as the ark of the covenant and the furniture of the tabernacle. The Gershonites would transport the tabernacle itself, with all its curtains and coverings. The Merarites would set up and tear down the tabernacle as they moved about. Later these groups would be assigned other functions such as assisting in worship, maintenance of the temple, singing, etc.

Micah was an Ephraimite. He was not qualified to be a priest. His sons were not qualified to be priests. The priesthood was restricted to the sons of Aaron and their sons, on down

through the years. It's clear, though, that Micah either doesn't know or simply doesn't care. Oh, he cares about mama's curse! But not YHWH's curse. In addition to the carved image from his mother and the priestly ephod he made, and in addition to ordaining one of his sons to be his personal priest, he made household gods. Oh, he will worship YHWH! *Also*.

While he appears to be claiming to worship YHWH God of Israel, he was worshiping him in a way he despised. The author tells us, however, that Micah thought he was doing the right thing. In verse 6 we read there was no king in Israel during those days. Rather than following what should be godly leadership, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes". That is, Micah assumed his behavior was good and right. He thought worshiping God was good and the way he wanted to worship would therefore also be "good". Boda and Conway put it so precisely:

Unfortunately, "good" is not a relative quality to YHWH.  
Mark J. Boda and Mary L. Conway, ZECOT

## Syncretism

What we're seeing with Micah is syncretism. Syncretism is worshiping God in a way he has not authorized. It is worshiping him in the ways pagan gods were worshiped, though God has declared emphatically, "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way".

When the author declares "everyone did what was right in his own eyes", he doesn't mean they knew what they were doing was evil but they did it anyway. Surely there was some of that happening, but that's not what he means here. The people are doing what they think is right, and what they think is right is what they see everyone else doing.

They see the peoples around them bowing down before carved images of their gods. Hey, they're worshiping, right? We should worship our God, of course and it seems right to bow before an image of him. Hey, these folk are so committed to worshiping Molech they offer their own children in sacrifice. Surely YHWH is more valuable than Molech, so why should we offer him any less than Molech gets? It's easy to lose focus when worshiping our God so if a carved image enables us to stay focused, that has to be good, right? Our God is worth paying attention to, right? Besides, it's not like we're actually worshiping *the carved image*! People tend to prefer Canaanite worship styles, so if we worship the one true God, then that *has* to be good, right?

After telling them to destroy the altars and the carved images and the idols and whatever other religious furniture the people had, God was clear: "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way". To combine the worship of other gods with the worship of YHWH is syncretism. It is blending two unlike things together. Remember, there is God and there is everything else. These two categories could not be more different. To worship God the way others worshiped false gods was to mix oil and water. They simply don't go together.

Syncretism is an attempt to accomplish God's purposes through means that are contrary to his purposes. We, of course, would never engage in this sort of syncretism. Who here would bow down to an idol or a carved image? Of course not! We would never worship our God in that way.

Instead of bowing down before an image of God, we recognize God wants to grow his church. Since growing local churches are a good thing, we seek to *make* them grow. In fact,

there's an entire industry of church growth products out there! Books and seminars and training materials abound, all centered on how to grow a church.

How do you grow a business or other organization? If the aim is to grow—and why wouldn't it be?—then just about whatever it takes to get numbers is a good and worthwhile thing. In business, you market your product. You strive to convince folk they need your product—*your* product, not your *competitor's* product. So we market the gospel and we package it up nicely and make it look really, really attractive. We have shiny, happy people presenting it, you know, the sales pitch. While we would never bow down to a carved image modern Western Christians would happily embrace the marketing techniques of those around us.

Listen: you can't market Jesus. It's ridiculous and absurd when the church raffles off an AK47 or a toaster or maybe even a new car on Easter Sunday so as to entice people to attend. Are they kidding? On the one hand you get the risen Lord Jesus, the one who has conquered death. On the other hand you get, well, literally anything else. Church: anything other than the risen Jesus is less than the risen Jesus! You can't improve on Jesus!

Again, it's about growing a church, right? Whoever said, however, that numerical growth was ever a goal for a local church? Ever-expanding market share is how the world operates, so we operate churches with that mindset, completely oblivious to the wisdom of Edward Abbey, who said, "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell." Christians today may not worship God in a syncretistic way by bowing down to a carved image, but we gladly bow before "church growth".

It is true that God's aim is for his kingdom to grow and advance in this world. Many will embrace this and think they can bring about God's purposes in this world through the ballot box. If we get a majority in Congress and if we get a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate and if "our guy" occupies the White House, man! The converts will just fly in, won't they? Then the world will be as it should be, right? Everyone will worship the one true God because, you know, we got the right legislation passed?

God does not advance his kingdom through overwhelming power, however. The Lord Jesus, God in every way, came to this world as a servant. He humbled himself even to the point of dying, and not just any death. He was executed in a manner reserved for non-citizens, the worst of the worst. He emphatically rejected power as a means of growing his kingdom, but we think political power is the way?

In worship we recognize that God is worthy of awe. God must fill us with a sense of wonder. Rather than allow the Lord to bring about that sense we seek to bring it about by dimming the lights and playing music the right way and we add fog machines and colored lights. Somehow the hairs on your arm stand up and you feel...a sense of awe. God isn't looking for his people to have *an experience*. He wants them to experience *him*.

## Application

Worship, that is, any act of service or devotion that is intending to mix God with anything so as to make him more appealing or to accomplish something in his kingdom is syncretism. God declares, "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way". Fusion, whether with food or with culture in general, can be good and wise. We should have culturally relevant

worship music. Our preaching should be comprehensible. Our prayers should bless others who participate with us. How we structure our worship services can change with time.

Fusion—the mixing of two completely different things—is good, except when it comes to the Lord. God does not need fusion in order to be God. God does not need marketing. He does not need our assistance. He does not need a PR firm. The Spirit of God is quite capable of accomplishing God’s purposes. God is God, and he is perfect just as he is.

I’ve shared with you before about a song that I initially hated. Over 20 years ago the Newsboys released a song called “Who?”. The premise is great. The song declares God is not the sort of Deity who can be tamed or led on a leash. Much younger J-T was offended by this song because it dared to compare God to quite ordinary things:

How you gonna reckon with a God like this?  
When you gonna face what you can’t dismiss?  
Whatcha gonna say to the Soul Kiss that is my God?  
Fearsome like the sag in a fat man’s chair?  
Sweeter than a patch of Rogaine hair?  
How do you define what you can’t compare?  
This is my God

(It continues.)

How you gonna reckon with a God this Great?  
Why you gonna measure what you can’t equate?  
Whatcha gonna say to the Checkmate that is my God?  
Stronger than the burn of an aftershave?  
Tender as a burger in the microwave?  
Rarer than the air in an empty grave?  
This is my God

Newsboys, “Who?”

One day several years ago I was scoffing in my self-righteous indignation. I don’t remember if the song was on the radio or if it just came to mind, but I remember thinking how foolish it was to compare the power of God to the burn of an aftershave. It felt like blasphemy! Then it hit me: that’s the point of the song! (I’m slow, not stupid.) If you want to compare God’s power to something, to what, exactly, would you compare it? If you want to compare God’s wisdom and sovereign control of his world, what is there that’s better than a checkmate, the moment you realize you’ve lost the chess match, outwitted by a far superior intellect?

Our God is beyond compare. We don’t need to upsell him. As Charles Spurgeon once said, “You don’t have to defend a lion. All you have to do is let the lion loose, and the lion will defend itself.” God is not caged, except by our foolish attempts to make him appealing or to make him seem less offensive to our culture. God is holy. People are not. People are going to find great offense at God, just as people have been doing since our first parents rebelled against him and the somehow thought they suddenly needed to hide from him. He had not changed.

The cross is offensive to the world. The gospel of Jesus is the aroma of death to the world. We loose the lion by embracing it for what it is. The only reason we would not do



this is if we really did not believe the gospel is the power of God. If we really did not desire him for who he is but only for what he offers, then we might feel compelled to market the Lord Jesus and his gospel.

Just as Micah brought in other things to contribute to his experience of worshiping the God of Israel, including an unauthorized priest and illicit carved images, so do we when we seek to add to the Lord himself. If Micah found the Lord himself compelling and desirable, he would not have felt compelled to embrace syncretism.

Church, let's look to the Lord Jesus and see him as he is. We don't need to spruce him up. We don't need to add anything to him. He is the very essence of beauty just as he is. We need to make sure we're not engaging in syncretism by covering him up with anything that is not him. Let's bask in his presence for the very fact that we can illustrate how great he is. The Lord Jesus has made a way and allows us into the very presence of God. What more could we possibly want?