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UNDOING MASCULINITY: THREE CASE STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES USING MAURICE BLOCH'S THEORIES OF FORMALIZED LANGUAGE AND THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN

A DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

SUBMITTED TO THE

GRADUATE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE – JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

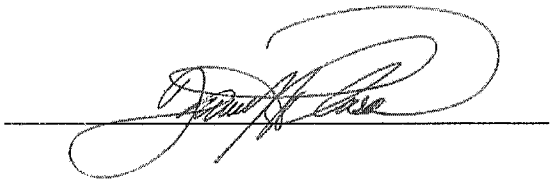
BY

Julia Rose Olson

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



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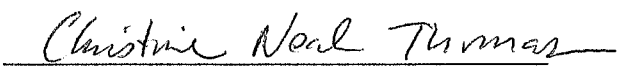

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This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Robert Cowgill,
in whose classroom I first witnessed the true art of teaching.

Abstract

This dissertation seeks to explore two interrelated theories proposed by Maurice Bloch and their efficacy in the examination of the character trope of the emasculating woman in the book of Judges. The "woman as emasculator" character is a formalized convention, employed by authors across time, space and genre. While their roles appear to be diverse, as queens, sex workers, wisdom (or vice) embodied, the convention the character serves is the same. Each of these female characters is a highly formalized, literary construct: a caricature. The convention was invented, perpetuated, and consistently employed by men primarily to maintain status quo in societal roles. To examine this formalized character, the work of Maurice Bloch on language formalization and the ritual devaluation of women will be key.

This dissertation will employ these two related theories—language formalization and female subordination—in analyzing female characters in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Judges. The theory of language formalization can be expanded to include the formalization of a narrative character. A character, like the use of formalized language, operates within a certain strict set of boundaries. While any character may appear in various literary contexts—narrative, legal, etc.—the character's form and meaning cannot be modified; it consistently adheres to the same formalized parameters even as it appears in different literary contexts.

The purpose of this study is to identify the clearest places in which the formalized "woman as emasculator" character appears and then examine the different implementations the authors have utilized, institutionalizing this convention, in order to maintain the status quo. The formalized character of emasculator is not limited to the book of Judges. This study will have implications for women in other parts of biblical literature as well, raging across time, space, and genre.

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Chapter One: Maurice Bloch and The Book of Judges

Introduction

Female imagery is instrumental in the development of key themes throughout the Hebrew Bible. Female characters and imagery play instrumental roles in Proverbs, certain prophetic passages, Esther, Ruth, and Song of Songs. The future of the formation of Israel, the fate of the Israelite monarchy, the survival of the people in Exile, and the covenant relationship between the people and God are embodied in female roles. Among the many diverse roles for female characters extant in the text, this project will focus on one particular role: the humiliation or insult to a male character's masculinity.

The "woman as humiliator" character is a formalized convention, employed by authors across time, space and genre. While their roles appear to be diverse, as queens, sex workers, wisdom (or vice) allegorically embodied, the convention the character serves is the same. Each of these female characters is a highly formalized, literary construct: a caricature. The convention was invented, perpetuated, and consistently employed by men. To examine this formalized character, the work of Maurice Bloch on language formalization and the ritual devaluation of women will be key.

Bloch, a cultural anthropologist who primarily studied the Merina of Madagascar, has developed two theories that will be useful in understanding formalized female characters. The first is the theory of language formalization. Bloch argues that in political oratory and even more so in ritual language, formalization creates an "arthritic" form of communication. formalized language usage differs from ordinary usage by virtue of the constraints imposed by social and political formalization processes. Formalization constrains the speaker and the interpreter by creating a highly artificial discourse structure. This style of communication cannot be rejected by either the speaker or the hearer and statements made in this style cannot be challenged. The rigidity of the language is what inspires Bloch to describe it as "arthritic." In a formalized discourse, both parties are constrained by the form. The immutability of formalized language embeds a social and political power which cannot be challenged because there is no linguistic option available

to the speaker or the hearer to do so. The structure of both the original statement and the response is preordained, timeless, and unchanging. Formalized language drastically limits the response that can be offered. Consequently, its users are locked into a discourse structure that does not permit individual innovation: a timeless, unchanging exchange. Accordingly, formalized language is used not to create a new social order but to maintain an existing power structure. Because of its efficacy in exerting social control, its use is limited to those who participate in how language intersects with political and social power. It is not accessible to everyone – it is not democratized. It is a limited use power language that upholds the system of power that benefits from it.

Bloch's studies exposed how formalized language, particularly in ritualized contexts, facilitated the devaluation of female members of the community. From the rituals themselves, Bloch derives the idea that women are considered dangerous due to their generative power which stems from the female capacity for procreation. This power is considered wild, untamed, and extremely threatening to community cohesion. The rituals in which female participants are devalued serve to strip them of this untamed generativity and repackage feminine procreative power in a safer, constrained way. In numerous rituals, two of which will be examined in this study, the features of natural birth are devalued and then replaced by a community birthing element. The act of bearing a child is subjugated to the concept of birth-into-the-community, thereby shifting the emphasis from the birthing mother to a concept that includes both men and women. These rituals serve to deny the unique feminine capacity for generativity and supplant it with notions of a more important birth: not that of an individual to its mother, but of an individual as a community group member. Women's capacity for birth is seen as untamed and dangerous, requiring these ritual elements to strip them of danger. After the threat of individual feminine generativity is removed, female agents in the community can be reintroduced back into a group in which the power associated with their birthing ability is mitigated by a predominantly male-led ritual. Thus, feminine generativity is made to fit into the already existing power structure which privileges community (including and often featuring) men, rather than the individual female actor. The women are forced into a role of submission in order to serve the larger, communal purpose of perpetuating continuity.

This project will employ these two related theories—language formalization and female subordination—in analyzing female characters in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Judges. The theory of language formalization can be expanded to include the formalization of a narrative character. A character, like the use of formalized language, operates within a certain strict set of boundaries. While any character may appear in various literary contexts—narrative, legal, etc.—the character's form consistently adheres to the same formalized parameters even as it appears in different literary contexts.

The biblical text, like those of Bloch's Merina ritual, facilitates and sustains the status quo using formalized language and characters. Female characters in the biblical narrative of Judges are devalued in a manner parallel to what takes place in Merina culture. This study will show that many aspects about formalization and female subjugation recognized in Bloch's cultural analysis are evidenced in Judges. This study will explore the ways devaluation practices through language formalization in the Hebrew Bible may differ than those of the Merina. Both methods of devaluation are used to maintain a status quo. The Merina message related to women is that they must be cleansed of their wildness and reintroduced safely into society so that their generative power does not upend the status quo. Ironically, the devaluation of female characters in the Hebrew Bible is often at the expense of another male character. That is, the women characters are not cleansed and reintroduced in a safe paradigm that allows them to contribute to the sustaining of the status quo, but rather they are weaponized and used as the ultimate tool to humiliate men. Thus, the very same cultural phenomena described by Bloch are employed to different ends.

We will examine Bloch's analysis of Merina funerary and circumcision rituals to elucidate the character of formalized language. Both rituals showcase the broader themes of formalization and devaluation central to this study. These rituals illustrate well Bloch's general theory of formalization and ritual devaluation, and it is the general theory that will be applied to the Hebrew Bible. The following section will include a detailed description of Bloch's understanding of the two Merina rituals so that the reader can see the intricacy of the larger theory. That theory, then, will be applied to texts in the Hebrew Bible. This study will not examine funerary and circumcision practices in the Hebrew Bible, rather it will use the broader concepts drawn from Bloch's analysis of these rituals and apply them

to female characters in the Hebrew Bible. The examples from Bloch are not parallel with the Hebrew Bible, but the mechanisms used to devalue the female character in each is the same.

Bloch's analysis of the funerary and circumcision rituals gives us the tools to create a thorough description of the literary mechanisms by which the biblical authors execute their subordination of women. The theories allow for us to expose the subliminal subordination of female characters that occurs across numerous stories in the Hebrew Bible. Application of Bloch's theories will expose the institutionalized conventions that transcend author and narrative context in the Hebrew Bible.

Language Formalization

Maurice Bloch draws his political anthropological approach from the raw data of "people speaking to each other."[1] Over that data, Bloch then applies a theoretical construct that can only be built after the raw data has been gathered. Traditional political anthropology typically begins with the creation of a theoretical construct first, followed by the application of subsequently gathered data to the existing construct. Bloch reverses this process, instead using the data itself to create the concept. The theoretical construct then accurately reflects the ways by which people communicate with one another. Bloch's structure derives from the very "words and actions of the actors" themselves.[2] Political anthropological analysis commonly seeks to analyze the conscious exercise of power. Such an analysis requires the examination of local political hierarchy, succession events, legislation, and dispute settlement to determine the ways power is exerted. These instances of potential power conflicts and dispute resolutions did not appear among the Merina. Yet the core of what political anthropological analysis seeks to examine, the exercise of authority, frequently occurs. Systems of power are present in the community, but the Merina means of exercising it took place in an entirely different register. For example, the exercise of power took place unconsciously in places such as interpersonal communication.

[1] Bloch, Maurice, "Introduction," in *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*, ed. Maurice Bloch (London; New York: Academic Press, 1975), 2.
[2] Ibid., 2.

Bloch noticed "the oppressively hierarchical character of the society which manifested itself in elders continually telling younger men what to do, in fathers similarly telling their sons, older brothers telling their younger brothers, and men telling women."[3] Though the traditional means of examining the exercise of power were not present in the Merina culture, power was still being exercised through person to person interactions.

In Bloch's observations, the *conscious* exercise of power was missing in Merina culture. There, "as a result of socialization, power was permeated through social intercourse on a day-to-day basis in a totally unconscious and completely accepted way."[4] Though the exercise of power was subliminal, it was still occurring, and a particular status quo was being upheld, whether or not the participants in this communication were aware of it. Bloch sought a way to explore these interactions. He decided that the best way was to begin "with the observed speech acts of political leaders in order to see what these speech acts imply both in terms of the intentions of the speakers and in terms of the implications of the type of speech which they employ."[5]

Political language is essential to the exercise of power. There is an expectation that a certain set of language conventions will be used when one is communicating in a political linguistic register. This is where language formalization and its effects come most clearly into view. According to Bloch, formalized language usage involves a fixed loudness pattern with a limited choice in intonation. Some syntactic forms often found in everyday speech acts will be excluded, and the range of vocabulary available to the user will be limited. There will also be a fixed sequence of speech acts, and illustrations and metaphors will be drawn only from limited sources. There are stylistic rules to formalized language usage that do not exist in everyday speech, and they will be applied at all levels of the formalized speech act. Given these criteria, Bloch describes the formalized language of traditional authority structures as "an impoverished language."[6] Choices of form, style, words, and syntax are all limited in a way not manifest in ordinary speech acts. Because

[3] Ibid. 3.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 4.
[6] Ibid., 15. "Traditional authority" here refers to the Weberian understanding of one of the three types of domination. That is, Weber's traditional authority rests on the "sacredness of the social order," indicating that the leadership is ordained by tradition that has always existed.

the style of this communication is so fixed, "formalized language isolates itself from the processes of traditional historical linguistics" thus creating an archaic use of the language not found in ordinary communication.[7]

Already, given these criteria alone, it is evident that formalized language is fundamental in the exercise of power, as the values are embedded in particular usage patterns, most evident in the prescribed use of illustrations and metaphors. When formalized language is employed, the repertoire of imagery the user can draw on is limited. All events are described in terms of other events that have already occurred, reducing any specificity of a speech act and flattening events to make them appear as though they are alike.[8] Every speech act adheres to a timeless convention. The implementation of this convention is designed to influence the social realm, as it "moves the communication to a level where disagreement is ruled out since one cannot disagree with the right order."[9] Since all things have happened before and have always been as they are, and since particular events are dissolved into the generality permitted by the accepted communication format, the hearer of the formalized speech act cannot disagree with what has been communicated because the order is timeless and incontestable. As Bloch describes it,

> The order in which things are arranged is not seen as the result of the acts of anybody in particular, but of a state which has always existed and is therefore of the same kind as the order of nature. It is not surprising therefore to find how often traditional authority is linked with such processes as the passage of the seasons or the periods of the moon.[10]

The exercise of power in a society is not illustrated by the development of a new system of ideas or control, but rather by the continual sustaining of the system that already exists. Though its means of exerting social control, language formalization also has a unifying quality. In accepting the terms of its use, users create a society wide unity "under the aegis of accepted values."[11] The accepted values become generalizations that can be applied broadly in any realm where formalized language might be used. Thus, the values continue to supply the status quo because of their generality. However, the unity of the specificity

[7] Ibid., 17.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 16.
[10] Ibid., 17.
[11] Ibid., 16.

of formalized language precludes the ability of its users to deal with specific issues. Any innovation in the form is impossible, so any new, individuating event cannot be supported in its use. Everything must be generalized.[12] The inability to specify a unique event within the formalized discourse locks the users into a system wherein they cannot create a new concept that could possibly upset the discourse structure. This is not to say that formalized language cannot adapt to developing circumstances. The formalized system of communication permits changes that reinforce its own power. New technology may call for new developments in formalized expression, but those developments remain within the formalized ideology so that the same structure may be upheld. Offering a new concept, however, that might challenge that structure, that might upend the status quo, is impossible. Formalized language builds into its use the inability to think creatively. As Bloch suggests, this linguistic register is "arthritic."

The arthritic nature of formalized communication is evident in the range of responses available to the user. There can usually only be one response to the formalized speech act, and thus "formalization of language is a way whereby one speaker can coerce the response of another."[13] The framework of formal communication dictates that a single act of communication can only be followed by "a few or possibly only one" other act of communication.[14] "Indeed, in the extreme situation where we are dealing with traditional discourse repeated from a traditional body of knowledge, only one speech act…can follow another."[15] Since the first predicts the second, "the possibility of contradiction becomes less and less."[16] Contradiction would indicate that the hearer of the formalized speech act had unlimited possible responses, but because of the impoverished nature of formalized language, there is only one choice of response that can follow the original act of communication. Formalized communication "is a situation where power is all or nothing, and of course in society total refusal is normally out of the question.[17]

[12] Ibid., 16.
[13] Ibid., 19.
[14] Ibid., 18.
[15] Ibid., 19.
[16] Ibid., 20.
[17] Ibid., 20.

Essential to the analysis of formalized language usage is the recognition that it is far removed from ordinary, everyday language usage. This is true on the syntactical level as well as on the semantic level. Meaning in formalized communication is knitted together by means of timeless cultural knowledge that focuses on the general rather than the specific. This timeless knowledge draws primarily from proverbs or scriptures, which constrains the ways one can make meaning. But this constraint is not limited to the generation of a statement, for the range of response is equally restricted.[18] Ordinary language usage does not rely this heavily on formalized expressions, which are distinct from ordinary language usage. New metaphors, for example, cannot be generated in formalized speech, as they would lack the grounding in timelessness that other formalized, socially developed expressions have retained. Because formalized language does not permit any range of response and rules out any possibility for contradiction, it is "non-logical and any attempt to represent it as such, whether by a paraphrase into ordinary language which implies 'explanation' or by the use of tabular representation containing a logical form, is misleading."[19] When we are dealing with formalized language, we are not dealing with a form of communication that can be rendered more meaningful by its translation into ordinary language. Its particular form and its peculiarity in meaning must be preserved.

Formalized language has the appearance of ordinary language to the uninformed observer or to the group outsider. Rather, the formalization process means that the formalized expression carries a specific meaning. This meaning is accessible only to those who have access to the cultural repertoire of the user. It is the cultural repertoire of the community which facilitates the discernment of formalized from ordinary usage based on context and speech community. The distinction between ordinary and formalized does not lie in the speech act, but in the user.

The relationship between meaning and cultural repertoire is what makes translating formalized expressions into ordinary language usage impossible. This difficulty exists within a single language, and it is magnified exponentially when one language is translated

[18] Ibid., 15.
[19] Ibid., 21.

into another. The socio-linguistic formalization process that has taken place within the specific community is further lost to the translator. The risk of translating formalized language usage as ordinary language usage is multiplied. This is especially critical when we consider the application of this theory to the Hebrew Bible, an issue which will be addressed below.

Formalized language facilitates social control. Since ordinary speech acts entail alternative responses, formalization violates the logic of standard communication acts. Thus,

> the effect of removing the possibility of alternatives from the mode of communication, as is done by formalization, makes what is said beyond logic, its force being traditional authority, but disguised in that it has been accepted unconsciously before the event by the acceptance of the proper, of the polite, or the appropriate way of behaving. What is being said is the right thing because by the acceptance of the formalization of language it has become the only thing.[20]

In this form of social control, it is not that the language itself has lost meaning. Rather, formalized language usage violates the logic of ordinary language usage. Bloch describes the new meaning as a "performative force."[21] The goal is no longer to communicate a series of facts but rather to use the language to influence people. If, as discussed above, maintenance of the status quo is the goal of agents in power who make use of formalized language, then meaning itself is not as important as the result of the performance of the language.

Formalized Language, Systems of Power, and the Status Quo

If formalized language usage is such a powerful tool for enforcing authority and coercing listeners, how is it that not everyone uses it to achieve their own gain? Formalized language is not democratized. It is not accessible to everyone. Formalized language requires skill to use it, skill which is not shared with any but those who wield power. In the societies which Bloch examines for his discussion, oratory requires special training, formal teaching that is often only available to leaders, limiting the education to "rightful heirs."[22] As Bloch

[20] Ibid., 21-22.
[21] Ibid., 22.
[22] Ibid., 22.

describes it, "formalization is thus a form of power for the powerful rather than simply a tool available to anybody."[23]

That formalized language is useful in maintaining the status quo rather than creating a new social order is clear at the outset of its use. Both parties must agree to the code *before* it is used. The social force of formalized language lies in its universal acceptance by all parties. Its use implies that both parties accept the existing power structure, but it does not *create* that social order. It simply upholds it." That is, formalized language does not produce power, but rather it produces a situation wherein all parties agree to maintain the system of power that is already in place. The hearer has agreed that there can only be one response to a statement, and the speaker has agreed that only certain criteria may be used to create a statement. Formalized language cannot create a new order "because it leads to a nonhistorical, non-specific and highly ambiguous language which reduces events to being merely instances of a recurring eternal order."[24] If one is to challenge this order, they must create an entirely new code. They cannot adapt the current one. Formalization affirms the order; it does not produce it.[25]

Formalized Language and Its Relationship to Ritual

Bloch's theory of formalized language developed from his analysis of the speech acts of members of the Merina culture. His goal was to determine how conscious (or unconscious) social control was exercised. However, upon observing Merina ritual practices, Bloch identified that Merina elders were utilizing formalized speeches in parts of the ritual itself. The oratory used during the ritual was, in fact, "identical to the formal speeches made by Merina elders at political meetings."[26]

Oratory used in ritual

shares with political oratory such features as the use of a restricted, archaic vocabulary, the use of only certain syntactic forms, usually the ones considered most polite and impersonal, the use of a wealth of illustrations from a given traditional body of sources –

[23] Ibid., 23.
[24] Ibid., 25.
[25] Ibid., 25-26.
[26] Maurice Bloch, "Symbols, Song, Dance, and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?" *European Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (May 1974): 58.

proverbs, traditional history, etc., the use of a special style of delivery and finally the use of a rigid traditional structure for the whole speech.[27]

The same constraints enforced upon ordinary speech in order to render formalized political speech are implemented to render ritual speech.[28] Bloch suggests that ritual language takes all the elements of political oratory discussed thus far and pushes them even further.

Echoing what we learn from discourse theory, Bloch recognizes the significance of intonation. Intonation is even more restricted than word choice in formalized speeches.[29] This leads to the more restricted patterns found in song since, in singing, the word choice is limited *as well as* the way in which one can make noises and intone those words. The fixed features of formalized speech appear to a much greater extent in song, because the singer has a "total lack of individual creativity."[30] There is no way to refute a song, so this element of the ritual, like the formalized speech acts, has no propositional force.[31] If this is the case, then one cannot "extract an argument from what is being said and what is being done in ritual" because there is no possibility for contradiction and no logical connection between elements. Religious ritual, then, is not an explanation for one's place in the world, or one's relationship to the cosmos, as other anthropologists have explained it. For Bloch, religious ritual actually "rules out the very tools of explanation" that one would expect to find. That is, explanation can only occur when one statement logically follows another. But in formalized speech acts, the rules of logic do not apply and thus no explanation can be offered. Again, Bloch illustrates that meaning transcends language usage and is found within a specific speech community.

Formalization Beyond Speech Acts

The same set of parameters applies to ritual dance. Much like formalized speech and singing, there is a restriction, in this case, of movement rather than in content or intonation. As with spoken language, "messages carried by the language of the body also become ossified, predictable, and repeated from one action to the next, rather than

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 59.
[29] Ibid., 69.
[30] Ibid., 70.
[31] Ibid., 71.

recombined as in everyday situations where they can convey a great variety of messages."[32] Dancers, like users of formalized language, have accepted a code from which there is no freedom to diverge. Bloch extends his theories about the impoverished nature of formalized language to song, dance, and, ultimately, art. For Bloch, art "is an inferior form of communication."[33] This is so because, while art forms may seem creative, generative, and unique, the "generative potential of language (or bodily movement) has been forbidden, removed, and the remaining choices left are so simple that they can suddenly be apprehended consciously. Creativity has suddenly become controllable, hence, enjoyable. This, however, is an illusion of creativity, in fact this is the sphere where it occurs least."[34]

Given Bloch's analysis of formalized speech, song, and dance, what appears as a uniquely creative field, that of ritual/art, is also similarly restricted through formalization. It is confined within certain accepted frameworks that prohibit creativity and, ultimately, coerce a single response. Though the appearance of these forms of expression may be superficially unique, they serve the same goal: the perpetuation of the status quo. They may appear to diverge, but at their core they abide by the same formalized convention as does political oratory. This does not mean that the content used within these formalized structures loses meaning, however. The meaning simply changes. The words, phrases, or whatever else may fall under the category of formalization and which are being used in ritual, become "fused into each other, form[ing] solidified lumps of meaning within the religious framework."[35] When these units are used outside of the ritual sphere, they bear a totally different meaning than when they are used in that highly restricted sphere. Within this ritual sphere, the language has no propositional force but rather increases in performative force.[36]

Ritual communication is a more extreme form of what we have already learned of political oratory. Thus, religion and ritual should be considered a political process of traditional authority.[37] The method used to maintain power and to sustain the status quo in

[32] Ibid., 72.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 73.
[35] Ibid., 74.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 77.

political oratory is also used in the ritual/religious realm, meaning that the ritual in question, or the religion as a whole, is shaped around serving a particular form of authority.[38] Consider that traditional authority relies on "making a power situation appear a fact in the nature of the world."[39] What better way to do so than to link the origin of that power structure with timeless, ritualistic elements of the world? Rather than separating politics and religion, Bloch shows that *both* are the exercise of a form of power.

Language formalization contributes to the formation of a community's values, something that has grave implications for each member of the community. Ritual language, while used only during social events, concretizes and enforces a social hierarchy. The social order it creates is not limited in its existence to those certain events, but rather the language used in ritual communication serves to "make the social world appear organized in a fixed order which recurs without beginning and without end."[40] Ritual language makes social world appear to be a reality; it is produced and then solidifies the social order. Potential challenges to the social order are preemptively addressed in ritual language.

Bloch's Theory of Ritual and the Devaluation of Women

Famadihana – The Merina Funerary Ritual

While studying the Merina and developing his theory on the arthritic nature of formalized language in political oratory and ritual, Bloch was simultaneously developing a theory about the nature of ritual itself and the subjugation of women that appears to take place.

The beginning of his analysis stemmed from his observation of the funerary practices of the Merina. Merina identify themselves as members of a community defined by their ties to a particular piece of land. Each member of the community is buried in a large, monumental, shared tomb. This tomb is located on the ancestral land that belongs to the particular community whose members were then interred within.[41] Community

[38] Ibid., 79.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Maurice Bloch, "The Disconnection Between Power and Rank as a Process: An Outline of the Development of Kingdoms in Central Madagascar," *European Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 01 (June 1977): 138.
[41] Bloch discusses the history of Merina settlement, resettlement, and the relationship between people groups and tombs extensively throughout much of his work. Two primary sources that are useful for understanding the relationship between individuals and their community tombs are

membership and, by extension, tomb placement, is linked to this ancestral village, the *tanindrazana*, which is an individual's place of origin.

Historical causes, such as military conflicts, as well as social causes, such as economic hardship or marriage, resulted in relocation in the Merina community. However, despite the movement of the population, one's *tanindrazana* remains the same. As Bloch writes, "in terms of emotions and allegiances it is clear that they consider membership of their *tanindrazana* as more significant than their membership of the village they live in."[42] Living outside one's ancestral village places that person in a *vahiny*, "a word which means both a guest and a stranger."[43] Even if a person has lived in a village separate from their tanindrazana for a number of generations, that individual is still considered in a vahiny, separated from their ancestral land. This almost mythical ancestral community is sustained, now, mostly by the interment of individuals in the ancestral tomb. Regardless of where one has been living, "after death a person is ultimately buried in one of the many tombs of his tanindrazana."[44]

The Merina tombs stand as monuments to generational continuity. Burial in the ancestral tomb enters an individual "in a system which is ideally rigid and fixed forever – the society of the ancestors." In that ancestral society, individuals no longer exist but become part of a community of ancestors.[45] Links formed in the community are based on unity of the whole, rather than personal connections between individuals and others buried in the tomb. The "ideological stress" is "on the tomb itself and the dead in it" which provides a permanent kinship relationship with *everyone* in the tomb, rather than focusing on family lines. [46] The importance of being in one's ancestral tomb, then, cannot be understated. Upon death, one moves from the individuality of their own life into the

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Maurice Bloch, "Tombs and Conservatism Among the Merina of Madagascar," *Man* 3, no. 1 (March 1968): 94–104; Maurice Bloch, "Tombs and States," in *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death*, ed. S.C. Humphreys and Helen King (London: Academic Press Inc., 1981), 137–48.

[42] Bloch, "Tombs and Conservatism Among the Merina of Madagascar," 96.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid, 99.

[45] Ibid., 100.

[46] Ibid.

communality of the ancestral family, made tangible in the tomb. Despite the dispersal of the community over time, ancestors (and their remains) are regrouped at the tomb.

This regrouping is one of the ideological pillars holding up what the Merina consider "the good." Other elements of what the Merina consider good highlight the importance of ancestral continuity and togetherness: ancestral land, the ancestors themselves, indivision, and blessing.[47] Togetherness, indivision, and continuous community are the goals of all Merina. Division, like exogamous marriage which would entail the transfer of some ancestral land to another family, or burial outside of the ancestral tomb, create division in the community, the antithesis to the continuity of the group. The problem of division and the means by which it is often symbolized will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Merina burial ritual, called *famadihana*, is the ultimate regrouping of the deceased individual into the eternal ancestral community. When a person dies, their remains are usually interred in a single grave "without any particular sepulchre and near the locality where the death took place, irrespective of whether this be part of the ancestral land of the dead or not. This is burial outside the tomb."[48] Typical aspects of mourning occur at his time, with overt displays of public grief, which Bloch describes as "socially organised sorrow."[49] Public mourning includes a number of practices, including even self-mutilation, although it is the female mourners who bear the brunt of the mourning duties. "Women mourners do not plait their hair but leave it tousled, they wear old clothes, they sit on dung heaps to receive visits of condolence. Mourning is therefore self-punishment implying that the death is to a certain extent the mourner's fault for which a woman atones by these self-deprecating practices."[50] The importance of Bloch's gender specificity in the mourning practices will become clear later in this chapter.

Key to this first part of a Merina burial is the concept of pollution. Decomposition is taboo in Malagasy culture, and for as long as the remains are wet, a major element of the

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[47] Maurice Bloch, "Death, Women and Power," in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 213.
[48] Ibid., 214.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 215.

notion of pollution, "decomposition is still taking place," an extremely pollutive event, "and any contact however indirect requires ritual cleaning."[51] Anything remotely related to this first interment, including the burial tools, the funeral attendees, and even the homes of the mourners, must be cleaned so that "the contamination they bring back does not re-enter" the homes of the living.[52] However, despite this abhorrence of the pollution caused by decomposition, mourners who are closely related to the deceased are expected to throw themselves onto the remains before burial "as an extreme form of self-devaluation."[53]

During his observation of this ritual, Bloch noticed that the primary actors in these mourning practices were women. Women are the ones who sit on the refuse heap, disheveled and despairing, publicly exhibiting the discomfort of grief. When it comes to contact with the remains, the lion's share of it falls to women. In preparation for this first burial, women are tasked with washing the remains and everything in the house of the decedent which is contaminated by death. Women are also the primary actors when it comes to the throwing of oneself onto the corpse. When a person is buried for the first time, individually, in a single grave, it is a time "of sadness, of pollution and of women."[54]

The second part of the *famadihana* ritual takes place after the remains have totally decomposed. The decedent is disinterred, now "dry" and completely decomposed, rather than "wet" with the pollution of ongoing decomposition.[55] The remains are moved from wherever they were buried to communal tomb on the ancestral land. Disinterment requires removal of every element of the deceased person, from the bones to the dust left behind during the process of decomposition. During the return of the remains to their ancestral land, a journey which can sometimes be quite long, music and dancing occurs. The entire scene is a joyous one, seen as a time of blessing and fecundity.[56] Because the deceased individual is regrouping with their ancestral community, in their ancestral tomb, they are securing generational continuity, undoing any division that may have occurred in their time

[51] Ibid., 215.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., 216.

via marriage, moving, or anything else. If the first part of the burial is about despair, this second part is about joyous unity.

When the remains arrive at the ancestral land for interment in the communal tomb, they are kept in the nearby lodgings of a mourner and watched over by women in the community. When the actual time of interment arrives, the corpse is "carried to the tomb on the shoulders of women who are quite literally *driven* forward by the men."[57] While the wetness of decomposition has passed, the remains are still considered polluting, and proximity to the corpse and the tombs is "extremely frightening" for all Merina.[58] Thus, the men in the group *force* the women to carry the remains and, during the procession, *force* the women to dance. While the experience of interring a person in their ancestral tomb is a joyous one, the element of fear remains and, even during the periods of prescribed dancing, "the women at least, if not the men as well, are terrified by this contact with the dead and with the tomb."[59] Contact with corpse is always polluting, but during this second ritual men coerce women into doing this taboo action.[60] Thus, this most important element of regrouping, though it is joyous and essential, must be a *forced* action, brought about by men who subject the women to the degradation and fear of pollution.

Formalized ritual speech plays a role in all Merina rituals, and the *famadihana* is no different. Men stand atop the ancestral tomb and give speeches indicating the joy that abounds when a deceased person is reunited with their ancestral community. While the speeches are given, women sit with the corpse on their laps. Then, "the atmosphere takes on a bacchanalian turn," during which the women bearing the remains throw the corpses into the air, "very often crunching them up as the bones are very brittle and will ultimately disintegrate into the dust from the decayed flesh."[61] After this, the bodies are reunited in their ancestral tomb, this final act of division undoing made by the *men*. It is one of the few times throughout this entire process during which men have any contact with the human remains.

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 217.

Bloch's analysis of this ritual focuses on two elements: the treatment of the corpse in this second part of interment and the "assault on women and their emotions."[62] The specific and, perhaps brutal, treatment of the human remains is understood to dissolve the individual set of remains into a dust that is better able to blend with the dust of the ancestors, creating the indivisible community to which all Merina strive to return. Bloch views this as an undoing of the individual into a "togetherness" that permits the remains to become one with the community.[63] The shaking and tossing of the remains remove the physical elements of individuality, like bones and dry flesh, and turn them into dust which can easily blend with the dust of others and become the eternal tomb community.

The assault on women is more nuanced than the assault inflicted on the human remains. In Merina thought, women are representatives of the home, the birthplace, though not the ancestral one, and to individuation. Through birth by a woman, one becomes an individual. If unity is the key to communal longevity and ancestral continuity, individuating acts like birth and individual dwellings are counter to unifying acts like death (or other community-based activities, which will be discussed later in this chapter) and communal tombs.

Women represent division. Thus, like the corpses that reduced to a communal substance, women must also be reduced for their role as division makers. The whole ritual is intended to act out the notion that "blessing in unity is achieved through victory over individuals, women, and death itself (in its polluting and sad aspects) so that these negative elements can be replaced by something else: the life-giving entry into the tomb. This is achieved by breaking through, vanquishing this world of women, of sorrow, of death and division."[64] Women aid in the transition between individual death in the individual grave and communal longevity in the tomb. By their subjugation and the resulting pollution, they assist the entire community in vanquishing division and achieving unity. In their role as individual birthing agents, they humiliate men by the capacity to generate life. Thus, the men subjugate the women in the ritual that is key to reunifying the community and removing the individual barriers believed to result from female birth. In order to complete

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 217-218.

a decedent's birth into the eternal ancestral community, the men force the women to pollute themselves, seemingly humiliating *them* in return for their original act of humiliation: the capacity for birth.

Typically, anthropologists interpret this behavior as a way to restore the social order after it is threatened by death. The acts of transcending the individual in death are meant to restore the generational continuity that is so important to the Merina. However, Bloch turns this on his head and argues that this continuity does not exist. It is a reality created only in ritual. The "eternal non-individualist" community "has no material referent."[65] The image of continuity is created through its antithesis in the burial ritual. The construction of the ideal continuous community

> is achieved by acting out a complex dialectical argument: The ideal image is constructed by stressing a phantasmagoric ritually-constructed antithesis – the world of women, pollution, sorrow, and individuality. Then, once created this world is vanquished by…the triumph of the regrouping in the tomb. In other words, order is created by the ritual and is it is created very largely through dramatic antithetical negative symbolism.[66]

In order for any victory to take place over death, division, or anything else, the ritual itself must first create the enemy over which the victory is to be achieved.[67] The creation of the symbolic and ideal social order relies on the negation of that very order, a process for which women are ultimately responsible in this ritual and, as we will see, others in Merina culture. Group unity is produced through devaluation of women.[68]

Women serve as characters in the burial ritual. Their role, much like that of the men, is a formalized convention meant to undo the damage they cause by the process of birth. By giving birth, they sew division. They humiliate men, who lack the ability to generate life on their own. Thus, their formalized character role is that of the humiliated; they must undergo the same humiliation they have caused in order to ensure the continuity of the community.

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[65] Ibid., 218.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 219.

The Ritual of Circumcision

Famadihana is not the only time in Merina ritual where an antithetical world is used to assert an ideal one by means of devaluation of women. The circumcision ritual utilizes similar ritual elements to assert the same thing about women as famadihana does. As in the *famadihana*, women are characters in this ritual, adhering to the same conventions and perpetuating the same values.

The circumcision ritual begins with a shared cooking event, outdoors, run entirely by men. The women are separated from this group, sitting near the hearth, considered the center of every Merina home, inside the dwelling. This is important because, as we will see, outside is considered the community space where the group exists undivided, but the house, the individual dwelling, is the antithesis, associated with women and, by extension, individuality and division.[69]

The house is supplied with plants that are key to the ritual. Some of the plants are brought by an astrologer who has played a role in determining the right day for the ritual itself.[70] Some of the plants are provided by the parents of the youth who is to be circumcised. These plants must be "of a living mother," meaning that they must be cut from a living plant, as they are to represent fertility that is understood to be wholly matrilineal.[71] Finally, some of the plants are brought by a group of older youth, who are already circumcised, who have stolen the plants from the gardens of neighbors. The stolen plants are bananas and sugarcane, pilfered from nearby gardens. The violence of their theft is meant to match the violence of their fate during the ritual.[72] The bananas should be in a large cluster, and they should be unripe. They, like the plants brought by the parents, must also have a living mother, meaning they must be cut from a living banana tree. The sugar canes that the youths steal are required to be quite knotty, as the knots represent children. The selection of these two plants for the theft are key to the notion of fertility. They must

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[69] Maurice Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 51.
[70] Ibid., 52.
[71] Ibid., 53.
[72] Ibid., 55.

come from living plants and they must represent fecundity.[73] That the plants are stolen constitutes the first act of violence against these representations of matrilineal fertility.

All the plants are then placed in the northeast corner of the home in which the circumcision is to take place. This is the holiest corner of the house, just as it is the communal tombs discussed above. One of the key elements of this part of the ritual is a collection of reeds which are meant to represent the Vazimba, or water spirit, queens. The Vazimba were the first inhabitants of Madagascar, now mythologized by current residents as water spirits who are associated with raw, dangerous power and often death.

Various community members have specific roles during a circumcision. First, there is the circumciser himself who, though not related to the child undergoing the ceremony, is referred to as "father of the child."[74] The "mothers of the child" are a group of young women, similarly unrelated to the child who allegedly must be virgins or at least abstain from intercourse during the ceremony, which stretches over several days. They are responsible for the child and often dance with him on their backs.[75] Unlike the circumciser, they do not have ritual specific positions during the ceremony, but they often lead the community in song and dance and the vigor with which they do so is thought to increase their fertility.[76]

The ritual itself must take place during the cold season, as cold is thought to reduce the danger of circumcision. Heat is associated with childbirth and, in fact, heat related terms are used surrounding any birth that takes place in the community. Births also occur in the home and a house of reed mats is built around the bed so that the mother and newborn stay warm at all times. Cold may be more closely connected with the interior of the communal tomb and thus the focus on cold during the circumcision associates the ritual more with the *famadihana* and the ongoing generational unity found there rather than the warmth of the individuating birth.[77]

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., 56.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 58.

The initial blessing is delivered by three elders who give speeches asking the ancestors for a blessing. Next, singing and dancing occurs, led by the mothers of the child, and it continues until 3 A.M. the next day. The child is understood in this part of the ritual to be *mahery*, or powerful and wild.[78] The circumcision itself is a cut that transforms the child's raw power into "true blessing."[79] That power is mirrored in the use of fresh water gathered from a waterfall during the ceremony. The water, also *mahery*, is associated with the raw fertility and power of the Vazimba.

The bringing of the powerful water into the home is a key part of the ritual and one that illustrates well the undoing of feminine power in the ceremony. The water must be brought into the house forcefully by youths who ultimately mime nearly breaking the door down to obtain entry. The young men selected for this task must be unmarried and have two living parents. Thus, when the inbreaking occurs, they are storming the domicile, a representation of female space, as "opposites to the home."[80] They are unmarried and thus "nondomestic," and "because they have both their mother and their father, they represent the bilateral unity" of the community as opposed to the unilateral women-house construction. At every turn, the power of the hearth, of the matrilineal relationship to the child, the female-centered home, is undermined by elements of the ritual which must violently break into the home. As Bloch sees it, this part of the ritual and, ultimately, the entire ceremony itself, is a "conquest of matrilinearity and natural birth."[81]

While the ceremony is gearing up, some of the women in the group will attempt to steal bananas from those which were stolen from neighboring gardens. A staged fight will take place, whereby the men (and some women) will attempt to prevent the theft of the bananas. The fruit is broken into tiny pieces, which the women then abscond with outside the home and consume in the hopes that their consumption will increase fertility. The sugar canes are also stolen, most often by men but occasionally by women as well. Mock fighting again ensues, and in the process the sugar canes are broken into small pieces and eaten

[78] Ibid., 72.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 77-78.
[81] Ibid., 78.

outside the house. The cycle of stealing these two already stolen items, fighting, and consumption outside the house, continue into the night.[82]

The treatment of the bananas and sugar canes illuminates the community's understanding of matrilineal fertility. Since both of the plants are to come from already living plants, they embody the "prolific fertility of the wild."[83] As we have seen in the *famadihana* ritual, as well as what is to come in the circumcision ritual, matrilineal fertility, or the act of birthing, must be made bilateral by means of violence. The plants that represent wild fertility are only of use to the community once they have been fought over and smashed. The plants themselves still represent fertility, but it has been processed through the community. It is no longer feminine fertility; it is communal fertility.

During the actual circumcision, all the men leave the house and stand in a semi-circle facing the door. The women remain inside. The child is placed on the threshold of the home. The assembled men shout celebrations that the child is now a man while the women, still indoors, crawl around on hands and knees, throwing dirt from the floor onto their heads.[84] The powerful water of the Vazimba is then poured on the child. The child is handed back from outside the threshold of the home through the window and into the arms of his real mother.

The dichotomy between inside the home as the territory of the individual and the outside of the home as that of the community is made very clear in this ritual. While the men stand outside and welcome the child into the community, the women are committing an act of self-pollution inside the house. The throwing of dirt on one's head perhaps one of the worst kinds of this sort of pollution in Merina culture, as "contact of the head with dirt is the worst possible offence that can be committed against the self or anybody else."[85] This self-pollution in the circumcision should call to mind that committed by the women in the *famadihana* ritual as well. During both of these ceremonies, women take on extreme forms of pollution. Bloch presents the dirt ritual at the circumcision as part of a mourning process, like that of the funerary ritual. Recall that, during the *famadihana*, women engage

[82] Ibid., 71.
[83] Ibid., 72.
[84] Ibid., 79.
[85] Ibid., 81.

in this activity when they remains are "wet" with decomposition. Bloch suggests that, during the circumcision, the women are mourning "the death of the child as a 'wet' creature."[86] The child is moved across the threshold from the wet, death associated, division making home of the woman and into the communal life of the tomb and, antithetically to the home, of manhood. The subjugation of women, their humiliation because of their natural fertility, must be made public so that power of female fertility can be vanquished and rendered to the safer, bilateral concept of community birth.

Like the *famadihana*, during a circumcision ceremony, an antithesis to the ideal world must be created so that it can be vanquished. Here, the core of the antithesis is the home. The child does not become a man and thereby full participant in the community until he is on the threshold of the home, about to leave it. The blessing of the circumcision can only be obtained upon leaving the home.[87] Even when the child reenters the home through the window, it is an alternative route into the home and, as Bloch understands with, a route that has "clear sexual overtones of conquest."[88]

Paradoxically, the ritual of circumcision is meant to promise fertility, and yet major elements of it require the central part of fertility, the home where all births take place, to be vanquished. Bloch understands this as a means to forefront "true" fertility and create opposition between that true fertility the biological fertility of the home and, by extension, women. Women represent individual kinship ties that are viewed in Merina cultural matrilineally. Houses represent individual units that hold private property which is antithetical to "the merged interests and the communal property" of the community.[89] Women create separation and thus, in both the circumcision ritual and the *famadihana*, women are contrasted with communal longevity and are shown as a threat to the community's "unity, individuality and permanence."[90] This is made tangible in the women's' application of dirt to their own heads. Dirt, as discussed earlier, is associated with mourning and death. During the *famadihana* ritual, the dirt application comes while

[86] Ibid., 82.
[87] Ibid., 91-92.
[88] Ibid., 102.
[89] Ibid., 92.
[90] Ibid.

the body decomposes, away from the community tomb, in an individual grave. Dirt is linked with the notion of the home/individual, rather than the tomb/community. It is a marker of death, a severing of the communal continuity, before the regrouping of the decedent to their ancestors. Women are responsible for biological birth, but they are also responsible for bearing the markers of death and division. In this way, both the *famadihana* and the circumcision ritual devalue women and their generative capacity by diminishing the importance of biological fertility and emphasizing instead true fertility which results from the community at large rather than any one individual.

However, women are still understood to be part of the community that receives the blessing, and they too are interred in the communal tombs. In both rituals, women represent the individual. The opposite then, is the community, which is comprised of both men and women.[91] In order to emphasize this bilateral community, the unilateral nature of feminine fertility and birth must be abolished. Achieving this requires women take on the role of "dirty creatures to be transcended."[92] Though the community outside the house waiting for the child to pass the threshold and become a man is meant to represent the entire community, it is solely comprised of men.[93]

The devaluation of women goes further than their connection with the home and individuation, however. Recall the special water required for the circumcision that represents the Vazimba. The same holy water is often placed in a gourd on top of the communal tomb during the speeches of the elders during the funerary proceedings. The Vazimba were associated with the wild elements of nature, unpredictable and highly potent.[94] The water representing them is imbued with this wildness and power, but its containment within the gourd in both ceremonies allows for its wild force to be tamed and thus useful and even beneficial for the community.[95]

The Vazimba are primarily worshiped by women. They are also understood to be the cause of barrenness in women. Bloch asserts that the women are associated with this

[91] Ibid., 93.
[92] Ibid., 93.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 98.
[95] Ibid.

wild, untamed power of the wild as embodied in the Vazimba. Just like the Vazimba water, the feminine power of fertility and generativity must be contained in a vessel that permits it to have power, but a power mediated through elements of the ritual that primarily involve men. This is the root of the devaluation of women in both the *famadihana* ritual and the circumcision ceremony. The potent matrilineal power of birth is diminished, attacked by pollution, and devalued. After this conquest, feminine power can be reintroduced to the community, but only after it is repackaged as part of a bilateral force that emphasizes the unity of both men and women. Feminine fertility cannot be totally abolished from a community, otherwise the community would cease to be, but it can be reintroduced into the community in a controlled way, dictated by the laws of community, its threat mitigated by violence. Bloch argues that, in this way, rituals like this appear to be "chasing its own tail," as it tries to "establish a source of fertility free from nature, women and biology" while also recognizing "the inevitable reliance of the living on natural fertility."[96]

Despite this cyclical nature of the ritual, Bloch argues that its purpose is to uphold the timeless continuity of the community. The community achieves ancestral blessing by maintaining unity within the group and deemphasizing the role of biological fertility in the creation of this timeless community. The ritual provides a means by which the group can maintain an unchanging order. Bloch describes the ceremony as one that legitimizes those in authority, particularly the elders of the group.[97] The timelessness of the community is held up by this cyclical practice of defeating individual power and reinforcing group unity. Participants in the ritual described to Bloch the consequences of failing to uphold it. Children disobey parents, elders are no longer honored in the community, and the ancestors are forgotten.[98] Blessing is central to the community maintaining unity. The ritual itself shows that "the basis of authority in this life is a timeless order, transcending the flux of life."[99] Those who are in power in the community must aid in upholding this order and thus their own position in the community.

[96] Ibid., 103.
[97] Ibid., 104.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

The Devaluation of Women

In both the *famadihana* and the circumcision ritual, "individual biological birth, like individual biological death, is elaborately represented as associated with women."[100] The funerary and circumcision rituals assert that both of those events are similarly a birth into a community, and this is done by creating an anthesis to that birth that is acted out by women.[101] The victory over the feminine ultimately benefits women as members of the unified community, but that unity comes at their own sacrifice. This, according to Bloch, is not unique to the Merina. In fact, "nearly all cultures symbolically associate women with uncontrolled biological processes and that this particularly close association is used to rationalize female subordination."[102] Women are often envisioned as a threat to the social order, powerful in their generativity and a dangerous force that must be mitigated and reintroduced in a more acceptable package. The Merina rituals of *famadihana* and circumcision illustrate this, but Bloch shows that it exists throughout the world. Consider the ritual of baptism and its goal of introducing a child into a new family by essentially undoing biological birth and creating in its place a spiritual one.[103] The feminine elements are always reintroduced, as Bloch sees it, but tamed, often through some sort of violence.[104]

Maintaining a Social Structure: The Integration of Bloch's Two Theories

Just as the elders who use formalized language in political and ritual spheres uphold a sense of timeless authority by utilizing specific linguistic elements, so do those who uphold the *famadihana* and circumcision rituals. In a group whose power structure relies on the sense of "unchanging, permanent organization," upholding these rituals and using language which cannot be challenged ensure the current power structure also goes unchallenged.[105] The individual, the source of division in the community, must be vanquished. Female characters are essential to overcoming the very division they sew. Both "birth and death

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[100] Bloch, "Death, Women and Power," 219–20.
[101] Ibid., 220.
[102] Maurice Bloch, "Descent and Sources of Contradiction in Representations of Women and Kinship," in *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 324.
[103] For further discussion of baptism see Maurice Bloch and S. Guggenheim, "Compadrazgo, Baptism and the Symbolism of a Second Birth," *Man* 16, no. 3 (September 1981): 376–86.
[104] Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina*, 171.
[105]Bloch*, Death, Women, and Power*, 223.

imply discontinuity and individuality, things which of their nature are a challenge to the permanent representation of a society based on traditional authority where people are mere caretakers of eternal positions."[106] Defying this authority, the power responsible for facilitating community blessing through continuity, is defying one's own self-interest.[107] Women characters in both the rituals discussed adhere to conventional character roles that are simultaneously essential for their fertility and punished for it.

The devaluation of women that occurs in the ritual plays a significant role in ensuring the timelessness of the social order. Just as formalized language ensures that no challenge can be provided by those who hear it and participate in it, ritual too cannot be challenged. For a woman to opt out of the ritual devaluation that is her role would be to deny the entire community ancestral blessing. Her role as the woman humiliated for the sake of community continuity cannot be challenged. Fertility and femininity must be denied to ensure the continuousness of the community – and that continuousness, the timelessness of the power structure, ensure that the devaluation continues and that the onus of creating the antithetical world that must be destroyed so that the ideal one can exist lies totally with women. They bear the burden of ensuring community longevity by denying their own agency in creating it. Their formalized character convention exists to deny the singular power of female fertility and assert instead the value of bilateral community participation. The impact of Bloch's two intertwined theories comes to a head here. The language and meaning of ritual are illogical and thus cannot be denied. The ritual requires women to devalue themselves for the sake of the community. The community cannot achieve longevity without the women's denial of their own power in creating the very members of the community. Women's own devaluation of themselves in the language of the ritual sustains the very power structure that insists that that devaluation is essential to generational continuity. The role played by women in both rituals is unchanging. Though they appear to be different on the surface, the end which their participation in the plot achieves is the same. They exist to deny their own power.

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[106] Ibid.
[107] Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence: History and Ideology in the Circumcision Ritual of the Merina*, 170.

Application to the Hebrew Bible

Bloch's theories of formalized ritual language and feminine devaluation are applicable to all societies in which a traditional authority exists. The criteria that Bloch lays out for formalized language, its application to ritual, and the ritual devaluation of women for the longevity of the community are three cultural phenomena that appear throughout the Hebrew Bible, across author, book, and genre.

While Bloch's theory of formalized language applies primarily to his studies of oral communication within the Merina culture, the criteria he supplies for that analysis are equally useful in analyzing written material coming out of traditional authority structures. Spoken tonality or volume may not be accessible for examination, but the delimiting effects of syntactic forms, vocabulary usage, the specific repertoire of illustrations and metaphors, and the use of a certain set of stylistic rules, enable us to relate to written communication as containing the kinds of telltale elements Bloch discerns in oral communication. This is especially true of the language used in the Hebrew Bible. The repetition of particular forms to the exclusion of others, a limited vocabulary, a highly fixed sequence of elements, and limited metaphors and illustrations, are all elements of biblical literature. This is true across many, if not all genres of literature in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical Hebrew also follows Bloch's criteria for formalization because it, like that of Merina political or ritual language, is totally separate from ordinary language. Different ideological groups utilize formalized language to achieve their goals, a particular language is formed that operates in the political or ritual sphere and which, by nature, *cannot* mirror everyday language. It is *because* of this separation from ordinary language that formalization is so effective. It cannot be used for the individual; it is only located in the ideologically unifying realm of political oratory and ritual communication.

The Bible as Ritual Language

We should not assume that the language of the biblical text is identical to the language used colloquially. That is to say, any interpretation of biblical literature, a psalm, a prophetic passage, a narrative section from Genesis, cannot be thought of as a "typical" use of the colloquial language but rather something highly curated to a particular goal, the maintenance of social control, and highly limited in its ability to communicate new ideas

or be contradicted by a hearer/reader. Using Bloch's treatment of formalized oratory in the above section, it will prove fruitful to consider the scribes of the Hebrew Bible as the traditional authority, and the text, as the more formalized type of political language, *ritual language.*

Let us consider the context in which formalized language is used. It is not ordinary, day-to-day interactions that warrant the use of this particular linguistic register. It is reserved for public speeches made by authority figures and features largely in numerous Merina rituals. Meaning is not the same because logical response is not permitted. Thus, the meaning of the language in the Hebrew Bible cannot *be understood to have the same meaning as ordinary, day-to-day communication*. What an image may stand for in the Hebrew Bible may totally differ from what it stood for were it to be used in daily conversation as an illustration between two parties to elaborate a point.

Relating to Biblical Hebrew as a formalized language undermines the arguments of scholars who argue that the biblical texts reflect the vernacular used at the time of the literature was composed. Two advocates of the latter position are Seth Sanders and William Schniedewind. For Sanders, Biblical Hebrew develops out of the vernacular of its writers, scribes who sought to relay the stories of their people in language those people could understand.[108] Biblical Hebrew is a far cry from the cold imperial language of Akkadian. For Sanders, the crux of Biblical Hebrew as a vernacular is its second person address, allowing the people to become a participant in their own narrative.[109] The biblical authors unlinked language from empire by using their own vernacular and thus was able to mobilize local power without the framework of empire.[110] Similarly, Schniedewind argues the oral stories of the Israelites were written down during the reign of Hezekiah, in the language the scribes themselves spoke.[111] Both Sanders and Schniedewind suggest that the language of the Bible is directly related to the vernacular in use *at the time the authors were writing it*.

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[108] Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).
[109] Ibid., 75.
[110] Ibid., 76
[111] William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Philip Davies, however, has argued against a connection between the language of the Hebrew Bible and the "real life" of those who composed it.[112] Davies believes that the biblical texts originated in Persian Yehud (much later than the reign of Hezekiah), and that the stories and language were meant to project an idealized Israel, rather than to represent it authentically. In support of Davies' late date of composition, Robert Rezetko and Ian Young successfully illustrate that the categories of "early" and "late" Biblical Hebrew are arbitrary. What other scholars read as dated forms in the text should be attributed to stylistic preferences.

The arguments of Davies, Rezetko, and Young, among others, when paired with Bloch's concept of formalization, expose how strongly the language usage of the Hebrew Bible supports the authority system behind the composition. The failure to recognize the form and power of formalized language systems fosters misconceptions about the function and purpose of the literature. Arguably almost no ancient example of writing can be considered representative of a local, spoken language. Even epigraphic and economic materials stick to a formalized style that is not altered regardless of author. Letters and inscriptions *may* hint at a possible vernacular, if the register of epigraphic communication matches that of ordinary language usage. Since we cannot be sure of that, it is not useful to compare those brief samples with biblical prose.[113]

There is no possibility for free expression. There are too many formulaic elements in these sources to suggest that any are creatively written free expression in a local language that reflects the actual spoken language. Thus, we can examine Biblical Hebrew with the same criteria by which Bloch examines the political and ritual language of the Merina. All are detached from any tangible reality, and none reflects the way in which day to day interactions would ever take place.

Restriction in form is followed by restriction in use. Formalized language is not available to everyone in the community. Its use is limited to the powerful few who are its rightful heirs. If we apply this analysis of access to formalized language training to the

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[112] Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel: A Study in Biblical Origins*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).
[113] P. Deryn Guest, "Can Judges Survive Without Sources? Challenging the Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 78 (1998): 54.

Hebrew Bible, the "rightful heirs" would be the scribes. Only the literate few were able to communicate their ideas which could then be disseminated, thus there was no threat that some outsider may learn the language of formalization and adapt it to some new, different power structure. Those who were in power, the authors or those served by the authors, remained in power and preserved the status quo (in which they are in power) through the formalized language they used in their own written communication.

The biblical text itself is as highly formalized as Bloch's ritual language. As such, it employs the strictures of formalization even beyond the already highly formalized political oratory. It follows that the context in which biblical ritual language is used can be examined using the same criteria Bloch uses to analyze the context of Merina ritual. That is, given that it is already established that the language of the Bible employs all the trappings of ritual language, it should follow that one can examine the larger use of the language within its particular context as a ritual itself. Maurice Bloch applied what he knew of ritual language to examine the ritual practices of the Merina. It is possible, even fruitful, to do the same thing with the Hebrew Bible.

Formalized Female Characterization: The Woman as Humiliator

Often in biblical literature, the generative power of women is represented as a wild, dangerous force which must be tamed and, ultimately, subjugated by the social order. For the Merina, wild, dangerous feminine power had to be devalued, diminished, neutralized, and then reintroduced into the social order as a tamer (as filtered through the masculine) power. The same violent conquest, mitigation, and reintroduction occurs in the Hebrew Bible. The generative power of women, their ability to create and sustain life, poses a challenge to the timeless power structure that formalized language and ritual seeks to uphold. Language formalization (ritual language) is one of the methods by which the domination internal to the social order is maintained. The ritual language, arthritic and incapable of being challenged, strengthens and sustains a social order that too cannot be challenged. There is no room in ritual communication for a woman to contest this. To do so would be to deny the ritual altogether and risk the wellbeing of the entire community.

In terms of biblical analysis, Bloch's language formalization can here be expanded to character formalization. Seemingly unique, powerful female characters who appear to

be serving different plot functions are ultimately reduced to the same conventional character type. In this way, we can *extend* Bloch's language formalization to the biblical author's character formalization. Their purpose is to humiliate a male character. If we examine the language of the Hebrew Bible as Bloch examines political oratory's more stringent, more arthritic relative, ritual language, we can see in a new way the means by which the authors subordinate women, even unconsciously, by repeatedly placing them in this particular character role. The character of "woman as humiliator" is a frozen form, arthritic, and unable to be challenged.

It is important to note here that the use of "ritual language' in this analysis does not apply solely to legal material dictating ritual or narratival material describing a particular ritual. In terms of the formalized female character convention there is no difference between female characters in different genres. It is not about formalized characters and ritual formalized characters. The ritual application comes when we are understanding the nature of formalization and its even more extreme applications than political oratory, but the characters themselves do not have to be related to a religious ritual. Bloch's ritual language framework permits us to recognize the extreme level of formalization that is taking place in the literature.

There is no shortage of examples of formalized female characters in biblical literature. The character of the woman humiliator appears across genres in the Hebrew Bible, a feature appearing from narrative to poetry to the prophets. No one has yet used the work of Maurice Bloch to examine formalized characters in the Hebrew Bible. The humiliator character is also lacking in exploration. This examination will increase the scope of feminist criticism of the Hebrew Bible by applying Bloch's concepts of formalization and devaluation to the text and drawing out a clearly contoured, highly developed formalized character who, despite her changing appearance, continually serves the same role across all of the literature. This particular study will take into consideration three scenes involving humiliators who appear in the book of Judges.

Women as Formalized Characters in the Book of Judges

The application of Bloch's two theories of formalized language and the subordination of women in ritual allow us to examine women as plot conventions in the biblical text. Many of the women in the book of Judges are ill defined, serving a single purpose and lacking background information, motivation, and other elements that are typically provided for male characters. The three stories explored in this study, those of Deborah and Jael, Jephthah's daughter, and Delilah, will illustrate that the authors view these women as a functional piece of the story, rather than well rounded, robust characters. Just as language formalization employs a strict set of rules for its use, so does the character formalization explored here. They are given limited descriptions, and their background is often not provided. As we will see in the following discussion, the lack of information provided for the female characters prompts many scholars to fill in those gaps. I argue, however, that the authors had no interest in that missing information, it was not viewed as essential to the plot, and thus filling in any gaps actually diverts from a clear understanding of the story.

Recall that Bloch describes formalized language as a language which limits syntactic forms, uses a restricted vocabulary and a fixed sequencing, and employs a limited repertoire of illustrations. In the following examination, we will see that the formalized character of the "woman as humiliator" in the book of Judges embodies the same series of limitations. The language used to describe them is limited to their basic functions (judge, wife, etc.). They do not act alone, but only in relation to male characters. That is, they have a limited sphere of movement that requires the key male actor to be present. In formalized language, the statement and the response are predicted based on the acceptable series of exchanges that are permitted by the form. The same is true for the women characters explored here. They do not depart from the program; they adhere to the formalized role. They can act only in the way which has already been prescribed.

The limitations of the formalized character of woman as humiliator subordinate women because they are only permitted to act in a particular way. Female characters are plot conventions, not robustly developed characters. They are not afforded a thick description; no extraneous information is conveyed about them. They serve the larger agenda of the story or book by serving as a means to convey one male character from one

point in the story to another. They are vehicles by which the message is delivered to the intended audience. Women as characters are devalued, reduced, and flattened. They are caricatures of characters, emphasizing a single feature of the story in the service of the greater plot.

While the female characters in each story seem vastly different, they serve a single purpose. They all have one function: to humiliate a powerful man. Barak, Jephthah, and Samson ostensibly embody the book of Judge's ideal of masculinity. Raw physical power, battlefield prowess, and wit are key to this picture of Judges manhood. Yet each of these characters is humiliated by a woman. Let us consider the superficiality of the formalized character who does the humiliating. All the women are extremely underdeveloped. The most basic information is provided about them (if they are married, that information is given), as well as where they may be located. Is Delilah a Philistine? Or an Israelite working with the Philistines? The authors do not find that information important. We are given Jephthah's entire lineage and the interfamilial struggles he undergoes due to his mother being a concubine, and yet his daughter does not even get a name. Deborah is a prophet who sits under a tree and judges Israel, but there is no other background information. She is the wife of Lappidot, clearly in a position of power, but it is her relationship with Barak that receives the attention, not her work on its own. Jael is the wife of a Kenite who, for unknown reasons, sides with Israel. The authors are not, as many exegetes claim, subverting a cultural stereotype by employing female characters in different positions of power, they are upholding the cultural stereotype by reducing the character to a simple convention.[114] The women are not "thickly developed," they are caricatures and serve a single plot convention: to humiliate a man.

[114] Some examples of authors who argue for the subversion of a cultural stereotype are: Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1998); J.L. Wright, "Deborah's War Memorial. The Composition of Judges 4-5 and the Politics of War Commemoration," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 123, no. 4 (2011): 516–34; Adrien Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men Who Play God?," *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, January 1, 1993; Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," in *Immaculate & Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, The Harvard Women's Studies of Religion Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 15–38.

In this analysis, it will become clear that these three female characters, and likely others across biblical literature, serve the single purpose of humiliating a man so that the authors can render a specific meaning in the plot. I believe that as this theory is developed, we will see that the "woman as humiliator" serves to humiliate the manly men in the book of Judges because it is, ultimately, a satirical antiwar polemic. As society unravels more and more throughout the book, the men are humiliated on a more and more public scale. This book is a satirical book showing the follies of everything related to war, and that is illustrated through shaming the male characters using formalized female characters. As the paradigm of "sin, punishment, and deliverance" in the book of Judges loses structure and degenerates, the shame escalates for the male characters, culminating in Samson's shame in front of a stadium audience.

Using Bloch's intertwined theories of language formalization and the ritual devaluation of women, we can see that, from Merina ritual to the Hebrew Bible, women as actors function in a similar flat and frozen way. They serve a singular purpose to the overall message, and usually, their purpose involves their own subordination. The female characters in the book of Judges serve a single purpose, to shame a man, to challenge a particular masculinity as it relates to the status quo, and to highlight the overall plot of the story. The plot may be different. It may be a funeral ceremony or circumcision, for the Merina, and it could be a story of deliverance or seduction, as it is in the book of Judges. These roles cannot be challenged or changed, they exist within the structure of the language, employed for different uses but serving always the same function. These characters, formalized plot conventions, are devalued as actual characters and instead are reduced to mere function.

Women are used as the vehicle for the shame in Judges, and the shame is meant to subvert the masculinity featured in the book. By subverting the male power in the book, the authors have offered a critique of military prowess and masculinity to illustrate the futility of war. The pseudo-cyclical nature of the book of Judges emphasizes this critique. Using Bloch's theories of language formalization and the ritual devaluation of women, I believe I can highlight this particular convention and use it to interpret a new meaning in the book of Judges. This examination will increase the scope of feminist criticism of the

Hebrew Bible by applying Bloch's concepts of formalization and devaluation to the text and drawing out the formalized character who, despite her changing appearance, continually serves the same role across all of the literature.

In order to explore the formalized female character of "humiliator" in the book of Judges, we will need to examine the book itself before we render a new interpretation using the formalized character. It will be important to illuminate discussions about the dating and structure of the book before we can move further into any new interpretation. It will also be important to understand the way scholars have examined the role of women in Judges, as well as the overall meaning of the book. I will also provide a quick analysis of the way masculinity and ancient ideas of masculinity may or may not factor into a reading of the book. By exploring the use of the formalized female character of the humiliator, I believe I can render an interpretation of the book of Judges as a satirical antiwar polemic.

Dating and Authorship of the Book of Judges

It is impossible to date the text of the Book of Judges. Early Judges scholarship from G.F. Moore posits that the text was written sometime in the ninth century and then combined with another source from the eighth/seventh century, with some source material originating in the tenth century BCE.[115] This, however, is contested by more recent scholarship.[116] Layers of redaction and reshaping, sometime with sympathetic voices, sometimes by voices who have alternative agendas, are apparent in the text. Despite the movement away from traditional dating, many scholars still attempt to connect the material related in the book to actual events in the history of Israel. The shadow of Moore's dating still looms over the current scholarship. Though exegetes acknowledge the later accumulation of the stories as well as the lateness of their arrangement and organization, they cannot let go of the notion that the book reflects an actual period of tribal unrest and minor chieftain rulership in the land of Israel. Many scholars attempt to illuminate this period of the judges using the dates of the Exodus and Solomon's reign as secure

[115] George Foot 1851-1931. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges,* International Critical Commentary. [v. 7] (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1910). Guest also gives a brief summary of the nature of textual dating based on literary and archaeological analysis. Guest, "Can Judges Survive Without Sources?: Challenging the Consensus."
[116] Yaira. Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*, Biblical Interpretation Series, 0928-0731; v. 38 (Leiden ; Brill, 1999); Guest, "Can Judges Survive Without Sources?: Challenging the Consensus."

chronological points.[117] The "period of the judges" is reconstructed sometimes with exact dates and maps.[118] But, as Davies points out, there is no connection between the land itself and the text about which it is written.[119]

Of course, serious chronological questions must be dealt with, if one is to interpret this text as depicting an actual period in the history of the Israelite people. For example, how does one contend with the reference to Jabin in both Joshua 11:1 and Judges 4 that, if accurate, must be at least hundred years apart? Explanations of dynastic names or chronological telescoping abound but, as we shall see, they are unnecessary. The events depicted in the book of Judges do not require a secure chronological setting *because it is an ideological exercise, not a story about a people's actual history*. As will be discussed, the structure of the book indicates a high level of editing and shaping narratives to fit a certain agenda. It is unwise to examine the text as an accurate depiction of "the life of the Israelite people." Attempting to determine the time, as well as locate the spots in correlating land today, or attempting to figure out why a foreign name such as Sisera is used in a text, is not beneficial for a reading of the text.

Certainly, there exists a scintilla of ancient material in the book of Judges, as is true of much of the Hebrew Bible. There is no reason to suspect that the characters of Barak, Jephthah, and Samson did not originate in ancient fables shared among a group of people. But the inclusion of these unique stories into what can best be seen as a particular ideological overlay in the book of Judges suggests a later editing process. The final form of the book, with its individual characters fitting into a rapidly degenerative cycle of sin and punishment, must certainly be a postexilic development, as is much of the final stages of editing in other biblical material. This study will examine the current adaptation of the story of Judges. Some of the stories may be considerably older than this final form, but this study will not endeavor to determine the dating or origins of any of these singular stories.

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[117] An excellent example of the precise attempts at dating the period of the judges can be found in Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 11–12.
[118] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, First edition., The Anchor Bible; 6A (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975).
[119] Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*.

Instead, it will examine the book as a whole, in its final form, with unique stories of tribal leaders fitted into a carefully crafted structure of sin, punishment and redemption.

Studying the book in its final, postexilic form, allows us to craft some theories about what status quo the biblical authors intended to preserve by their use of the formalized female character of the humiliator. Recall that Bloch's intertwined theories of language formalization and female subordination in ritual indicate that the subjugation of women is intended to preserve and maintain a particular status quo. Among the Merina, that status quo is the bilateral community, which is reached by the act of women subjugating themselves and denying their generative capacity for birth. The same subversion of feminine power is apparent in the Hebrew Bible.[120] Just as women are subjugated among the Merina because of their generativity, the women of the bible are subjugated as a formalized character by the authors to suppress their generative power and fit them into an acceptable format. They are not given the opportunity for complexity. If the biblical authors too subordinate women by their use of the formalized character convention, what status quo might they be trying to maintain within their own community? I will return to this question later in this chapter.

Given all of what we have determined so far about the book of Judges, we must also assume, for this study, that the authors are men. While much has been made about the possibility of a woman writer, it cannot be proven and it is highly unlikely.[121] While it is empowering, and encouraging, perhaps, to think about a woman author, subverting what we typically expect of a patriarchal culture, it is not a fruitful pursuit. There is not enough data to support a women author, and arguments that suppose one underestimate the totality of the agenda in the text and the creative means with which the authors achieve it.

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[120] Klein suggests that the textual repression of women stems from masculine anxieties about female reproductive power. As Bloch points out, this is a universal fear manifested in patriarchal communities, and the impulse to subvert the power of birth by a process of subjugation or humiliation is easily to identify, as Klein has done, not just anthropologically but in ancient texts as well. Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

[121] Adrien Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men Who Play God?," *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, January 1, 1993; Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," in *Immaculate & Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles, The Harvard Women's Studies of Religion Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 15–38.

Structure of the Book of Judges

The structure of the book of Judges plays a role in the larger antiwar messaging of the book. It appears on the surface that the text depicts a cyclical process, with the people sinning, crying out to God, followed by a judge or other means for redemption, and then the people falling into sin again. It is key to our understanding of the authors' agenda that we do not read the book as a series of stories about the history of a people. Each story is strategically placed in a specific order, and the chaos that unfolds after each judge gets progressively worse. The structure is intentional, and it itself is a part of the storytelling. This is not some anthology of tribal lore about a series of leaders. The highly structured nature of the text should disabuse interpreters from reading the text as historically accurate. Each story should be read as a contribution to the integrity of the entire narrative.[122]

With each judge, the organization of the people Israel unravels. As the judges who are raised up in response to the people crying out are increasingly incapable of righting the ship, so the instability of the people, their relationship with Yahweh, and their ability to maintain their place in the land is compromised.[123] The authors have arranged this intentionally, and details in each pericope contribute to this larger narrative of chaos and unraveling. The framework of the stories is not a later addition, as some argue, but rather a key part of the storytelling itself.[124]

But the cyclicality is not a pure one, and degeneration appears as the cycle breaks down. Consider the difference between the Othniel episode and the Samson episode. The Othniel cycle, accompanied by the expository material in 2:11-23, provide a basic formula for each story.[125] However, as the narrative progresses and the cycle appears to begin again, a new problem in the format appears. In this way, the authors weave degeneration into the

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[122] Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, Bible and Literature Series; 14 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1988), 11; Amit, *The Book of Judges*.
[123] J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *Catholic Biblical Association* 52, no. 3 (July 1990): 411.
[124] Guest, "Can Judges Survive Without Sources? Challenging the Consensus," 61.
[125] Amit, *The Book of Judges*, 37; Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," 411–12; Eliyahu Assis, *Before There Were Kings: A Literary Analysis of the Book of Judges*, Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements; 29 (University Park, Pennsylvania: Eisenbrauns, 2023). For more on the author's depiction of Yahweh throughout the book of Judges, see the excursus on pages 170-174).

cyclical nature of the book. The stories show a "downward spiral,"[126] which becomes "progressively chaotic"[127] as the narrative progresses. Exum compares the characters in the book of judges with Yeats' actors in "The Second Coming," who lack conviction and subvert our expectations of them.[128] Yeats' poem is exceptionally helpful for imagining the crisis depicted throughout the degenerative cycles of the book of Judges. As each cycle begins, it moves further away from the center, which we can view as the Othniel/expositional material. The gyre widens, as Yeats puts it, and the judges lose more control and are unable to maintain prolonged periods of peace. By the end, as Yeats puts it, the falcon can no longer hear the falconer, and "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The best, like Barak, "lack all conviction," as Yeats writes, and the worst, like Samson, are "full of passionate intensity."[129]

But, along with Yeats, we readers expect that surely some revelation is at hand. And indeed, it is. The revelation comes through the structure of the book and the increasing public humiliation of the men who are supposed to be pillars of masculine strength. As the cycle breaks down, as the expectation of strong male leadership is hurdled away from us in the gyre, so we are given the authors' view of the value of war. It is futile, as is the raising of any judge after Othniel, for no deliverer can save the broken people. Every expectation is subverted when it comes to male, military leadership in the book. Not only that, but the humiliation of these men begins somewhat privately, in the tent of a barely known woman, but ends in a most dramatic scene. Samson, without sight, humiliated before a stadium full of Philistines, can no longer hear the falconer. He performs one final feat of strength and executes the jeering audience, but he dies with them, because there are no heroes in the book of Judges. The stories that follow Samson no longer pretend to retain the cyclical structure, for all is lost. Women are dismembered, tribes are nearly massacred and, as always, every man does what is right in his own eyes.

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[126] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 34.
[127] Victor Harold Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8.
[128] Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," 431.
[129] W. B. Yeats, The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, Wordsworth Poetry Library (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2015), 158.

The Women of Judges

Much work has been done on the women of Judges. The characters themselves appear incredibly diverse. Some characters, such as Deborah and Jael, appear to be fairly developed characters while others, like Jephthah's daughter, appear almost as passive actors, receiving not even a name from the story writers. However, as Maurice Bloch's intertwined theories will illustrate in this book and likely in others in the Hebrew Bible, the unique characteristics of these characters is only surface level. Though they may appear in roles of power (good power or bad power, like Deborah and Delilah), they are actually extremely flat. They are undeveloped. Their key attribute is that they are women. But not that they are a robust cast of women. It is key for the authors only that they are women; they are not men. They will serve the same purpose for a male character, to humiliate him, but beyond that they do not exhibit the robusticity that other scholars claim to see in the female cast of the Book of Judges.[130]

The bad habit by other scholars to read too much into the female characters is often linked with their dating of the book. Hackett, for example, suggests that women are allowed into a sort of liminal leadership space because there is no centralized leadership in "the period of the Judges."[131] Women are allowed such key roles, Hackett says, because the subjugation of women does not occur until power is centralized.[132] This exhibits the dating issue. The assumption is that the core stories of Judges were written when this centralized power was lacking and that it reflects a time when women were allowed more "ad hoc" leadership.[133] However, this is not supported by any evidence. I argue, contrary to Hackett et al, that the text was written when power was highly centralized, long after "the period of the Judges" (if there even was such a period, which I doubt) and thus women do not play a role of leadership at all, though they appear to, but rather act as a superficial foil to a male character. This study will examine three stories about women in the book of Judges using Maurice Bloch's theories of language formalization and the subordination of women to

[130] Brenner identifies the flattening of female characters and explores female conventions in the text. Athalya. Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, The Biblical Seminar, 0266-4984 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).
[131] Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel."
[132] Ibid., 17.
[133] Ibid., Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, Old Testament Readings (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).

show how highly formalized and, as a result, underdeveloped these woman characters are. The problem is already clearly presented by the lack of information about the female characters of the book of Judges.

On Navigating Away From "Gap Filling"

None of the women are very well defined in the book of Judges. We are only presented with the vague contours of a woman characters, but details as motivation or background are considered unnecessary. Cheryl Exum highlights the problem presented by limited information about female characters in her analysis of Delilah.[134] She identifies the minimal of information given about Delilah in Chapter 16 of Judges. She is not identified as either Philistine or Israelite, she is not described as having a husband, father, or means of income. Exum points out that even her house is not described beyond the fact that it has a chamber capable of hiding Samson's attacker.[135] This lack of information requires readers to fill the gaps, Exum claims.[136] This "gap filling" creates a problem when we are trying to understand the motivation of the authors and the ideology they are attempting to forward by including Delilah as a plot function. No gap filling can be useful when it comes to understand how the authors are employing the particular character formalization of the woman as shamer. In fact, attempts to fill in the gap, to give unnamed characters a name, to read more into their position based on the location of their home, or their tribe, counteract a fruitful analysis of the formalized character. I am proposing that we examine the function of the woman as shamer formalization in three cases in the book of Judges.

This approach allows us to develop an alternative reading from those proposed by feminist scholars who fill in the gaps for the female characters in the text. Bal, and others, suggest that we empower the characters by reading them apart from their use as masculine tools and give them dimensional characterhood. This, however, is impossible, because the women *are* masculine tools. Reading dimension into them is fabricating a narrative that does not exist. It is better to examine the text and its subordination of women so that we

[134] J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament; 215; 3 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 181.
[135] Ibid., 181.
[136] Ibid., 184.

can recognize this authorly behavior elsewhere in the text and identify the systemic use of female subordination by means of this particular formalization.

This is not to say that "gap filling" does not have its place in the world of scholarship. It is empowering for women readers of the bible to imagine for the female characters a more robust backdrop some form of agency in what is so painfully identifiable as a patriarchal society. Endowing agency in characters primarily used as plot functions is an act of empowerment, and a valuable one. However, this study will examine systemic use of a character formalization and its relationship to the subordination of women in the service of a practice (ritual) that aids in preserving the status quo. It is important to notice where women serve as objects, rather than actors, and to highlight the problem to identify the one committing it. This act helps us examine the ideology of the authors, their goals for producing this text, and the status quo it was meant to uphold. Typical masculinity is challenged to serve a point, and the best way to challenge that masculinity is to put a woman in front of it. If you want to meet a wife, use a well. If you want to uphold or challenge masculinity, use a woman.

There are many ways to read the book of Judges. I am proposing a reading that does not heap assumption upon assumption in order to support a thesis. The thesis comes directly from the text itself. I want to acknowledge the limitations of our knowledge regarding a variety of themes in the material. However, none of these limitations hamper the analysis of character formalization. Many standard themes that occupy Judges scholarship may not appear in my interpretation. First, I am avoiding the fabrication of scenarios for which evidence is wanting. Second, my analysis of character formalization is not dependent upon the issues for which there is the most abundant speculation in traditional scholarship such as dating or historical accuracy.

If we take the text at face value, we can render a new interpretation of the book that allows us to see the ways masculine authors use a feminine plot convention in the service of maintaining the status quo.

Masculinity in Judges

This is not a study about "biblical masculinity." Many fruitful discussions have been had about multiple masculinities in the text, and the idea of hegemonic masculinity in the bible and in Judges.[137] However, we must establish what an "ideal masculinity" looks like in the book of Judges. It is certainly hegemonic. It is embodied in military leadership and/or physical prowess.

Leadership and the ability to fight in battle are key to the books' presentation of masculinity. Again, we are not examining the idea of masculinity for the biblical authors as a whole. Instead, we are examining what the authors of Judges wish to communicate in that particular book. It fits with the agenda of the book – it fits with the ideological overlay. I wish to readily acknowledge that limitations exist when we examine masculinity and femininity in any ancient text. We cannot possibly know the exact contours of masculinity in the ancient world. We cannot suggest that the authors of Judges had the same expectations of masculinity as the author of a psalm, for example. We develop a basic *type* of masculinity that appears to be valued in the text, but we cannot define each aspect of that type. We can establish an outline, but specifics cannot move beyond speculative and will largely remain proxies for modern conceptions projected backward in time onto a group of writers.

The Book of Judges as a Satirical Antiwar Polemic

That warriors are shamed is not enough in the book of Judges to serve the point. The strife within the social institutions increases more and more as the cycle breaks down. The stories of the breakdown of social institutions are interspersed with stories of war. As war rages on, daughters are sacrificed, men are killed by millstones, and concubines are murdered and dismembered. While Bal's analysis of Judges as a book illustrating the fraught nature of the virgin/young woman may rely on the gap-filling fallacy discussed above, she does strike correctly on the simultaneous action of war and the unraveling of

[137] Jon-Michael Carman, "Abimelech the Manly Man? Judges 9.1-57 and the Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43, no. 3 (2019): 301–16; David J. A. Clines, *Play the Man!: Biblical Imperatives to Masculinity*, Hebrew Bible Monographs; 103 ([Sheffield]: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2023).

social institutions.[138] Those who are expected to be in power, those who are expected to have the capacity to lead, are shown to be inadequate. Military might has a very different meaning in the world of Judges than it does in other texts. The traditional picture of leadership is upended, and chaos consistently works itself into the community structure. It is possible that the authors are using the follies of the judges as an illustration of the futility of war. This would be especially poignant after the loss of the temple, the dissolution of the monarchy, and the utter displacement of the intellectual elite that came with the Babylonian captivity. What good had miliary power done for the scribes who were deported to Babylon? What good was muscle against the wheel of empire? The book of Judges, if it is indeed postexilic, is an exploration into the futility of military resistance to a mightier power. It is an inversion of our typical biblical expectations, because here, in Judges, the underdog *does not* save the day. Over and over again any attempt at leadership and organization fails. War is not the answer. The judges do not serve as stories of heroes who made the best with what they were give, they serve, as Amit argues, as *signs*.[139] For Amit, the judges are educational tools meant to show that "the one and only savior is the Lord."[140] Only God chooses when there is war.

If, as we have suggested before, the final form of the book of Judges is postexilic, what status quo might be maintained by such a position? After the exile, Israel existed as a Persian suzerainty. It is possible that the repeated denigration of the military leadership by the women of Judges was meant to show the futility of resistance against Persian rule. The book illustrates the futility of war, proving that the question of revolt against the Persian empire would be useless. The women of Judges serve as a vehicle for this polemic. They are the mechanism with which the authors illustrate their point that military revolt is useless, that it is God alone who chooses when there is war. The status quo of being a subordinate state within the Persian empire is what is being maintained in the book.[141] The satirical element of the polemic is made clear through the use of women as humiliators.

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[138] Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 232.
[139] Amit, *The Book of Judges*, 54.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Brenner identifies that female character types are used for the "continuation of the existing (patriarchal) social order," but her reading does not extend to the book as an antiwar polemic (Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, 89.

Men who should otherwise be successful in their endeavors are laid low by the least likely of enemies – women. The character formalization of woman as humiliator appears over and over to carry the polemic through to the end of the narrative.

Chapter Two: Barak

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
the falcon cannot hear the falconer"

W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

In the story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael, not one but two military leaders are humiliated by women. The female characters of the book, Deborah and Jael, are described using only as much information as is necessary for their performance as the vehicle for the polemic. As we will see, the scarcity of biographical information and motivation for the female characters in chapter 4 has driven many scholars to fill the gaps in the narrative with information that distracts us from its overall point. The analysis provided here will present an interpretation of the text solely based on the information that is present. This reading will highlight the formalized function. The formalization itself is evident in the text because the characters are otherwise underdeveloped. Ultimately, we will see that character development is unnecessary when characters are filling highly formalized roles. An in-depth analysis of the poetic material that follows in chapter 5 will not be included here. We note that the poem itself is rife with military imagery, depicting Yahweh as a marching war leader and the people as an army. As such, its imagery is consistent with our findings regarding chapter four.

Focus will be drawn to several key themes in this chapter. First is the subordination of the woman by the flattening of a character into a formalization. We will examine the information given about Deborah and Jael in the light of its function as a formalization in the text. Another formalization that will be highlighted is military imagery. Military imagery is one means by which masculinity is formalized in chapter 4, as well as throughout the rest of the book of Judges. The formalizations and their function in the chapter illustrate the overall polemic at use in the book. Two men are undermined by women in 24 verses of text. One pair, Deborah and Barak, is Israelite. The other pair, Jael and Sisera, is foreign. Not only does the antiwar polemic of Judges reveal the folly of military action for the Israelites, but it also reveals its futility more broadly. Only God decides when there is war. And we shall see, by the end of chapter 4 and most certainly by the end of this analysis of Judges, not only is sustained victory removed from Israelite

leaders, it is removed from men completely. Men who try to win wars in Judges are either displaced by the pseudo-cyclical failure of the people, or they are deprived of victory by the hand of a woman. Either way, the author shows that it does not do to upend the status quo.

Analysis

The narrative story of Deborah, Barak, and Jael begins with the typical introductory phrase "the Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh." The Hiphil form of the verb יָסַף is often interpreted as a repetition, translated as they "again did what was evil." However, as Greenspahn points out, there is no indication that the people have ever stopped doing evil things, and thus "again" should not be included in the translation.[142] The Israelites continued to do evil after Ehud died. The introductory sentence of the chapter is essentially formulaic, a marker of the ideological overlay in the book of Judges. It is the framework that ties the individual stories to one another and maintains continuity in the overall narrative.

The report of Ehud's death marks an important deviation in pseudo-cyclicality in Judges, hinting at the ongoing degeneration of the people, especially the leadership, in the book. The phrase ushers in an idea of unrest, of the instability that follows the death of a leader. The announcement's appearance at the very least sets the stage for Deborah. Yet, its appearance at the beginning of a new story feels somewhat disconnected. The inclusion of the Shamgar information in 3:31 provides an interruption in the Ehud narrative, and so the announcement of the death of Ehud seems as though it should have appeared before this book began. Webb sees the Shamgar episode as a stitch in the narrative, added to show that Ehud had indeed made a total defeat of the Moabites, making him a fairly good and effective judge, and that Shamgar only held off a temporary threat to the peace that Ehud had established.[143] However, the simplest reading of this insertion is as part of the ideological overlay that propels the narrative. Whether or not Ehud established peace is not

[142] Frederick E. Greenspahn, "The Theology of the Framework of Judges," *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 4 (1986): 394.
[143] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 185.

important because, for the sake of the overall narrative, the people must continue to fail so that the antiwar message can be properly delivered. Any peace in the book of Judges is temporary. The people continued to do evil after Ehud died and so there appeared on the scene another judge. Ehud's death here is simply a function that gets us to the next part of the narrative.

In verse two we are introduced to Israel's oppressors: Jabin the king of Canaan and his army commander, Sisera. Much has been made about the location of Jabin in Hazor, and the fact that the same name is mentioned in Joshua 11:1. This issue has already been partially addressed in the dating and authorship discussion in the previous chapter. The possible connection between the use of these two names is not pertinent to the analysis of character formalization and, I would argue, not entirely pertinent to the book of Judges either. Does the author of Judges know the names of the kings in the story of Joshua? Was Jabin a remembered name of a ruler of the region that exists in the cultural environment of the author and is thus factored in? It is impossible to say. And it is irrelevant to this analysis. All that we need to know is that Jabin and Sisera (foreigners) oppress the Israelites as part of their continual cycle of punishment. Sisera is based in Harosheth-Hagoyim. This is a better reading than Sisera "living" or "dwelling" there.[144] The army commander and his troops are based at this site. Where Sisera lives is not germane to the story's coherence. The information given to the reader here serves the militaristic theme of the story.

As such, it is Sisera's military prowess that provokes the Israelites' outcry this time (4:3). He has nine hundred iron chariots – a massive number of troops that highlights the connection between military power and oppression. Until Sisera's encounter with Jael at the end of the story, he is *always* mentioned with his nine hundred chariots. The emphasis on military ability is key to understanding the author's goals here. It is important to recognize that *all* military men in this story are humiliated. It is not only Barak who is shamed by a woman; Sisera, as we shall see, is also humiliated by a woman. The way

[144] Robert Alter, trans., *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014); Boling, *Judges*; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

women render military strength useless in the narrative is the means by which the author delivers the antiwar polemic in the book of Judges.

Following the description of the current situation in the land, Deborah is introduced. The two absolute nouns, "woman, prophet" function adjectivally here. A similar construction occurs in Judges 6:8, as Yahweh sends a male prophet (אִישׁ נָבִיא) to communicate to the Israelites. It is not likely that the two nouns are "exclamatory syntax" that suggest the author is making a "value judgement" about this statement.[145] Rather, it may simply be an authorial expression used here. Huldah is not described with these nouns, so it is possible that the 2 Kings author simply had a different way to communicate the gender of his prophet. The description of Deborah as a female prophet who was judging Israel at the time during Sisera's oppression is still part of our ideological overlay. It establishes that, for this pseudo-cycle, the person who is acting as the leader in Israel is Deborah, a female prophet. Just as the editor illustrates the ongoing transgressions of the Israelites as part of his overarching framework, so he includes morsels of information about each of the Judges that will arise and attempt to remedy the situation. We should note that, despite her introduction as a prophet, the genre of prophecy is not at all developed in the book of Judges. The inclusion of Deborah's description as a prophet should give us pause. What we are given in her introduction is not faithful to the genre practices associated with prophecy, and thus Deborah does not use any of the typical prophetic formulae we expect from the genre. Instead, we should consider that the editor saw Deborah's command to Barak in the story around which he was weaving his narrative and couched it in the realm of prophecy without developing the actual genre any further than what he delivered. In his explanatory introduction, he quickly explains why Deborah could speak to Barak with any knowledge at all about what Yahweh was planning on the battlefield.

Deborah is established as a woman, a prophet, and then, lastly, the wife of Lappidot. Volumes of analysis address the many possible interpretations of אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת . Is she the wife of someone named Lappidot? Or is she the "woman of torches?" Many scholars connect the name Lappidot to Barak, as Lappidot means fire, and Barak means lightning.

[145] Boling, *Judges*, 94–95.

In this case, then, Barak would be Deborah's husband.[146] According to this argument, the name Lappidot does not appear again because the audience already knows that the same character is also called Barak, but the story itself is begun with this appellation in order to conjure the image of a great military hero.[147] This is a case of gap filling, however. The author does not suggest that there is any other relationship between Deborah and Barak than prophet and military commander. Women are consistently defined by their relationship to a man in the book of Judges, including Deborah, and she is the wife of Lappidot. Not Barak. The fabrication of a marital relationship between Deborah and Barak illustrates the act of gap filling that many scholars apply in order to empower the women that the author does not even consider to be fleshed out characters.

But it is not even the reading of Deborah as the wife of Barak that is the most problematic interpretation of the phrase "Wife of Lappidot." It is the reading "woman of torches" or "fiery woman" that is most illustrative of gap filling that is not useful to this particular analysis. Frymer-Kensky suggests that "Torch-lady" is a good reading, as torches and lightning in the ancient world are often the sign of the storm god and that Deborah, "who is the torch…" sets the general Barak (whose name means lightening) on fire." [148] Newell and Gunn argue that we must read the phrase as "woman of fire" because "wifehood hardly defines Deborah." [149] Since she is described as a woman, and a prophet, Newell and Gunn argue that she cannot be simply a wife because she is in a position of power. The phrase "woman of torches" is perhaps an introduction to a fiery woman whose appellation indicates the potency of her spiritual force."[150] Sasson goes even further, reinterpreting the meaning of אֵשֶׁת completely and rendering the construct phrase as "a wielder of flames."[151] Sasson draws this reading from lore about divination in the Hellenistic period as a form of pyromancy, going as far as to suggest that Deborah did

[146] Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," 27–28.;
[147] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, First edition., The Anchor Bible; 6A (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 95.
[148] Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 1st ed (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 46.
[149] Dana Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, no. 3 (1990): 391.
[150] Daniel Skidmore-Hess and Cathy Skidmore-Hess, "Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah," *Shofar* 31, no. 1 (2012): 3.
[151] Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible; Volume 6D (New Haven [Connecticut]: Yale University Press, 2014), 250*n*a. .

indeed "practice this art" and had "an expert capacity to interpret the movement of flame or of smoke."[152] In any other text, the introduction of a woman as the "wife of PN" would be read as such. But, for some reason, many exegetes cannot settle for this interpretation when it comes to Deborah. The author does not depict scenes of pyromancy. Nor does he depict scenes wherein we are to assume Deborah and Barak are married. She is a woman, a prophet, and a wife. The reading is straightforward.

Schneider reads the phrase as a version of the introductory formula that is included for all judges presented in the text before chapter 4. Schneider, referring to the role of judge as savior, writes,

> "After introducing each savior, his primary relationships are defined. In Othniel's' case, after his first two relationships are noted, the text states that he was the younger one (Judg 3:9). With Ehud the text states that he was the son of Gera, a son of the right, a man [is] restricted in his right hand. In Deborah's introduction, the reference to her being a woman/wife of Lappidot [eset], parallels the third aspect of the characters' introduction describing a more personal characteristic. Thus, one possible interpretation could be that she was, 'Deborah, a woman, a prophet, a fiery one.'"[153]

Schneider is reading אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת as a descriptor, then, and not a title. I am more inclined to entertain this interpretation of the phrase, as it relies on textual parallels to explore its meaning (whereas the other interpretations previously discussed do not). However, I feel Schneider's interpretation still misses the point here. I appreciate that it is drawn from the previous pericope, which I believe is critical in understanding Judges, but still, we must ask, "what does it mean?" Why would the author describe Deborah as a prophet, a "fiery one?" If that is the case, we must assume the author is nodding toward perhaps her attitude, or pyromancy, or something else. But why not read it as we would read it for any other woman who was not described as a prophet: Wife of Lappidot? Again and again, we see scholars apply a far more complex interpretation of the construct phrase than is necessary. The scholars addressed above have developed a detailed explanation for what is an extremely straightforward phrase. The author's job is to get the details out. She judges over Israel. She is a woman, and a prophet, but her position as a powerful woman is not a threatening one, because she is married and does not transcend too many societal

[152] Ibid., 256
[153] Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 66.

boundaries in her role. Based on this analysis, I do not believe anything valuable is added by a complex interpretation of the title given to Deborah. Just as we read "wife of Shalem" from אִשְׁתּ שַׁלֻּם about Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14, so too we should read, "wife of Lappidot" about Deborah.

Verse 5 introduces Deborah's location, as well as details about her role as a judge. While we cannot know the nuances of the role of "judge" as it exists in the book, we are told that Deborah established her office beneath a palm and that the Israelites would go to her for decision making. Her location, between Ramah and Bethel, is straightforward, and I do not think that it behooves our investigation to expound upon what the author may have meant by placing her here and not somewhere else. Locations in the book of Judges are backdrops for the characters to act upon, rather than legitimate reflections of tribal placement in a distant past, as is often argued by Judges exegetes. As for the role of judge, despite the description of Deborah's specific role in the community included here, it is still difficult to trace the contours of what the position is throughout the rest of the book. I would like to suggest that each judge served the role that he or she needed to, and that it differs based on the circumstances and the person. The idea that people come to her for judgement is not meant for us to decipher the nebulous role of a judge in Israel, but rather it is so that we know that Deborah is understood to have credibility in the community. People ask her for judgement. It is even more curious, then, if we understand this as her role, that Barak should express any hesitation at all. The details given about Deborah in this story are in service of the point of the story: shame a military man. If we read it that way, the questions about the interpretation of the past few verses are immediately clarified. We know that Deborah speaks with certainty on behalf of God because she is described as a prophet, and the people of the community come to her for judgement.

The verb pair in verse 6 is often translated as "summoned," however, it may be possible to render a translation that is better suited to Deborah's office described in the previous verse. The pair occurs just after her role as judge has been illuminated with the description of Israelites coming to her for her decisions. Perhaps "conveyed a message" is a better reading of the hendiadys, since she is described as communicating messages and decisions to people. Thus, "she conveyed the following message to Barak…" makes use of

the verbal pair וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא and the phrase וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו that introduces the words of her message to him.[154]

The structure of Deborah's command is complex and, when read hastily, its implications can be missed entirely. She introduces her message to Barak with the particle הֲלֹא, which indicates a rhetorical flourish in her questioning. While it is argued that the particle can have an emphatic meaning, carrying with it "a certain exclamatory nuance," we must not neglect the potentiality that Deborah is indeed using it rhetorically.[155] She is posing a question to Barak, a question for which there is only one right answer, about something that must have been said in the past. Since she is asking this rhetorical question, we can assume that whatever was said in the past has not been acted on. The structure of the passage suggests there was an off-stage scene to which readers were not privy. If we understand that this is not the first time Barak has been given instructions such as these, it illuminates Barak's response far better. We are not being given the oracle directly, as we see in prophetic literature, where a statement from Yahweh is introduced with more typical prophetic flavor like "דִּבֶּר יְהוָה" or the standard use of "כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה." Instead, Deborah repeats what Yahweh has said in a secondhand way, avoiding the direct address typically seen in prophetic oracles. This part of the text is key to understanding Barak's behavior in the following verses. If the oracle has already occurred off stage, then Barak has already done something to suggest that he is not receptive to the oracle, also offstage. In a single particle, the writer is able to show us that Deborah has received an oracle and communicated it to Barak who appears to have disregarded it. The author does not have to explain *why* Barak has disregarded it, but simply that he has and now the outcome has changed. With the particle, the author is able to convey Barak's procrastination without having to detail it at all.

Following the rhetorical flourish that introduces her message, Deborah now tells us for the first time and Barak, ostensibly, for the second time, that he is to "Get ready to deploy" his troops at Mount Tabor. The imperative form followed by the second person verb לֵךְ·וּמָשַׁכְתָּ suggests that the recipient of the imperative is being "urged to plan" for the

[154] Sasson offers three possible translations of the verbal pair in verse 6, but argues for this one. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 257.
[155] Juon Muroka, 161c, p 574

action of the next verb.[156] This reading also permits us to get a sense of the temporality of this command and the previous, off stage command. Barak has been told to make ready his troops twice.

The verb מָשַׁךְ here means "to deploy," as in one's army. The word describes a leading type of action, such as leading a cart with a rope, leading troops, or leading one to doom. But it also describes the action one takes with a bow (1 K 22:34), to *draw* it. It also carries the meaning "to march," and is used to describe marching in Judges 20:37 when Gibeah is attacked. As we shall see, it is repeated often in this story. Through Deborah, Yahweh tells Barak where to go and how many troops to take with him. The tribes of Naphtali and Zebulon are to accompany him. It is unclear why, though this analysis will approach this information the same way as it approaches geographical information, discussed above. The choice of the tribes may be based on proximity or on a certain tribal polemic the author was offering, which is now buried in the complex editing process and whose original meaning is lost to us.

Verse 7 shifts into a direct address, albeit it is delivered without any of the standard formula that typically introduces oracular material. Yahweh proposes a parallel action, as the verb מָשַׁךְ appears again, here with the same military thrust. It should not be rendered exactly the same way, however. The repetition of the verb permits for the translation "meanwhile," indicating that while Barak is preparing to deploy his troops, Yahweh will be mustering Sisera's troops so that they are ready to meet Barak's deployment. Without what follows, the pronouncement could be read as quite ominous. However, Yahweh assures Barak will have a positive outcome in the battle, as the deity promises to deliver Sisera into his hand.

Our military theme is again and again revisited, and Sisera, in this first part of the book, is not mentioned without his nine hundred chariots of iron. But even these chariots, the ones that sparked the Israelite's initial cry to Yahweh in verse 3, are to be rounded up in the tandem victory that Barak and Yahweh will achieve over the Canaanite troops. The message is clear: You and I will work together, and as a result I will deliver the enemy right

[156] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 258.

into your hand. The military strategy is outlined; success is guaranteed. The certainty of victory is clear.

In verse 8, then, Barak utters what, given that certainty, is a shocking response. Barak says to Deborah, "If you go with me, then I will go. But if you will not go with me, I will not go." The previous verses seem to ensure military success for Barak, and yet he expresses immediate hesitation. Of course, the abruptness of Barak's response is the subject of a great deal of scholarly interpretation. Many readings highlight the interpreters' contention with the notion of a male military leader who appears dependent on a woman. Most scholars invent reasons, none of which are clear in the text, as to why Barak's hesitation cannot be cowardice. For example, when discussing whether or not Barak's statement is cowardly, Niditch argues it is not fear of the battlefield, but rather that a victory is more likely "with the presence of God's favorite."[157] Others see Barak's hesitation as part of a trend of prophetic-call denial. Moses balks at the idea of public speech, and Jeremiah doubts his capacity to change hearts and minds. Assis agrees with this, arguing that Barak denies his call out of modesty, "as do other biblical leaders, such as Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah, on the occasion of their appointment."[158] Bae sees Barak's conditional statement as an indication that he is not seeking "personal honor or dignity."[159] In fact, according to Bae, a reader should regard Barak's request for Deborah's presence as a sign that he is obedient to the deity, and that his request for Deborah's presence "betrays his enthusiasm for the deliverance of Israel."[160] Bae also uses this argument, as well as Barak's capacity to summon ten thousand troops, as a sign that he is in fact the judge in the story, rather than Deborah.[161] Soggin agrees that Barak is actually a judge, and that his conditional pause in accepting the call is a seasoned military general weighing out his options and analyzing the risks.[162] Sasson reads the verse as Barak asking for more details. While instructions have been given, Sasson's Barak is hoping to bring the prophetess with

[157] Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 65.
[158] Elie Assis, "Man, Woman and God in Judg 4," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20, no. 1 (2006): 120.
[159] Hee-Sook Bae, "Reconsidering Barak's Response in Judges 4," *Biblica* 98, no. 4 (2017): 506–7.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid., 513-14.
[162] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 73.

him onto the battlefield so that he may know *exactly* when to strike.[163] In a similar vein, Newell and Gunn see Barak as one who is questioning Deborah's authority. Barak is shocked that a woman is giving a command to him, dipping her toe in a sphere typically reserved for men.[164] For Newell and Gunn, then, his hesitation is a patriarchal pause; a man taking a moment to see if he should listen to the guidance of a woman. The fact that the audience does not hear Yahweh speak the command to Deborah before she repeats it is at the crux of Newell and Gunn's argument:

> Furthermore, though Deborah claims that the command to fight comes from Yahweh, neither the reader nor Barak ever hears Yahweh speak. Barak is being asked to risk his life as well as the lives of ten thousand men on the strength of this woman's unconfirmable word. Barak's conditional proposal, then, is a test: if Deborah is willing to stake her own life on this word, then he will believe and obey.[165]

For Newell and Gunn, Deborah's rebuke of Barak is brought about by his suspicion of her authority. It is his punishment for doubting her word. Bae agrees, suggesting that "Barak was not otherwise prone to listening to a woman, asking a woman for help, or honoring a woman."[166] Barak's response is a confusing one, muddied further by Deborah's answer to him. The complexity of the exchange leads many scholars, as we can see, to fill in the gaps with biographical material or, worse, psychological analysis, for Barak. Even more shocking, perhaps, is the idea that this hesitation indicates that Barak is the judge, rather than Deborah, when nothing of the sort is included in the text.

Some interpreters offer a reading that shows Barak's misstep in the verse. Perhaps Barak sees himself as dependent on Deborah.[167] Perhaps he is her protégé, subservient to the prophetess. If this is the case, then, his servitude to her highlights even more her unique role as a female leader, since she has a male second in her command. He is *her* consort, he manifests the dependent feminine role, requiring not only her command but her presence

[163] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 260.
[164] Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," 398.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Bae, "Reconsidering Barak's Response in Judges 4," 507.
[167] Assis, "Man, Woman and God in Judg 4," 113.

to carry out the mission.[168] Though Soggin earlier suggests that Barak is asking for more concrete plans, he also argues that Barak is inferior to Deborah.[169]

However, we should consider another option that falls more in line with the Blochian reading of formalization. Barak has already avoided the command from the first, off stage oracle. It takes a second reminder, with an added rhetorical flourish, to get him to move. And his move, for the author, is the wrong one. Here is a warrior, a military leader, who has already received *two* oracles assuring victory, and his response is one of hesitation. He has dragged his feet instead of deploying his troops and now he asks for additional accompaniment even though he does not need it. On what grounds should we believe his military prowess now?

In response to Barak's conditional statement in verse 8, Deborah responds with an emphasized affirmative: "I will indeed go with you." The nail in Barak's coffin as a deliverer, she acquiesces, but lays out *her own* conditions that reflect his from the previous verse and condemn him to a semi-public shaming. The woman who has been described as giving people decisions in her role as judge now judges Barak's decision. She warns him that there is no glory for him on this path. Since he has made this decision, the glory will now go to the same woman into whose hand Sisera will be delivered. In a simple action, she closes the conversation and commences with the plan. She goes along with him to Kadesh, to the peril of his own glory.

Verse 11 brings with it a dramatic scene shift. The audience is removed from the war party approaching the field of battle and dropped next to the oak of Zaanaim, near Kedesh. Biographical material about a previously unknown character marks the narratival shift, as does the simple vav accompanying Heber's name, forming the disjunctive syntax that contributes to the scene shift. The shift appears extremely abrupt and comes at a time when the reader feels suspense is building and battle is about to unfold. What we are likely seeing here is an inclusion by an editor, developing his narratival overlay that links the stories of individual judges together. The disjunctive, followed by a series of names,

[168] Skidmore-Hess and Skidmore-Hess, "Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah," 3.
[169] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 71.

familial connections, and locations, feels out of step with the core narrative of Judges 4. It is an insertion, meant to link this story with others. The Kenites appear in Judges 1:16, so they are not totally foreign to the overall story, but their appearance here feels somewhat strange. But when we analyze this part of the story, we must avoid falling into gap filling.

The place name "the oak of Zaanaim," just as with the Palm of Deborah, is not essential to the plot. Most reconstructions of the area from the book of Judges also rely on the book of Joshua, which, as we have already seen in the naming of Jabin, provides information that conflicts with the Judges narrative.[170] The information given in verse 11 is especially confusing as the meaning of Heber's relationship to the Kenite clan, his ties to Mosaic family lines, and even the location of his tent are seemingly out of step with the story. The information itself is textually straightforward, but its meanings remain vague. Why has Heber separated from the Kenites? Is he pro-Israel, or on the side of Sisera and Jabin? It is suggested that, as a Kenite, Heber would have been a smith. Since a repeating motif in the story is Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots, objects that would require many smiths to maintain, Newell and Gunn suggest that Heber is actually one of Sisera's smiths.[171] In this case, then, Heber and his wife Jael would be on the side of Jabin and Sisera, making Jael's choice later in the narrative quite confusing. It is also possible that Heber had separated himself from the other Kenites because he and his wife support Israel. If we avoid filling the gaps with unnecessary biographical information based on other material from the Hebrew Bible, we are left with a scene shift that explains the later introduction of the character of Jael. Though she is not mentioned yet, the editor has reached into the text and set up an introduction to explain why she will be there later. If the writer cared about Jael's connection to Moses or, for that matter, her husband Heber and his political affiliation, he would have mentioned that later. But he does not.

The scene rapidly shifts again, and in verse 12 our lens is suddenly focused on Sisera, somewhere in the battlefield. He has received news that Barak is marching to Mount Tabor. Upon hearing this, Sisera mobilizes his massive forces and heads into battle. Again,

[170] Contrary to Boling, who argues that there are two towns named Kedesh, and that the oak is meant to differentiate which town it is for the knowledgeable reader. Boling, *Judges*, 97.
[171] Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," 395.

military imagery is emphasized. The text states that Sisera calls all his chariots, but then *adds* an appositive to show it is the same massive force of nine hundred chariots of iron that he will be bringing to the field. These chariots are the root of Israel's woe, their oppressor, and the reminder that military force is a key part of this narrative.

We last see Deborah in verse 14, as she accompanies Barak and his troops from Zebulun and Naphtali from Kedesh to the battlefield. Even now, as they are about to enter the thick of battle, Barak *still* needs prompting. Sisera has mustered his massive troops and brought with him his chariots. God has already held up his end of the bargain; he has done what he said he would do. And yet, Deborah still must goad Barak into action. The rhetorical particle, translated in verse 6 as a simple "has not" can now be rendered with a bit more force. "Don't you see," Deborah asks Barak, "things are unfolding according to what you were told?" The rhetorical force of the particle deserves to be emphasized even more here, as it is now the third time, counting the initial message delivered off-stage, that Barak must be told to act. The author has shown Barak dragging his feet again and again. The battle is unfolding in front of him, God is holding up the bargain and mustering the troops, all is happening as he was told, and yet, he does not act. Barak's military prowess does not prevent him from faltering. *Finally*, Barak gets something right, and he plunges down the mountain with his troops close behind him.

This is the last time Deborah appears in the narrative. The brevity of her presence in the story and the fact that she disappears before any action has taken place further supports the reading of women as character formalizations in the book of Judges, rather than fleshed out actors in the narrative. If this were a story about Deborah, surely we would see her again. But women do not function as fully developed characters in the book. Deborah has served her part in the plot; she has offered an oracle and condemned the man who refused to hear it. She has goaded a man who should need no goading to go into a battle for which victory has already been assured. Though she is *the* judge in this story, she is no longer needed.

In verse 15, Yahweh delivers on his promise to muster Sisera's troops before Barak, proving again that Barak's hesitation was misguided. The word הָמַם occurs primarily in military settings, though it can also mean to crush grain. It appears in the Exodus narratives

and describes what happens to Pharaoh's men when the Yam Suf washes over them (Exod 14:24). In a single action, Yahweh throws Sisera, all of his chariots, and all of his troops into a panic. The three direct objects in a row indicate the totality of Yahweh's action. The military thrust of God's action here is further emphasized by the phrase פִּי־חָרֶב often used to describe military action throughout the Hebrew Bible. Translators either render it "by the edge of the sword" or "by the sword." Both are acceptable, with "by the edge of the sword" simply reflecting an idiomatic Hebrew expression rendered into English. The phrase, should not, however, be excised from the text because it anticipates a future action, as Soggin and others argue.[172] Military language is crucial in the book of Judges, and the association with a deity leading the charge and causing enemies to die by the sword is essential to the antiwar message of the book. Only God decides when there is war and when he does, Israel is successful. It is the human agents who falter. The ongoing theme of the chariot is further drawn out in the second part of verse 15. As Sisera steps down from his chariot to flee Barak, he relinquishes the power that he has until now wielded over the Israelites. If the chariot is a symbol of Canaanite power and oppression, Sisera has just divested himself from those qualities. And this is clear in the text, as Sisera, once the formidable enemy, now presents a threat to absolutely no one else in the rest of the narrative. Once he steps down from the chariot, he loses all access to his military power. He is now a man without an army, alone and on foot.

Barak, meanwhile, pursues Sisera's army. We are told, in verse 16, that the entirety of Sisera's army falls to the sword in Harosheth-Hagoyim. The enemy is routed. And yet, Barak, our military leader, is not depicted as the one doing the felling. The writer instead describes a passive victory, with no single agent responsible for wielding the sword. God attempted to deliver Sisera into Barak's hand. The man fled his chariot on foot. Instead, Barak loses his quarry and pursues the chariots. We now see the first part of the fulfillment of Deborah's condemnation of Barak. He lets his target go in order to fight a nameless horde of soldiers. Barak has missed the point. He chooses to pursue the chariots, the mechanism by which they have been oppressed, rather than the oppressor himself.[173] He

[172] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 66; Boling, *Judges*, 97; Barnabas. Lindars and A. D. H. (Andrew David Hastings) Mayes, *Judges 1-5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 195.
[173] Schneider, *Judges*, 75.

will pursue Sisera later in the story, but by that point it will be too late and the Canaanite commander will already be dead.

The purpose of the dramatic narrative shift from verse 11 finally becomes apparent in verse 17. We have already met Heber the Kenite and are now introduced to his wife Jael. The writer gives the reason for Sisera's fleeing to this tent as Heber's peace with Jabin. He will be safe with those who are sympathetic to the Canaanite cause. Unlike Barak, who never comes face to face with his enemy, Jael steps out of the safety of her dwelling and confronts him directly. Not only that, she issues a command, asking him to turn aside into her tent with an imperative. She assures Sisera of the safety of her tent and so he enters (4:18). The military man says nothing here. It is the feminine voice that directs the situation. Sisera enters Jael's tent, and she covers him with a blanket.

Verse 18 and the following section detailing the interactions between Jael and Sisera are perhaps the most discussed verses in the entire chapter. From the minute Sisera enters Jael's tent, the purpose of each action is ambiguous. Why does she cover the military general with a blanket? When he asks for water, she gives him milk. When he asks her to guard the entrance to the tent, he uses a masculine imperative to address a woman. Even though her husband, Heber the Kenite, and King Jabin are described as having peace between them, the minute Sisera falls asleep Jael reaches for the nearest weapon and kills him. The meaning of the scene appears at first indeterminate. As we will see, many readings have been offered to attempt to clarify what appear to be very ambiguous actions by the characters. But it is possible that the ambiguity that we sense as readers is due to a subtle undermining of our expectations for the scene. We expect the scene where she covers him with a blanket to lead to a sexual encounter. Instead, she hands him a blanket to sleep alone and then she kills him. Our expectations are being subverted just as the masculinity in the story is being subverted. This creates a tension when we read about Jael's interaction with Sisera. The actions seem to suggest something and yet that something does not occur. When we apply our notions of formalization, however, the series of actions makes sense. The goal of the author is to present a weakened military man in order to serve his antiwar message in the overall book. As stated above, from the minute he leaves his chariot, Sisera is no

longer a powerful man. He has forfeited his power for self-preservation, and Jael is able to take advantage of that.

Interpretations of Jael's character in this story range from presenting her as an inhospitable host,[174] to fawning mother, [175] to a promiscuous seductress.[176] Her ethnicity is not stated in the text. Is she a foreign woman in support of Israel?[177] A foreign woman who has betrayed her ethnic group? Or is she an Israelite sympathetic to her people's cause? Whether scholars wish to see the exchange between Jael and Sisera as sexual or maternal depends on who they want Jael to be. But, often, in order to render a fully developed argument for any interpretation, scholars have to participate in the practice of gap filling. These problems are reduced, if not entirely sidestepped, however, when one applies the antiwar reading and views the character of Jael as a plot mechanism entirely in service to that polemic. The author did not include her ethnicity. Why? Not because we are meant to guess, but because it was not instrumental to him. Her ethnicity, left ambiguous, is not instrumental in her function. The author also does not obliquely suggest a sexual exchange between Jael and Sisera by using blankets and bowls of milk as story props. These interpretations require too much gap filling, and the details added to the narrative to render one of the interpretations discussed above obscure the fact that the author intentionally left it out *because it is not critical for the story's coherence.*

Let us further explore this analysis by returning to verse 18 and examining the text with this new lens. We must recall that, prior to this verse, Sisera stepped down from his chariot and fled on foot. He has dissociated himself with the mechanics of war and thus is no longer a strong military man. From the moment he arrives at the tent of a man who he

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[174] Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21, no. 1 (1991): 13–21.
[175] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*; Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5"; Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*; Mieke 1946- Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[176] Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19, no. 1 (2005): 24–47; Bae, "Reconsidering Barak's Response in Judges 4"; Athalya. Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, The Biblical Seminar, (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985); Lillian R. Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 24–33.
[177] Niditch, *Judges*.

knows has a peace agreement with his king, he takes almost no initiative himself. The man who directed nine hundred chariots of iron is now directed by a lone woman, who uses a masculine imperative to order him into her tent. Many scholars read this as a sexual invitation by Jael. Newell and Gunn compare the story of Leah and Jacob, stating "a man seldom enters a woman's tent for a purpose other than sexual intercourse."[178] Reis goes as far as to argue that a woman inviting a man into her tent would have been immediately understood by the "first readers" of the story who would have known that Jael's choice to come out and invite him in is "loose and brazen," and that she is clearly "offering a sexual liaison."[179] Since the audience also would have assumed that Jael was foreign, Reis links this interpretation by the "first readers" as a xenophobic one as they would have understood all non-Israelites as immoral.[180] Alter infuses seduction into the very language, arguing that the "alliteration of sibilants in the Hebrew…are soothingly reassuring, almost seductive."[181] What makes more sense, however, is that a woman emerges from a tent as a man is running by and calls to him to turn aside from his flight to her tent. I argue that we should read this invitation as the first step in a series of humiliating acts for what was a previously strong military man. He has fled the battle, he is without his chariot power, he flees to a lone tent and, instead of demanding the occupant therein shelter him while he regroups, Jael comes out to meet him and begins issuing commands. It is the opposite of what we would expect from a military general. He is fleeing a battle, and she diverts his flight and tells him not to be afraid.

The second half of verse 18 is also ripe for the sort of gap filling interpretations we have been exploring above. Jael covers Sisera with a שְׂמִיכָה. The word is a *hapax legomenon*, which complicates even more the many readings of this passage. Most scholars interpret the word as meaning blanket or rug, meant to cover someone up. Ackerman reads Jael's action as that of a mother, tending to an "overwhelmed child."[182] Newell and Gunn agree, balancing their previously discussed sexual interpretation with a maternal one, as

[178] Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," 392.
[179] Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading," 27.
[180] Ibid., 36.
[181] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 128*n*18.
[182] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 90.

they suggest the covering with a blanket and the giving of milk as motherly actions.[183] Sasson also agrees, highlighting not only the maternal themes in the story but also that the author has not provided the ages of the actors, allowing for us to perhaps find a maternal age gap.[184] Reis goes a step further in interpreting the *hapax*, suggesting that we should read it not as a blanket but rather her body. Reis argues that this scene depicts Jael mounting Sisera and engaging in sexual intercourse.[185] While the meaning of the *hapax* is certainly unclear, Reis' interpretation should not be taken as the most plausible one. A reading that fits better, I argue, is yet again one that forefronts the humiliation of a military man. She has directed him into her tent, and then she "puts him to bed," covering him and thus rendering him slightly more helpless than he would have been had he been sitting up. Here is a military man brought very low indeed.

Even when Sisera does attempt to demand something, his goal is not met. A man who commands a massive military, whose men listen to him and follow him to their own potential death, cannot now even get the particular beverage he requests. It is possible to read Jael's offering of milk instead of water as her ignoring his command. But we can also read it as an extremely practical action. Rather than leaving the tent to go to the well for water, she reaches for milk in a readily available container. This verse leads to many interpretations either related to maternity or sex. For some, the giving of milk after the tucking in scene calls forth maternal imagery.[186] The milk is also often seen as a soporific, meant to lull Sisera to sleep so that Jael can put her murderous plan in motion.[187] The text gives no indication that Sisera's later sleepiness is the result of a beverage, however. We can also understand his falling asleep as the result of an intense battle and harried flight after defeat. Whether or not milk was understood as a soporific by the author should not be assumed.

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[183] Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," 393.
[184] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 275.
[185] Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading," 29.
[186] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*; Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5."
[187]Boling, *Judges*, 98.

The sexual interpretation of the scene needs the greatest amount of gap filling, and thus I believe we should disregard it. What many of these interpretations miss is the entire point of the exchange. The military general Sisera does not get what he asked for. Here, finding Jael's motive for serving milk over water is a trap into which one need not fall. Certainly, the maternal imagery can apply, but the overall point is that a man whose career centers on issuing commands asks for a simple thing and *does not receive it*. If the reader is meant to expect a commanding presence from Sisera, taking control of the situation as he regroups for battle, they are instead greeted with an acquiescent body who is primarily acted *upon*, who asks for one thing and is handed another. The maternal reading can be viewed in this same way, as a powerful military man is treated by a woman as a fussy boy is treated by his mother. The element of humiliation is clear, regardless of whether one wants to view the author as giving Jael a maternal role or not. My interpretation works with the theme of humiliation, which is the most important element. That is the goal of the writer. A woman, the least powerful person in this scene, does not respond to the commands of a well-known chariot commanding military man. Our expectations are turned on their heads. Wartime masculinity means nothing in this tent.

Much is made about Sisera's choice to use a masculine imperative as he directs Jael to "stand at the opening of the tent" (4:20). Is he feminizing himself by treating a woman as a masculine entity? After the use of the masculine imperative, however, Sisera returns to using second person feminine inflections, so the argument that he is speaking with confusion does not stand. It could be a scribal error. It could be that Sisera is so used to commanding his men that he begins his imperative with a masculine inflection because, we are to be reminded again and again, he is a general and giving commands to men is second nature to him. Of course, the argument that he is emasculating himself with this command is strengthened by his following command. If someone comes to the tent and asks Jael if there is any man there, she is to say, "there is not." Regardless of how one interprets the dialogue here, I argue that the meaning of it is secondary to the theme that has been clear throughout. Here is Sisera, a powerful commander, tucked under a blanket, with a belly full of milk, asking a woman to keep an eye out and to tell any potential enemy that he is not there. He is *hiding.* Military men are supposed to continue to pursue the battle. They are supposed to endure in their pursuit for glory and they are certainly never to cower

or surrender. And here, now parted from the mechanisms of his military might, Sisera hides beneath a blanket.

The next verse gives us one of the most famous scenes in the Hebrew Bible. Sisera has just finished issuing a command. And then Jael reaches for a tent peg and a hammer, walks softly over to him from the entrance of the tent, and drives the peg into his body while he is sleeping (4:21). The single verse contains a flurry of activity, which no doubt has contributed to the many varied ways the incident between Jael and Sisera has been interpreted. Many questions arise upon initial examination of the text. Why does Jael reach for a tent peg? No motive is given for her action in the text itself. Kirsch argues that Jael opts for these pedestrian tools for murder in order that she may comply with Deuteronomy 22:5, that "a woman should not wear what pertains to a man," interpreted later by the rabbis as an injunction against women bearing swords or other weapons.[188] This assumes, however, that the author wishes for Jael to operate within the legal code of his own people, or that he assumes that she is herself an Israelite. A foreigner would not need to abide by the laws of Deuteronomy. I find that this interpretation confuses the matter even more and obfuscates the clear meaning of the text. It is too much gap filling. Jael reaches for the tent peg and hammer because she is in the tent. Kirsch adds later that Jael is not an Israelite, making his assumption that the law of Deuteronomy should have any application here even more bewildering.[189] The closest thing the reader is given as to motive is the relationship between Heber and Jabin and even that falls short of providing any explanation without a good deal of gap filling. The author also makes a curious choice in his ordering of Jael's actions. First, we are told that she walks quietly over to him, but only after she kills him are we told that the quiet walking was because Sisera had fallen asleep. The details about Sisera sleeping are organized into a trio of descriptions about him that only comes at the end of the entire series of actions. The trio is introduced with a simple vav. In the phrase, Sisera moves through three different states: sleep, exhaustion or faintness, and then death. Jael's action dominates the scene, and Sisera's positioning, from when the action begins to

[188] Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*, 1st trade pbk. ed (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 256.
[189] Ibid., 257.

when it ends, is all placed at the end of the sentence. His varied states are presented simply as the outcomes of the previous action just described.

There is also the question of *where* she drives the stake into Sisera. Some interpreters say his throat, while others suggest his mouth, though the most common interpretation is his temple. It is a crude, violent death, most certainly, and one that seems impulsive as it uses easy to reach tools that would be nearby in any tent. Another question that arises is the subject of the feminine form of the verb צָנַח. Is the peg the object doing the descending? Is it Sisera's temple, as his body drops to the ground? Or is it Jael herself who descends? I believe we can rule Sisera's temple as the subject of the verb. He is already laying down, and even for the sometimes-cryptic author the bodily positioning of Sisera would be very confusing. So, either Jael forces the tent peg completely through Sisera's skull, or she herself kneels to the ground. Reis argues that the subject of the verb should be read as Jael as she dismounts Sisera after intercourse.[190] As stated above, the intercourse interpretation requires a gap filling that obfuscates the point of the female character convention. She is not well developed. She is a plot function set in place to murder Sisera and she does so completely: driving the tent peg through his whole skull. The goal of the scene is to rob Barak of glory, during the course of which *two* military men shall be humiliated, by a quick and improvised murder by the weakest possible actor: a woman.

Speculation as to what Jael's motive could be for the murder abounds in scholarship. Newell and Gunn see Jael as murdering Sisera to defend her honor and avoid accusations of impropriety.[191] Since she is alone in the tent, she must fight for her own survival and prove her "allegiance to the victors."[192] But this interpretation assumes something we are not told in the text. *How does Jael know the Israelites are the victors?* Reis agrees with Newell and Gunn, arguing that Jael uses her sexual wiles to protect herself and her husband from "the victorious and resentful Israelites."[193] Soggin assumes that Jael is bound to Israel through "common faith and affinity," which is the only reason her action

[190] Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading," 34.
[191] Nolan Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," 394.
[192] Ibid., 396.
[193] Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading," 35.

is lauded in the text rather than condemned.[194] Both Sasson and Frymer-Kensky acknowledge that her motive is not explicitly stated, a rare occurrence among the scholars of this section of Judges. While Sasson admits that the author makes no explicit reference to her motive, Frymer-Kensky gets closer to the truth, stating that "her own motives do not count."[195] I argue that the author did not consider Jael's motive as necessary to the overall story coherence, so he did not elaborate on it. The same can be said for her ethnicity and the location of her tent. These are not details that serve the story, and the plot function presented in the character of Jael does not require any more detail than that which is given. Barak has lost his glory to the hand of a woman. The goal is to humiliate the military man by ceding his strength to a woman. The author uses the Jael formalization for this purpose twice. She manages to rob power from *two* military men.

In verse 22 Barak experiences his humiliation in a semi-private sphere, as it is only witnessed by himself and Jael. However, remember that Deborah is also aware of this outcome, having prophesied it earlier in the narrative. After the action-packed scene of Sisera's murder, the author shifts our camera lens again with the use of the particle. This is followed by the use of a participle: Barak is in the midst of action. In fact, the entire verse utilizes a series of participles, suggesting a sort of rushed immediacy of the action. When Barak arrives at Jael's tent, she already seems to know who he is and who he is looking for. Again, she issues a command to a military man, and again, this major commander of men acquiesces without a single word. The men represent two different sides, the Canaanites and the Israelites, but the message is the same. Military men have no power in this story. Jael shows Barak Sisera's body, lying dead with the peg still in his skull. Assis deftly identifies this as the final blow to Barak, casting him as a fool. The entire shift in the point of view that begins in 22 highlights this, according to Assis,

> The shift in point of view when the assassination is discussed for the second time is meant to place Barak in a foolish light – he had continued to pursue Sisera although Sisera was already dead. This ironic presentation is part of the actual realization of Deborah's prophecy.[196]

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[194] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 78.
[195] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 274; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 57.
[196] Elie Assis, "'The Hand of a Woman': Deborah and Yael (Judges 4)," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 5 (2005): 8.

If Barak is a skilled military leader, he has made an error here, pursuing a quarry that is already dead. If Sisera was a skilled military leader, capable of leading nine hundred iron chariots, he made an error trusting Jael and is now dead on a tent floor. Each man's outcome in the story illustrates the folly of war. As a result of Jael's action, Yahweh humbles Jabin, king of Canaan, before the people of Israel. Here we see another example of the public scale of shaming. Jabin has been humbled before all of Israel; the great oppressor is now gone. The Israelites manage to reclaim some agency, fighting against Jabin until he is destroyed (4:24).

Application

On the surface, Deborah and Jael look like extremely different characters. It is easy to see how so many interpreters create robust stories for them. Their appearance of prominence in the story almost seems to demand more detail from the text than is provided. However, I argue that their differences are only superficial, and that they serve as the same formalized character and are used to achieve the same end goal. Information about these formalized female characters was not essential to the plot of the story, and so the author chose not to include it. Their formalized role is to humiliate a man. Any other information not in service of that goal was not considered germane to the polemic or necessary for story coherence by the author. This is what makes Deborah and Jael formalized characters.

Their purpose, then, is to humiliate or shame characters who represent what we have previously described as the Judges' ideal of masculinity. Both Barak and Sisera are military leaders who command large amounts of troops. Sisera has the military apparatus of nine hundred chariots of iron behind him, another indicator of masculine power. The characters bring with them the assumption of power and military prowess, and yet two women lay them low. Each man is shown to be inadequate by the hand (or word) of a woman. The women are given just enough defined details to be able to perform this specific role, but nothing else. They are the means by which military leadership is shown to be ineffective in Judges 4. They are the polemic bearers, the ones who deliver the message that resistance is futile, that war is folly, and that the status quo of nonresistance is most desirable. But they are not thickly described characters, and there is no reason to provide details for them that distract from their singular purpose.

The antiwar polemic in Judges begins to come into clearer view in chapter 4. God has decided that there would be war and so the Israelites were successful in overthrowing their longtime oppressors. However, human representatives of military power, Barak and Sisera, are both humiliated by the least likely and least dangerous enemy: women. Human military resistance is futile without God. Only God decides when there is war, and any human attempt to move without divine backing is sheer folly. Masculinity is not permitted a victory in this story. The author will develop this antiwar polemic throughout the book, and as the book progresses and the leaders become less likeable and more self-motivated, the humiliation of traditional Judges masculinity will become visible to the entire world.

Chapter Three: Jephthah

"The blood dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned."

W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

The character of Jephthah's daughter is so highly formalized that she lacks a name, a husband, and a presence for the majority of the pericope which utilizes her as a plot convention. Unlike Deborah, a woman prophetess, wife of Lappidot, or Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, who lived in a tent near the Oak of Zaanaimm, the daughter of Jephthah is spared every single detail except for those which serve her functionality in the story. If the notion of female subordination through formalization is reified in any single character in the book of Judges, it is in her. But the daughter is not alone in her humiliation of Jephthah. Three formalized women, all primarily identified by their sexual statuses, contribute to his humiliation. His mother, an unnamed sex worker or concubine to his father makes his birth illegitimate. His father's nameless wife, whose sons use her legitimacy as the primary wife to cast Jephthah out, also paves the way for humiliation. Finally, his humiliation and tragedy are finalized in a third nameless woman, Jephthah's virgin daughter. He is humiliated by a single woman, a married woman, and a virgin. The entire gambit of female sexual status factors into the story.

Not only is biographical information and motivation missing from the character development of the women in Jephthah's life, but even plot points that might serve the broader coherence of the story appear to be missing in the pericope as well. Textual inconsistences in the text such as who is responsible for Jephthah's ouster from the community (initially the brothers cast him out but later he blames the elders), Israel's relationship and history with Ammon and Moab, and other inconsistencies abound. These disparities in the text lend themselves to gap filling, but if we apply the theory of character formalization then we remove the need for narratival fabrication and instead we can recognize that these possible editing flaws in the text are committed in the service of the larger polemic. The author was so focused on the polemic that he pared down what must

have been a broader story about a man named Jephthah. But what should bear out to us in this analysis most of all is that the story itself has coherence without any unnecessary speculation about even the most basic missing details in the story. We can understand the coherence of the narrative without embellishing it. The methodology employed in this dissertation helps interpreters and exegetes avoid having to invent unnecessary and ungrounded backstory. The function of the formalized character is fulfilled. The polemic is delivered. We do not need the elements of the story to have any more meaning than the literary function the author employed them to serve.

Analysis

Jephthah's story begins before his introduction when the Ammonites begin to muster their troops. They are met with Israelites, who are assembling a war camp at Mizpah in response to the Ammonite activity. Though he is not yet on the scene, his appearance is heralded by military activity. Other than his interaction with his daughter, everything Jephthah does is couched in military imagery. Jephthah's arrival is foretold by the speculation of the leaders of the Israelite community. I have rendered שָׂרֵי גִלְעָד here as commanders of Gilead, as they appear to be gathering with troops in response to the Ammonite's approaching military forces. The Judges author cannot resist illustrating the futility of military activity, even as the new upcoming judge is waiting in the wings. As the commanders are gathering for war, they still consider themselves leaderless. They are so desperate for leadership that they use an indefinite pronoun for the one who will fill the role. "Whoever is the man who will begin to fight the Ammonites will be the leader over all the residents of Gilead." Not only are they indicating they are unwilling to "begin to fight the Ammonites" alone, but they are so unwilling to lead the charge that they grant the possibility of leadership over all of Gilead to anyone who is willing to do so. Not only do the judges fail militarily throughout the entire book, but others who try to lead Israel in war are equally as futile. The author seeks to humiliate all male leadership in the book of Judges, not just single characters in discrete pericopes. Thus, anyone who steps into the void left by the absence of brave members of the patriarchy is given a chance at leadership, though he too will ultimately suffer humiliation in service of the broader polemic. The author is working within the genre of dark satire here. This means that no matter who assumes a position of leadership, failure is

the only outcome. No one can overcome the pseudo-cyclical breakdown in Judges. The characters are given no chance at overcoming obstacles by the author.

The disjunctive that begins the first verse of chapter 11 shows us that the "whoever" to whom the Israelite commanders refer is most certainly Jephthah. He is introduced as a גִּבּוֹר חַיִל, a phrase which, for some, lends itself to numerous interpretations about his background. Boling reads this as "a knight," who was able not only to skillfully fight but also had the means to supply his own equipment and battalion.[197] Hattin understands the phrase to indicate Jephthah's high birth, based on the name of his father.[198] If we are examining the story with formalized conventions in mind, then the rendering of the phrase that makes the most sense is "powerful warrior." Niditch, who translates the phrase as "man of valor," aptly identifies this phrase as a "warrior idiom."[199] It requires no more background than that. Jephthah embodies the sort of strength that the biblical author is seeking to upend in the book of Judges. Nowhere is it included that he has his own brigade, nor does anything in the story indicate high birth. That the author chooses *not* to include the details that Hattin and others wish to find about Jephthah's social status illustrates the author's very dark sarcasm and satirical approach to their message in this story. Here is a great warrior, but he is the son of a whore. He is illegitimate and only granted legitimacy because of his prowess (and the fact that no one else is brave enough to lead Israel against Ammon).

The first sentence introducing Jephthah is loaded with information about him, but as we will see, that information is underdeveloped. Not only is Jephthah a great warrior, but he is also the son of a sex worker. Already other exegetes are inclined to read more into the character of Jephthah's mother than is necessary for this reading of the text. Klein speculates that his mother is an Israelite sex worker, because Jephthah himself does not introduce foreign worship practices, an idea that was "threatening at this phase of Israel's

[197] Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, First edition., The Anchor Bible; 6A (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 197.
[198] Michael Hattin, *Judges: The Perils of Possession*, First edition., Maggid Studies in Tanakh (New Milford, CT; Maggid Books, an imprint of Koren Publishers, 2020), 110.
[199] Niditch, *Judges*, 131.

history."[200] But Matthews argues that the character of the mother must be "outside the community" because that leads to the inheritance dispute.[201] Soggin suggests that since his mother is a sex worker, Jephthah himself is not even Israelite, but rather "a person living on the periphery of civilization and Israelite faith."[202] But we need not consider the ethnicity of the mother, for certainly the author did not do so. The reason his mother is described as a sex worker is so that the conflict with the brothers can unfold in the next verses.

In the same verse, his paternity is described by the phrase "Gilead fathered Jephthah." The story is set in Gilead, which confuses this information even more. As discussed above, Hattin proposes that Jephthah's father is a man named Gilead and that because of this Jephthah is high born.[203] But others suggest that the name Gilead here is meant to represent the district, which is somehow being personified as Jephthah's father.[204] Webb builds on this and suggests that the father's name is unknown, and since his mother is a prostitute, Gilead is a substitute for the patronym based on the region in which the baby was born.[205] Klein agrees, indicating that Jephthah's low birth left him without a name, so one was supplied. This aligns with Klein's exploration of the irony of Judges, for since he has no real connection to a family, he has no investment in the future of Gilead.[206] The irony is that he will be the one to deliver Gilead though he has a limited connection with it. The simplest explanation is that Gilead is a man, not a district, and that he fathered Jephthah with a sex worker. These details are part of the formalized character of Jephthah. He needs to have a questionable birth so that he may be rejected by those who will later need him.

This straightforward interpretation is reinforced by the next verse. Gilead is certainly a man, because "Gilead's wife bore him sons." It is difficult to carry the

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[200] Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, Bible and Literature Series; 14 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1988), 87.
[201] Victor Harold Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 2004), 117.z
[202] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 218.
[203] Hattin, *Judges: The Perils of Possession*, 110.
[204] Boling, *Judges*, 197.
[205] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 310.
[206] Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 227*n*7.

interpretation of Gilead as a district through to this verse. It is the אֲשֶׁת־גִּלְעָד who bears him children, and not the זוֹנָה of verse 1, so the author has set up a classic inheritance struggle between half-brothers, which plays out in the second half of verse 3. The brothers *clearly* state their problem with Jephthah, and the reason why they are expelling him from their home. "You are the son of another woman." It is as simple as that. The rejection is not overdeveloped or dragged out, and it serves to get us to the next key point in Jephthah's formalization: he is an outcast. Sasson attempts to find the legal precedent for the sons of one mother casting out that of another, but it does not render a promising result.[207] Niditch understands that the conflict with the brothers is part of a long tradition of rivalry between biblical brothers.[208] For Niditch, Jephthah must be cast out so the story can reflect "the success of the unlikely son," a common underdog narrative which appears throughout the biblical corpus. We shall see later, however, that the underdog narrative will be subverted by the author to illustrate the futility of military leadership. But most scholars attempt to supply some sort of backstory that connects the brothers in verse 2 to the elders in verse 7. Sasson reconstructs the scene, suggesting that the brothers appeal to the elders who are ultimately responsible for his ouster, which explains Jephthah's accusation of them in 11:7.[209] But we do not need to supply this connection, because the author did not seek to make it. This is one of the textual disparities in the story that exists due to the author's laser focus on delivering polemic. Jephthah has been cast out and that was the point of this verse; the disparity between verse 2 and verse 7 would not likely have troubled the author because it is not key to the story.

The result of the brothers' rejection is achieved in verse 3, as Jephthah flees to the land of Tov. I have chosen to render רֵיקִים as "a band of misfits." I do not think that the word should indicate a value judgement on the men who join him, but rather that he has drawn other misfits like himself. While the verb is simply יצא, "to go out," it is most likely this this band of misfits has formed a raiding party. Niditch reads this as the character beginning development as "a social bandit who begins his career as an outcast."[210] For

[207] Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible; Volume 6D (New Haven [Connecticut]: Yale University Press, 2014), 421.
[208] Niditch, *Judges*, 131.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Niditch, *Judges*, 130.

Niditch, Jephthah's "personal history, like that of many biblical heroes, traces a pattern from early rejection and low status to leadership."[211] He is the "unlikely son," the underdog, least likely to inherit, who becomes the chosen one.[212] Here Niditch has employed the elements of the formalization to correctly interpret Jephthah, but she takes it one step too far. Niditch sees the underdog tale here employed "to reinforce a message about the serendipitous power of the deity to select whom he will," and that Jephthah is "a symbolic counterbalance to the controlling social structures and institutions."[213] I do not agree that the outcast formalization is being used to illustrate the miraculous unpredictability of the deity, nor does Jephthah's role challenge social structures. While he is an outsider at the beginning, he is called back into the fold to become a leader. In this role he takes part in traditional structures of power, including international diplomacy with the Ammonites, and the enforcement of a particular status quo with the Ephraimites. Jephthah is no outsider because he roved with a band of raiders for a brief time. He is the embodiment of formalized leadership, ripe with military prowess and a charismatic penchant for a diplomatic tête-à-tête before traditional battle.

The narrative shifts back to the gathering Ammonites, who are beginning their attack on the Israelites. This is the third time that the Ammonites have attacked Israel since the beginning of chapter 10, with other instances occurring in 10:9 and 10:17.[214] Spronk sees the repeated attacks a possible redundancy in the text, introduced by the hand of a redactor or author "piecing together originally separate parts."[215] But Spronk acquiesces that the multiple appearance of Ammonite forces are meant to emphasize the threat.[216] Military danger is meant to be seen as an ongoing state of affairs in the book of Judges, regardless of the oppressor. It is clear that chapters 10 and 11 are edited together in a way that emphasizes the constant threat of war, in service of the polemic.

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[211] Ibid., 131.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Klaas Spronk, *Judges*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven; Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2019), 332.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.

In verse 5, the author sets the reader up to expect that Jephthah is about to have his redemption. He was cast out of the community and is now being invited back to lead it. However, his leadership, like that of all judges and military men in the book, will be flawed and unsustainable. We the readers expect the elders' petition to Jephthah to lead to the underdog coming out on top. The author will later subvert this expectation in a brutal way. The elders find Jephthah in Tov and offer him a position as קָצִין. Webb reads this as a temporary position meant to entice the outcast into joining due to the "rapid advancement" being offered.[217] Matthews agrees with the temporary nature of the post, which he argues Jephthah senses as he points out the "hypocrisy" of the elders in the next verse.[218] Later the position discussed will be that of רֹאשׁ. Spronk sees these as separate posts, with רֹאשׁ as a civil position and קָצִין as a military leader.[219] It is difficult to conceive of the difference in status that may accompany these titles, as we only see Jephthah acting in one way, as a military leader in Gilead. His actions could be that of either a רֹאשׁ or a קָצִין. The author provides no context for differentiating the roles. It is possible that the difference of terms serves only to introduce Jephthah's charismatic skill, and that the author did not intend for a detailed delineation of each role to be considered by the audience. If there is a difference in the terms, the author may have expected his audience to know it and thus did not explain it further. If that is the case, the specifics of each role are lost to the modern audience, buried within the Persian period audience's own sphere of meaning.

Verse 7 belies the flawed editing in the narrative, and the author's focus on the polemic to the detriment of the finer details of his plot. Jephthah responds to the elders; however, he appears to accuse them of his expulsion which is attributed to his brothers in verse 2. He uses the same rhetorical particle that Deborah uses (4:6), but this time we have indeed witnessed the event to which he refers. Jephthah's recounting does not agree with what we have seen in verse 2, a disparity which causes tension in the narrative. It is possible that the author is attempting to show Jephthah as a charismatic military leader, introducing his penchant for diplomatic tongue twisting. At the risk of losing the thread between the event of the casting out and Jephthah's recollection of it, the author uses this space to weave

[217] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 311.
[218] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 118.
[219] Spronk, *Judges*, 334.

in the charismatic ability that will be part of the formalized leadership that is challenged in the book of Judges. But it is also possible that the author and editor did not feel that the disparity was problematic to the text. The point of the story up until now is that he is militarily powerful and was once cast out of a community that now seeks his aid. Soggin describes the incongruence in verse 2 and 7 as "clearly difficult to reconcile," though he suggests 7 is more reliable than 2 because the incident in verse 2 is a secondary recounting and in verse 7 the protagonist himself is recounting it.[220] Webb somewhat agrees, describing 2 as the narrator's "dispassionate account" whereas Jephthah's direct address in verse 7 is "an accusation in the form of a question, delivered with obvious passion and an eye to its effects on the elders."[221] These interpretations require a level of background information that is not in the text, and is not necessary to the account. Both author and editor seem not to care much about the two different culprits of the expulsion, because no effort has been made to remedy the text. There is no attempt to add the elders into the scene in verse 2, nor is there any desire to illustrate the possible legal hierarchy that would make both the brothers and the elders responsible. The point of the story is that Jephthah was rejected and is now needed. Remembering that rejection, he uses it to leverage his position with the elders to gain some sort of different role than that which they are offering. The goal of the exchange is to highlight Jephthah's ability for negotiation, a key part of his formalization and an aspect of the sort of military leadership the author is showing as futile throughout the whole book.

The elders initially offer Jephthah the position of קָצִין. After Jephthah's response, however, they acknowledge their own role in his ouster and then offer him a role as רֹאשׁ not only over them but over all of Gilead. While we do not know the details of these different roles, we can be sure that they have offered him a broader scope of leadership. In verse 6, the offer was to be "our קָצִין," but now the offer is to be a רֹאשׁ over the elders *and all of Gilead*. His leadership role is now more widely applied, and more likely to be publicly acknowledged.

[220] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 206–8.
[221] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 311*n*33.

Jephthah concretizes his more public role with a conditional. He offers to lead them only if his success against Ammon is the result of Yahweh's intervention. Only then he will be a רֹאשׁ to them. Jephthah has invoked the deity who has otherwise been inactive in this pericope, and he has articulated the role he seeks as that of רֹאשׁ. If we consider the formalization being used here, we can certainly agree with other exegetes that Jephthah is engaging in some charismatic wheeling and dealing to get his role. But why רֹאשׁ, and not קָצִין? Perhaps this is less important, and the key to this sentence is not the position Jephthah appears to seek but rather that he has invoked the deity and paired any possible success on his part with what he presents as Yahweh's sanction of his leadership. We should note, however, that the deity remains inactive. The action is merely suggested by Jephthah. We do not see God responding to the situation at this point in any way. Webb suggests that Jephthah's invocation of Yahweh is a divine endorsement, a trump card in the negotiations.[222] Sasson somewhat agrees, again revisiting the idea that the invocation of Yahweh along with the extended negotiations and title change show that Jephthah wants permanent leadership.[223] Matthews takes Jephthah's mention of Yahweh as a sign that he is a skillful negotiator, using "Near Eastern treaty language" that ensures that "any victory he gains will then be seen as divine affirmation of his position of leadership.[224]

In verse 10, the elders acquiesce to Jephthah's terms, following his lead and invoking Yahweh as "witness between us." Thus, they make a pact with Jephthah, so dire are the circumstances, and for the first time in Jephthah's narrative Yahweh makes an appearance, simply as a bargaining chip. God appears in name only, but we cannot even ensure the deity is present to bear witness to the agreement. At this point the deity's passivity is his only characteristic in the story. The difference in the positions that the parties are negotiating for offers some difficulty in the interpretation. However, what we can see clearly is that Jephthah is being depicted as a powerful man. He is capable of leading a band of soldiers, as we have seen in verse 3, and he is capable of negotiating to get what he wants. So far, our expectations remain in place. The social outcast rises to power; we expect that everything that follows will be a success for the silver-tongued

[222] Webb, 312.
[223] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 423.
[224] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 119.

soldier of fortune. Formalization in the service of the polemic is fully utilized by the author here. As usual, any further detail that might render a more robust biographical background for the character is missing, but the author has cemented the qualities of the formalization that will end up illustrating the polemic. Again, at the risk of losing the appearance of consistency in the details of Jephthah's life and his eventual role in the community of Gilead, the author has focused on the elements of the formalization which are key to the polemic.

In verse 11, Jephthah's new role is concretized, and he returns to Gilead after his ouster. The people make him both רֹאשׁ and קָצִין. Regardless of any other meaning, the leadership granted by the role of רֹאשׁ or קָצִין will be a military type, as it will be forged in the battle with the Ammonites. All that matters is that Jephthah has been invested with the role of leader in the community and that that leadership is intrinsically connected to his military success. Yahweh again appears passively in this verse, as Jephthah goes to Mizpah to reiterate "all of his words" before the deity. Webb sees the negotiations and ceremony at Mizpah as elements of Jephthah as a "man made judge" rather than a divinely invested one.[225] Yahweh has still not actively engaged with Jephthah, however, despite his repetition of the agreement in front of the deity. The author here may be supplying a tiny subversion to our expectations. Jephthah has invoked Yahweh, and the leaders of Gilead have agreed to appoint him over the community. The one invoked in the agreement, however, has neither sanctioned nor discouraged the appointment. For all his charismatic appeal, Jephthah appears to have had no impact on God. His negotiation with the elders, his invocation of the deity, and his recital of the agreement before the deity are all quite performative. If they were not, we might expect to see a response.

In verse 12, Jephthah sends an envoy to the king of the Ammonites. I have chosen to render מַלְאָכִים as an envoy, since Jephthah is positioning himself as the military leader of the Israelite troops. This is a formal exchange between two enemies on the brink of battle, and Jephthah is engaging in the rules of diplomacy. His message to the Ammonite king can be rendered in a number of ways. The same confrontational phrase "What do you have against me" appears in 1 Kings 17:18, 2 Kings 3:13, 2 Chronicles 35:21, and a similar form

[225] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 313.

of it in 2 Samuel 16:10, 19:23. Jephthah also includes that the Ammonites have come to attack "my land." He has stepped into the role of leader now. It is his land.

The response of the Ammonite king is a mechanism for the polemic as well as foreshadowing of Jephthah's fate. The foreign king tells Jephthah that Israel, after its exodus from Egypt, took (and continues to occupy) a piece of Ammonite land. He then requests that Jephthah return that land בְּשָׁלֹום. I have chosen to render "in their entirety." Sasson reads the word as "peaceably" as though the Ammonites might wish to avoid war, but also acknowledges that the word can read "completeness."[226] Sasson takes his interpretation of the messages too far, however, by suggesting that the Ammonite king not only wants Israel to leave the area, but that if they did not they should submit to him, which includes "the payment of tribute and possibly the acceptance of forced labor."[227] Nowhere does the king of the Ammonites stipulate any other term that "return all of my land to me." It is not necessary to create any background to the stipulation, as it serves its purpose. It sets up the reason for the conflict. But, more so, it mirrors something Jephthah will say during his vow later in the narrative. Jephthah says that he will give up a burnt offering "when I return unscathed." The phrase Jephthah uses to describe returning home unscathed is the same phrase the Ammonite king uses here to describe that he wants the entirety of his land returned to him. Both are asking for wholeness, totality. And neither will get the wholeness that he requests. The Ammonites eventually lose this battle and, though Jephthah returns home temporarily unscathed, he will ultimately never be whole again after the loss of his only child. Military men in power who ask for something are not to be successful in obtaining it. This is Judges' antiwar polemic.

The following monologue from Jephthah essentially serves a single purpose: to illustrate Jephthah's rhetorical flare. Fact checking Jephthah's account against the narratives in Numbers and Deuteronomy completely misses the purpose of the narration. Jephthah sets up a finely honed argument. But, as we have seen, in the book of Judges, any demonstration of military ability is bound to fail. The façade of diplomacy here is just that, a façade. It is a superficial demonstration of charismatic leadership that will serve no real

[226] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 425.
[227] Ibid.

purpose in actual diplomacy. In fact, after all is said and done, the king of the Ammonites does not even respond to Jephthah's loquacious message. Webb notes that at this moment Jephthah now speaks for Israel as a whole, rather than just the forces of Gilead. For Webb, this shows Jephthah's "ambition and confidence" and his ability to command diplomatic language. He is showing he is "more than equal to his royal adversary."[228] This might be true in any other book that is not employing an antiwar polemic. However, our expectations here need to be subverted. Jephthah is not going to be successful in his speech. No matter what he says, or how confident he may seem, he is set up to fail. His confidence is *meant to be read as folly*. We are already supposed to know that the outcome of this elaborate speech will not be what we should expect.

Verse 15 poses a problem if one is reading the story Jephthah tells beyond its narratival function. As Jephthah's envoy begins the message, he states that Israel did not take the land of *Moab*, or the land of the Ammonites. Why would Jephthah mention Moab in his speech when he is addressing the king of the Ammonites? This begins a problem that is present throughout the entire speech. Jephthah mentions Ammon and Moab as equal parts of the narrative. Webb sees Jephthah's inclusion of Moab in his monologue as part of the sweeping claim that Israel did not wrongly take *anyone's* land, neither Moab nor Ammon. He is stressing that "Israel did not wrongfully seize anyone's land, something that is borne out by the record of its dealings with all nations in the region, not just Ammon."[229] More importantly, Webb takes from this scene Jephthah's importance and skill as an ambassadorial leader for Israel. For Webb, Jephthah is illustrating his authority to the king of Ammon, using language "which heads of state used in addressing each other…especially when a superior power was addressing an inferior one."[230] Webb compares this exchange in Judges to that between Sennacherib's messengers and Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18:28-29. There is a striking difference, however, once we consider the outcome of Sennacherib's message to Hezekiah and the outcome of Jephthah's message to the king of Ammon. While we would expect our loquacious charismatic leader to affect change with his speech, he does not. The problem of Jephthah's inclusion of Moab in his oration is concretized further

[228] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 318.
[229] Ibid., 319.
[230] Ibid., 318.

with his mention of the deity Chemosh. Possible interpretations of his inclusion of Moab in his speech will be discussed at that point.

In Jephthah's recounting of Israel's wilderness journey, I have chosen to render מַלְאָכִים as messengers, rather than envoy, as I have rendered it in verse 12. While Jephthah is employing tactics used by diplomats to address the king of Ammon, in his actual diplomatic argument, I suggest that he is depicting Israel as innocent passers-through. Were they sending envoys, they may have been perceived as a threatening military force attempting to take the lands he mentions, rather than an innocent band of refugees passing through. "Israel sent messengers," says Jephthah, to the king of Edom, and to the king of Moab, and to Sihon, king of the Amorite.

Jephthah allows that Israel took the land of the Amorites, describing how Yahweh delivered Sihon, the Amorite king, and all his forces into Israel's hand (vv. 19-23). Now he *does* depict Israel as militarily successful, because it suits the purpose of his diplomatic act. He claims that Yahweh has given the land to Israel, just as Chemosh is supposed to have given the Ammonite king all that belongs to him. Essentially, Jephthah asks that if the Ammonites believe they possess what is given to them by their deity, so too the Israelites view their ownership of the formerly Amorite land. Klein argues that this entire speech subverts our expectations about Jephthah. At first, he is supposed to appear as a real Yahwist. However, by mentioning Chemosh, he "identifies Yahwism with the practices of the local cults rather than with the ideas of the Yahwist faith; he does not understand belief in one god, the basic tenet of Yahweh's commandments: Hear O Israel, Yahweh Our God, Yahweh is One (Deut. 6:4)."[231] While Klein is right to identify that the readers' expectations are being subverted, I do not agree that the expectation is that of Jephthah as a traditional Yahwist. Certainly, Jephthah invokes Yahweh a few times before this exchange, but we should not be surprised that the same character may also recognize Chemosh in a moment that serves him in his negotiations. Boling sees Jephthah's incorporation of Chemosh into the argument as a reflection of how serious the crisis is. For Boling, Jephthah's appeal to Chemosh "was important enough to risk Yahweh's wrath for talking about another god."[232]

[231] Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 89.
[232] Boling, *Judges*, 205.

Boling sees this appeal as a practical part of Jephthah's Yahwism, arguing that Jephthah is "the sort of man God used repeatedly throughout the stormy period prior to kingship, a man who would have been very dear to the heart of the pragmatic compiler."[233] Webb points out, as do others, that Chemosh is actually the god of Moab, not Ammon, and that somehow either the author or Jephthah is mistaken. But, Webb clarifies, that the entire argument is at odds with the history given in Deuteronomy, because "it was Yahweh who gave both Israel and Ammon their respective territories (Deut. 2:19, 36). No other god played any part in it at all."[234]

As we saw with Jael's choice to wield a tent peg in the previous chapter, it is not beneficial to this particular reading of the text to seek answers for Judges behavior in Deuteronomistic law. Webb has accurately pointed out that the deity to which Jephthah appeals is incorrect, however whether his appeal follows Deuteronomistic law is not important. Soggin addresses the issue from a textual standpoint, arguing that an earlier version of this speech about the relationship between Israel and Moab has now been adapted to a story about Israel and Ammon.[235] It is very likely that the confusion of the deity may not be important. Perhaps the author conflated deities in foreign lands for no particular reason at all except the service of Jephthah's argument. Webb finds an answer to the Chemosh issue in the Balak reference in verse 25. Webb traces the contours of Jephthah's geographical argument and suggests that his

> focus on the Arnon as the border implies that by the time he came to power the Ammonites had already occupied the former Moabite territory south of it, and were intent on occupying the Israelite territory to the north of it as well….That is why Jephthah can speak to the king of Ammon as the successor to the kings of Moab. It is probably why he referred to Chemosh as 'your god' back in verse 24: not because he believed that Chemosh was Ammon's only or supreme god, but that the Ammonites now occupied the 'land of Chemosh,' so to speak, and therefore Chemosh was the technically correct god to refer to in the present negotiations.[236]

Boling agrees, going further back in Jephthah's speech to verse 15, where he believes Jephthah "is referencing not two separate lands but one that formerly belonged to

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[233] Ibid.
[234] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 322.
[235] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 211–13.
[236] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 322–23.

Moab and now belongs to Ammon."[237] These arguments require too much for Jephthah, for the reader, and for the author to keep straight. Jephthah is pulling out names and facts in an effort to provide a diplomatic statement that cannot be refuted. We will see, despite his fancy footwork, that the Ammonite king does not even deem it worthy of refutation. They go to war; the entire recitation has been futile.

It is more likely that the inclusion of Moab and its god in a speech to the Ammonite king is an editing issue that arises from the focus on the polemic over specific details of Jephthah's life. If we consider that the author compiled a broader story or series of stories about Jephthah into one single story, than we can accept that one tradition of the text had Jephthah communicating with the king of Moab in one and Ammon in another. The author compiled a broader story and a later editor integrated elements of the wilderness narrative. But the finer details of the wilderness narrative were irrelevant to the Jephthah story, and thus no one sought to harmonize them. Whether Jephthah's speech is directed to Ammon or Moab and references Milcom or Chemosh is not the point of the speech at all. The point is the solidification of Jephthah as a charismatic leader. Words are his weapon as much as the sword, and they will also be his downfall. The author sets that up as the pivotal point of the story, and to whom the words are directed was not as serious a consideration as the delivery of the polemic.

Jephthah is a charismatic military leader, and he is being set up to fail. Inaccuracies about Israel's journey or Jephthah's' recognition of a foreign god are not germane to the plot and are thus left ambiguous by the author. We are being set up to watch another type of leadership crash and burn, as is the case for all men who lead in the book of Judges. But even within Jephthah's monologue exegetes search for biographical information about his character. Schneider sees Jephthah's entreaty to the Ammonite king as demonstrative of his knowledge of the history of his people. Like Klein, in a way, Schneider sees his vast knowledge of their journey as "ironic" because he is an outsider, "exiled from his home" but "well versed in the history and tradition of Israel." For Schneider, "this makes Jephthah the only leader in Judges who exhibited any knowledge of Israelite history or their

[237] Boling, *Judges*, 202.

conflicts."[238] In this moment, Schneider sees Jephthah as worthy of the office of judge since he shows a knowledge of Yahweh, Israelite history, and "was prepared to negotiate before fighting," one who "pled his people's innocence while glorifying his deity." [239] Again, if we consider that Jephthah is equally as formalized as his daughter will be, and that he is being used solely to deliver the polemic, the extraneous development of his background motivations, his education in Yahwism, or his polytheism, do not matter at all. At the surface, Jephthah's monologue to the Ammonite king appears to hit all the genre markers of diplomatic communication. Commentators are mistaken in their attempts to relate to Jephthah as a real person or to understand what his theology or knowledge of Israelite history might have been. He is a fictional character in a highly charged polemical story. These details are not only extraneous to Jephthah's motivations, but they are also extraneous to the author's motivations. We should focus on why the author would write Jephthah this way rather than whether or not Jephthah is a good Israelite or a competent historian. The author is a fiction writer shaping his ideology; he is not a reporter detailing a specific event.

Like a true orator, Jephthah reserves his heavy swings until the very end. In verse 26, Jephthah asks why the Ammonites have waited until now to reissue a claim for their land when the Israelites have been there for 300 years. In verse 27, he attempts to flip the claim of the Ammonite king from verse 13, arguing that it is not Israel who is wrong, but rather Ammon who is in error. Jephthah ends his speech with a divine appeal, asking that Yahweh, the final judge, make a ruling about who is right and who is wrong in this situation. As we mentioned above, his words are performative and serve only his own goals. Just as the Ammonite king does not issue a response, neither does God.

Some interpreters consider Jephthah's entire diplomatic appeal as an odd, mostly unnecessary action. Most suggest that Jephthah does not believe the envoys will deter the Ammonites from war. Webb argues that Jephthah is sending an envoy not because a war can be avoided as the war encampments have already been made, but rather to show that he has the moral high ground.[240] With this, Webb reads the moment as an opportunity for

[238] Schneider, *Judges*, 172.
[239] Ibid., 173.
[240] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 317.

Jephthah to put himself on the level of the Ammonite king, all while not using the title for the king.[241] Reis agrees that Jephthah does not expect a peaceful result with the Ammonites, but is instead taking the opportunity of recounting Israel's journey through the wilderness as a "morale builder and recruiting speech for his own people."[242] Instead of addressing the people directly, which Reis argues would be considered an insulting lecture coming from "an outcast and an exile," she suggests Jephthah is motivating his own troops.[243] I suggest, however, that the entire speech, as well as Jephthah's dealings with the elders of Gilead, are meant to show that a silver tongued leader who is strong with a sword is no more effective than the more taciturn but still powerful Barak. These qualities of leadership are meaningless when acts of war are futile, and it is best that we do not get distracted by the fancy diplomatic footwork. The point of Jephthah's extremely long, extremely detailed oration is that it will end up being fruitless. That is clearly illustrated in verse 28, as the Ammonite king does not deign to respond to Jephthah's speech.

While the disjunctive vav in verse 29 might appear as a dramatic shift in action, it is an even further illustration of the futility of Jephthah's charisma. The spirit of Yahweh comes upon Jephthah, and *that* will be what wins him the battle, not his diplomacy or detailed recounting of Israel's history. Finally, God has indeed sanctioned Jephthah's entry into battle, as all war must be decided upon by God. But that the scene immediately follows Jephthah's incredibly long monologue is meant to illustrate the futility of Jephthah's efforts. Alter points out that it is only when Jephthah is actively leading his troops into battle that we have the "investiture" scene typical of "most of the other judges."[244] Sasson translates it as Jephthah becomes "endowed with zeal for the Lord."[245] He suggests that the endowment here is "more detached than others in Judges. This is not a God who had planned to deliver support in this way, but one maneuvered into doing so."[246] I do not find sufficient evidence for this reading, however. The point of Jephthah's speech is that it is unnecessary, especially in light of the endowment with the spirit of Yahweh. God decides

[241] Ibid.
[242] Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter," *Prooftexts* 17, no. 3 (1997): 280.
[243] Ibid., 281.
[244] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 169.
[245] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 435.
[246] Ibid., 436

when there is war. The war with the Ammonites is divinely decided, and Jephthah, just like Othniel and Gideon before him, becomes endowed with the ability to bring about military success. The speech, Jephthah's personality, and everything else, do not matter. Most readings render this as Jephthah's divine election to the role of judge. Boling suggests the endowment with the spirit of Yahweh "leaves no room to doubt that Jephthah's victory against the Ammonites was considered to be Yahweh's saving act on behalf of Israel."[247] For Matthews, the preposition עַל is the determining factor, as it is "exactly the same as that in 3:10 and signals a divine sanction or legitimating of his role as leader of his people."[248] Matthews goes further, arguing that this finally provides him with "true legitimacy for his role as Gileadite leader and as charismatic marshal of a larger body of Israelite tribes."[249] I suggest that the spirit coming upon Jephthah is simply the deity sanctioning the war, part of the larger point in the book of Judges. The antiwar polemic is being used to illustrate that human agents cannot decide when to go to war, they cannot sanction it. Only God can. It puts to shame Jephthah's diplomacy, because it renders it unnecessary. This is the only time in Jephthah's story that the deity is not passive.

Jephthah's decision to make a vow after the spirit has already come upon him is not as confusing as many exegetes make it out to be. It is all set up to illustrate the total futility of Jephthah's charisma. Whether Jephthah knew he was invested with the spirit before he made the vow, or if he made the vow because of it, is intentionally left ambiguous by the author. Still, many scholars explore Jephthah's interior motivations for making the vow. Ackerman reads the vow as totally unnecessary. Since the spirit is already upon him, the vow "is at best superfluous and, in fact, it implies a lack of faith in Yahweh's promise."[250] Webb also sees it as unnecessary, as God was going to give him victory anyway. But for Webb, beyond the vow being unnecessary, it is also a bribe, and thus "a denial of his bold, public expression of confidence in Yahweh."[251] It is even worse, writes Webb, because it will utilize the pagan rite of child sacrifice and will thus "commit an abomination" and

[247] Boling, *Judges*, 207.
[248] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 123.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 110.
[251] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 336.

"incur God's judgement rather than secure his help."[252] Bal sees the vow making as personal failure on the part of Jephthah, suggesting that in Jephthah's case, "the spirit assigns might, not understanding."[253] For Bal, Jephthah lacks knowledge and insight, so he is unable to trust Yahweh and makes an unnecessary vow.

Webb tries to deliver Jephthah from wrongdoing in the vow making, however. Though he believes the vow is unnecessary, he argues that Yahweh has been absent in the story, "aloof and uncommitted."[254] Boling sees Jephthah's vow as hastily worded, deeply contrasted against his previous speech to the elders and the Ammonites.[255] For Boling, it was "one vow too many," added by the author based on Jephthah's "penchant for making deals. This one presents Jephthah's' tragic flaw as a failure to trust in the time-tested institution of the federation."[256] His reliance on words is often referenced when exegetes interpret the vow making following so quickly on the heels of the spirit coming upon him. The vow making is "psychologically consistent" with the argument to the Ammonite king, as "both scenes hinge on Jephthah's 'words' recited to Yahweh and before the people (vs.11)."[257] Bal sees Jephthah's charisma as an operating factor as well, describing the vow as "a combination of trade and promise."[258] For Sasson, it is the outcome of the vow, the "choice of victim" which "reinforces the gambling personality created for Jephthah."[259]

Interpreters also try to cast Jephthah as either calculating or rash based on his vow-making. Soggin describes Jephthah as a "responsible man, calculating and particularly skilled at negotiations."[260] Reis goes as far as to suggest that Jephthah does not actually mean to sacrifice his child, but instead is navigating the Leviticus 27:1-8 notion of redemption.[261] Schneider disagrees, however, arguing that there is no evidence of priesthood in Judges, and that "there are no indications in the book that any of the cultic

[252] Ibid.
[253] Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 44.
[254] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 65.
[255] Boling, *Judges*, 207.
[256] Ibid., 207-8.
[257] Ibid., 210.
[258] Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 43.
[259] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 444.
[260] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 216.
[261] Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter."

laws of Israel were remembered, in place, imposed, or practiced in any way."[262] Webb uses the vow as an opportunity to analyze Jephthah's psyche. The appeal to God in verse 27 was public and meant more as a message to the Ammonites. Webb sees the vow as evidence that Jephthah is "still haunted by his past. Publicly he has argued that Israel is the innocent party and expressed confidence that God's favor judgment will be in their favor; privately he remembers that he himself has been the innocent party in a dispute and found his rights disregarded by those who should have protected him."[263]

Webb sees the vow as an expression of "deep angst" that Yahweh too might reject him.[264] Instead of being a rash move, Webb sees the vow as a security against God's failure to uphold the bargain. But Webb also reads it as folly.[265] Reis absolves Jephthah and reads the vow as "astutely" expressed, "well-calculated" so that he can achieve his end goal of success against the Ammonites and avoid "the accident of targeting the wrong entity."[266] Reis uses the absolution of Jephthah here in her argument which lays the blame instead on the victim of Jephthah's vow. We will explore Reis' interpretation later in this chapter.

The position of the vow right after the endowment with the spirit confuses the real source of the victory in the end, Exum argues, for now it is "impossible to determine whether victory comes as a result of the spirit, or the vow, or both."[267] If we are to read Jephthah as a charismatic military leader who is destined to fail, then the function of the vow is meant to illustrate that. Here the spirit of Yahweh has come upon him, he is set to win the war. Yet he cannot sheath the silver tongue, and he continues his charismatic behavior even when it is unnecessary. In verse 30 Jephthah vows a vow to Yahweh, and it is the changing point in the entire story. While Jephthah has referenced Yahweh before, this is a close-up communication with Yahweh, and it is an unnecessary one. I have chosen to translate נָתֹון תִּתֵּן as "wholly deliver." Just as the Ammonite king is asking for the total return of his land, Jephthah asks for a total delivery of the enemy into his hand. Both

[262] Schneider, *Judges*, 174.
[263] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 328.
[264] Ibid.
[265] Ibid., 335.
[266] Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter," 279.
[267] J. Cheryl Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical & Historical Texts*, ed. Alice Bach (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 4.

military leaders are seeking a totality of success throughout this chapter, and neither will receive it. Their efforts, no matter what tactics they employ, are futile. Boling translates the verb chain as "if you will really subject," rendering this as part of Jephthah's "penchant for making deals."[268] Webb reads in the vow a reflection of Gideon's quest for divine reassurance that God will grant him a victory.[269] The "emphatic infinitive" is the marker of Jephthah's angst, according to Webb.[270]

Jephthah's choice of bargaining chip in verse 31 is ambiguous. Up until now Jephthah has been shown to have the gift of gab, here he loses his gift for recounting specifics and says, "whoever emerges from the door of my home." The participle is indefinite and so we have no idea who Jephthah intends when he makes this deal. This ambiguity is one of the most discussed elements of the Jephthah story. Boling attempts to resolve it by translating הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדַּלְתֵי בֵיתִי as "anything coming out of the doors of my house" based on the fact that there used to be livestock pens in the homes.[271] I do not agree with Boling's reasoning. It appears as though he is applying a real-world archaeological interpretation to the story based on the traditional understanding of the "four room house" wherein an animal pen is housed on the first floor of the structure. Surely, we cannot assume that it is possible that a member of one of Jephthah's herds will wander out of his house. The author has not even mentioned that Jephthah keeps flocks. Of course, he also does not mention his daughter until she is a necessary plot point. But to suggest that Jephthah is ambiguous in his vow because there is livestock in his home misses the point. Why not identify the type of animal that one would traditionally give as a sacrifice? The ambiguity is the point. It is part of his formalization as a failure in leadership. Until this point, he has had details for everything. And now he cannot even identify the species of thing that might be leaving his house? Alter obliquely agrees with the idea that Jephthah is not expecting a human sacrifice at the outset of his vow.[272] Contrasting to Boling and Alter, Matthews suggests that Jephthah's intent is to make a human sacrifice all along.[273]

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[268] Boling, *Judges*, 207–8.
[269] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 328.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Boling, *Judges*, 208.
[272] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 169.
[273] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 125.

Matthews argues that Jephthah would have known that his household would emerge in celebration upon his return, and that he was making a serious vow that he felt he needed to secure victory.[274] For Matthews, Jephthah is a victim to his own charisma, and feels he must make a deal in this situation just as he did with the elders of Gilead.[275]

Like the king of the Ammonites before, Jephthah is asking to return unscathed, just as his adversary is asking for the complete return of Ammonite land. Again and again both military leaders seek a totality that will not be given to them. Jephthah wishes to return from battle unscathed having routed completely the Ammonite forces. Physically, that will be the case, but he will never be whole again after this battle is ended. In order to return unscathed and triumphant, Jephthah offers up "whoever" comes to meet him when he returns victorious and unharmed.

The battle itself is not key to the polemic, so it is begun and concluded in the single line of verse 33. The spirit of God has already decided the victory in an earlier verse, so the author takes little time to deliver details of the battle. In what is presented as a single, sweeping action, Jephthah handily defeats the entire Ammonite force "with a powerful attack." We must not forget that this is a story of military prowess subverted. Regardless of his skill on the battlefield, his success as a leader cannot occur, so we already know that he has committed the flaw that will render him an utter failure. The second half of the verse illustrates the totality of the victory, as he lays low the Ammonites "all the way from Aroer to Minnith, twenty cities (in total), all the way to Abel-Keramim." In case we had any doubt, the final part of the verse indicates his complete success: the Ammonites were subdued before the Israelites. The Ammonite king sought a total return of his land, and in that pursuit lost everything. נכה can mean "smite" and is often translated that way, but I wanted to encapsulate the *completeness* of Jephthah's victory here. The list of sites is meant to give us a sort of metonymy. While we cannot trust the geographical points in the book of Judges to have any meaning, we can understand that the inclusion of וְעַד־בּוֹאֲךָ מִנִּית עֶשְׂרִים עִיר וְעַד אָבֵל כְּרָמִים is meant to show the completion with which Jephthah achieves his victory. "He defeated them with a powerful attack" renders נכה along with מַכָּה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד as one

[274] Ibid., 126.
[275] Ibid., 124.

movement, and the object of that movement is the mini metonymy in between. The theme of military might is thoroughly presented here. There is no question at any point in this verse that Jephthah is not going to be successful in his attack. Just like Barak, Jephthah is superficially militarily successful, however he is humiliated by a woman and in the end his military success will be rendered useless by the ongoing degenerating structure.

Verse 34 provides a scene shift for the reader. The flurry of battle is concluded in the single previous verse, and now Jephthah returns home unscathed, just as he had indicated in his vow. His return to Mizpah, however, is diminished by the vav and particle, וְהִנֵּה, and another rapid scene shift is introduced. Out comes his daughter, dancing and playing an instrument. Her entrance serves only a single purpose. It is not the heart-rending scene so many scholars read, it is a scene where Jephthah is immediately shamed by the choices he has made in his role as military leader. From the very first minute she appears, she exists solely to shame Jephthah.

In an attempt to fill the gaps in the daughter's profile, commentators imagine an entire life story for the girl. They imagine an entourage, coming out of the house with her, though she is described as the only person exiting the door. Sasson supplies a cohort of celebrants for the girl based on his reading of Exodus 15. Since Miriam celebrates the successful defeat of the Egyptian military "with the other women contributing to the beat or engaging in dancing," so must Jephthah's daughter exit her home with a similar cadre of women.[276] But we must remember that the female characters of Judges are meant to be flat – they remain undeveloped. So even adding a crowd of people to a character that is moving through the narrative alone is an unnecessary reading of the text. Whatever tradition of celebration, be it one led by Miriam or mocked by Michal, was not important to the author. Sasson goes on to argue that the daughter would have been a "woman of status" and thus would be expected to have "many women companions," as illustrated later by the young women that join her in the mountains.[277] Sasson imagines a whole cast of characters, a cast which he uses to absolve Jephthah of being so nebulous in his vows. Matthews agrees with Sasson that the daughter of Jephthah was not alone, citing the same

[276] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 439.
[277] Ibid., 439

examples.[278] Boling reads the daughter with a crowd as well, suggesting the author uses the dancing scene as "a calculated inversion of the traditional role of singing women on the evening after victory."[279] But no companions are necessary for the purpose of the story, and for this reading, they need not be involved. That the daughter exits the house is the point.

That her role is solely to shame Jephthah is clear in the next phrase in verse 34. The author drives the nail in the coffin, describing her as "his only child." In case we were unclear, again the writer emphasizes, "he had no other son or daughter." This phrase provides for us almost the only other biographical information we shall have about the girl. Her name is not important, it is only her function that matters. She exited the house after Jephthah made his fatal vow, and she is his only daughter. Fuchs identifies the daughter's sole significance in the story, "her relationship with her father."[280] For Fuchs, these final details in verse 34 do not really describe her as much as they "clarify what the daughter represented to the father" and "what her loss will mean to him."[281] As Fuchs aptly identifies, the daughter is only a character in as much as she is in service to the plot of the father.

I have chosen to render the beginning of the next phrase, וַיְהִי֩ כִּרְאוֹתָ֨ו אֹותָ֜הּ, as "The moment he saw her. The action here is supposed to be very rapid – there should be no doubt that the minute she exits the home Jephthah is aware of his mistake and the very real price he will pay for it. Jephthah then follows the traditional activity of mourning, rending his clothing as a sign of grief. But did he not expect his daughter to be the one coming out of the house? Why this immediate response? The grief is compounded by his next action, which is to cry out in anguish. אֲהָהּ is often translated as "alas," and I have rendered that here. He immediately mourns not his daughter, but his own words. Sasson suggests that we should read this as "an onomatopoeic *cri d'angoisse*, carrying with it none of the

[278] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 126.
[279] Boling, *Judges*, 208.
[280] Esther Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 119.
[281] Ibid.

resignation associated with our 'alas.'"[282] Boling agrees, indicating that it is "a guttural ejaculation, better transliterated than translated."[283] However, Sasson goes on to argue that, because the word is often (8 out of 12 times) followed by "Lord God," that Jephthah is not addressing his anguished cry to his daughter, but "the god who has done him wrong."[284] But the text tells us exactly who he is addressing with his cry, and we cannot ignore the importance of Jephthah saying בִּתִּי rather than any divine name after his lament. Her sole purpose in the story is to shame him and so his address is to her. Though he has obliquely addressed Yahweh earlier in the story, or even somewhat directly in his rash vow to the deity, he does not incorporate Yahweh here at all into his reasoning. This is a clear choice by the Judges author. Jephthah is good with his words; he is charismatic. We have no reason to doubt his specificity in any of his statements, from his monologue to the Ammonite king to his vow made to Yahweh before the battle, to his direct address to his daughter at this moment. We should also note that Jephthah's choice to rend his clothing and cry out a traditional word of mourning are highly formalized actions. While we may be inclined to humanize Jephthah and deepen his character by allowing him to utter a *cri d'angoisse*, we should refrain from doing so. He grieves his poor choice of words and the flaw in his own charismatic ability, and so he acts out the rote steps of mourning. His grief is expressed at his own failure and subsequent humiliation.

This is made all the clearer by the accusatory statements he levels at her upon her appearance. "You have destroyed me," is a better rendering, especially following his lamenting word previously, than "you have brought me low." Though Jephthah has returned unscathed, he is destroyed because he no longer has any heirs. In his own shame, he transfers the cause of his shame from himself to his daughter. It is a moment of self-pity, highlighting a particular self-absorption in Jephthah that hitherto may have been unnoticed.[285] Jephthah shows absolutely no empathy for the fact that his daughter must now die. She is the one who is truly destroyed by his vow. But he has always been bargaining for himself. All his negotiating and his charisma have been entirely self-serving,

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[282] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 439–40.
[283] Boling, *Judges*, 208.
[284] Sasson., 440.
[285] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 440; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 332.

and now we see the impact of what a self-serving man does when he makes a mistake. He blames the victim. This is clearly a message that the author is sending about the quality of wartime leadership and the reliability of charismatic military leaders. Jephthah's charisma is part of the antiwar polemic, and the fact that the daughter forces him to stay true to his word is the vehicle for that polemic.

Jephthah's lack of empathy for his daughter and the situation into which he has gotten them both is simple and to the point: "I have opened my mouth to Yahweh, and I cannot undo it." Jephthah has been "opening his mouth" throughout this whole story. Here, it has real consequences. Suddenly, the consequences from his previous openings, becoming רֹאשׁ or קָצִין, seem superfluous. He has opened his mouth and now forgone his shot at perpetuity. Alter identifies that the verb "opened" resonates with Jephthah's name, meaning to open.[286] Other attestations of opening that use this word are "not flattering," says Sasson, referencing the earth opening to blood in Genesis 4:10, rebels in Numbers 16:30.[287] For Sasson, "the intimation here is that Jephthah is admitting to a gross blunder."[288] But in his address to his daughter he does not even mention that he has made a vow, though she somehow seems to know that it is a very binding one, given her response. For Sasson, Jephthah's admittance that he cannot undo the opening is the only reference he makes to the earlier vow.[289] Webb reads Jephthah's statement to his daughter as a partial admission of responsibility but qualified with a denial because he says he cannot take back the vow he has made.[290]

Just like her first appearance on the scene, her words to her father also serve the single purpose of humiliation. She mirrors what he says about opening his mouth, a theme of Jephthah's leadership, but goes on to address him with an imperative, "so now do to me what came out of your mouth" (verse 35). She goes on to provide an explanation. "After all, Yahweh has avenged you against your enemies, the Ammonites." Though she speaks so few words, much is made about the entire personality of the daughter based on what she says to her father. Alter says that "do what came out of your mouth" is "circuitous

[286] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 170.
[287] Sasson, 440.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 322.

language" because neither she nor Jephthah can actually "bring themselves to mention explicitly the horrific content of the vow."[291] Other exegetes imagine that her response to Jephthah shows her as "young" and "docile," the ideal woman and an innocent victim.[292] She is without the autonomy of Deborah, Jael, or Delilah, and is not an independent agent.[293] Soggin suggests that her lack of resistance shows that the sacrifice might have been "part of a generally accepted practice" like Mayan human sacrifice, and may have even been considered honorable for the victim.[294] She becomes the paradigm of the perfect daughter, submitting to paternal authority even at the risk of her own life. By encouraging her father to uphold his vow, Exum writes that "she subordinates her life to her community importance, accepting her role as sacrificial victim so that the sacrifice might be performed.[295]

Some exegetes turn the tables and seek to hold the daughter responsible for her own death. Fuchs argues that her choice to greet him is her own initiative, because "Jephthah is not shown to instruct her to come out of the house to greet him."[296] To Fuchs, she is possibly even more responsible for her own death than Jephthah is.[297] Reis too assigns the daughter blame, assuming that Jephthah's family heard the vow when he made it.[298] For Reis, the daughter "knows the repercussions of the vow, but she thinks her father can resolve the difficulty."[299] Gerstein softens the accusations of downright spoiled behavior, but still suggests that both Jephthah and the daughter are "active characters."[300] By allowing her own sacrifice, the daughter chooses to end the possibility to "exhibit power again."[301]

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[291] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 170.
[292] Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters," 26; Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," 3.
[293] Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," 2.
[294] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 217.
[295] J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 2nd ed (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 76.
[296] Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," 121.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter," 283.
[299] Ibid., 290.
[300] Beth Gerstein, "A Ritual Processed," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Bal, Mieke, 2009, 182.
[301] Ibid.

The majority of the interpretations attempt to track the innerworkings of the character's minds rather than the author's motivations for writing the characters a certain way. The notion of a woman subordinating herself for the sake of community longevity should sound familiar to us by now, as it lies at the heart of Bloch's theory which is being applied to these readings. But the difference between the Merina and the book of Judges lies in who is ultimately responsible for the subordination. I would argue that the author is the one who has subordinated her life, not the girl herself. She is subordinated to the story. This backstory about her resolve, or her docility, is not relevant. Her response is provided solely so that we know that Jephthah is being shamed by a woman. It must be a woman just as it must have been with Barak, because the female characters are mechanisms for the antiwar polemic. Mighty men with military skill are humiliated by the least likely and least threatening person, a woman. She does not need any more biographical information than that she is his only daughter and that she exited the house.

The readings shown here illustrate the widespread inclination to assign motive to the daughter's behavior. Interpreters try to give her agency or deprive her of it. Reis even imagines a scene not provided by the author wherein the daughter overhears her father's vow. Reis is partially responding to daughter's affirmation that Yahweh has avenged Jephthah against the Ammonites. How could she know this if she had not heard the details of the vow? But if we look at the daughter as a highly formalized character, we do not need to imagine an extra scene. The author needs the daughter to relate in the same breath Jephthah's mistaken vow coupled with his military success. This is part of her function as a humiliator. She associates his military success with a major shortcoming/failure in his charisma (the vow) and by doing so she illustrates to the reader the folly of charismatic military leadership.

If her initial response to her father generates speculation about her background and personality, her next statement increases that speculation exponentially. The daughter asks her father to be alone for two months, "to go up the mountain" with her friends and mourn her virginity (verse 37). I have chosen to render her request as "let me go up to the mountain with my friends" though the text shows two verbs, וְאֵלְכָה֙ וְיָרַדְתִּי׃. She asks to go away with her friends for two months to mourn her virginity. Her sexual status is critical to the story

here and is meant to serve in juxtaposition to Jephthah's mother's sexual status. He is humiliated by both a whore and a virgin. While these two female characters might appear to be entirely different due to their sexual status, they are not. They both serve as formalized characters who serve a single purpose: to humiliate a man. Age, sexual status, and other details are secondary to their primary function as humiliator.

Many exegetes interpret the daughter's request as a clue that she may have some cultic connections. This is especially true for Ackerman, who argues that the religious instability in the time of the judges permitted nontraditional cultic leadership, including women leaders.[302] The daughter is understood by others to be the founder of a religious event that would continue to be celebrated.[303] The lack of certain details about the ritual, such as its name or what they are actually doing out there in the mountains, can be explained by the fact that the ritual is still being forced to operate within the patriarchal sphere of the text.[304] The lack of details is intentional, "depriving the ritual of any description" so as to "silence the female expression of religion."[305] Ackerman at least acknowledges the missing details in the ritual, however she still links it to a real world ritual upheld at some point in Israel's history by Israel's women. Others attempt to reconstruct the ritual based on the daughter's terse request. Day and Bal see it as a coming-of-age celebration, wherein women both celebrate their lives as women but mourn for having left their childhood behind.[306] Day focuses more on the impact of the ritual as an etiology, casting the daughter as a "culture heroine" for founding a woman centered ritual.[307] Bal specifies that the coming of age element is that the women transition from being the property of the father to the property of the husband, reading "betulah" as a marital status rather than a bodily one.[308] Soggin attempts to find links between this ritual and other mourning rituals and relates it to Israelite religion before Josiah's reform.[309]

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[302] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 109.
[303] Ibid., 111.
[304] Ibid., 116-17.
[305] Ibid.
[306] Peggy Lynne Day, "From the Child Is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Lynne Day (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 60; Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 49.
[307] Day, "From the Child Is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," 59.
[308] Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 49.
[309] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 216–18.

Hackett takes the daughter's request to bring her friends with her as an indication of a "closely bound society of females with female concerns and their own means of dealing with such concerns."[310] Hackett goes as far as imagining the content of the ritual, suggesting that the women prepare the daughter for her death but also address "the dilemma posed by the opposition of her strong faith in Yahweh and her desire to live and have a family."[311] Somewhat conversely, Schneider argues that it does not follow the pattern of women in the book of Judges that she should be mourning her capacity for a family. Rather, she is "lamenting the sexual experience in her life that she will miss because of her death – this is more fitting with the pattern of the book (women and sexuality) than virginity."[312]

We can skirt this issue entirely if we think about the increasing public spectacle of military failure as a guiding theme in the book of Judges. As society unravels and the judges become less capable and certainly less likeable, they fail on a more and more public scale. Barak's failure was known only to Deborah and Jael; however, Jephthah's failure is now lamented by women in the mountains and, eventually, memorialized into a yearly celebration wherein all the daughters of Israel lament the folly of Jephthah's insufficient charisma. We need not envision what rite the women practice in the mountains, or whether the daughter is lamenting her lack of a family or her exclusion from a world of sexual experience. It does not matter if the ritual is related more to puberty or marriage. What matters is simply that the outcome of Jephthah's greatest charismatic folly is publicized first by the victim herself with her friends in the mountains and then on a broader scale by all the women of Israel after her death. His failure in leadership is publicly remembered and lamented *every year*. The scale of the judges' public exposure has increased dramatically with the story of Jephthah.

Jephthah's response in verse 38 is the least number of words he has spoken in the entire story. His charisma has brought about his ruin and his daughter is about to publicize that with her friends before he puts her to death. For once, Jephthah has nothing left to say. Of course, he is also a formalized character, so where his charisma does not serve him, the author does not put it to use. The point of the daughter's request is to grant a public scale

[310] Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel," 30.
[311] Ibid.
[312] Schneider, *Judges*, 181–82.

to his shame, and it is not essential for this plot point for Jephthah to adapt his silver-tongued specialty to the situation. The story requires nothing more from him than his allowance for her to leave. Alter describes the one-word response as one coming from "a man choked with emotion, barely able to speak."[313] But we need not ascribe emotion to the character. He has already rent his clothing and fallen to his knees. He is no longer required for his powers of speech in this part of the story, so those powers are not shown.

Verse 39 informs the reader that, after two months, the daughter returns from her sojourn, and Jephthah "did to her what he had vowed." As mentioned above, Alter suggests that the act is so horrible that the text refers to it obliquely rather than saying exactly what is happening.[314] The act of the sacrifice itself is not described so, while there are some parallels with the Akedah in Genesis 22, we should see this rather as an inversion of any expectations of relief for Jephthah. While Abraham's preparation for his son's sacrifice is well detailed, as is the interference of Yahweh before the fatal blow is dealt, Judges shares no details at all and certainly does not provide divine intervention. If the reader was expecting a suspenseful scene like that of Genesis 22, that expectation is immediately subverted. The act itself is actually embodied in the phrase "what he had vowed." The text does not use a verb for sacrifice but rather relates the act back to Jephthah's words. The author takes the opportunity to highlight his folly at every turn. We are reminded again that the daughter must be put to death because of his vow and his vow alone. Exum reads the absence of detail about the sacrifice as an absence of narratival condemnation of the act.[315] Since the text says nothing about how horrifying it must be to kill one's daughter, "the ritual act of sacrifice transforms murder in this story into a socially acceptable act of execution."[316] I would argue, however, that the condemnation of the act is contained in the disintegration of the social structure in the book of Judges. The author does not need to intervene and supply a direct condemnation of child sacrifice because the readers are supposed to infer that this act is horrible and indicative of an unraveling society and a progressively less effective leadership. We must recall that the author is working within the

[313] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 171.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," 75.
[316] J. Cheryl Exum, "On Judges 11," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 137.

genre of dark satire here. A condemnation of child sacrifice is not something that needs to be made explicit in that genre. Our interpretations should be rooted in our understanding of what the author is doing within a particular genre. For a satire, we ought to remove any expectation that the author will explicitly spell out his meaning.

Others read the absence of condemnation about the sacrifice as tacit justification of Jephthah's behavior. Fuchs says the ambiguity allows for the audience to deny that the act has taken place.[317] This creates the possibility to read Jephthah as the victim of his own circumstances because the act is not expressly described, thus recentering Jephthah and not his murder of his daughter.[318] For Frymer-Kensky, Jephthah arises from the status of victim at the beginning of the story and returns to it by his own actions. A fool, but a victim nonetheless.[319] Reis argues that the sacrifice should be read metaphorically, and that a death never takes place at all since Jephthah is dealing with the idea of the redemption of a sacrificial victim, as in Leviticus 27.[320] Klein thinks redemption was a possible route of action, but suggests that Jephthah is a victim of what he does not know. Though he appears to demonstrate piety in his previous monologues, he seems unaware that he could have redeemed her another way.[321] Klein argues that, had Jephthah consulted a priest he would have known he could avoid sacrificing the child but his own ignorance prevents him from doing so.[322] Gerstein suggests the sacrifice is a necessary part of Jephthah's change in status from regular man to tribal leader.[323] Again and again, scholars reach out for explanations as to why Jephthah *had* to complete the sacrifice, why it might be the daughter's fault, or that the sacrifice is a metaphor and never happened at all. The inclination for gap filling has led scholars to create so many situations that both absolve and condemn Jephthah that the terse depiction of the event from the author is almost forgotten in the wake of larger imagined theatrics. Again, Jephthah "did to her what he had

[317] Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," 116.
[318] Ibid.
[319] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 115.
[320] Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter."
[321] Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 90.
[322] Ibid., 93.
[323] Gerstein, "A Ritual Processed," 183.

vowed" because the author needs our attention on the fact that this is something Jephthah has vowed, his previous charisma be damned.

The final part of verse 39 and all of verse 40 memorialize Jephthah's mistake, as discussed above. Just after he does what he had vowed, terminating his family line, we are told that "it became a custom in Israel, that every year the women of Israel went out to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite for four days." The verse works not only as a spectacular conclusion to the story, but as an illustration of the heightened public scale. Every year all the women in the land convene in the hills and remember his failure. We should not read "every year" as an etiology for an annual ritual, such as the festival of Tammuz.[324] The recurring nature of the event is not etiological. It is polemical.

The story of Jephthah does not end with the fulfillment of his vow, however. If we needed more evidence of the societal unraveling and the judges' inability to prevent it, we are provided it in the next episode of Jephthah's tale. This analysis will focus on the military themes of the final section of Jephthah's story. A thorough examination of the shibboleth episode and Ephraimite roles in the book of Judges are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In the first verse of chapter 12, we are shown the men of Ephraim preparing to confront Jephthah and the Gileadites. I have chosen to render וַיִּצָּעֵק֙ אִ֣ישׁ אֶפְרַ֔יִם as "the men of Ephraim mustered themselves," so that Jephthah's experience of leadership is essentially bookended by troops mustering in his environs. While it is Ammon at the beginning of the pericope, the social fabric is unraveling and now it is a fellow tribe who poses the threat. The Ephraimites accuse Jephthah of leaving them behind in the battle with Ammon and threaten to burn his house down with him inside of it. We expect the charismatic Jephthah to exercise more rhetorical skill at this moment. We have previously seen him pull out all the diplomatic stops in his communication both with the elders of Gilead and with the king of the Ammonites. Here he has been sent a message which affords him another opportunity to exhibit his charismatic skill. Jephthah, however, who once spoke on behalf of all of Israel before the king of Ammon, now reduces his battle with the Ammonites as one that took

[324] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 171; Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 217.

place because Jephthah and his own people had a conflict with them (12:2). In 10:17 and 11:4, the Ammonites attack Israel. In this verse, however, Jephthah indicates that the conflict was between the Gileadite people and Ammon. This could possibly be a reduction in Jephthah's view of his own power (and by extension his own responsibility as a leader) or it could be an editing issue that results from the author's focus on polemic delivery over detail.

In the second half of verse 2, Jephthah says that he raised a battle cry, inviting Ephraim to join him in his fight, but they did not come to his rescue. Jephthah makes the story about himself, not even his own people, telling the Ephraimites "I risked my life" to march against the Ammonites. The scope of who he feels he represents has shrunk noticeably. He describes his victory as a work of Yahweh, and then challenges the Ephraimites: Why have you come here to attack me? This is essentially the same confrontation that Jephthah shares with the Ammonites, however he has lost his charismatic flair. Unlike before, it is every man for himself. Sasson identifies the charismatic drop off, arguing that "the manipulative skills with which he negotiated with the elders of Gilead and the diplomatic dexterity that helped earn God's support evade him when dealing with the demands of Ephraim."[325] This final section of Jephthah's story serves to show not only the unraveling societal fabric but the increasing incompetence of the judges to maintain peace. Othniel's peacekeeping skills are nowhere to be found, and each judge loses more and more ability to maintain control over the people.

In verse 4, Jephthah and the Gileadites make swift work of the Ephraimites. In a single verse they attack and defeat Ephraim. On the surface, Jephthah is still militarily successful. However, his success here should give us pause, as it is military success against his own people and not a foreign enemy. The reason for the internecine quarrel is glossed over quickly by the author. The second half of verse 5 tells us that, ostensibly before Jephthah had attacked, Ephraim had made some claim about the legitimacy of Gilead and its relationship to Ephraim and Manasseh. The meaning of the insult is not important. It is only that the tribes are turning against one another that is key to this part of the story. While Jephthah is still judge, an internal conflict with a neighboring (and supposedly friendly)

[325] Sasson, *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 452.

tribe turns into a bloodbath. The gyre widens, and things are clearly beginning to fall apart. Under Jephthah's leadership the Gileadites annex the fords and interrogate any Ephraimite hoping to transverse the region. Based on their pronunciation of the word שִׁבֹּלֶת they are summarily executed. For the purposes of this analysis, we should focus on the fact that it is under a charismatic leader, so good with words, that a single word leads to the death of 42,000 Ephraimites. While Jephthah is not directly mentioned in the Shibboleth episode, it is on the pronunciation of a mere word that men are killed. Under the charismatic leadership of a man who has shown to love words, a single word is now the edge of a knife. He is an ineffectual leader. Though he defeated the Ammonites, the pseudo-cycle of Judges tells us another enemy will arise, that Jephthah will be unable to maintain the peace, and now, on top of that, a civil war has erupted. The text follows the announcement for 42,000 dead Ephraimites with a recounting of the total time that Jephthah was a judge in Israel (vv 6-7). That the two ideas are positioned next to each other signals the author's intention to mitigate any belief we might have that Jephthah was a good leader. His story ends with death everywhere—the death of his daughter, the death of the Ephraimites, and finally his own death. All leadership in the time of the judges, no matter how successful it appears, ends with failure and death.

Application

War breaks out between tribes under Jephthah's rule, and Yeats' blood dimmed tide is loosed over the land. This intertribal struggle paves the way for the brutal dismembering of a woman's body and all-out war between the tribes. This conclusion to Jephthah's story highlights the polemic the author sought to deliver through the use of character formalization. In Yeats' tide, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned," and so too is it for Jephthah. Sacrifice, a ceremony meant to bring God close to the people, to please the deity and solidify the covenantal relationship, has been made a public spectacle. Charismatic military leadership is futile; the unraveling structure of the book of Judges demands that every leader be made more of a spectacle.

The character of Jephthah's daughter needs no more development than what she is given in the story because she serves her purpose with the details she is given. She does not need a name, or any interior motivations. She does not need wealth, or friends. She is

entirely undeveloped, existing only to bring about a man's shame. Unlike Deborah and Jael, who at least appear to be powerful in some way in chapter 4, Jephthah's daughter does not even carry with her the façade of individual importance. The author gave her just enough information so that she could perform her function. Her formalized role in the story is to humiliate Jephthah. In her very short scene, the daughter acts in an extremely limited sphere. Her entire role in the story requires a male actor. This is why she is not mentioned before she is necessary to the story. It is also why the author appears to relinquish almost no information about her actual death. It is not key to the story. Jephthah made a vow, and "he did to her what he had vowed." Even her death is recounted through her relationship with the male character.

Throughout the majority of the story, Jephthah embodies the sort of masculinity that Judges is seeking to show as futile in positions of leadership. He is a גִּבּוֹר חַיִל, skilled with a weapon but even more skilled with a silver tongue. Another facet of the particular masculinity that the Judges author wish to subvert is that of the skillful orator. Jephthah is shown in three scenes of confrontation, with the elders of Gilead, with the king of the Ammonites, and with the Ephraimites. He is being presented to us as a talker, a skilled negotiator. But when his daughter exits his home, and when it is time for his words to bear fruit, he no longer negotiates.

Jephthah's humiliation is more public than Barak's, as the pseudo-cyclical structure of the book demands. Each man's shame is more and more public. While perhaps only a few women were privy to Barak's shame, now an entire group of women annually commemorate Jephthah's abject failure as a leader and as a man. His folly has become a public spectacle as the author seeks to multiply the shame of traditional male leadership as the book progresses. This idea of humiliating public spectacle will come to a head in the next chapter, as Samson, disfigured and chained, is shamed in front of an entire stadium audience.

The goal of this increasingly public humiliation of traditional military masculinity is to illustrate that war is futile. While Jephthah may have had success against Ammon, it is temporary. A new enemy always arises. He defeated Ammon with the help of the spirit of Yahweh, not by any of his own merit. And when it comes to handling the conflict with

the Ephraimites, he fails and is responsible for thousands of deaths of a group who should, for all purposes, be allies. His daughter exists in the story only to bear the polemic. She is developed only as much as she needs to be to highlight the futility of the kind of leader who might challenge the status quo and seek to wage war when it has not been sanctioned by God.

Chapter Four: Samson

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

The unraveling social fabric and descent into total ruin that is illustrated through the pseudo-cyclical structure of Judges and its treatment of its male characters is nearly culminated in the story of Samson. While the dismemberment of a woman's body as a rallying cry for war is the pinnacle of the unravelling, Samson heralds the beginning of the end. The polemic on the futility of war is continued in the story of Samson, but it is also slightly expanded. The author contends not only with the failure of traditional masculine leadership but also the ambiguity of a deity who fashions the flawed Samson to be Israel's deliverer.. The story shows the author dealing with the idea that the God who intervenes in history may be an unknowable one. A god who decides when there is war but who also submits his people to extensive periods of suffering and oppression, who elects weak, flawed leaders to deliver the people from their oppressors, may not be completely trusted to behave in an expected way. Each of the three stories not only illustrates the futility of war and traditional masculinity, but each also depicts a deity who is not in control of history the way we would expect. The Deuteronomistic ideology suggests that God directs history. The Judges author illustrates that, though that is indeed true, a god who directs history may do so in unpredictable, surprising ways. Consider that this is the deity who engaged an outsider to humiliate Barak and kill Sisera, and did not intercede when tragedy appeared to be the outcome of Jephthah's horrific vow. Throughout the book the author urges us to consider what God's involvement in the outcome of Israelite history is. Does God operate within the same parameters as human beings? That is, does God understand a "good outcome" the same way the Israelite author might? The nature of divine intervention in history is ambiguous. The stories in Judges show that divinely chosen leaders botch up their end goals or succeed only partially in fulfilling them. This ambiguity is developed throughout the book, but it is especially illuminated in the Samson story. If God can bring

about the birth of Samson, the one who will begin to deliver Israel from its oppressors, why not make this deliverer a better version than the one with whom we are presented?

The antiwar polemic dances very near the edge of a polemic written to confront the notion of a mercurial deity who is in full control. After all, this is the same God who let the community return to Yehud after the exile, but who allowed the temple to remain under Cyrus' control. Why deliver the temple only halfway to the ones who have yearned for it for so long by the rivers of Babylon? Why allow a foreign power to collect the temple's taxes? The author casts doubt on the strength of the relationship between Israel and the deity. This is a critique of the notion that Yahweh is a deity who engineers history well. If indeed the deity's role is ambiguous, war is a very bad approach to problem solving or, even worse, the deity is mercurial and the human sense of allegiance to such a deity is misguided. Not only does the ambiguity sew doubt about the relationship between Israel and God, it also casts doubt on the deity's real time capabilities and the idea that human religious communities can rely on their mythology.

The ambiguity of Yahweh's role that the author is confronting is highlighted in the self-serving, enigmatic Samson. He is a rogue element, acting alone and always on his own behalf. He is imbued with divine power, chosen to begin Israel's deliverance, and thus spared from what seems like any real consequences of his actions. His story is woven together from different strands and finessed by the hand of the author. Samson the folk hero appears in stories full of absurdity, of collusion with foxes, and of feats of superhuman power. Samson the polemic bearer appears in those same scenes, but also in the later editing that shows the spirit of Yahweh rushing upon him, seemingly sanctioning many of his actions and removing the possibility of consequence. He is a complex character woven together from many sinews. This makes the task of unraveling a particular meaning from the story more difficult than it is in other stories in Judges. He is a composite, Yeats' shape with a lion body and the head of a man. And just like Yeats' rough beast, Samson too will end the story with a gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun. But we must not take the tragic nature of Samson's end as a guide for his entire story. To do so would be to neglect a key element: absurdity.

Up until his capture and public death, the story of Samson displays characteristics of a mythical comedy. According to Frye's presentation of fictional modes, Samson is a man "whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being."[326] In Samson's world, "the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended," which permit for his hand-to-hand combat with a lion, for example.[327] In a comedy, absurdity is woven into the very nature of the story. If Samson thought his tete a tete with the lion was unusual or surprising, certainly he would have shared the experience with his parents who are accompanying him on his journey. That Samson accepts it as a natural part of his world, as well as the edible honey that appears in its corpse, is absurd. No one sings an epic song about Samson's feats; no chorus gathers to reiterate how spectacular his strength is. Rather, the comedic elements of the story are presented as factually as any other detail. They are submitted to the reader without comment. It is this deadpan presentation of the absurd that firmly plants the majority of Samson's story in the realm of comedy.

If there is one trend in the interpretation of Samson that stands out the most, it is the predilection to ignore the absurdity of many scenes in the story and interpret them all as if they were reporting actual events in history. A man ripping a lion in half with his bare hands is absurd, as is the fresh *edible* honey that emerges from its corpse. Displacing an entire city gate drips with phantasmagoric drops, and yet most scholars attempt to dissect not why the absurdity is there but whether or not the Gazites were waiting within the gate. The shadow of Samson's publicly humiliating death looms over the interpretation of his story, and often we miss the forest through the trees. Absurdity should guide our interpretation of the fragments of Samson's story that feature miraculous feats. That this is the author's intention is clear when we consider how playful he is with the language of these sections. Puns and plays on words abound in Samson's story.

The absurdities in Samson's story begin before his birth, in his father's unwillingness to see what is right in front of his face. When Samson journeys to procure his first wife, a lion appears on the scene and is instantaneously ripped in half with bare human hands. Later the corpse of the lion produces a snack for Samson and his parents, an

[326] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, 15. pr (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), 33.
[327] Ibid.

event that, while ridiculous to the reader, is not even deemed important enough by the protagonist to mention. Samson then proposes he share an enigma with his wedding party, an unsolvable riddle, and becomes angry when his counterparts in the scene use other means to find its answer. That the riddle is based on a specific event that occurred only to the protagonist is absurd. The scene with the foxes further intensifies the absurdity and is *meant* to be seen as a ridiculous scene. Killing a group of Philistines with a donkey's jawbone is fantastical, and Samson's own interpretation of the event, "heaps upon heaps," emphasizes that. The movement of the Gazan city gate is the culmination of the absurdity. After that, the author subverts our expectations of continued absurdity and delivers very real, very dark results by the hand of a woman.

Unlike the story of Jephthah, where the editing was sometimes sacrificed for the sake of polemic, here the editing *wholly delivers* both narrative and polemic in a complex fabric. The pieces with which the writer was working were, just like Jephthah, from an older folk tale. But the amount of material allowed the author to play with the story and do two things at once: deliver his polemic and entertain his readers with raucous absurdity along the way.

Analysis

Chapter 13

Much like Jephthah, Samson's future is determined by his mother before he even enters the scene. The Israelites are under Philistine control, a punishment from Yahweh for their continued evil deeds. Just as in Judges 4 with Jabin, and with the Ammonites in Judges 11, Yahweh has "delivered them into the hand of the Philistines." This classic military idiom has already been seen in both chapters 4 and 11. Here, God has essentially begun this pericope with a sort of military action of his own. The reader should note, however, that unlike the other scenes mentioned, the people do not cry out to God after their long oppression at the hands of the Philistines. Yeats' gyre has widened even more and now the people no longer ask for help from their God. This provides a pretense for Yahweh to raise up Samson not only as Israel's last judge but as its incipient deliverer. Webb argues that, after the previous twelve chapters, the morale is so low that the people lack the strength to

cry out.[328] But, given what we know about the people in Judges, and the structure of deterioration employed by the writer, the people no longer ask for help because they no longer think of God. Or of themselves, Israel, as in a relationship with God.

The camera shifts from this typical introductory line in verse 1 to Manoah, a member of a tribe of Danites who are living near Zorah. As with the location of the Oak of Zaanaim in chapter 4, it is not prudent to link concrete geographical details to the location mentioned in the story. The important detail is that Samson is near the coastal plain where the Philistines were located. The location should not be reconstructed based on the book of Joshua which, as we have seen with Jabin, is not a reliable narratival backdrop for the book of Judges.[329] Soggin argues that this is before the Danites moved north and that they were a nomadic group in the area, which explains the appearance of the Judahites later.[330] But whether or not the group is nomadic is not germane to the story at hand, not least because we do not meet a single other Danite in the story.

In the same verse we are introduced to Manoah's wife. Like Jephthah's daughter before her as well as the Timnite woman and the Gazite sex worker in later chapters, she is without a name. Her role is defined by her relationship to her husband and her inability to give birth. The author emphasizes her barrenness, a key part of her formalization, by describing her as such *twice*: עֲקָרָה וְלֹא יָלָדָה. Webb understands the barrenness of Manoah's wife to be a reflection of Israel's plight, "disgraced and powerless, with nothing to look forward to but extinction."[331] Soggin agrees that the barrenness is disgraceful, but suggests that barrenness in the Hebrew Bible often creates the occasion for "divine miraculous intervention."[332] There is no evidence for Matthews' argument that her lack of name and inability to give birth indicate she was "powerless and despised within her household and among her people."[333] The details are simply indicators of her formalization. She needs to bring Samson into the story, so the details that lead to that event are all that are given. Since

[328] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 350.
[329] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 227–28; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 350. Both Soggin and Webb cite location of the tribe as it is discussed in Joshua, though Soggin recognizes that Joshua lacks "the details that we would have liked. (226)
[330] Soggin, 227-8.
[331] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 350.
[332] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 233–34.
[333] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 140.

her name is not essential to Samson's existence, it is not included. Schneider aptly recognizes this, citing the same reasoning for Jephthah's daughter.[334] Exum reads the suppressed information about Manoah's wife as a tactic used by the author to "focus our attention on her role as a mother."[335]

In verse 3, Yahweh's messenger appears and proposes an ending to her barrenness. The messenger only appears to the woman, a detail that will cause issues later in the story. Exum argues that the messenger's selection of the wife when she was alone, as well as her role as a wife, "highlights her role and underscores her virtue."[336] Niditch agrees, stating the author sees her as "more worthy than her dolt of a husband" but that even this must take place within the confines of a patriarchal world.[337] Her empowerment "takes place within the system and is imagined within stereotypical roles."[338] But Manoah's wife is not empowered. She is not even a developed character. She is a wife, a barren woman without a child. The messenger reminds the woman of her current situation, that she is barren, and that her status as a barren woman is about to change. He reminds her of her current status, repeating the dual descriptions from above. "You are barren and have not given birth. But you shall become pregnant and bear a son." The two parts of the statement mirror one another, and reflect a shift in aspect and mood, but not an instantaneous impregnation. At the moment the messenger is speaking to her ("right now"), she is barren and has not given birth. The opposite of that barrenness is "you shall become pregnant" and the opposite of "have not given birth" is "bear a son." The statement is clear. In the near future, your status is about to shift.

Many scholars toy with the idea of immaculate conception in this scene. Though the messenger has clearly indicated that she will become pregnant, others read it that she becomes pregnant instantaneously. There is no evidence that this birth is a miraculous one that takes place "without sexual intercourse."[339] Brettler argues that the messenger himself is Samson's father, and that this is lost because of the difficulty of rendering the Hebrew

[334] Schneider, *Judges*, 195.
[335] Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," 79.
[336] Exum, 79.
[337] Niditch, *Judges*, 143.
[338] Ibid.
[339] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 350.

into English.[340] He argues that, in her dialogue with her husband, the woman makes this clear by saying אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים בָּא אֵלַי but that Manoah is "too dim witted" to understand.[341] For Brettler, the supernatural nature of the birth is the reason for Samson's superhuman strength.[342] But we must consider that indeterminacy is the currency of the Judges author, and the curious use of the verb here highlights this. The ambiguity is part of the absurdity, and we should resist the urge to resolve or overwork what the author perhaps intended to leave indeterminate. Klein agrees with Bretter that there is a "sexual component" to the phrase בָּא אֵלַי, and that "the nature of the deed is unknown, but the result is pregnancy."[343] This contributes to the buffoonery of Manoah, for Klein, who is emasculated by his own wife and a messenger of Yahweh.[344]

We should recognize that the author did not intend for such a detailed reading of the female character here. His lack of attention to anything beyond what they needed from her contributes to their lack of adhesion to the typical annunciation scene. Hattin argues that Sarah, Rebeccah, Rachel and Hannah, who also have divine interference with their barrenness, "express heartfelt prayers for offspring."[345] Manoah's wife, however, offers "no tearful supplications or profound entreaties," asking neither her husband nor her god for help.[346] But, just as the author avoided employing prophetic genre markers for Deborah, so too he manipulate the annunciation genre here. He has consciously decided to use it but pushes it to absurdity, defying our expectations of a more typical annunciation scene. The announcement is not what is critical to the story here, it is the means by which the author relays important information about Samson. He has been chosen "to begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (v.5). The mother's role is only as the hearer of this plot point.

The words of the messenger prompt one of the major interpretive issues of the Samson story. He shares a series of admonitions directed at both mother and child. First,

[340] Brettler, *The Book of Judges*, 45.
[341]Ibid., 46
[342]Ibid.
[343] Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 112.
[344] Ibid., 114.
[345] Hattin, *Judges: The Perils of Possession*, 147.
[346] Ibid.

she is to avoid wine or any other intoxicants, and she is to stay away from unclean things. This first admonition is conveyed solely with feminine verbs. The command is meant for the expecting mother. The only admonition for the son is that "a razor shall never touch his head, for the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb" (v.5). That the boy is to be a Nazir is confusing, considering it is his mother that is prohibited from drinking and touching unclean things, part of the Nazirite vow, but the son is prevented from cutting his hair. The admonition against hair cutting is part of the Nazirite vow as well, but it is not meant to be a permanent one as it is for Samson. The whole Nazirite equation is missing pieces; it suffers the same flaw as Deborah's prophecy and the above annunciation scene. The author needed the information provided by a specific detail, but he subverted the genre markers that typically accompany this type of scene. The incomplete implementation of the Nazirite requirements are often used as an overarching interpretation to the Samson story by other interpreters, rather than acknowledged as a superficial detail to get the story from point A to point B.

Based on this misinterpretation, Samson is viewed as a failed vow-keeper, appearing in vineyards, drinking wine at wedding parties, and eating honey from dead bodies. His constant attempts to break the vow leads interpreters to suggest that he lacks freedom, and that his wild behavior is a response to his life being chosen for him before he was born. Soggin, however, argues that the Nazirite details appear to be unknown in later chapters of Samson, and that this beginning chapter is "composed as an ad hoc intro to the story pieces."[347] This explains why the author seems to be unbothered by Samson's un-Nazirite like behavior. But Soggin's hesitation to apply the Nazirite interpretation to the entire story is uncommon. Webb believes Numbers 6 is the best guide to reading the passage, but that Samson is a "special case."[348] Niditch chooses to focus on the chosenness of the Nazirite state, reading the restrictions given by the messenger as emphasizing "a God-sent charisma."[349] I do not feel that it is advantageous to any interpretation to use a section of Numbers to illuminate the Samson chapters. Soggin may be the closest in his argument that the Nazirite element is a later addition to the story, and it is only revisited

[347] Ibid.
[348] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 351.
[349] Niditch, *Judges*, 143.

when the topic of his hair and its related superhuman strength arises long after its introduction. The point is that the child is being singled out so that "he will begin to deliver" Israel from its current oppressors. He is special, and in his specialness, there are certain restrictions that are given. The scene conflates the annunciation with the voluntary Nazirite vow scene and creates a new type of scene that is meant to predict the boy's future. The author is subverting, or distorting, the genre as part of the polemic. The reader's horizon of expectation is violated. The entire story of Samson undermines genre expectations, and the fact that the story does not fulfill the necessary conditions for a Nazirite vow is typical of that violation. But the subversion of our expectations often leads interpreters down the rabbit hole.

After the admonitions, the messenger tells the woman about the boy's ultimate future, that he will "begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (v.5). This is critical, because even though he has been singled out and, as we will see, will have superhuman strength and frequent visits from the spirit of Yahweh, he can only *begin* the process of redemption. The days of a judge who can singlehandedly deliver Israel from its own failures, albeit only temporarily, are gone. Just as the people no longer cry out to God for liberation, so the judges no longer have the capacity to deliver a total victory. Even this message of liberation carries with it an ominous tone.[350] As Schneider states, "the stakes have changed. The deity-chosen leaders, even when designated before their conception, can now only hope to begin the process of redemption."[351]

After the messenger leaves, the woman returns to her husband and tells him what happened. She informs him "a man of God came to me. His appearance was like that of a messenger of God, very terrifying" (v.6). There are many ways to render the appearance as the woman describes it, from "exceedingly awe-inspiring,"[352] "frightening,"[353] "terrible,"[354] or "very awesome."[355] Regardless of how interpreters render her description of the messenger, she is on to something. She is aware that this is no regular man, that his

[350] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 352.
[351] Schneider, *Judges*, 195.
[352] Niditch, *Judges*, 139.
[353] Schneider, *Judges*, 198.
[354] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 232.
[355] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 348; Boling, *Judges*, 217.

appearance was that of a divine messenger, and it was "very terrifying," unlike a regular human visage. She already knows who has visited her. In fact, it is essential to her formalized role that she should know exactly who has visited her. Later, her knowledge will be what highlights the dunderheadedness of her husband. Boling underestimates her, however, describing her words to her husband as "very close to the truth in her groping way," which is meant to entertain the reader, "who already knows better."[356] But the point of her role here, apart from giving birth to the boy who will "begin to deliver" Israel, is that she *does* already know who has visited her. In typical Judges fashion, the woman serves a role to highlight the weakness of the man, undoing his traditional masculinity. She tells him who has visited her, and it will not be until that visitor disappears in a fiery display that Manoah finally realizes it for himself. She doubly illustrates her knowledge that this is a divine being by telling her husband, "I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name." Manoah will later press the messenger for a name.

The woman also relays an abbreviated version of the message to her husband. She includes the details about the prohibition against her use of intoxicants and unclean foods, of which we are already aware, but she adds that "the boy will be a Nazirite from the womb until the day he dies" (v.7). She does not include that the boy will "begin to deliver" Israel. Boling sees her limited information sharing as an indication that she is focused on "what the announcement means to her."[357] Webb sees her choice of words as a premonition, "a gnawing dread of what must be."[358] But really, she is simply delivering the most pertinent information from the divine exchange with her husband. We will see that he will struggle to understand even these very basic details.

Manoah's response is not to question his wife further about this miraculous, divine visit and the announcement of his son's birth, but rather to pray that God send the messenger again "so that he may teach us what to do with the boy who will be born" (v.8). The author ramps up the comedy here. The woman has just told him what the messenger has commanded her, and instead of responding, Manoah requests the divine messenger come back and repeat himself so that Manoah can hear the details firsthand. That she has

[356] Boling, *Judges*, 221.
[357] Boling, 221.
[358] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 353.

just told him, and that he immediately responds by asking God what they are to do is part of the comedic nature of the scene. Boling lays the blame for Manoah's request to God at the feet of the woman, suggesting that "the woman doesn't really know what she is saying, though she is dropping hints all along the way."[359] Schneider critiques Boling's sexist reading, arguing "[Boling] never contemplates the possibility that Manoah's disbelief concerning his wife is indicative of some of the problems of the period," and that women are seen as untrustworthy and often treated haphazardly.[360] Matthews suggest Manoah asks for divine confirmation because he is suspicious of "unauthorized fraternization between his wife and the unknown."[361] On top of that, argues Matthews, Manoah may be insulted because the messenger chose to come to the woman instead of to Manoah himself.[362] But the point of the story is that we, the readers, are supposed to think that Manoah is an immeasurable dolt. He is a ludicrous character.

The absurd nature of the character of Manoah and of the story in general is emphasized when the messenger returns. Indeed, Manoah has requested this return. And yet, the messenger returns to the woman, when she is alone, "sitting in a field," without Manoah (v.8). Manoah is continually thwarted in his requests. Men are ineffectual, not only on the battlefield and in their role as diplomats, as we have seen before, but also as leaders within a single family unit. That Manoah asks for a confirmatory visit from the messenger which is granted but only to his wife is a hilarious reminder of the ineffectuality of masculine leadership, even on a micro scale. As Alter writes, men are often "sidelined" in an annunciation scene, but this scene is not directly adhering to the traditional annunciation scene.[363] In other scenes, the man does not demand direct confirmation from the deity. In the verse, we are told "God listened to Manoah's request," which heightens the comedy (v.9). God listens to the request and delivers on it, but Manoah did not specify the recipient of the reiteration, and so the messenger appears to the woman alone, yet again.

[359] Boling, *Judges*, 221.
[360] Schneider, *Judges*, 199.
[361] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 141.
[362] Ibid.
[363] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 175.

This time the woman hurries back to her husband to share the news. Schneider argues that she hurries because she is acknowledging that she will not be believed.[364] But this is not necessarily the case. Whether or not she will be believed is not important to her role. There are two messengers in this story. The divine one, who speaks to the woman, and the woman herself, who has to convey the message to her slow witted husband in a secondhand retelling. The story is rife with the comedy of the repeated messages and the husband's inability to understand when he is being spoon fed the details *over and over again*.

The woman tells her husband that the messenger has reappeared, and "Manoah followed after his wife" (v.10). There should be no doubt that this is meant to have a double meaning. The author is telling us that he literally followed after her to the site of the messenger's reappearance, but, as the audience, we are also aware that he is following after her intellectually. Physically and mentally, Manoah is one step behind his unnamed wife. Niditch argues that Manoah trailing after his wife reverses the expected order "in a patriarchal culture."[365] Based on what we have seen the author do in our other case studies, this is a plausible reading. Certainly, traditional masculinity is challenged throughout the book of Judges, and here we see a man fumbling behind his wife, struggling to keep up with the information he is being given. But we must not remove the comedy from the situation. The role reversal is not an empowering one for the wife, but a silly and humiliating one for the man. Webb argues that Manoah following his wife is not about his mental capacity but rather about his "need to take control."[366] For Webb, Manoah is asserting his position as her husband, contrary to what Niditch sees in the scene. Manoah's reference to "this woman" instead of "my wife," Webb argues, is potentially an intended slight meant to reestablish his dominance.[367] But, though he speculates that this is a possible reading, he ultimately backtracks, concluding, "most likely, though, no slight is intended; Manoah is simply a man of his time…He wants to be doubly sure that no mistake has been made because he senses a great deal is at stake."[368] And so Webb rescues Manoah

[364] Schneider, *Judges*, 199.
[365] Niditch, *Judges*, 145.
[366] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 354.
[367] Ibid.
[368] Ibid.

from the role of the comedic relief and restores to him a fatherly masculinity which the author chose not to provide for him.

We can be sure that Manoah's address to the messenger is not meant to reestablish his masculine power because he asks yet another question to which he has already received an answer. He asks," Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" (v.11). He could ask any number of questions to the divine messenger, and instead he asks what he already knows. Time and time again the author seeks to illustrate the absurdity in this story, and yet interpreters eschew what is right in front of them (just as Manoah does) and ask unnecessary questions.

In verse 12, Manoah asks again for what he has already been told: "What rules will be observed for the boy?" The messenger indicates that he has told this all to the woman and repeats himself for Manoah's sake. Though Manoah has not been told that the child will begin to deliver Israel, Webb argues that Manoah wants to have a hand in raising the boy and that "if he is to begin to deliver Israel, how will he do this, and how can he prepare for such a task?"[369] Webb gives Manoah information he does not have in an attempt to save Manoah from appearing foolish. But this is unnecessary. Nothing in the dialogue indicates that Manoah is enthusiastic about becoming a father, nor is he attempting to "make the most of this private audience," as Boling suggests.[370] If he were trying to make the most of the meeting, he would ask questions to which he has not already been given clear answers. Alter reads a "note of annoyance" in the messenger's response to Manoah in verse 13, especially given that "the celestial messenger does not directly answer Manoah's question about what will be the conduct of the child because everything he says pertains to the restrictions that the future mother must observe."[371] Schneider agrees, seeing the divine response to Manoah as a "rebuff" because he himself "has no role in the preparations for the child's birth."[372] The text could not be clearer. Manoah asks the wrong questions. He is not responsible for anything leading up to the child's birth. Traditional masculinity is a joke here, and Manoah is the punchline. So often interpreters wish to instill characters with

[369] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 354.
[370] Boling, *Judges*, 221.
[371] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 174.
[372] Schneider, *Judges*, 200.

traits, thoughts, and motivations that they do not have. In all the stories examined in this dissertation, examples of interpreters filling in the gaps abound. What is given to us in the story is what is true about the character: he is dim witted. By ascribing an interior life to these characters, we deprive the author of his goal which, in this case, is to create a comedic scene that critiques the "father at the head of the household" masculine structure.

Even though there have been several indications that the messenger is not a human agent, Manoah continues to miss the point. In verse 15, Manoah seeks to detain the messenger a bit longer so that they may feed him. The point is being driven home: Manoah is the only one who does not know who he is dealing with. The messenger denies the request, stating, "I will not eat your food," but that instead Manoah should make a burnt offering to Yahweh (v.16). The verse ends with an aside from the author, who ensures the reader that "Manoah did not know" that the messenger was indeed divine. This is a key transition into the next verse, where Manoah continues to fumble around and not recognize exactly who is standing before him. He asks for the name of the messenger, so that the parents may honor this visitor when his words come true (v.17). Manoah asks מִי שְׁמֶךָ when we might instead expect מה, but we should not read into this anything other than authorial choice. Boling, however, reads it as a sign of Manoah's nervousness. He sees the use of מִי instead of מה as Manoah being "momentarily reduced to stuttering" though he "promptly recovers."[373] But why would Manoah begin stuttering now? So often, attempts are made to create a personality for these characters that simply *cannot* be found in the text. Webb excuses Manoah's question and argues that Manoah is not stupid, but that he "simply wants the kind of information he needs (as he sees it) to discharge his proper responsibilities when the promised son is born."[374] Schneider points out that this is Manoah asking for proof "of the deity's word and presence, often at the expense of others," just as Barak, Gideon, and Jephthah also require proof.[375]

The messenger replies, "Why do you ask for my name, since it is incomprehensible?" (v.18). The first part of the messenger's answer should sound rather familiar to us. It is the same response Jacob receives when he asks his midnight wrestling

[373] Boling, *Judges*, 222.
[374] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 356.
[375] Schneider, *Judges*, 202.

opponent his name in Genesis 32:30. The author has adapted the divine name giving motif here in Judges. While Jacob believes he is wrestling with a man and must be shown that this is a divine entity, Manoah is face to face with the fact that this is a divine being. The motif is used in Judges to make fun of Manoah, instead of to inform him of the divine presence, as it is used in Genesis.[376]

The messenger follows the typical motival response "why do you ask for my name," with an explanation for the dimwitted Manoach. Here, he adds, "since it is incomprehensible." The yod in the word פִּלְאִי is very likely an orthographic mistake. In Psalm 139:6, the word appears with a yod, but also with a mater after it, which is not the case here. Here, in 13:18, the word is an adjectival form of פֶּלֶא. It is often translated as "wonderous," however it is better understood as incomprehensible, or inscrutable. Alter renders "it is a mystery,"[377] while Webb and Niditch render "wonderful."[378] Webb understands the response as a "mild rebuke" because "Manoah has inadvertently trodden on holy ground. If he knew who he was speaking to, he would have been more circumspect."[379] However, the messenger's response is not about a rebuke, but rather an indication that, yet again, Manoah is not asking the right questions. He has freely been given information about the future of his son and what the woman is supposed to while she is pregnant. When that information was presented to him in a straightforward way, he was unable to process it. Finally, he asks for information that is not pertinent to the boy's life, and he is told that it is incomprehensible. Over and over again, Manoah asks for the wrong thing.

Manoah makes an offering on an altar to Yahweh, prompting a miraculous pyrotechnic display. The translations of verse 19 vary depending on how interpreters choose to render the phrase וּמַפְלֶא לַעֲשׂוֹת·וּמָנוֹחַ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ רֹאִים·. The Hiphil participle with the Qal infinitive should be read as "A miraculous thing happened while Manoah and his wife looked on." This is an action shot. It should not be read as Alter does, nominally, as "the

[376] David H. Aaron, *Genesis Ideology: Essays on the Uses and Meanings of Stories* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 69–70.
[377] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 177.
[378] Niditch, *Judges*, 140; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 356.
[379] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 356.

other was performing a wonder, with Manoah and his woman watching."[380] Alter argues that it should be read this way so that the reader does not confuse Manoah as the one who is working a wonder. However, given everything we have read about Manoah in this story, there is no risk that the reader will think that he is the one who is working wonders here. Niditch also renders "he who makes things wonderous."[381] Similarly, Boling says "the wonder worker," and restores a divine name from an LXX reading, which he argues was lost due to haplography in the MT.[382] Webb agrees with the haplography argument, restoring the name Yahweh as the subject of the verb "who works wonders."[383] However, the verbal reading of the participle/infinitive phrase is a better reading and does not require haplography as an explanation. That the verse ends with another participle indicates that we have an ongoing action – that an event is taking place in the eyes of two people watching. The clear solution to this issue is actually found in verse 20. There, we are told that "as the flame leapt high above the altar toward heaven, the messenger of Yahweh went up with the flame from the altar, *while Manoah and his wife were still watching*." This interpretation accommodates the aspect and mood of 19, which operate in order to allow the subsequent event of verse 20. The whole thing happens in a moment, and the participles in verses 19-20 allow for the rapid nature of the event to be relayed clearly, while making sure we are aware that both Manoah and his wife are eyewitnesses to this event. Verse 21 sews up this intense flurry of action. The infinitive construct לְהֵרָאֹה should be read as a compound sort of verb with וְלֹא־יָסַף עוֹד, and it is also a callback to רֹאִים in verse 19. This all takes place in their sight and then, here, in verse 21, after the flames ascend, "the messenger of Yahweh was no longer visible to Manoah and his wife" (v.21). This moment, when the messenger is no longer visible, especially with its use of the infinitive, carries over the aspect of instantaneous action from the previous verse. יסף modifies the infinitive and should not be read separately, but rather as a means the author uses to convey how quickly this entire scene begins and ends.

The author cannot resist delivering a final blow to Manoah's masculinity. Only after this intense moment of fire and ascension does Manoah finally understand the identity of

[380] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 177.
[381] Niditch, *Judges*, 140.
[382] Boling, *Judges*, 222.
[383] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 349.

the visitor (v.21). Of course, Manoah manages to misinterpret this. In verse 22, he says "we will certainly die, since we have seen God." We might let Manoah off the hook just a bit for this one, however, since the conception of coming face to face with God elsewhere carries with it a threat of death. Curiously, anyone who sees God survives it, but it seems to be an accepted fact that a face-to-face confrontation with Yahweh was a rather dangerous event. Hagar expresses concern about her meeting with a divine figure in Genesis 21, and Moses too is given special precautions so that he does not die when facing God in Exodus 33. Manoah's wife disabuses him of this however, asking why the deity would grant them the possibility of having a child only to turn around and kill them. Alter sees this whole scene as "highlighting male obtuseness and the good sense of the woman."[384] Niditch agrees, describing the whole scene as a juxtaposition of the "down-to-earth good sense of the woman….with the timidity and ignorance of the man."[385] From start to finish Manoah misses the point. The head of the household as the representative of a patriarchal ideal is being lambasted here. Samson will bring about his own humiliation by the end of his story, but before he is born, he manages to bring about his father's as well.

The messenger was true to his word, for in the next verse we are told that "the woman bore a son and named him Samson" (v.24). We are told that Samson is already endowed with a special quality. As he grew up, Yahweh blesses him (v.24). Directly related to this blessing, it seems, is the fact that "the spirit of Yahweh began to stir in him" (v.25). Just as Samson will "begin to deliver Israel," so the spirit of Yahweh "begins" to interfere in his life. The two are directly related. While we have seen the spirit of Yahweh descend on Jephthah, the verb that is used in chapter 11 is different than what is used here in 13. The activity of Yahweh's spirit will be different in Samson than it has been in any other judge. It will drive his actions, it will lend to the absurd elements of the story, and it will ultimately lead to his death. The chapter closes with a reminder that Samson is still in Danite territory, between Zorah and Eshtaol. His sphere of existence will stray from the ancestral, tribal land and down to the Philistine coast. The spirit of Yahweh will drive him

[384] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 178.
[385] Niditch, *Judges*, 146.

there, and he will spend his life on the boundary between his own people and the Philistines. He will die that way as well.

Chapter 14

Much of Samson's travel in his story is introduced with the verb ירד. While this dissertation emphasizes that geographic locations are not essential to understanding the larger polemic, we should acknowledge that the verb indicates that Samson is going to coastal Philistine lowlands, descending from a higher land, regardless of where that might be. I have chosen to render "while there" instead of using Timnah for a second time in the translation. The repetition of the location is meant to emphasize that he is visiting Timnah and during that visit, he sees a woman from that area. Samson's first action as an adult in our story is seeing a woman.

Samson returns home to his parents and demands they "get her" as his wife (v.2). This is a technical term. While Samson embodies raw masculinity, the author is already showing us that the qualities of leadership that we would expect from a judge and an Israelite man are being compromised. First, he returns home and asks that his parents arrange a marriage with a foreign woman. Second, as we will see, Manoah is unable to dissuade him from marrying outside the clan. The traits associated with traditional male leadership are increasingly compromised in the book of Judges. While Samson still embodies raw physical strength, a major characteristic of Judges' masculinity, the usefulness of that strength in terms of leadership is being shown as quite weak. His motivations are entirely self-serving. They are not in the interest of Israel, or even of his immediate community. In fact, throughout the entire narrative, Samson will do absolutely nothing on behalf of Israel. This illuminates the author's goal of presenting the deity's direction of history as ambiguous.

Webb sees Samson's request of his parents in verse 2 as a sign that he is headstrong, a "youth whose passions are so inflamed by what his eyes see that they blind him to all reason and duty."[386] For Webb, this request indicates the upending of traditional roles that

[386] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 365.

depict Samson as a "chaos monster."[387] When he visits Timnah, he has crossed the boundary between Israel and Philistia. When he sees the Timnite woman, he blurs a line between love and lust. When he demands his parents procure her "he overturns normal family relationships."[388] Matthews sees Samson's activity along similar lines as Webb, suggesting that Samson's choice of a foreign wife "functions as a reflection of a world in which values are overturned or reversed."[389] However, I propose that we view Samson's actions as the next logical step in the degeneration of leadership or, as Yeats would have it, the further widening of the gyre that unravels the social fabric of the community in the book of Judges. Instead of seeing Samson's behavior as a singularity, we should see it as the next indicator of the failure of traditional male leadership. Samson, a judge, is unable to serve in any traditional sense of leadership. He is totally self-serving. The chaos that Webb describes is a result of the unraveling system, not of Samson himself. He is simply a prop – a mechanism to convey the leadership failures and thus embody the polemic.

As we see in verse 3, Manoah attempts to stop his son from marrying outside the Israelite fold. Manoah wonders if there isn't someone from his own family, or from within the Israelites, rather than from the "uncircumcised Philistines." This is Manoah's only protest against Samson's request, and it is halfhearted and posed as a speculation, and not a statement. Webb argues that the father's protestation (which he interprets as the hesitation of both parents) is due to their concern that he "cannot maintain his Nazirite status if he marries the Timnite woman."[390] But in doing so, Webb imagines an inner dialogue between the parents that is unnecessary to the story. Schneider chooses to render "circumcised" as "foreskinned ones" to elevate the crassness of Samson's choice. For Schneider, "the Philistines were the enemy and what better way to depict them as dirty and barbaric than by referring so vividly to something that the writer's group disdains."[391] But we must consider: if the parents find the Philistines so reprehensible, or fear that Samson will lose Nazirite status, why is Manoah's protest so feeble? They raise a single objection, almost passively, and are deterred with a single sentence. "Get her for me, for she is right in my

[387] Ibid.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 144.
[390] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 365.
[391] Schneider, *Judges*, 204.

eyes," is all Samson says to quash their protests. Throughout the entire book, Israel has done evil in Yahweh's eyes, bringing about their own destruction. They will continue to do so, led by a man who defies cultural marriage expectations by doing what is right in his own eyes.

The author breaks into the narrative in verse 4, however, and assures us that this has all been designed by God. Though Manoah and his wife don't know it, Yahweh "is seeking grounds for a conflict with the Philistines" (v.4). The Philistines were currently ruling over Israel, and, as we will recall, Samson is the one who will "begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5). Though most of the characters in the story will have no awareness that God has arranged the events in order to obtain his end, the audience is aware that Samson has been chosen for a special role. Samson's unawareness that his choice of marriage partner is providing grounds for a conflict for the deity is another clue that we are looking at a comedy, albeit with a tragic ending. Also, God's choice to use Samson to begin Israel's deliverance is a strange one. Samson embodies the idea of wasted divine gifts. Even a judge, imbued with divine gifts, cannot totally save Israel. Strength is useless. The author is challenging the notion that God intervenes in history is a way that makes sense. The ambiguity in God's power and ability is highlighted in Samson's shortcomings. Surely, God could design a better person. Or perhaps he could not. The author, illustrating the total breakdown of traditional leadership, is not only positing the futility of armed resistance but also whether or not divinely engineered history whose engineer has indeterminate goals is all that comforting. Certainly the deity engineers history, but is he doing it well? The author repeatedly chooses not to answer that question for his readers.

The pretext for the conflict with Philistia carries on, and Samson and his family go down to Timnah for the marriage ceremony. Samson is then near the vineyards of Timnah, and a lion in its prime comes roaring at Samson (v.5). The spirit of Yahweh comes upon Samson, and he tears the lion apart "just as one would tear a kid apart, though there was nothing in his hand." After this event, Samson says nothing about it to his parents.

At first blush, it may seem as though this scene demands a line by line interpretation to explain not only its absurd nature but its brevity and confusing presentation. The

appearance of the lion is introduce by the וְהִנֵּה particle. This is meant to shift the perspective to Samson's point of view. He is the one in the vineyard, and he is the one who sees the lion come roaring at him. That Samson's parents are not part of the lion scene causes some confusion with interpreters. Alter, summarizing Erlich, suggests that Samson is "an energetic young man," who has "bounded far ahead of his parents, who are walking slowly on the path to Timnah."[392] But we must not abandon the idea of absurdity. We do not need to provide an alternative setting for other characters who are not present for the scene – it is not essential to the story. The reason we are told that Samson does not tell his parents is because the lion scene must become an enigma for his wedding party later, and no one but Samson can have access to the solution.

Another sticking point in the lion story is that Samson is near a vineyard. Schneider argues that, as a Nazirite sworn to avoid alcohol, he should not have been there.[393] But as we saw in the opening scene of Samson's story, only his mother is prohibited from the vine. While Samson is meant to be a Nazir, the rules are not elaborated by the messenger, and it is not wise to interpret the scene on the basis of Numbers 6. Another issue that arises is whether or not a lion would have been a likely inhabitant of a coastal vineyard. Niditch says "lions would have been commonplace in the forested ecosystem of ancient Israel."[394] Webb disagrees, however, indicating that the animal's presence in the vineyard is "incongruous and unexpected."[395] Here we have an example of the interpretive trend to disregard the absurdity of individual story events. This is made clear in the next verse. Samson rips the lion apart with his bare hands, using no weapon. Boling suggests that this is "the way a lion would tear a kid apart. Or possibly, as though the lion were a mere kid."[396] Soggin goes a step further, arguing that this is actually a common practice. He suggests that "it is a practice even today in Arab countries to tear a kid or a lamb to pieces with the hands; though of course this is when the animal has already been cooked. The paragon demonstrates the ease of the operation, proof of his heroic strength."[397] This is, of course,

[392] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 180.
[393] Schneider, *Judges*, 205.
[394] Niditch, *Judges*, 155.
[395] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 367.
[396] Boling, *Judges*, 230.
[397] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 240.

an unnecessary explanation. The absurdity of the image contributes to the comedic character of the story. A lion approaches Samson, God imbues Samson with God's own wild spirit, and Samson rips the lion apart with his bare hands. The lion is a pretext for Samson's wedding enigma that he will present later, but we must not neglect the fact that the scene is simply a comedic one. As mentioned above, though Samson does not tell his parents about the lion event, we should not read his quietness about the event as shame, or that he knew he was breaking his Nazirite vow. The vow does not factor into this story, except perhaps to explain why Samson is imbued with the spirit of Yahweh in the first place, because he is chosen by God. The lion tale wraps up with Samson's arrival in Timnah, where he speaks to the woman who he will marry. I have rendered וַתִּישַׁר בְּעֵינֵי שִׁמְשׁוֹן as "Samson found her attractive" (v.7). There is, of course, a moral judgment being made here, that she was right in his eyes, but it may be better to translate Samson's behavior as based in his level of attraction to her, not that she is "right," because, let us not forget, she comes from the "uncircumcised Philistines." She is distinctly not "right" morally, for an Israelite leader, but "attractive."

As the wedding approaches and Samson heads back to Timnah, Samson returns to the scene of the lion attack (v.8). We should not dedicate too much energy toward determining why he went there to see the woman in the previous verse and between that verse and this verse, seemingly returned home and then took off for Timnah again. The necessary part of the scene is that the lion renders a pretext for the wedding enigma. As Samson approaches the corpse of the lion, he notices "a swarm of bees in the lion corpse, as well as some honey" (v.8). Determining the passage of time between the attack and the appearance of the honey in the lion corpse is not necessary to understanding the story. Again, we need to recall the absurdity the author weaves into the tale. Thus, honey appearing in the corpse does not have any special meaning. It is not, as Boling suggests, related to a Mesopotamian "mixture of milk, honey, and other components" used to "ward off a devil caused 'fever sickness'" or "part of preparation for battle."[398] Soggin focuses instead on why the animal has not rotted, speculating the heat in the area has eliminated putrefaction."[399] But these disregard the וְהִנֵּה particle that indicates the surprising nature of

[398] Boling, *Judges*, 230.
[399] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 240.

the scene. The two uses of וְהִנֵּה in this lion scene are indicators of the silliness and absurdity of the story.

Samson removes the honey from the corpse and eats it, later sharing it with his parents as they continue their journey. Again we are told "he did not tell them that he had gotten the honey from the lion carcass" (v.9). This is for the later enigma. But this provides another opportunity to emphasize the absurdity of some of the individual Samson story elements. The entire story is devised to bring about a defeat. This is the macro meaning of the tale. Within the story there are micro elements such as the lion event, and other miraculous happenings, but the overall impact of the story is greater than the sum of its parts. This dissertation is examining the macro purpose of the story, rather than the micro elements which are meant to contribute to the comedic character formation. The micro elements are *entertainment*. The micro elements do not always serve the larger heuristic component, but may just function to push the absurdity forward. The author ha larger purpose to achieve, but they are also reminding the audience that this is phantasmagoric fiction. Feasibility and plausibility have to be sacrificed for the value of the symbolism: something sweet comes from a corpse, just as Israel's victory will begin to come from Samsons' corpse. That Samson does not tell his parents may be a set up for the enigma later, and it may also be furthering the comedic element because Samson himself does not see this as an extraordinary event. We need not consider that touching a corpse violates his Nazirite vow, especially in a vineyard, as Alter states.[400] Soggin agrees, arguing that "for the Nazirite the action is doubly sinful."[401] Webb suggests Samson's shame is the reason he does not tell his parents.[402] But as we have seen, the Nazirite element is subverted, made into a parody, and should not function as a guiding principle for understanding Samson's actions.

Finally, the wedding takes place. Samson and his parents arrive and "Samson prepared a feast there, for that was what the young men were supposed to do" (v.10). It is not fruitful for us to consider the possible Philistine customs that are in play here. The author is adding a note here that Samson is putting together a feast because it is a custom.

[400] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 180.
[401] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 240.
[402] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 369–70.

We do not need to have any more information, for the feast is the vehicle for the enigma to be delivered, and the pretext for an inciting moment of violence with the Philistines. Soggin argues that the note delivered by the author indicates that "this custom was not practiced at the time and in the social milieu of the author."[403]But, instead of trying to understand regional customs from an unknowable and nebulous time period, perhaps we are instead being delivered a folk tale that includes explanatory elements such as this. Soggin and Schneider attempt to outline the custom taking place here, including that the wedding feast likely featured a lot of drinking, further violating Samson's Nazirite vow.[404] Niditch assumes that riddling is also a part of the custom, perhaps meant to "create a new sense of community and union."[405] But we should not enforce our ideas of story coherence on the Judges author. For him, this detail was not germane to the story's internal coherence. The same can be said for the interpretation of Samson as the party host, rather than his parents. Their absence is not a "stark condemnation" of his marital choice by his parents,[406] or a lack of parental control.[407] These details of the custom are not relevant to the author's goals for the story, so they are not illuminated any further. The point is that there needs to be a wedding feast. This also liberates us from attempting to explain the thirty companions that are provided when Samson arrives for the wedding (v.11). Webb argues that the sight of Samson's impressive physique may have prompted the provision of the thirty companions, but it may also be a sign of respect.[408] Whether it is part of the custom does not matter. It is a repeated number and mirrors the number of garments that Samson will later obtain.

Yahweh's pretext for conflict with the Philistines concretizes in verse 12. Samson suggests a challenge to the wedding attendees. חִידָה is often rendered as "riddle" by most translators. I have chosen to render it "enigma." Riddles have solutions. Samson is the only person who can resolve the enigma he poses, because it is based on an event that occurred solely to him. It is impossible to render a solution without having been in the vineyard with Samson. He sets a very high stake for the enigma, thirty linens and thirty garments. He is

[403] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 241.
[404] Soggin, 241; Schneider, *Judges*, 206.
[405] Niditch, *Judges*, 156.
[406] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 242.
[407] Schneider, *Judges*, 206.
[408] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 371.

quite aware that the puzzle is unsolvable, and that is why he creates stakes that are so high. In verse 14 he delivers his enigma: "out of the one who devours comes something to eat, and from the strong came something sweet." It is clearly not a riddle. The fact that the enigma cannot be resolved by anyone but Samson contributes to the absurdity of the story. His riddle is not, as Webb argues, a sign that Samson "must be the center of attention."[409] But we have already been told the purpose for the enigma, and basically for everything that Samson will do throughout his career. Yahweh is seeking grounds for a conflict with the Philistines, and this is how he will bring it about (v.4). After three days, the Philistines cannot solve the riddle *because they are not supposed to*.

A number of days pass and the Philistines begin to pressure the Timnite woman to coerce the solution to the enigma out of Samson. The text reads that seven days have passed, but most interpreters render it as four days based on an LXX reading. Alter argues that "it is not credible that they would have waited until the very last moment, and this would also contradict the report that she pestered him for the solution day after day."[410] But I argue that this is not necessarily a sticking point for the story. Alter is measuring credibility for the story based on a contemporary notion of coherence. But this may not be the coherence the biblical author sought while constructing the story. The key is that the woman is being threatened in order to coerce a solution to Samson's enigma out of her husband. She is merely a recipient of the threats of her community members.[411] If she does not do what they ask, they threaten not only her wellbeing but her entire family. Then they pose a rhetorical question to the young woman: "Did you two bring us here to dispossess us?" The Philistines accuse the woman of conspiring with Samson for material gain over her own people. The only thing we have learned so far about the woman is that she is attractive, she is married, or at least promised, to Samson, and that she has a family that can be used as collateral. These are not details that pertain to her as a character, but as a plot mechanism.

She confronts Samson, accusing him of "loathing her" because he did not share the answer to the enigma with her (v.16). Samson's response shows us the purpose of the

[409] Webb, 372.
[410] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 181.
[411] Alter, 181; Schneider, *Judges*, 210.

enigma in the first place; no one was *meant* to know about it. He answers, "I have not even told my mother and father, but I should tell you?" Now we can be sure that the repetition of Samson's decision not to tell his parents about the lion encounter and the origin of the honey are not because he fears they will be angry about the breaking of his Nazirite vow. Rather, the secrecy of the event is what makes it an enigma, and the dramatic response of the Philistines is the seed of the conflict that Yahweh has sought to plant between the Philistines and Samson.

The Timnite woman continues her campaign to wrest the enigma's solution from Samson. Over the course of the wedding festivities she "continued to lament to him" (v.17). Finally, he reveals the answer to her, "since she was distressing him." Alter renders "for she had badgered him," while Webb reads, "because she had worn him down."[412] Matthews renders הֲצִיקַתְהוּ as "she had nagged him."[413] Though her life and the life of her family is at risk, interpreters continue to render her actions as "nagging" or "badgering." She serves a single purpose, which is to foment the conflict between the Philistines and Samson. She relays the solution to the enigma to the Philistines.

We are told that the Philistines deliver the solution to Samson "just before sunset" on the last day of the feast (v.18). Everything is down to the wire – tensions are extremely high. While we may have expected the Philistines to be unable to obtain the answer, thus creating the grounds for the conflict, our expectations are upended. Samson's absurd and therefore insoluble enigma has been solved, an outcome we were perhaps not expecting. Samson's response to this is to insult the woman he has just married, comparing her to a farm animal being used for mere functionality. In effect, he is not wrong. He states "if you had not plowed with my heifer, you would never have solved the enigma" (v.18). Alter reads this as Samson imagining "that she has been unfaithful to him – perhaps with thirty different men!"[414] But this is not clear from the statement. Samson believes that they received the answer unfairly and this provokes his response in order to uphold his end of

[412] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 182; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 364.
[413] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 143.t b
[414] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 183.

the deal. Again – we must view the entire interaction as a pretext for conflict with the Philistines. Samson is the ignition switch, not the Philistines.

In verse 19, we are told that the spirit of Yahweh again rushes onto Samson and this time, instead of ripping an animal in half, he kills thirty men in Ashkelon, strips the clothing from the dead bodies, and "gave their garments to those who had solved the enigma." *This* is the inciting action. The insoluble enigma, the intermarriage, and everything leading up to the attack in Ashkelon are mere groundwork. That Samson fulfills his own wager by killing people from the group he wagered against is an act of war. Now Yahweh has the conflict with the Philistines that he seeks. Matthews argues that the Philistines who fall victim to Samson in Ashkelon are "not truly innocent" because "they are uncircumcised Philistines" and because, like many foreigners, "they are fair game because they represent the potential for religious contamination and idolatry."[415] But we must ask – why on earth would Samson care about the potential for idolatry? This is unnecessary gap filling. God wants a pretext for war with Philistia. The story's purpose is the evocation of war, which is the focus of every Judges story, one way or another. In this story, Samson is the vehicle for war. But the fact that he is Yahweh's sole operator here calls into question the deity's national interest, so to speak. Does Yahweh want a war between Israel and Philistia? Or does he himself want to wage war and only requires Samson to do so? The author leaves the answer to this ambiguous.

Samson, this vehicle for war, is powerful and rash, and with the help of the Spirit of Yahweh, strong enough to kill thirty men. Whether or not they are "innocent" does not matter; he has answered his own wager with not only thirty sets of garments but with thirty Philistine lives. He is angry, and he returns back home, once again, to his parents. The woman, we are told, was "given to one of his companions, who had been a friend of his." Alter views this as a marriage annulment.[416] Niditch examines the giving away of the woman as a sign of who has "political and social power."[417] But we must consider a different interpretation: the trading of the woman is simply grounds for more conflict. Whether or not the marriage is annulled based on rules found elsewhere in the Hebrew

[415] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 148.
[416] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 183.
[417] Niditch, *Judges*, 158.

Bible, or whether or not it reflects the powerlessness of women in society, is not the point. The point is that the situation is not resolved. Samson has killed thirty men and stormed off. However the Philistines interpret Samson leaving his wife among them was not essential to the author's notion of story coherence. The author's story does not pivot off an internal Philistine thought, just as it does not pivot off the contemporary reader's expectations. The detail about how the Philistines respond to Samson's behavior is irrelevant to the narrative's autonomy. Regardless of the motivation behind the outcome, Samson will still become enraged again and continue to create conflict. *That* is the detail that is germane to the story.

Chapter 15

Samson returns to Timnah "later, during the wheat harvest" (v.1). This detail is important, because the conflict with the Philistines will escalate when he destroys the entire harvest. Schneider describes the harvest as a "season associated with labor," which we have not seen Samson doing at all.[418] Schneider seems to suggest that we should expect that Samson would have had plenty of work to do at home, "and yet Samson took this time to visit the wife from whom he had estranged himself earlier."[419] But we have not been given any indication that Samson's family has anything to harvest. We know the name of the place where they live, but there has been no other information about how the family makes its living. This is not because the author has forgotten it, but because it is not information that is critical to the story's coherence. We were told the entire point of Samson's life before he was even born: "he will begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5). Whether or not Samson dedicates his hands to manual toil is not the point. Schneider also says that we do not even see Samson engaged in any military labor, even though he is a "professional military person."[420] But this is an unnecessary attempt to find fault with Samson. Schneider is attempting to depict Samson as single minded, driven by his lust and need for women into shirking some labor we should assume he is abandoning. But in what

[418] Schneider, *Judges*, 212.
[419] Ibid.
[420] Ibid.

way is Samson a "professional military person?" He is a lone actor. His violence is not even related to the benefit of Israel's people. The whole point of the disintegration of the social fabric of Judges is that, by the time God has to use Samson, there *is no* military leadership. The only time we see a possible Israelite military presence in the entire Samson saga is the Judahites later in this chapter who appear to be in service to the Philistines! We must remember that the author is contending with what it means when God utilizes a flawed leader like Samson to deliver the people. He does not need to be shirking family farm labor or military service in order to embody the characteristics necessary to the polemic. Samson returns to the home of his wife because he must spur on the conflict between Philistia and Israel.

He appears with a kid, what Boling describes as "the ancient near eastern alternative to our box of chocolates."[421] Matthews also understands it as a "peace offering."[422] He wishes to go about "business as usual," requesting to enter her bedroom. Yet, we must recall, Samson previously murdered thirty Philistines and stormed away in a rage. The fact that he even went back to Timnah is the entire point of this next story section. The conflict must continue. The Timnite woman's father refuses Samson entrance to her bedroom. He explains that Samson had abandoned the woman and that she is now the wife of "your companion" (v.2). We should not interpret the father's statement as an indicator that he thought there was an actual divorce that took place. Boling argues that the infinitive absolute with the finite form "is based on the technical term used in matters of divorce (Deut 24:3)."[423]Boling also sees in this scene "the father's ungovernable rage" because "he has performed an irreparable act in giving his daughter to another man, and she cannot return to Samson under any conditions (Deut 24:1-4)."[424] Offering another daughter, as Boling sees it, is the only way to salvage the situation. Soggin also takes the Deuteronomic approach, arguing that the father's statement "I thought for sure that you utterly despised her" is "part of the Israelite formula of repudiation, cf. Deut 22:13, 15 and 24:3."[425] But a Deuteronomic interpretation may be using another text to fill the gaps in the Samson story.

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[421] Boling, *Judges*, 234.
[422] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 151.
[423] Boling, *Judges*, 234–35.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 245.

There is no legal language taking place in the scene between Samson and his father-in-law. They are not discussing actual divorce proceedings between two parties. *The conflict must continue.* There is no resolution, just as with Samson's enigma. The relevance of the Deuteronomic material is, at best, indirect to this story.

That the wife has been given away to another is all that it takes to infuriate Samson. The offering of another daughter is an ineffective solution. In verse 3, Samson justifies his actions, though based on what we know about Yahweh needing grounds for a conflict, this is unnecessary as well. Samson states that he is now exonerated. "I will be without guilt, for I am about to do a terrible thing against them" (v.3). In the previous verse, the father states to Samson that he has given the woman to לְמֵרֵעֶךָ, "to your friend." Now, in verse 3, Samson subverts the מֵרֵעַ from the previous verse with רָעָה. This clever play on words is used to justify his revenge in advance.

Samson's choice of revenge act is the key to understanding why he is visiting the Philistines during the wheat harvest. Yahweh is seeking grounds for a conflict. Now an enraged Samson is about to destroy the entire harvest of the Philistines – this is undoubtedly a worse act than killing thirty men from Ashkelon. Yahweh hits them where it hurts: financially. But the means by which Samson achieves this is another element of absurdity in the story that is often missed for a deeper (nonexistent) meaning by other interpreters. We are told "Samson went out and caught three hundred foxes. He took torches, and set a torch between each pair of tails. He set fire to the torches and released them into the Philistine grain fields" (v.4-5). Our first response should be: how on earth does one man catch three hundred foxes? What's more – how does one go about tying a flaming torch to the tails of a set of foxes? These questions highlight the absurdity of the scene. Yet, interpreters focus instead on whether or not the foxes should instead be understood as jackals. Soggin argues that "foxes are solitary animals and would be virtually impossible to tie together."[426] These interpretations illuminate the absurdity of the scene. Yes. It is absurd that a man should catch three hundred wild animals and manage to tie one hundred and fifty torches to them after having paired them off. We should not attempt to understand the logic of the scene! We should not be considering the feasibility of the act. Again, while

[426] Soggin, 246.Boling also reads jackals, .Boling, *Judges*, 234.

the macro story is one about flawed heroes and the idea of deliverance, the micro elements serve to remind us that the story's genre is a phantasmagoric comedy! The grounds for the conflict are met; the means by which they are met are absurd.

Verse 5 returns us to the macro story. The flaming teams of foxes set alight all the harvestables in the region. This is how you cripple an army; this is how you begin a major conflict. Everything in the story has been in service only to this point. The repetitive nature of the materials that are destroyed by Samson's wildlife antics indicate the destruction is a complete one. Translations differ based on how interpreters wish to understand מִגָּלִישׁ וְעַד־ קָמָה וְעַד־כֶּרֶם זָיִת, but even the diversity of interpretations show the totality of the damage. Samson's, and by proxy, Yahweh's aims, are sheer and total devastation. Matthews draws a parallel between the thirty men in Ashkelon and the damage to the Philistine harvestables and in doing so properly highlights the escalation in the attempt at conflict. He writes, "he strips them bare in much the same way as he had stripped the bodies of the men he killed in Ashkelon."[427] Every action Samson takes is in service of the conflict Yahweh seeks with the Philistines.

The Philistine response to the fire crisis is comedic, bordering on the absurd, and it also illustrates the weakness and futility of leadership not only in Israel but also among the Philistines. In verse 6, the Philistines ask "who did this?" Who indeed? The answer to the Philistines is delivered via the typical response: וַיֹּאמְרוּ. However, rather than rendering this as "they said," I have chosen to render it passively as "the reply came." We need not, as Webb does, imagine a whole crowd of "unidentified informants" who "are probably relatives and neighbors who were close enough to witness what had provoked Samson."[428] The author is looking for the simplest way to relay information among the Philistines; we need not imagine a group of neighbors when the text does not provide them. The answer condemns not only Samson for his act of fiery terrorism but also "the Timnite, who took his wife and gave her to his companion" (v.6). This response appears to assign some blame to the man from 15:2, and that blame is realized in the next phrase. The Philistines "went and burned her and her father with fire." This act had originally been threatened when the

[427] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 152.
[428] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 378.

woman was faced with coercing Samson to give her the solution to his wedding enigma, and we see now that death by fire was an unavoidable fate for her. She is a formalized, expendable character even to her own people. She has doubly erred, by being traded to a different man for marriage and now for being the reason Samson has sought revenge against the Philistines. Schneider sees the burning of the woman and her family as a condemnation of Philistine customs. For her, the burning "provides a platform to describe illegitimate practices of the Philistines, thereby describing what the Israelites should not be doing."[429] But this story is not a condemnation of Philistine practices as much as it is a condemnation of traditional leadership structures. The Timnite woman serves as a pawn to illustrate the futility of both resistance and compliance. She complied, her father resisted, and their lives end in an ash heap. A polemic that challenges the value of both compliance and resistance is not only struggling with the nature of being a Persian suzerain, but with what it means to have a God who allows leaders such as this to have as much power as they do. She exists solely as a vehicle for the polemic.

Samson responds to the death of his wife with rage, swearing vengeance. He responds, "If this is what you have done with her, then I shall not cease until I avenge myself against you." (v.7). The second part of verse 7, וְאַחַר אֶחְדָּל, is confusing. If we render it "and then I shall cease," it seems uncharacteristic of Samson. Since when have we seen him draw limits for himself and his retributive actions? Soggin reads the phrase as "only then will I be satisfied."[430] Matthews follows similar lines, rendering "I swear I will not stop until I have taken revenge on you."[431] Opposing these readings that feature the relentlessness of the phrase, Boling reads, "but thereafter, I quit."[432] Similarly, Webb credits Samson with taking this opportunity to learn boundaries. He writes,

> What is clear, though, is that at this point at least Samson shows some capacity to act in a considered and measured way. This is surprising, to say the least, in view of his previous behavior and the extreme provocation he has suffered. It shows that he is beginning to show some of the qualities required in a leader and prepares the way for the statement in 15:20 and 16:31 that he 'judged Israel for twenty years.' Samson has begun to grow up.[433]

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[429] Schneider, *Judges*, 215.
[430] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 244.
[431] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 150.
[432] Boling, *Judges*, 235.
[433] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 380.

Alas, I do not think we can permit Samson to have a moment of growth here. If we are reading the book of Judges as a polemic in which all the characters act in service of the message, and all are formalized (though the women more so than the men), emotional growth and maturity cannot factor in. And, contrary to Webb, we do not see any qualities of leadership develop in Samson after this moment. What qualities are required in a leader? And is deciding not to murder everyone one of them? Samson is not maturing. He is threatening the Philistines with total annihilation, just as Yahweh intended when he established these grounds for a conflict.

Samson illustrates this totality in the next verse. We are told that "he struck them from leg to thigh with a great blow" (v.8). Much work has been done to determine the meaning behind the phrase שׁוֹק עַל־יָרֵךְ׃ Soggin summarizes its lack of clarity, wondering "whether it is a technical military expression or fighting slang whose implications escape us, or whether it is an idiomatic way of indicating total defeat."[434] Boling takes it in combination with the following phrase מַכָּה גְדוֹלָה , suggesting "he left them a tangle of legs and thighs."[435] The phrase is certainly an idiomatic one, and we need not consider its implications beyond that. Samson routes the Philistines in a total and devastating victory. The idiom, followed by "a great blow," is all that is needed to convey Samson's superhuman strength and his ability to defeat an entire group of people by himself. This is not the first time he has done this (recall his murder of thirty men in Ashkelon) and it will not be the last. The author is highlighting the raw power embodied in one man. It is part of the polemic, and here he uses an idiom to illustrate it.

Yahweh has used Samson as the ignition for a conflict, and indeed an armed conflict follows. The Philistines "mustered themselves against Judah" (v.9). This is similar imagery to Sisera's troops in chapter 4 and the Ammonites in chapter 11. The military forces of the Philistines have assembled and are readying to march on Judah. Samson's actions have finally provoked the beginnings of the conflicts that Yahweh had been aiming for. The troops deploy at Lehi, which foreshadows what is to take place at the site based on its most fitting name.

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[434] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 246.
[435] Boling, *Judges*, 235.

For the first time in the entire Samson saga, we are introduced to Israelites who are outside of Samson's immediate family. They are Judahites, and they only appear because they are faced with a Philistine invasion. Rather than facing down the Philistine threat, the Judahites ask "Why have you come up here against us?" (v.10). Let us consider that the Philistines have mustered themselves at Lehi; they have begun a military presence in the region. Rather than preparing for war, the Judahites seek an explanation. Again, traditional leadership is reduced in Judges. All leadership is weak, regardless of whether it is Philistine or Israelite leadership. The Philistines respond by stating that they have come to capture Samson, so that they may "do to him what he did to us" (v.10). The verb is the verb for bind, which may foreshadow the eventual capture of Samson at the hands of Delilah, who will bind him up several times. I think we can render the word as "capture," as we are being shown military action. Matthews uses bind in his translation, seeing it as a nod to the Delilah story. The Philistine goal to bind Samson "is a basic violation of Samson's freedom, but his ability to escape bondage is tied directly to his recognition of Yahweh as his source of strength and thus is a source of hope to the nation if it will return to the worship of Yahweh."[436] This is a fine sentiment to imbue into the text, but I think the sentimentality diminishes the impact of the polemic at work here. The story is not about a return to true worship of Yahweh. It is about the ambiguous nature of a deity who changes history through deeply flawed means

In an amazing twist, the next verse shows the Judahites becoming mercenaries for the Philistines, a foreign army currently occupying Lehi. We are told "three thousand men" went to the cave to which Samson fled after his "hip to thigh" massacre (v.11). We should envision here platoons, or companies, regardless of the number. The military imagery is key. The Judahites have activated their own military against a fellow tribesman in service of the Philistine military. Webb accurately describes the Judahites as "lackeys."[437] The Philistines had not asked for the Judahites to intervene. In fact, they state their purpose clearly: "We came to capture Samson and do to him what he did to us" (v.10). The

[436] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 153.
[437] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 383.

leadership of Israel is so deeply flawed, so desperately useless, that they become a proxy battalion for the Philistines, taking the work of capturing Samson upon themselves.

They explain their own behavior in the next verse when they finally reach Samson at the cave in the rock of Etam. They ask of him, quite rhetorically, "Don't you know that the Philistines are our masters? Why have you done this to us?" (v.11). What is left of Israel's leadership is in full service to the Philistines now. By admitting that the Philistines are "our masters," the Israelites have shown that indeed, the falcon no longer hears the falconer, and they no longer consider Yahweh their master but instead the uncircumcised Philistines. Samson's response highlights the lack of unity among Israel, and the personal motivations that have surpassed the motivation to maintain the relationship with Yahweh. He replies to them, "As they did to me, so I have done to them" (v.11). It is a simple, straightforward response to their question. After he learns they are here to capture him on behalf of the Philistines, he makes them promise that they will not attack him in the process. They promise him, "we will only capture you and deliver you into their hands, but we will not murder you" (v.13). They have been reduced to flunkies. At the end of verse 13, the Judahites bind Samson with two new, presumably quite strong, ropes, and bring him out of his hiding place. Webb sees the scene as "full of pathos" as "it is not the ropes that bind Samson here, but something deeper: a sense of hopelessness, perhaps, of the awareness of a destiny he is powerless to resist."[438] But we must recall the entire purpose for Samson's life, which is to begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. To do this, God must have grounds for a conflict with the Philistines, which he had sought from the outset of Samson's marriage to the Timnite woman. Samson cannot do this without being in the presence of the Philistines. If the Judahites were to allow Samson to escape, the opportunity for this particular conflict would be lost.

When Samson comes to Lehi, the Philistines "shouted to greet him" (v.14). We should note that the approach is the same as that of the lion from chapter 14. Here, וּפְלִשְׁתִּים הֵרִיעוּ לִקְרָאתוֹ, while in 14:5 כְּפִיר אֲרָיוֹת שֹׁאֵג לִקְרָאתוֹ. The outcome of the actions is the same as well. Just as the spirit of Yahweh rushes upon him and allows him to rip the lion in half with no weapon, so here the spirit of Yahweh rushes upon him and liberates him from his

[438] Webb, 384–85.

bindings. The enemy with which Samson must contend has escalated, as has the conflict with the Philistines.

The following scene, beginning with the ropes melting away "like linen that is burned with fire" again highlights the author's use of absurdity as a story element (v.14). The miraculous disappearance of the bonds, as well as Samson's discovery of a nearby donkey jawbone, are entertaining micro elements that reinforce the genre's components. In verse 15, we are told that Samson finds a "fresh jawbone of a donkey," which he reaches out and picks up as a weapon. The detail of the freshness of the jawbone is part of the absurdity. We must consider – in the midst of being captured by Philistines, Samson looks around and sees a freshly skeletonized jawbone. The detail itself is absurd! Thanks to a donkey's recent demise, Samson will be able to defeat the many Philistines attacking him. However, just as we have seen with the lion remains, many interpreters read the jawbone scene as another violation of his Nazirite vow. Alter points out that Samson finds his weapon in an "unclean object."[439] Matthews sees Samson as the problem, with his selection of the jawbone illustrating "either a lack of understanding for his Nazirite obligations or a total disregard for them."[440] Soggin also understands the use of the jawbone as a violation of Nazirite rule.[441] Curiously, Webb does not see the use of the jawbone as a problem, however, since the whole thing is a pretext from God. Samson cannot be blamed for picking up the jawbone, considering that the rushing spirit of God is what provoked Samson to do so in the first place.[442] We must also not assume the inclusion of the freshness of the jaw is to show that it would be a good weapon, as Alter states, arguing that the bone "would not be dry and brittle" thus making it an ineffective weapon.[443] But a donkey jawbone *is* an ineffective weapon. That is why the scene is so absurd. The freshness lends to the comedy, not the efficacy, of the weapon. A single jawbone lays low one thousand Philistine men!

That the scene is absurd is proven by Samson's response. After killing one thousand men with a donkey's jawbone, Samson delivers a sing-song summation of his actions. He says, "with a donkey's jawbone, heaps upon heaps, with a donkey's jawbone I have killed

[439] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 186.
[440] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 154.
[441] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 250.
[442] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 387.
[443] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 186.

a thousand men" (v.16). It is meant to be read this way, based on the repetition of the word חמֹור. Alter suggests that the reading might actually mean "a donkey, a pair" because "the word for 'mound' requires different vowels."[444] But Alter renders it as "mound upon mound" following "a long tradition of interpretation."[445] Both Niditch and Boling render "one heap! Two heaps!" with Boling suggesting an archaic reading, "older than the finished story of Samson."[446] Webb, who also renders "heap upon heap" argues that Samson is not bragging here, but "finds it just as hard to believe as we do!"[447] Schneider disagrees, arguing that Samson is taking all the credit for the slaying, even though it was the work of the deity, because he "did not recognize the deity."[448] But we must step back and assess what the scene looks like. Here, at *Lehi* (לְחִי), Samson has used a *donkey jawbone* (לְחִי) to kill everyone attacking him. The repetition of לְחִי and חמֹור are meant to add to the absurdity of the scene. That Samson performs such an absurd act and follows it up with an absurd song is extremely fitting with the rest of the absurdity woven into the micro level of the story. He finishes his song by chucking the jawbone away, again, a comical scene when one pictures it, and moves along. The story ends with a neat little bow – the place where Samson killed one thousand men with a donkey's jawbone is now called Jawbone Hill (רָמַת לֶחִי).

After this event, we are presented a brief scene during which Samson and Yahweh interact more directly than we have seen previously. After the defeat at Ramat Lehi, Samson realizes he is thirsty and cries out to God. In a single phrase he proclaims God's role in the act (contrary to what Schneider says above) and then challenges God about letting "your servant … die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised" (v.18). For the first time in the entire story, Samson acknowledges Yahweh's power, and in the same turn condemns Yahweh for his careless treatment of his chosen champion. Webb argues that the purpose of this scene is to show that Samson is not like Superman, but "a real man with needs."[449] Webb also accurately points out that within the entire pericope,

[444] Ibid., 187.
[445] Ibid.
[446] Boling, *Judges*, 236; Niditch, *Judges*, 151.
[447] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 388.
[448] Schneider, *Judges*, 216.
[449] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 389.

Samson is the only one who has actually cried out to God.[450] This is an important detail. But the crying out is unlike the others we have seen in Judges. The Israelites are not crying out to Yahweh for collective deliverance for their whole people from an evil oppressor. Instead, one man cries out to Yahweh for his own benefit. He even prefaces the crying out with a reminder to God about his "great victory" (v.18). Suddenly, Samson cares that the Philistines are "uncircumcised" because Samson is *whining*. The man who has singlehandedly defeated one thousand Philistines with a donkey's jawbone is now thirsty and dramatically begging his deity to provide water for him. The author here seeks to remind us that even raw physical power and the battle prowess that Samson has is not enough to make him a good leader – just a verse after his "great victory" he thirsts and demands that someone else resolve it for him. He is self-motivated and short sighted, and the author includes this scene to show that leadership has devolved so seriously in the land of Israel that *this* is the best option there is.

In verse 19 God responds to Samson, not with words, but with an action. God breaks open "the hollow that was at Lehi, and water came rushing out from it." It is unclear exactly what "the hollow that was at Lehi" is, but we need not expend too much energy trying to figure it out. Alter sees it as a "concave formation in rock,"[451] while Webb argues it is a "depression (in the ground)."[452] We should focus on the fact that God performed a miraculous thing here, upon Samson's request. This is also another etiology, an explanation for the name of a place being "En-Hakkore, which is still at Lehi to this day." En-Hakkore is "the spring of the one who calls out," which is at Jawbone Hill, where Samson performed this act. It is possible that these details are older, unrelated details to the Samson story and were included here because they relate to the material at hand. This interpretation is strengthened by the conclusion of the chapter, in verse 20, which also appears to be a random detail placed into this part of the story. In the concluding verse, we are told "he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines for twenty years." Alter rightly describes the phrase as seeming out of place."[453] Boling agrees, but suggests that this is the end of the

[450] Ibid.
[451] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 187.
[452] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 382.
[453] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 187.

"pragmatic editor's" story about Samson.[454] For this argument, Boling conjures up two different editors, the pragmatic of which ends his story here and perhaps continues on to stories of Eli and Samuel.[455] But we need not make this distinction. The author is telling us now, for the first time, that Samson is also a judge. He has been chosen to deliver Israel from the Philistines, this we know, but we had no idea that he was appointed judge until now. There is no mistaking what the author is doing here. Samson, a powerful man, albeit a self-motivated one, is the only leader left in Israel, a judge, and we have just witnessed his tantrum before his deity. The juxtaposition of the Lehi story with Samson's description as a judge is meant to highlight the futility of any kind of leadership that reflects traditional elements like strength, military prowess, charisma, or knowledge. Schneider argues that the "military victory" that Samson has just achieved was what was required so that Samson can be called a judge.[456] But, we must ask, was it a military victory? The closest thing to an Israelite military we have seen are the Judahites who turned him over to the Philistines and they disappear from the text the minute the action starts. Samson is no military leader. *There is no military*. The author is juxtaposing Samson's sheer strength in the service of self-motivation with the description of him as a judge. They are meant to feel as though they are in opposition – our expectations of leadership and the position of judge are being subverted.

Chapter 16

The final chapter of Samson's story begins with a scene shift – to Gaza. Because God is continually seeking grounds for a conflict with them, Samson cannot stay away from the Philistines. While he was there, "he saw a sex worker and slept with her" (v.1).[457] There is some debate as to whether Samson's solicitation of a sex worker should be read negatively in light of the recent mention of his position as judge in Israel. Boling says that the Gazite

[454] Boling, *Judges*, 240.
[455] Ibid.
[456] Schneider, *Judges*, 216.
[457] The state of research on the resonances of the word *zonah* are inadequate. As discussed in private communication with Dr. David H. Aaron, there lacks in the field a significant understanding of how society viewed a man who utilized a *zonah*'s services. There is certainly more to explore on this matter, but the pursuit currently lies beyond the present parameters of this project. I look forward to exploring this subject in another project.

sex worker is "going about her publicly recognized business" yet "the judge of Israel was not going about his publicly recognized business."[458] But we must question what this means in regard not only to Samson but all the other judges in the book. There is not one particular job description for the role of judge in Israel. What should we expect Samson to be doing instead? The social fabric has unraveled. It is every man for himself, and Samson is acting for himself. He engages the sex worker in her line of business, and again interpreters raise the question as to whether or not we should be suspicious of Samson's morals here. Niditch reads Samson as a "womanizer," so, for her, this is fitting for his character.[459] Webb sees the behavior as a "relapse into the kind of immature and irresponsible behavior that had brought him into conflict with the Philistines in the first place."[460] But we must recall, it was *Yahweh* who brought Samson into conflict with the Philistines. That is what has happened throughout the entire narrative, and that is what has happened here.

The following short scene is meant to continue the thread of absurdity throughout the story but is also meant to illustrate the futility of organized leadership not only in Israel but in Philistia as well. In verse 2, we are told "the residents of Gaza learned that Samson had come, so they mustered themselves and waited to ambush him all night at the city gate. All night they whispered to one another, 'We will kill him at morning light." We are given a great number of details about the organization of the ambush. First, since the Gazites have "mustered themselves," a military term, we can assume that they are in some way a representation of Philistine military forces. Then, the reader is plopped down among the Philistine troops as they wait all night, whispering back and forth to one another about their plans to kill Samson at dawn.

The comedic element of the story is all but lost if one pauses and attempts to understand the scene based on archaeological evidence of gate complexes in the coastal lowlands of Israel. Boling argues that the forces are hiding within the chambers of the gates, allowing for Samson to slip past. Boling is rendering בְּשַׁעַר הָעִיר as "in the city gate," literally *in* the chambers of the gate. They would easily miss Samson sneaking by *outside*

[458] Boling, *Judges*, 248.
[459] Niditch, *Judges*, 167.
[460] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 393.

the chambers, which would make his next feat surprising to the guards. Boling argues that any "Iron Age Palestinian" hearing the story would undoubtedly recognize the structure of the gate and recognize the problem with the Philistine plan. But these details lie outside the author's comedic genre coherence. We are being shown the follies of traditional leadership, and we are in the midst of the Philistine forces as they are making a silly assumption about how to entrap Samson.

They also whisper back and forth to one another that "we will kill him at morning light." They expect that Samson will spend the entire night with the sex worker and so they will wait for him to be on the move at sunrise. It is not, as both Matthews and Webb argue, that he will be too exhausted from a night of lovemaking to repel their sunrise ambush.[461] But we do not need to make this assumption. The Philistine expectations are being subverted, because they are not very good at carrying out an ambush. Traditional masculine leadership is impotent in the book of Judges, and that is embodied in this scene.

Samson stays with the woman only until midnight. Then, "he got up, gripped the doors of the city gate along with the gatepost, and he pulled them up along with the crossbar. He rested them on his shoulders and brought them up to the top of the hill near Hebron" (v.3). The scene is obviously meant to garner some laughter. Certainly, we are meant to see that again, Samson's strength is superhuman, and at the expense of a group of Philistines he uses it. We should not, as Soggin does, spend too much time worrying about how one could move the gates while the Philistines were standing guard. Soggin's understanding requires that the gate complex be similar to what has been excavated in Israel.[462] The Philistines are depicted as dolts. They wait to ambush him at the gate, so he moves the gate. We should not sacrifice the absurdist comedy of the scene for any archaeological reality. The same goes for Samson's decision to deposit the gate on the top of a hill near Hebron. Soggin goes as far as to provide coordinates to where he thinks the hill is but acquiesces "the text does not set out to give topographical details, but to underline

[461] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 155; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 394.
[462] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 253.

the magnitude of the exploit."[463] Matthews also uses geographical details, arguing that moving the gate

> forty miles east of Gaza and continuously uphill (3,350 feet in elevation), may be both a public display of his immense strength and a political statement. Hebron was in the tribal allotment of Judah. And it is therefore ironic that Samson returned the pilfered gates to the men of Judah. Perhaps by defiantly carrying the gates toward Hebron Samson was calling out the men of Judah to resist Philistine domination – to be free.[464]

That Matthews also factors in a "political statement" is curious, considering Samson has never done anything like that before and seems not to care about the larger body of Israelite tribes or their relationship to God. Why would Samson seek to send a message to the Judahites to "be free," when he himself returns to the Philistines and takes up with a woman in their lands? He himself is not free of the Philistines, so we should not expect that he is challenging others to break the Philistine bonds. Just as with the lion, the foxes, and the donkey jawbone, the gate is a micro expression of the entertainment of the story, of its absurdist elements. Samson's removal of the gate while the Philistines are near it (or even in it) is practically slapstick comedy and attempts to understand the gate complex or geographic details strip the text of this literary value and misrepresent the goal of the writer. Part of the slapstick element of the genre development in the story is the image of Samson schlepping the gate as far as he does. His depositing of the gate on the hill may be no more meaningful than that. The story ends abruptly after the displacement of the gate. Samson has had yet another dust up with the Philistines, the penultimate one before the final showdown. We will now enter into Samson's final story – his relationship with Delilah, the only named woman in the narrative, and his eventual death.

In verse 4 we are told that some time has passed after the Gaza gate incident. Matthews argues that the phrase could be an indicator that the next story is "an isolated narrative, fused to the others, and not dependent upon them for anything other than narrative pattern."[465] It may be true that the Delilah narrative is a separate story appended to the other texts, but we need not assume as much. The author is illustrating that time is passing between each of these episodes. Not enough time, as Webb states, for "Samson's

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[463] Ibid.
[464] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 156.
[465] Matthews, 158.

rage against the Philistines to settle and his attraction to their women to reassert itself."[466] Samson has only personal motivations, so his rage against the Philistines seems not to affect his choices all that much. He returns time and time again to Philistine territory despite the increasingly violent interactions he has with them. Webb goes further, suggesting the Gaza gate incident has given Samson the notion that he is invincible.[467] But there is no evidence of this. Samson's character does not change throughout the story. He does not show self-reflection.

The only thing that *is* different this time around is that Samson "fell in love with" Delilah (v.4). So far, we have not been told about Samson's emotions toward the women with whom he has been involved. The inclusion of his feelings for her is likely meant to indicate the story is nearing a climax, as Alter suggests.[468] Matthews argues that Samson's heightened emotional state will make him "even more vulnerable in the midst of their relationship."[469] Webb agrees, arguing that this love will blind him and lead to his literal blinding later in the narrative.[470] At this point, we have reached perhaps one of the most infamous characters in the book of Judges, if not in the whole Hebrew Bible. Delilah is one of the most discussed female characters in the Hebrew Bible, and the interpretations of her role in Samson's downfall, as well as her character as a woman, are many and varied. She appears abruptly, with little background information provided about her at all. Of course, by this point in our study of formalized female characters in the book of Judges, we should not be surprised by the dearth of information about this character. We are told that she is named Delilah, that she hails from Nahal Sorek, and that somehow the Philistine commanders are comfortable approaching her with a cash offer to help them defeat Samson.

Interpreters make much from Delilah's name, though none completely agree on the meaning. Soggin tries to trace the meaning of her name based on her possible hairstyle or connecting it to the word "beloved." Soggin acknowledges that "the text says nothing to that effect" but that "the woman was Canaanite, or given Samson's preferences, perhaps

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[466] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 398.
[467] Ibid.
[468] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 189.
[469] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 158.
[470] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 399.

even Philistine."[471] Boling reads her name as "flirtatious," connecting it to the Aramaic "dallatum" which is "quite congenial to the narrative structure.[472] Webb suggests the name is related to darkness because "darkness starts to close around Samson" when she arrives on the scene.[473] Since the name is "Hebrew sounding," Webb argues that it "is possible that Delilah was an Israelite, but where she lived and how she behaved make it far more likely that she was a Philistine."[474]

Just as with other geographical locations in the book of Judges, we should not attempt to define exactly where Nahal Sorek is. Alter suggests it is "in Israelite territory," possibly making Delilah an Israelite woman.[475] Boling finds it as a real place, "thirteen miles southwest of Jerusalem," rendering it "Vineyard Valley."[476] Matthews agrees with the vineyard interpretation, suggesting that Sorek was "known for its production of red grapes, and the location hints at Delilah's foreign origins although she is never actually said to be a Philistine."[477] As we can see, pressing the name of the valley, along with Delilah's name, renders conflicting interpretations. Exum correctly asserts that the location of Nahal Sorek, regardless of where it may be, does not tell us if Delilah is a Philistine or an Israelite. Instead, Exum focuses on the fact that the information given to the reader emphasizes that Delilah is "an independent woman."[478] She is not identified in relationship to a man. She also

> appears to have her own house, but how she came by it is not revealed. Is she a foreign woman of independent means? A wealthy widow with property, like Judith? A harlot, as is commonly supposed? We cannot be sure about Delilah's social position, or even about her house, which is not described beyond the fact that there is an inner chamber where ambushers could hide from Samson's view.[479]

But even Exum, in her recognition of the ambiguity of the character, misses a key detail. Delilah *is* identified by a relationship to a man, though it is not her father or husband. She is identified by her relationship to Samson. She serves the plot of the Samson story. She

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[471] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 253.
[472] Boling, *Judges*, 148.
[473] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 398.
[474] Ibid., 399.
[475] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 189.
[476] Boling, *Judges*, 246.
[477] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 159.
[478] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, 181.
[479] Ibid.

does not exist without him. Meredith sees her lack of connection to a father or husband as "immediately suspect" from a patriarchal point of view.[480]

Though she is the only woman in the Samson narrative given a name, we must not forget that all women, even the named ones, are formalized characters in the story. They are developed without any real depth. Formalized women need not fulfill a checklist of standard narratival details with regard to their identification. She is still formalized, despite her different appearance from other female characters in the book. The formalization is here being used to help the reader recognize that this character is different than the others with whom Samson has interacted. Because she is still highly formalized, speculation about her ethnicity is not integral to the story, just as it was not for Jael. Brenner reads Delilah as a foreigner who "fits into the type of dangerous temptress foreign woman.[481] Frymer-Kensky agrees, suggesting that the character of the female other represents danger. For her, women like Delilah "are allied with the other side in Israel's national and cosmic battles. For this reason, all of them represent the 'other,' the alternative to Israel's destiny and way."[482] Ackerman too reads Delilah as 'other,' particularly a Philistine, though she acknowledges that the text does not specify whether she is Israelite or Philistine.[483]

Some interpreters speculate that Delilah is a prostitute. Schneider suggests that, since Samson was just seen in the company of a Gazite sex worker, and "the connection is not far from many depictions of her."[484] For Schneider, the character is "between depictions of a wife, which she clearly was not, and a prostitute, raising serious questions about who she was and what she did for a living."[485] Though it is unclear if she is a sex worker, Niditch still reads the character as a seductress, going as far as to say that the "motif of the seductive and dangerous foreign woman finds quintessential expression in the character of Delilah."[486] Exum reads Delilah as a harlot "because she is not identified in terms of her familial relationship to a male – she seems to have her own house, and Samson is

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[480] Betsy Meredith, "Desire and Danger: The Drama of Betrayal in Judges and Judith," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 75.
[481] Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, 112.
[482] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 74.
[483] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 213.
[484] Schneider, *Judges*, 220.
[485] Ibid., 221.
[486] Niditch, *Judges*, 167.

apparently her lover though she is not his wife – other possibilities for understanding her position in society are rarely entertained."[487] Ackerman finds allusions to sex work in the text about Delilah, as she is "depicted very prostitute-like in her behavior….like a prostitute, she uses her sexuality and a man's desire for her in order to ensure her own well-being."[488]

We must recall, however, that the indeterminacy is fundamental to the narratival coherence that the Judges author is working to present. The ambiguity about the nature of the character has a function. The goal of the story is to illustrate the futility of traditional masculine leadership, be it a military leader like Barak or Jephthah, or a leader with brute strength and self-motivating charisma, like Samson. None of these styles of leadership are desirable for the author, and he employs formalized female characters to humiliate that masculine leadership. There are no more details available about Delilah because *they are not germane to the author's vision of story coherence.*

After we are given the short introduction to Samson's final woman, we are told that the Philistine commanders ask her to "Coax him, find out what makes him so strong, and what we can do to bind him up and overpower him" (v.5). I have chosen to render סַרְנֵי פְּלִשְׁתִּים as " Philistine commanders" to emphasize the military position that these men hold. If the goal of the book is to highlight the futility of leadership, the Philistines are not free from this judgement either. These men are the rulers of the Philistine pentapolis, as Alter understands it.[489] Even they are unable to conquer Samson on their own. They have to rely on *a woman* to do it. Not only that, but they offer a very substantial cash reward to do so. These are men who are weak and desperate, who cannot handle the problems caused by one man, and who must outsource their conquering to a mere woman. Based on the theory of formalization explored in this dissertation, men fight men on the basis of formalized military structures. Samson is superhuman, so the typical military approach is no longer effective for the Philistines. Instead of defeating Samson with the formalized structure of military prowess, they must shift to another formalized structure, his sexuality. We expect the fighting to be in the masculine domain, and here it is being transferred to the feminine

[487] Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," 81.
[488] Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 231.
[489] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 189.

domain. The formalization still exists, but it is adapted by the author based on Samson's apparently unbeatable physical power. No man in the book of Judges escapes humiliation, not even the foreigners, who in their recognition of Samson's superior strength must outsource victory to a woman. Soggin understands the Philistine commanders' request to Delilah as an indicator of how serious the Samson problem is, since "the narrators bring the supreme commanders of the Philistines against him."[490] Both Soggin and Boling render the term as "tyrants," recognizing that it is a political title for the specific group of Philistine leaders.[491] While this may be true, commanders better emphasizes the military power of the men who are seeking Delilah's help.

The goal of their mission is to find out what they can do to "bind him up and overpower him." It is important to note that the word used for "overpower," ענה, is also the word used in the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:12. Alter understands that their motivation is to "torture him" because "they want him rendered helpless so that they can torment and abuse this despised enemy who has wreaked so much havoc among them."[492] Matthews reads "subdue him,"[493] while Webb suggests "torment."[494] Schneider softens the implication of the Philistine request, rendering the word as "humble."[495] It is quite possible the author wants the readers to draw a parallel between what the Philistines seek to do to Samson with what they are doing to themselves by asking a woman to carry out the mission they themselves cannot complete.

Delilah does not respond to the Philistine commanders. In verse 6, our camera shifts to Delilah with Samson, as she asks him where the source of his power lies. Matthews argues that this is because she did not need to be coerced, nor was she full of malice, but that "it is simply a matter of business for this very business-like woman."[496] But again, her motivation is not required for narratival coherence. The character formalization is fulfilling the plot structure. Delilah does not require motivation, coercion, or anything else because

[490] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 243-44.
[491] Boling, *Judges*; Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*.
[492] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 189.
[493] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 156.
[494] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 396.
[495] Schneider, *Judges*, 220.
[496] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 160.

those details are not essential for the overall coherence of the Samson story. The only possible next step in the story for Delilah is to do what she does: to find out what causes Samson to have so much strength.

Delilah's question to Samson is one of the most misinterpreted parts of her character. For some reason, she is viewed as deceptive and seductive. She is viewed as the foreign temptress, luring key information from our beloved hero.[497] But she is not any of these things. After being given her mission by the Philistine commanders, she turns around and literally asks him, word for word, what the Philistine commanders want to know. "How can you be tied up and humiliated," she asks. She is straightforward. Bal accurately highlights that Delilah states exactly what her intentions are from the outset. She is not a liar. But, as Bal sees it, Delilah must be seen as a liar in order for Samson to maintain his role as a hero and not a blithering idiot.[498] Bal is astute here, highlighting a fact that seems to be overlooked by many interpreters. I argue, however, that the author does not need Delilah to be a liar in order for Samson to be the weak idiot in the story. The point is that the information Delilah seeks will not be all that hard to get from our "hero," because he is the kind of emasculated male figure the author of Judges repeatedly explores. She does not need to coerce it from him, or seduce him, or lie. He plays a riddle game, as we shall see, but Samson *willingly provides* information of his own weakness to her. She only serves to highlight his futility as a leader. We do not need to make her a harlot, a liar, or a temptress for Samson to do so. He is fully capable of digging his own grave, and so he shall.

Samson responds with a hypothetical statement. We should not be surprised by this. We have seen Samson favor a riddle. He responds, "If they tie me up with seven new cords that have not yet dried out, then I might become like any other man" (v.7). Webb sees this exchange between Delilah and Samson as an indication of "how well Delilah knows her man" because "Samson is the kind of person who is aroused by danger rather than repelled by it."[499] Webb sees the exchange as a sort of foreplay, completely ignoring the fact that, if that is the case, Samson is the only one who is participating. Delilah has repeated the question that the Philistines have charged her with answering, and only Samson is the one

[497] Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative*, 112.
[498] Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 11.
[499] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 401.

playing a one-sided game. His response regarding the seven new cords should indicate that they would be fresh and less likely for him to break. They are not, as Boling suggests, some sort of magical item used in the "Hittite soldier's oath" whose disintegration in a hot pan reinforce the punishment of the soldier for breaking ranks.[500] Samson is not about to "be dishonorably discharged from military service," as Boling suggests.[501] First, Samson is not in military service. Second, we do not need to rely on Hittite oaths in order to understand what Samson is asking for. Had he asked for a pan and some salt, as is also included in that oath, perhaps we could explore the possibility. However none of that is the case, and turning to a Hittite text to understand what Samson is asking for complicates a fairly straightforward scene. Soggin also disagrees with Boling, stating that "the request cannot be connected with cursing in the ancient Near East, far less with dishonorable discharge of Samson from military service."[502] However, Soggin does draw a connection between Samson and the cords as a reference to the Nazirite vow and the issue of Samson touching "elements belonging to a corpse."[503] We should also note that the outcome of the binding, says Samson, is that he will become "weak like any other man." We have seen weakness highlighted in almost every male character we have examined for this study. The goal of the author is to illustrate the futility of traditional masculine leadership. In doing so, he has presented flawed, weak characters who miss opportunities, sacrifice their daughters, and here, with Samson, tempt death with their propensity for riddles. That Samson assumes that he is not, or will not be, "weak like any other man," is ironic.

We are not afforded a scene of communication between Delilah and the Philistine commanders, for in the next verse we are simply told that "the Philistine commanders brought her seven new cords which had not yet dried out and she bound him up with them" (v.8). This is a further indicator that she is a highly formalized character acting only in the role for which she is needed. In the end of verse 8 she binds Samson with the cords. In verse 9, the camera shifts to a secret room where she has a "unit of men lying in wait." That this is a concurrently happening event with the first binding of Samson is clear from the vav and the masculine noun at the beginning of the sentence rather than a verb. The

[500] Boling, *Judges*, 249.
[501] Ibid.
[502] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 254.
[503] Ibid.

scene is a suspenseful one. I have chosen to render the verse as "she had a unit lying in wait" from וְהָאֹרֵב יֹשֵׁב לָהּ בַּחֶדֶר׃ We should get the sense that the ambush is made up of a military unit. Time and time again in this scene they will be unsuccessful. As we will see, when they are finally successful, they only avoid failure and humiliation for a brief moment before they end up bringing it upon themselves and a stadium full of other Philistines.

Delilah again tells the truth to Samson, announcing to him "Samson, the Philistines are coming for you!"[504] As Samson has *not* been telling the truth, he rips the cords "just as a strand of thread disintegrates in fire" (v.9). This is similar to Samson's restraints melting away when he is captured by the Judahites and handed over to the Philistines in 15:14. As of yet, no restraint is strong enough for Samson, and the same has been true throughout the whole story. Like the enigma Samson shared at his wedding feast, "his strength remained a mystery," and will continue to do so until he is pressed to reveal the solution by a woman.

Much like Samson's Timnite wife, Delilah confronts Samson about his deception. But she quickly presses him again, asking "Come now, share with me how you can be tied up" (v.10). As Bal has shown, she consistently tells the truth about her goal, unlike Samson. A similar scene follows, but this time Samson tells her that it is "new ropes that have never been used" that will succeed in properly binding him (v.11). Again Samson indicates that this will make him "weak like any other man" (v.11). Unlike the previous verse, however, no Philistine commanders need to bring her the ropes. In verse 12 we are told "Delilah then took new ropes and tied him up with them." Just like last time, she warns him that "The Philistines are coming for you, Samson!" The ambush has already been set up in the room, just as last time. Of course, again, "Samson ripped the ropes from his arms like a thread" (v.12). Two mirrored scenes have just taken place, with the same outcome for each. Just as before, Samson offers her an enigma that turns out to be insoluble. The attempts to bind him, first with cords and then with ropes, fail. Each time she announces there are Philistines nearby who are about to be upon him, and each time the bindings break. Finally, both times, Delilah confronts Samson and accuses him of lying to her. This time, she emphasizes that

[504] I have chosen to render פְּלִשְׁתִּים עָלַיִךְ שִׁמְשׁוֹן as "Samson, the Philistines are coming for you" as opposed to the more traditional, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" Her cry heightens the suspense, but it also reflects a truer scene. The Philistine unit in the room is not yet upon him, but they are certainly coming for him.

the lie has been told twice: “You have repeatedly deceived me by telling me lies, but now, tell me how you can be tied up” (v.13).

The third iteration of this deception scene gets closer to the truth of Samson’s strength. Twice she has stated she wants to tie him up and humiliate him, and twice she has tried though the bindings have not been strong enough. But, more importantly, twice she has warned him *there is a nearby ambush that is coming for him* and yet he continues with this treacherous exchange. Not only that, but his next “enigma” will get closer to the truth because it will involve his hair. It should be clear to the reader that Samson is making terrible decisions. He is a judge and a leader (though not a military leader) and he cannot discern when danger is escalating and he should exercise caution. In his self-motivation, or in his blind confidence, he does not take into consideration facts that are in front of his face. Even the self-motivated leader cannot make good decisions about his own self-protection, let alone that of his people. Time and time again masculine leadership is utterly lambasted in the book of Judges. Israel’s last shot at a leader refuses to see an ambush that is right in front of his face. Because Samson has superhuman strength, he cannot be defeated physically. The author employs a way to defeat him through an appeal to his libido. Both approaches highlight a formalization of masculinity that the author is working to upend. But here, for the final judge, the author has employed a different element of formalized masculinity to defeat Samson. It is unexpected, a plot twist, but it still fits perfectly within the reader’s horizon of expectation. The author subverts our expectations while still using recognizable formalizations to serve his larger point: men are weak.

After Delilah asks him a third time, Samson tells her “If you weave seven braids on my head with fabric from a loom.” Out of all of Samson’s turns of phrase in the entire story, this is perhaps the most confusing. However, it is confusing because something is missing from the Hebrew here. This is clear, because in verse 14 we are told that Delilah “thrust a peg” (v.14). The noun מַסֶּכֶת refers to an arrangement of threads that are stretched into making a fabric. It is unclear where the peg fits into the equation. I have chosen to render exactly what is in the Masorah here though other interpreters often bring in a substitution from the Septuagint which adds “drive them with a peg into the wall.” Alter follows this reading, as does Boling and Webb. Both Boling and Webb suggest that the Masoretic text

is flawed due to haplography.[505] Soggin describes it as homoeoteleuton.[506] Contrastingly, Niditch argues that the omission may be intentional, writing

> it is also possible that the writer in the MT tradition leaves the rest unstated because it is metonymically understood, whereas the translators, or the Hebrew traditions they are translating, prefer to say it all. One resists choosing in this way 'a better' or 'original' text in order to acknowledge variation in the traditions, differing aesthetic and storytelling preferences, and the possibility that the translator himself provides expected continuations of the scene within a traditional medium.[507]

I agree with Niditch and am resistant to providing extra words when we cannot be sure of the intentions of the scribe. There is enough information in verses 13 and 14 to get a picture of what is going on, and that shall suffice for our understanding of the meaning of the story of Samson.

Verse 14 revisits a familiar scene where a woman reaches for a peg while a man sleeps near her. As Samson sleeps, she "thrust a peg" and then gave him her usual warning, "The Philistines are coming for you, Samson!" (v.14). But Samson wakes up, "and pulled out the peg, along with the loom and the web." Whatever has taken place with the hair weaving, Samson is able to thwart it, seemingly upending any apparatus to which he may have been fastened by his hair. The next time, the final time he and Delilah will have this discussion, will be the end of Samson. We should note that the structure of the scene is tightened each time it occurs. First, we are shown the Philistines bringing Delilah the cords, and we are told there is an ambush nearby. The second time we are not shown anyone bringing Delilah the ropes, but we are still reminded of the nearby ambush. The third time, we are told only about the exchange between Samson and Delilah, with no mention of the ambush. The suspense grows.

After Samson has freed himself from his bonds, Delilah asks him one more time how he can deceive her. She asks him, "How can you tell me you love me if your heart is not really with me? This is the third time you have deceived me and not told me the source of your great strength" (v.15). Again, just like Samson's Timnite wife, she continues to pressure him, "urging him, until he was vexed to death" (v.16). Interpreters often render

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[505] Alter, *Ancient Israel*; Boling, *Judges*, 250; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 397.
[506] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 254.
[507] Niditch, *Judges*, 165.

this as "exasperated to the point of death."[508] Webb argues that Samson's "defenses had been broken down, and he could not resist Delilah any more…his love for her had blinded him."[509] But this is another failing of masculine leadership and strength in the story of Judges. We are led to understand that Samson is aware that the source of his strength is his hair. Yet, he gives up all that information simply because he is irritated with the ongoing questioning. Again, even a solely self-motivated leader cannot succeed. He is incapable of preserving even his own self-interest. In verse 17, the author reveals that "he told her everything."

What he tells her harkens back to the story of Samson's birth. It is the only other time in the entire story that his Nazirite status will be mentioned, and it is the only time Samson himself discusses it. He tells Delilah, "A razor has never touched my head, because I have been a Nazirite of God since I was in my mother's womb. If it were cut, my strength would disappear, and I would be weak, just like any other man" (v.17). Boling sees Samson's revelation as an indication that Samson has never taken his Nazirite vow seriously.[510] Webb agrees, suggesting that Samson has consistently rebelled against his role as a Nazirite.[511] Webb understands Samson as the reluctant hero, who "never wanted to fight the Philistines as he was destined to do. He has wanted to mix with them, intermarry with them."[512] But we must remember that God has been seeking a pretext for a conflict with the Philistines. Samson *is* that conflict. Whether or not he wanted this role, or if he was rebelling against it by continually mixing with the Philistines, does not matter. God selected Samson as the "one who would begin to deliver Israel" (13:5). Samson's acquiescence is irrelevant.

Samson ends his revelation to Delilah with the phrase "I would be weak," not "I might become weak." This time, the fourth time, is the charm. He is no longer using a hypothetical. This is what will render him a regular man. This is made clear in the next verse. Delilah knows that he has told the truth and she summons the Philistine commanders to reveal what she knows. Curiously, the ambush in her room appears no longer to be

[508] Boling, *Judges*, 250; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 404.
[509] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 404.
[510] Boling, *Judges*, 250.
[511] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 405.
[512] Ibid.

present, as she is the one who has to relay the information to the Philistines. Powerful men, both Philistine and Israelite, are maneuvered around by a woman. The Philistine commanders bring her the money, and Samson's downfall begins.

Delilah lulls Samson to sleep. Just as Jael attacks a sleeping Sisera, so Delilah utilizes the same technique. The women in both Judges 4 and Judges 16 serve the same formalized role meant only to humiliate a man. In this case, the author relies on the same device to get to the humiliation. While he is asleep, she calls to one of the Philistine men and then she shaves seven locks off his head (v.19). There is some debate about who does the shaving in this scene, since she calls to a man but then וַתְּגַלַּח אֶת־שֶׁבַע. The verb is clearly feminine, so it is Delilah who is doing the shaving. Alter agrees, suggesting the man is called to bring her the razor. He suggests that "it makes more sense that Delilah, who can't very well move with Samson asleep on her knees, calls the man to bring her a razor so that she can then shave Samson's head."[513] Soggin and Schneider choose a masculine reading of the feminine verb.[514] For Soggin, the man is the subject, but "the confusion arises from the fact that it is Delilah who is acting, but through the intermediary of the barber."[515] I believe the man is summoned so that when Delilah calls out for the last time that the Philistines are upon Samson, it will finally be true. There is no need to add details that are not provided, like the man as the barber supplying the razor or doing the hair cutting. The stakes are higher now, and the truth of Samson's strength is known. She summons a man to her home because this time they can be sure that Samson will not be able to escape. Verse 19 closes with a confirmation that it is Delilah who is doing the hair cutting: "She began to humiliate him, and his strength abandoned him." The author is telling us exactly what has happened. She is cutting his hair; she is humiliating him. Just like every other woman examined in this dissertation, this is her sole purpose.

This is made clear by the fact that the next verse, verse 20, is her final appearance. After she has achieved her sole purpose in the story, she disappears from it. For the fourth and final time, she tells Samson, "The Philistines are coming for you, Samson!" Then, she is gone, never once having deceived Samson about her purpose. Samson's response to this

[513] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 191.
[514] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 254; Schneider, *Judges*, 223.
[515] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 254.

concretizes the fact that the purpose of her character is humiliating him. He awakens and assumes he will be able to escape. He thinks to himself "I will get out by shaking free, just like every other time" (v.20). He is indeed humiliated, for even though he has told her the truth about the source of his strength, and even though she has done what she has promised to do the entire time (humiliate him) he *still* assumes this is "just like every other time." As a final blow to Samson's potential as a leader, as if there were there any shred of suspicion that he had a chance at redeeming himself, the audience is let in on a secret unknown to Samson. Yahweh had left him (v.20).

His weakness now realized, the Philistines are able to seize Samson. Before they bind him, they gouge out his eyes. His humiliation escalates and will escalate even more before the story ends. Then, the Philistines "brought him to Gaza and imprisoned him in bronze bonds. He became a mill grinder in prison" (v.21). Yahweh has truly left him. The Philistines are not only able to capture him, but they are also able to gouge out his eyes before they bind him in bronze bonds. Before he revealed the secret of his strength, he could defeat an entire battalion with the jawbone of a donkey. Now, because of his own inability to lead even himself, he is easily caught and disfigured. The final blow to Israel's last judge is his imprisonment. No longer is he setting fire to Philistine grain supplies, he is grinding their grain for them. All who appear mighty in the book of Judges fall, and none fall so far as Samson. But, just as the author interjects the note that Yahweh had left him, he builds suspense again in verse 22, in which he reveals "the hair on his head began to grow as it had before it was cut." We know Samson will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines, and now we know how. His hair begins to grow; his strength will soon return.

In verse 23, the camera shifts to the Philistine commanders. To celebrate their victory over Samson, they "gathered together to make a great sacrifice to Dagon, their god" (v.23). The commanders first cry out, "Our god has delivered Samson , our enemy, into our hand" (v.23). This cry is then picked up by the larger crowd, who magnifies it, simultaneously magnifying Samson's humiliation. The crowd repeats "Our god has delivered the enemy into our hand," but they modify this by including what a serious enemy Samson was. They describe him as "the one who decimated our land and murdered so many of us" (v.24). They call Samson forth for entertainment as they are celebrating. Then,

"Samson was brought from the prison, and he debased himself before them" (v.25). I have chosen to render וַיְצַחֵק as "he debased himself," as it gets at the heart of the Philistines' intended humiliation of him. Alter renders this "he played," suggesting that "the playing might be dancing, or more likely, blindly stumbling about, while the audience laughs."[516] Matthews reads it as "he performed" for the Philistines.[517] The root can mean to joke or laugh, or more cruelly, to mock. Since the verb is followed by לִפְנֵיהֶם , the word "debase" highlights the extremely public nature of the mocking. After describing this scene, the author sets us up with more foreshadowing, just as he did with the mention of Yahweh leaving Samson and Samson's miraculous hair regrowth. This time, the author tells us that "they stood him up between the pillars" (v.25).

In verse 26, the author shows us an even further weakness that is afflicting Samson. Not only has he been made to debase himself in front of a stadium full of Philistines, but he had to be led to his position between the pillars by a young man. Samson, master of the impromptu weapon, the man who slayed Philistines "heaps upon heaps," now must feebly ask a young man, "Release me, and let me feel the pillars on which this place rests, so that I can lean on them for support" (v.26). He needs a young man to guide him to his humiliating position, and now he needs the pillars of the building for support.

The next verse presents the reader with a shift in perspective. We have already been told that the Philistines have put together a celebration to make a sacrifice to Dagon for Samson's capture. Verse 27 shows us that "the temple was full of men and women. All the Philistine commanders were also there, and even on the roof there were three thousand men and women, watching Samson's humiliation." This is a stadium audience. It may be a temple, but right now it is more of an amphitheater. Based on the inclusion of the detail about the pillars, Soggin suggests that a similar structure can be found at modern Tel Qasile and that the scene probably took place in the temple at Gaza.[518] But we need not draw real world parallels to this scene to understand the scale the author intended to deliver. He have already given us all the details we need. There are pillars supporting the structure, upon two of which Samson is leaning. The building is filled to the brim with men and women,

[516] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 192.
[517] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 158.
[518] Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, 255.

including the Philistine commanders who have arranged for Samson's capture through Delilah. Beyond that, another three thousand people are watching from the roof. *Everyone* is there. This is the culmination of masculine humiliation in Judges. The scale of humiliation has been growing in our case studies. Barak's humiliation has been semi-private, Jephthah's is commemorated yearly by the women of the land, and now, Samson's is witnessed in a packed stadium full of jeering, uncircumcised Philistines.

The moment before Samson's demise is punctuated by his final desperate cry. In his pitiful state, blinded, leaning against pillars for support, the former fox tamer cries out to God. Finally, in the Samson pericope, an Israelite cries out to God for help. He is the last Israelite who will do so in the book of Judges. This is not the first time Samson has cried out to God, of course. He also does so in 15:18, when he asks God for water after his performance at Lehi. There, however, Samson is able to pair his request with a description of his own power and prowess. There, he asks "You have delivered this great victory into the hand of your servant, but must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Here, he is already in the hands of the uncircumcised, a whole stadium full of them. Victory has deserted him. Has God as well? This time, he cries out "My Lord, Yahweh, please remember me, and give me strength this one last time, oh God, so that I can enact vengeance for both my eyes upon the Philistines" (v.28). He no longer calls himself God's servant, but instead begs even to be remembered. His final request to Yahweh is the strength to avenge himself against the Philistines for the loss of his eyes. We must recall that Samson's role, assigned to him even before his birth, was to be the one that will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. And we must recall that most of Samson's interactions have been moving toward this end. God has always been seeking grounds for a conflict with Philistia, and now the moment presents itself. But we should also note that Samson wants to avenge the loss of his eyes. God wants to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Even at the end of his life, the prime literary moment for Samson to learn his lesson, he is *still* entirely self-motivated. Not once does he think of delivering Israel. He thinks only of personal revenge. He is blind to all but himself. Alter reads Samson similarly in this moment, as one operating with a personal motive, however Alter also suggests that

Samson "finally realizes his source of power is God."[519] But, since his motivation is about his own revenge, "one sees why the messenger of the Lord prophesied that Samson would no more than 'begin' to rescue Israel from the Philistines."[520] Webb depicts Samson's plea as "the language of a beggar," and "a cry for vengeance, nothing noble."[521]

We must assume that Samson's request is granted, based on his next actions. After his plea, we are told "Samson grasped at the two pillars in the middle of the temple which the entire place rested on, and he leaned on one with his right hand and the other with his left" (v.29). The author builds suspense. We are meant to recall the other feats of strength Samson has performed prior to this moment – we are meant to expect another one. After this, Samson says "Let me die with the Philistines!" and then "he shoved with all of his might, and the temple collapsed on the commanders, and all the people who were inside" (v.29). In this final feat of superhuman strength, Samson dramatically increases his body count. The author notes that "all those who died at the same time as him outnumbered those he had killed while he was alive" (v.29). Samson gets his vengeance indeed, but he dies in the process. We should note that the Philistine commanders, the ones who are responsible for this instance of humiliation, are noted separately in the recounting of the deaths. As Alter describes it, Samson's final act is one of "wholesale destruction" even from which he himself cannot escape.[522]

The author has shifted his genre alignment in this final section of the Samson story. With all his strength stripped from him, the man who ripped a lion in half now needs a child to help him walk. We are meant to pity Samson, regardless of how we viewed his exploits before his fatal haircut. He is a hero now separated from society, blinded and made a fool. He is a man apart from the Philistine society which he so frequently sought to join and from the Israelite society that only viewed him as a threat to their safety. Frye shows us that tragedy "mingles the heroic with the ironic," that mingling is not missing from the end of Samson's story.[523] The ironic element in Samson's tragic end is that his strength, which was originally the vehicle for the story's absurdity, will be the means by which he

[519] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 193.
[520] Ibid.
[521] Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 413-14.
[522] Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 193.
[523] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 37.

brings about his own tragic death. The author has migrated from comedy to tragedy using *the same story element:* absurdity. The absurdist thread that has run throughout the entire story does not disappear in the Philistine stadium, but it takes on a much different appearance.

Samson's story ends with a tranquil final verse. Despite the stadium collapse, his body is reclaimed by his family. They take his remains away, and "they buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol, in the tomb of his father, Manoah" (v.31). This is the first time we have been told of Manoah's death. Before this it was not critical to the story, but here it is essential that we know that Israel's final judge was not left for dead in a pile of Philistine rubble. We are told that he was returned to the tomb of his father by his family. The final verse of Samson's entire saga is a brief recounting of his life as a judge: "he had judged Israel for twenty years" (v.31). Rather than a poetic, final sentence, Samson's life is recounted in terms of his time served as Israel's judge. Samson's story is at an end. The feats of strength are not recounted, nor is his tumultuous life among the Philistines. Instead, we are reminded that this self-motivated, vengeance obsessed man was a judge in Israel. He was the last weak thread holding the Israelite fabric together, and he did not succeed. The social fabric unravels, and the rest of the book depicts a chaotic, leaderless world, where every man does what is right in his own eyes.

Application

Masculine leadership of all kinds is subverted throughout the book of Judges. Traditional masculine leadership is subject to serious flaws, as has been illustrated through all three case studies in this dissertation. Even Samson, a man who only commands an army of foxes, a warrior who serves only his own self-interest, cannot succeed. He is a man without an army, a capricious and self-motivated man whose brute strength is used only in the service of his own ends.

Only God decides when there is war, and that is the only reason Samson is successful in his efforts against his Philistine enemies. Without God's sanctioning, Samson's actions, like the actions of other leaders in Judges, are futile. Traditional masculine leadership is not the answer to Israel's current situation as a Persian suzerainty.

The author confronts not only that futility, but also the fearsome ambiguity of a God who would dictate such a situation in the first place. Samson is deeply flawed and never once thinks of anything beyond his own interests. And yet, this is the man whom Yahweh has selected to begin to deliver Israel. It will be a salvation wrought through brutal means, not just for the Philistines, but for Samson and Israel as well. And what sort of deliverer is he – who is this savior the Israelites have wrought for themselves? He is Yeats' beast, with "a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun." Whether or not he is the ideal Israelite savior means nothing, for he is the one they have been given. We must ask ourselves what sort of salvation this brutal deliverer can bring about – what does freedom look like when your savior is a man like Samson? Like Yeats, we look upon the deliverer and shudder, asking ourselves, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

Excursus: God

"…a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi* troubles my sight"

W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

The deity's choice to intervene in history is not a predictable one; the Judges author seems to provide no set of circumstances which prompt an intervention from God. Where God intervenes in one situation, he sits quietly in a parallel one. In his male characters, the author shows qualities that *should* succeed, like military prowess, strength, and charisma, failing repeatedly. The pseudo-cyclical structure shows us again and again that all judges fail. Even a "successful" Judge is only so for a short while; there is always another war. The author has shown us that only God decides when there is war, and that Israel's success against its enemies is reliant upon the deity's sanction and interference. But in doing this, he introduces a disquieting image of God in the scenes where the deity chooses not to intervene. The divine activity in the book of Judges is shown to be ambiguous. God can and does intervene, but the results of those intervention raise more questions than they answer. The author consciously makes it impossible to know whether God is good at his job, somewhat inept or worse, cruelly indifferent. Part of the ambiguity in the character of God is because he too is formalized, just as the other characters in the book are formalized.

Let us recall that formalized characters might appear to serve different roles but are typically reduced to the same character type. The female characters in the book of Judges all serve the single purpose: to humiliate a man. While the God character in Judges does not serve this particular purpose, I argue that the ambiguity in God's behavior in the book is the key element of his formalization.

As with our formalized female characters, we are inclined to fill in the gaps. In the absence of clear motivation or any communication from God, we ascribe motivations for God's inaction (or strange choice of action) based on readings of texts from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. We might seek to use theology provided by other Biblical authors, like the Deuteronomist, who are perhaps less cynical than the Judges author. The Deuteronomist believes that God engineers history for the betterment of his people. This

God is in full control and, as the Deuteronomist believes, operates with Israel's best interest in mind. In Judges, the author appears to respond to the Deuteronomistic notion of a deity who is in full control with a question: Is that a good thing? Does the deity simply allow things to happen? Or does he engineer them? The author makes it impossible to know. Divine indeterminacy is a critical part of the book of Judges. It serves to heighten the uneasiness we feel in light of the failure of traditional leadership structures throughout the text. By keeping the deity's behavior indeterminate, the author is urging us to leave the character of the deity unresolved. The author has intentionally crafted a picture of God that is impossible to fully define or understand. As things fall apart, and the center fails to hold, God becomes an increasingly more mysterious character. The Judges author is not the first person to ask what God's function in an evil world should be, but he may be one of the few who refrains from answering the question. He leaves us instead with ambiguity.

Let us consider a few of the scenes in which the author leaves the deity's involvement ambiguous. Though God is closely associated with military imagery in the book, his level of engagement in each military event is unpredictable. In chapter 4, God communicates a military strategy to Deborah and, by extension, Barak, and even leads the charge into battle (4:14). When Barak hesitates, his victory is given into the hand of a woman. The text is not clear *which* woman, but the notion that it will be a woman who slays Sisera is humiliating enough for the military general. But the author does not make explicit whether Sisera simply happens to go to the tent of Jael, or if the deity specifically brings him to the tent. While Yahweh throws Sisera's chariots into a panic and causes the Canaanite general's flight, does he direct him to Jael's tent, or is his proximity to a possible ally's camp mere happenstance? By leaving this detail out, the author is making a point by *what is not said*. The Deuteronomist would not hesitate to see God's divine guiding hand moving Sisera toward his death. But the Judges author refrains from illustrating how much is divine interference and how much is simple coincidence. God ensures a military victory, but the military general leading the charge is humiliated by a woman.

In the story of Jephthah versus the Ammonites, both Jephthah and the Gileadite elders assume Yahweh is their witness as they negotiate. Jephthah connects his possible success against Ammon with Yahweh's intervention, seemingly suggesting the deity's

sanction of his future leadership of Gilead. The elders agree, also invoking Yahweh "as a witness between us" (11:10). But so far, Yahweh has only appeared in the mouths of the people who are negotiating. The author intentionally neglects to include whether Yahweh has indeed witnessed the event or whether or not a group of men are simply using the divine name without any divine power. When Jephthah repeats "all of his words" before the deity at Mizpah, the deity has still neither sanctioned nor discouraged his appointment as leader (11:11).

The ambiguity of the deity's role in Jephthah's story is heightened when the battle between Jephthah and the Ammonites begins. In 11:29, we are told that "the spirit of Yahweh was upon Jephthah." It appears to be a divine sanction of Jephthah's battle plans. This is made clear by the fact that Jephthah's entire military campaign is detailed in a single verse. In one action, Jephthah sweeps the land "with a powerful attack, all the way from Aroer to Minnith," subduing the Ammonites completely (11:33). But before Ammon is delivered to him by the deity, and after he has already been imbued with the divine spirit, Jephthah makes a vow to God which seeks to ensure his victory. Already his victory is guaranteed, as the coming of God's spirit is a sanction of war, but despite this Jephthah makes his ill-fated, unnecessary vow. As we have seen, interpreters struggle to determine whether Jephthah is aware that he is invested with the spirit before his vow. But the author has intentionally obscured the order of events here. Our expectations of cause and effect are subverted – the role of the vow and why Jephthah chooses to make it when he does is left ambiguous by the author.

The deity disappears from the story after Jephthah's military success; it is unclear whether the vow is expected to be upheld. God has intervened only to ensure the military victory. His role ends after that. Both Jephthah and his daughter invoke Yahweh in their conversation about the vow, but just as with the Gileadite elders, Yahweh's engagement in the scene is unclear. Is Yahweh a witness to this scene as well? Or are Jephthah and his daughter using the divine name in the absence of any divine presence? The author has again chosen to obscure the nature of divine intervention. When tragedy looks to be the outcome of Jephthah's vow, God does not intercede. The author may not be directly condemning

God for inaction, but rather making ambiguous our expectations of what sort of event determines divine intervention. War? Yes. Child sacrifice and human error? Maybe not.

We are given more information about the deity in Samson's story than any other story explored in this dissertation, and yet the ambiguous nature of the divine is still not resolved. Yahweh intercedes on behalf of a barren woman and endows her with a child who "will begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines," their current oppressors (13:5). We are told that the spirit of Yahweh begins to stir in the boy, so we can be sure that the child is indeed God's chosen deliverer and that all the information relayed by the divine messenger to Manoah and his wife is credible (13:25). When Samson seeks to marry a foreign wife, the author is sure to tell us that "this came from Yahweh, as he was seeking grounds for a conflict with the Philistines" (14:4). This is, by far, the most explicit the author has been about God's intervention in the three stories explored in this study. And yet, ambiguity still reigns supreme. God is able to create for Israel one who will begin to deliver it from its oppressors, and yet the one created leaves quite a bit to be desired as a leader. Samson is self-motivated. He does nothing on behalf of Israel and only seeks to serve his own desires. Again, in presenting these conflicting images of God's intervention, the author highlights the ambiguity of the deity's direction of history. The author does not make explicit how much control the deity has over his people, and this raises questions about why Samson is not a better deliverer. Could not God design a better person? Does he choose not to? Or is he incapable? The author seems to pose these questions via his depiction of Samson's life events, and yet he refuses to answer them. In Samson, the author shows us that the deity is certainly engineering events. But he does not explicitly state that engineering conforms to our expectations.

The ambiguity of God's role in the story is part of what makes it a tragic comedy. While Samson embodies elements of the absurd, at the end of his life he is made into a pathetic figure. Perhaps nothing solidifies this more than the author's decision to make explicit that Yahweh has abandoned Samson in Delilah's home. This is a rare moment in the author's depiction of the deity. He takes a moment to pause his detailing of the action between Samson and Delilah to tell the reader that Samson "did not know that Yahweh had left him." So rarely is such an aside provided in Judges and yet it does nothing to crystalize

our picture of the deity. This action, that of the deity abandoning his deliverer, is the last divine action in the story. The author tells us that Samson's hair begins to grow back during his imprisonment, but the connection between the hair, Samson's power, and divine election has always been ambiguous in the story and it remains so here in the story's denouement. Just like Jephthah, Samson invokes the name of Yahweh before he topples down the Philistine stadium. But, as with Jephthah, the divine name in the mouth does not mean the divine presence is at hand. The author does not tell us that God returns and aids Samson. The deity's role in Samson's final act, the one that begins to deliver Israel, is left obscure.

The author works throughout Judges to provide an antiwar polemic that highlights the futility of male leadership. Those we expect to be in power are shown to be inadequate. The author seeks to highlight the futility of war, maintaining instead that the status quo is a more desirable position than armed resistance. If, as we have explored in the introduction, the status quo for which the author advocates is Israel's continued submission as a Persian suzerainty, the ambiguity of Yahweh becomes more ominous. If God alone chooses when there is war, can the people ever be sure of divine sanction when they pursue military resistance? The author leaves God as an ambiguous character because he cannot be sure of God's efficacy in the world. Again, the people have returned to Yehud, but God's temple is in the hands of a foreign king. By leaving so much ambiguity in the character of God, the author sews doubt into his stories about the relationship between God and Israel, as well as the nature and efficacy of a God who intervenes only sometimes and often in a way that lacks a clear resolution. The author not only confronts the failures of traditional male leadership, he confronts a God he fears is beyond understanding, whose actions will *always* seem ambiguous, and whose motivations cannot be made explicit. Behind the antiwar polemic is an author struggling with the way things are, an author who is familiar with the God of Deuteronomy and yet fearful of what such divine power means when the outcome is not always in the people's favor. I suggest that the deity in Judges cannot be "figured out," as many interpreters seek to do, simply because the author himself does not want us to do so. The author's formalized deity does not permit us to compress the God of Judges into the neat stereotypes that typify other ideologies. The author writes a deity that is impossible to force into any preconception.

Conclusion

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"

W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

No man is able to accomplish lasting victory in the book of Judges. The characters serve a larger purpose, to illustrate the futility of war and the failure of traditional male leadership. Part of the great irony of the book is that the characters themselves are unaware that war is futile, and they continue their attempts to lead in spite of their inability to succeed. They are unable to transcend their lots as failures; they are trapped in the pseudo-cyclical structure that renders them useful only to the polemic but not to the people of Israel. The tragic thread woven through the book is accentuated by the growing publicity of their failures and the constant reminder that there will always be another war.

Of course, this tragic role is reserved only for the men of the book. The women are not given enough space in the story to become objects of sympathy. They are written only to serve the polemic. They serve man, the author, in his attempt to lambast other men. For the author, they are not even worthy of their own form of humiliation. In the author's work to castigate masculine leadership they are subjugated into formalizations not even worthy of the author's critical eye.

The female characters we have encountered in this study appear to be remarkably diverse at first blush. They appear as judges, wives, unnamed sex workers, and more. But the diversity shown in this cast of characters is superficial. Despite their changing appearances, the women in this story serve a single role: to humiliate a man. These characters are highly formalized; they are caricatures whose only emphasized feature is the fact that they are women. That is the only feature that is important to the author, for humiliation at the hands of a woman is the primary way he illustrates that masculine leadership ineffectual.

The concept of female character formalization is thoroughly presented in Maurice Bloch's two intertwined theories of formalized language and the subordination of women in ritual. By expanding Bloch's definition of formalized language to include formalized characters, we have been able to explore the function of the female characters without any

distraction by their superficial differences. This has allowed us to eliminate the act of "gap filling," which other interpreters fall into in order to compensate for the dearth of information about the female characters. With Bloch's notion of formalized women, we are better able to understand the author's motivation for employing the female characters the way he does. We can resist the temptation to see Deborah as a pyromancer, the daughter of Jephthah as the leader of a female cult, and Delilah as a sex worker. We need not fill in these gaps and supply more biographical information, for it was not the author's intention for the characters to be given a robust reading by his audience. That they are women is the only critical part of their role; they are woefully underdeveloped beyond that. While in Bloch's interpretation of the Merina we see that the subordination of women is a bilateral action performed by *both* men and women of the community, here the subordination takes place wholly by the act of a man. The women in the book of Judges are subordinated to the message of their respective stories by the hands of male authors. It is our job, as interpreters, to figure out *why* the subordination is occurring and *what* purpose the author is fulfilling by doing so. In Judges, the author subordinates the women in order to show the failures of masculine leadership. His goal is to show the futility of military resistance, an action that lies solely in the realm of men. To illustrate that futility, the author uses female characters as the ultimate undoing of masculine leadership. Within Israelite culture, the ultimate form of male humiliation is brought about by a woman. Whether the humiliator is a married woman, or a prophet, or anyone else, is not germane to the author's goal. When we attempt to liberate the female characters from this role by providing them with more details, we are absolving the author of his misogynistic treatment of them. We can both appreciate the skill with which he delivers his polemic and condemn his subordination of women without adding extraneous details that dilute the potency of his message.

The polemic to which the author subordinates the women in Judges is primarily an antiwar polemic. As we have seen, society unravels more and more throughout the book, and in each story the humiliation of a man, carried out by a woman, occurs on an increasingly public scale. The growing publicity of masculine humiliation culminates in Samson, a hyper-masculinized character, as he is made to debase himself in a stadium full of jeering Philistines. The author is using these stories as a means to critique military prowess and its association with intensified masculinity because ultimately, he believes

that military resistance is futile. He chooses to embody that futility in the male characters and highlights it by the use of the "woman as humiliator" formalization. The author's goal is to show the futility of war and argue for the maintenance of the status quo. For him, the status quo is Persian suzerainty. The repeated public failures of the male characters in Judges would be of great poignancy to his audience after the loss of the temple. The Judges author seems to use his male characters to ask what good masculine strength is against the wheel of a powerful empire. But, lodged behind this antiwar message is a deeper uneasiness that the author weaves into the narrative. Yes, resistance is futile and yes, masculine leadership is ineffectual. But, since this is the case, since Yahweh's temple is in the hands of Persian leadership, what role does God serve in all of this? The author hints at the ambiguous role of God throughout the book – daring his readers to wonder whether God even cares and, if he does, whether he is all that good at his job as a deity. In his artistry, the author manages never to be explicit about the role of the deity in the lives of the people. He intentionally leaves questions unanswered. We have seen that commentators seek to resolve the ambiguities of Judges at all levels, from the human to the divine, but that may not be the most useful reading of the book. The author uses ambiguity as a tool to turn his antiwar polemic into something more complex and, most certainly, more unsettling. The book of Judges resists an easy interpretation. The author forces us to accept the ambiguity and refuses to provide the means of its resolution.

The women in Judges are formalizations that allow the author to render such a complex message. They are subordinated in his effort to make his point. Even in his humiliation of men, he must subordinate women as well, or the message loses its resonance. The women of Judges have the single role of helping the author deliver his unsettling, complex message about God and empire to the readers. In order to show that Yehud must remain subordinate to the Persian government, the author must subordinate others. The women are the vehicle for his polemic, but they lack any individual importance beyond that. Traditional masculine leadership is not the answer, as the author sees it, to Israel's suzerainty to Persia. In order to show how futile masculinity is, however, he must reduce women to formalized conventions and deny them any role other than the one that furthers his message. Ultimately, it is a tragic ending not only for the flattened female characters and the male characters they humiliate. It is also a tragic ending for the author who, while

suggesting military resistance to a foreign oppressor is futile is also questioning the potency of his deity and whether or not the plight of Israel matters to God at all.

Appendix: Translations

Judges 4

4. [1] The Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh after Ehud had died. [2] So Yahweh sold them into the hand of Jabin, the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who was based in Harosheth-Hagoyim. [3]The Israelites cried out to Yahweh because he had nine hundred chariots of iron and had violently oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. [4] Now Deborah, a female prophet, wife of Lappidot, was judging Israel at that time. [5] She would sit beneath the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in Mount Ephraim, and the Israelites would approach her for decisions. [6]She conveyed the following message to Barak, son of Avinoam, from Kedesh Naphtali, saying as follows: "Has not Yahweh, God of Israel, commanded: 'Get ready to deploy at Mount Tabor ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulon. [7]Meanwhile, at Nahal Kishon, I will draw to you Sisera, commander of Jabin's army, along with his chariots and his troops. I will deliver him into your hand." [8]Barak replied "If you go with me, then I will go. But if you will not go with me, I will not go." [9]She said "I will indeed go with you, however, there will be no glory for you on the path which you have chosen, for Yahweh will deliver Sisera into the hand of a woman." So, Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak mustered Zebulon and Naphtali at Kedesh. Ten thousand men marched behind him, and Deborah went up along with him. [11]Now, Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites, that is, from the descendants of Hobab, father-in-law of Moses. He pitched his tent as far as the Oak of Zaanaim, which is by Kedesh. [12]They told Sisera that Barak, son of Avinoam, had marched up to Mount Tabor. [13]Sisera mustered all his chariots -- nine hundred chariots of iron -- and all the troops he had with him, from Harosheth-Hagoyim to Nahal Kishon. [14] Deborah told Barak "Get up! This is the day that Yahweh has given Sisera into your hand! Don't you see that Yahweh has marched out in front of you?" So, Barak charged down Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following behind him. [15] Yahweh threw Sisera, all his chariots, and all his army into a panic at the edge of the sword before Barak. Sisera leapt from his chariot and fled on foot. [16] Barak pursued the chariots and the troops to Harosheth-Hagoyim. The whole of Sisera's army fell to the sword; not a single one was left. [17] However, Sisera had escaped on foot to the tent

of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, as there was peace between Jabin, king of Hazor, and the house Heber the Kenite. [18]Jael emerged to greet Sisera, saying to him "Turn here, my lord, turn here to me. Do not be afraid." So, he turned toward her and into the tent, where she covered him with a blanket. [19] He said to her, "Please give me some water, for I am thirsty." She opened a skin of milk and gave it to him to drink, then covered him again. [20] Then he said to her, "Stand at the opening of the tent, and if anyone comes and asks you 'is there a man here?,' say there is not." [21] Jael, wife of Heber, picked up a tent peg and grasped a hammer in her hand. She went up to him quietly, then thrust the peg through his temple, driving it into the ground. He, having fallen asleep from exhaustion, met his death. [22]Just then, as Barak was pursuing Sisera, Jael met him and said, "Come inside and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." He followed her, and there was Sisera, fallen dead with a peg in his temple. [23]And so, on that day, God subdued Jabin, king of Canaan, before the Israelites. [24]The hand of the Israelites turned more aggressively against Jabin, king of Canaan, until they exterminated Jabin, king of Canaan.

Judges 10: 17 – 12:7

10[17]The Ammonites mustered their troops and camped at Gilead while the Israelites assembled and camped at Mizpah. [18]The commanders of the forces of Gilead said to one another, "Whoever is the man who will begin to fight the Ammonites will be the leader over all the residents of Gilead.

11

[1]Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a powerful warrior, but he was also the son of a sex worker. Gilead fathered Jephthah. [2]Gilead's wife bore him sons, and when those sons grew up, they expelled Jephthah, saying to him "You do not have a share in our father's property, for you are the son of another woman." [3]So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of Tov. A band of misfits were drawn to Jephthah, and they went out raiding with him.

[4]Later, the Ammonites attacked Israel. [5] Just as the Ammonites were attacking Israel, the elders of Gilead went to summon Jephthah from the land of Tov. [6]They said to Jephthah, "Become our commander so we can fight the Ammonites." [7]But Jephthah replied to the elders of Gilead, "Didn't you reject me and drive me from my father's home? How can you come to me now when you are in trouble?" [8] The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah "That is so, but now we are turning to you. Come with us and fight the Ammonites, then you shall be a leader for us and for all of Gilead." [9]Jephthah responded to the elders of Gilead, "If you are bringing me back to fight the Ammonites, and Yahweh delivers them to me, then I will be your leader." [10] The elders of Gilead replied to Jephthah, "Yahweh is witness between us if we do not do what you have said." [11]So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead. The people made him leader and commander over them. Then Jephthah repeated all of his words before Yahweh at Mizpah.

[12]Jephthah sent an envoy to the king of the Ammonites, asking: "What do you have against me that you should come here and attack my land?" [13]The king of the Ammonites responded to Jephthah's envoy: "When Israel was coming out of Egypt, it took my land, from Arnon to the Jabbok, and all the way to the Jordan. Now, return them in their entirety." [14] Once again Jephthah sent an envoy to the king of the Ammonites. [15] [The messenger] said to him "Thus says Jephthah: 'Israel did not take the land of Moab, or the land of the Ammonites. [16]When they came up from Egypt, Israel traveled in the wilderness as far as the Yam Suf, and then went to Kadesh. [17]Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, asking 'Please let us cross your land.' But the king of Edom would not agree. They also sent a message to the king of Moab, but he too would not acquiesce. So, Israel remained at Kadesh. [18] Then they traveled through the wilderness, avoiding the land of Edom and the land of Moab. They went east of the land of Moab and camped beyond Arnon, but they did not cross the border of Moab, as Arnon is on the border of Moab. [19] Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, king of Heshbon. Israel asked him "let us cross your land, please, to our destination.' [20]But Sihon would not trust Israel to go through his territory. Sihon then mustered all his troops, and they made base at Jahaz, where they attacked Israel. [21]But Yahweh, God of Israel, delivered Sihon and all his forces into the hand of Israel. Israel defeated them and took possession of all the land of the Amorites who were living there. [22]They took all the territory of the Amorites, from Arnon to the Jabbok,

from the wilderness to the Jordan. [23]At that time, Yahweh God of Israel dispossessed the Amorites before his people, Israel. Now then, is it *you* who should possess it? [24]Don't you already possess what Chemosh, your god, had given you to possess? And thus, should we not possess all that Yahweh, our God, gave to us to possess? [25]Are you any better than Balak, son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel, or go to war with them? [26]When Israel was staying in Heshbon and its surroundings, and Aroer and its surroundings, and all the towns along the Arnon, for three hundred years, why did you not reclaim them during all that time? [27]See, I have not done you any wrong, but *you* do me wrong by attacking me. May Yahweh, the judge, making a ruling today between Israel and the Ammonites.'" [28]But the king of the Ammonites did not acknowledge the message which Jephthah had sent him.

[29]The spirit of Yahweh was upon Jephthah. He marched through Gilead and Manasseh, passing through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he marched to the Ammonites. [30] Jephthah swore a vow to Yahweh: "If you will wholly deliver the Ammonites into my hand, [31]then whoever emerges from the door of my home to meet me when I return unscathed from the Ammonites shall be Yahweh's. I shall offer it up as a sacrifice." [32] Jephthah then marched up to the Ammonites and attacked them, and Yahweh delivered them into his hand. [33]He defeated them with a powerful attack, all the way from Aroer to Minnith, twenty cities (in total), all the way to Abel-Keramim. The Ammonites were subdued before the Israelites.

[34]Jephthah went to his house at Mizpah, and there was his daughter, coming out to greet him, dancing with a tambourine. She was his only child; he had no other son or daughter. [35]The moment he saw her he tore his clothing and cried out, "Alas, my daughter. You have destroyed me. You have become my ruiner. I opened my mouth to Yahweh, and I cannot undo it." [36] She replied "My father, you have opened your mouth to Yahweh, so now do to me what came out of your mouth. After all, Yahweh has avenged you against your enemies, the Ammonites. [37]Then she added to her father, "Let me do this one thing. Let me be alone for two months, let me go up the mountain with my friends and let me weep for my life.[38] "Go," he replied. He sent her away for two months. She and her friends went and wept for her life in the mountains. [39]When two months had passed she returned to her father, and he

did to her what he had vowed. She had never known a man. It became a custom in Israel [40]that every year the women of Israel went out to celebrate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite for four days.

12

[1]The men of Ephraim mustered themselves and crossed Zaphon. They confronted Jephthah, "Why did you march to attack the Ammonites and not recruit us to go with you? Now we shall burn your house down with you in it!" [2]Jephtha replied, "I and my people had a conflict with the Ammonites. I raised a battle cry to you, but you did not deliver me from their hand. [3]When I saw that you were not going to save me, I risked my life and marched against the Ammonites. Yahweh delivered them into my hand. Now why have you come here now to attack me?" [4]Then Jephthah assembled all the men of Gilead and attacked Ephraim. The men of Gilead defeated Ephraim, as they had said 'You Gileadites are merely fugitives of Ephraim, in the middle of Ephraim and Manasseh." [5]So the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan from Ephraim. When any fugitive of Ephraim would say "Let me cross," the men of Gilead would respond to him "Are you an Ephraimite?" Should he say no, [6]they would counter: Say 'shibboleth.' But he would say "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce it correctly. Then they would capture him and kill him near the fords of the Jordan. At that time, forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed. [7]Jephthah judged Israel for six years. When Jephthah the Gileadite died, he was buried in the city of Gilead.

Judges 13-16

Chapter 13

[1]The Israelites continued to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh, so Yahweh delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. [2]There was a man from Zorah, from the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren; she had not given birth. [3]A messenger of Yahweh appeared to the woman and said to her, "Right now you are barren and have not given birth. But you shall become pregnant and bear a son. [4]As such, take care and do not drink wine or any other intoxicant. Do not eat anything that is unclean.

[5]Because soon you will become pregnant, and you will give birth to a son. A razor shall never touch his head, for the boy will be Nazirite of God from the womb. He will begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. [6]The woman went to her husband and told him "A man of God came to me. His appearance was like that of a messenger of God, very terrifying. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name. [7] Then he said to me, 'You will become pregnant and you will give birth to a son. So now, do not drink wine or any other intoxicant, and do not eat anything that is unclean, for the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day he dies." [8]So Manoah prayed to Yahweh, "My Lord let the man of God whom you sent come to us again, so that he may teach us what to do with the boy who will be born." [9]God listened to Manoah's request and the messenger of God came again to the woman. She was sitting in the field, and Manoah, her husband, was not with her. [10] The woman hurriedly ran to tell her husband, saying to him "Look! The man who appeared to be the other day has come to me."[524] [11]Manoah followed after his wife. He came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to the woman?" "I am," he answered. [12]Then Manoah asked, "Now then, when your words come to pass, what rules will be observed for the boy?" [13]The messenger of Yahweh said to Manoah, "All of the things which I said to the woman she shall observe. [14]She may not eat anything which comes from the grapevine, she shall not drink wine or other intoxicating beverages, and she may not eat anything that is unclean. She shall observe all that I have commanded her." [15]Manoah said to the messenger of Yahweh, "Let us detain you and prepare a kid for you." [16]But the messenger of Yahweh said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat your food. But if you make a burnt offering, offer it to Yahweh." However, Manoah did not know that he was a messenger of Yahweh. [17]Manoah said to the messenger of Yahweh, "What is your name, so that when your words come true we may honor you." [18]The messenger of Yahweh replied to him, "Why do you ask for my name, since it is incomprehensible?" [19]Manoah took the kid and the grain and offered them up on the rock to Yahweh. A miraculous thing happened while Manoah and his wife looked on. [20]As the flame leapt high above the alter toward heaven, the messenger of Yahweh went up with the

[524] While I typically chose not to translate the particle, here it follows the direct speech marker וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו. Since the messenger has arrived a second time, she is now calling his attention to the fact that the messenger has not only visited her *again*, but is still present, presumably in the field in which he first appeared to the woman. The particle highlights the urgency of the situation for the woman.

flame from the altar while Manoah and his wife were still watching. They prostrated themselves on the ground. [21]The messenger of Yahweh was no longer visible to Manoah and his wife. It was then that Manoah understood that he was a messenger of Yahweh. [22]Manoah said to his wife, “We will certainly die, since we have seen God.” [23]But his wife said to him, “Had Yahweh intended to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain from us, nor would he show us all these things. He would not have made this announcement to us.” [24]The woman bore a son and named him Samson. As the boy grew up, Yahweh blessed him. [25]The spirit of Yahweh began to stir in him, in the camp of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Chapter 14

[1]Samson went down to Timnah and, while there, he saw a Philistine woman. [2] Then he returned to his father and his mother and said “I saw one of the Philistine women in Timnah. Now, get her for me as a wife.” [3]But his father and his mother said to him, “Is there no woman from your relatives’ daughters or from all my people that you should go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?” But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes.” [4]His father and his mother did not know that this came from Yahweh, as he was seeking grounds for a conflict with the Philistines. At that time, the Philistines were ruling over Israel. [5]So Samson and his father and mother went to Timnah. Then he came upon the vineyards of Timnah and there a lion in its prime came roaring at him. [6]Then the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, and he tore it apart just as one would tear a kid apart, though there was nothing in his hand. But he did not tell his father or mother what he had done. [7]He went to speak to the woman, and Samson found her attractive. [8] Later on, he returned to marry her, so he turned aside to see the lion’s carcass. There was a swarm of bees in the lion corpse, as well as some honey. [9]He scooped it up in his hands, eating it as he walked along. When he got to his father and mother, he gave them some and they ate it, but he did not tell them that he had gotten the honey from the lion carcass. [10]His father went to the woman. Samson prepared a feast there, for that was what the young men were supposed to do. [11]When they saw him, they brought thirty companions to accompany him. [12]Samson said to them, “Let me present you an enigma. If you can solve

it for me during the seven days of the feast, then I will give you thirty linens and thirty garments. [13]But if you cannot solve it, then you will give me thirty linens and thirty garments. So, they said to him, “Give us your enigma and we will listen to it.” [14]Then he said to them, “Out of the one who devours comes something to eat, and from the strong comes something sweet.” They were unable to solve the enigma for three days. [15]On the seventh day, they said to Samson’s wife “Convince your husband to tell us the solution to the enigma, otherwise we will burn you along with your father’s house with fire. Did you two bring us here to dispossess us?

[16]Then Samson’s wife wept to him and said “You loathe me; you do not love me. You gave an enigma to my people, and you did not tell me the answer.” He said to her, “I have not even told my father and my mother, but should I tell you?” [17]She continued to lament to him during the seven days of the feast. On the seventh day, he told her, since she was distressing him. Then she told the enigma to her people. [18]On the seventh day, just before sunset, the townsmen said to him “What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?” “If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would never have solved the enigma,” he retorted. [19]Then the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, so he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of their men. He stripped their armor and gave their garments to those who had solved the enigma. He went, enraged, to his father’s house. [20]Samson’s wife was given to one of his companions, who had been a friend of his.

Chapter 15

[1]Later, during the wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife with a kid. “Let me go to my wife in the bedchamber.” But her father would not allow him to enter. [2]Then her father said “I thought for sure that you utterly despised her, so I gave her to your friend. But, isn’t her younger sister even more beautiful than she? Why not take her as your wife instead?” [3]Samson said to them, “This time, I will be without guilt, for I am about to do a terrible thing against them.” [4]So Samson went out and caught three hundred foxes. He took torches, turned the foxes tail to tail, and set a torch between each pair of tails. [5]He set fire to the torches and released them into the Philistine grain fields. He burned everything from the piles of grain to the grain still standing, and even the olive groves. [6]The Philistines asked, “Who did this?” The reply came: “Samson, son in law of the Timnite, who took his wife

and have her to his companion." So, the Philistines went and burned her and her father with fire.[7] Samson said to them "If this is what you have done with her, then I shall not cease until I avenge myself against you." [8]He struck them *from leg to thigh* with a great blow, then fled, staying in a cave in the rock of Etam. [9]The Philistines mustered themselves against Judah. They deployed at Lehi. [10]The Judahites asked them, "Why have you come up here against us?" "We came to capture Samson and do to him what he did to us," they replied. [11]So three thousand men from Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam. They demanded of Samson: "Don't you know that the Philistines are our masters? Why have you done this to us?" He replied, "As they did to me, so I have done to them." [12]They said to him, "We came down to capture you and deliver you into the hand of the Philistines." Samson replied, "Promise me that you will not be the ones to attack me." [13]They said to him, "We will only capture you and deliver you into their hands but will not murder you." So, they bound him with two new ropes, and they brought him out from the cave.

[14]He was coming to Lehi when the Philistines shouted to greet him. The spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, and the ropes which bound his arms became like linen that is burned with fire; the bonds melted away from his hands. [15]He found the fresh jawbone of a donkey. He reached for it and seized it, and with it he killed a thousand men. [16]Then Samson said, "With a donkey's jawbone, heaps upon heaps, with a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men. [17]As soon as he had finished speaking, he threw the jawbone from his hand. That place was called Ramat Lehi. [18]Samson was extremely thirsty, so he called out to Yahweh, "You have delivered this great victory into the hand of your servant, but must I now died of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" [19]So God broke open the hollow that was at Lehi, and water came rushing out from it. When he drank, his spirit returned and he was revived. Since then, the place has been called En-Hakkore, which is still at Lehi to this day. [20]He judged Israel in the days of the Philistines for twenty years.

Chapter 16

[1]Samson went to Gaza. While there, he saw a sex worker and he slept with her. [2]The residents of Gaza learned that Samson had come, so they mustered themselves and waited

to ambush him all night at the city gate. All night they whispered to one another, “We will kill him at morning light.” [3]But Samson stayed in bed until the middle of the night. Then, at midnight, he got up, gripped the doors of the city gate along with the gateposts, and he pulled them up along with the crossbar. He rested them on his shoulders and brough them up to the top of the hill near Hebron. [4]Later on, he fell in love with a woman in Nahal Sorek. Her name was Delilah. [5]The Philistine commanders approached her and said “Coax him, find out what makes him so strong, and what we can do to bind him up and overpower him. We will each give you eleven hundred silver shekels.” [6]So Delilah said to Samon, “Won’t you tell me where your powerful strength comes from? And how you could be tied up and humiliated?” [7]Samson responded, “If they tie me up with seven new cords that have not yet dried out, then I might become like any other man.” [8]The Philistine commanders brought her seven new cords which had not yet dried out and she bound him up with them. [9]But she had a unit lying in wait in her room. She said to him, “Samson! The Philistines are coming for you!” Then he ripped the cords just as a strand of thread disintegrates in fire, and his strength remained a mystery. [10]Delilah said to Samson, “You have deceived me by telling me lies. Come now, share with me how you can be tied up.” [11]So he said to her, “If they tie me up with new ropes that have never been used, then I might become weak just like any other man.” [12]Delilah then took new ropes and tied him up with them. She said to him, “The Philistines are coming for you, Samson!” The ambush was already set up in the room. But Samson ripped the ropes from his arms like a thread. [13]Delilah said to Samson, “You have repeatedly deceived me by telling me lies, but now, tell me how you can be tied up.” So he said to her, “If you weave seven braids on my head with fabric from a loom.[14]She thrust a peg and said to him, “The Philistines are coming for you, Samson!” But he awoke from his slumber and pulled out the peg, along with the loom and the web. [15]She said to him, “How can you tell me you love me if your heart is not really with me? This is the third time you have deceived me and not told me the source of your great strength.” [16]She continued to pressure him with her words, urging him, until he was vexed to death. [17]He told her everything. “A razor has never touched my head, because I have been a Nazirite of God since I was in my mother’s womb. If it were cut, my strength would disappear, and I would be weak, just like any other man. [18]Delilah saw that he had told her everything, so she summoned the Philistine commanders and said to them, “Come here

once more. He has told me everything." The Philistine commanders came to her, bringing the money with them. [19]She lulled him to sleep on her lap. Then she called to one of them men, and she shaved the seven locks off his head. She began to humiliate him, and his strength abandoned him. [20]She said, "The Philistines are coming for you, Samson!" He awoke from his slumber, saying "I will get out by shaking free, just like every other time." But he did not know that Yahweh had left him. [21]The Philistines seized him and gouged his eyes out. They brought him to Gaza and imprisoned him in bronze bonds. He became a mill grinder in prison. [22]But the hair on his head began to grow as it had before it was cut.

[23]The Philistine commanders gathered together to make a great sacrifice to Dagon, their god, and to celebrate. They cried out, "Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hand!" [24]The people looked at him, and praised their god, for they said, "Our god has delivered the enemy into our hand, the one who decimated our land and murdered so many of us." [25]As they were celebrating, they said "Call Samson, so that he might entertain us." Samson was brought from the prison, and he debased himself before them. Then they stood him up between the pillars. [26]Samson said to the young man who was holding him by the hand, "Release me, and let me feel the pillars on which this place rests, so that I can lean on them for support." [27]The temple was full of men and women. All the Philistine commanders were also there, and even on the roof there were three thousand men and women, watching Samson's humiliation. [28]But then, Samson cried out to Yahweh, "My Lord, Yahweh, please remember me, and give me strength this one last time, oh God, so that I can enact vengeance for both my eyes upon the Philistines. [29]Then Samson grasped at the two pillars in the middle of the temple which the entire place rested on, and he leaned on one with his right hand and the other with his left. [30]Samson said "Let me die with the Philistines!" He shoved with all of his might, and the temple collapsed on the commanders, and all the people who were inside. All those who died at the same time as him outnumbered those he had killed while he was alive. [31]His relatives and all the members of his father's house came and carried him away. They buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol, in the tomb of his father, Manoah. He had judged Israel for twenty years.

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