Judges

1

Summary: *After Joshua's death, Judah and Simeon lead the initial campaigns against the Canaanites. Several tribes fail to drive out the inhabitants of their territories, settling instead for forced labor or coexistence.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The chapter opens with the same question that opened Joshua ('Who will go up first?'), but the trajectory is downward. Judah's victories give way to partial conquests, then failures, then accommodation. The phrase lo horish (repeated throughout, 'did not drive out') becomes a refrain of incomplete obedience. The Canaanites are not too strong for God — Israel simply stopped trying. Adoni-bezek's capture and mutilation (vv. 5-7) includes his own theological commentary: 'as I have done, so God has repaid me.'*

Translation Friction: *The verb horish ('drive out, dispossess') carries legal force — it means not merely defeating but removing from the land. We rendered each instance consistently. The phrase chesed (v. 24, rendered 'deal faithfully') uses the Hebrew verbal construction asah chesed, requiring a verbal English form rather than the nominal 'faithful love.' This is a documented departure from the register default.*

Connections: *The catalog of failures here is the setup for the entire book of Judges — the nations Israel did not drive out become the instruments of their testing (2:20-3:6). The Kenite settlement (v. 16) connects to Moses's father-in-law (Numbers 10:29-32). Jerusalem's incomplete conquest (v. 21) persists until David (2 Samuel 5:6-9).*

1 After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of the LORD: "Who will go up first on our behalf against the Canaanites, to
fight against them?" 2 The LORD said, "Judah will go up. I have given the land into his hand." 3 Judah said to his brother
Simeon, "Come up with me into my allotted territory, and we will fight the Canaanites together. Then I will go with you into
your allotted territory." So Simeon went with him. 4 Judah went up, and the LORD gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites
into their hand. They struck them down at Bezek — ten thousand men. 5 They found Adoni-Bezek at Bezek and fought against
him, and they struck down the Canaanites and the Perizzites. 6 Adoni-Bezek fled, but they pursued him, captured him, and
cut off his thumbs and big toes. 7 Adoni-Bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to scavenge
under my table. As I have done, so God has repaid me." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there. 8 The
descendants of Judah fought against Jerusalem, captured it, struck it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire. 9 Aft

erward the descendants of Judah went down to fight the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, the Negev, and the Shephelah. 10Judah marched against the Canaanites living in Hebron — formerly called Kiriath-Arba — and struck down Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai. 11From there he marched against the inhabitants of Debir — formerly called Kiriath-Sepher. 12 Caleb said, "Whoever attacks Kiriath-Sepher and captures it, I will give him my daughter Achsah as a wife." 13Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it, and Caleb gave him his daughter Achsah as a wife. 14When she arrived, she urged him to ask her father for a field. She dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" 15She said to him, "Give me a blessing. Since you have given me the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water." So Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs. 16The descendants of the Kenite, Moses's father-in-law, went up from the City of Palms with the descendants of Judah into the wilderness of Judah in the Negev near Arad, and they went and settled among the people. 17Judah went with his brother Simeon, and they struck down the Canaanites living in Zephath. They devoted the city to destruction and named it Hormah. 18Judah captured Gaza and its territory, Ashkelon and its territory, and Ekron and its territory. 19The LORD was with Judah, and they took possession of the hill country. But they could not dispossess the inhabitants of the plain, because they had iron chariots. 20They gave Hebron to Caleb, as Moses had promised, and he drove out from there the three sons of Anak. 21But the descendants of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem. So the Jebusites have lived alongside the descendants of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day. 22The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel along with the LORD was with them. 23The house of Joseph sent scouts to Bethel — formerly called Luz. 24The scouts saw a man coming out of the city and said to him, "Show us the way into the city, and we will deal faithfully with you." 25He showed them the way into the city, and they struck the city with the edge of the sword, but they let the man and all his family go free. 26The man went to the land of the Hittites and built a city, naming it Luz — that is its name to this day. 27Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shean and its dependent towns, or Taanach and its dependent towns, or the inhabitants of Dor and its dependent towns, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its dependent towns, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its dependent towns. The Canaanites were determined to remain in that land. 28When Israel grew strong, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out completely. 29Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites living in Gezer, so the Canaanites lived among them in Gezer. 30Zeb ulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron or the inhabitants of Nahalol. The Canaanites lived among them and were subjected to forced labor. 31Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or Ahlab, or Achzib, or Helbah, or Aphik, or Rehob. 32So the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, because they did not drive them out. 33Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh or the inhabitants of Beth-Anath, but lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land. However, the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh and Beth-Anath became their forced laborers. 34The Amorites pressed the descendants of Dan back into the hill country and would not let them come down to the valley. 35The Amorites were determined to remain in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim. But when the hand of the house of Joseph grew heavy upon them, they became forced laborers. 36The border of the Amorites ran from the Ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The opening vayyehi acharei mot Yehoshua ('and it was after the death of Joshua') exactly mirrors Joshua 1:1 (acharei mot Mosheh) — the same narrative seam that opened Joshua now opens Judges. But the structural echo highlights a critical difference: after Moses's death, God spoke to Joshua unbidden; after Joshua's death, Israel must ask. There is no named successor.

1. The verb sha'al ('to inquire, to ask') combined with ba-YHWH ('of the LORD') indicates formal oracular consultation, likely through the Urim and Thummim administered by the high priest (cf. Numbers 27:21). This is proper covenant procedure — Israel begins the book correctly, seeking divine direction before acting.

2. God's answer is immediate and decisive: Judah leads. The selection of Judah — the tribe of the royal line — at the opening of a book whose refrain is 'there was no king in Israel' is not accidental. Judah's preeminence was established in Jacob's blessing (Genesis 49:8-12) and is reasserted here.

2. The perfect tense natatti ('I have given') echoes Joshua 1:3 — God declares the outcome accomplished before the first blow is struck. The gift precedes the effort, as it did throughout Joshua.

3. The mutual-aid pact between Judah and Simeon reflects their geographic and genealogical proximity — both sons of Leah, and Simeon's allotment was embedded within Judah's territory (Joshua 19:1-9). The term goral ('lot, allotted portion') refers to the divinely assigned tribal territories distributed in Joshua 13-21. The alliance is pragmatic but also underscores the tribal fragmentation that will characterize Judges: each tribe fights for its own inheritance, not as a unified nation.

4. The pattern is established: Judah goes up, the LORD gives the victory. The verb natan ('gave') with the military idiom be-yadam ('into their hand') is the standard formula for divinely granted victory throughout Joshua and Judges. Human effort and divine action are inseparable.

4. The Perizzites are one of the pre-Israelite populations listed in the Canaanite nations formula (cf. Genesis 15:20, Exodus 3:8). The term may designate rural, unwalled-village dwellers (from perazot, 'open settlements') rather than a distinct ethnic group. Their pairing with the Canaanites here may indicate the full range of the population — urban Canaanites and rural Perizzites.

5. Adoni-Bezek ('lord of Bezek') is a title-name — the local ruler of Bezek. He is distinct from Adoni-Zedek ('lord of righteousness'), the king of Jerusalem in Joshua 10:1, though the similar names have caused confusion in textual traditions. The LXX confuses the two in some manuscripts.

6. The mutilation — cutting the behonotav ('thumbs') of his hands and feet — is not mere cruelty. Removing thumbs and big toes renders a warrior permanently unable to grip a weapon or maintain balance in combat. It is a deliberate disabling that allows survival but eliminates military threat. This practice is attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East as an alternative to execution for captured rulers.

7. Adoni-Bezek's confession is a striking moment of theological recognition from a pagan king. He identifies his fate as divine retribution — ka'asher asiti ken shillam-li Elohim ('as I have done, so God has repaid me'). The verb shillam (from the root sh-l-m, related to shalom) means 'to repay, to make whole, to requite.' The irony is rich: the root that means 'peace' and 'wholeness' here describes just punishment.

7. The seventy mutilated kings scavenging under his table (melaqtim, 'picking up scraps') is a vivid image of systematic humiliation. Whether seventy is precise or a round number indicating 'many' (shiv'im is a conventional number for a large complete set), Adoni-Bezek's own testimony establishes the measure-for-measure justice he now receives.

7. Elohim rather than YHWH in Adoni-Bezek's speech is theologically appropriate — a Canaanite king would recognize divine justice in general terms ('God') rather than invoking Israel's covenant name.

8. This notice of Jerusalem's capture by Judah stands in tension with verse 21 (Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem) and with Joshua 15:63 (Judah could not drive them out). The most likely explanation is that Judah achieved a temporary military victory without establishing permanent occupation. Jerusalem remained a Jebusite stronghold until David's conquest (2 Samuel 5:6-9). The text preserves the tension rather than harmonizing it.

8. Lefi-cherev ('at the mouth of the sword') is the standard idiom for comprehensive military defeat. The 'mouth' (pi) of the sword is its cutting edge — the Hebrew imagines the sword as consuming its victims.

9. Three geographic zones define Judah's theater of operations: the har ('hill country,' the central ridge), the Negev ('the south,' the arid region below Beersheba), and the Shephelah ('the lowland,' the foothills between the central highlands and the coastal plain). These three zones together constitute Judah's full territorial allotment as described in Joshua 15. The geographic specificity is theological documentation — the conquest must be as physical and verifiable as the promise it fulfills.

10. The three named warriors — Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai — are identified elsewhere as descendants of Anak, the giant clan (Numbers 13:22, Joshua 15:14). These are the same population the spies feared in Numbers 13:28-33, causing the wilderness generation to refuse entry into the land. Their defeat here is the fulfillment of Caleb's confidence in Numbers 14:24 — what the faithless spies thought impossible, covenant-faithful warriors accomplish.

10. Kiriath-Arba ('city of Arba' or 'city of four') was the older name for Hebron. Arba was identified as the greatest of the Anakim (Joshua 14:15). The parenthetical name note connects the conquest to the patriarchal narratives — Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah at Hebron to bury Sarah (Genesis 23).

11. Kiriath-Sepher ('city of the scroll' or 'city of writing') suggests Debir may have been an administrative or scribal center. The name has intrigued scholars as possible evidence of a Canaanite literary tradition. This account parallels Joshua 15:15-19 almost verbatim — the Judges narrator incorporates the earlier tradition.

12. Caleb's offer of his daughter as a prize for military valor reflects ancient Near Eastern customs where marriage to a leader's daughter conferred both honor and alliance. The practice appears also in 1 Samuel 17:25 (Saul's similar offer regarding Goliath). Achsah is not merely a trophy — as verses 14-15 will show, she is a shrewd negotiator who secures her own future.

13. Othniel's introduction here prepares for his role as the first judge in 3:7-11. He is Caleb's younger brother (or possibly nephew — achi Kalev, 'brother of Caleb,' is ambiguous in Hebrew kinship language). His military initiative at Debir establishes his credentials as a leader capable of covenant-faithful action — making his later role as deliverer narratively coherent.

14. The verb va-tesitehu ('she urged him, she incited him') indicates Achsah's initiative — she is the strategic thinker in the marriage, prompting Othniel to request land. The verb sut can carry negative connotations (incitement to wrongdoing, cf. 1 Chronicles 21:1), but here it simply indicates persuasive initiative. Achsah recognizes that land without water is worthless and acts to secure both.

14. Va-titsnach me'al ha-chamor ('she dismounted from the donkey') — the verb tsanach means 'to descend, to alight.' The physical act of dismounting signals deference and petition — she approaches her father as a supplicant, not standing above him on the donkey.

15. Achsah's request is shrewd and theologically resonant. She asks for a berakhah ('blessing') — the word carries more weight than a simple gift. She recognizes that the Negev land alone is semi-arid and insufficient; gullot mayim ('springs of water,' literally 'basins of water') are essential for viability. Caleb's generous response — both upper and lower springs — exceeds her request, a pattern that echoes divine generosity throughout the land-gift narrative.

15. This vignette (vv. 12-15) appears almost identically in Joshua 15:16-19. Its repetition in Judges 1 serves a structural purpose: the successful completion of Caleb-Othniel's conquest is the last positive military achievement before the catalog of failures begins in verse 19.

16. The Kenites were a non-Israelite clan connected to Israel through Moses's marriage to Zipporah (Exodus 2:16-21). Choten Mosheh ('father-in-law of Moses') identifies the clan through this relationship — their alliance with Israel is based on kinship, not covenant membership. The Kenites' presence in Judah's territory prefigures Jael's role in chapter 4, where a Kenite woman delivers Israel.

16. Ir ha-temarim ('City of Palms') is Jericho (cf. Deuteronomy 34:3, 2 Chronicles 28:15). The Kenites migrated south from Jericho's oasis into the arid Negev near Arad — territory that suited their semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle.

17. Va-yacharim otah ('they devoted it to destruction') — the verb is from cherem, the sacred ban carried over from Joshua. Zephath is renamed Hormah (from the same root ch-r-m), making the city's name a permanent marker of its destruction. The name Hormah means 'destruction' or 'devoted thing.' The same location appears in Numbers 21:3, where Israel made a similar vow of cherem against the king of Arad. The connection between the Numbers vow and its fulfillment here should be noted.

17. This is the last successful cherem in Judges. After this verse, the narrative turns to a catalog of failures — tribes that could not or would not drive out the Canaanites. The placement is deliberate: the book shows what faithful conquest looks like one last time before documenting its collapse.

18. These three cities — Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron — are Philistine pentapolis cities (along with Ashdod and Gath). The claim of Judah's capture is striking because the Philistines remain a dominant military presence throughout Judges and into Samuel. The LXX reads 'Judah did NOT capture Gaza...' (adding the negative ou), which many scholars consider the more historically plausible reading. The MT text as it stands may describe a temporary or partial occupation that the Philistines quickly reversed.

18. The term gevulah ('its territory') indicates that the claim extends beyond the city walls to the surrounding agricultural land — a complete territorial claim, not just urban capture.

19. This verse is the theological hinge of chapter 1. The LORD was with Judah — the covenant presence is affirmed — yet Judah cannot complete the conquest. The stated reason is military: rekhev barzel ('iron chariots'), the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of armored divisions. Iron technology gave the lowland Canaanites a decisive advantage on flat terrain where chariots could operate.

19. The theological tension is acute: if the LORD is with Judah, why can iron chariots stop them? Joshua 17:16-18 raises the same issue. The text does not resolve the tension — it lets it stand. The implication, which the narrator will develop through the rest of Judges, is that the failure is not military but spiritual: the tribes lack the faith to press the conquest against superior technology, and the LORD's presence does not override human willingness.

19. The verb yarash ('to take possession, to dispossess') is the key land-conquest verb from Deuteronomy and Joshua. Its appearance here — successful in the hills, failed in the plains — marks the beginning of the 'could not / did not' sequence that runs through the rest of the chapter.

20. The fulfillment of Moses's promise to Caleb (Numbers 14:24, Deuteronomy 1:36, Joshua 14:6-15). Caleb's success against the Anakim — the giant clan that terrified the faithless spies — is the narrative bookend to Numbers 13-14. What the wilderness generation could not face, Caleb conquers at age 85. His personal faith stands in contrast to the tribal failures documented throughout the rest of this chapter.

21. The first explicit failure: lo horishu ('they did not drive out'). This begins the catalog of tribal failures that dominates the rest of the chapter. Benjamin's failure at Jerusalem is especially significant because Jerusalem sat on the border between Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 15:8, 18:16). Verse 8 reported Judah's partial victory there; Benjamin's failure to follow through left the Jebusites in place until David's conquest (2 Samuel 5:6-9).

21. The phrase ad ha-yom ha-zeh ('to this day') is a narrator's marker indicating that the situation persisted into the time of writing. This temporal note is evidence for a pre-Davidic (or at least pre-Solomonic) composition date for at least this portion of the text, since David took Jerusalem.

22. Beit-Yosef ('house of Joseph') designates the combined tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh — Joseph's two sons who received tribal status through Jacob's adoption blessing (Genesis 48). The LORD's presence with them (va-YHWH immam) echoes verse 19 (the LORD was with Judah) and creates a parallel: both Judah and Joseph begin with divine support but end with incomplete results.

22. Bethel ('house of God') was one of the most significant cultic sites in Israel's history — the place of Jacob's dream and vow (Genesis 28:10-22, 35:1-15). Its capture by the house of Joseph restores the site to Israelite control. Ironically, Bethel will later become a center of illicit worship under Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:29).

23. The verb va-yatiru ('they scouted, they spied out') connects to Joshua 2's reconnaissance of Jericho. The parallel is intentional: as Joshua sent spies before Jericho, so the house of Joseph sends scouts before Bethel. The former name Luz ('almond tree') appears in Genesis 28:19, where Jacob renamed it Bethel after his dream encounter with God.

24. The promise ve-asinu immekha chesed ('we will do chesed with you') is a deliberate echo of Rahab's exchange with the Israelite spies in Joshua 2:12-14, where the same chesed language appears. The parallel invites comparison: Rahab's chesed led to her incorporation into Israel; this man's chesed leads to his exile. The same covenant vocabulary produces different outcomes.

24. Chesed here functions at the human-to-human level — faithful dealing, loyal reciprocity. The scouts pledge covenantal goodwill in exchange for intelligence. The register term appears in its relational dimension: binding loyalty between parties who have entered an agreement.

24. Register departure: chesed rendered as 'deal faithfully' rather than default 'faithful love' because the Hebrew uses the verbal construction asah chesed ('do chesed'), requiring a verbal English form. The spies promise reciprocal loyalty to the informant — a human pledge, not a divine covenant.

25. The chesed pledge is honored: the man and his entire mishpachah ('family, clan') are released. The verb shillechu ('they sent away, released') is the same root used for Pharaoh releasing Israel from Egypt (sh-l-ch). The irony is layered: an Israelite liberation verb is used for releasing a Canaanite family from a city under conquest.

26. The man rebuilds his city-identity in exile — naming the new settlement Luz after the old one. The relocation to erets ha-Chittim ('land of the Hittites,' Syria/southern Anatolia) places him far from Israel's territory. The narrator's tag 'to this day' (ad ha-yom ha-zeh) indicates the new Luz persisted into the writer's era, though its precise location is unknown.

27. This verse (paralleling Joshua 17:11-12) lists five major Canaanite city-states that Manasseh failed to conquer. These cities form a strategic line across the Jezreel Valley — controlling them meant controlling the major east-west trade and military route through northern Israel. Their continued Canaanite occupation left Israel's territory effectively divided between north and south.

27. The term benoteiha ('its daughters,' rendered 'dependent towns') uses the family metaphor: the main city is the 'mother' and surrounding villages are its 'daughters.' This reflects the ancient Near Eastern city-state structure where a major fortified city dominated surrounding agricultural settlements.

27. Va-yo'el ha-Kna'ani lashevet ('the Canaanite was determined to dwell') — the verb ya'al means 'to be willing, to determine, to persist.' The emphasis is on Canaanite tenacity, not merely Israelite weakness. The Canaanites are agents in the narrative, not passive victims.

28. The devastating summary: even when Israel was strong enough to act, they chose economic exploitation over covenant obedience. The term mas ('forced labor, corvée') indicates state-imposed compulsory labor — the same institution Solomon would later use on Israelites themselves (1 Kings 5:13-14, 12:18), provoking the kingdom's division. The irony is bitter: Israel, who was once subjected to mas in Egypt (Exodus 1:11), now imposes it on others rather than carrying out the conquest as commanded.

28. The emphatic construction horesh lo horisho ('driving out — they did not drive out') uses the infinitive absolute for emphasis. The narrator underscores the deliberate nature of the failure: this was not inability but unwillingness.

29. Gezer was a strategically important city on the road between Jerusalem and the coast. It remained Canaanite until Pharaoh conquered it and gave it to Solomon as a dowry for his daughter (1 Kings 9:16). The phrase be-qirbo ('in his midst') signals something worse than coexistence — the Canaanites are embedded within Ephraim's territory, not merely on its borders.

30. The same pattern as verse 28: failure to drive out, followed by the forced-labor compromise. The repetition is literary: each tribe's failure follows the same formula, building cumulative weight. Kitron and Nahalol were cities in Zebulun's territory in the lower Galilee. Their exact locations remain debated.

31. Asher's list of seven unconquered cities is the longest single tribal failure. Critically, this includes Sidon — one of the great Phoenician port cities. Asher's allotment extended to the Mediterranean coast and included major commercial centers. The failure to take these cities meant Asher was effectively surrounded by Canaanite populations and cut off from the sea trade that defined the region.

32. The phrasing shifts tellingly: for Zebulun and Manasseh, 'the Canaanites lived among them' (verse 27, 29, 30); for Asher, 'the Asherites lived among the Canaanites.' The reversal is deliberate — Asher's failure is so complete that the Canaanites are the majority population and Asher is the minority living in their midst. The tribe has not absorbed the Canaanites; the Canaanites have absorbed the tribe.

33. Naphtali follows Asher's pattern — 'lived among the Canaanites' rather than the reverse. Both Beth-Shemesh ('house of the sun') and Beth-Anath ('house of Anath') are names with pagan religious significance: Shemesh was a solar deity and Anath was a Canaanite warrior goddess. The place names themselves signal the cultic environment that will become Israel's undoing.

33. The forced-labor note at the end provides a slight qualification: Naphtali at least achieved economic dominance, even if not territorial displacement. The hierarchy of failure across tribes is calibrated — from Judah's partial success to Asher and Naphtali's near-total absorption.

34. Dan's situation is the worst of all: they are not merely unable to drive out the Canaanites — they are actively pushed back by them. The verb va-yilchatzu ('they pressed, they squeezed') indicates military pressure that confined Dan to a small, inhospitable highland area. This territorial pressure is the background for the Dan migration narrative in chapters 17-18, where the tribe abandons its allotment entirely and migrates north to seize Laish.

34. The text uses 'Amorites' rather than 'Canaanites' — the Amorites were the highland population, and Dan's conflict was specifically with the hill-country inhabitants of the Aijalon valley region.

35. Va-tikhbad yad beit-Yosef ('the hand of the house of Joseph grew heavy') — the verb kavad ('to be heavy, weighty') is from the same root as kavod ('glory'). Here 'heavy hand' means military/political dominance. The house of Joseph (Ephraim-Manasseh) eventually achieved enough power to subjugate but not displace the Amorites — the same forced-labor compromise repeated throughout the chapter.

36. The final verse defines the Amorite territorial boundary — they held ground from Ma'aleh Aqrabbim ('Scorpion Pass,' on the southern border of Judah, cf. Numbers 34:4, Joshua 15:3) northward from ha-Sela ('the Rock,' possibly Petra or a prominent rock formation). This closing geographic note frames the Amorite presence as a fixed, established reality rather than a temporary situation. The chapter ends not with hope of future conquest but with the mapping of Israel's failure.

36. The chapter thus moves from Judah's partial success (vv. 1-20) through a cascade of tribal failures (vv. 21-36). The downward trajectory is structural and theological: God gave the land, the tribes were unable or unwilling to take it fully, and the Canaanite presence that remains will become the catalyst for the apostasy cycle that defines the rest of Judges.

2

Summary: *The angel of the LORD rebukes Israel at Bochim for failing to destroy Canaanite altars. Joshua's generation dies, and a new generation 'did not know the LORD.' The cycle begins: apostasy, oppression, crying out, deliverance — then apostasy again.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The theological framework for the entire book is laid out in verses 11-19: Israel serves the Baals, God's anger burns, He gives them into the hands of oppressors, they cry out, He raises a judge who delivers them, the judge dies, and they do worse than before. The phrase 'did not know the LORD' (v. 10) diagnoses the root cause: not rebellion but amnesia — the failure of Deuteronomy's catechetical program.*

Translation Friction: *The verb zanah (v. 17, 'played the prostitute after other gods') uses sexual infidelity as a covenant metaphor. We rendered it 'prostituted themselves' to preserve the Hebrew's force. The phrase lo sham'u (v. 17, 'they did not listen') echoes the Shema's imperative — Israel's fundamental command is to hear, and their fundamental failure is deafness.*

Connections: *The Bochim rebuke connects to Joshua's farewell warning (Joshua 23:12-13). The judges cycle anticipates the monarchy: the pattern's failure creates the demand for a king. The remaining nations as 'testing' (v. 22) echoes Deuteronomy 8:2. The angel of the LORD from Gilgal to Bochim traces a path from conquest's beginning to its mourned failure.*

1 The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land
that I swore to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you.' 2 But you — you must not make a covenant with
the inhabitants of this land. You must tear down their altars.' Yet you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done?
3 So I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you. They will be thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a trap for you.'" 4
When the angel of the LORD spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people lifted up their voices and wept. 5 They named
that place Bochim, and they sacrificed there to the LORD. 6 When Joshua had dismissed the people, the Israelites went each
to his inheritance to take possession of the land. 7 The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua and all the days of the
elders who outlived Joshua — those who had seen all the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. 8 Joshua son of Nun,
the servant of the LORD, died at the age of one hundred and ten. 9 They buried him within the territory of his inheritance, at
Timnath-Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash. 10 And all that generation too were gathered to their
fathers. Another generation rose up after them who did not know the LORD or the work that He had done for Israel. 11 The
Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. 12 They abandoned the LORD, the God of their
fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who
surrounded them, and bowed down to them, provoking the LORD to anger. 13 They abandoned the LORD and served Baal
and the Ashtoreths. 14 The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hand of raiders who
plundered them. He sold them into the hand of their enemies all around, and they could no longer stand before their
enemies. 15 Wherever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for disaster, just as the LORD had spoken and
as the LORD had sworn to them. They were in severe distress. 16 Yet the LORD raised up judges, and they delivered them

from the hand of those who plundered them. 17Yet they did not listen even to their judges, for they prostituted themselves to other gods and bowed down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way their fathers had walked, obeying the commandments of the LORD — they did not do so. 18Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies throughout the judge's lifetime. For the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning under those who oppressed and crushed them. 19But whenever the judge died, they turned back and acted more corruptly than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. 20The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and has not obeyed my voice, 21I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, 22in order to test Israel through them — whether they would keep the way of the LORD and walk in it, as their fathers had kept it, or not." 23So the LORD left those nations in place, not driving them out quickly, and He had not given them into the hand of Joshua.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Malakh YHWH ('the angel of the LORD') speaks in the first person as God Himself — 'I brought you up out of Egypt.' This is not a mere messenger relaying information but the divine presence speaking directly. The malakh YHWH in the Hebrew Bible often functions as a manifestation of God's own presence, blurring the line between messenger and sender (cf. Genesis 16:7-13, Exodus 3:2-6). The notes should flag this theological complexity without resolving it.

1. The movement from Gilgal to Bochim is geographically and theologically significant. Gilgal was the base camp where Israel renewed the covenant upon entering the land (Joshua 5:2-12) — the place of circumcision, Passover, and the beginning of the conquest. The angel's departure from Gilgal symbolizes the covenant moving from its place of renewal to the place where its violation will be announced.

1. Lo afer beriti ittkhem le-olam ('I will never break my covenant with you') — two register terms converge: berit (covenant) and olam (forever). God's commitment is permanent. The indictment that follows (verse 2) therefore does not charge God with covenant failure but Israel with covenant violation. The asymmetry is crucial: God keeps His olam commitment; Israel does not keep hers.

2. The indictment cites two specific covenant obligations from Deuteronomy: no treaties with Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7:2) and destruction of their altars (Deuteronomy 7:5, 12:3). Both have been violated — chapter 1 documented coexistence and forced labor instead of displacement, and the persistence of Canaanite populations implies the persistence of Canaanite worship sites.

2. Lo tikhre'tu verit ('you must not cut a covenant') — the verb karat ('to cut') is the technical term for covenant-making (from the ritual of cutting animals in the ratification ceremony, Genesis 15:10). Israel is forbidden from entering into binding agreements with Canaanite populations because such agreements create obligations that compete with the covenant with YHWH.

2. Mah-zot asitem ('What is this you have done?') — the question is rhetorical and devastating. It echoes God's question to Adam (Genesis 3:13) and to Cain (Genesis 4:10). The language of primal transgression frames Israel's failure as a fall from covenant grace.

3. The consequence is measure-for-measure: because Israel did not drive out the Canaanites, God will not drive them out either. The nations Israel spared will become le-tsiddim ('thorns in your sides' or 'adversaries' — the Hebrew tsiddim is debated; it may derive from tsad, 'side,' or from tsud, 'to hunt/trap'). Either reading yields the same theology: the Canaanite remnant will cause ongoing pain.

3. Ve-eloheihem yihyu lakhem le-moqesh ('and their gods will be a trap/snare for you') — moqesh is a hunting term, a bait-trap that catches prey. Canaanite religion is described not as a temptation one might resist but as a trap already set. This language anticipates the entire cycle of apostasy in Judges: Israel will be 'caught' by Baal worship repeatedly. The metaphor absolves no one — Israel walks into a trap it was warned about.

4. The response — va-yivku ('and they wept') — is immediate and communal. The weeping is genuine grief, not strategic repentance. But the text records no prayer, no confession, no commitment to change. Weeping alone does not constitute teshuvah (repentance/return). The narrator's silence on what follows the weeping is damning — the people cry, but nothing changes.

5. Bokhim means 'Weepers' — the place is named for Israel's response. The sacrifice (va-yizbchu) suggests an attempt at restoration through proper worship, but the text gives no indication of divine acceptance or rejection. The name remains as a monument to grief without resolution — a fitting opening for a book about cycles of sorrow.

5. The location of Bochim is uncertain. The LXX adds 'Bethel and' before 'Bochim,' which would place it near the central sanctuary site. If Bochim is near Bethel, the association with Jacob's covenant encounter (Genesis 28) adds another layer: Israel weeps at the place where the covenant was first envisioned.

6. The narrative now flashes back to a point before Joshua's death — the dismissal of the tribes to their allotments (cf. Joshua 24:28). This retrospective section (vv. 6-10) provides the context for the cycle that will dominate the rest of Judges: Joshua's generation served the LORD, but the generation that followed did not.

6. Two key terms appear: nachalah ('inheritance' — the divinely assigned tribal territory) and yarash ('to take possession' — the conquest verb). The language of promise and possession frames even this retrospective as part of the ongoing land-gift narrative.

7. This verse establishes the critical variable: firsthand experience. The generation that served the LORD faithfully was the generation that had seen (ra'u) God's acts with their own eyes. Covenant faithfulness, in the Judges framework, correlates directly with experiential knowledge of God's power. When the eyewitnesses die, faithfulness dies with them. This raises the question that haunts the book: How does covenant memory survive generational transition?

7. The phrase kol ma'aseh YHWH ha-gadol ('all the great work of the LORD') encompasses the conquest, the Jordan crossing, the fall of Jericho, the solar event at Gibeon — the entire Joshua narrative. Seeing these acts produced faith; not seeing them produced apostasy.

8. Joshua dies at 110 — the same age as Joseph (Genesis 50:26). In the ancient Near East, particularly in Egyptian tradition, 110 was considered the ideal lifespan. The parallel between Joseph (who brought Israel into Egypt) and Joshua (who brought them into Canaan) creates a structural bookend. Joshua now receives the title eved YHWH ('servant of the LORD') that Moses carried — the succession is complete, and the era ends.

9. Timnath-Heres ('portion of the sun') appears as Timnath-Serah in Joshua 19:50 and 24:30 — the consonants of the second element are reversed (ch-r-s vs. s-r-ch). Some scholars suggest the Judges form may allude to sun worship that later developed at the site, while others view it as a simple scribal variation. The burial in his own nachalah ('inheritance') demonstrates that Joshua practiced what he preached: he took an allotment in the land he helped conquer.

10. This is the most important verse in Judges — the generational rupture that explains everything that follows. Lo yad'u et-YHWH ('they did not know the LORD') — yada ('to know') in Hebrew is not cognitive awareness but experiential, relational knowledge. This generation had not personally experienced the conquest, the Jordan crossing, or the covenant ceremonies. Their ignorance is not intellectual but experiential: they have no firsthand encounter with the God of the covenant.

10. The phrase ne'esfu el avotav ('gathered to his fathers') is the standard death formula throughout the Hebrew Bible — the metaphor implies reunion with ancestors, though the text does not elaborate on afterlife theology. The passing of the entire generation (kol ha-dor ha-hu) marks a clean break: the book operates from this point forward without the witness generation.

11. Va-ya'asu ... et ha-ra be-einei YHWH ('they did the evil in the eyes of the LORD') — this is the cycle's opening formula, and this is its first occurrence in the book. The definite article (ha-ra, 'THE evil') suggests a specific category of transgression: the covenant violation of serving other gods. It appears seven times in Judges (2:11, 3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1), structuring the book's major narrative sections.

11. Ha-be'alim ('the Baals') — the plural indicates the multiple localized manifestations of the Canaanite storm deity Baal. Each Canaanite city had its own Baal shrine. Israel's sin is not monotheistic worship of the wrong god but polytheistic fragmentation — abandoning the one LORD for many local gods. The theological contrast is absolute: covenant unity versus cultic chaos.

12. The verse narrates the full trajectory of apostasy in a single sentence: abandoned (azav) pursued (halakh acharei) worshiped (hishtachavu) provoked (hikh'isu). Each verb deepens the betrayal. The identification of YHWH as 'the God of their fathers who brought them out of Egypt' makes the abandonment intensely personal — they are forsaking not an abstract deity but the One who liberated their ancestors.

12. Elohim acherim ('other gods') is Deuteronomy's standard phrase for prohibited deities (Deuteronomy 5:7, 6:14, 8:19, 11:28). The phrase me-elohei ha-ammim asher sevivoteihem ('from among the gods of the peoples around them') specifies that the apostasy is not abstract theology but cultural assimilation — Israel adopts the religions of its neighbors.

12. Va-yakh'isu et-YHWH ('they provoked the LORD to anger') — the verb ka'as means 'to grieve, to provoke, to vex.' God's anger in the Hebrew Bible is not arbitrary wrath but the response of a covenant partner to betrayal. It is the grief of a spouse whose partner has been unfaithful (a metaphor the prophets will develop extensively).

13. The pairing of Baal (masculine storm/fertility deity) and Ashtaroth (plural of Ashtoreth, the feminine fertility goddess) represents the complete Canaanite divine couple. Together they embody the fertility religion Israel adopted — agricultural prosperity guaranteed through ritual sex and worship of nature gods rather than through covenant faithfulness to YHWH. The text presents this as a comprehensive replacement, not a supplement: they abandoned the LORD and served others.

14. Va-yichar af YHWH ('the anger of the LORD burned') — the idiom uses the verb charah ('to burn') with af ('nostril, nose, anger'). The image is of flaring nostrils — hot breath through the nose as a physiological sign of rage. This is covenant wrath, not capricious temper.

14. Two military metaphors describe God's judgment: He 'gave them into the hand' (natan be-yad) of raiders and 'sold them' (makhar) to their enemies. The selling metaphor is striking — it implies Israel has become a commodity, transferred from one owner to another. The verb makhar appears in debt-slavery contexts (Exodus 21:7-8), suggesting Israel's sin creates a spiritual debt that results in bondage. The very thing God freed them from in Egypt — servitude to a foreign power — is now their punishment.

15. The devastating phrase yad YHWH hayetah bam le-ra'ah ('the hand of the LORD was against them for harm') reverses the conquest formula: in Joshua, God's hand was with Israel for victory; now God's hand is against Israel for disaster. The same divine power that demolished Jericho's walls now opposes Israel at every turn.

15. Ka'asher dibber ... ve-kha'asher nishba ('as He had spoken and as He had sworn') — this is a direct citation of the Deuteronomic covenant curses (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). The distress Israel experiences is not arbitrary punishment but the announced consequence of covenant violation. God told them exactly what would happen, and it happened exactly as He told them.

16. Va-yaqem YHWH shoftim ('the LORD raised up judges') — the initiative is entirely divine. Israel does not produce its own leaders; God raises them. The verb qum (hiphil — 'to raise up, to establish') emphasizes God's sovereign action: the judges are God's instruments, appointed from above, not elected from below.

16. Va-yoshi'um ('and they delivered them') — from the root y-sh-a (salvation). The judges are moshi'im (deliverers/saviors) — the same root from which yeshua ('salvation') and Yehoshua ('Joshua') derive. The theological point is clear: deliverance comes from God through human instruments, but the source is always divine.

17. The verb zanu ('they prostituted themselves, they committed harlotry') introduces the marriage/adultery metaphor for idolatry that becomes central in prophetic literature (Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel). Israel's covenant with YHWH is figured as a marriage; worship of other gods is therefore zanah (sexual infidelity). The metaphor is deliberate and disturbing — it frames apostasy not as an intellectual error but as intimate betrayal.

17. Saru maher min ha-derekh ('they turned aside quickly from the way') — the 'way' (derekh) is the covenant path of obedience. The adverb maher ('quickly') underscores the speed of the decline: not a gradual drift but a rapid departure. The generation that had seen God's acts walked the derekh; the generation that had not abandoned it almost immediately.

18. Ki yinnachem YHWH min-na'aqatam ('for the LORD was moved to compassion by their groaning') — the verb nacham carries complex meaning: to comfort, to relent, to be grieved, to change one's mind. Here it describes God's visceral response to human suffering. The na'aqah ('groaning') is the same word used for Israel's groaning under Egyptian slavery (Exodus 2:24, 6:5). The parallel is explicit: God responds to groaning in Judges as He did in Egypt — with compassionate intervention.

18. The phrase kol yemei ha-shofet ('all the days of the judge') reveals the systemic limitation: deliverance lasts only as long as the deliverer lives. The shofet's authority is personal, not institutional — it cannot be transferred, inherited, or perpetuated. This built-in expiration date guarantees the cycle's repetition.

19. Ve-hishchitu me-avotam ('they acted more corruptly than their fathers') — the key word is me-avotam ('more than their fathers'). Each cycle does not merely repeat the previous one; it escalates. The decline is progressive, not cyclical in the strict sense. This is a spiral, not a circle — each revolution is worse than the last. The narrator announces this principle before the individual judge stories begin, so the reader watches for the intensification.

19. Lo hippilu ('they did not drop') — the verb nafal (hiphil, 'to let fall, to drop') means they did not release or abandon any of their corrupt practices. The image is of someone clutching something tightly, refusing to let go. The 'stubborn way' (darkam ha-qashah) uses qashah ('hard, harsh, difficult') — their chosen path is not merely different from God's but actively resistant to correction.

20. God now speaks in direct discourse, pronouncing the consequence of covenant violation. The term beriti ('my covenant') echoes verse 1 — the same covenant God declared He would never break is the covenant Israel has transgressed (avru, 'crossed over, violated'). The verb avar means literally 'to cross over' — covenant transgression in Hebrew is figured as crossing a boundary line, stepping over the limit set by the agreement.

20. The phrase ha-goy ha-zeh ('this nation') rather than 'my people' or 'the Israelites' is subtly distancing — God refers to Israel with the same term used for foreign nations. The word choice signals the relational rupture caused by their disobedience.

21. The divine declaration lo osif lehorish ('I will no longer drive out') transforms Israel's military failure into divine policy. What began as Israel's disobedience (chapter 1's catalog of 'did not drive out') now becomes God's deliberate decision. The remaining nations are no longer an accident of incomplete conquest but a purposeful instrument of testing (as verse 22 will explain).

22. Le-ma'an nassot bam et-Yisra'el ('in order to test Israel through them') — the remaining Canaanite nations become a divine testing instrument. The verb nasah ('to test, to prove') is the same word used for God's testing of Abraham at the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1). The test is not arbitrary but diagnostic: will this generation walk in the derekh YHWH ('way of the LORD') as the previous generation did?

22. The answer, which the reader already knows from the narrator's preview in verses 11-19, is no. The test will be failed repeatedly. But the text presents the test as genuinely open-ended — the 'whether...or not' (ha-shomrim hem ... im lo) preserves the possibility that Israel could have chosen differently.

23. Va-yannach YHWH ('the LORD left, allowed to remain') — the verb nuach means 'to rest, to settle, to leave in place.' The word choice is quietly ironic: the nations 'rest' in the land that was supposed to be Israel's place of 'rest' (the menucha of Deuteronomy 12:9). Israel's promised rest is disrupted by the nations God leaves at rest within their borders.

23. The final note — 'He had not given them into the hand of Joshua' — refers back to Joshua 13:1-7, where God told the aging Joshua that much land remained unconquered. The incomplete conquest was never merely a military shortcoming; it was, in retrospect, part of the divine plan to test subsequent generations.

3

Summary: *The remaining nations that test Israel are listed. Othniel delivers Israel from Cushan-rishathaim of Aram, Ehud assassinates Eglon king of Moab with a concealed dagger, and Shamgar strikes down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Ehud's narrative is the book's most viscerally detailed. He is left-handed (ish itter yad yemino, literally 'restricted in his right hand') — a Benjaminite, whose tribal name means 'son of the right hand.' The irony is structural. The assassination scene spares no physical detail: Eglon is so fat the sword disappears entirely, 'and the fat closed over the blade' (v. 22). The narrator's unflinching realism serves theology: God delivers through unexpected agents using unexpected methods.*

Translation Friction: *The word sarnei (v. 3) is rendered 'tyrants' — the locked term for Philistine rulers. The phrase parshedonah (v. 22) is a hapax legomenon (appears only once in the entire Hebrew Bible) and has been variously translated as 'the refuse came out,' 'the dagger came out at the back,' or a reference to the vestibule/porch. We chose the reading best supported by context and noted the uncertainty.*

Connections: *Othniel's deliverance echoes his courage in Joshua 15:16-17. The left-handed Ehud anticipates the left-handed Benjaminite slingers of Judges 20:16. Shamgar's oxgoad prefigures Samson's unconventional weaponry (ch. 15, jawbone of a donkey). The Mesopotamian oppressor Cushan-rishathaim ('Cushan of double wickedness') may be a derisive nickname rather than his real name.*

1These are the nations that the LORD left in order to test Israel by them — all those Israelites who had not experienced any
of the wars of Canaan — 2only so that the generations of the Israelites might learn — to teach them war, those who had not
experienced it before. 3the five tyrants of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the hill
country of Lebanon from Mount Baal-Hermon to Lebo-Hamath. 4They were there to test Israel, to determine whether they
would obey the commandments of the LORD that He had commanded their fathers through Moses. 5The Israelites lived
among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 6They took their daughters as
wives and gave their own daughters to their sons, and they served their gods. 7The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of
the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. 8The anger of the LORD burned against
Israel, and He sold them into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram-Naharaim. The Israelites served
Cushan-Rishathaim for eight years. 9The Israelites cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a deliverer for the
Israelites who saved them — Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. 10The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and
he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into his hand. His hand
prevailed over Cushan-Rishathaim. 11The land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died. 12The Israelites again
did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD strengthened Eglon king of Moab against Israel, because they had
done what was evil in the sight of the LORD. 13He gathered the Ammonites and the Amalekites to himself, marched out, and
struck Israel. They seized the City of Palms. 14The Israelites served Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years. 15The Israelites
cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up a deliverer for them — Ehud son of Gera, a Benjaminite, a man restricted in
his right hand. The Israelites sent tribute to Eglon king of Moab through him. 16Ehud made himself a short sword with two
edges, a gomed in length, and strapped it under his garment on his right thigh. 17He presented the tribute to Eglon king of
Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. 18When he had finished presenting the tribute, he dismissed the people who had
carried the tribute. 19But he himself turned back from the carved stones near Gilgal and said, "I have a secret message for
you, O king." The king said, "Silence!" And all his attendants withdrew from his presence. 20Ehud approached him as he sat
alone in his cool upper room. Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And Eglon rose from his seat. 21Ehud reached
with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly. 22Even the hilt went in after the
blade, and the fat closed over the blade — for he did not withdraw the sword from his belly — and it came out at the back. 23E
hud went out through the vestibule, shut the doors of the upper room behind him, and locked them. 24After he had left, the

servants came and saw that the doors of the upper room were locked. They said, "He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber." 25They waited until they were embarrassed, but he still did not open the doors of the upper room. So they took the key, opened them — and there was their lord, fallen to the ground, dead. 26While they delayed, Ehud escaped. He passed the carved stones and reached safety at Seirah. 27When he arrived, he blew the shofar in the hill country of Ephraim. The Israelites went down with him from the hill country, with him at their head. 28He said to them, "Follow me, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand." They followed him and seized the fords of the Jordan against Moab, allowing no one to cross. 29They struck down about ten thousand Moabites at that time — all of them strong, all of them warriors. Not a single man escaped. 30Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel, and the land had rest for eighty years. 31After him came Shamgar son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an ox goad. He too delivered Israel.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The narrator provides a second rationale for the remaining nations: not only a spiritual test (2:22) but also military training for a generation that had not experienced warfare. The phrase lo yad'u ('had not known/experienced') uses the same verb as 2:10 — the generational knowledge gap is both theological (they did not know the LORD) and practical (they did not know war). Both forms of inexperience prove fatal.
2. Le-lamdam milchamah ('to teach them war') — the divine purpose is pedagogical. The remaining nations serve as a training ground. The irony is that the best teacher of warfare would have been complete obedience in the first generation — the conquest itself. Because Israel failed to learn through faithful conquest, they must now learn through ongoing conflict with enemies that should not have remained.
3. Sarnei Felishtim ('rulers of the Philistines') — the term seren (plural sarnei) is a uniquely Philistine title, not used for any other people group. It is likely a loanword from the Philistines' Aegean origin (possibly related to Greek tyrannos). The five Philistine city-states — Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath — each had its own seren. Their continued presence on the coastal plain will dominate the Samson narrative and the early monarchy.
3. Har Ba'al Chermon ('Mount Baal-Hermon') — the Baal prefix indicates a Canaanite cultic site on Mount Hermon. The geographic range described (from Hermon in the north to Lebo-Hamath, the entry to the Hamath region in modern Syria) defines the northern extent of the unconquered territory.
4. The section closes by returning to the spiritual test announced in 2:22. The phrase be-yad Mosheh ('through the hand of Moses') — literally 'by the hand of Moses' — is a standard expression for Mosaic mediation of divine law. The commandments in view are specifically Deuteronomy's requirements regarding the Canaanite populations and their worship.
5. The six-nation list echoes the traditional Canaanite peoples formula (cf. Exodus 3:8, 3:17, Deuteronomy 7:1). The phrasing is significant: Israel lives 'among' (be-qerev) these nations, not the reverse. As with Asher in 1:32, Israel is the minority presence in a Canaanite-dominated landscape. The conquest has not merely stalled — it has effectively reversed.
6. The three-step progression is precise: intermarriage (took/gave daughters), then idolatry (served their gods). This is exactly the sequence Deuteronomy 7:3-4 warned about: 'Do not intermarry with them... for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods.' The prohibition was not ethnic prejudice but theological protection — intermarriage with Canaanites meant absorption into Canaanite religion. The text presents this as an inevitable cause-and-effect chain, not as an isolated moral failure.
7. The cycle begins for the first time in narrative form. The verb shakhechu ('they forgot') adds a dimension beyond active rebellion — forgetting implies the complete dissolution of covenant memory. The generation that 'did not know the LORD' (2:10) now actively forgets Him. Knowledge has become non-knowledge; memory has become oblivion.
7. Ha-Asherot ('the Asherahs') — wooden cult poles or stylized trees representing the Canaanite goddess Asherah, consort of El (and sometimes paired with Baal). The KJV renders this as 'groves,' which obscures the cultic object. An Asherah was a carved or living sacred pole set up beside an altar. Deuteronomy 16:21 explicitly prohibits them beside YHWH's altar.
8. Cushan-Rishathaim — the name appears to mean 'Cushan of double wickedness' (from rishah, 'wickedness,' with the dual ending -atayim). Most scholars consider this a pejorative Hebrew distortion of the king's actual name — the narrator mocks the oppressor by making his name an epithet of evil. The double form (-atayim) intensifies: not merely wicked but doubly wicked.
8. Aram Naharayim ('Aram of the two rivers') is the region between the Tigris and Euphrates — upper Mesopotamia. An oppressor from this distance is unusual in the Judges period, leading some scholars to emend to 'Edom' (alef-dalet-mem instead of alef-resh-mem). However, the MT reading is retained as the received text.
8. Va-yimkerem ('He sold them') — the selling metaphor from 2:14 is now enacted. Israel's servitude to a foreign king is God's judicial act, not merely a military outcome.
9. Va-yiz'aqu ('they cried out') — the cry of distress. The verb za'aq is the standard cry of the oppressed to God throughout the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 2:23, 3:7). It is not necessarily repentance — it is the raw cry of pain. God responds to the cry regardless of the crier's spiritual state, because the compassion described in 2:18 is triggered by suffering, not by merit.

9. Va-yaqem YHWH moshia ('the LORD raised up a deliverer') — Othniel is called moshia, from the root y-sh-a (salvation). He is the first formally narrated judge and serves as the ideal template: the cycle operates perfectly in his case — no character flaws noted, no complications, pure divine deliverance through a faithful instrument.

10. Ruach YHWH ('the Spirit of the LORD') — this is the first appearance of the Spirit empowerment formula in Judges. The Spirit 'came upon him' (hayetah alav) — the preposition al ('upon') indicates the Spirit descends on the judge from above, a temporary endowment for a specific task. Later judges will receive the Spirit with different verbs — 'clothed' (lavash, Gideon in 6:34) and 'rushed upon' (tsalach, Samson in 14:6) — each suggesting different modes of empowerment.

10. The Othniel narrative is deliberately spare — five verses from sin to deliverance. No personal drama, no character development, no dialogue. He is the template: Spirit-empowered, militarily victorious, divinely vindicated. Every subsequent judge will deviate from this template in increasingly dramatic ways.

11. Va-tishqot ha-aretz ('the land had rest') — the verb shaqat means 'to be quiet, to be at rest, to be undisturbed.' This is the goal-state of each cycle: shalom in the form of military peace. The 'forty years' is a round number conventionally representing a generation in Hebrew reckoning (cf. the wilderness generation's forty years). The cycle closes cleanly: deliverance rest death (implied) next cycle begins.

11. The terse final sentence — 'Othniel son of Kenaz died' — triggers the cycle's restart. The judge dies, and with him dies the stability he provided. The pattern announced in 2:18-19 is now enacted for the first time.

12. The second cycle begins with the formula va-yosifu ... la'asot ha-ra ('they again did the evil'). The verb yasaf ('to add, to do again') signals repetition — the cycle is explicitly acknowledged as repeating, not as a new event.

12. Va-ychazzeq YHWH et Eglon ('the LORD strengthened Eglon') — the verb chazaq (piel, 'to strengthen, to make strong') presents God as the active agent in Israel's oppression. YHWH does not merely permit Eglon's rise — He empowers it. Eglon is God's instrument of judgment, as Assyria will later be called God's 'rod of anger' (Isaiah 10:5). The name Eglon likely derives from egel ('calf') — a bovine name for the 'very fat man' of verse 17.

13. Eglon assembles a three-nation coalition: Moab, Ammon, and Amalek — all traditional enemies of Israel from the wilderness period. The Ammonites were kinsmen of Moab (both descended from Lot, Genesis 19:36-38). The Amalekites were Israel's perennial enemies (Exodus 17:8-16, Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

13. Ir ha-Temarim ('City of Palms') is Jericho (cf. 1:16). The seizure of Jericho reverses Joshua's greatest victory — the first city conquered in the promised land is now occupied by a foreign king. The narrative reversal is devastating: what Joshua won, Eglon takes.

14. Eighteen years of servitude — more than double the eight years under Cushan-Rishathaim. The escalation pattern noted in 2:19 ('more corruptly than their fathers') corresponds to longer periods of oppression. The verb avad ('served') carries the double meaning of political subjection and the involuntary service of slavery — the same verb used for Israel's servitude in Egypt.

15. Ish itter yad yemino ('a man restricted in his right hand') — the Hebrew does not say 'left-handed' but 'restricted/bound in his right hand.' This could mean left-handed by nature or disabled in the right hand. The irony is layered: Ehud is a ben-ha-Yemini ('son of the right hand' — a Benjaminite), yet he is itter ('bound/restricted') in his right hand. The tribal name and the personal trait create a wordplay on 'right' (yamin) that the narrator clearly enjoys.

15. The left-hand advantage is tactical: a left-handed man could conceal a weapon on his right thigh, where guards searching for weapons on the conventional left side would miss it. The physical trait is not incidental but integral to the deliverance plan.

15. Minchah ('tribute/gift') — the same word used for the grain offering in Leviticus 2. Israel's tribute to Eglon is an act of vassalage — they bring gifts to their overlord. The sacral overtones of the word may be intentional: Israel offers to a foreign king what should be offered to God.

16. The weapon is described with precision: cherev ('sword/dagger'), shenei feyot ('two edges/mouths' — double-edged), gomed orkhah ('a gomed in length'). The term gomed is a hapax legomenon — it appears only here in the entire Hebrew Bible. It likely refers to a short cubit or forearm-length (approximately 12-15 inches / 30-38 cm), making this a concealable dagger rather than a full sword.

16. The right thigh (yerekh yemino) is the unconventional location — warriors typically wore swords on the left hip for right-hand cross-draw. Ehud's left-handedness allows him to hide the weapon where it would not be expected and draw it with his strong hand. Every physical detail in this narrative serves the assassination plan.

17. The narrator's description — ish bari me'od ('a very fat man') — is not incidental characterization. The physical detail prepares for the graphic assassination in verses 21-22, where the fatness becomes narratively operative (the blade disappears into the flesh). The adjective bari ('fat, well-fed, robust') can be positive in agricultural contexts (fat livestock = prosperity), but here it paints Eglon as a man gorged on Israel's tribute — growing fat on what he has extracted from God's people.

18. Ehud's strategic thinking emerges: he sends away the tribute-bearers first, ensuring no witnesses and no companions who might lose nerve. The deliberate pacing — present the tribute publicly, dismiss the entourage, then return alone — reveals careful premeditation. The narrator builds suspense through procedural detail.

19. Ha-pesilim ('the carved stones/images') near Gilgal — the term pesil usually means 'carved idol' (cf. Deuteronomy 7:5, 7:25). If these are indeed idols, their location near Gilgal — the sacred site of covenant renewal (Joshua 5) — is deeply ironic. Some scholars interpret pesilim here as 'quarries' (carved rock formations), but the idolatrous reading fits the theological environment of Judges.

19. Devar seter li eleikha ('I have a secret word/message for you') — Ehud's ruse exploits Eglon's curiosity. A secret message from a tribute-bearer could be intelligence about Israelite dissent, offers of alliance, or confidential information. The king's eagerness — ordering silence (has!) and dismissing all attendants — plays directly into Ehud's plan. Eglon's vanity becomes his vulnerability.

20. Aliyyat ha-meqerah ('the cool upper room') — an upper-story chamber designed for ventilation and privacy. Royal residences in the ancient Near East often had elevated private chambers for the king's personal use. The detail 'which he had for himself alone' (lo levaddo) confirms the isolation Ehud needs.

20. Devar Elohim li eleikha ('I have a message from God for you') — Ehud's second statement escalates from 'secret message' (v. 19) to 'message from God.' Whether Ehud is deceiving Eglon or speaking literally (the assassination IS God's message to the oppressor) is left ambiguous. Eglon's response — rising from his seat — may reflect either reverence for a divine oracle or simple courtesy for what he expects to be important revelation.

20. Va-yaqom me'al ha-kiseh ('he rose from his seat') — standing to receive a divine message would be an act of deference that exposes Eglon's midsection. Every detail converges toward the assassination.

21. The left-hand draw from the right thigh — the detail established in verses 15-16 now pays off narratively. The verb taq'ah ('he thrust, he drove') is forceful and sudden. The betno ('his belly') receives the blade. The narrator slows down time for the assassination, describing each physical movement with surgical precision. This is not gratuitous — it demonstrates that every detail of Ehud's preparation was purposeful.

22. The Hebrew is graphically specific: gam ha-nitsav achar ha-lahav ('even the hilt after the blade') — the entire weapon, handle and all, disappears into Eglon's flesh. Va-yisgor ha-chelev be'ad ha-lahav ('the fat closed over the blade') — Eglon's obesity, introduced in verse 17, now has narrative function. The word chelev ('fat') is the same term used for the sacrificial fat offered to God in Leviticus 3:3-5 — a darkly ironic echo.

22. Va-yetse ha-parshedonah — this final clause is the most debated in the chapter. Parshedonah is a hapax legomenon (appears only here). Possible meanings include: (1) excrement ('the dung came out' — a reference to Eglon's bowels releasing), (2) the blade emerged from his back ('it came out at the back'), (3) Ehud went out through a back passage or anteroom. The scatological reading (option 1) connects to the servants' assumption in verse 24 that Eglon is relieving himself. The rendering preserves the ambiguity while favoring the spatial reading.

23. Ha-misderonah ('the vestibule/porch/colonnade') — another rare word whose exact architectural referent is debated. It likely describes a covered passage or anteroom between the upper chamber and the exterior. Ehud's escape route through the vestibule rather than the main entrance avoids the servants waiting outside.

23. The detail of locking the doors (na'al, 'he bolted/locked') buys Ehud time — the servants will hesitate to disturb what they assume is the king's private moment (verse 24). Ehud's plan accounts for every variable: the weapon, the isolation, the escape route, and the delay.

24. Mesikh hu et raglav ('he is covering his feet') — a euphemism for defecation. The idiom 'covering the feet' (from the position of the garment during squatting) appears also in 1 Samuel 24:3, where Saul enters a cave to 'cover his feet.' The servants' assumption — that the locked door means the king is using the chamber as a latrine — is both plausible (private upper rooms served multiple functions) and narratively essential: it delays their discovery of the assassination and extends Ehud's escape window.

25. Va-yachilu ad bosh ('they waited until embarrassment') — the servants' dilemma is psychologically precise: they waited so long that their hesitation itself became embarrassing. The verb chul ('to wait, to writhe, to be in anguish') suggests not passive waiting but anxious anticipation. The word bosh ('shame, embarrassment') reveals their predicament — entering the king's private chamber uninvited risks their positions, but the extended silence demands action.

25. The discovery scene is narrated with devastating economy: ve-hinneh adoneihem nofel artsah met ('and look — their lord, fallen to the ground, dead'). The hinneh ('look!') forces the reader to see what the servants see — their master's corpse.

26. The narrator returns to Ehud's perspective: ad hitmahmeham ('while they delayed') — their embarrassment was his escape window. The time the servants spent agonizing over whether to enter was exactly the time Ehud needed. He passes the pesilim (the same 'carved stones/images' of verse 19, marking the route) and reaches Se'irah, a location in the hill country of Ephraim whose exact site is unknown.

27. The shofar blast is the traditional call to arms — the ram's horn sound that summons the militia. Ehud's individual assassination becomes the catalyst for a national uprising. His position 'at their head' (lifneihem, 'before them') establishes him as the military leader. The transition from lone assassin to general demonstrates how the shofet role encompasses both covert action and public leadership.

28. Ehud's speech uses the divine-gift formula: natan YHWH et oyvekhem be-yedkhem ('the LORD has given your enemies into your hand'). The same language that authorized Joshua's conquest now authorizes Ehud's revolt. The strategy is sound: seizing the fords of the Jordan (ma'aberot ha-Yarden) cuts off the Moabite retreat route. Any Moabite soldiers west of the Jordan are now trapped — they cannot return home.

29. The description of the fallen — kol shamen ve-khol ish chayil ('all fat/strong and all men of valor') — uses shamen ('fat, robust, strong'), connecting back to the description of their king Eglon as bari ('fat'). The echo is not coincidental: the fat king and his fat warriors are both cut down. The term ish chayil ('man of valor/capable warrior') indicates these were Moab's elite troops, not militia. The totality of the defeat — lo nimlat ish ('not a man escaped') — mirrors the totality of the fords blockade.

30. Va-tikkana Moav ('Moab was subdued/humbled') — the verb kana means 'to be brought low, to be humbled, to submit.' The subjugation reverses the power relationship: where Israel served Moab for eighteen years, now Moab is under Israel's hand.

30. Eighty years of rest — the longest peace period in Judges, double the standard forty-year generation. This extended peace may reflect the thoroughness of Ehud's victory or, more likely, is a literary doubling of the conventional generation-length to signal exceptional stability.

31. Shamgar receives the briefest treatment of any deliverer — a single verse, no cycle framework, no Spirit endowment. His name is non-Israelite (possibly Hurrian), and his patronymic 'son of Anath' (ben Anat) connects him to the Canaanite warrior goddess Anath — either as a place name (Beth-Anath, cf. 1:33) or as a personal name reflecting Canaanite cultural influence. The use of a non-Israelite deliverer hints at the theological point that God can use anyone.

31. Malmad ha-baqar ('ox goad') — a long wooden prod with a metal tip used to drive cattle. As a weapon it is improvised, not military — Shamgar fights with a farming implement. This connects him to the later 'farmer-warriors' of Judges and anticipates the Philistine practice of denying Israel access to metalworking (1 Samuel 13:19-22).

31. Va-yosha gam hu et-Yisra'el ('he too delivered Israel') — the verb yosha (from y-sh-a) explicitly labels Shamgar a deliverer despite his outsider origins and unconventional methods. Deliverance in Judges comes through increasingly unexpected channels.

4

Summary: *Deborah the prophet judges Israel. She summons Barak to fight Sisera, commander of Jabin of Hazor's army. Barak refuses to go without her. Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots are defeated, and Sisera flees to the tent of Jael, who kills him with a tent peg through his temple.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The chapter is dominated by women: Deborah commands, Jael executes, and the glory Barak forfeited passes 'into the hand of a woman' (v. 9). The phrase beyad ishah is deliberately ambiguous — Barak hears it as Deborah, but the reader discovers it means Jael. Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots (v. 3) represent overwhelming technological superiority — and they become useless when God routes the army (v. 15, vayyaham, 'threw into panic'), possibly through the rainstorm described in chapter 5.*

Translation Friction: *The verb vayyaham (v. 15, 'threw into confusion/panic') is the same word used for God's intervention at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:24). We rendered it 'threw into panic' to preserve the divine-warrior theology. Jael's action (v. 21) — driving a tent peg through a sleeping man's temple — raises ethical questions the narrator does not address. We let the text stand without moral commentary, as the Hebrew does.*

Connections: *Jabin of Hazor echoes the Hazor king defeated in Joshua 11 — whether this is the same dynasty or a later one is debated. The divine-warrior intervention echoes the Red Sea (Exodus 14), the Jordan crossing (Joshua 3), and anticipates Gideon's victory (ch. 7). Jael is celebrated as 'most blessed of women' in 5:24 — the same phrase applied to Mary in Luke 1:42.*

1The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud had died. 2The LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-Hagoiim. 3The Israelites cried out to the LORD, for Sisera had nine hundred iron chariots and had harshly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. 4Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth — she was judging Israel at that time. 5She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come up to her for judgment. 6She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded: 'Go, deploy on Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men from the descendants of Naphtali and Zebulun'? 7I will draw Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops, to you at the Wadi Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.'" 8Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go. But if you will not go with me, I will not go." 9She said, "I will certainly go with you. However, there will be no glory for you on the road you are taking, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. 10Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up at his command. Deborah went up with him. 11 Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites — the descendants of Hobab, Moses's father-in-law — and had pitched his tent as far as the oak at Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh. 12When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, 13Sisera summoned all his chariots — nine hundred iron chariots — and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-Hagoiim to the Wadi Kishon. 14Deborah said to Barak, "Rise! For this is the day the LORD

has given Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. 15The LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into confusion before Barak, striking them with the edge of the sword. Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled on foot. 16Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth-Hagoiim, and Sisera's entire army fell by the edge of the sword. Not a single man remained. 17 Meanwhile, Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the household of Heber the Kenite. 18Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord! Turn aside to me — do not be afraid." He turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. 19He said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty." She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him again. 20He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anyone comes and asks you, 'Is there a man here?' say, 'No.'" 21Jael, the wife of Heber, took a tent peg, gripped a mallet in her hand, and went to him quietly. She drove the tent peg through his temple and pinned it to the ground. He was sound asleep and exhausted. He died. 22Just then, Barak came in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to meet him and said, "Come, and I will show you the man you are looking for." He went in with her, and there was Sisera, fallen dead, with the tent peg through his temple. 23On that day God subdued Jabin king of Canaan before the Israelites. 24The hand of the Israelites pressed harder and harder against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The third cycle opens with the standard formula va-yosifu ... la'asot ha-ra ('they again did the evil'). The causal link is explicit: ve-Ehud met ('and Ehud had died'). The judge's death triggers the cycle's restart — as the narrator programmatically stated in 2:19. The pattern is now firmly established, and the reader recognizes it.

2. Jabin melekh Kena'an ('Jabin king of Canaan') — a Jabin king of Hazor appears also in Joshua 11:1, where Joshua burned Hazor. Either this is a different king with the same dynastic name (Jabin may be a title, like 'Pharaoh') or the city was rebuilt after Joshua's destruction. Hazor was the largest city in Canaan — its destruction and resurgence illustrate the incomplete conquest theme.

2. Sisera (sar tseva'o, 'commander of his army') is the actual military power — Jabin is the political authority, but Sisera commands the iron chariots that terrify Israel. Harosheth-Hagoiim ('woodlands of the nations') was likely a site in the western Jezreel Valley, controlling the strategic pass between the coast and the central valleys.

3. Tesha me'ot rekhev barzel ('nine hundred iron chariots') — the number represents overwhelming military superiority. Iron chariots were the decisive weapon of lowland warfare, and Israel's hill-country infantry had no counter (cf. 1:19, where iron chariots prevented Judah from taking the valley). The twenty-year oppression is the longest yet — eight under Cushan-Rishathaim, eighteen under Eglon, now twenty under Jabin/Sisera.

3. The verb lachatz ('to press, to oppress, to squeeze') combined with be-chozqah ('forcefully, harshly') intensifies the suffering. The same verb describes Egypt's oppression of Israel (Exodus 3:9).

4. Deborah holds three titles simultaneously: ishah nevi'ah ('a woman, a prophetess'), eshet Lappidot ('wife of Lappidoth'), and shofetah et-Yisra'el ('she was judging Israel'). She is the only judge who is also explicitly called a prophet, and the only one whose judicial authority precedes the military crisis. All other judges are raised up in response to oppression; Deborah is already in place.

4. The name Lappidot means 'torches' or 'flames.' Some scholars read eshet Lappidot not as 'wife of Lappidoth' (a man's name) but as 'woman of torches' — a characterization of Deborah herself as fiery or illuminating. The ambiguity is noted; the traditional reading ('wife of') is retained.

4. The participle shofetah ('she was judging') is feminine — the narrator uses the grammatically correct form without comment, treating Deborah's gender as a fact, not an anomaly. The text makes no apology for a woman in this role.

5. Tomer Devorah ('Palm of Deborah') — the palm tree is named for her, suggesting her judicial seat was well-known. The location between Ramah and Bethel places her near the ancient sanctuary sites of central Ephraim. The practice of sitting under a specific tree for judgment evokes the patriarchal model (Abraham at Mamre's oaks, Genesis 18:1) and anticipates Samuel's circuit-judging (1 Samuel 7:16-17).

5. La-mishpat ('for judgment') — Deborah's judicial function is genuine legal arbitration, not merely the military deliverance role. She is the only judge in the book who actually judges in the courtroom sense — hearing cases and rendering verdicts. This distinguishes her from the other shoftim, who are primarily military deliverers.

6. Deborah speaks as a prophet relaying divine command — ha-lo tsivvah YHWH ('Has not the LORD commanded?'). The rhetorical question format implies Barak already knows the command; Deborah is reminding him, not informing him. Her authority is prophetic — she transmits God's battle plan, including the specific location (Mount Tabor, overlooking the Jezreel Valley), the troop count (ten thousand), and the tribal composition (Naphtali and Zebulun, the northern tribes nearest Sisera's base).

6. The verb mashakh ('draw, deploy, march') has military connotations — it suggests a deliberate, ordered movement of troops to a strategic position. Mount Tabor's elevation (approximately 1,900 feet) gave infantry an advantage over chariots, which could not operate on the steep, forested slopes.

7. God speaks through Deborah using the first person: u-mashakhti ('I will draw') and u-netattihu ('I will give him'). The divine strategy is to lure Sisera's chariots into the Kishon Valley, where the Wadi Kishon (nachal Qishon) flows. As the Song of Deborah will reveal (5:21), the wadi flooded, turning the valley into a chariot-destroying quagmire. God weaponizes the terrain against the military technology that terrifies Israel.

7. The promise untattihu be-yadekha ('I will give him into your hand') is the standard divine victory formula. The plan is God's, the execution is Barak's, and the outcome is guaranteed before the battle begins.

8. Barak's conditional refusal — im telkhi immi ve-halakhti ('if you go with me, I will go') — is the first sign of a less-than-ideal deliverer. Othniel needed no such condition; Ehud acted alone. Barak requires the prophet's physical presence as a guarantee of divine presence. Whether this reflects lack of faith, military pragmatism (wanting the prophetic oracle accessible in real-time), or personal deference to Deborah is debated. The narrator does not condemn Barak explicitly, but the consequence in verse 9 suggests the condition comes at a cost.

9. Deborah's prophecy — be-yad ishah yimkor YHWH et Sisera ('the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman') — is deliberately ambiguous at this point. The reader assumes she means herself, but the narrative will redirect: it is Jael, not Deborah, who kills Sisera. The verb makhar ('to sell') echoes 2:14 and 3:8, where God 'sold' Israel to oppressors; now God 'sells' the oppressor to a woman.

9. Lo tihyeh tif'artkha ('there will be no glory for you') — tif'eret means 'glory, honor, beauty, adornment.' Barak's conditional obedience costs him the honor of the kill. The military victory remains his, but the decisive act — the death of the enemy commander — will belong to someone else. The narrative logic is clear: hesitant faith still receives deliverance but not full credit.

10. Va-yaz'eq Baraq ('Barak summoned') — the verb za'aq means 'to cry out, to summon.' It is the same verb used for Israel's cry to God in the distress formula (3:9, 3:15). Here Barak 'cries out' to the tribes as God 'cries out' are cried out to God — the deliverer mediates between the divine command and the tribal response.

10. Be-raglav ('at his feet') — an idiom meaning 'under his command, following his lead.' The ten thousand comply with the number specified in Deborah's oracle (verse 6). The human response matches the divine plan exactly.

11. This seemingly digressive genealogical note is narratively essential — it positions Heber's tent (and therefore Jael's tent) near the battlefield. The Kenites were allied with Israel through the Moses connection (cf. 1:16), but Heber has 'separated' (nifrad) from the main clan. His isolation near Kedesh — close to Jabin's territory — will make his tent a plausible refuge for a fleeing Sisera.

11. Elon be-Tsa'anannim ('the oak at Zaanannim') is a landmark that fixes the location. The term elon ('great tree, oak, terebinth') marks a notable tree — the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of a named geographic feature.

12. Intelligence reaches Sisera that Barak has taken the high ground at Tabor. From Sisera's perspective, this is an opportunity — an Israelite force concentrated on a single mountaintop is an army that can be pinned down and starved out, or destroyed when it descends to the plain where his chariots dominate. He does not know he is being drawn (mashakh, verse 7) into a divine trap.

13. Sisera deploys his full force to the Kishon Valley — exactly where Deborah's prophecy said he would be drawn (verse 7). The narrator creates dramatic irony: the reader knows this is God's trap; Sisera thinks it is his tactical advantage. The nine hundred chariots, repeated from verse 3, emphasize the overwhelming odds that God will overturn.

14. Deborah gives the battle command — Qum! ('Rise!') — speaking as the prophetic voice of God on the battlefield. Her question ha-lo YHWH yatsa lefanekha ('Has not the LORD gone out before you?') uses the military idiom of God 'going out before' the army (cf. Deuteronomy 20:4, 2 Samuel 5:24). God leads the charge; Israel follows.

14. Barak descends from Mount Tabor — the terrain advantage is abandoned in faith. Infantry charging downhill into a chariot force on level ground would normally be suicidal. The act is either extreme faith or prophetic obedience — either way, it requires trusting the divine guarantee over military logic.

15. Va-yaham YHWH ('the LORD threw into confusion/routed') — the verb hamam is the divine-panic verb used for God's supernatural intervention in battle (cf. Exodus 14:24 at the Red Sea, Joshua 10:10 at Gibeon, 1 Samuel 7:10 against the Philistines). The panic is divine in origin — it is not Barak's tactical skill but God's intervention that breaks Sisera's force.

15. The Song of Deborah (5:21) reveals what the prose account leaves implicit: the Wadi Kishon flooded, turning the valley into mud that immobilized the iron chariots. The chariots — the weapon that terrorized Israel for twenty years — become death traps in the sudden torrent. Sisera's dismount (va-yered me'al ha-merkavah, 'he descended from the chariot') and flight on foot (va-yanas be-raglav) is the ultimate reversal: the chariot commander runs like a foot soldier.

16. The pursuit extends to Sisera's base at Harosheth-Hagoiim — the complete destruction of his military force. Lo nish'ar ad echad ('not one remained') is the formula of total annihilation, matching the completeness of Ehud's victory at the Jordan fords (3:29). The chariot force that seemed invincible is obliterated.

17. Sisera's flight to Jael's tent makes strategic sense: shalom ('peace') existed between Jabin and Heber's household. Sisera expects shelter from an ally. The note about Heber's separation from the other Kenites (verse 11) now acquires its full significance — Heber has aligned with Canaan, not Israel. Sisera relies on this alliance when he enters Jael's tent.

17. The mention of shalom here is laden with irony — the 'peace' Sisera seeks in Jael's tent will become his death. The word shalom, which should mean wholeness and well-being, is about to be weaponized.

18. Jael's hospitality language — surah adoni surah elai al tira ('turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me, do not fear') — is the language of sanctuary and protection. She addresses him as adoni ('my lord'), offering deference and safety. The repeated imperative (surah, surah) is insistent, welcoming. Every word communicates safety. Every word is deception.

18. Va-tekhasehu ba-semikha ('she covered him with a rug/blanket') — the act of covering is a hospitality gesture (warmth, concealment from pursuers) that will be weaponized: the covering that protects him also prevents him from seeing the killing blow. The semikha is a thick covering or rug — the exact item is uncertain but its function is clear.

19. Sisera asks for water; Jael gives him milk (chalav, likely curdled goat's milk or yogurt). The upgrade from water to milk is a hospitality excess — she offers more than requested, deepening his sense of safety and her role as gracious host. The milk may also have a sedative effect — warm curdled milk induces drowsiness, and Sisera is already exhausted from battle and flight.

19. Va-tekhasehu ('she covered him') — again. The covering is repeated for emphasis: Sisera is wrapped, concealed, and lulled. Each act of apparent care moves him closer to vulnerability.

20. Sisera gives orders to Jael — he assumes the host-guest power dynamic favors him as the warrior lord. The request to stand guard and lie for him further embeds him in her hospitality: he trusts her not only for shelter and sustenance but for active protection. His vulnerability is now complete. The irony is that he asks her to deny his presence — and by killing him, she will make the denial true.

21. The killing is described with deliberate, almost clinical precision: yeted ha-ohel ('tent peg'), maqqevet ('mallet/hammer'), ba-la'at ('quietly, stealthily'), be-raqqato ('through his temple'). The raqqah is the temple — the thinnest part of the skull. The verb titsna ch ('she drove/sank it') is forceful; va-titsnach ba-aretz ('it sank into the ground') means the peg went through his skull and into the earth beneath him.

21. Jael's weapon choice is significant: the tent peg and mallet were women's tools in nomadic culture — it was women who set up and took down the tents. She kills with the implements of her daily domestic life. The warrior who fled a battlefield is destroyed by a homemaker's equipment.

21. The narrative holds its judgment: no divine commentary, no angelic approval, no prophetic sanction. Deborah's Song (5:24-27) will celebrate Jael, but the prose account simply reports what happened. The moral complexity — betrayal of hospitality laws, killing a sleeping man, violation of the guest-host covenant — is left for the reader to process.

22. Deborah's prophecy from verse 9 is fulfilled: be-yad ishah yimkor YHWH et Sisera ('the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman'). Barak arrives to find his quarry already dead — the glory of the kill belongs to Jael. The repetition of the tent peg image (ve-ha-yated be-raqqato, 'the peg in his temple') forces the reader to see the gruesome scene through Barak's eyes.

22. Jael's invitation to Barak — lekh ve-ar'ekka ('come and I will show you') — mirrors her invitation to Sisera in verse 18 (surah elai, 'turn aside to me'). She meets both men with the same welcoming initiative, but the outcomes could not be more different.

23. Va-yakhna Elohim ('God subdued') — the narrator uses Elohim rather than YHWH here, broadening the statement from covenant-specific to universal. The verb kana ('to subdue, to humble') marks the reversal: the oppressor who lorded over Israel for twenty years is now brought low. Note that Jabin the political authority is subdued — Sisera the military commander is dead. Both power structures collapse simultaneously.

24. Va-telekh yad Bnei-Yisra'el halokh ve-qashah ('the hand of the Israelites went, going and hardening') — the infinitive absolute construction (halokh ve-qashah) conveys continuous intensification. Israel's power grew progressively until Jabin was completely destroyed (hikhritu, 'they cut off'). The chapter ends not with a peace formula (that comes in 5:31) but with the complete elimination of the Canaanite threat — the political authority that oppressed Israel is terminated.

5

Summary: *The Song of Deborah and Barak celebrates the victory over Sisera in some of the oldest poetry in the Hebrew Bible. The song names tribes who fought and shames those who stayed home, culminating in Jael's killing of Sisera and his mother's agonized vigil at the window.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The poem's most devastating literary move is its ending: it cuts from Jael's tent to Sisera's mother peering through the window lattice, wondering why her son's chariot is late. Her ladies reassure her — 'surely they are dividing the spoil, a womb or two for each man' (v. 30). The Hebrew word for 'womb' (racham) is used for 'girl' as spoil — reducing women to body parts. The dramatic irony is total: while the mother imagines her son victorious over women, he lies dead at a woman's feet.*

Translation Friction: *This chapter contains some of the most difficult Hebrew in the entire Bible. Verse 2 (bifro'a pera'ot) has been translated as 'when leaders led,' 'when hair was worn long,' 'when warriors let hair loose,' and 'when anarchy broke out.' Verse 7 (perazon) might mean 'village life,' 'warriors,' or 'peasantry.' We made choices and documented them, but the reader should know that this poem pushes the limits of what scholarship can confidently determine.*

Connections: *The theophany (vv. 4-5) — God marching from Seir with the earth trembling — parallels Deuteronomy 33:2, Psalm 68:7-8, and Habakkuk 3:3. The stars fighting from their courses (v. 20) connects to Joshua 10:12-13. The tribal muster creates a precedent for evaluating national covenant participation. The closing prayer — 'may those who love Him be like the sun rising in its full strength' — anticipates Malachi 4:2.*

1 On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:

2 When leaders led in Israel,
when the people volunteered willingly —
bless the LORD!

3 Hear, O kings!
Give ear, O rulers!
I — I will sing to the LORD,
I will make music to the LORD, the God of Israel.

4 LORD, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the fields of Edom,
the earth trembled,
the heavens also poured down,
the clouds poured down water.

5 Mountains quaked before the LORD —
this one, Sinai — before the LORD, the God of Israel.

6 In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael,
the roads were deserted,
and travelers walked by winding paths.

7 Village life ceased,
it ceased in Israel,
until I arose — Deborah —
until I arose, a mother in Israel.

8 They chose new gods —
then war was at the gates.
Was there a shield or a spear to be seen
among forty thousand in Israel?

9 My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel,
to those who volunteered among the people.
Bless the LORD!

10 You who ride on tawny donkeys,
you who sit on rich saddle cloths,

and you who walk along the road — speak up!

11To the sound of musicians at the watering places,
there they recount the righteous acts of the LORD,
the righteous acts for His villagers in Israel.
Then the people of the LORD went down to the gates.

12Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, sing a song!
Arise, Barak!
Lead away your captives, son of Abinoam!

13Then down marched the remnant against the nobles;
the people of the LORD marched down for me against the mighty.

14From Ephraim came those rooted in the valley against Amalek;
behind you, Benjamin, among your kinsmen!
From Machir came down the commanders,
and from Zebulun those who carry the marshal's staff.

15The chiefs of Issachar were with Deborah;
as was Issachar, so was Barak —
sent into the valley at his heels.
Among the clans of Reuben
there were great searchings of heart.

16Why did you stay among the sheepfolds,
listening to the whistling for the flocks?
Among the clans of Reuben
there were great searchings of heart.

17Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan;
and Dan — why did he linger by the ships?
Asher sat at the coast of the sea
and settled by his harbors.

18Zebulun — a people who risked their lives to the death,
and Naphtali, on the heights of the field.

19Kings came, they fought;
then the kings of Canaan fought
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo.
No plunder of silver did they take.

20From heaven the stars fought;
from their courses they fought against Sisera.

21The Wadi Kishon swept them away,
the ancient wadi, the Wadi Kishon.
March on, my soul, with strength!

22 Then the horses' hooves pounded —
galloping, galloping, his mighty steeds!

23 "Curse Meroz!" says the angel of the LORD.
"Curse bitterly its inhabitants,
because they did not come to the help of the LORD,
to the help of the LORD against the mighty."

24 Most blessed of women is Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite —
most blessed of women in the tent!

25 He asked for water — she gave him milk;
in a lordly bowl she brought him curds.

26 Her hand reached for the tent peg,
her right hand for the worker's mallet.
She struck Sisera,
she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple.

27 Between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still;
between her feet he sank, he fell.
Where he sank,
there he fell — destroyed.

28 Through the window she peered —
the mother of Sisera cried out through the lattice:
"Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why do the hoofbeats of his chariots delay?"

29 The wisest of her ladies answer her;
indeed, she repeats their words to herself:

30 "Are they not finding and dividing the plunder? —
a womb, two wombs, for every warrior;
plunder of dyed cloth for Sisera,
plunder of dyed embroidery,
two pieces of embroidery for the neck of the plunderer."

31 So may all your enemies perish, O LORD!
But may those who love Him be like the sun
rising in its full strength.

And the land had rest for forty years.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Va-tashar Devorah ('then Deborah sang') — the feminine singular verb suggests Deborah is the primary singer, with Barak joining (u-Varaq). The Song of Deborah is one of the oldest poems in the Hebrew Bible — linguistic analysis suggests a composition date as early as the 12th-11th century BCE, making it roughly contemporary with the events it describes. The archaic Hebrew grammar, vocabulary, and spelling throughout this chapter set it apart from the prose narrative of chapter 4.

2. The opening couplet is textually difficult. Bi-froa pera'ot be-Yisra'el — the root para can mean 'to lead, to let loose, to let hair hang free' (as warriors letting hair loose before battle), or 'to avenge.' The translation 'when leaders led' follows the reading that sees pera'ot as a leadership term. The parallelism with be-hitnaddev am ('when the people volunteered') creates a dual picture: leaders leading and people willing. Both together produce a moment worthy of blessing the LORD.

2. The three-line structure (tricolon) with the climactic barekhu YHWH ('bless the LORD!') establishes the hymnic tone. This is worship poetry — the military victory is subsumed into praise.

3. The summons to kings and rozenim ('rulers, princes') sets the cosmic stage — this is not a private celebration but a declaration before the nations. The double anokhi ('I — I') is emphatic first-person: Deborah asserts her role as the singer with deliberate force. The parallel verbs ashirah ('I will sing') and azammer ('I will make music') are standard praise-poetry vocabulary, establishing this as a hymn to YHWH, not a human war ballad.

4. The theophany — God marching from Seir/Edom — describes YHWH coming from the south, from the direction of Sinai. This is the 'Divine Warrior' tradition: God marches into battle from His mountain, and creation responds with cosmic upheaval. The same tradition appears in Deuteronomy 33:2, Habakkuk 3:3, and Psalm 68:7-8. The trembling earth and pouring rain are not mere weather but the physical response of creation to God's warlike approach.

4. The geographic movement from Seir/Edom northward to the Jezreel Valley where the battle occurred creates a sweeping visual: God traverses the entire land to fight for Israel. Erets ra'ashah ('the earth trembled') and shamayim natafu ('the heavens dripped/poured') create the earth-heaven axis of cosmic response.

5. Harim nazelu ('mountains flowed/quaked') — the verb nazal means 'to flow, to stream, to trickle down.' Mountains dissolving or streaming before God is the most extreme theophanic imagery: even the most permanent features of creation become fluid in God's presence. The reference to Sinai (zeh Sinai, 'this one, Sinai' or 'that Sinai') connects the Kishon battlefield to the foundational covenant event. The God who shook Sinai now shakes the Jezreel Valley — the same power, the same God.

5. The phrase zeh Sinai is grammatically unusual — it may be an archaic relative construction meaning 'the One of Sinai' (referring to God) rather than 'this Sinai' (referring to the mountain). Both readings connect the battle to Sinai theology.

6. The song shifts from theophany to lament, describing conditions before the deliverance. Chadelu orachot ('roads ceased/were abandoned') — the main trade routes were too dangerous for civilian travel due to Canaanite military control. Travelers took orachot aqalqallot ('crooked/winding paths') — back roads and detours to avoid Canaanite patrols and checkpoints.

6. The mention of Jael alongside Shamgar (not Deborah or Barak) is striking — Jael's era is characterized by road insecurity. This is the 'before' portrait that makes the 'after' of deliverance meaningful. The disruption of commerce and travel represents a society living in fear.

7. Chadelu ferazon ('village life ceased / open villages ceased') — perazon can mean 'peasantry, village life, open settlements.' Rural communities could not survive without military protection — they were abandoned as populations fled to walled cities. The collapse of village life indicates a society under siege.

7. Ad sha-qamti Devorah ('until I arose, Deborah') — the first-person voice claims the pivotal role directly. The title em be-Yisra'el ('a mother in Israel') is extraordinary — Deborah identifies herself not as a warrior or judge but as a 'mother.' The maternal metaphor conveys nurture, protection, and the restoration of communal life. A mother in Israel is one who makes life possible again for her children.

8. The causal logic is compressed and devastating: Israel chose new gods (elohim chadashim, 'new gods' — the modifier 'new' mocks the Canaanite deities as novelties compared to the eternal YHWH), and the direct consequence was war at the gates (lachem she'arim — fighting at the city gates, the last line of urban defense). Simultaneously, Israel was disarmed: no shield (magen) or spear (romach) among forty thousand. Whether the disarmament was Canaanite policy (cf. the Philistine weapon monopoly in 1 Samuel 13:19-22) or metaphorical (no one willing to fight), the effect is total vulnerability.

9. Libbi le-choqeqei Yisra'el ('my heart is toward the commanders/legislators of Israel') — choqeq can mean 'commander, lawgiver, one who decrees.' Deborah's heart is moved by leaders who stepped forward. The parallel ha-mitnaddevim ba-am ('those who volunteered among the people') echoes verse 2 — the willingness theme returns. The refrain barekhu YHWH ('bless the LORD') recurs, framing the song's structure.

10. Three social classes are summoned to praise: riders of atonot tsehorot ('tawny/white donkeys' — the donkeys of the wealthy and nobility), yoshevei al middin ('those who sit on saddle cloths/judgment seats' — either wealthy riders or judicial officials), and holkhei al derekh ('walkers on the road' — common travelers). The entire social spectrum is called to testify. The restored road safety of verse 6-7 is now celebrated — those who walk the roads (previously too dangerous) can now travel freely.

11. Mi-qol mechatsetim ('from the sound of those dividing/distributing' or 'musicians/singers') — the exact meaning is debated but the scene is communal celebration at watering places (mashabbim), the village gathering points. Tsidqot YHWH ('righteous acts of the LORD') — the plural of tsedaqah used for God's saving interventions. Here God's military deliverance is categorized as a righteous act — an act of justice and covenant faithfulness, not merely military power.

11. Am YHWH ('the people of the LORD') — Israel is identified by covenant relationship, not ethnic or political terms. The descent 'to the gates' (la-she'arim) reverses verse 8's 'war at the gates': where once the gates were besieged, now the people freely enter and exit.

12. The fourfold uri ('awake!') is the song's climactic summons — Deborah calls herself to action. The imperative repetition creates rhythmic intensity. The parallel pair: Deborah is called to sing (dabberi shir, 'speak/utter a song'), Barak is called to act (qum, 'arise' — the same command Deborah gave him in 4:14). Their roles are distinct and complementary: she speaks, he leads.

12. Sheveh shevyekha ('lead captive your captives') uses the cognate accusative for emphasis — take captivity itself captive. The phrase will be echoed in Psalm 68:18, which Paul applies christologically in Ephesians 4:8.

13. This verse is among the most textually difficult in the Hebrew Bible. Az yerad sarid le-addirim ('then the remnant descended to/against the nobles') — the meaning depends on whether the 'remnant' is Israel's surviving population marching against Canaanite nobility, or whether addirim ('nobles') refers to Israel's own leaders. The rendering follows the reading that sees Israel's reduced remnant taking the offensive against superior Canaanite forces — a picture of the weak overcoming the mighty through divine power.

14. The tribal muster roll begins — Deborah names the tribes that came and those that did not. Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (a Manasseh sub-clan), and Zebulun are listed as participants. Shorsham ba-Amaleq ('their root in Amalek' or 'rooted against Amalek') is obscure — it may refer to Ephraim's territory formerly held by Amalekites (cf. 12:15).

14. Mi-Zevulun moshkhim be-shevet sofer ('from Zebulun those who draw with the staff of the writer/marshal') — the shevet sofer may be a mustering staff, a commander's baton, or a scribal tool. The image suggests organized military leadership, not just warriors but officers who marshal troops.

15. Issachar is praised for loyalty — its chiefs stood with Deborah and Barak. But the tone shifts abruptly at Reuben: bi-felaggot Re'uven gedolim chiqeqei lev ('among the divisions/clans of Reuben, great searchings/resolves of heart'). The 'searchings of heart' (chiqeqei lev) is ambivalent — it could be deliberation, indecision, or anguish about whether to join. The next verse (16) will make clear that Reuben's 'searching' produced no action. They deliberated but did not come.

16. The accusation takes the form of a rhetorical question: lammah yashavta bein ha-mishpetayim ('why did you sit between the sheepfolds?'). Reuben, a pastoral tribe east of the Jordan, chose tending flocks over joining the battle. Sheriqot adarim ('whistlings/pipings for the flocks') is the pastoral idyll Reuben preferred to the battlefield. The repeated refrain 'great searchings of heart' (now chiqrei lev, a variant spelling) frames Reuben's deliberation as culpable — they considered the call and declined.

16. The poetry's accusatory tone anticipates the more bitter rebuke of Meroz in verse 23. Deborah's song is not only praise for the willing but judgment against the unwilling.

17. Three more non-participants are named: Gilead (the Transjordanian tribes — Gad and eastern Manasseh), Dan, and Asher. Each is characterized by what they chose instead of battle. Gilead stayed east of the Jordan. Dan lingered by ships (oniyyot) — suggesting Dan at this period had a coastal or riverine trade interest. Asher sat by the seashore (chof yammim) and at his harbors (mifrasav, 'breaches, landing places'). Each tribe chose economic self-interest over covenant solidarity.

17. The geography tells the theological story: the tribes most distant from the battle (eastern and far-northern/coastal) are the ones who abstained. Physical distance from the crisis correlates with spiritual indifference.

18. After the catalog of abstainers, the song returns to praise. Zebulun and Naphtali — the two tribes Deborah specifically called (4:6) — receive the highest commendation: am cheref nafsho lamut ('a people who scorned death / risked their lives to death'). The verb charaf means 'to reproach, to scorn, to defy' — they defied death itself. This is the counterpoint to Reuben's 'searchings of heart': while some deliberated, Zebulun and Naphtali acted.

18. Al meromei sadeh ('on the heights of the field') — they took the exposed, dangerous positions on the high ground. The contrast between these warrior-tribes and the coastal/pastoral non-combatants is absolute.

19. The battle location is specified poetically: Taanach and the waters of Megiddo — the Kishon drainage area in the Jezreel Valley. The final line is darkly ironic: betsa kesef lo laqachu ('spoil of silver they did not take') — the Canaanite kings came expecting profit from their military superiority but gained nothing. The verse may also be read as the Israelites gaining no silver plunder — the victory was divine, not economic.

20. Min shamayim nilchamu ('from heaven they fought') — the cosmic dimension of the battle. The stars themselves join the war against Sisera. Ha-kokhavim mi-mesilotam ('the stars from their courses/paths') — the celestial bodies are marshaled as divine warriors. This is not astrology but theophanic poetry: all creation is conscripted into God's army. The language echoes the holy-war tradition where nature fights for Israel (cf. Joshua 10:11 — hailstones; Exodus 14:24-25 — the sea).

20. The astronomical language may also encode a meteorological reality: a sudden storm (the stars 'fighting' = a violent weather event) caused the Kishon to flood (verse 21), destroying the chariots. Cosmic poetry and physical causation converge.

21. Nachal Qishon gerafam ('the Wadi Kishon swept them away') — the verb garaf ('to sweep away, to carry off') reveals the mechanism of the divine victory that the prose account (4:15) left implicit. The Kishon flooded — the seasonal wadi became a raging torrent that swept Sisera's iron chariots and their crews downstream. The chariots that terrorized Israel for twenty years were destroyed by a flash flood.

21. Nachal qedumim ('the ancient wadi') — the epithet 'ancient' (qedumim) gives the Kishon a personality: this is an old waterway with a long history, now awakened to fight for God. The self-exhortation tidrekhi nafshi oz ('march on, my soul, with strength!') is Deborah addressing herself mid-song — a burst of warrior confidence that breaks the descriptive narrative.

22. Az halmu iqqevei sus ('then the hooves of the horses pounded/were smashed') — the scene is auditory: the thunder of horse hooves as Sisera's cavalry tries to flee the flooding battlefield. Mi-daharot daharot abbirav ('from the galloping, the galloping of his mighty ones/steeds') — the repeated daharot creates an onomatopoetic effect mimicking the rhythmic pounding of hooves. The sound of galloping horses in panicked flight is the soundtrack of Sisera's defeat.

23. The curse on Meroz is the harshest judgment in the song. Malakh YHWH ('the angel of the LORD') pronounces the curse — the same figure who indicted Israel at Bochim (2:1-5) now curses a specific town. Meroz's exact location is unknown — it may have been so thoroughly cursed that it was obliterated. The double curse (oru ... oru aror) is intensive.

23. The charge is stunning: lo va'u le-ezrat YHWH ('they did not come to the help of the LORD'). The language implies that God Himself needed help — not in the sense of divine weakness, but in the covenant obligation of partnership. YHWH fights for Israel, and Israel is expected to fight with YHWH. Refusing to join the battle is refusing to help God. The concept is radical: human participation in divine warfare is not optional but covenantally obligated.

24. Tevorakh min-nashim Ya'el ('blessed above women is Jael') — the superlative blessing is the song's highest honor. The phrase min-nashim ba-ohel ('above women in the tent') may mean 'among tent-dwelling women' (nomadic women) or may contrast Jael with women of the settled cities. The blessing formula echoes the blessing on Mary in Luke 1:42 ('blessed are you among women'), creating an intertextual echo across testaments.

24. The immediate juxtaposition of Meroz's curse (v. 23) and Jael's blessing (v. 24) creates a moral spectrum: the coward is cursed, the brave is blessed. Jael's blessing is explicitly connected to her act of killing Sisera — the song celebrates what the prose narrative reported without comment.

25. The poetic retelling of 4:19 intensifies the hospitality: mayim sha'al, chalav natanah ('water he asked, milk she gave') — the upgrade from water to milk signals generosity beyond obligation. Be-sefel addirim ('in a bowl of nobles/a lordly bowl') — the vessel itself is dignified, fit for royalty. Chem'ah ('curds, cream, butter') is a delicacy. Every detail of the hospitality is heightened in the poetic telling, making the reversal that follows even more devastating.

26. The poetic account of the killing is more elaborate than the prose version (4:21). The poetry uses slow-motion technique: yadah la-yated tishlachnah ('her hand to the peg she sent') vi-yminah le-halmut amelim ('her right hand to the toilers' mallet') ve-halemah Sisera ('she struck Sisera') machaqah rosho ('she crushed his head') u-machatsh ve-chalefah raqqato ('she shattered and pierced his temple'). Each verb intensifies: struck crushed shattered pierced.

26. The triple parallelism of verbs (machaqah, machatsh, chalefah) creates a rhythmic hammering effect in the Hebrew — the sound of the poetry mimics the act it describes. This is masterful ancient poetry: form and content are unified.

27. Bein ragleha kara nafal shakhav ('between her feet he sank, he fell, he lay') — the three verbs (kara, nafal, shakhav) replay the death in excruciating slow motion. The repetition is deliberate and relentless: the poetry refuses to let the listener move past the moment. 'Between her feet' (bein ragleha) carries unmistakable overtones of sexual dominance — the great warrior ends at the feet of a woman, in a posture of complete subjugation.

27. The word shadud ('destroyed, despoiled, plundered') is the final word — Sisera, the plunderer of Israel, is himself destroyed. The poetic justice is complete: the one who plundered is plundered, the one who enslaved falls at a woman's feet. The verse's hypnotic repetition functions as a kind of incantation — the death is enacted again and again in the poetry.

28. The song's most devastating poetic move: it shifts from the battlefield to Sisera's home, to his mother watching from the window. Be'ad ha-challon nishqefah ('through the window she peered') — the verb shaqaf ('to look down, to peer out') suggests anxious watching from above. Va-teyabev ('she cried out') — the verb yabav is rare and suggests a high-pitched, wailing cry. Em Sisera ('the mother of Sisera') — she is not named, only defined by her relationship to the dead man she doesn't yet know is dead.

28. The pathos is extraordinary and deliberate. Deborah's song humanizes the enemy at the moment of his destruction. Sisera's mother becomes a universal figure — any mother waiting for a son who will never return. The dramatic irony (the audience knows what she does not) creates a compassion that coexists with the celebration of victory. This is among the most psychologically sophisticated moments in ancient literature.

29. Chakhmot saroteiha ('the wisest of her noble ladies') — Sisera's mother is surrounded by attendants who offer reassurance. The irony deepens: the 'wisdom' (chakhmah) of the court ladies is about to produce a grotesquely wrong explanation for Sisera's delay. Their confident answer (verse 30) will make the truth — that Sisera is dead — even more brutal by contrast.

29. Af hi tashiv amareiha lah ('indeed, she returns her words to herself') — she repeats their reassurance as self-comfort, trying to convince herself that the explanation is true. The psychological portrait is painfully precise.

30. The court ladies' 'wise' answer is the song's most cutting irony. Racham rachamatayim le-rosh gever ('a womb, two wombs, for each warrior') — the Hebrew racham means 'womb' and is used here as a dehumanizing synecdoche: the captured women are reduced to their reproductive organs. The noble ladies casually assume that Sisera's delay is because he is busy raping captive women. They are not shocked by this — they expect and approve it as a warrior's perquisite.

30. The poet forces the listener to hear how the enemy dehumanizes Israelite women — and then to recall that Sisera himself is now dead at the feet of a woman. The ironic reversal is total: the man whose mother assumes he is violating women has been killed by a woman. The embroidered cloth (tseva'im riqmah) and luxury goods they imagine Sisera collecting will never arrive. The 'plunder' fantasy is a fantasy of a world that no longer exists.

30. This verse is among the most discussed in feminist biblical scholarship. The poet's decision to include the enemy mother's perspective — and to give her court ladies this particular speech — is a sophisticated literary choice that simultaneously exposes the brutality of warfare and celebrates its subversion by women (Jael, Deborah) who act rather than wait.

31. The song's closing is a prayer — ken yovedu khol oyvekha YHWH ('so may all your enemies perish, O LORD'). The imprecation is not personal vengeance but covenant theology: God's enemies are those who oppose His purposes for Israel. The counter-blessing — ve-ohavav ke-tset ha-shemesh bi-gvurato ('may those who love Him be like the sun going forth in its might') — is the most beautiful image in the song. The sun rising in full strength (gevurah, 'power, might') is the image of irresistible, warming, life-giving force. Israel, delivered and faithful, is as unstoppable as dawn.

31. The final prose line — va-tishqot ha-aretz arba'im shanah ('the land had rest forty years') — closes the cycle with the standard peace formula. The forty-year rest matches Othniel's (3:11). The Song of Deborah, for all its cosmic scope and psychological depth, resolves into the same formulaic peace that every judge's deliverance produces. The pattern holds.

6

Summary: *Midian oppresses Israel for seven years, devastating their crops. God calls Gideon — who is threshing wheat in a winepress to hide it — as deliverer. Gideon tears down his father's Baal altar at night and receives the fleece sign.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The angel greets Gideon as gibbor hechayil ('mighty warrior,' v. 12) while he hides in a winepress. The irony is intentional: the deliverer is introduced as a coward. Gideon's objection — 'my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house' (v. 15) — echoes Moses's and Saul's reluctance. God consistently chooses the insufficient. Gideon's night raid on the Baal altar (vv. 25-32) earns him the name Jerubbaal ('let Baal contend') — if Baal is real, let him fight his own battles.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase hineni magia (v. 37, 'I am laying') uses a rare verb for placing the fleece — the precise action matters because Gideon is testing God, a posture the text neither condemns nor endorses. The phrase shalom lekha (v. 23, 'peace to you') is God's reassurance after Gideon realizes he has seen the angel — we preserved shalom as 'peace' in this greeting context.*

Connections: *Gideon's calling echoes Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3-4) — both encounter God unexpectedly, both object, both receive signs. The Baal-altar destruction anticipates Elijah's contest on Carmel (1 Kings 18). The winepress hiding mirrors the larger theme of Israel cowering before oppressors until God intervenes. Gideon's family dynamics preview Abimelech's murderous ambition (ch. 9).*

1 The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian for seven years.
2 The hand of Midian was heavy on Israel. Because of Midian, the Israelites made for themselves the tunnels in the
mountains, the caves, and the strongholds. 3 Whenever Israel sowed, Midian would come up, along with Amalek and the
people of the east, and attack them. 4 They would camp against them and destroy the produce of the land as far as Gaza,
leaving no food in Israel — no sheep, no ox, no donkey. 5 For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, arriving
like locusts in number — they and their camels were beyond counting — and they invaded the land to devastate it. 6 Israel
was brought very low because of Midian, and the Israelites cried out to the LORD. 7 When the Israelites cried out to the
LORD because of Midian, 8 the LORD sent a prophet to the Israelites. He said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of
Israel, says: 'I brought you up from Egypt and led you out of the house of slavery. 9 I rescued you from the hand of Egypt and
from the hand of all who oppressed you. I drove them out before you and gave you their land. 10 I said to you: I am the LORD
your God. You must not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live.' But you have not obeyed my voice." 11 The
angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite. His son Gideon was
threshing wheat in the winepress to hide it from Midian. 12 The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, "The LORD is
with you, mighty warrior." 13 Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us?
Where are all His wondrous acts that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But
now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." 14 The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this
strength of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" 15 He said to him, "Please, my lord, how can

I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's household." 16The LORD said to him, "I will be with you, and you will strike down Midian as though they were a single man." 17He said to him, "If I have found favor in your eyes, show me a sign that it is you who are speaking with me. 18Please do not leave here until I come back to you and bring out my offering and set it before you." He said, "I will stay until you return." 19Gideon went in and prepared a young goat and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. He put the meat in a basket, poured the broth in a pot, and brought it out to him under the oak and presented it. 20The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." He did so. 21The angel of the LORD extended the tip of the staff in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire rose from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. 22When Gideon realized that he was the angel of the LORD, Gideon said, "Alas, Lord GOD! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!" 23The LORD said to him, "Peace to you. Do not be afraid — you will not die." 24Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and named it "The LORD Is Peace." To this day it still stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. 25That same night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull — the second bull, seven years old — and tear down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. 26Then build an altar to the LORD your God on top of this stronghold, in proper arrangement. Take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down." 27Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his father's household and the men of the city to do it by day, he did it at night. 28When the men of the city rose early in the morning, the altar of Baal had been torn down, the Asherah pole beside it had been cut down, and the second bull had been offered on the altar that was built. 29They said to one another, "Who did this?" When they investigated and inquired, they said, "Gideon son of Joash did this." 30The men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son so he can die, because he tore down the altar of Baal and because he cut down the Asherah pole beside it." 31Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal? Will you save him? Whoever contends for him will be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him contend for himself, since someone tore down his altar." 32So on that day he named him Jerubbaal, saying, "Let Baal contend with him," because he tore down his altar. 33All the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east gathered together, crossed over, and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. 34The Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he blew the shofar. The Abiezrites rallied behind him. 35He sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too rallied behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them. 36Gideon said to God, "If you are going to save Israel through me, as you have promised — 37I am placing a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and all the ground around it is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel through me, as you have promised." 38And so it happened. He rose early the next morning, wrung out the fleece, and squeezed enough dew from it to fill a bowl with water. 39Gideon said to God, "Do not let your anger burn against me — let me speak just one more time. Let me test just once more with the fleece: let only the fleece be dry, and let there be dew on all the ground." 40God did so that night: the fleece alone was dry, and there was dew on all the ground.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The fifth cycle opens with the standard formula. Midian — a semi-nomadic people associated with the desert east of the Jordan (Moses's father-in-law Jethro was a Midianite priest, Exodus 2:16-3:1). Seven years of oppression is relatively short but, as the following verses reveal, intensely devastating.
2. Va-ta'oz yad Midyan ('the hand of Midian was strong/heavy') — the verb azaz means 'to be strong, to prevail.' The oppression is so severe that Israel retreats to minharot ('tunnels, dens'), me'arot ('caves'), and metsadot ('strongholds, fortified positions'). The people of the promised land are hiding like fugitives in their own territory. This is the most extreme description of oppression in Judges — Israel is reduced to cave-dwelling.
3. The Midianite strategy is economic terrorism: they wait until Israel has sowed (zara, 'planted seed') and then invade to destroy or seize the harvest. The coalition includes Amalek (Israel's perennial enemy) and benei qedem ('sons of the east,' desert nomads from the Transjordan). The timing is precise — attacking after sowing but before harvest ensures maximum agricultural devastation.
4. The destruction extends ad bo'akha Azzah ('until you reach Gaza') — the entire width of the country from the eastern desert to the western coast. The comprehensiveness is deliberate: lo yash'iru michyah be-Yisra'el ('they left no sustenance in Israel'). Even livestock — sheep, oxen, donkeys — are taken or destroyed. This is systematic starvation, not mere raiding.

5. Ke-dei arbeh la-rov ('like locusts in multitude') — the locust simile is one of the most powerful in the Hebrew Bible for describing overwhelming numbers. Locusts consume everything in their path, leaving nothing — exactly what the Midianite raiders do to Israel's agriculture. The camels (gemalim) are significant: camel-borne nomads had superior mobility over settled agricultural populations, enabling rapid strikes across vast distances. The Midianite raids represent an early form of nomadic warfare against sedentary communities.

6. Va-yiddal Yisra'el me'od ('Israel was greatly impoverished/diminished') — the verb dalal means 'to become thin, poor, reduced.' Israel is wasting away. The cry (va-yiz'aqu) comes from desperation, not repentance — the same pattern as previous cycles. But this time, uniquely, God responds first not with a deliverer but with a prophet (verses 7-10).

7. The causal chain is established: Midianite oppression Israel's cry God's response. But the response is unusual — God sends a prophet before sending a deliverer. This is the only cycle in Judges where prophetic rebuke precedes military deliverance. The sequence suggests Israel needs to understand why they are suffering before they can be rescued.

8. Ish navi ('a man, a prophet') — the prophet is unnamed, which is unusual. His anonymity underscores that the message matters, not the messenger. His speech follows the classic prophetic formula koh amar YHWH ('thus says the LORD') — the covenant lawsuit pattern. The content echoes the angel's speech at Bochim (2:1): God recites His saving acts as the basis for the indictment that follows.

8. Beit avadim ('house of slavery/bondage') is the standard Deuteronomic designation for Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:6, 6:12, 8:14). Its use here reminds Israel that their current oppression is not their first — God delivered them from worse.

9. The recital of God's acts mirrors the covenant prologue form known from ancient Near Eastern treaties — the sovereign recounts what he has done for the vassal before stating his demands. God's credentials are His acts: rescue (hitsil), expulsion of enemies (gerashti), and land gift (natatti). Each verb is in the first person — God takes personal ownership of every stage of the deliverance.

10. The indictment climaxes: lo shema'tem be-qoli ('you have not obeyed my voice'). The command lo tir'u et elohei ha-Emori ('do not fear the gods of the Amorites') uses the verb yare ('to fear, to revere, to worship'). 'Fearing' another god is functionally worshipping it — acknowledging its power and submitting to its demands. The Amorites are used here as a generic term for the Canaanite population.

10. Notably, no deliverance is promised in this prophetic speech. The prophet delivers the diagnosis but not the prescription. God's answer to the Midianite crisis — Gideon — does not come through this prophet but through a separate theophany (verses 11ff). The prophet explains the cause; the angel provides the cure.

11. Malakh YHWH ('the angel of the LORD') — the same figure from 2:1-5. The scene echoes the patriarchal theophanies: the divine visitor sits under a tree (cf. Abraham at Mamre, Genesis 18:1). Gideon's introduction is deliberately unheroic: he is threshing wheat (chovet chittim) in a winepress (ba-gat) — a hidden, cramped space used to avoid Midianite raiders. Normal threshing occurs on an open hilltop where wind separates chaff; using a winepress means working in concealment, in fear. The deliverer God will raise is introduced as a man hiding his grain.

11. The Abiezrite clan belongs to Manasseh (Joshua 17:2). Ophrah's location is uncertain but somewhere in the Manasseh territory in the central highlands.

12. YHWH immekha gibbor he-chayil ('the LORD is with you, mighty warrior') — the greeting is deeply ironic given the context. Gideon is a man hiding grain in a winepress, and the angel addresses him as gibbor he-chayil ('mighty warrior, valiant hero'). The title is either prophetic (God sees what Gideon will become) or challenging (calling forth a courage Gideon does not yet possess). The phrase YHWH immekha ('the LORD is with you') is a standard divine assurance of presence (cf. Joshua 1:5, Ruth 2:4), but Gideon will immediately question it.

13. Gideon's response is the most theologically articulate complaint by any judge. He raises three challenges: (1) If YHWH is with us (ve-yesh YHWH immanu), why has this happened? — questioning the divine presence claim; (2) Where are the miracles (nifle'otav) our fathers told us about? — the generational knowledge gap of 2:10 is now voiced by a character within the story; (3) The LORD has abandoned us (netashanu) — a direct accusation of divine desertion.

13. Gideon's theology is actually correct about the situation but wrong about the cause. God has not abandoned Israel — God has handed them over because of their idolatry (verse 1). Gideon sees the effect but not the reason. The unnamed prophet's speech (vv. 8-10) provided the explanation Gideon seems not to have heard.

14. Va-yifen elav YHWH ('the LORD turned to him') — the text now identifies the speaker as YHWH directly, not merely malakh YHWH. The blurring between angel and God continues (as in 2:1). The commission is direct: lekh be-khochakha zeh ('go in this strength of yours'). What strength? Gideon has displayed none. The 'strength' may refer to his honest confrontation with God — his willingness to ask hard questions is itself a form of spiritual strength that God can use.

14. Ve-hosha'ta et Yisra'el ('and you will save Israel') — the root y-sh-a (salvation) applied directly to Gideon. Ha-lo shelachticha ('Have I not sent you?') — the rhetorical question establishes divine commissioning. Gideon's authority comes not from personal ability but from divine sending.

15. Gideon's protest follows the classic call-narrative pattern: Moses ('Who am I?' Exodus 3:11), Jeremiah ('I am only a youth,' Jeremiah 1:6), and now Gideon ('My clan is the weakest, I am the youngest'). The double diminishment — alphi ha-dal ('my thousand/clan is the poor one') and anokhi ha-tsa'ir ('I am the youngest') — places Gideon at the bottom of both social and familial hierarchies. The theology is consistent: God chooses the weak to shame the strong (a principle Paul will articulate in 1 Corinthians 1:27).

16. Ki ehyeh immakh ('for I will be with you') — the divine assurance echoes God's promise to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:12, using the same ehyeh). The verb ehyeh ('I will be') is the first-person form of the divine name YHWH — God pledges His own being as guarantee. The promise transforms Gideon's weakness into irrelevance: Gideon's clan doesn't matter because God will be the one fighting.

16. Ke-ish echad ('as a single man') — the entire Midianite host will fall as easily as if they were one individual. The image collapses the impossible odds into a single opponent, which is theologically accurate: the battle is God's, not Gideon's.

17. Im na matsati chen be-einekha ('if I have found favor in your eyes') — the standard petition formula for requesting something from a superior. Gideon asks for an ot ('sign') — visible confirmation that this visitor is genuinely divine. The request for signs will become Gideon's pattern (the fleece test in vv. 36-40). The text does not criticize the initial request — confirmation of divine commission is reasonable. But the pattern of repeated sign-seeking will raise questions about Gideon's faith.

18. Minchati ('my offering/gift') — the same term used for the grain offering in Leviticus 2 and for tribute to a king. Gideon's offering could be a meal for a distinguished guest or a sacrificial offering to a deity — the ambiguity reflects Gideon's own uncertainty about who he is dealing with. The divine visitor's willingness to wait (anokhi eshev, 'I will sit/stay') echoes God's patience throughout the patriarchal narratives — the divine is never in a hurry.

19. The offering is lavish: a gedi izzim ('kid of the goats'), an eifah ('ephah,' approximately 22 liters / 6 gallons) of flour for matzot ('unleavened bread'), plus broth. In a time of famine, this represents enormous generosity — Gideon gives what his family can barely afford. The unleavened bread (matzot) is associatively linked to the exodus Passover (Exodus 12:8), though the connection may be incidental. The presentation under the oak (ha-elah) transforms the domestic meal into something approaching sacrifice.

20. The angel's instruction transforms a meal into an offering: the rock (ha-sela) becomes an altar. Placing meat and bread on a rock and pouring out the broth mirrors sacrificial procedure — the solid elements are placed for burning and the liquid is poured out as a libation. Gideon's domestic gift is being redirected from hospitality to worship.

21. The staff-touch ignites the offering — fire from the rock (va-ta'al ha-esh min ha-tsur) consumes the sacrifice. This is the sign Gideon requested (v. 17): divine fire accepting the offering, just as fire consumed Elijah's sacrifice on Carmel (1 Kings 18:38) and the tabernacle inauguration offerings (Leviticus 9:24). Fire from the rock is theophanic — God reveals Himself through consuming fire.

21. U-malakh YHWH halakh me-einav ('the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight') — the departure confirms the divine identity. The angel does not walk away but disappears. Gideon's visitor was not human.

22. Gideon's terror (ahahh, an exclamation of distress) reflects the ancient Israelite belief that seeing God or His angel directly was fatal (cf. Exodus 33:20, 'no one can see my face and live'). The phrase panim el panim ('face to face') is the most intense form of divine encounter — unmediated, direct. Gideon fears he will die because he has seen the divine face. This is the same fear Jacob expressed at Peniel (Genesis 32:30).

22. The address Adonai YHWH ('Lord GOD') uses both divine titles — Adonai as the spoken form and YHWH as the covenant name. The doubling signals extreme urgency.

23. Shalom lekha ('peace to you') — God's response to Gideon's terror is the gift of shalom. The word carries its full weight here: not merely 'hello' but a declaration of well-being, wholeness, safety. Al tira ('do not be afraid') is the standard divine reassurance formula. Lo tamut ('you will not die') directly addresses Gideon's specific fear. The encounter that threatened death produces instead a declaration of peace.

24. YHWH Shalom ('The LORD Is Peace') — Gideon's altar name commemorates God's gift of shalom in the theophany. The altar name is a theological statement: the God who commissioned Gideon for war is the God whose fundamental character is peace. The construction of an altar is Gideon's first act as a covenant leader — before any military action, he establishes worship. The narrator's tag 'to this day' (ad ha-yom ha-zeh) attests to the altar's survival into the writer's era.

25. God's first command to Gideon is not military but cultic: destroy your own father's Baal altar and Asherah pole. The theology is clear — before Israel can be delivered from external enemies (Midian), it must be delivered from internal idolatry (Baal worship). The seven-year-old bull may correspond to the seven years of Midianite oppression (verse 1), symbolically connecting the idol's age to the duration of God's judgment.

25. Asher le-avikha ('that belongs to your father') — the idolatry is domestic, familial. Gideon must confront his own household's sin before he can address Israel's. The personal cost of the commission is immediate.

26. The instruction is theologically charged: burn the Asherah pole and use its wood as fuel for a burnt offering (olah) to YHWH. The idol becomes firewood for the true God's altar. The desecration of the Canaanite cult object is total — it is not merely destroyed but repurposed for YHWH worship. The olah (burnt offering — the total surrender offering from Leviticus 1) replaces the Baal cult with YHWH worship on the same site.

26. Ba-ma'arakhah ('in proper arrangement') — the offering must be done correctly, according to prescribed procedure. Even in the emergency of spiritual revolution, liturgical order matters.

27. Gideon obeys — but at night, in fear. Ka'asher yare et beit aviv ('because he feared his father's house') — the deliverer who will defeat Midian is afraid of his own neighbors. The narrator does not condemn the fear but records it honestly: Gideon's courage is imperfect, his faith is growing but not complete. The ten servants provide both labor and witnesses — even fearful obedience requires community.

28. The morning-after discovery reveals the three-part act: altar destroyed, Asherah cut, YHWH-offering presented. The built altar (ha-mizbeach ha-banui) stands where the Baal altar stood — replacement, not merely destruction. The community confronts a fait accompli: their cultic center has

been transformed overnight from Baal worship to YHWH worship.

29. The investigation (darash, 'to seek, to inquire' and biqqesh, 'to search') reveals Gideon — perhaps through the testimony of the ten servants, or through the process of elimination in a small community. The discovery puts Gideon in immediate danger: destroying a community's cultic center is a capital offense by local custom.

30. The demand hotse et binkha ve-yamot ('bring out your son that he may die') uses the same formulation as the demand for Lot's guests in Sodom (Genesis 19:5, though with different intent). The townspeople want Gideon executed for sacrilege against Baal. The irony is that an Israelite community demands death for destroying an idol that Israelites were commanded to destroy (Deuteronomy 7:5). The depth of Canaanization is exposed: Israel defends Baal's honor.

31. Joash's defense of his son is brilliant and devastating: ha-attem terivun la-Ba'al ('will YOU contend for Baal?'). The verb riv ('to contend, to argue, to litigate') is a legal term — Joash puts Baal on trial rather than Gideon. His argument is simple and irrefutable: if Baal is a real god, he can defend his own altar; if he cannot, he's not worth defending. Im elohim hu yarev lo ('if he is a god, let him contend for himself') — this is the theological acid test. The logic anticipates Elijah's mockery on Carmel (1 Kings 18:27).

32. Yerubba'al ('Let Baal contend') — the name is a permanent theological taunt. Every time Gideon is called by this name (which the text uses throughout the rest of the narrative and in later references, 1 Samuel 12:11), the hearer is reminded that Baal could not defend his own altar. The name functions as a walking declaration of Baal's impotence.

33. The Midianite coalition masses in the Emek Yizre'el ('Valley of Jezreel') — the same strategic plain where Deborah and Barak fought Sisera. This is Israel's most vulnerable geographic zone: a broad, flat valley ideal for the nomadic raiders' mobility advantage. The gathering of 'all' the coalition forces signals the scale of the threat that Gideon must face.

34. Ruach YHWH lavshah et Gid'on ('the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon') — a unique verb for Spirit empowerment. Where the Spirit 'came upon' (hayetah al) Othniel (3:10) and will 'rush upon' (tsalach al) Samson (14:6), here the Spirit 'clothed' (lavash) Gideon — wrapping him like a garment. The metaphor suggests total covering: Gideon is enveloped by divine power, worn by the Spirit as much as wearing it. This is the most intimate of the Spirit-empowerment verbs in Judges.

34. The shofar blast and the rallying of the Abiezrite clan (Gideon's own family) is the beginning of the military campaign. The man who destroyed Baal's altar at night in fear now summons troops publicly in daylight — the Spirit's clothing has transformed him.

35. Four tribes respond: Manasseh (Gideon's own), Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. The Song of Deborah rebuked Asher for not joining (5:17); here Asher responds. The gathering of multiple tribes shows a broader coalition than most judge narratives — Gideon's summons reaches beyond his immediate clan to the northern tribal alliance.

36. The fleece test begins. Gideon has already received a theophany (vv. 11-24), divine fire consuming his offering (v. 21), the Spirit's clothing (v. 34), and four tribes responding to his summons. Despite all this, he seeks additional confirmation: im yeshkha moshia be-yadi ('if you are saving through my hand'). The im ('if') after so many confirmations reveals Gideon's persistent uncertainty. The fleece test is not a model of faith but a concession to weakness.

37. Gizzat ha-tsemer ('fleece of wool') — a sheared sheep's fleece. The test is straightforward: an outcome that defies natural probability will confirm divine intent. Dew falling only on the fleece while the surrounding ground remains dry would be a localized miracle. The threshing floor (goren) is an open hilltop area — the same kind of exposed location Gideon avoided when threshing in the winepress (v. 11). His willingness to use the threshing floor now, rather than the winepress, shows some progress in confidence.

38. God grants the sign generously — melo ha-sefel mayim ('a full bowl of water'). The fleece is saturated while the ground is dry. The miracle is conceded without divine commentary or rebuke. God meets Gideon's weakness with patience, not punishment.

39. Al yichar appekha bi ('do not let your anger burn against me') — Gideon knows he is pushing the boundary. His own words reveal consciousness of presumption: akh ha-pa'am ('just this time'), raq ha-pa'am ('only this once'). He reverses the test: now the fleece should be dry while the ground is wet. The reversal is actually a harder test — wool naturally absorbs moisture, so a dry fleece on wet ground defies the material's properties more dramatically.

39. The repetition of sign-requests is Gideon's character trait: he needs constant reassurance. God accommodates this weakness, but the narrative trajectory suggests it is weakness, not exemplary faith.

40. Va-ya'as Elohim ken ('God did so') — divine compliance with Gideon's second request, without rebuke or commentary. God's patience with Gideon's sign-seeking is remarkable and reveals the divine commitment to working through imperfect faith. The chapter ends with Gideon's confirmation complete — he now has no further excuse for hesitation. Chapter 7 will immediately strip away his military assets, making the point that God's sign, not Gideon's army, is the basis for victory.

7

Summary: *God reduces Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 through two tests — fear and drinking posture. The 300 attack the Midianite camp at night with torches, jars, and trumpets. The Midianites panic and destroy each other.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The reduction from 32,000 to 300 is God's deliberate design: 'The people with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for themselves' (v. 2). Military weakness is a theological requirement — victory must be obviously God's, not Israel's. The battle plan is maximally unconventional: no swords, no strategy, just torches inside clay jars, trumpets, and a shout. The shattering of the jars to reveal the light inside may be the chapter's deepest image — the earthen vessel must break for the light to shine.*

Translation Friction: *The water-drinking test (vv. 5-7) — those who lap like dogs vs. those who kneel — has been interpreted as testing alertness, humility, or simply providing an arbitrary selection method. The Hebrew does not explain the criterion's rationale, and we did not import one. The war cry (v. 18) 'a sword for the LORD and for Gideon' (cherev laYHWH uleGid'on) pairs divine and human agency in a single shout.*

Connections: *God's army-reduction principle echoes Deuteronomy 20:8 (sending the afraid home) and anticipates Jonathan's 'nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few' (1 Samuel 14:6). Paul's metaphor of treasure in clay jars (2 Corinthians 4:7) may echo the torch-in-jar image. The Midianite self-destruction parallels the Philistine panic in 1 Samuel 14:20.*

1 Jerubbaal — that is, Gideon — and all the people with him rose early and camped beside the spring of Harod. The Midianite
camp was north of them, below the hill of Moreh in the valley. 2 The LORD said to Gideon, "The people with you are too
many for me to give Midian into their hands — otherwise Israel would claim credit against me, saying, 'My own hand saved
me.' 3 Now announce in the hearing of the people: 'Whoever is afraid and trembling may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'"
Twenty-two thousand of the people turned back, and ten thousand remained. 4 The LORD said to Gideon, "The people are
still too many. Bring them down to the water, and I will refine them for you there. When I tell you, 'This one goes with you,'
he will go with you; and when I tell you, 'This one does not go with you,' he will not go." 5 He brought the people down to the
water. The LORD said to Gideon, "Set apart everyone who laps the water with his tongue the way a dog laps. Do the same
with everyone who kneels down on his knees to drink." 6 The number of those who lapped — bringing their hands to their
mouths — was three hundred men. All the rest of the people knelt on their knees to drink water. 7 The LORD said to Gideon,
"With the three hundred men who lapped, I will save you and give Midian into your hand. Let all the rest of the people go,
each man to his home." 8 The people took provisions and their shofars in hand. He sent all the rest of Israel away, each man
to his tent, but kept the three hundred men. The Midianite camp was below him in the valley. 9 That same night the LORD
said to him, "Get up and go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. 10 But if you are afraid to go down, go
down with your servant Purah to the camp. 11 You will hear what they are saying, and afterward your hands will be
strengthened to go down against the camp." So he went down with his servant Purah to the edge of the armed units stationed
in the camp. 12 Midian, Amalek, and all the people of the east were spread across the valley like locusts in number, and their
camels were beyond counting, like the sand on the seashore. 13 When Gideon arrived, a man was telling his companion a
dream. He said, "Listen — I had a dream: a round loaf of barley bread came rolling into the Midianite camp. It struck a tent,
and the tent collapsed — it flipped upside down and fell flat." 14 His companion answered, "This can only be the sword of
Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given Midian and the entire camp into his hand." 15 When Gideon heard the
account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship. Then he returned to the Israelite camp and said, "Get up!
The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hand." 16 He divided the three hundred men into three companies and
placed shofars in every man's hand, along with empty jars and torches inside the jars. 17 He said to them, "Watch me and do
as I do. When I reach the edge of the camp, whatever I do, you do the same. 18 When I and those with me blow the shofar,
then you also blow your shofars all around the camp and shout, 'A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!'" 19 Gideon and the

hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after the guard had been changed. They blew the shofars and shattered the jars that were in their hands. 20All three companies blew their shofars and smashed their jars. They held the torches in their left hands and the shofars in their right hands for blowing, and they shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" 21Each man stood in his position around the camp. The entire Midianite camp broke into a run — they screamed and fled. 22The three hundred kept blowing their shofars, and the LORD turned every man's sword against his companion throughout the entire camp. The camp fled toward Beth-shittah in the direction of Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah near Tabbath. 23The men of Israel were called out from Naphtali, Asher, and all of Manasseh, and they pursued Midian. 24Gideon sent messengers throughout the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down to intercept Midian — seize the water crossings as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan." All the men of Ephraim rallied and seized the water crossings as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan. 25They captured two Midianite commanders, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the Rock of Oreb and Zeeb at the Winepress of Zeeb. They continued pursuing Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the far side of the Jordan.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The narrator identifies Gideon by his altar name Yerubba'al ('let Baal contend,' from 6:32), connecting the battle narrative back to Gideon's confrontation with Baal worship. Ein Charod ('spring of trembling') — the name is significant: charod means 'trembling, fear,' foreshadowing the fear test that will thin Gideon's army (v. 3). Giv'at ha-Moreh ('hill of the teacher/instructor') places the Midianite encampment in the Jezreel Valley, one of the most strategically important corridors in Canaan.

2. Rav ha-am ('the people are too many') — God's opening statement reverses all military logic. A commander wants more soldiers; God demands fewer. The reason is theological, not tactical: pen yitpa'er alai Yisra'el ('lest Israel glorify themselves against me'). The verb pa'ar in the hitpael means 'to boast, to glorify oneself, to claim credit.' God will not share the glory of deliverance with human military strength. The phrase yadi hoshi'ah li ('my hand saved me') is precisely the claim God intends to prevent — self-salvation is idolatry of the self.

3. Mi yare ve-chared ('whoever is afraid and trembling') — this first test echoes Deuteronomy 20:8, which commands that the fearful be sent home before battle so they do not demoralize their comrades. But here the purpose is different: God is not protecting morale but reducing numbers. The verb tsaphar ('to depart early, to go swiftly') is rare — some read it as 'to turn' or 'to go around' from Har ha-Gil'ad (though Gilead is east of the Jordan; some scholars suggest a local Gilead near the Jezreel Valley or emend to Gilboa). The result is staggering: two-thirds of the army departs. From 32,000 to 10,000 — and God is not yet satisfied.

4. Od ha-am rav ('the people are still too many') — even 10,000 is too large for God's purpose. The verb etsrefennu ('I will refine/test them') comes from tsaraf, a metallurgical term meaning 'to smelt, to refine, to purify' — the same verb used for testing gold or silver by fire (Psalm 12:7, Zechariah 13:9). God is smelting Gideon's army: the water test is a crucible that separates the chosen from the rest. The selection criteria remain entirely in God's hands — Gideon does not choose; he only sorts according to God's verdict.

5. Yaloq bi-leshono min ha-mayim ka'asher yaloq ha-kelev ('laps with his tongue from the water as a dog laps') — the verb laqaq means to lap like an animal, scooping water with the tongue. The comparison to a dog (kelev) is deliberately demeaning in Israelite culture, where dogs were scavengers, not pets. Those who lap water from their hands while standing remain alert; those who kneel with their faces to the water are vulnerable. Many interpreters see military readiness in the distinction, but the text never explains why the lappers are chosen — God's criteria remain His own.

6. Shelosh me'ot ish ('three hundred men') — from 32,000 to 300: a reduction of over 99%. The odds are now roughly 450-to-1 against Israel (the Midianite coalition is described as innumerable in verse 12). The detail be-yadam el pihem ('with their hand to their mouth') clarifies the lapping technique: the 300 did not put their faces to the water but scooped water in their hands and lapped from their cupped palms. This is the selection criterion, but the text emphasizes that the number — not the method — is what matters. Three hundred is deliberately inadequate for conventional warfare.

7. Oshi'a etkhem ('I will save you') — the emphatic first person: I will save. Not 'you will fight and win' but 'I will deliver.' The verb yasha ('to save, deliver, rescue') is the theological center of the chapter. God claims the saving act entirely for Himself. The 300 are the instrument, not the cause. Ve-natatti et Midyan be-yadekha ('and I will give Midian into your hand') — the giving is God's; the hand is Gideon's. God does the giving; Gideon receives.

8. Tsedah ('provisions, food') and shoferoteihem ('their shofars, ram's horn trumpets') — the 300 carry food and shofars, not swords. The weaponry is liturgical, not military: shofars are instruments of worship, assembly, and divine announcement, not tools of combat. This is the first hint that the 'battle' will be won by noise and divine panic, not by human fighting. The positioning — Gideon above, Midian below in the valley (ba-emeq) — gives the 300 the high ground, but with 300 men the tactical advantage is negligible against a vast army.

9. Ki netattiv be-yadekha ('for I have given it into your hand') — the perfect tense (netatti, 'I have given') treats the victory as already accomplished before the battle begins. In God's declaration, the outcome is settled; only the execution remains. This prophetic perfect — speaking of the future as if it has already happened — is a characteristic of divine speech throughout the Hebrew Bible. What God has decreed is as good as done.

10. Ve-im yare attah laredet ('but if you are afraid to go down') — God knows Gideon's character. After the fleece tests, the midnight commission, and every prior hesitation, God still accommodates Gideon's fear. The conditional im yare ('if you are afraid') is a concession, not a rebuke. Purah (the name may mean 'branch' or 'foliage') is Gideon's na'ar ('servant, attendant, armor-bearer'). God sends Gideon on a reconnaissance mission — not to gather intelligence for battle planning, but to overhear something that will strengthen his faith.

11. Ve-achar techezeqnah yadekha ('and afterward your hands will be strengthened') — the promise is specific: what Gideon overhears will give him courage. God orchestrates the conversation Gideon will stumble upon. The chamushim ('armed men, battle formations, organized units') at the camp's edge are the Midianite sentries or forward positions. Gideon creeps to the perimeter of an enemy army that outnumbers him hundreds to one — a moment of raw vulnerability that requires whatever courage he can muster.

12. Ka-arbeh la-rov ('like locusts in multitude') — the locust simile repeats from 6:5, reinforcing the overwhelming scale of the threat. The narrator uses two similes of incalculability: the enemy forces are like locusts (arbeh), their camels like sand on the seashore (ka-chol she-al sefat ha-yam). The sand simile is typically reserved for God's promises to the patriarchs (Genesis 22:17, 32:13) — here it describes the enemy, creating a disturbing inversion. What God promised Abraham in blessing, Israel now faces as threat. The visual contrast between 300 Israelites above and this locust-swarm below is the chapter's central dramatic image.

13. Tselil lechem se'orim ('a round cake of barley bread') — the word tselil is rare, possibly meaning 'round, rolling, tumbling.' Barley bread was the food of the poor; wheat bread was the grain of the wealthy. A barley loaf representing Gideon — a farmer from the weakest clan of Manasseh (6:15) — is fitting. The dream's action is violent: the bread strikes (va-yakkeihu) the tent, causes it to fall (va-yippol), flips it over (va-yahafkeihu le-ma'elah), and the tent collapses flat (ve-nafal ha-ohel). A loaf of cheap bread demolishes a military tent — the absurdity of the image is the theological point. God uses the weak to overthrow the strong.

14. Ein zot bilti im cherev Gid'on ('this is nothing other than the sword of Gideon') — the interpretation is remarkable: a barley loaf is decoded as a sword (cherev). The leap from bread to blade reveals how deeply fear has penetrated the Midianite camp. Gideon's reputation — or God's terror — has preceded him. The Midianite soldier's interpretation contains an unwitting prophecy: natan ha-Elohim be-yado ('God has given into his hand'). A pagan soldier attributes the coming defeat to Israel's God, echoing the very words God spoke to Gideon in verse 9. Even the enemy knows the victory is divine.

15. Va-yishtachu ('he bowed in worship') — Gideon's first response is not tactical planning but worship. The verb shachah means to prostrate oneself, to bow down in reverence. This is a turning point: the man who required fleece tests, signs, and divine patience now responds with immediate, unreserved worship upon hearing a Midianite soldier's dream. What five direct divine encounters could not fully accomplish, an overheard enemy conversation achieves — Gideon believes. His command to the troops mirrors God's own language: natan YHWH be-yedkhem ('the LORD has given into your hand'). Gideon speaks God's words back to the people.

16. Sheloshah rashim ('three companies' — literally 'three heads') — the tactical division into three groups allows a surrounding approach. The equipment list is extraordinary: shofarot (ram's horn trumpets), kaddim reqim ('empty jars' — clay pots), and lappidim ('torches, flames') hidden inside the jars. No swords, no spears, no shields. Every hand holds an instrument of noise and light, not violence. The torches concealed in clay jars is tactically brilliant — the jars hide the light until the moment of coordinated reveal, creating the illusion of a massive army appearing simultaneously from all sides.

17. Mimmenni tir'u ve-khen ta'asu ('watch me and do likewise') — Gideon leads by example, not merely by command. The instruction is simple: observe and imitate. The transformed Gideon now takes the forward position — be-qetseh ha-machaneh ('at the edge of the camp') — the most dangerous location. The fearful farmer of chapter 6 who threshed in hiding now volunteers for the front line. The Spirit's clothing (6:34) and the overheard dream (v. 13-14) have completed his transformation.

18. La-YHWH u-le-Gid'on ('for the LORD and for Gideon') — the battle cry as given here in verse 18 is shorter than the form in verse 20: cherev la-YHWH u-le-Gid'on ('a sword for the LORD and for Gideon'). The KJV supplies 'the sword of' in verse 18, following the longer form of verse 20. The cry pairs YHWH and Gideon — the divine and human agents — but the order is significant: God's name comes first. The shofar blast from three sides simultaneously would create the acoustic impression of an enormous army. Three hundred shofars in the dark, echoing off the valley walls, would sound like thousands.

19. Rosh ha-ashmoret ha-tikkonah ('the beginning of the middle watch') — the Israelite night was divided into three watches. The middle watch began around 10 PM. The timing is precise: akh haqem heqimu et ha-shomerim ('they had just set the watch') — the new sentries were freshly posted, still adjusting to the dark, at their least alert. The coordination required is remarkable: three companies of 100 men each must arrive simultaneously at different points around the camp's perimeter and act in unison. The shattering of the jars (nafots ha-kaddim) would produce a sudden, startling crash from every direction.

20. The full battle cry now appears: cherev la-YHWH u-le-Gid'on ('a sword for the LORD and for Gideon'). The physical choreography is vivid: left hands hold blazing torches (lappidim), right hands hold shofars (shofarot) to their mouths. Both hands are occupied — there is literally no hand free to hold a weapon. The 300 are simultaneously trumpeters, torch-bearers, and war-criers. They are not fighters; they are instruments of psychological warfare orchestrated by God. The simultaneous crash of 300 clay jars, the sudden blaze of 300 torches, the blast of 300 shofars, and the unified war cry from three directions would create the sensory impression of a massive army attacking from all sides.

21. Va-ya'amdu ish tachtav ('each man stood in his place') — the 300 do not charge. They stand still. The Hebrew emphasizes static positioning: they hold ground while the enemy disintegrates. The response of the Midianite camp is triple: va-yarots ('they ran'), va-yari'u ('they screamed/cried out'), va-yanusu ('they fled'). Three verbs of panic in rapid succession — running, screaming, fleeing — describe total psychological collapse. The 300 never

draw a weapon; they never take a step forward. The battle is won by standing still while God shatters the enemy's nerve.

22. Va-yasem YHWH et cherev ish be-re'eihu ('the LORD set each man's sword against his companion') — this is the decisive theological statement: the LORD (YHWH) is the active agent. God turns the Midianite army against itself. In the dark, panicked, surrounded by noise and fire from every direction, the Midianite soldiers cannot distinguish friend from enemy and begin killing each other. The 'sword' (cherev) in this verse is real — the Midianites' own swords — unlike the metaphorical 'sword' in the battle cry. The irony is precise: the only swords drawn in this battle belong to the enemy, turned against themselves by God.

22. The flight path — Beth-shittah, Zererah, Abel-meholah, Tabbath — traces a southeastern retreat toward the Jordan crossing, away from the Jezreel Valley and toward the Transjordan desert from which the Midianites came.

23. Va-yitsa'eq ish Yisra'el ('the men of Israel were called out/rallied') — the same three tribes plus Manasseh that responded to Gideon's initial summons in 6:35 (with Zebulun absent here). The 9,700 men sent home earlier (plus others) are now recalled for the pursuit phase. The irony is deliberate: the reduced army of 300 wins the battle; the full tribal muster handles the cleanup. God wanted no confusion about who won — but He allows human effort in the pursuit. The battle belongs to God; the chase belongs to Israel.

24. Gideon's strategic thinking emerges in the pursuit: he summons Ephraim — a powerful tribe not part of the original coalition — to cut off the Midianite escape route at the Jordan fords. Likhedu lahem et ha-mayim ('seize the water crossings for them') — controlling the river fords traps the fleeing enemy east of the Jordan. Beth-barah ('house of the ford/crossing') was likely a strategic crossing point. Ephraim's involvement here sets up the inter-tribal conflict in 8:1-3, where the Ephraimites will angrily confront Gideon for not summoning them earlier.

25. Shenei sarei Midyan ('two commanders/princes of Midian') — Orev and Ze'ev. The names are vivid: Orev means 'raven' and Ze'ev means 'wolf' — predator names for predatory leaders. The execution sites become named landmarks: Tsur Orev ('Rock of the Raven') and Yeqev Ze'ev ('Winepress of the Wolf'). The winepress detail creates a narrative echo: Gideon was first found hiding in a winepress (6:11); now a Midianite commander dies in one. The oppressor's end mirrors the deliverer's beginning.

25. The heads brought to Gideon me-ever la-Yarden ('from across the Jordan') indicate Gideon has crossed the Jordan in pursuit — a campaign that will continue in chapter 8. The Ephraimites' independent capture of enemy commanders demonstrates effective military action but also sets the stage for tribal jealousy (8:1).

8

> **Summary:** *Gideon pursues the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna across the Jordan, rebukes Succoth and Penuel for refusing provisions, captures and executes the kings, and refuses the offer of kingship — but makes an ephod that becomes an idolatrous snare.*
>
> **What Makes This Remarkable:** *Gideon's refusal of kingship (v. 23) — 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you' — is the book's most explicit anti-monarchical statement. But immediately after, he requests gold earrings and makes an ephod that 'all Israel prostituted themselves after' (v. 27). The deliverer becomes the stumbling block. The verb zanah (v. 27, 'played the prostitute') uses the same word as the judges-cycle framework in 2:17.*
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> **Translation Friction:** *The phrase chesed (v. 35, 'loyal faithfulness') departs from the default rendering 'faithful love' because the context describes Israel's failure toward Gideon's household — human-to-human political loyalty rather than divine covenant. This departure is documented. The ephod's nature (v. 27) is debated: was it a priestly garment, an idol, or an oracular device? The text does not specify, and we rendered it as the Hebrew gives it.*
>
> **Connections:** *Gideon's ephod anticipates Micah's idol and Levite in chapters 17-18. The refusal of kingship contrasts with Abimelech's seizure of it in chapter 9 and anticipates the monarchy debate of 1 Samuel 8. The Succoth/Penuel episode echoes the punishment of communities that refuse aid to covenant partners. The seventy sons (v. 30) set up the mass murder of chapter 9.*

1The men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this you have done to us — not calling us when you went to fight Midian?" They confronted him aggressively. 2He said to them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the full harvest of Abiezer? 3God gave the princes of Midian — Oreb and Zeeb — into your hand. What was I able to do compared to you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said this. 4Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over — he and the three hundred men with him, exhausted but still pursuing. 5He said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the troops following me, because they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and

Zalmunna, kings of Midian." 6The leaders of Succoth replied, "Are the fists of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your grip, that we should give bread to your army?" 7Gideon said, "Very well — when the LORD gives Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will thresh your flesh with desert thorns and briers." 8He went up from there to Penuel and made the same request. The men of Penuel answered him the same way the men of Succoth had answered. 9He also said to the men of Penuel, "When I return safely, I will tear down this tower." 10Zebah and Zalmunna were at Karkor with their camp — about fifteen thousand men, all that remained of the entire army of the eastern peoples. One hundred and twenty thousand sword-bearing men had already fallen. 11Gideon went up by the route of the tent-dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and struck the camp while it felt secure. 12Zebah and Zalmunna fled, but he pursued and captured the two kings of Midian — Zebah and Zalmunna — and threw the entire camp into panic. 13Gideon son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. 14He captured a young man from the people of Succoth and interrogated him. The young man wrote down for him the names of the officials and elders of Succoth — seventy-seven men. 15He came to the men of Succoth and said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you mocked me, saying, 'Are the fists of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your grip, that we should give bread to your exhausted men?'" 16He seized the elders of the city, along with desert thorns and briers, and with them he disciplined the men of Succoth. 17He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city. 18Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What about the men you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "They were like you — every one of them had the bearing of a king's son." 19He said, "They were my brothers — sons of my own mother. As the LORD lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you." 20He said to Jether his firstborn, "Get up — kill them." But the boy did not draw his sword because he was afraid, for he was still young. 21Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise and strike us yourself — for a man's strength matches his stature." So Gideon rose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments from the necks of their camels. 22The men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us — you, your son, and your grandson — because you have saved us from the hand of Midian." 23Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." 24Then Gideon said to them, "Let me make one request of you — each of you give me an earring from his spoil." (The defeated had gold earrings because they were Ishmaelites.) 25They said, "We will gladly give them." They spread out a garment, and each man threw in an earring from his spoil. 26The weight of the gold earrings he requested came to one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold — in addition to the crescent ornaments, the pendants, the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and the chains on their camels' necks. 27Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, in Ophrah. All Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his household. 28So Midian was subdued before the Israelites and never raised its head again. The land had rest for forty years during the lifetime of Gideon. 29Jerubbaal son of Joash went and settled in his own house. 30Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, because he had many wives. 31His concubine in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. 32Gid eon son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. 33As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites turned back and prostituted themselves to the Baals. They made Baal-berith their god. 34The Israelites did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side. 35 They did not show loyal faithfulness to the household of Jerubbaal — that is, Gideon — in return for all the good he had done for Israel.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Va-yarivu itto be-chozqah ('they quarreled with him with force/sharply') — the verb riv is a legal term for formal dispute or lawsuit, and chozqah ('strength, force') intensifies the confrontation. Ephraim's complaint is essentially a claim of violated tribal honor — they are the dominant tribe of the central hill country and expect to be summoned for any major military action. This inter-tribal friction anticipates the deeper fractures that will dominate the later chapters of Judges.

2. Gideon's response is a masterclass in diplomatic de-escalation. The metaphor compares olelot ('gleanings' — the grapes left after the main harvest) to batsir ('vintage' — the primary harvest). Gideon is saying: what Ephraim accomplished as an afterthought surpasses what my own clan Abiezer accomplished as its main effort. The rhetorical strategy elevates Ephraim's secondary role above Gideon's primary role. This is strategic humility — Gideon understands that tribal pride, if left unchecked, can fracture the coalition.

3. Raftah rucham me'alav ('their spirit/anger relaxed from upon him') — the verb rafah ('to relax, slacken, weaken') describes the tension draining away. Gideon credits Ephraim with the capture of the Midianite princes Oreb ('raven') and Zeeb ('wolf') — names that ironically cast the Midianite commanders as predatory animals. Gideon's diplomacy works: anger defused by deference. This stands in sharp contrast to Jephthah's handling of the identical Ephraimite complaint in 12:1-6, which ends in civil war and 42,000 dead.

4. Ayefim ve-rodefim ('exhausted yet pursuing') — one of the most memorable phrases in Judges. The participial pair captures the paradox of Gideon's pursuit: physical depletion combined with relentless determination. Three hundred men — the same reduced force from God's selection in chapter 7 — now chase an army across the Jordan into Transjordan territory. The pursuit has moved from the surprise night attack in the Jezreel Valley to a long-distance chase eastward.

5. Succoth (sukkot, 'booths') is a Transjordanian city in the Jordan Valley near the Jabbok River (Genesis 33:17). Gideon's request for kikkerot lechem ('loaves/rounds of bread') is a basic military provision request — his men have been fighting and marching without food. Zebah (zevach, possibly 'sacrifice' or 'slaughter') and Zalmunna (tsalmunna, possibly 'shadow/protection withheld') are named as malkei Midyan ('kings of Midian'), a higher rank than the 'princes' Oreb and Zeeb captured by Ephraim.

6. Ha-khaf Zevach ve-Tsalmunna attah be-yadekha ('Is the palm/fist of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand?') — Succoth's leaders demand proof of victory before committing resources. Their refusal is a calculated bet: if Gideon fails, they will face Midianite retaliation for aiding his pursuit. The word kaf ('palm, fist') makes the question visceral — have you physically seized them yet? It is practical cowardice disguised as pragmatism. Succoth hedges against the possibility that Gideon will lose.

7. Ve-dashti et besarkhem ('I will thresh your flesh') — the verb dush ('to thresh') is agricultural language applied to human bodies. Threshing separates grain from chaff by dragging weighted boards studded with stones across the harvest floor; Gideon will drag thorn-studded implements across human flesh. The qotsei ha-midbar ('thorns of the wilderness/desert') and barqanim ('briers, thorn-bushes') are instruments of punishment. This is not idle threat — Gideon will fulfill it in verse 16. The vow reveals a vindictive edge beneath Gideon's earlier diplomacy.

8. Penuel (penu'el, 'face of God') is the site where Jacob wrestled with the angel (Genesis 32:30-31). The city's refusal parallels Succoth's — both Transjordanian towns hedge their bets against Gideon's success. The narrator's compression (ka-asher anu anshei Sukkot — 'as the men of Succoth answered') signals that the response is identical and equally contemptible. The doubling of the refusal amplifies both the offense and the coming retribution.

9. Be-shuvi ve-shalom ('when I return in peace/safely') — Gideon's confidence is absolute. He does not say 'if' but 'when.' The migdal ('tower') was Penuel's fortified structure — its military stronghold and civic pride. Gideon's threat targets the symbol of their security: if they will not support Israel's cause, they will lose the very structure they are trying to protect by hedging. The threat is fulfilled in verse 17.

10. The scale is staggering: me'ah ve-esrim elef ish sholef charev ('120,000 men drawing sword') have already been killed, leaving only 15,000. Karkor is deep in Transjordan, showing how far east the Midianite retreat has gone. The numbers follow the hyperbolic conventions of ancient Near Eastern battle accounts — the theological point is that God's 300 routed an army of 135,000. The phrase benei qedem ('sons of the east') is the umbrella term for the eastern desert coalition.

11. Derekh ha-shokhnei ba-ohalim ('the route of the tent-dwellers') — Gideon uses the nomadic caravan trails to approach the enemy camp from an unexpected direction. The camp was betach ('secure, unsuspecting') — the same word used of Laish in 18:7 and 18:27. They assumed Gideon's exhausted 300 could not reach them this far east. The surprise attack mirrors the night assault of chapter 7, confirming Gideon's tactical ability.

12. Ve-khol ha-machaneh hecherid ('he terrified/threw into panic the entire camp') — the verb charad ('to tremble, to be terrified') in the Hiphil means 'to cause terror.' The same root described the Midianite camp's terror in 7:21. The full-circle irony: the army that once terrorized Israel now experiences charadah itself. The capture of both kings alive is significant — Gideon has specific business with them (vv. 18-21).

13. Milma'aleh ha-Chares ('from the ascent of Heres') — the meaning is debated. Cheres can mean 'sun' (a variant of shemesh) or may be a place name. If 'ascent of the sun,' it may indicate Gideon returned before sunrise (i.e., at night, as in his original attack). If a geographic location, it identifies the pass through which he re-entered Israelite territory. The ambiguity is ancient; the KJV renders it temporally ('before the sun was up') while most modern translations treat it as a place name.

14. Va-yikhtov elav ('he wrote for him') — the young man (na'ar) is literate, which is a notable detail suggesting widespread literacy in this period, at least in urban centers. The fact that a random na'ar can write indicates that writing was not limited to scribal elites. The seventy-seven officials (sarei Sukkot ve-et zeqeneiha — 'princes/officials of Succoth and its elders') represents a substantial leadership body for a single town. Gideon systematically identifies every leader who refused him.

15. Asher cheraftem oti ('about whom you taunted/reproached me') — the verb charaf ('to reproach, to mock, to taunt') is the same word used when Goliath 'defied' Israel (1 Samuel 17:10). Gideon quotes their own words back to them — the rhetorical device of returning someone's mockery is a powerful form of vindication. He presents the captive kings as living evidence that their cynicism was wrong. Succoth bet against God's deliverer and lost.

16. Va-yoda bahem et anshei Sukkot ('he taught/made known to them the men of Succoth') — the verb yada ('to know') in the Hiphil means 'to make known, to teach, to cause to experience.' The use of 'teach' for a brutal punishment is grimly ironic: the lesson is inscribed in flesh. Some manuscripts and versions read va-yadash ('he threshed'), which would directly fulfill the threat of verse 7. Either reading indicates severe corporal punishment using thorn-covered implements dragged across the body.

17. Penuel receives harsher punishment than Succoth: not just corporal punishment but execution (va-yaharog et anshei ha-ir — 'he killed the men of the city') and demolition of their tower (natats, 'to tear down, demolish'). The escalation is unexplained — perhaps Penuel's refusal was more defiant, or the tower represented active military resistance. Gideon's violence against Israelite cities is troubling: the deliverer is beginning to act like a king enforcing his will on his own people.

18. Kamokha kamohem ('like you, like them') — the Midianite kings recognize a family resemblance. Their description ke-to'ar benei ha-melekh ('like the appearance/form of the sons of a king') is either genuine praise or an attempt at flattery to save their lives. The word to'ar ('form, appearance, stature') describes physical bearing and nobility. The men killed at Tabor (Mount Tabor, the site associated with Deborah's battle in ch. 4) were Gideon's blood brothers — this transforms the pursuit from military duty into blood vengeance.

19. Achai benei immi hem ('they were my brothers, sons of my mother') — in a polygamous society, full brothers (same mother) share the closest bond. Gideon specifies benei immi ('sons of my mother') to emphasize the intimacy of the relationship. The oath chai YHWH ('as the LORD lives') invokes God as witness to the conditional: lu hachitem otam ('if you had kept them alive'). The implication is that Gideon's pursuit was always partly personal — he was not only acting as Israel's deliverer but as a blood avenger (go'el ha-dam). The dual motivation complicates the narrative's moral texture.

20. Gideon assigns the execution to Yeter bekhoro ('Jether his firstborn') — a culturally significant act. Having the eldest son perform the execution establishes the family's blood claim and initiates the boy into warrior status. But the na'ar ('boy, youth') is too young and afraid (ki yare — 'because he feared'). The word odenu na'ar ('he was still a youth') echoes Gideon's own initial fear and inadequacy. The scene is poignant: Gideon thrusts his son into a role the boy cannot fill.

21. Ki kha-ish gevurato ('for as the man, so is his strength') — a proverbial saying meaning that being killed by a warrior is more honorable than being killed by a boy. The Midianite kings prefer death at the hands of a proven fighter. Gideon complies and takes the saharonim ('crescent-shaped ornaments, moon pendants') from their camels' necks. These crescents are associated with lunar worship common among Arabian peoples; their reappearance in verse 26 connects to the larger theme of pagan religious objects that Gideon accumulates rather than destroys.

22. Meshol banu gam attah gam binkha gam ben binkha ('rule over us — you, your son, your son's son') — this is an explicit offer of hereditary monarchy, a dynastic kingship. The verb mashal ('to rule, to govern') is the standard term for political sovereignty. The threefold generational scope (you, son, grandson) constitutes a dynasty. The justification — ki hosha'tanu ('because you saved us') — locates kingship's legitimacy in military deliverance. This is the first explicit attempt to establish monarchy in Israel, predating the request to Samuel in 1 Samuel 8.

23. YHWH yimshol bakhem ('the LORD will rule over you') — Gideon's refusal is the theologically correct answer: Israel's king is YHWH. The triple use of mashal (lo emshol ani / lo yimshol beni / YHWH yimshol) creates a powerful rhetorical structure: human rule denied twice, divine rule affirmed once. This statement articulates the ideal of theocracy — direct divine rule without human intermediary. The tragic irony is that Gideon's subsequent actions (the ephod, the seventy sons, the concubine named Abimelech — 'my father is king') systematically contradict this noble declaration.

24. The pivot from refusal to request is immediate and jarring. Gideon has just declined the kingship but now asks for nezem shelalo ('an earring from his spoil') from every soldier. The narrator explains: kismei zahav lahem ki Yishme'elim hem ('they had gold earrings because they were Ishmaelites'). Ishmaelites and Midianites are used interchangeably here, as in the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37:25-28). Gold earrings were characteristic markers of the Arabian desert peoples. The request seems modest, but the aggregate will prove enormous — and its use devastating.

25. Naton nitten ('giving we will give' — we will gladly/certainly give) — the infinitive absolute construction expresses wholehearted willingness. The simlah ('garment, cloak') spread on the ground as a collection surface becomes a visual symbol: the people eagerly contributing to what will become their own spiritual downfall. The scene parallels the golden calf narrative in Exodus 32:2-3, where Aaron asks for gold earrings and the people eagerly comply. The literary echo is almost certainly intentional.

26. Elef u-sheva me'ot zahav ('1,700 gold') — approximately 43 pounds (19.5 kg) of gold, a staggering amount. The inventory of additional items — saharonim ('crescent ornaments'), netifot ('pendants, drops'), bigdei ha-argaman ('purple garments' — royal attire), and anaqot ('chains, necklaces') — reads like a royal treasury. Purple (argaman) was the most expensive dye in the ancient world, extracted from murex snails. That Gideon accumulates these royal and cultic objects while refusing the royal title is the chapter's central irony.

27. Va-ya'as oto Gid'on le-efod ('Gideon made it into an ephod') — the ephod was originally a priestly garment (Exodus 28:6-14) associated with seeking divine oracles. What Gideon constructs from this mass of gold is likely a free-standing cultic object, not a wearable garment. Va-yiznu khol Yisra'el acharav ('all Israel prostituted themselves after it') — the verb zanah ('to prostitute, to commit sexual infidelity') is the standard prophetic metaphor for idolatry: Israel's covenant with YHWH is a marriage, and worship of other objects is adultery. The ephod becomes a moqesh ('snare, trap') — the same word used for the forbidden Canaanite altars in 2:3.

27. The theological irony is devastating: the man who tore down his father's Baal altar (6:25-27) and refused the crown (8:23) creates a new idol. The deliverer becomes the source of a new apostasy. Gideon's ephod does not replace YHWH worship explicitly — it is a YHWH-associated object — but its independent cultic status makes it functionally idolatrous. This is the subtler form of covenant violation: not worshipping a foreign god but distorting the worship of the true God.

28. Va-yikkana Midyan ('Midian was subdued/humbled') — the verb kana ('to humble, to subdue, to bring low') is a comprehensive term for total defeat. Lo yasfu la-se't rosham ('they did not again lift their head') — a vivid idiom for permanent subjugation; a defeated people who cannot even look up. The forty years of rest (va-yishqot ha-arets arba'im shanah) is the standard generation of peace in the Judges cycle. The phrase bimei Gid'on ('in the days of Gideon') ominously limits the peace to his lifetime — what follows his death is already foreshadowed.

29. The narrator pointedly uses the name Yerubba'al ('let Baal contend'), the name Gideon earned by tearing down Baal's altar (6:32). The use of this name in the closing summary creates an ironic frame: the man named for opposing Baal now lives with the ephod he created. Va-yeshev be-veito ('he settled in his house') suggests the life of a landed patriarch — a man of substance and property who, despite refusing the crown, lives like a king.

30. Shiv'im banim yotse'ei yerekho ('seventy sons going out of his thigh/loins') — the phrase is biological and emphatic: these are his own biological sons. Seventy is a conventional number for a large ruling family (cf. Ahab's seventy sons in 2 Kings 10:1). Nashim rabbot hayu lo ('he had many wives') — the multiplication of wives is a characteristic of kingship in the ancient Near East and explicitly warned against in the 'law of the king' (Deuteronomy 17:17). Gideon refused the title of king but adopted every practice of one.

31. Pilagsho asher bi-Shekhem ('his concubine who was in Shechem') — the pilegesh ('concubine') was a secondary wife with lower legal status. That she resides in Shechem rather than Ophrah indicates a separate household and a connection to the major Canaanite city. The name Avimelekh ('my father is king') is devastatingly ironic: the man who said 'I will not rule over you' names his son 'my father is king.' Whether the name reflects Gideon's hidden ambition or the mother's aspirations, it directly contradicts verse 23. Shechem, the city of Abimelech's mother, will become the stage for the horrific events of chapter 9.

32. Be-seivah tovah ('in a good old age') — the same phrase used of Abraham's death (Genesis 25:8). It denotes a full, complete life concluded with honor. Gideon receives a patriarch's death notice — burial in the family tomb (qever Yo'ash aviv), in his ancestral territory of Ophrah. The dignity of his death contrasts sharply with the catastrophe that immediately follows it. The notice that he is buried with his father closes the family frame opened in 6:11 when Gideon was introduced as the son of Joash.

33. Va-yashuvu benei Yisra'el va-yiznu acharei ha-Be'alim ('the Israelites turned back and prostituted themselves after the Baals') — the verb zanah ('to prostitute') appears again, connecting Israel's post-Gideon apostasy to the ephod-worship of verse 27. The cycle is immediate: ka-asher met Gid'on ('as soon as Gideon died'). There is no gap, no gradual decline — the apostasy is instantaneous. Ba'al Berit ('Lord of the Covenant') is a Canaanite deity worshipped at Shechem (cf. 9:4, 46). The name is a devastating parody: Israel abandons the God of the true covenant (berit) for a pagan deity who steals the covenant title.

34. Lo zakheru ('they did not remember') — the verb zakhar ('to remember') in Hebrew is not merely cognitive recall but active loyalty. To 'remember' God is to honor the covenant relationship, to act on the basis of what God has done. Failure to remember is not forgetfulness but abandonment. Ha-matsil otam ('the one who rescued them') uses the Hiphil participle of natsal — God is characterized as the one whose defining activity is deliverance. Israel forgets the Deliverer even as they enjoy the deliverance.

35. Lo asu chesed im beit Yerubba'al ('they did not do chesed with the house of Jerubbaal') — chesed here operates at the human-to-human level: the obligation of loyalty and reciprocal faithfulness owed to a benefactor and his family. Israel's failure is twofold: they forgot God (v. 34) and they abandoned the family of God's agent (v. 35). The phrase ke-khol ha-tovah asher asah im Yisra'el ('according to all the good he did with Israel') measures the ingratitude — Gideon's service was comprehensive (kol, 'all'), but Israel's response was nothing. This sets up chapter 9: the ungrateful nation will stand by as Abimelech slaughters Gideon's seventy sons.

35. Register departure: chesed rendered as 'loyal faithfulness' rather than default 'faithful love' because here chesed describes Israel's failure toward Gideon's household — human-to-human covenant loyalty in a political context rather than divine-human covenant.

9

Summary: *Abimelech, Gideon's son by a Shechemite concubine, murders his seventy brothers on a single stone and makes himself king at Shechem. Jotham's fable of the trees warns against him. Shechem rebels, and Abimelech destroys the city before being killed by a millstone dropped by a woman.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Jotham's fable (vv. 7-15) is the only true parable in the Hebrew Bible before the prophets. The trees ask the olive, fig, and vine to be king — each refuses because productive trees have better things to do. Only the thornbush (atad) accepts — worthless, combustible, offering shade it cannot actually provide. The political theology is devastating: the bramble-king will burn the cedars of Lebanon. Abimelech's death by a woman's hand (v. 53) echoes Sisera's and previews a pattern: those who seize power by violence die in humiliation.*

Translation Friction: *The word ba'al berit (v. 4, 'Baal of the Covenant' or 'Lord of the Covenant') is the name of Shechem's deity — the irony of a 'covenant god' presiding over covenant betrayal is sharp. We transliterated the divine name and noted the irony. The mass fratricide 'on a single stone' (v. 5, al even achat) suggests a ritual or political execution, not random violence.*

Connections: *Shechem's prominence connects to Genesis 34 (the Dinah incident), Joshua 24 (the covenant renewal), and the future division of the kingdom. Jotham's fable anticipates Nathan's parable to David (2 Samuel 12). The phrase 'God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech' (v. 56) fulfills Jotham's curse exactly. The lone survivor Jotham echoes David as the lone survivor of Saul's purges.*

1 Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to his mother's relatives, and spoke to them and to the entire clan of his
mother's father's household, saying, 2 "Speak in the hearing of all the citizens of Shechem: 'Which is better for you — to be
ruled by seventy men, all of Jerubbaal's sons, or to be ruled by one man?' And remember that I am your own flesh and
blood." 3 His mother's relatives spoke on his behalf in the hearing of all the citizens of Shechem, repeating all these words.
Their hearts turned toward Abimelech, because they said, "He is our kinsman." 4 They gave him seventy pieces of silver from
the temple of Baal-Berith. With it, Abimelech hired reckless and worthless men, and they followed him. 5 He went to his
father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubbaal — seventy men — on a single stone. But Jotham, the
youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived because he hid himself. 6 All the citizens of Shechem and the entire house of Millo
assembled. They went and made Abimelech king beside the oak of the pillar that was in Shechem.

7 When they told Jotham, he went and stood on the summit of Mount Gerizim. He raised his voice and called
out to them:

"Listen to me, citizens of Shechem,
so that God may listen to you!"

8 "The trees once set out
to anoint a king over themselves.
They said to the olive tree,
'Reign over us!'"

9 "But the olive tree said to them,
'Should I abandon my richness,
by which gods and humans are honored,
just to go sway over the trees?'"

10 "Then the trees said to the fig tree,
'You come — reign over us!'"

11 "But the fig tree said to them,
'Should I abandon my sweetness
and my excellent fruit,
just to go sway over the trees?'"

12 "Then the trees said to the vine,
'You come — reign over us!'"

13 "But the vine said to them,
'Should I abandon my wine,
which brings joy to gods and humans,
just to go sway over the trees?'"

14 "Then all the trees said to the thornbush,
'You come — reign over us!'"

15"And the thornbush said to the trees,
'If you are truly anointing me king over you,
come, take shelter in my shade.
But if not —
let fire come out from the thornbush
and consume the cedars of Lebanon!'"

16"Now then — if you have acted in truth and integrity by making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt fairly with Jerubbaal and his household, and if you have treated him as his actions deserved — 17for my father fought for you and risked his life, and rescued you from the power of Midian — 18but you have risen against my father's house today and killed his sons — seventy men — on a single stone, and made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the citizens of Shechem because he is your kinsman — 19if you have acted in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal and his household today, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you! 20But if not — let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the citizens of Shechem and the house of Millo, and let fire come out from the citizens of Shechem and the house of Millo and consume Abimelech!" 21Then Jotham fled and escaped. He went to Beer and lived there, away from his brother Abimelech. 22Abimelec h ruled over Israel for three years. 23God sent a spirit of hostility between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, and the citizens of Shechem acted treacherously against Abimelech — 24so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal would be repaid, and their blood would be placed on Abimelech their brother, who murdered them, and on the citizens of Shechem, who strengthened his hand to murder his brothers. 25The citizens of Shechem set ambushes against him on the hilltops and robbed everyone who passed by them on the road. This was reported to Abimelech. 26Gaal son of Ebed arrived with his relatives and crossed into Shechem, and the citizens of Shechem put their trust in him. 27They went out into the fields, harvested their vineyards, trod the grapes, and held a celebration. They entered the temple of their god, ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech. 28Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and what is Shechem to him, that we should serve him? Isn't he the son of Jerubbaal, with Zebul as his deputy? Serve the men of Hamor, the father of Shechem! Why should we serve this man? 29If only this people were under my command — I would get rid of Abimelech!" He said to Abimelech, "Build up your army and come out to fight!" 30When Zebul, the governor of the city, heard the words of Gaal son of Ebed, his anger burned. 31He sent messengers to Abimelech secretly, saying, "Gaal son of Ebed and his relatives have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. 32Now get up during the night — you and the troops with you — and set an ambush in the open country. 33At dawn, when the sun rises, move quickly and attack the city. When he and his men come out against you, do to him whatever your hand finds to do." 34Abimelech and all the troops with him moved out at night and positioned themselves in ambush against Shechem in four companies. 35Gaal son of Ebed went out and stood at the entrance of the city gate. Then Abimelech and the troops with him rose from their ambush positions. 36When Gaal saw the troops, he said to Zebul, "Look — people are coming down from the hilltops!" Zebul said to him, "You are seeing the shadows of the hills — they look like men to you." 37Gaal spoke again and said, "Look — people are coming down from the center of the land, and one company is coming by way of the Diviners' Oak!" 38Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your big mouth now — you who said, 'Who is Abimelech that we should serve him?' Isn't this the army you despised? Go out now and fight them!" 39Gaal went out at the head of the citizens of Shechem and fought Abimelech. 40Abimelech pursued him, and Gaal fled before him. Many fell dead all the way to the entrance of the gate. 41Abimelech stayed at Arumah, while Zebul expelled Gaal and his relatives, preventing them from living in Shechem. 42The next day, the people went out into the fields, and this was reported to Abimelech. 43He took his troops and divided them into three companies and set an ambush in the fields. When he saw the people coming out of the city, he rose against them and struck them down. 44Abimelech and the company with him rushed forward and took position at the entrance of the city gate, while the two other companies attacked everyone in the fields and struck them down. 45Abimelech fought against the city all that day. He captured the city, killed the people in it, tore down the city, and sowed it with salt. 46When all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem heard this, they entered the stronghold of the temple of El-Berith. 47Abimelech was told that all the leaders of the Tower of Shechem had

gathered together. 48Abimelech went up Mount Zalmon — he and all the troops with him. He took axes in his hand, cut a branch from the trees, lifted it, and placed it on his shoulder. He said to the troops with him, "What you have seen me do — hurry, do the same!" 49All the troops also cut branches, each person one, and followed Abimelech. They piled them against the stronghold and set the stronghold on fire over the people inside. All the people of the Tower of Shechem also died — about a thousand men and women. 50Then Abimelech went to Thebez, besieged it, and captured it. 51There was a fortified tower in the center of the city, and all the men and women — all the citizens of the city — fled there. They shut themselves in and went up to the roof of the tower. 52Abimelech advanced to the tower and fought against it. He approached the entrance of the tower to set it on fire — 53But a woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and cracked his skull. 54He quickly called to the young man who carried his weapons and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, so they won't say about me, 'A woman killed him.'" His attendant ran him through, and he died. 55When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, each one went home. 56So God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech that he had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers. 57And all the wickedness of the men of Shechem God brought back on their own heads. The curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal came upon them.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Abimelech (avimelekh, 'my father is king') — the name itself is a political statement and foreshadows his ambition. He is identified as ben Yerubba'al ('son of Jerubbaal/Gideon'), but critically he goes to Shechem, to achei immo ('his mother's brothers') — his maternal kin. His mother was Gideon's concubine (pilegesh) from Shechem (8:31), making Abimelech half-Canaanite and half-Israelite. His power base is not among the Israelite tribes but among the Shechemite clan. The word mishpachat ('clan, extended family') emphasizes the kinship network he will exploit.
2. Ba'alei Shekhem ('citizens/lords of Shechem') — the term ba'al here means 'lord, citizen, property owner,' the civic elite. Abimelech's argument is deceptively simple: would you rather have seventy overlords or one? The number shiv'im ('seventy') is both literal (Gideon had seventy sons, 8:30) and rhetorical — it sounds oppressive. His closing appeal, atsmikhem u-vesarkhem ani ('I am your bone and your flesh'), invokes the kinship bond. This is the language of covenant loyalty (cf. Genesis 29:14, 2 Samuel 5:1), but Abimelech weaponizes it for political ambition.
3. Va-yet libbam acharei Avimelekh ('their heart inclined/turned after Abimelech') — the verb natah ('to turn, incline, stretch') describes a gravitational pull of loyalty. The decisive factor is the tribal bond: achinu hu ('he is our brother/kinsman'). The Shechemites choose ethnic solidarity over any evaluation of character or divine appointment. This is the anti-pattern of Judges: human criteria replacing divine selection. Shechem's decision is immediate and unexamined.
4. Shiv'im kesef mi-beit Ba'al Berit ('seventy silver from the house/temple of Baal-Berith') — seventy pieces of silver from the temple treasury to murder seventy brothers: one shekel per life. The grim arithmetic is almost certainly intentional. Baal-Berith (ba'al berit, 'lord of the covenant') is a Canaanite deity whose name carries devastating theological irony — the 'lord of the covenant' funds the murder of the sons of the man who delivered Israel. The anashim reqim u-fochazim ('empty and reckless men') are mercenaries of the lowest class — reqim ('empty, worthless') and fochazim ('reckless, unstable'). The same word raq ('empty') describes Jephthah's followers in 11:3.
5. Al even echat ('on a single stone') — the mass execution is carried out on one stone, suggesting a ritual or sacrificial dimension. The stone may function as an improvised altar or execution block; the phrase emphasizes the systematic, assembly-line nature of the slaughter. Va-yivvater Yotam ('but Jotham was left/remained') — the verb yatar ('to remain, be left over') is the same root used for the 'remnant' concept in prophetic literature. Jotham (yotam, 'the LORD is perfect/complete') survives because he hid (nechba, 'concealed himself'). The youngest surviving to challenge the tyrant echoes David's position as youngest son.
6. Va-yamlikhu et Avimelekh le-melekh ('they made Abimelech king') — this is the first time in Judges that anyone is actually made melekh ('king'). Gideon refused the title (8:23); his bastard son seizes it by fratricide. Beit Millo ('house of Millo/the filled place') likely refers to a fortified area or citadel within Shechem. The elon mutsav ('oak/terebinth of the pillar/standing stone') connects to the sacred site where Joshua made a covenant (Joshua 24:26) — the coronation of a murderer at a covenant site is deeply ironic. Abimelech's kingship is a grotesque inversion of everything the judges period represents.
7. Va-yissa qolo va-yiqra ('he raised his voice and called out') — the doubled expression signals a formal public proclamation. Mount Gerizim overlooks Shechem from the south and is the mountain of blessing (Deuteronomy 11:29, 27:12); Jotham delivers his curse from the mountain of blessing — another layer of irony. His opening line shim'u elai... ve-yishma aleikhem Elohim ('listen to me... and may God listen to you') frames the fable as more than political rhetoric — it is a prophetic appeal with divine witness. The shift to heightened speech begins here.
8. Halokh halekhu ha-etsim limshoch aleihem melekh ('going, the trees went to anoint over themselves a king') — the infinitive absolute halokh halekhu intensifies the action: the trees deliberately, purposefully set out on this quest. The verb mashach ('to anoint') is the technical term for royal inauguration — the same root as mashiach ('messiah/anointed one'). Jotham's fable is the earliest known political parable in the Hebrew Bible. The trees personified represent the citizens of Shechem seeking a ruler. The olive tree (zayit) is approached first as the most valuable and productive tree in the Israelite economy.

9. Ha-chaddalti et dishni ('should I cease/abandon my fatness/richness') — the olive's response reveals the fable's political logic: productive, valuable members of society have better things to do than rule. The dishni ('my fatness, my oil, my richness') refers to olive oil, essential for cooking, lighting, medicine, and ritual anointing. The phrase yekhabbedu Elohim va-anashim ('by which gods/God and men are honored') elevates olive oil to sacred status — it serves both divine worship and human civilization. The verb nu'a ('to sway, wave, wander') for ruling is deliberately dismissive — kingship is reduced to mere swaying above others.

10. Lekhi at molkhi aleinu ('come, you, reign over us') — the imperative addressed to the fig tree (te'enah) uses feminine forms, following the grammatical gender of trees in Hebrew. The fig tree is the second most valuable tree in the Israelite economy after the olive. The pattern is being established: the trees approach each productive tree in descending order of economic importance.

11. Ha-chaddalti et motqi ve-et tenuvati ha-tovah ('should I abandon my sweetness and my good produce') — the fig tree's refusal echoes the olive's structure but highlights different virtues: motqi ('my sweetness') and tenuvati ha-tovah ('my good fruit/produce'). Figs were a staple food in ancient Israel, dried into cakes for travel and storage. Like the olive, the fig refuses to trade productive contribution for empty authority. The verb nu'a ('sway') again mocks the nature of kingship.

12. La-gafen ('to the vine') — the grapevine is the third productive plant approached. Olive, fig, and vine form the classic triad of Israelite agriculture (Deuteronomy 8:8; 1 Kings 4:25). Each refusal narrows the field until only the worthless candidate remains. The repetition of the invitation formula creates a rhythmic, almost liturgical pattern in the fable.

13. Ha-chaddalti et tiroshi ha-mesammeach Elohim va-anashim ('should I abandon my new wine that gladdens gods/God and humans') — tirosh ('new wine, fresh grape juice') is distinguished from yayin ('fermented wine'). The verb sameach ('to gladden, bring joy') gives wine a quasi-sacred function: it serves both divine offering (drink offerings/nesekh) and human celebration. Like the olive's oil, the vine's product operates in both sacred and secular spheres. The three refusals — oil, sweetness, wine — represent the full spectrum of agricultural blessing. What remains is the thornbush.

14. El ha-atad ('to the thornbush/bramble') — the atad is a low, thorny scrub bush, utterly worthless for fruit, shade, or timber. It produces nothing useful and is a fire hazard in the dry season. The contrast with olive, fig, and vine could not be sharper: the trees have exhausted every productive option and now turn to the one plant that contributes nothing. The word kol ('all') is added: all the trees address the thornbush — unanimous desperation. This is Jotham's portrait of Abimelech: the worthless, dangerous option chosen only because every worthy candidate refused.

15. The thornbush's response is the climax of the fable and drips with dark irony. Im be-emet attem moshchim oti le-melekh ('if in truth you are anointing me as king') — the thornbush demands absolute sincerity, the one thing this entire arrangement lacks. Bo'u chasu ve-tsilli ('come, take shelter in my shade') is absurd: a thornbush provides no shade. It is a parody of royal protection. The threat is the real point: ve-im ayin tetse esh min ha-atad ve-tokhal et arzei ha-Levanon ('if not, let fire go out from the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon'). Thornbushes catch fire easily in dry conditions; once burning, they spread wildly. The cedars of Lebanon are the most majestic trees in the ancient Near East. The thornbush — the lowliest plant — threatens to destroy the noblest. This is Jotham's prophecy: Abimelech will destroy Shechem, and Shechem will destroy Abimelech.

16. Im be-emet u-ve-tamim asitem ('if in truth and in integrity you have acted') — Jotham now applies the fable to the real situation. The word tamim ('integrity, completeness, wholeness') is a covenant term demanding total honesty. The series of conditional 'if' clauses (im... ve-im... ve-im...) builds a rhetorical case that the Shechemites know they are answering 'no' to every question. Gemul yadav ('the reward/recompense of his hands') refers to Gideon's service — what he earned by his hands in delivering Israel.

17. Va-yashlekh et nafsho mi-neged ('he threw/cast his life from before [him]') — a vivid idiom for risking one's life. The verb shalakh ('to throw, cast') makes the risk visceral: Gideon hurled his very life away for their sake. Jotham calls Gideon avi ('my father'), emphasizing the personal dimension: you are repaying my father's sacrifice with the murder of his sons. Va-yatsel etkhem mi-yad Midyan ('he rescued you from the hand of Midian') — the standard deliverance formula, reminding Shechem of the debt they owe.

18. Ben amato ('son of his slave woman/maidservant') — Jotham deliberately downgrades Abimelech's mother from pilegesh ('concubine,' 8:31) to amah ('slave woman, maidservant'), a pointed insult to Abimelech's status. The repetition of shiv'im ish al even echat ('seventy men on a single stone') hammers the atrocity home. The bitter sarcasm of ki achikhem hu ('because he is your kinsman') throws the Shechemites' own reasoning (v. 3) back in their faces — your only criterion for kingship is ethnic solidarity, and look what it has purchased.

19. Simchu ba-Avimelekh ve-yismach gam hu bakhem ('rejoice in Abimelech and let him also rejoice in you') — this is dripping with sarcasm. Jotham knows they have not acted in truth. The conditional im ('if') carries the weight of 'since you obviously have not.' The mutual rejoicing he describes is impossible — relationships built on murder and treachery cannot produce joy. The verse is the ironic setup for the curse that follows.

20. Jotham's curse directly echoes the thornbush's threat in verse 15 — tetse esh ('let fire go out'). The curse is bilateral and self-consuming: fire from Abimelech destroys Shechem, and fire from Shechem destroys Abimelech. Both parties to this blood-soaked arrangement will annihilate each other. The narrator will show this curse fulfilled with terrible precision: Abimelech destroys Shechem (vv. 45-49) and Shechem's legacy destroys Abimelech (v. 53). The fable is not mere rhetoric — it functions as prophetic judgment.

21. Va-yanas Yotam va-yivrach ('Jotham fled and escaped') — two verbs of flight emphasize his danger. Beer (be'erah, 'well') is an unidentified location, possibly south of Shechem. The phrase mi-penei Avimelekh achiv ('from the face/presence of Abimelech his brother') is devastating — Jotham must flee from his own brother, the one who murdered all the other brothers. The word achiv ('his brother') keeps the fratricidal horror in focus. Jotham disappears from the narrative, but his curse remains active.

22. Va-yasar Avimelekh al Yisra'el ('Abimelech ruled/was prince over Israel') — critically, the verb is sar (from the root s-r-r, 'to rule, be prince'), NOT malakh ('to reign as king'). Despite being made melekh by Shechem (v. 6), the narrator refuses to use royal language. He 'ruled' but the text withholds the dignity of the verb 'to reign.' Three years is the shortest tenure in Judges — divine judgment is already in motion.

23. Va-yishlach Elohim ruach ra'ah bein Avimelekh u-vein ba'alei Shekhem ('God sent a spirit of evil/hostility between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem') — this is a rare and theologically significant statement. Ruach ra'ah ('spirit of evil/hostility') is not a demon in the later sense but a divinely dispatched disposition of enmity. God actively intervenes to fracture the alliance between Abimelech and Shechem. The same concept appears with Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-16). The verb bagad ('to deal treacherously, betray') is covenant-violation language — the relationship founded on treachery now collapses through treachery.

24. Lavo chamas shiv'im benei Yerubba'al ('so that the violence of the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come') — chamas ('violence, injustice') is the same word used for the corruption before the flood (Genesis 6:11). Ve-damam lasum al Avimelekh ('and their blood to place upon Abimelech') — blood-guilt (dam) is treated as a physical substance placed on the guilty party. The narrator distributes responsibility to both parties: Abimelech asher harag otam ('who killed them') and ba'alei Shekhem asher chizzqu et yado ('who strengthened his hand') — Shechem financed and enabled the slaughter and shares the guilt.

25. Me'arvim ('ambushers, those lying in wait') — the Shechemites' rebellion begins with banditry on the trade routes that pass through Shechem's territory. Since Abimelech presumably controlled and taxed these routes, the robbery is both economic warfare and political provocation. Al rashei heharim ('on the tops/heads of the mountains') gives the ambushers high-ground advantage on the mountain passes. Va-yuggad la-Avimelekh ('it was told to Abimelech') — the passive reporting verb signals the breakdown in the intelligence network between king and city.

26. Ga'al ben Eved ('Gaal son of Ebed/Servant') — the name may be pejorative: ga'al can mean 'loathing' and eved means 'servant/slave.' Whether historical names or narrator's contempt, the effect is to diminish this rival. Va-yivtechu vo ba'alei Shekhem ('the citizens of Shechem trusted in him') — the verb batach ('to trust') is significant: Shechem transfers its loyalty from one violent opportunist to another. They have learned nothing from the thornbush fable.

27. Va-ya'asu hillulim ('they made praise-festivals/celebrations') — the hillulim is a harvest festival with religious overtones, likely connected to the autumn grape harvest. The sequence — harvest, treading, celebration, temple worship — describes a complete Canaanite agricultural festival. Beit eloheihem ('the house/temple of their god') is the temple of Baal-Berith (v. 4). Va-yeqallelu et Avimelekh ('they cursed Abimelech') — the verb qalal ('to curse, treat lightly') is the opposite of kavad ('to honor, make heavy'). Emboldened by wine and religious fervor, the Shechemites publicly curse their king.

28. Mi Avimelekh u-mi Shekhem ki na'avdennu ('who is Abimelech and who is Shechem that we should serve him') — Gaal's rhetoric challenges both Abimelech's legitimacy and Shechem's subordination. His counter-proposal is striking: ivdu et anshei Chamor avi Shekhem ('serve the men of Hamor, father of Shechem') — Hamor was the original Canaanite ruler of Shechem (Genesis 33:19, 34:2). Gaal is appealing to pre-Israelite Canaanite identity: why should native Shechemites serve the half-breed son of an Israelite? This is ethnic nationalism aimed at reversing Abimelech's hybrid rule. Zebul (zevul, 'prince/exalted one') is Abimelech's governor in Shechem — his local enforcer.

29. U-mi yitten et ha-am hazeh be-yadi ('who would give this people into my hand' — if only this people were in my hand) — the optative formula mi yitten expresses a wish. Va-asirah et Avimelekh ('I would remove Abimelech') — the verb sur ('to remove, turn aside') treats Abimelech as an obstacle to be cleared away. Gaal's final taunt, rabbeh tseva'akha va-tse'ah ('increase your army and come out!'), is a direct military challenge — drunken bravado that he cannot back up, as events will prove.

30. Zevul sar ha-ir ('Zebul, the ruler/governor of the city') — sar designates an appointed official, Abimelech's man in Shechem. Va-yichar appo ('his anger burned/was kindled') — the standard Hebrew idiom for intense anger. Zebul's loyalty to Abimelech is about to be tested; unlike the Shechemites, he remains faithful to the king who appointed him. His response will be cunning rather than confrontational.

31. Be-tormah ('secretly, by deception/cunning') — the word suggests both secrecy and strategic deception. Zebul cannot openly oppose Gaal while inside the city. Hinnam tsarim et ha-ir alekha ('they are besieging/pressuring the city against you') — the verb tsur ('to press, besiege, confine') can mean either fortifying the city in rebellion or inciting the city against Abimelech. Zebul frames the situation in urgent military terms to provoke Abimelech's response.

32. Qum lailah ('rise at night') — Zebul's tactical advice mirrors the night-attack strategy that characterized Gideon's victory over Midian. Ve-erov ba-sadeh ('and lie in ambush in the field') — the verb arav ('to lie in wait, ambush') is a military tactic; the sadeh ('field, open country') outside Shechem's walls will become the killing ground.

33. Ki-zroach ha-shemesh ('at the shining/rising of the sun') — Zebul plans a dawn assault. Tashkim u-fashat'ta al ha-ir ('rise early and raid/rush upon the city') — the verb pashat ('to strip, raid, rush upon') is a military term for a sudden assault. Ve-asita lo ka-asher timtsa yadekha ('do to him as your hand finds') — this idiom means 'do whatever opportunity presents,' giving Abimelech total latitude for violence. Zebul's plan is efficient and ruthless.

34. Arba'ah rashim ('four heads/companies') — Abimelech divides his force into four units, a standard military tactic for surrounding a target from multiple directions. The number four suggests coverage from all compass points, cutting off escape routes. This mirrors Gideon's three-company strategy (7:16), though Abimelech adds a fourth. The night movement follows Zebul's advice precisely.

35. Petach sha'ar ha-ir ('the entrance/opening of the city gate') — the gate was the center of civic life and the defensive chokepoint. Gaal standing at the gate suggests either morning routine or watchful vigilance. Va-yaqom Avimelekh… min ha-ma'arav ('Abimelech rose from the ambush') — the timing is precise: Gaal exposes himself just as Abimelech's trap is sprung.

36. Zebul's response is a masterpiece of deception. Et tsel heharim attah ro'eh ka-anashim ('you are seeing the shadow of the mountains as men') — he gaslights Gaal, dismissing the advancing army as an optical illusion. Zebul is buying time for Abimelech's forces to get closer. The word tsel ('shadow') is grimly appropriate — the shadow of death is descending on Shechem. Zebul stands beside Gaal at the gate while secretly orchestrating his destruction.

37. Me-im tabbur ha-arets ('from the navel of the land') — tabbur ('navel, center') identifies a central high point, possibly the sacred center of the Shechem area. Elon me'onenim ('oak of the diviners/soothsayers') — the me'onenim are practitioners of divination (from the root anan, 'to practice divination/observe omens'), and this named oak suggests a site associated with pagan practices. The detail adds to the Canaanite religious atmosphere of the entire narrative. Gaal now recognizes distinct companies approaching from different directions — the trap is closing.

38. Ayyeh efo pikha ('where then is your mouth') — Zebul drops the pretense and turns Gaal's own boasting (v. 28-29) against him. The word peh ('mouth') stands for his bragging — your mouth was brave last night at the festival; where is it now? Asher ma'asta bo ('which you despised/rejected') — the verb ma'as ('to reject, despise') is covenant language often used for Israel's rejection of God. Zebul's taunt forces Gaal into a battle he cannot avoid — fight or be exposed as a coward. The trap is complete.

39. Va-yetse Ga'al lifnei ba'alei Shekhem ('Gaal went out before/at the head of the citizens of Shechem') — despite being trapped, Gaal leads the Shechemites into battle. The preposition lifnei ('before, at the head of') gives him the position of a military leader. But his drunken bravado at the festival (v. 29) is about to meet Abimelech's professional violence.

40. Va-yirddefehu Avimelekh va-yanas mi-panav ('Abimelech pursued him and he fled from his face') — the rout is swift and total. Va-yippelu chalalim rabbim ('many fell slain/pierced') — challalim ('pierced ones, slain') denotes battle casualties. The pursuit reaches ad petach ha-sha'ar ('to the entrance of the gate') — the same gate where Gaal stood confidently minutes earlier (v. 35). The gate that was his civic platform becomes the boundary of the slaughter.

41. Arumah is Abimelech's base of operations, possibly the same as Rumah. Va-yegaresh Zevul et Ga'al ('Zebul drove out Gaal') — the verb garash ('to drive out, expel') is the same word used for driving out nations from the land. Zebul, having orchestrated Gaal's defeat, now completes the political purge. Gaal disappears from the narrative entirely — he was a minor opportunist crushed between two more ruthless players.

42. Va-yehi mi-mochorat ('it happened on the next day') — the narrative moves quickly. The people of Shechem resume their normal agricultural routine, going out to the sadeh ('field') — perhaps unaware that Abimelech's punitive campaign is not over. Despite Gaal's expulsion, the Shechemites have still participated in rebellion. Va-yaggidu la-Avimelekh ('they reported to Abimelech') — someone provides intelligence, perhaps Zebul maintaining his informant role.

43. Va-yechetsem li-shloshah rashim ('he divided them into three companies') — now three companies rather than four (v. 34), optimized for an open-field engagement rather than a siege. The pattern of ambush (arav) repeating from verse 34 shows Abimelech's consistent tactical approach. Va-yaqom aleihem va-yakkem ('he rose against them and struck them') — the people caught in the fields are defenseless civilians, not combatants. Abimelech's campaign has shifted from defeating Gaal's forces to punishing the general population.

44. Abimelech's tactical genius is evident: he personally seizes the gate (petach sha'ar ha-ir) to cut off retreat into the city, while the other two companies (shenei ha-rashim) sweep the fields. Pashtu ('they rushed/raided') — the verb pashat implies a swift, stripping attack. The people caught between the gate and the field have nowhere to go — trapped between Abimelech at the gate and his forces in the open ground.

45. Va-yittots et ha-ir va-yizra'eha melach ('he tore down the city and sowed it with salt') — the total destruction of Shechem culminates in a ritual act of devastation. Sowing salt renders land agriculturally useless — it is a symbolic curse declaring the site permanently desolate. This act has parallels in ancient Near Eastern treaty curses and was performed on conquered cities marked for permanent abandonment. The irony is crushing: Abimelech, who was made king at Shechem, now annihilates the city that crowned him. Jotham's curse (v. 20) — 'let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the citizens of Shechem' — is being fulfilled with terrible literalness.

46. Ba'alei migdal Shekhem ('the lords/citizens of the Tower of Shechem') — this is the citadel district, possibly the same as Beth-Millo (v. 6). The tseriach ('stronghold, inner chamber, crypt') of Beit El-Berit ('house/temple of El-Berith') — here the deity is called El-Berith ('God of the covenant') rather than Baal-Berith ('Lord of the covenant,' v. 4). The variation may reflect different cult titles for the same deity, or the narrator may be alternating deliberately. The theological irony deepens: the people seek refuge in the temple of the 'god of the covenant' — but no covenant will save them from the consequences of breaking faith.

47. Va-yuggad la-Avimelekh ki hitqabbetsu kol ba'alei migdal Shekhem ('it was reported to Abimelech that all the lords of the Tower of Shechem had assembled') — the passive reporting formula (yuggad) appears again. Abimelech's intelligence network functions efficiently even amid the destruction. The gathering of all the tower's inhabitants into the temple stronghold concentrates the remaining population in one location — making Abimelech's task of total annihilation easier.

48. Har Tsalmon ('Mount Zalmon/Shadow Mountain') — a wooded hill near Shechem. Abimelech's personal example — cutting branches and carrying them on his own shoulder (shikhmo, 'his shoulder,' a wordplay on Shekhem) — shows the charismatic military leadership he inherited from Gideon. Mah re'item asiti maharu asu kamoni ('what you have seen me do, hurry, do like me') — the command echoes Gideon's 'watch me and do likewise' (7:17). Father and son share tactical instinct, but Gideon fought God's enemies while Abimelech massacres his own people.

49. Va-yatsitu aleihem et ha-tseriach ba-esh ('they set the stronghold on fire over/upon them') — the people huddled in the temple crypt are burned alive. Jotham's fable reaches its most horrific fulfillment: 'let fire come out from the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon' (v. 15). The thornbush (Abimelech) has set fire to the very people who crowned him. Ke-elef ish ve-ishah ('about a thousand men and women') — the inclusion of women emphasizes that this is not a battle but a massacre of a civilian population seeking sanctuary in their temple. The 'lord/god of the covenant' could not save them.

50. Tevets is a town northeast of Shechem, apparently part of the same regional rebellion. Va-yichan be-Tevets va-yilkedah ('he camped against Thebez and captured it') — the verbs describe a standard siege operation: encampment followed by capture. Abimelech, flushed with the destruction of Shechem, extends his punitive campaign. The narrator's brevity here is ominous — the real story at Thebez is not the siege but what happens next.

51. Migdal oz ('tower of strength/fortified tower') — the situation mirrors the Tower of Shechem scenario (v. 46), but with different results. The people seek the same kind of refuge — a fortified structure — that failed the Shechemites. Va-yisgeru ba'adam ('they shut/locked behind themselves') — the verb sagar ('to close, lock') suggests barricading. Going up to the gag ha-migdal ('roof of the tower') gives them a defensive height advantage, or so they think.

52. Va-yiggash ad petach ha-migdal le-sorfo va-esh ('he approached to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire') — Abimelech attempts to replicate his Shechem strategy: burn the fortified refuge with the people inside. The verb saraf ('to burn') echoes the burning of the Tower of Shechem's stronghold (v. 49). He has found a tactic that works and applies it mechanically. But this time, the narrative will not repeat — the fire strategy that destroyed Shechem will be interrupted at Thebez.

53. Va-tashlekh ishah achat pelach rekhev al rosh Avimelekh ('a certain/one woman threw a piece of an upper millstone on Abimelech's head') — the pelach rekhev ('piece of a riding [stone]' — the upper millstone that rides on the lower) is a heavy grinding stone, a domestic implement. The irony is exquisite: the man who murdered seventy brothers on a single stone (v. 5) is killed by a stone dropped by a single woman. Va-tarits et gulgolto ('she cracked/crushed his skull') — the verb ruts ('to crush, crack') and gulgoleth ('skull') create a visceral image. The unnamed woman becomes one of the most consequential minor figures in the Hebrew Bible (cf. 2 Samuel 11:21). Abimelech, who slaughtered a thousand men and women at Shechem, is brought down by one woman with a millstone.

54. Shelof charbakha u-moteteni pen yomru li ishah haragathu ('draw your sword and put me to death, lest they say of me, a woman killed him') — Abimelech's final concern is not his soul, not his legacy of governance, not his people, but his masculine honor. Pen yomru ('lest they say') reveals that his dying thought is about reputation, not repentance. The verb motet ('put to death, kill') is a piel intensive — he wants decisive death, not lingering. Va-yidqerehu na'aro va-yamot ('his attendant pierced/thrust him through and he died') — the armor-bearer complies, but it changes nothing. The narrator (and later, Joab in 2 Samuel 11:21) remembers: a woman killed him.

55. Va-yelekhu ish li-meqomo ('they went, each man to his place') — the army dissolves instantly upon the leader's death. There is no successor, no institutional continuity, no dynasty. The entire enterprise was built on one man's ambition, and with his death it evaporates. This is the inherent fragility of power seized by violence rather than granted by divine appointment.

56. Va-yashev Elohim et ra'at Avimelekh ('God returned/repaid the evil of Abimelech') — the verb shuv ('to return, turn back') here means divine retribution. Ra'ah ('evil, wickedness') is the same root as the ruach ra'ah ('spirit of evil') God sent in verse 23. God's instrument of judgment was the very evil that characterized Abimelech's reign. Asher asah le-aviv ('which he did to his father') — the narrator says 'to his father,' emphasizing that the fratricide was ultimately an offense against Gideon/Jerubbaal himself.

57. Heshiv Elohim be-rosham ('God returned upon their heads') — the preposition be-rosham ('on their head') makes the retribution personal and inescapable. Va-tavo aleihem qillat Yotam ben Yerubba'al ('the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal came upon them') — the chapter's final verse explicitly confirms that Jotham's curse (v. 20) functioned as prophetic utterance, not merely political rhetoric. The bilateral destruction — Abimelech destroyed Shechem, Shechem (through the woman at Thebez) destroyed Abimelech — fulfills the curse with mathematical precision. The chapter demonstrates what happens when human ambition replaces divine appointment: mutual annihilation.

10

Summary: *Tola and Jair judge Israel in a period of relative quiet. Then Israel again serves the Baals and Ashtoreths, and God gives them into the hands of the Philistines and Ammonites for eighteen years. Israel cries out, and God — initially refusing — relents.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *God's response to Israel's cry is unlike any previous cycle: He refuses. 'Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress' (v. 14). The sarcasm is devastating. Only when Israel puts away the foreign gods and God 'could no longer bear Israel's misery' (v. 16, vatiqtsar nafsho ba'amal Yisra'el) does He act. The phrase is extraordinary — God's soul is 'shortened' or 'cut short' by their suffering. Divine compassion overrides divine anger.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase vatiqtsar nafsho (v. 16) literally means 'His soul was shortened' — it describes impatience, but here it is impatience born of compassion, not irritation. We rendered it 'He could no longer bear Israel's misery' to capture the emotional force. The list of seven oppressor nations (v. 12) — a complete number — suggests that Israel has been oppressed from every direction by every available enemy.*

Connections: *God's initial refusal anticipates His reluctance in 1 Samuel 8 to give Israel a king. The phrase 'His soul was shortened' echoes the same emotional language in Isaiah 63:9. The Ammonite oppression sets up Jephthah's story in chapter 11. Israel's confession (v. 15, 'we have sinned') is the most explicit repentance in Judges.*

1After Abimelech, Tola son of Puah son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, rose up to deliver Israel. He lived in Shamir in the hill
country of Ephraim. 2He judged Israel for twenty-three years, then died and was buried in Shamir. 3After him, Jair the
Gileadite rose up and judged Israel for twenty-two years. 4He had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys, and they
controlled thirty towns — called Havvoth-Jair to this day — in the land of Gilead. 5Jair died and was buried in Kamon. 6The
Israelites again did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD. They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram,
the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. They abandoned the LORD
and did not serve Him. 7The LORD's anger burned against Israel, and He sold them into the power of the Philistines and the
power of the Ammonites. 8They shattered and crushed the Israelites that year — for eighteen years — all the Israelites who
were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. 9The Ammonites also crossed the Jordan to fight
against Judah, Benjamin, and the house of Ephraim. Israel was in severe distress. 10The Israelites cried out to the LORD,
saying, "We have sinned against You — we have abandoned our God and served the Baals." 11The LORD said to the Israelites,
"Did I not deliver you from Egypt, from the Amorites, from the Ammonites, and from the Philistines? 12The Sidonians,
Amalekites, and Maonites also oppressed you. You cried out to Me, and I delivered you from their power. 13But you have
abandoned Me and served other gods. Therefore, I will not deliver you again. 14Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen —
let them deliver you in your time of distress!" 15The Israelites said to the LORD, "We have sinned. Do to us whatever seems
right to You — only please rescue us today!" 16They removed the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And
His spirit could no longer bear Israel's suffering. 17The Ammonites were called to arms and camped in Gilead. The Israelites
assembled and camped at Mizpah. 18The people — the leaders of Gilead — said to one another, "Who is the man who will
take the lead in fighting the Ammonites? He will become the head of all the inhabitants of Gilead."

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Va-yaqom acharei Avimelekh lehoshi'a et Yisra'el Tola ('after Abimelech, Tola rose to save/deliver Israel') — the verb hoshi'a ('to save, deliver') is the standard judge-deliverer term, and its use here implicitly contrasts Tola with Abimelech: Abimelech never 'delivered' anyone — he only destroyed. Tola (tola, 'worm' or 'scarlet/crimson') is from the tribe of Issachar but lives in the hill country of Ephraim — a detail suggesting tribal displacement or strategic positioning. His grandfather Dodo (dodo, 'his beloved') appears in some genealogies as a clan name.
2. Va-yishpot et Yisra'el esrim ve-shalosh shanah ('he judged Israel twenty-three years') — the 'minor judge' formula is compressed: length of service, death, burial location. No military exploits are recorded, no enemies named, no narrative developed. The verb shafat ('to judge') here likely means ongoing governance and dispute resolution rather than military deliverance. Twenty-three years of quiet stability after Abimelech's three-year reign of terror represents healing and restoration.
3. Ya'ir ha-Gil'adi ('Jair the Gileadite') — Jair ('he enlightens/shines') is from Gilead, the Transjordanian territory east of the Jordan. The Gileadite connection sets the stage geographically for the Jephthah narrative that follows. His twenty-two year tenure, combined with Tola's twenty-three, gives Israel forty-five years of minor-judge stability — a significant period of peace between the Abimelech disaster and the next major crisis.
4. Sheloshim banim rokhevim al sheloshim ayarim ('thirty sons riding on thirty donkeys') — the threefold repetition of sheloshim ('thirty') creates a pattern of abundance. Riding donkeys (ayarim, 'male donkeys/colts') signifies aristocratic status — donkeys were the prestige mount before horses became common. U-sheloshim ayarim lahem ('and thirty towns belonging to them') — a wordplay: ayarim means both 'donkeys' and 'towns/cities' (different Hebrew words with similar sounds). Chavvot Ya'ir ('the tent-villages/settlements of Jair') is a territorial name that persisted, suggesting Jair's legacy was administrative rather than military. The detail ad ha-yom hazeh ('to this day') indicates the narrator's awareness of ongoing place-name traditions.
5. Qamon is an otherwise unknown Gileadite town. The burial notice completes the minor-judge formula. Both Tola and Jair receive compressed notices — no divine call, no enemy, no battle — functioning as transition markers between the Abimelech catastrophe and the Ammonite crisis that follows. Together they represent about forty-five years of relative calm, the narrative breathing space before the next cycle of apostasy.

6. This verse contains the most comprehensive apostasy catalog in the entire book of Judges — seven categories of foreign gods. Va-ya'avdu et ha-be'alim ve-et ha-ashtarot ('they served the Baals and the Ashtoreths') covers the standard Canaanite fertility deities. Then five additional national pantheons are listed: elohei Aram ('gods of Aram/Syria'), elohei Tsidon ('gods of Sidon/Phoenicia'), elohei Mo'av ('gods of Moab'), elohei benei Ammon ('gods of the Ammonites'), and elohei Pelishtim ('gods of the Philistines'). The catalog covers every geographical neighbor — north, northwest, east, southeast, and southwest. The totality is the point: Israel has adopted the gods of every surrounding nation while abandoning the one God who delivered them. Va-ya'azvu et YHVH ve-lo avaduhu ('they abandoned the LORD and did not serve Him') is the final, devastating summary.

7. Va-yichar af YHVH be-Yisra'el ('the anger of the LORD burned against Israel') — the standard formula for divine wrath. Va-yimkerem be-yad Pelishtim u-ve-yad benei Ammon ('He sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites') — the verb makhar ('to sell') presents Israel as property that God hands over to foreign powers. The use of two oppressor nations — Philistines from the west and Ammonites from the east — creates a pincer movement of judgment. This dual oppression will split into two separate narrative tracks: the Ammonite crisis is resolved by Jephthah (chapters 11-12), while the Philistine crisis drives the Samson narrative (chapters 13-16).

8. Va-yir'atsu va-yerotsatsu ('they shattered and they crushed') — two near-synonymous verbs of violent oppression are piled together for intensifying effect. The root ra'ats means 'to shatter, break' and ratsats means 'to crush, oppress.' Together they describe a grinding, pulverizing subjugation. The eighteen years of oppression is one of the longer periods in Judges. The geographical focus is Transjordan — the Gileadite territory where Jair had just governed — specifically be-erets ha-Emori asher ba-Gil'ad ('in the land of the Amorite which is in Gilead'), the territory Israel conquered from Sihon (Numbers 21:21-31).

9. Va-ya'avru venei Ammon et ha-Yarden ('the Ammonites crossed the Jordan') — the aggression escalates beyond Transjordan into the heartland of Israel. The three tribes named — Yehudah, Binyamin, and Beit Efrayim — represent the core of western Israel: south, center, and north-center. Va-tetser le-Yisra'el me'od ('it was very distressing/narrow for Israel') — the verb tsarar ('to be narrow, constricted, distressed') conveys the crushing pressure of oppression from all sides. The situation is the most desperate since the opening cycles of Judges.

10. Va-yiz'aqu venei Yisra'el el YHVH ('the Israelites cried out to the LORD') — the verb za'aq ('to cry out, call for help') is the standard appeal for deliverance in the Judges cycle. But this time, unlike previous cycles, the confession is explicit: chatanu lakh ('we have sinned against You'). They name their specific sin: azavnu et Eloheinu va-na'avod et ha-be'alim ('we abandoned our God and served the Baals'). The confession mirrors the accusation of verse 6, suggesting genuine recognition. Yet God's response will be unprecedented — He will not immediately deliver.

11. Va-yomer YHVH el benei Yisra'el ('the LORD said to the Israelites') — this is one of the rare moments in Judges where God speaks directly, not through a prophet or angel. The divine speech begins with a rhetorical question: ha-lo mi-Mitsrayim ('did I not from Egypt...') — God recounts His own resume of deliverances. The list begins with Egypt (the foundational deliverance) and moves through the Amorites (the Transjordanian conquest), the Ammonites, and the Philistines — the very nations now oppressing Israel. The irony is sharp: God saved them from these peoples before, and Israel responded by worshiping their gods.

12. The list continues: Tsidonim ('Sidonians/Phoenicians'), Amaleq ('Amalekites'), and Ma'on ('Maonites' — possibly Meunites, a people from the region of Mount Seir). Lachatsu etkhem ('they oppressed/pressed you') — the verb lachats ('to press, squeeze, oppress') describes the recurring pressure of foreign domination. Va-tits'aqu elai va-oshi'ah etkhem mi-yadam ('you cried to Me and I delivered you from their hand') — God's pattern has been consistent: they cry, He saves. The cumulative weight of this history makes what follows devastating.

13. Ve-attem azavtem oti va-ta'avdu elohim acherim ('but you — you have abandoned Me and served other gods') — the pronoun attem ('you') is emphatic: despite everything I did, YOU abandoned ME. Lakhen lo osif lehoshi'a etkhem ('therefore I will not continue to deliver you') — this is unprecedented in Judges. God refuses to deliver. The verb osif ('add, continue, do again') with the negative lo creates a definitive statement: I am done saving you. This is the most radical divine speech in the book — it challenges the assumption that the cycle of sin-oppression-cry-deliverance will always reset.

14. Lekhu ve-za'aqu el ha-elohim asher bechartem bahem ('go and cry out to the gods you have chosen') — God's command is devastating sarcasm. The verb za'aqu ('cry out') is the same word Israel uses to cry to God (v. 10); God redirects it: use that cry on the gods you preferred. Asher bechartem ('which you chose') emphasizes volition — this was not accident but deliberate choice. Hemmah yoshi'u lakhem be-et tsaratkhem ('let them save you in your time of distress') — the challenge is unanswerable: the Baals cannot save. The gods of Aram, Sidon, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia have no power to deliver. God's refusal forces Israel to confront the emptiness of their chosen alternatives.

15. Chatanu aseh attah lanu ke-khol ha-tov be-einekha ('we have sinned — do to us whatever is good in Your eyes') — this is unconditional surrender. Israel does not negotiate, does not make excuses, does not promise future obedience. They accept whatever punishment God chooses. Akh hatsilenu na ha-yom hazeh ('only please rescue us today') — the word akh ('only, just') reduces their request to its barest minimum: we accept any consequence, just save us now. Ha-yom hazeh ('this day, today') conveys the urgency of present suffering. This is the most abject plea in the entire book.

16. Va-yasiru et elohei ha-nekhar mi-qirbam ('they removed the gods of foreignness from their midst') — this time the repentance includes concrete action, not just words. They physically remove (sur, 'to turn aside, remove') the foreign idols. Va-ya'avdu et YHVH ('and they served the LORD') — the cycle reverses. But the critical clause is va-tiqtsar nafsho ba-amal Yisra'el ('and His soul/spirit grew short with the suffering of Israel'). The verb qatsar ('to be short, cut short') with nefesh ('soul, spirit, self') describes God's patience reaching its limit — but not with Israel's sin. God's spirit 'grew short' with their misery (amal, 'toil, suffering, trouble'). Even while angry, even after refusing to deliver, God cannot bear to watch them suffer. This is one of the most profound theological statements in the Hebrew Bible: God's compassion overrides His stated refusal.

17. Va-yitsa'aqu benei Ammon ('the Ammonites were called together/mustered') — the verb tsa'aq here means 'to be summoned, called to assembly' in a military sense. Va-yachanu ba-Gil'ad ('they camped in Gilead') — the Ammonite army positions in the contested Transjordanian territory. The Israelites respond by assembling at ha-Mitspah ('the Mizpah/watchtower') — likely Mizpah of Gilead, a strategic assembly point in Transjordan. The two armies are now positioned for confrontation, setting the stage for the search for a military leader in verse 18 and the Jephthah narrative of chapter 11.

18. Mi ha-ish asher yachel lehillachem bi-venei Ammon ('who is the man who will begin/volunteer to fight the Ammonites') — the verb chalal ('to begin, start, initiate') can also carry the sense of 'profane' or 'pierce,' giving the question an edge: who will risk defilement by initiating combat? Yihyeh le-rosh le-khol yoshvei Gil'ad ('he shall be the head of all the inhabitants of Gilead') — they offer the headship (rosh, 'head, chief') as compensation, essentially creating a mercenary arrangement: military leadership in exchange for political power. This sets up the ironic parallel with Abimelech — again, human selection of a leader rather than divine appointment. The question hangs unanswered at the chapter's end, pointing forward to Jephthah in chapter 11.

11

Summary: *Jephthah, an outcast son of a prostitute, is recalled by Gilead's elders to fight Ammon. He negotiates diplomatically, citing Israel's history. When war comes, Jephthah vows a burnt offering of whatever first meets him from his house — and his only daughter comes out dancing.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Jephthah's vow (v. 31) is the book's most tragic moment. The Hebrew is unambiguous: 'I will offer it up as a burnt offering' (veha'alitihu olah). Whether the vow was fulfilled literally (human sacrifice) or commuted (perpetual virginity) has been debated for millennia. The text says 'he did to her according to his vow' (v. 39) and gives no indication of divine approval. The narrator's silence is the loudest commentary: in a book about failed leadership, Jephthah's victory costs him everything.*

Translation Friction: *Jephthah's historical argument to Ammon (vv. 14-27) is remarkably sophisticated — he cites Numbers 20-21 and appeals to the three-hundred-year statute of limitations on territorial claims. The reference to Chemosh (v. 24) as Ammon's god is unusual since Chemosh is typically Moab's deity; this may reflect an ancient boundary confusion or a deliberate rhetorical choice. We rendered it as the Hebrew gives it and noted the difficulty.*

Connections: *Jephthah is listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11:32 despite the vow's horror — faith and tragedy coexist. His daughter's mourning 'on the mountains' (v. 37) becomes an annual ritual (v. 40), one of the few women's observances in the Hebrew Bible. The historical review (vv. 14-27) parallels Deuteronomy 2 and Numbers 21. The vow's tragedy anticipates Saul's rash oath in 1 Samuel 14:24-45.*

1 Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute. Gilead was Jephthah's father. 2 Gilead's
wife also bore him sons. When the wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and told him, "You will not inherit in our
father's house, because you are the son of another woman." 3 So Jephthah fled from his brothers and settled in the land of
Tob. Worthless men gathered around Jephthah, and they went out raiding with him. 4 Some time later, the Ammonites went
to war against Israel. 5 When the Ammonites fought against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah back from the
land of Tob. 6 They said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, so we can fight the Ammonites." 7 Jephthah said to the
elders of Gilead, "Did you not hate me and drive me out of my father's house? So why do you come to me now, when you are
in trouble?" 8 The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "That is exactly why we have turned back to you now. Come with us and
fight the Ammonites, and you will be head over all the inhabitants of Gilead." 9 Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you
bring me back to fight the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, then I will be your head." 10 The elders of Gilead
said to Jephthah, "The LORD is the witness between us — if we do not do exactly as you say." 11 So Jephthah went with the
elders of Gilead. The people appointed him head and commander over them, and Jephthah spoke all his terms before the
LORD at Mizpah. 12 Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites, saying, "What dispute is between you and me,
that you have come to fight against my land?" 13 The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah's messengers, "Because
Israel took my land when they came up from Egypt — from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan. Now return it
peacefully." 14 Jephthah sent messengers again to the king of the Ammonites, 15 saying to him, "This is what Jephthah says:

Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. 16When they came up from Egypt, Israel traveled through the wilderness to the Sea of Reeds and arrived at Kadesh. 17Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Please let me pass through your land.' But the king of Edom would not listen. They also sent to the king of Moab, but he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh. 18Then they traveled through the wilderness, going around the land of Edom and the land of Moab. They came to the east side of the land of Moab and camped on the other side of the Arnon, but they did not enter Moab's territory — because the Arnon was Moab's border. 19Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and Israel said to him, 'Please let us pass through your land to our destination.' 20But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. Sihon gathered all his forces and camped at Jahaz, and fought against Israel. 21The LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and all his forces into Israel's hand. They defeated them, and Israel took possession of all the land of the Amorites who lived in that region. 22They took possession of all the Amorite territory — from the Arnon to the Jabbok, and from the wilderness to the Jordan. 23So now — the LORD, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites before His people Israel. And you think you should possess it? 24Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And everything that the LORD our God has driven out before us — that we will possess. 25Now — are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever dispute with Israel or go to war against them? 26While Israel has lived in Heshbon and its surrounding villages, in Aroer and its surrounding villages, and in all the towns along the Arnon for three hundred years — why did you not reclaim them during that time? 27I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by fighting against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide today between the Israelites and the Ammonites." 28But the king of the Ammonites did not listen to the message Jephthah had sent him. 29Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah. He crossed through Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced against the Ammonites. 30Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will certainly give the Ammonites into my hand, 31the n whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites will belong to the LORD, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering." 32Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. 33He struck them from Aroer all the way to the approaches of Minnith — twenty towns — and as far as Abel-keramim, inflicting a massive defeat. So the Ammonites were subdued before the Israelites. 34When Jephthah came to Mizpah, to his house, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with tambourines and dancing! She was his only child — he had no other son or daughter. 35When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Oh, my daughter! You have brought me to my knees — you have become my devastation! I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take it back." 36She said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD — do to me what you have spoken, since the LORD has carried out vengeance for you against your enemies, the Ammonites." 37She said to her father, "Grant me this one thing: give me two months to go and wander on the mountains and weep over my virginity — I and my companions." 38He said, "Go." He sent her away for two months, and she went with her companions and wept over her virginity on the mountains. 39At the end of two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her according to the vow he had made. She had never known a man. And it became a tradition in Israel 40that the daughters of Israel would go year after year to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days each year.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The narrator introduces Jephthah with a devastating juxtaposition: gibbor chayil ('mighty warrior,' a title of highest military honor) immediately collides with ben-ishah zonah ('son of a prostitute woman'). The same title gibbor chayil was applied to Gideon (6:12), but Jephthah's comes with an asterisk — his valor is real, but his social standing is fatally compromised. The word zonah is unambiguous: a woman who sells sexual access. Gilead is both a person and a region; the dual meaning hints that Jephthah belongs to the land even as the land's people will reject him.

2. The brothers' verb is yegareshu ('they drove out, expelled') — the same root (g-r-sh) used for Adam's expulsion from Eden and for the driving out of Canaanite nations. Jephthah is exiled from his own family with the same force Israel uses against foreigners. Their stated reason — ben ishah acheret ('son of another woman') — softens zonah to acheret ('other, different'), but the euphemism barely conceals the contempt. The inheritance dispute (lo tinachal — 'you will not inherit') is both economic and covenantal: Jephthah is denied his portion.

3. Jephthah becomes a bandit chief in erets Tov ('the land of Tob'), an Aramean territory east of Gilead. The men who gather to him are anashim reqim ('empty men, worthless men') — the same descriptor used for Abimelech's mercenaries in 9:4. The parallel is ominous: the last 'empty men' enabler destroyed Shechem. Yet the verb yitlaqtu ('gathered themselves') suggests these men chose Jephthah, drawn to his charisma and skill. The irony

deepens: rejected by respectable society, Jephthah builds his own society from its rejects.

4. The phrase mi-yamim ('from days,' meaning 'after some days passed') creates a narrative gap between Jephthah's exile and Ammon's aggression. The Ammonites (benei Ammon — 'sons of Ammon') are Israel's eastern neighbors, descended from Lot (Genesis 19:38). Their attack forces Gilead to confront its earlier decision to expel its strongest fighter.

5. The verb laqachat ('to take, to fetch') — the elders go to retrieve Jephthah like a tool from storage. The same community that expelled him now needs him. The ziqnei Gil'ad ('elders of Gilead') represent the established power structure — the very system that endorsed his expulsion. Their journey to Tob is a journey of desperation, not repentance.

6. The title they offer is qatsin ('commander, military leader') — a temporary war-chief, not a permanent ruler. The elders want Jephthah's sword but not his authority. The imperative lekha ('come!') from the mouths of those who once said 'go!' (by expelling him) creates sharp dramatic irony. They propose a transactional arrangement: fight for us, then presumably return to Tob.

7. Jephthah's response is pointed: senetem oti ('you hated me') uses the strong verb s-n-' (hate), and the expulsion verb garashu returns from verse 2 — now thrown back at the elders. His question madua batem elai ('why have you come to me?') followed by ka'asher tsar lakhem ('when it is tight/distressing for you') exposes their motives. The word tsar ('tight, narrow, distressing') is the root for tsarah ('trouble, distress') — they come not from love but from pressure.

8. The elders escalate their offer from qatsin ('commander,' v. 6) to rosh ('head') — a permanent leadership role over all Gilead's inhabitants. The word lakhen ('therefore, for that very reason') acknowledges the injustice: precisely because they wronged him, they now owe him more. The shift from temporary military authority to permanent political headship reveals how desperate they are. They concede everything Jephthah's brothers once denied him.

9. Jephthah makes the deal explicit and introduces a theological condition: venatan YHWH otam lefanai ('and the LORD gives them before me'). He does not claim personal ability — victory depends on divine action. The conditional im ('if') creates a two-stage test: first the elders must commit, then God must deliver. Only if both conditions are met does Jephthah accept permanent leadership. His political shrewdness matches his military prowess.

10. The elders invoke YHWH yihyeh shomea benotenu ('the LORD will be the one hearing between us') — making God the enforcer of their oath. The verb shomea ('hearing, listening') implies judicial witness: God hears the terms and will hold the violator accountable. The phrase kidvarekha ken na'aseh ('according to your word, so we will do') gives Jephthah full control over the terms. The oath formula is covenantal — a binding agreement with divine enforcement.

11. The installation happens in two dimensions: the people (ha-am) confirm both titles — rosh ('head,' the political role) and qatsin ('commander,' the military role). Then Jephthah speaks kol devarav ('all his words/terms') before the LORD at Mizpah. The phrase lifnei YHWH ('before the LORD') transforms a political negotiation into a sacred covenant. Mizpah ('watchtower') is a significant covenant site — a place where God 'watches' between parties (cf. Genesis 31:49). Jephthah the outcast now stands at the covenant center.

12. Jephthah's first act as leader is diplomatic, not military. The phrase mah li valakh ('what is to me and to you?') is a formula of diplomatic protest — 'what business do you have with me?' His question ki-vata elai lehilachem be-artsi ('that you have come to me to fight against my land') frames the conflict as Ammonite aggression against legitimate Israelite territory. By saying artsi ('my land'), Jephthah claims the land as his own — remarkable for a man who was denied inheritance. The rejected son now speaks for the nation.

13. The Ammonite king's claim defines the disputed territory: from the Arnon (the southern boundary, a deep canyon flowing into the Dead Sea) to the Jabbok (the northern river, modern Zarqa) and to the Jordan (the western border). His demand hashivah ethen beshalom ('return them in peace') presents the choice as war or peaceful restoration. His argument — ki laqach Yisrael et artsi ('because Israel took my land') — frames Israel as the original aggressor. Jephthah's response (vv. 15-27) will dismantle this claim systematically.

14. The phrase vayosef od ('he added again') introduces Jephthah's lengthy diplomatic counter-argument (vv. 15-27), one of the longest diplomatic speeches in Judges. Rather than responding with force, Jephthah builds a careful historical and legal case — demonstrating intellectual sophistication unusual in the Judges cycle.

15. Jephthah opens his legal argument with a flat denial: lo laqach Yisrael ('Israel did not take'). The formula koh amar Yiftach ('thus says Jephthah') mirrors prophetic messenger formulas — Jephthah speaks as an authorized representative. His argument distinguishes between Moabite/Ammonite territory (which Israel did not take) and Amorite territory (which Israel conquered from Sihon). This distinction is crucial: the disputed land was Amorite, not Ammonite, when Israel took it.

16. Jephthah begins a detailed historical recitation of Israel's wilderness journey. Yam Suf ('Sea of Reeds') is the traditional crossing site — rendered here as 'Sea of Reeds' rather than 'Red Sea' following the Hebrew more closely (suf = reeds/rushes). Kadesh (Kadesh-Barnea) was the staging area in the southern wilderness where Israel prepared for entry into the land. Jephthah demonstrates command of Israelite history to establish legal precedent.

17. Jephthah's argument establishes Israel's diplomatic good faith: they requested passage (e'berah-na — 'let me pass through, please') before resorting to force. Both Edom and Moab refused (lo shama, lo avah — 'did not listen, was not willing'). The verb avah ('to be willing, to consent') implies Moab's refusal was deliberate, not incidental. Israel's compliance — vayeshev Yisrael beQadesh ('Israel stayed at Kadesh') — proves they respected territorial boundaries when asked.

18. Jephthah emphasizes Israel's scrupulous respect for borders: vayasov ('they went around, they circled') — the long detour around Edom and Moab rather than forcing passage. The critical detail is velo va'u bigvul Moav ('they did not enter Moab's border'), and the reason: ki Arnon gevul Moav ('because the Arnon was Moab's border'). This establishes that Israel recognized and respected territorial sovereignty. If Israel respected Moab's border at the Arnon, they certainly did not take Ammonite land.

19. The pattern continues: diplomacy before force. Sihon is identified as melekh ha-Emori ('king of the Amorites'), not king of Ammon — a critical distinction in Jephthah's argument. The request na'berah-na be-artsekha ('let us pass through your land, please') is identical in form to the request made to Edom. The phrase ad meqomi ('to my place') implies Israel had a specific destination and was not seeking to conquer Sihon's territory.

20. Unlike Edom and Moab who simply refused, Sihon responds with military force: lo he'emin ('he did not trust') Israel's intentions. The verb he'emin (from the root '-m-n, related to 'amen' and 'faithfulness') means Sihon refused to have faith in Israel's word. He gathered kol ammo ('all his people') and chose Jahaz as his battleground. By initiating combat, Sihon forfeited his territorial claims under ancient Near Eastern norms of war — the key to Jephthah's legal argument.

21. The victory is attributed to YHWH Elohei Yisrael ('the LORD God of Israel') — divine agency, not Israelite military superiority. The verb vayirash ('and he dispossessed, took possession') is a key legal term: Israel's title to the land comes by divine conquest, replacing the Amorite inhabitants. Jephthah's point: this was Amorite land (erets ha-Emori), not Ammonite land. Israel conquered it from Sihon the Amorite, not from Ammon.

22. Jephthah defines the conquered territory using the same boundaries the Ammonite king cited in verse 13 — Arnon, Jabbok, Jordan — but identifies it as gevul ha-Emori ('the border/territory of the Amorite'). The fourth boundary — min ha-midbar ('from the wilderness') — indicates the eastern desert. The rhetorical strategy is precise: the land the Ammonite king claims was Amorite, not Ammonite, when Israel took it. You cannot reclaim what was never yours.

23. Jephthah's argument turns theological: YHWH Elohei Yisrael horish et ha-Emori ('the LORD God of Israel dispossessed the Amorite'). The verb horish (hiphil of y-r-sh, 'to cause to possess / to dispossess') carries double force — God both expelled the Amorites and granted the land to Israel. The rhetorical question ve-atah tirashennu ('and you — will you possess it?') challenges Ammon to contest not Israel's army but Israel's God. Jephthah frames territorial claims as theological claims.

24. This is the most theologically provocative verse in Jephthah's argument. He invokes Kemosh (Chemosh), the national deity of Moab (not Ammon — Ammon's god was Milcom/Molech), framing the dispute in terms both sides can accept: each nation possesses what their god gives them. The argument is diplomatically brilliant but theologically complex — Jephthah appears to grant Chemosh real agency alongside YHWH. Most scholars see this as diplomatic rhetoric rather than polytheistic confession: Jephthah argues on the Ammonite king's own terms. The error in naming Chemosh (a Moabite god) for an Ammonite king may reflect the historical overlap between Moabite and Ammonite territories, or it may be a deliberate conflation in the narrator's source.

25. Jephthah brings a precedent argument: Balak ben Tsippor, king of Moab (from Numbers 22-24), who hired Balaam to curse Israel, never made a territorial claim. The rhetorical questions harov rav ('did he contend?') and im nilchom nilcham ('did he fight?') use infinitive absolute constructions for emphasis. If Balak — who had far more grievance — never contested Israel's possession, what grounds does the current Ammonite king have? The argument from silence is powerful: three centuries of unchallenged possession.

26. Jephthah's strongest argument: prescription by long possession. Shelosh me'ot shanah ('three hundred years') of unchallenged Israelite occupation constitutes legal title. The cities named — Heshbon (Sihon's former capital), Aroer (on the Arnon's north rim), and their satellite villages (benoteiha — literally 'her daughters') — define the full extent of the contested territory. The rhetorical question madua lo hitsaltem ba-et ha-hi ('why did you not deliver/reclaim them at that time?') is devastating: silence for three centuries forfeits any claim.

27. Jephthah closes his argument with a legal verdict and a divine appeal. The phrase lo chatati lakh ('I have not sinned against you') uses the legal sense of chata' — 'transgress, commit an offense.' His countercharge — atah oseh iti ra'ah ('you are doing evil to me') — reverses the accusation. The climax invokes YHWH ha-Shofet ('the LORD the Judge') to render divine judgment (yishpot). The repetition of sh-f-t (judge) — yishpot YHWH ha-Shofet — is emphatic: the ultimate arbiter is God. Jephthah's case rests on three pillars: historical fact, legal precedent, and divine adjudication.

28. The terse velo shama ('and he did not listen') dismisses Jephthah's entire diplomatic effort in a single phrase. The verb shama ('listen, heed') implies more than hearing — it means 'to accept, to comply.' The Ammonite king's refusal makes war inevitable and, in the narrative logic, makes the Ammonite king morally culpable for the ensuing bloodshed. Diplomacy exhausted, the narrative pivots to war.

29. The phrase vattehi al Yiftach ruach YHWH ('the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah') marks divine empowerment for battle — the same Spirit that came upon Othniel (3:10), Gideon (6:34), and Samson (13:25, 14:6). The verb avar ('crossed, passed over') appears three times in rapid succession, creating a sense of sweeping momentum across the tribal territories. The geographic sequence — Gilead, Manasseh, Mizpah of Gilead — traces Jephthah's military march gathering forces. The critical question the narrative raises: if the Spirit empowers Jephthah, does the vow that follows (v. 30-31) also come from the Spirit — or from Jephthah's own anxiety?

30. The phrase vayidar Yiftach neder la-YHWH ('Jephthah vowed a vow to the LORD') uses the cognate accusative (neder/vow + nadar/to vow) for emphasis — this is a solemn, binding oath. The conditional im naton titten ('if giving you will give' — 'if you will certainly give') uses the infinitive absolute for intensity. The vow comes after the Spirit has already come upon Jephthah (v. 29), raising the question: was the vow necessary? The Spirit should have been assurance enough. Many interpreters see Jephthah's vow as revealing insecurity — a man who bargains with God rather than trusting the empowerment already given.

31. This is one of the most debated verses in the Hebrew Bible. The key phrase veha'alitihu olah ('and I will offer it up as a burnt offering') uses olah, the whole burnt offering where the entire animal is consumed by fire — the most complete form of sacrifice. The word ha-yotse ('the one going out') uses a masculine participle, which could refer to a person or animal. The conjunction in vehayah la-YHWH veha'alitihu can be read as 'and' (cumulative: 'it will be the LORD's AND I will offer it as a burnt offering') or 'or' (disjunctive: 'it will be the LORD's OR I will offer it as a burnt offering'). The cumulative reading implies literal sacrifice; the disjunctive reading allows for dedication to divine service. The text's ambiguity may be deliberate — the narrator presents the vow without commentary, forcing the reader to sit with its horror. Ancient interpreters were divided: Josephus and most early readers took it as literal sacrifice; later rabbinic tradition (Radak, Kimchi) argued for lifelong dedication to virginity.

32. The victory is reported with devastating brevity: vayitnem YHWH beyado ('the LORD gave them into his hand'). God fulfills the condition of Jephthah's vow — the Ammonites are delivered. The narrator's terseness is itself a statement: the military triumph is not the point. What matters narratively is what happens when Jephthah goes home. The victory that should be the climax becomes merely the trigger for tragedy.

33. The scope of victory is rendered geographically: from Aroer to Minnith (twenty towns) to Abel-keramim ('meadow of vineyards'). The phrase makkah gedolah me'od ('a very great striking') emphasizes the scale of destruction. The verb vayikkane'u ('they were subdued, humbled') uses the niphal of k-n-' — forced submission. But the narrator rushes through this triumph, devoting only two verses (32-33) to the entire war. The narrative weight falls elsewhere.

34. The collision between vow and reality arrives with devastating force. The word hineh ('there! look!') forces the reader into Jephthah's perspective at the moment of recognition. His daughter is yotse'at liqrato ('coming out to meet him') — the exact fulfillment of ha-yotse asher yetse middaltei veiti liqrati ('whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me,' v. 31). She comes betuppim uvimcholot ('with tambourines and dances') — the traditional victory celebration (cf. Miriam in Exodus 15:20). The narrator's parenthetical — veraq hi yechidah, ein lo mimmennu ben o-vat ('she was his only one; he had no son or daughter besides her') — maximizes the pathos. The word yechidah ('only one, unique one') echoes Genesis 22:2 where Isaac is called yachid ('your only one'), creating an unmistakable parallel between Jephthah's daughter and the binding of Isaac.

35. Jephthah's grief erupts physically — vayiqra et begadav ('he tore his garments'), the traditional sign of mourning and anguish. His cry ahah bitti ('alas, my daughter!') is raw lament. The verb hikhra'tini ('you have brought me low, brought me to my knees') from k-r-' uses the hiphil intensive — she has destroyed him, though she has done nothing wrong. The phrase ve-at hayit be-okhrai ('you have become among my troublers') uses the root '-k-r, the same root in Achan's name and story (Joshua 7) — one who brings catastrophe on the community. But the devastating self-indictment follows: anokhi patsiti fi el-YHWH ('I opened my mouth to the LORD') — the fault is his words, not her existence. Velo ukhal lashuv ('I cannot return/retract') reflects the ancient Near Eastern understanding that vows to a deity are irrevocable (cf. Numbers 30:3).

36. The daughter's response is among the most remarkable speeches in the Hebrew Bible. She addresses him as avi ('my father') — the relationship word that should have prevented the vow's fulfillment. Her words aseh li ka'asher yatsa mipikha ('do to me according to what came out of your mouth') accept the vow's binding force. She frames compliance as the proper response to God's faithfulness: acharei asher asah lekha YHWH neqamot me-oyvekha ('since the LORD has carried out vengeance for you against your enemies'). Her theology is flawless — God kept His side of the bargain; the human side must be honored too. She never names herself as victim; she speaks as a covenant participant. Her courage exceeds her father's — she faces the vow's consequence without tearing her garments.

37. Her single request: harpeh mimmenni shenayim chodashim ('release me for two months'). The verb harpeh ('let go, release, relax your grip') implies she is already held by the vow's power. She will yaradti al he-harim ('go down upon the mountains') — the verb yarad normally means 'descend,' but here likely means 'roam' or 'wander' over the mountain terrain. What she mourns is al betulai ('over my virginity') — betulim refers to her virginal state, meaning she will never marry, never bear children, never continue her father's line. In an Israelite context where lineage and progeny were paramount blessings, this is a form of death even if she physically survives. Her companions (re'otai — 'my female friends') will share her grief.

38. Jephthah's response is a single word: lekhi ('go'). The brevity speaks volumes — he has nothing left to say. The narrator reports without commentary: vayishlach otah shenei chodashim ('he sent her for two months'). The verb shalach ('send') is the same used for sending messengers — but here he sends his daughter to grieve her own life. She and her companions vattevk ('wept') — the community of women shares what the community of men caused. The mountains become a space of ritual lamentation, separate from the settlements where men make vows and wars.

39. This is the pivotal and deliberately ambiguous verse. The narrator states vaya'as lah et nidro asher nadar ('he did to her his vow which he had vowed') — but does NOT describe what he actually did. The text is silent at the precise moment the reader most needs to know. Two major interpretive traditions exist: (1) LITERAL SACRIFICE — Jephthah offered his daughter as an olah (burnt offering), which is the plain meaning of the vow in v. 31 and was understood this way by Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, and most early interpreters; (2) PERPETUAL DEDICATION — Jephthah dedicated his daughter to lifelong virginity and service to God, reading the vav in v. 31 as disjunctive ('or'), supported by the narrator's note vehi lo yade'ah ish ('she did not know a man'), which would be superfluous if she were dead. The phrase vattehi choq be-Yisrael ('it became a statute/custom in Israel') introduces the annual commemoration in v. 40. CRITICAL: Unlike Genesis 22, where God intervenes to stop Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, no angel speaks here. No ram appears. The narrator offers no divine commentary — no approval, no condemnation. The silence of God in this text is itself a theological statement that the reader must confront.

40. The chapter closes with an annual women's ritual: mi-yamim yamimah ('from days to days' — 'year after year') the benot Yisrael ('daughters of Israel') gather letannot levat Yiftach ('to commemorate/lament for the daughter of Jephthah'). The verb tannot is debated: it may derive from t-n-h ('to recount, to rehearse, to lament') — either retelling her story or mourning her fate. The four-day annual observance (arba'at yamim ba-shanah) preserved her memory in Israelite women's tradition. She is never named — she is simply bat Yiftach ('Jephthah's daughter'), defined entirely by the father whose vow consumed her. The women of Israel remember what the men of Israel caused. The Judges cycle continues its descent: from

Gideon's compromised victory to Abimelech's tyranny to Jephthah's devastating vow — each judge more costly than the last.

12

Summary: *The Ephraimites challenge Jephthah for not summoning them to battle. Civil war breaks out. Jephthah's Gileadites use the word 'Shibboleth' to identify fleeing Ephraimites, who cannot pronounce the 'sh' sound. 42,000 Ephraimites fall.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The Shibboleth test (v. 6) is the Bible's most famous linguistic episode. The Ephraimites' dialect lacked the shin sound, producing 'Sibboleth' instead of 'Shibboleth' — and this phonetic difference became a death sentence. The word itself means 'ear of grain' or 'flowing stream,' and its meaning is irrelevant; what matters is pronunciation. Identity is betrayed by accent, not by argument.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase vayyomru lo Sibbolet (v. 6, 'they would say Sibbolet') represents a dialectal difference that we can describe but cannot reproduce in English — both 'sh' and 's' exist in English, so the test's lethality requires explanation. We rendered the episode as the Hebrew presents it and noted the phonological reality. The number 42,000 (v. 6) is staggering for inter-tribal conflict — it exceeds most external wars in the book.*

Connections: *Ephraim's complaint echoes their identical challenge to Gideon (8:1-3), but Jephthah — lacking Gideon's diplomacy — responds with violence. The inter-tribal warfare previews the civil war against Benjamin (ch. 20). The Shibboleth episode has become a universal metaphor for identity testing. The three minor judges closing the chapter (Ibzan, Elon, Abdon) mark time between the major narratives.*

1 The men of Ephraim mobilized and crossed over to Zaphon. They said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight the
Ammonites without calling us to go with you? We will burn your house down on top of you!" 2 Jephthah said to them, "I and
my people had a fierce dispute with the Ammonites. I called for your help, but you did not rescue me from their hand. 3 Whe
n I saw that you would not save me, I took my life in my hands and crossed over against the Ammonites, and the LORD gave
them into my hand. So why have you come up against me today to fight me?" 4 Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and
fought Ephraim. The men of Gilead struck down the Ephraimites, because they had said, "You Gileadites are fugitives from
Ephraim — you are nothing but Ephraim's and Manasseh's rejects!" 5 The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan ahead
of the Ephraimites. Whenever a fugitive from Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would ask him, "Are you
an Ephraimite?" If he said, "No," 6 they would say to him, "Say 'shibboleth.'" If he said "sibboleth" — unable to pronounce it
correctly — they would seize him and slaughter him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites fell at that
time. 7 Jephthah judged Israel for six years. Then Jephthah the Gileadite died and was buried in one of the towns of Gilead. 8
Following him, Ibzan of Bethlehem served as judge over Israel. 9 He had thirty sons and thirty daughters. He sent his
daughters out in marriage and brought in thirty daughters from outside for his sons. He judged Israel for seven years. 10 The
n Ibzan died and was buried in Bethlehem. 11 After him, Elon the Zebulonite judged Israel. He judged Israel for ten years. 12 El
on the Zebulonite died and was buried in Aijalon in the territory of Zebulun. 13 After him, Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite
judged Israel. 14 He had forty sons and thirty grandsons who rode on seventy donkeys. He judged Israel for eight years. 15 Abd
on son of Hillel the Pirathonite died and was buried in Pirathon, in the territory of Ephraim, in the hill country of the
Amalekites.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The Ephraimites' complaint echoes their confrontation with Gideon (8:1-3), but this time the rhetoric is far more violent: beitekha nisrof alekha ba-esh ('your house we will burn over you with fire'). The verb yitsa'eq ('they cried out, assembled') implies a military muster, not just verbal protest. The phrase avar tsafonah ('crossed northward') may refer to the town Zaphon (in the Jordan Valley) rather than the direction 'north.' Ephraim's grievance — that they were excluded from the campaign — masks tribal jealousy: they want credit for a victory they did nothing to achieve. The pattern of Ephraimite entitlement recurs across Judges and foreshadows the eventual fracture between northern and southern tribes.

2. Jephthah's response is defensive but factual: ish riv hayiti ani ve-ammi ('a man of strife I was, I and my people') — the conflict was real and intense. Unlike Gideon's diplomatic deflection (8:2-3), Jephthah confronts directly: va'ez'aq etkhem ('I cried out to you') — the verb za'aq is the same cry of distress Israel makes to God throughout Judges. His accusation: velo hosha'tem oti miyyadam ('you did not save me from their hand'). Whether this summons actually happened or Jephthah is fabricating a defense, the text does not say — but his point stands either way.

3. The phrase va'asimah nafshi bekhappi ('I placed my life in my palm') is a vivid idiom for mortal risk — holding one's own life as if it might fall and shatter. Jephthah attributes the victory to divine action: vayitnem YHWH beyadi ('the LORD gave them into my hand'), implicitly asking: if God endorsed my leadership with victory, who are you to challenge it? His final question — lamah alitem elai ('why have you come up against me?') — frames Ephraim's action as aggression against a divinely validated leader.

4. The insult pelitei Efrayim attem ('fugitives of Ephraim you are') cuts deep — the Ephraimites dismiss Gileadites as refugees, people without their own tribal identity, absorbed between Ephraim and Manasseh. This echoes Jephthah's personal history of rejection (11:1-3). The taunt transforms a diplomatic dispute into tribal war. Gilead's furious response — vayakku anshei Gil'ad et Efrayim ('the men of Gilead struck Ephraim') — escalates from words to civil war. Where Gideon defused Ephraimite anger with flattery (8:2), Jephthah answers with the sword.

5. The Gileadites seize the ma'abrot ha-Yarden ('fords/crossing points of the Jordan') — the only way for fleeing Ephraimites to reach home on the west bank. This strategic control transforms a military victory into a systematic execution. The irony is sharp: pelitei Efrayim ('fugitives of Ephraim') was the insult Ephraim hurled at Gilead (v. 4), and now Ephraim's own men are the actual fugitives. The interrogation ha-Efrati atah ('are you an Ephrathite/Ephraimite?') begins the test — but a simple denial is not enough.

6. This verse gave the English language the word 'shibboleth' — a test of group identity through speech. The Hebrew word shibbolet means either 'flowing stream' (fitting the Jordan River context) or 'ear of grain.' The Ephraimite dialect lacked the shin/sin distinction — they pronounced the initial consonant as samekh rather than shin, producing sibbolet instead of shibbolet. The phrase velo yakhin ledabber ken ('he could not establish/manage to speak thus') indicates a genuine dialectal inability, not deliberate deception. The verb vayishchatuhu ('they slaughtered him') uses the verb reserved for animal slaughter (sh-ch-t), dehumanizing the victims. The number arba'im ushenayim elef ('forty-two thousand') represents catastrophic intertribal violence — Israelite killing Israelite over pronunciation. The Judges cycle's descent continues: God's deliverer now presides over civil war.

7. Jephthah's tenure is brief — shesh shanim ('six years') — and his burial notice is strikingly vague: vayiqqaver be-arei Gil'ad ('he was buried in the towns of Gilead'). The plural arei ('towns of') rather than a specific city name is unusual; most judges receive a named burial site. Some scholars suggest textual corruption, others that the vagueness reflects Jephthah's ambiguous legacy — a man who belonged nowhere specific, the perpetual outsider even in death. His judgeship is summarized without evaluation; the narrator lets the reader weigh the cost.

8. The narrative shifts to a series of 'minor judges' — figures given brief biographical notices without deliverance stories. Ibzan is from Beit Lechem ('Bethlehem'), though scholars debate whether this is the famous Bethlehem in Judah or a lesser-known Bethlehem in the Zebulun tribal territory (cf. Joshua 19:15). The minor judges provide chronological continuity and suggest that Israel's governance was not limited to charismatic military deliverers.

9. Ibzan's biography is defined by family: sheloshim banim ushloshim banot ('thirty sons and thirty daughters') — an enormous household indicating wealth and status. The phrase shillach ha-chutsah ('he sent out') refers to marrying daughters into other clans, while hevi levanav min ha-chuts ('he brought in for his sons from outside') means arranging marriages from other families. This network of sixty marriages represents massive political alliance-building through intermarriage — governance through kinship networks rather than military force. The contrast with Jephthah, who lost his only daughter, is painful.

10. Ibzan receives a proper named burial — bebeit lachem ('in Bethlehem') — unlike Jephthah's vague burial notice (v. 7). The minor judges' biographical notices follow a consistent formula: judgeship duration, family details, death, and burial location. These formulaic entries contrast sharply with the extended, troubled narratives of the major judges.

11. Elon (meaning 'oak' or 'great tree') is from the tribe of Zebulun in the northern Galilee region. His entry is the most minimal of all the minor judges — no family details, no notable achievements, only his tribal affiliation and tenure: eser shanim ('ten years'). The name Elon may connect to the sacred oak trees associated with worship sites throughout Judges and Genesis.

12. Elon is buried in Ayalon — a name that shares the same consonantal root as his own name ('-y-l-n, related to 'oak/tree'). This Ayalon in Zebulun's territory is distinct from the more famous Aijalon in Dan (cf. Joshua 10:12). The phonetic connection between the judge's name and his burial site may be coincidental or may reflect a local tradition linking the person to the place.

13. Abdon ('servant, service') son of Hillel ('praise') comes from Pirathon, a town in the Ephraim hill country (cf. 2 Samuel 23:30). His name Avdon from the root '-b-d ('to serve') and his father's name Hillel from h-l-l ('to praise') together suggest 'servant of praise' — though this may be coincidental rather than intentional. His Ephraimite origin is notable given the recent intertribal war with Ephraim (vv. 1-6).

14. Abdon's household is the largest among the minor judges: arba'im banim ushloshim benei vanim ('forty sons and thirty grandsons') — seventy male descendants in total. The detail that they rode al shiv'im ayarim ('on seventy donkey colts') signals wealth and status; donkeys were the riding animals of nobility and judges (cf. 5:10, 10:4). The number seventy echoes Gideon's seventy sons (8:30) and carries symbolic weight as a number of completeness (7 × 10). His eight-year tenure (shemoneh shanim) is modest compared to his household's grandeur.

15. Abdon is buried bePir'aton be-erets Efrayim behar ha-Amaleqi ('in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim in the mountain of the Amalekite'). The reference to har ha-Amaleqi ('the hill of the Amalekite') is enigmatic — Amalekites were desert nomads associated with the Negev and Sinai, not the Ephraim highlands. The name may preserve an ancient memory of Amalekite incursion (cf. 6:3) or a local toponym. The chapter closes with the last of the minor judges before the Samson cycle begins (chapters 13-16), marking the final descent into the chaos that will culminate in the book's concluding refrain: 'In those days there was no king in Israel.'

13

Summary: *An angel of the LORD appears to Manoah's barren wife, announcing she will bear a son who will be a Nazirite from the womb and begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines. Manoah encounters the angel and is terrified. Samson is born.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The annunciation to Manoah's wife follows the barren-mother pattern (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah), but with a twist: the angel speaks to the woman, not the man, and she understands the encounter better than her husband does. Manoah asks the angel's name and receives the answer peli ('wonderful/beyond understanding,' v. 18) — the same root as the 'Wonderful' of Isaiah 9:6. The angel ascends in the altar flame (v. 20), merging sacrifice and theophany.*

Translation Friction: *The Nazirite vow (v. 5) — no wine, no razor, no corpse contact (Numbers 6) — is imposed before birth, making it involuntary. Samson will violate all three conditions during his life. We rendered nazir as 'Nazirite' (one set apart to God) and noted that the word shares a root with nezer ('crown/consecration'). The phrase yachel lehoshi'a (v. 5, 'begin to deliver') is precise: Samson only begins what later generations must complete.*

Connections: *The barren-mother annunciation echoes Genesis 18 (Sarah) and anticipates 1 Samuel 1 (Hannah) and Luke 1 (Mary). The angel-in-the-flame echoes the burning bush (Exodus 3). Samson's incomplete deliverance ('begin to deliver') sets up the Philistine conflict that dominates 1 Samuel. The Nazirite vow connects to Numbers 6 and anticipates Samuel's dedication (1 Samuel 1:11).*

1The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years. 2There was a man from Zorah, from the clan of Dan, whose name was Manoah. His wife was unable to conceive and had never given birth. 3The angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "You are currently unable to conceive and have not given birth, but you will become pregnant and bear a son. 4Now be careful: do not drink wine or any fermented drink, and do not eat anything ritually impure. 5For you will become pregnant and bear a son. No razor is to touch his head, because the boy will be a Nazirite dedicated to God from the womb. He will begin to rescue Israel from the hand of the Philistines." 6The woman went and told her husband, "A man of God came to me. His appearance was like the appearance of an angel of God — utterly awe-inspiring. I did not ask him where he was from, and he did not tell me his name. 7He said to me, 'You will become pregnant and bear a son. Now, do not drink wine or any fermented drink, and do not eat anything ritually impure, because the boy will be a Nazirite of God from the womb until the day of his death.'" 8Manoah prayed to the LORD and said, "Please, my Lord, let the man of God you sent come to us again and instruct us on what we should do for the child who is to be born." 9God listened to Manoah's voice, and the angel of God came again to the woman while she was sitting in the field. But Manoah her husband was not with her. 10The woman hurried and ran to tell her husband. She said to him, "The man who came to me the other day has appeared to me again!" 11Manoah got up and followed his wife. He came to the man and asked him, "Are you the man who spoke to this woman?" He answered, "I am." 12 Manoah said, "When your words come true, what is to be the rule for the boy's life and his work?" 13The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "The woman must be careful about everything I told her. 14She must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, and she must not drink wine or any fermented drink, and she must not eat anything ritually impure. She must observe everything I commanded her." 15Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "Please let us keep you here while we prepare a young goat for you." 16The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Even if you keep me here, I will not eat your food. But if you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the LORD." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) 17

Manoah asked the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that when your words come true, we can honor you?" 18The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask for my name? It is beyond comprehension." 19Manoah took the young goat and the grain offering and offered them on the rock to the LORD — and He performed something extraordinary while Manoah and his wife watched. 20As the flame rose from the altar toward the sky, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. Manoah and his wife watched, and they fell face-down to the ground. 21The angel of the LORD did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that he was the angel of the LORD. 22Manoah said to his wife, "We are certainly going to die, because we have seen God!" 23But his wife said to him, "If the LORD intended to kill us, He would not have accepted the burnt offering and the grain offering from our hands. He would not have shown us all these things, and He would not have announced something like this to us just now." 24The woman gave birth to a son and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the LORD blessed him. 25The Spirit of the LORD began to stir him in the camp of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The seventh and final cycle opens with the standard formula va-yosifu benei Yisra'el la'asot ha-ra ('the Israelites again did the evil'). This is the longest oppression in Judges — arba'im shanah ('forty years'), a full generation under Philistine domination. Unlike previous cycles, there is no cry for deliverance recorded. The absence of Israel's cry is striking: the people seem to have accepted Philistine rule as normal. The decline of the judges era reaches its nadir.
2. The introduction follows the birth-announcement pattern found with Isaac (Genesis 18), Samuel (1 Samuel 1), and John the Baptist (Luke 1). The word aqarah ('barren') followed by ve-lo yaladah ('and she had not given birth') is emphatic — the situation is humanly impossible. Notably, the wife is never named; she remains 'the wife of Manoah' throughout, yet she proves to be the more perceptive and theologically astute of the pair. Zorah sits on the border between Israelite and Philistine territory in the Shephelah — the zone of conflict that defines Samson's entire life.
3. Malakh YHWH ('the angel of the LORD') — this figure in Judges is consistently presented as more than a mere messenger. In chapter 6, the malakh YHWH is identified with God Himself (6:14, 22). The appearance to the woman rather than to her husband is significant — God chooses to reveal the birth announcement to the one who will carry the child. The promise structure — present impossibility (aqarah, 'barren') followed by future certainty (veharit, 'you will conceive') — echoes the Abrahamic promise pattern.
4. The prohibitions begin with the mother, not the child — she must observe Nazirite-like restrictions during pregnancy. Yayin ('wine') and shekhar ('strong drink, fermented beverage') cover all alcoholic drinks. The term tame ('impure, unclean') refers to foods forbidden under the Levitical dietary laws. The mother's body must be consecrated because the child she carries is already set apart. This prenatal holiness requirement is unique to Samson among all the judges.
5. Morah lo ya'aleh al rosho ('a razor shall not come upon his head') — the uncut hair is the visible sign of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:5). The full Nazirite vow includes three prohibitions: no grape products, no contact with the dead, no cutting the hair. Samson will eventually violate all three. The word nezir ('Nazirite, set apart one') comes from the root nazar ('to separate, consecrate'). The phrase min ha-baten ('from the womb') marks this as a lifelong consecration — unlike voluntary Nazirite vows which had a set duration (Numbers 6:13). The verb yachel ('he will begin') is critically important: Samson will only begin the deliverance from the Philistines. The full liberation requires Samuel, Saul, and David. Even before his birth, Samson's mission is framed as incomplete.
6. She describes the visitor as ish ha-Elohim ('a man of God') with an appearance like malakh ha-Elohim ('an angel of God') — she senses the divine nature without fully identifying it. The adjective nora me'od ('very terrible/awesome, utterly awe-inspiring') captures the numinous terror of the divine presence. Her restraint in not asking his origin or name shows either reverence or awe-struck inability to question. The rendering uses 'awe-inspiring' rather than KJV's 'terrible' because the modern English sense of 'terrible' has shifted to mean 'bad' rather than 'fear-inducing.'
7. The woman's report to Manoah subtly differs from the angel's original words. She adds ad yom moto ('until the day of his death') — a phrase the angel did not use in verse 5. She also omits the angel's statement about the razor and about the child beginning to deliver Israel. Whether this represents imperfect memory, interpretive expansion, or the narrator's intentional shaping is debated. The addition of 'until the day of his death' foreshadows the tragic end of the Samson story — his consecration and his death are linked from the beginning.
8. Va-ye'tar Manoach ('Manoah prayed earnestly') — the verb atar means 'to pray, to entreat,' carrying a sense of persistent, heartfelt petition. Manoah's request is understandable — he wants practical parenting instructions (mah na'aseh la-na'ar, 'what shall we do for the boy'). But it also reveals that he needs to see and hear the messenger for himself. The prayer addresses God (YHWH) while asking for the return of the ish ha-Elohim ('man of God') — Manoah correctly connects the messenger with his Sender.
9. God answers Manoah's prayer but sends the angel to the woman again — not to Manoah. The detail that Manoah ein immah ('was not with her') creates a pattern: the angel consistently seeks the woman. She is the primary recipient of the revelation. This may be because she demonstrates greater spiritual perception throughout the narrative — she recognizes the divine nature of the visitor (v. 6) and later offers the correct theological response when Manoah panics (v. 23).

10. Va-temaher... va-tarots ('she hurried... she ran') — the double verb conveys urgency and excitement. Despite the angel appearing to her a second time, she immediately shares the experience with Manoah. The phrase ba-yom ('the day,' or 'the other day') is ambiguous — it could mean 'that day' or 'recently.' The woman serves as mediator between the divine messenger and her husband, a reversal of typical ancient Near Eastern patriarchal patterns.

11. Va-yelekh Manoach acharei ishto ('Manoah went after his wife') — he follows her lead, literally and figuratively. His question ha-attah ha-ish ('Are you the man?') seeks confirmation of identity. The angel's terse response ani ('I am') is simply affirmative here, though the word carries deeper resonances throughout the Hebrew Bible as a form of divine self-identification.

12. Mishpat ha-na'ar u-ma'asehu ('the rule of the boy and his work/deed') — mishpat here means 'prescribed manner, regulation, custom' rather than 'judgment.' Manoah wants a practical manual for raising a Nazirite child. The term ma'asehu ('his deed, his work') asks about the boy's future mission. Manoah's question is well-intentioned but slightly presumptuous — he is asking for details beyond what the angel offered.

13. The angel redirects Manoah to what was already said to the woman — tishamer ('she must guard, be careful'). The angel does not provide the additional instructions Manoah sought. The revelation was sufficient the first time. There is a gentle rebuke implied: Manoah does not need new information; he needs to heed what his wife already received.

14. The angel now expands the earlier prohibition: not just wine and strong drink, but mikol asher yetse mi-gefen ha-yayin ('anything that comes from the vine of wine') — grapes, raisins, grape juice, vinegar. This matches the full Nazirite requirements of Numbers 6:3-4. The expansion suggests that even the mother must observe the complete Nazirite dietary restrictions, not just abstain from alcohol. The threefold prohibition (no vine products, no fermented drinks, no impure food) creates a comprehensive framework of consecrated living.

15. Na'atserah na otekha ('please let us detain you') — Manoah offers hospitality, as Gideon did in 6:18. The gedi izzim ('kid of the goats, young goat') is a standard meal offering for a guest of honor (cf. Genesis 18:7, Judges 6:19). Manoah still thinks he is dealing with a human prophet and offers appropriate hospitality. The parallel with Gideon's theophany in chapter 6 is deliberate — both hosts offer a goat meal, and both encounters end with fire from the altar.

16. The angel refuses to eat — lo okhal be-lachmekha ('I will not eat of your bread/food') — because he is not a human guest. Instead, he redirects the offering: if Manoah wants to prepare something, it should be an olah ('burnt offering, whole offering') directed to YHWH, not a meal shared with a visitor. The narrator's aside — ki lo yada Manoach ki malakh YHWH hu ('for Manoah did not know he was the angel of the LORD') — explains Manoah's confusion. The dramatic irony deepens: the reader knows what Manoah does not.

17. Manoah's question mi shemekha ('what is your name?') seeks to know the identity of the messenger so he can give proper recognition (kibbadnukha, 'we may honor you'). In the ancient Near East, knowing someone's name implied a relationship and the ability to invoke that person. Manoah still operates in a human framework — he wants to credit the prophet when the prediction comes true. The request for a name will receive one of the most mysterious answers in Scripture.

18. Ve-hu peli ('and it is wonderful/incomprehensible') — the word peli comes from the root pala, meaning 'to be extraordinary, beyond human understanding, wonderful.' KJV renders this as 'secret,' but the word does not mean hidden or confidential; it means transcendent, beyond the capacity of human categories. The angel does not refuse to give a name out of secrecy but because his identity cannot be contained in a name. This is the language of theophany — compare Isaiah 9:6 where the Messianic figure's name is pele yo'ets ('Wonderful Counselor'). The angel's refusal signals that Manoah is not dealing with a prophet or even an ordinary angel, but with the divine presence itself.

19. The goat intended as a meal for the guest becomes an olah ('burnt offering') on the tsur ('rock') — an improvised altar. The phrase u-mafli la'asot ('and doing wonderfully, performing something extraordinary') uses the same root pala as verse 18. What was 'beyond comprehension' in the angel's name now becomes visible in the angel's action. The transition from minchat hospitality to sacrificial worship marks the shift from human interaction to divine encounter. Manoah and his wife are witnesses — ro'im ('watching, seeing') — to something that defies natural explanation.

20. Va-ya'al malakh YHWH be-lahav ha-mizbeach ('the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar') — the angel does not merely depart; he ascends within the sacrificial fire itself. The image fuses the messenger with the offering — the angel rides the flame heavenward, uniting the divine presence with the sacrifice in a single ascending movement. This directly parallels Gideon's experience in 6:21, where fire springs from the rock and consumes the offering. The prostration (va-yippelu al peneihem artsah, 'they fell on their faces to the ground') is the instinctive response to theophany — the same posture of worship and terror seen throughout Scripture when humans encounter God's unmediated presence.

21. Az yada Manoach ('then Manoah knew') — the recognition comes only after the angel's departure. Throughout the encounter, Manoah operated under the assumption that he was hosting a human prophet. The supernatural ascent in the flame makes the truth undeniable. The verb yada ('to know') marks a cognitive and spiritual shift — what the woman perceived intuitively from the start (v. 6), Manoah grasps only through dramatic demonstration. His slower perception is not presented as a moral failing but as a narrative device that heightens the revelation.

22. Mot namut ki Elohim ra'inu ('dying we shall die, for God we have seen') — the infinitive absolute mot namut intensifies the certainty of death. Manoah's fear is rooted in the widespread ancient belief that seeing God means death (Exodus 33:20, Genesis 32:30, Isaiah 6:5). His identification of the angel as Elohim ('God') is theologically significant — the malakh YHWH is God appearing in visible form. The panic is understandable, but his wife will immediately demonstrate superior theological reasoning.

23. The unnamed woman's logic is flawless: lu chafets YHWH lahamitenu ('if the LORD desired to kill us') — she reasons from God's actions to His intentions. God accepted the sacrifice (evidence of favor, not wrath), revealed visions (investment in their future, not their destruction), and announced a birth (promise, not threat). Her three-part argument moves from worship (offering accepted) to revelation (things shown) to promise

(birth announced). This is one of the finest examples of practical theology in Judges — she reads God's character from God's behavior. The contrast with Manoah is striking: he leaps to fear; she reasons toward faith.

24. Shimshon — the name likely derives from shemesh ('sun'), possibly meaning 'little sun' or 'sun-like one.' Zorah, Samson's hometown, overlooks the Sorek Valley to the west, facing the setting sun — the direction of Philistine territory. The name may also be wordplay with the nearby site Beth-Shemesh ('house of the sun'). Va-yevarakhehu YHWH ('and the LORD blessed him') — a brief note of divine favor that will make Samson's later rebellion all the more tragic. The boy is blessed, consecrated, and named for the sun — yet his story will end in darkness and blindness.

25. Va-tachel ruach YHWH lefa'amo ('the Spirit of the LORD began to stir/impel him') — the verb pa'am means 'to thrust, strike, impel, stir.' The Spirit's action on Samson begins as stirrings — impulses toward action. This is the first of several Spirit-empowerment statements in the Samson cycle. The verbs will escalate: here the Spirit 'stirs' (pa'am), in 14:6 and 14:19 and 15:14 the Spirit 'rushes upon' (tsalach), and in 16:20 the Spirit departs (sar). The geography — Machaneh Dan ('camp of Dan'), between Zorah and Eshtaol — is the same place where Samson will be buried (16:31), forming an inclusio around his entire life.

14

Summary: *Samson demands a Philistine wife from Timnah. On the way, he kills a lion with his bare hands. Later he finds honey in the carcass and poses a riddle at his wedding feast. When his wife extracts the answer, he kills thirty Philistines for their garments and abandons his wife.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The narrator offers a theological key the characters lack: 'his father and mother did not know that it was from the LORD, who was seeking an occasion against the Philistines' (v. 4). Samson's desire for a Philistine wife — which violates every Deuteronomic principle — is used by God to provoke conflict with the Philistines. The riddle (v. 14, 'out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet') is both clever and theological: destruction produces sustenance, a pattern woven through the entire Samson narrative.*

Translation Friction: *The verb tsalach (v. 6, 'rushed upon') describes the Spirit's action as violent irruption, not gentle empowerment. We rendered it 'rushed upon' to preserve the Hebrew's force. Samson's contact with the lion carcass violates his Nazirite vow (corpse contact, Numbers 6:6), though the text does not comment — the silent violations accumulate.*

Connections: *The Spirit rushing upon Samson echoes its action on Othniel (3:10), Gideon (6:34), and Jephthah (11:29), but Samson is the only judge whose Spirit-empowerment serves personal rather than communal purposes. The honey-from-the-lion image anticipates the theological paradox of Samson's death (ch. 16): out of destruction comes deliverance. The Philistine-wife theme contrasts with the inter-Israelite marriage ideals of Deuteronomy 7.*

1 Samson went down to Timnah and saw a Philistine woman there. 2 He went back up and told his father and mother, "I saw a
Philistine woman in Timnah. Now get her for me as a wife." 3 His father and mother said to him, "Is there no woman among
your relatives or among all our people, that you must go take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson told
his father, "Get her for me, because she is the one I want." 4 His father and mother did not realize that this was from the
LORD, who was seeking an opportunity to confront the Philistines — for at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel. 5
Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah. When they reached the vineyards of Timnah, a young lion came
roaring toward him. 6 The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would tear apart a young
goat — with nothing in his hands. But he did not tell his father or mother what he had done. 7 He went down and spoke with
the woman, and she was pleasing in Samson's eyes. 8 Some time later, when he returned to marry her, he turned aside to look
at the lion's carcass. A swarm of bees had settled in the lion's body, along with honey. 9 He scraped it out into his hands and
walked along eating it. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them and they ate it too. But he did not tell
them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass. 10 His father went down to the woman, and Samson held a feast
there, as was the custom for young men. 11 When the Philistines saw him, they provided thirty companions to be with him. 12
Samson said to them, "Let me pose a riddle to you. If you can solve it during the seven days of the feast, I will give you thirty
linen garments and thirty sets of clothing. 13 But if you cannot solve it, then you will give me thirty linen garments and thirty

sets of clothing." They said to him, "Pose your riddle — let us hear it." 14He said to them: "Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet." They could not solve the riddle for three days. 15On the seventh day, they said to Samson's wife, "Persuade your husband to tell us the answer to the riddle, or we will burn you and your father's household alive. Did you invite us here just to rob us?" 16Samson's wife wept over him and said, "You only hate me — you do not love me! You posed a riddle to my people and haven't told me the answer!" He said to her, "I haven't even told my father or mother. Why would I tell you?" 17She wept over him through the seven days of the feast. On the seventh day he told her, because she had pressured him relentlessly. Then she told the answer to her people. 18On the seventh day, before the sun set, the men of the city said to him: "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" He said to them, "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." 19The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty men there, took their clothing, and gave the garments to those who had answered the riddle. Burning with anger, he went back up to his father's house. 20And Samson's wife was given to the companion who had been his best man.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Va-yered Shimshon Timnatah ('Samson went down to Timnah') — the verb yarad ('to go down') is geographically accurate (Timnah is lower than Zorah) but also signals spiritual descent. Throughout the Samson cycle, his movements are consistently downward — toward Philistine territory, toward compromise, toward captivity. Timnah was a border town in the Sorek Valley, roughly four miles from Zorah. The phrase mi-benot Pelishtim ('from the daughters of the Philistines') immediately signals trouble — the man set apart as a Nazirite is drawn to the women of the very people he is meant to oppose.
2. Samson's demand qechu otah li le-ishah ('get her for me as a wife') is blunt and imperious. He does not ask; he commands. The verb ra'iti ('I saw') echoes the language of desire and temptation — seeing leads to wanting, as with Eve in Genesis 3:6 and David in 2 Samuel 11:2. Marriage to a Philistine woman would violate the prohibition against intermarriage with the nations (Deuteronomy 7:3), though the Philistines are not explicitly listed among the prohibited peoples in that text. Samson's parents will serve as the voice of covenant faithfulness in the next verse.
3. The parents' objection uses the term ha-arelim ('the uncircumcised') — the most contemptuous Israelite designation for the Philistines, defining them by what they lack: the covenant sign. Samson's response ki hi yashrah be-einai ('because she is right/pleasing in my eyes') uses the exact phrase that characterizes the moral chaos of the judges era — 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes' (17:6, 21:25). The Nazirite judge embodies the very problem he was born to address. He does what is 'right in his own eyes' rather than what is right in God's eyes.
4. Ki me-YHWH hi ('for it was from the LORD') — this stunning editorial comment reveals that God works through Samson's sinful desire to achieve divine purposes. The word to'anah ('occasion, opportunity, pretext') means God is looking for a provocation, a reason to initiate conflict with the Philistines. This does not excuse Samson's lust; it shows God's sovereignty operating through human failure. The narrator adds the political context: Pelishtim moshelim be-Yisra'el ('the Philistines were ruling over Israel'). God's plan for deliverance runs through the very compromise that makes Samson an unlikely judge. The tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is left deliberately unresolved.
5. Kefir arayot ('a young lion') — kefir refers to a young but fully grown lion in its prime, not a cub. The lion sho'eg liqrato ('roaring to meet him, charging at him') is a lethal threat. The location in the karmei Timnatah ('vineyards of Timnah') is significant — a Nazirite should have no business in vineyards, where grapes grow. The text may subtly hint that Samson is already in territory that compromises his vow. His parents are present for the journey but apparently not for the lion encounter, as verse 6 notes he told them nothing about it.
6. Va-titslach alav ruach YHWH ('the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him') — the verb tsalach means 'to rush, to advance forcefully.' This is the characteristic verb for the Spirit's empowerment of Samson, appearing three times in the cycle (14:6, 14:19, 15:14). It conveys sudden, overwhelming, almost violent infusion of divine power. The result is superhuman: va-yeshasse'ehu ke-shassa ha-gedi ('he tore it as one tears a kid') — shasa means 'to tear, to rip apart.' The comparison to tearing a young goat makes the extraordinary seem casual. The secrecy — lo higgid le-aviv ule-immo ('he did not tell his father and mother') — is puzzling. It may set up the later narrative requirement: if his parents knew about the lion, the riddle would be solvable.
7. Va-tishar be-einei Shimshon ('she was pleasing in the eyes of Samson') — the verb yashar ('to be straight, right, pleasing') echoes verse 3 where the same root described his desire (yashrah be-einai, 'right in my eyes'). The repetition emphasizes that Samson's motivation is entirely visual and personal. The verb yarad ('went down') appears again — his pattern of descent continues. He speaks with the woman (va-yedabber la-ishah) but the content of the conversation is not recorded; what matters to the narrative is the sensory attraction.
8. Va-yasar lir'ot et mappelet ha-aryeh ('he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion') — the verb sur ('to turn aside') suggests a deliberate detour. Samson goes looking for the dead animal. The geviyat ha-aryeh ('body/corpse of the lion') contains bees and honey. This sets up a critical Nazirite violation: touching a dead body (mafelet, 'carcass, fallen thing') directly violates Numbers 6:6-7, which prohibits a Nazirite from going near any dead body. Samson has now crossed a boundary of his consecration — and he does it casually, out of curiosity.

9. Va-yirdehu el kappav ('he scraped it into his palms') — the verb radah means 'to scrape out, to extract.' Samson physically reaches into the dead carcass, making direct contact with the corpse — an unambiguous Nazirite violation. He then shares the contaminated honey with his parents without disclosure: lo higgid lahem ('he did not tell them'). This is the second secret (cf. v. 6). The pattern of concealment deepens Samson's isolation — he operates alone, hiding his actions from those closest to him. His parents unknowingly share in the ritual defilement. The honey from the dead lion becomes the basis for the riddle, linking Samson's violation to the coming conflict.

10. Va-ya'as sham Shimshon mishteh ('Samson made a feast there') — the word mishteh derives from the root shatah ('to drink'). A mishteh is literally a 'drinking feast' — a banquet centered on wine and alcohol. For a Nazirite who is forbidden all grape products, hosting a drinking feast is at minimum a profound irony and likely another vow violation. The narrator adds ki khen ya'asu ha-bachurim ('for so the young men used to do') — it was the cultural norm. Samson conforms to Philistine social customs rather than maintaining his Nazirite separation. The term bachurim ('young men') emphasizes youthful social pressure and convention over covenant obligation.

11. The sheloshim mere'im ('thirty companions') are Philistine groomsmen assigned to Samson. The phrasing ki re'otam oto ('when they saw him') may suggest they were impressed — or intimidated — by his physical presence. These 'companions' may also function as guards or minders, keeping an eye on the powerful Israelite in their midst. The number thirty will become significant when Samson must obtain thirty sets of garments as riddle payment (v. 19).

12. Achudah na lakhem chidah ('let me pose a riddle to you') — the verb chud ('to propound a riddle') introduces the central literary device of the chapter. The chidah ('riddle') was a respected intellectual contest in the ancient Near East (cf. Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, 1 Kings 10:1). The stakes are high: sheloshim sedinim ('thirty linen garments' — expensive undergarments) and sheloshim chaliphot begadim ('thirty changes of clothing' — complete outfits). This is a significant wager, equivalent to outfitting thirty men in luxury clothing.

13. The terms are symmetrical — the same payment either way: thirty of each garment type. The companions accept readily: chudah chidatekha ve-nishma'ennah ('pose your riddle and let us hear it'). Their confidence will prove misplaced, as the riddle is unsolvable without inside knowledge. No amount of intellectual effort can crack it, because it depends on a private experience — Samson's encounter with the lion. The riddle is not really fair; it is a trap disguised as a game.

14. Me-ha-okhel yatsa ma'akhal u-me-az yatsa matok ('from the eater came food, from the strong came sweetness') — the riddle is elegant in Hebrew, with parallel structure and alliterative wordplay (okhel/ma'akhal). The 'eater' is the lion; the 'food' is the honey. The 'strong one' is the lion; the 'sweet' is the honey. But without knowing about the lion carcass, the riddle is genuinely unsolvable — it describes a unique personal experience, not a universal phenomenon. The three-day failure establishes the companions' desperation, which drives them to coerce Samson's wife.

15. The companions' threat is savage: pen nisrof otakh ve-et beit avikh ba-esh ('lest we burn you and your father's house with fire'). This is not an idle threat — they will carry it out in 15:6. The verb patti ('entice, persuade, seduce') from the root patah carries connotations of deception and sexual manipulation. They pressure the wife to use her intimate access to Samson as a weapon. The accusation ha-leyarshenu qera'tem lanu ('did you call us to impoverish us?') reveals their real concern: the financial stakes of the wager. The threat creates an impossible situation for the woman — caught between Samson and his enemies.

16. Va-tevk eshet Shimshon alav ('Samson's wife wept over him') — her tears are a weapon of emotional manipulation, though her fear is genuine (v. 15). Her argument — raq sne'atani ve-lo ahavtani ('you only hate me and do not love me') — frames the riddle as a test of love rather than an intellectual game. This same pattern of weeping and emotional pressure will recur with Delilah in chapter 16, but with far more devastating consequences. Samson's defense — 'I haven't told my parents' — is logically sound but emotionally tone-deaf. It will not hold.

17. Ki hetsiqathu ('because she pressed him hard, pressured him relentlessly') — the verb tsaqaq means 'to press, to constrain, to squeeze.' The image is of constant, unrelenting emotional pressure. Samson's strength is physical, not emotional — he can tear apart a lion but cannot withstand a woman's tears. This vulnerability will prove fatal in chapter 16. The wife immediately relays the answer to her people (va-tagged ha-chidah li-vnei ammah), demonstrating that her loyalty lies with her own people, not her husband. The pattern — Samson telling a secret to a woman who betrays it to his enemies — will repeat with escalating consequences.

18. The answer — mah matok mi-devash u-meh az me-ari ('what is sweeter than honey, what is stronger than a lion') — is presented as two rhetorical questions rather than a direct statement, giving it a triumphant quality. They deliver the answer be-terem yavo ha-charsah ('before the sun went down') — just in time. Samson's furious response uses a crude agricultural metaphor: lulei charashtem be-eglati ('if you had not plowed with my heifer') — comparing his wife to a cow and their interrogation of her to plowing. The metaphor implies both sexual betrayal and informational exploitation. Samson instantly knows how they obtained the answer — there was no other way.

19. Va-titslach alav ruach YHWH — the second 'rushing' of the Spirit (cf. v. 6). The Spirit empowers Samson not for national deliverance but to settle a personal gambling debt. He goes to Ashkelon — a major Philistine city about twenty-three miles southwest — kills thirty men (the exact number needed), strips their chalitsotam ('spoils, clothing'), and pays the wager. The violence is divinely empowered but personally motivated. Va-yichar appo ('his anger burned') — Samson's rage drives him home, abandoning his wife. The narrator records this descent into fury without moral commentary, letting the reader draw conclusions.

20. Le-mere'ehu asher re'ah lo ('to his companion who had been his friend/best man') — the ultimate betrayal. The mere'a was the 'best man' or 'friend of the bridegroom' (cf. John 3:29). Samson's abandonment of his wife was interpreted by her family as divorce, and she was given to the very man who stood beside Samson at the wedding. This final verse sets up the chain of retaliations in chapter 15. What began with Samson's desire for a Philistine woman ends with losing her to a Philistine man — the irony is complete.

15

Summary: *Samson discovers his wife has been given to another man. He ties torches to foxes' tails and burns the Philistine grain fields. The Philistines retaliate by burning his wife. Samson slaughters them, then kills a thousand with a donkey's jawbone and is miraculously given water from the rock.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The escalation is relentless: personal grievance becomes agricultural terrorism becomes mass slaughter. The jawbone of a donkey (lechi hachamor, v. 15) — the most contemptible weapon imaginable — becomes an instrument of divine deliverance. Samson's naming of the site Ramath-lehi ('Jawbone Height,' v. 17) and his desperate prayer for water (v. 18) are his only recorded prayer until his death — and God answers by splitting open the hollow place, producing water from the very jawbone.*

Translation Friction: *The three hundred foxes (or jackals — shualim can mean either) tied tail-to-tail with torches (v. 4) strain modern credibility, but the text presents it without qualification. We rendered it as the Hebrew gives it. The place name En-haqore (v. 19, 'spring of the one who called') commemorates Samson's prayer — the name preserves his moment of dependence on God in a life characterized by self-reliance.*

Connections: *Water from rock echoes Moses at Meribah (Exodus 17:6, Numbers 20:11). The jawbone weapon anticipates David's unconventional sling against Goliath (1 Samuel 17). The Philistine-burning-his-wife motif (v. 6) inverts: the Philistines destroy the very person whose betrayal they exploited. The 'he judged Israel twenty years' (v. 20) places Samson in the institutional framework despite his personal chaos.*

1 Some time later, during the wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife, bringing a young goat. He said, "Let me go in to
my wife in her room." But her father would not let him enter. 2 Her father said, "I was sure you completely despised her, so I
gave her to your companion. But isn't her younger sister more attractive? Take her instead." 3 Samson said to them, "This
time I am justified in what I do to the Philistines — when I bring harm upon them." 4 Samson went out and caught three
hundred foxes. He took torches and tied the foxes tail to tail, placing one torch between every pair of tails. 5 He set the
torches on fire and released the foxes into the Philistines' standing grain. He burned up the harvested sheaves along with the
standing grain, and even the vineyards and olive groves. 6 The Philistines asked, "Who did this?" They were told, "Samson,
the son-in-law of the Timnite — because the man took his wife and gave her to his companion." So the Philistines went up
and burned her and her father alive. 7 Samson said to them, "Since you have done this, I swear I will take revenge on you —
and only then will I stop." 8 He struck them down ruthlessly with a great slaughter. Then he went down and stayed in a cave
in the rock of Etam. 9 The Philistines came up and camped in Judah, deploying their forces at Lehi. 10 The men of Judah
asked, "Why have you come up against us?" They answered, "We have come up to bind Samson — to do to him what he has
done to us." 11 Three thousand men of Judah went down to the cave in the rock of Etam and said to Samson, "Don't you
realize that the Philistines are ruling over us? What have you done to us?" He said to them, "What they did to me, I did to
them." 12 They said to him, "We have come down to tie you up and hand you over to the Philistines." Samson said to them,
"Swear to me that you yourselves will not attack me." 13 They said to him, "No — we will only tie you up securely and hand
you over to them. We certainly will not kill you." So they bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the rock. 1
4 When he arrived at Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him, and the
ropes on his arms became like flax burned by fire — his bonds melted off his hands. 15 He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey,
reached out and grabbed it, and struck down a thousand men with it. 16 Samson said: "With the jawbone of a donkey — heaps
upon heaps! With the jawbone of a donkey I have struck down a thousand men!" 17 When he finished speaking, he threw the
jawbone aside, and that place was called Ramath-Lehi. 18 He became desperately thirsty and called out to the LORD, saying,
"You gave this great victory through your servant, and now am I going to die of thirst and fall into the hands of the
uncircumcised?" 19 God split open the hollow place at Lehi, and water flowed from it. He drank, his strength returned, and he
revived. That is why it was called En-Hakkore, which is at Lehi to this day. 20 He judged Israel during the time of the
Philistines for twenty years.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Bi-yemei qetsir chittim ('in the days of the wheat harvest') — the timing is significant for two reasons: the dry, ripe grain fields will soon become the target of Samson's fiery revenge (vv. 4-5), and the wheat harvest was a time of celebration and movement. Samson brings a gedi izzim ('a young goat') — a gift intended to reconcile. He expects to resume the marriage as though nothing happened. The father's refusal reveals what occurred during Samson's absence: his wife has been given to another man (14:20). Samson does not yet know this.

2. Amor amarti ki sano senetah ('saying I said that hating you hated her') — double infinitive absolutes in both clauses intensify the father's certainty. He genuinely believed Samson had permanently rejected his daughter. The offer of the younger sister — ha-lo achotah ha-qetannah tovah mimmennah ('isn't her younger sister better/more beautiful than she?') — is meant to placate but instead enrages. The substitution of one daughter for another echoes Laban's swap of Leah for Rachel (Genesis 29:26). For Samson, the insult is compounded: his wife was given to his mere'a ('companion, best man'), and now he is offered a consolation prize.

3. Niqqeiti ha-pa'am mi-Pelishtim ('I am innocent/free of blame this time from the Philistines') — Samson claims moral justification. The verb naqah ('to be clean, innocent, free of guilt') is a legal term — he is declaring himself not liable for what follows. The phrase ki oseh ani immam ra'ah ('when I do them harm/evil') frankly announces his intention to retaliate. Samson operates on a personal code of proportional justice: they wronged him, so he has the right to wrong them. The narrator neither endorses nor condemns this reasoning — the events simply unfold.

4. Shelosh me'ot shu'alim ('three hundred foxes') — the word shu'al can mean either 'fox' or 'jackal.' Jackals are more likely since they travel in packs (foxes are solitary), making mass capture more feasible. The number three hundred may be symbolic (Gideon's three hundred warriors, 7:7) or literal. The engineering is deliberate: va-yefen zanav el zanav ('he turned tail to tail') — pairs of animals tied together with a lappid ('torch, firebrand') between them. The panicked animals would run erratically through the fields, spreading fire in unpredictable directions — a devastating incendiary tactic.

5. The destruction is comprehensive: gadish ('harvested sheaves' — grain already cut and stacked), qamah ('standing grain' — still in the field), kerem ('vineyard'), and zayit ('olive grove'). This represents the Philistines' entire agricultural economy — their present harvest, their future crop, their long-term investment in orchards and vineyards. Olive trees take decades to mature; their loss is generational devastation. The timing during wheat harvest (v. 1) means the grain is dry and burns easily. Samson's personal grievance has become an economic catastrophe for an entire region.

6. The cycle of violence escalates horribly. The Philistines identify Samson as the culprit (chatan ha-Timni, 'the son-in-law of the Timnite') and trace the cause to the wife's father giving her away. Their response — va-yisrefu otah ve-et avihah ba-esh ('they burned her and her father with fire') — fulfills the exact threat the thirty companions made in 14:15. The woman was caught between Samson and the Philistines, and now she dies the very death she was threatened with. The cruel irony: she betrayed Samson's riddle to save herself from burning, only to be burned anyway.

7. Im ta'asun kazot ki im niqqamti vakhem ('if you do this, I will surely take vengeance on you') — the conditional structure followed by the emphatic ki im creates an oath-like declaration. The verb naqam ('to take vengeance') is personal, not judicial — Samson acts as a one-man retaliatory force, not as a judge executing divine justice. His promise ve-achar echdal ('and after that I will stop') is ominously open-ended — how much violence satisfies the requirement of 'enough'? The spiral of violence shows no one willing to break the cycle.

8. Va-yakh otam shoq al yarekh makkah gedolah ('he struck them leg upon thigh, a great blow') — the idiom shoq al yarekh ('hip and thigh' or 'leg upon thigh') suggests a thorough, devastating beating. The exact meaning is debated, but the sense is unmistakable: total, merciless violence. After the slaughter, Samson retreats to se'if sela Eitam ('the cleft/cave of the rock of Etam') — he becomes a fugitive hiding in the wilderness, ironically resembling the Israelites who hid from Midian in caves (6:2). The deliverer has become an outlaw.

9. Va-ya'alu Felishtim va-yachanu bi-Yehudah ('the Philistines came up and camped in Judah') — the Philistine military response to Samson's raids now threatens all of Judah. The escalation has moved from personal vendetta to regional military crisis. Va-yinnatoshu ba-Lechi ('they spread themselves at Lehi') — the verb natash means 'to spread out' in military formation. Lechi, meaning 'jawbone,' foreshadows what will happen there (v. 15). The name is either pre-existing or given retroactively because of the coming events.

10. The men of Judah ask the question lamah alitem aleinu ('why have you come up against us?') — they view the Philistine incursion as an attack on themselves, not as a response to Samson. The Philistines' answer le-esor et Shimshon ('to bind Samson') makes clear: this is about one man. The phrase la'asot lo ka-asher asah lanu ('to do to him as he did to us') invokes proportional retaliation — the lex talionis. What is devastating here is that the men of Judah will cooperate with their oppressors to hand over their own judge.

11. Sheloshet alafim ish mi-Yehudah ('three thousand men from Judah') — a massive delegation sent not to rescue Samson but to surrender him. Their accusation ha-lo yadata ki moshelim banu Pelishtim ('don't you know the Philistines rule over us?') reveals a people who have accepted subjugation as the status quo. They blame Samson for disrupting a manageable oppression. His response ka-asher asu li ken asiti lahem ('as they did to me, so I did to them') reduces the entire conflict to personal reciprocity. Neither Samson nor the men of Judah speak in terms of God's purposes, covenant, or deliverance. The theological vacuum is deafening.

12. Le-esorekha yaradnu letittekha ve-yad Pelishtim ('to bind you we came down to give you into the hand of the Philistines') — Judah's own men will deliver their judge to the enemy. The parallel with later events is unmistakable: Israel handing its deliverer to the ruling power. Samson's condition — hishave'u li pen tifge'un bi attem ('swear to me that you yourselves will not strike me') — reveals where the real danger lies. He does not fear the Philistines; he fears his own people. He will go willingly, bound, if Judah promises not to kill him directly.

13. Asor ne'esorekha ('binding we will bind you') — the infinitive absolute emphasizes the thoroughness of the binding. The assurance hamet lo nemitekha ('killing we will not kill you') uses the same emphatic construction for the promise of safety. Two new ropes (shenayim avotot chadashot) — the newness implies maximum strength, ropes not weakened by prior use. The narrator builds tension: Samson is bound with fresh, strong rope, surrounded by three thousand of his own countrymen, about to be handed to the Philistines. Everything points to his doom — except the Spirit.

14. Va-titslach alav ruach YHWH — the third and final 'rushing' of the Spirit upon Samson (cf. 14:6, 14:19). Each occurrence triggers superhuman physical action. The ropes become ka-pishtim asher ba'aru va-esh ('like flax that has burned in fire') — flax (pishtim) is linen fiber, and when burned it disintegrates into nothing. Va-yimmassu essurav me-al yadav ('his bonds melted from his hands') — the verb masas ('to melt, dissolve') suggests the ropes did not break but dissolved, as if consumed by invisible fire. The Spirit's power is portrayed as an internal fire that destroys external restraints.

15. Lechi chamor teriyah ('a jawbone of a donkey, fresh/moist') — the jawbone is teriyah ('fresh, moist'), meaning it came from a recently dead animal. This constitutes yet another Nazirite violation: contact with a dead body (Numbers 6:6). The irony is devastating — the instrument of Samson's greatest military triumph is itself a source of ritual defilement. Elef ish ('a thousand men') — whether literal or a round number indicating a massive victory, the scale is extraordinary. A single man with an improvised weapon from a dead animal defeats an army. The Spirit empowers through the profane.

16. Samson's victory song uses elaborate wordplay: bi-lechi ha-chamor chamor chamoratayim ('with the jawbone of a donkey, a donkey, two donkey-loads' or 'a heap, two heaps'). The word chamor can mean both 'donkey' and 'heap' — Samson puns on the weapon's origin. The poetic structure is a brief victory hymn, similar to the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) or Deborah's song (Judges 5), but with a critical difference: Samson credits himself, not God. Hikketi elef ish ('I struck down a thousand men') — the first person pronoun is emphatic. He attributes the victory to his own power, never mentioning the Spirit that enabled it.

17. Va-yashklekh ha-lechi mi-yado ('he threw the jawbone from his hand') — after the battle, Samson discards the weapon. The naming — Ramat Lechi ('Jawbone Hill' or 'the height of the jawbone') — follows the biblical pattern of memorial place-naming. The Hebrew ramat means 'height, hill,' and lechi means 'jawbone' or 'cheek.' The name preserves the memory of the event in the landscape itself. Such etiological naming is common in Judges (cf. Bochim, 2:5; YHWH-Shalom, 6:24).

18. Va-yitsma me'od va-yiqra el YHWH ('he was very thirsty and he called out to the LORD') — this is the only recorded prayer by Samson before his final prayer in 16:28. After boasting of his own achievement in verse 16, extreme thirst forces him to acknowledge God. Attah natatta be-yad avdekha ('You gave into the hand of your servant') — he now credits God for the victory, calling himself avdekha ('your servant'). The shift from 'I struck down' (v. 16) to 'You gave' (v. 18) is prompted by need, not worship. His concern is still self-preservation: pen efol be-yad ha-arelim ('lest I fall into the hand of the uncircumcised').

19. Va-yivqa Elohim et ha-makhtesh asher ba-Lechi ('God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi') — the makhtesh is a mortar-shaped depression in rock. God provides water from stone, echoing Moses at Horeb (Exodus 17:6) and Meribah (Numbers 20:11). The water revives Samson: va-tashov rucho va-yechi ('his spirit returned and he lived'). The name Ein ha-Qore means either 'the spring of the one who calls' (commemorating Samson's prayer) or 'the spring of the partridge' (a bird associated with rocky terrain). The provision of water after military victory connects Samson's experience to Israel's wilderness narrative — God sustains His warrior even when that warrior is deeply flawed.

20. Va-yishpot et Yisra'el bi-yemei Pelishtim esrim shanah ('he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years') — this formula usually closes a judge's narrative, but here it appears mid-story. Chapter 16 still lies ahead. The phrase bi-yemei Pelishtim ('in the days of the Philistines') is unique — it acknowledges that Philistine domination continued throughout Samson's judgeship. He judged during the oppression, not after ending it. The twenty years may represent a period of relative stability before the events of chapter 16, or it may be the narrator's way of distinguishing Samson's time as judge from the personal disasters that conclude his life.

16

Summary: *Samson visits a prostitute in Gaza, escapes the city by carrying its gates away, then falls in love with Delilah. She extracts the secret of his strength — his uncut hair — and the Philistines capture him, gouge out his eyes, and put him to work grinding in prison. At a festival to Dagon, Samson pushes apart the pillars and kills more Philistines in death than in life.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Delilah asks the secret of his strength three times with obvious intent to betray him, and he tells her the truth on the fourth attempt anyway. This is not stupidity but self-destruction — Samson has been violating his Nazirite vow incrementally (corpse contact in ch. 14, feast in ch. 14, now the razor), and telling Delilah completes the surrender of what he was supposed to be. His prayer in the temple (v. 28) is his most honest: 'O Lord GOD, remember me and strengthen me only this once' — revenge and deliverance merge in one final act.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase 'he did not know that the LORD had departed from him' (v. 20, vehu lo yada ki YHWH sar me'alav) is the most chilling sentence in the book. We rendered it directly. The departure of divine presence is unannounced and unnoticed — the horror is the unknowing. Samson's final prayer uses both Adonai and YHWH Elohim — the fullest divine address in his life comes at its end.*

Connections: *Samson's death in the Dagon temple anticipates the ark's humiliation of Dagon (1 Samuel 5). His grinding in prison (v. 21) — a woman's or animal's task — is the final humiliation of the strongman. The phrase 'he judged Israel twenty years' (v. 31) echoes 15:20 and brackets his career. Hebrews 11:32 includes Samson among the faithful — his final prayer is counted as faith.*

1Samson went to Gaza and saw a prostitute there, and he went in to her. 2The people of Gaza were told, "Samson has come here." They surrounded the place and lay in ambush for him all night at the city gate, keeping quiet through the night, saying, "At first light we will kill him." 3Samson lay there until midnight. At midnight he got up, seized the doors of the city gate along with the two gateposts, and pulled them up — bar and all. He hoisted them onto his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron. 4After this, he fell in love with a woman in the Sorek Valley whose name was Delilah. 5T he rulers of the Philistines came to her and said, "Seduce him and find out where his great strength comes from, and how we can overpower him so we can tie him up and subdue him. Each of us will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver." 6Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me — where does your great strength come from? How could someone tie you up to overpower you?" 7 Samson said to her, "If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I will become weak and be like any other man." 8The Philistine rulers brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she tied him up with them. 9With an ambush party waiting in the room, she cried out, "The Philistines are on you, Samson!" He snapped the bowstrings as easily as a strand of flax snaps when it touches fire. So the secret of his strength remained unknown. 10Delilah said to Samson, "You made a fool of me and lied to me! Now tell me — how can you really be tied up?" 11He said to her, "If they tie me up securely with new ropes that have never been used, then I will become weak and be like any other man." 12So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then she called out, "The Philistines are on you, Samson!" (The ambush party was waiting in the room.) He snapped them off his arms like thread. 13Delilah said to Samson, "You keep making a fool of me and telling me lies! Tell me how you can be tied up." He said to her, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom." 14She fastened it with the pin of the loom and called out, "The Philistines are on you, Samson!" He woke from his sleep and pulled away the pin of the loom along with the fabric. 15She said to him, "How can you say 'I love you' when your heart is not with me? Three times now you have made a fool of me and have not told me where your great strength comes from." 16When she pressured him with her words day after day and nagged him relentlessly, he became so exhausted that he wanted to die. 17He told her everything in his heart and said to her, "A razor has never touched my head, because I have been a Nazirite of God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become weak and be like any other man." 18When Delilah realized that he had told her everything in his heart, she sent for the Philistine rulers with the message, "Come up one more time — he has told me everything in his heart." The Philistine rulers came to her, bringing the silver with them. 19She lulled him to sleep on her lap, then called for a man to shave off the seven braids of his head. She began to subdue him, and his strength left him. 20She called out, "The Philistines are on you, Samson!" He woke from his sleep and thought, "I will get free just as I did before and shake myself loose." But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him. 21The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles, and he was set to grinding grain in the prison. 22But the hair of his head began to grow back after it had been shaved. 23The rulers of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate. They said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hands." 24When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying, "Our god has given into our hands our enemy — the devastator of our land, who multiplied our dead." 25When they were in high spirits, they said, "Bring out Samson to entertain us!" So they brought Samson from the prison, and he performed for them. They stood him between the pillars. 26Samson said to the boy who was leading him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars that support the building, so I can lean against them." 27The building was full of men and women. All the Philistine rulers were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson

perform. 28Samson called out to the LORD and said, "Lord GOD, remember me! Strengthen me just this one time, O God, so that I may take one act of revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." 29Samson grasped the two central pillars on which the building rested and braced himself against them — one with his right hand and one with his left. 30Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." He pushed with all his strength, and the building collapsed on the rulers and on all the people inside it. Those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life. 31His brothers and his father's entire household came down and carried him back. They buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel for twenty years.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Va-yelekh Shimshon Azzatah ('Samson went to Gaza') — Gaza is deep in Philistine territory, one of the five major Philistine cities. The narrative moves from Samson desiring a Philistine wife (ch. 14) to visiting an ishah zonah ('a prostitute'). The moral trajectory is unmistakable: from wanting marriage to purchasing sex. The verb va-yar ('he saw') echoes the pattern established in 14:1 — Samson's eyes lead him into trouble. Va-yavo eleiha ('he went in to her') is the standard euphemism for sexual intercourse. The Nazirite's separation from the world is now reduced to its final external marker: his uncut hair.

2. Va-yassobbu va-ye'erevu lo kol ha-lailah ('they surrounded and ambushed him all night') — the Gazites plan a dawn attack. Their confidence is understandable: Samson is inside a walled city with a single gatehouse, surrounded by enemies. Va-yitchareshu kol ha-lailah ('they were quiet/silent all night') — the verb charash means 'to be silent, to hold peace.' They wait patiently, believing time is on their side. Ad or ha-boqer va-haraagnuhu ('until the morning light, and we will kill him') — they calculate that Samson will attempt to leave at dawn and walk into their trap.

3. Va-ye'echoz be-daletot sha'ar ha-ir u-vishtei ha-mezuzot ('he seized the doors of the city gate and the two doorposts') — the city gate was the most fortified point of an ancient walled city, with massive wooden doors reinforced by a metal bar (beriach). Samson does not open the gate; he tears the entire gate structure out of the wall — doors, posts, crossbar, everything. Va-yissa'em im ha-beriach ('he uprooted them with the bar') — the verb nasa means 'to uproot, to pull out.' He carries the entire assembly al ketefav ('on his shoulders') to a hilltop facing Hebron — approximately thirty-eight miles uphill from Gaza at an elevation gain of over three thousand feet. The feat is superhuman, a demonstration of raw power that humiliates the Gazites and renders their city defenseless.

4. Va-ye'ehav ishah be-nachal Soreq ('he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek') — for the first time in the narrative, the verb ahav ('to love') is used for Samson's attraction to a woman. Previously it was ra'ah ('to see') and yashar ('pleasing'). The Sorek Valley runs between Israelite and Philistine territory — Samson lives and loves in the border zone. Delilah's name (Delilah) may derive from the root dalal ('to hang down, to be weak, to impoverish') or from the word lailah ('night'). Either etymology is fitting: she will weaken him and bring his night. Whether she is Israelite or Philistine is never stated — the text leaves her identity ambiguous, focusing entirely on her function as the instrument of Samson's downfall.

5. Sarnei Pelishtim ('the lords/rulers of the Philistines') — the seren (plural seranim) was the title for each ruler of the five Philistine city-states (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath). All five come together for this operation — Samson is that important a threat. The verb patti ('entice, seduce') is the same word used when the companions pressured Samson's wife (14:15). The payment — ish elef u-me'ah kasef ('each one, eleven hundred pieces of silver') — totals 5,500 silver pieces from the five lords. For comparison, Micah's mother in chapter 17 consecrates 1,100 pieces of silver. The sum is enormous — they are buying the defeat of Israel's champion.

6. Delilah's question ba-meh kokhakha gadol ('in what is your strength great?') is astonishingly direct. She does not approach the subject subtly or build up to it over weeks. She asks outright, on behalf of his enemies, and Samson does not seem alarmed. The addition u-va-meh te'aser le-annotekha ('and with what could you be bound to afflict you') explicitly asks for the method of his capture. That Samson engages with this question at all — rather than recognizing the obvious trap — reveals his fatal flaw: he believes his strength makes him invulnerable to any scheme. His physical power breeds spiritual recklessness.

7. Shiv'ah yetarim lachim asher lo chorevu ('seven moist/fresh bowstrings that have not been dried') — yeter refers to a bowstring made from animal sinew or gut. The specification 'fresh, not dried' implies maximum flexibility and strength. The number seven suggests completeness. Samson's first lie is elaborate enough to be believable — it sounds like a magical formula. Ve-chaliti ve-hayiti ke-achad ha-adam ('I will become weak and be like one of the men') — the verb chalah means 'to become weak, sick.' Samson plays a game with the truth, giving false answers that parody the real one.

8. The Philistine lords supply the materials immediately — they are deeply invested in this operation. Delilah binds Samson herself (va-ta'asrehu bahem, 'she bound him with them'). The intimate setting — Delilah tying Samson while he allows it — suggests he treats the whole affair as a game, a lovers' contest. The Philistine lords are presumably hiding nearby, waiting to see if this attempt succeeds.

9. Ha-orev yoshev lah ba-cheder ('the ambusher sitting for her in the room') — Philistine soldiers are hidden in the very room where this intimate scene plays out. Delilah's cry Pelishtim alekha Shimshon ('Philistines are upon you, Samson!') becomes a recurring alarm — she uses it four times (vv. 9, 12, 14, 20). Samson snaps the bowstrings ka-asher yinnataq petil ha-ne'oret ba-haricho esh ('as a flax thread is broken when it smells fire') — the simile reduces the supposedly unbreakable bonds to nothing. Ve-lo noda kocho ('his strength was not known') — the secret remains intact. But the pattern of testing has begun.

10. Hinneh hetalta bi va-tedabber elai kezavim ('you mocked me and spoke lies to me') — the verb hatal means 'to mock, to deceive.' Delilah accuses Samson of deception — which is true — while herself being the true deceiver. The irony is layered: she demands honesty in the service of betrayal. Her persistence is remarkable. After the first failure, most people would abandon the scheme or at least change tactics. Delilah simply asks again, with exactly the same directness. She has calculated that Samson's weakness is not physical but relational — he cannot resist her persistent emotional pressure.

11. Avotim chadashim asher lo na'asah vahem melakhah ('new ropes with which no work has been done') — the second lie escalates from bowstrings to ropes. The specification 'unused' echoes the new ropes in 15:13, which the Spirit also destroyed. Samson may be amusing himself with references to his own history. The formula ve-chaliti ve-hayiti ke-achad ha-adam ('I will become weak and be like any other man') is repeated verbatim from verse 7 — a refrain in this darkening game. Each false answer brings the truth closer to the surface.

12. The pattern repeats: Delilah binds, cries the alarm, and Samson breaks free. Va-yenattqem me-al zero'otav ka-chut ('he snapped them from his arms like thread') — the ropes are reduced to nothing. The ease of the escape is emphasized: like a thread (chut), not even like a cord. Yet the fact that Samson continues to play this game after Delilah has now twice attempted to betray him to waiting Philistine soldiers reveals either extraordinary arrogance or a death wish. The ambush party remains in the room — witnesses to the failed attempts.

13. The third false answer moves dangerously close to the truth. For the first time, Samson mentions his hair: sheva machlefot roshi ('the seven braids/locks of my head'). The word machlefot means 'braids, plaits, locks' — Samson's hair is braided into seven sections. The masekhet ('woven fabric, web on a loom') is the cloth currently being woven. He tells Delilah to weave his hair braids into the loom's fabric. The answer is a lie — weaving his hair will not make him weak — but it touches the true source of his strength. Each false answer has moved closer: bowstrings (nothing to do with hair), ropes (nothing to do with hair), hair woven into a loom (his hair, but the wrong action). The truth is approaching.

14. Va-titqa ba-yated ('she drove in the peg/pin') — Delilah weaves his hair into the loom and secures it with the loom pin while he sleeps. He sleeps through the entire process — a remarkable detail that reveals both his trust and his recklessness. Va-yiqats mi-shenato ('he woke from his sleep') — this is the first mention of Samson sleeping during these encounters. Sleep will be his undoing in verse 19. He pulls away the yated ha-ereg ve-et ha-massekhet ('the pin of the loom and the fabric') — tearing the entire loom apart. Three attempts have failed. But Delilah now knows the answer is connected to his hair.

15. Eikh tomar ahavtikh ve-libbeka ein itti ('how can you say I love you when your heart is not with me?') — Delilah weaponizes the language of love. She equates full disclosure with genuine love: if he truly loves her, he will reveal his deepest secret. The accusation zeh shalosh pe'amim hetalta bi ('three times now you have mocked me') echoes the pattern of three — a number of completion in biblical narrative. The fourth time will be the truth. Her argument mirrors the Timnite wife's tactic exactly (14:16) — 'you hate me, you don't love me' — but Delilah is far more persistent and far more dangerous.

16. Ki hetsiqah lo bi-devareha kol ha-yamim ('because she pressed him with her words every day') — the verb tsaqaq ('to press, squeeze, constrain') describes unrelenting emotional pressure. Va-te'altsehu ('she urged him, she forced him') — the verb alats means 'to compel, to press hard.' Va-tiqtsar nafsho lamut ('his soul was shortened to death' — he was exhausted to the point of death) — the idiom captures complete emotional and spiritual depletion. The man who could tear apart lions and rip city gates from their hinges is broken down by persistent words. Samson's physical strength has no defense against emotional manipulation — the same vulnerability that undid him in 14:17.

17. Va-yagged lah et kol libbo ('he told her all his heart') — the phrase kol libbo ('all his heart') means he held nothing back. The disclosure is total. Morah lo alah al roshi ('a razor has never come upon my head') — this is the last remaining sign of his Nazirite consecration. He has already violated the prohibitions against contact with the dead (14:8-9, 15:15) and likely against grape products (14:10). Only the uncut hair remains. Ki nezir Elohim ani mi-beten immi ('for I am a Nazirite of God from my mother's womb') — Samson identifies himself by his consecration even as he is in the act of betraying it. He knows exactly what he is, and he tells anyway. Im gullachti ve-sar mimmenni kochi ('if I am shaved, my strength will depart from me') — the truth is out. The verb sar ('to depart, to turn away') will appear in the devastating verse 20 applied to God Himself.

18. Va-tere Delilah ki higgid lah et kol libbo ('Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart') — the verb ra'ah ('to see, to perceive') signals Delilah's discernment. She can tell the difference between Samson's lies and his truth. How she knows this time is genuine — whether through his tone, his tears, his weariness, or intuition — the text does not say. Alu ha-pa'am ('come up this time') — her message to the lords carries the confidence of certainty. Va-ya'alu ha-kesef be-yadam ('they brought the silver in their hand') — the payment is brought in advance this time. They trust Delilah's judgment. The transaction is complete: Samson's secret for 5,500 pieces of silver.

19. Va-teyashnehu al birkeiha ('she caused him to sleep on her knees/lap') — the intimacy of the scene makes the betrayal more devastating. He sleeps in a posture of complete trust and vulnerability. Va-tiqra la-ish va-tegallach et sheva machlefot rosho ('she called a man and he shaved the seven braids of his head') — Delilah does not shave him herself; she summons an ish ('a man') to do it. The seven braids — the last physical sign of his Nazirite consecration — are removed while he sleeps. Va-tachel le-annoto ('she began to afflict/subdue him') — the verb innah means 'to afflict, to humble, to overpower.' Va-yasar kocho me-alav ('his strength departed from him') — the verb sar ('departed') foreshadows the devastating parallel in the next verse.

20. Etse ke-fa'am be-fa'am ve-inna'er ('I will go out as time after time and shake myself free') — Samson expects the same result as before. His confidence is based on past experience: three times Delilah tested him, three times he broke free effortlessly. Why should the fourth time be different? Ve-hu lo yada ki YHWH sar me-alav ('and he did not know that the LORD had departed from him') — this is the most devastating sentence in the Samson cycle, and one of the most terrifying in all of Scripture. The verb yada ('to know') is the same verb used throughout the narrative for knowledge and awareness. Samson does not know. The LORD (YHWH — the covenant name, the personal name of God) sar

('departed, turned away') me-alav ('from upon him'). The divine presence that rushed upon him three times has now withdrawn. And Samson cannot tell the difference. The most terrifying thing about the departure of God is that a person may not notice it has happened.

21. Va-yenaqru et einav ('they bored out/gouged his eyes') — the verb naqar means 'to bore, to pick out, to gouge.' The eyes that saw Philistine women and led Samson into temptation are destroyed. There is grim poetic justice: the man who lived by sight (va-yar ishah, 'he saw a woman,' 14:1; 16:1) now lives in permanent darkness. Va-yoridu oto Azzatah ('they brought him down to Gaza') — the last 'going down' (yarad) in Samson's life. He returns to Gaza, where he once carried the city gates in triumph (v. 3), now as a blind prisoner. Va-ya'asruhu ba-nechushtayim ('they bound him with bronze fetters') — nechushtayim is a dual form, suggesting shackles on both wrists or both ankles. Va-yehi tochen be-veit ha-asurim ('he was grinding in the prison house') — grinding grain was the work of slaves, women, and animals. The mighty judge is reduced to the lowest form of prison labor, walking in circles pushing a millstone.

22. Va-yachel se'ar rosho letsammeach ka-asher gullach ('the hair of his head began to sprout/grow after it was shaved') — this single verse is one of the most quietly powerful in the entire narrative. Amid the darkness — blindness, slavery, grinding — a seed of hope emerges. The verb tsamach ('to sprout, to grow') is used for plants sprouting from the earth. The hair growing back is the Nazirite sign renewing itself. The text does not say God's power is returning; it simply notes the hair growing. But the reader knows the connection. The Philistines, in their arrogance, do not think to keep shaving him. This single botanical observation is the turning point of the chapter.

23. Va-ne'esfu lizboach zevach gadol le-Dagon eloheihem ('they gathered to sacrifice a great sacrifice to Dagon their god') — Dagon was the chief deity of the Philistines, a grain and fertility god (the name may relate to dagan, 'grain,' or dag, 'fish'). The irony of Samson grinding grain in the temple of a grain god is devastating. The Philistines' declaration natan eloheinu be-yadenu et Shimshon oyevenu ('our god has given our enemy Samson into our hands') deliberately echoes the language Israel uses for YHWH's victories — natan be-yad ('gave into the hand of'). They credit Dagon with what Samson's own sin accomplished. The theological contest is now explicit: YHWH versus Dagon, the God of Israel versus the god of the Philistines.

24. The people's hymn of praise to Dagon has three charges against Samson: oyevenu ('our enemy'), machariav artsenu ('the devastator of our land' — referring to the burned fields of 15:5), and asher hirbah et chalalenu ('who multiplied our slain'). The verb hillel ('to praise') is the same root used in the Hebrew word hallelujah ('praise the LORD'). The Philistines direct praise to the wrong god. This public liturgy of Dagon-worship sets the theological stage for the climax: when Samson prays to YHWH (v. 28), the two prayers — one to Dagon, one to YHWH — will be answered in radically different ways.

25. Ki tov libbam ('when their heart was good' — when they were merry/drunk) — the festive mood leads to cruelty. Qir'u le-Shimshon vi-ysacheq lanu ('call Samson that he may amuse/perform for us') — the verb tsachaq can mean 'to play, to perform, to make sport.' The mighty judge has become a court jester, a source of entertainment for drunk Philistines. The humiliation is total: the man empowered by the Spirit of the LORD is now a spectacle in the house of Dagon. Va-ya'amidu oto bein ha-ammudim ('they stood him between the pillars') — this seemingly minor staging detail is the pivot of the entire story. The pillars are load-bearing columns that support the temple roof.

26. El ha-na'ar ha-machaziq be-yado ('to the boy holding his hand') — the once-mighty Samson is now led by a na'ar ('boy, young attendant'). He is blind and needs a child's guidance. His request — hanichah oti va-hamisheni et ha-ammudim ('let me rest and let me feel the pillars') — sounds innocent: a tired, blind man wanting to lean against something for support. The stated reason ve-isha'en aleihem ('so I can lean on them') conceals his true intention. This is the first time in the Samson narrative that the protagonist plans strategically rather than acting on impulse. Blindness and suffering have produced something new in Samson: deliberation.

27. The narrator pauses to describe the scene: the temple is packed — male ha-anashim ve-ha-nashim ('full of men and women') — and all five sarnei Pelishtim ('Philistine rulers') are present. An additional kishlosheth alafim ish ve-ishah ('about three thousand men and women') watch from the roof. This is the concentrated leadership and populace of the Philistine nation, gathered in one building for a religious festival. Ha-ro'im bi-sechoq Shimshon ('watching Samson's entertainment') — they have come to see the defeated champion humiliated. The text carefully establishes the magnitude of the gathering before the collapse — every detail heightens the scale of what follows.

28. Va-yiqra Shimshon el YHWH ('Samson called out to the LORD') — this is Samson's only genuine prayer in the entire cycle. His earlier cry in 15:18 was a complaint driven by thirst; this is a plea driven by total dependence. Adonai YHWH ('Lord GOD') — the double divine address combines the title of sovereignty (Adonai) with the covenant name (YHWH), the most reverent form of address in Hebrew prayer. Zokhreni na ('remember me, please') — the verb zakhar ('to remember') in Hebrew does not mean merely to recall; it means to act on behalf of. Samson asks God not just to think of him but to intervene. Ve-chazzeqeni na akh ha-pa'am ha-zeh ('strengthen me just this one time') — the request is humble, limited, final. Yet even in this moment of genuine prayer, Samson's motivation remains mixed: ve-innaqemah neqam achat mi-shtei einai ('let me take one revenge for my two eyes'). His prayer mingles faith with vengeance, dependence on God with personal retribution.

29. Va-yilpot Shimshon et shenei ammudei ha-tavekh ('Samson grasped the two pillars of the middle') — the verb lafat means 'to grasp, to twist, to take hold of firmly.' These are the ammudei ha-tavekh ('central pillars') — the main load-bearing columns. Archaeological excavations of Philistine temples at Tell Qasile and elsewhere have revealed structures supported by two central wooden pillars resting on stone bases, set close enough together for a man to reach both. The description is architecturally plausible. Va-yissamekh aleihem ('he leaned/braced against them') — the verb samakh means 'to lean, to support oneself.' Samson positions himself to push outward.

30. Tamot nafshi im Pelishtim ('let my soul/self die with the Philistines') — Samson's final words are simultaneously a prayer, a battle cry, and a death wish. The verb tamot ('let it die') is a jussive — an expressed wish. He wills his own death along with his enemies'. Va-yet be-koach ('he pushed/bent with strength') — the verb natah means 'to stretch, to bend, to push.' God has answered his prayer — strength has returned one final time. Va-yippol ha-bayit al ha-seranim ('the building fell on the rulers') — all five Philistine rulers are killed. The narrator's summary — ha-metim asher hemit

be-moto rabbim me-asher hemit be-chayyav ('the dead he killed at his death were more than he killed in his life') — is both an epitaph and a judgment. Samson's greatest victory is his death. The man who was set apart for God from the womb returns to God in the rubble of a pagan temple.

31. Va-yeredu echav ve-khol beit avihu ('his brothers and all the house of his father came down') — Samson's family retrieves his body from the ruins of the Dagon temple. The verbs trace his final journey: they 'came down' (yaredu) to Gaza and 'brought him up' (va-ya'alu) to the hill country — the opposite of Samson's life pattern of always going down. He is buried bein Tsor'ah u-vein Eshta'ol ('between Zorah and Eshtaol') — the exact location where the Spirit of the LORD first began to stir him (13:25). The narrative forms a perfect circle: where his life as God's instrument began, there his body rests. Be-qever Manoach aviv ('in the tomb of Manoah his father') — he is gathered to his father. The closing formula ve-hu shafat et Yisra'el esrim shanah ('he judged Israel twenty years') repeats 15:20, forming a structural bracket. Samson's judgeship is complete, but the Philistine oppression continues — he only began the deliverance (13:5).

17

Summary: *Micah of Ephraim steals silver from his mother, returns it, and she has an idol and ephod made. Micah installs his own son as priest, then hires a wandering Levite from Bethlehem. 'In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The refrain 'there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (v. 6) appears for the first time here, framing the chaos of chapters 17-21. The sentence is simultaneously a political diagnosis and a theological indictment — without authority, Israel collapses into self-authorized worship. Micah's shrine is a complete parody of legitimate religion: he has an ephod, teraphim, and a Levite, but everything is unauthorized, homemade, and idolatrous.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase pesel umassekah (v. 4, 'carved image and cast metal image') describes two types of idols from the silver dedicated to the LORD — the contradiction between 'dedicated to the LORD' and 'made into an idol' captures the confusion of Israelite religion at its lowest point. We rendered both terms technically. The Levite's willingness to serve as a personal priest for hire (v. 10) violates every Levitical regulation in the Torah.*

Connections: *The wandering Levite from Bethlehem previews another Levite from Bethlehem in chapter 19. Micah's shrine becomes the basis for the Danite cult in chapter 18. The refrain 'no king in Israel' creates the theological case for the monarchy that 1 Samuel will establish. The ephod and teraphim echo Gideon's idolatrous ephod (8:27) and Rachel's stolen household gods (Genesis 31:19).*

1There was a man from the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micayehu. 2He said to his mother, "The eleven hundred
pieces of silver that were taken from you — the ones you pronounced a curse over, and spoke about in my hearing — the
silver is with me. I took it." His mother said, "May the LORD bless you, my son." 3When he returned the eleven hundred
pieces of silver to his mother, his mother said, "I had solemnly dedicated this silver to the LORD from my own hand, for my
son — to make a carved image and a cast idol. So now I am giving it back to you." 4He returned the silver to his mother, and
his mother took two hundred pieces of silver and gave them to the metalworker, who made them into a carved image and a
cast idol. It was placed in Micayehu's house. 5The man Micah had a shrine. He made an ephod and household idols, and he
installed one of his sons as his priest. 6In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did whatever seemed right in
their own eyes. 7There was a young man from Bethlehem in Judah, from the clan of Judah. He was a Levite, and he was
residing there as a foreigner. 8The man left the town of Bethlehem in Judah to settle wherever he could find a place. On his
journey, he came to the hill country of Ephraim, to Micah's house. 9Micah said to him, "Where are you coming from?" He
answered, "I am a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah, and I am traveling to settle wherever I can find a place." 10Micah said to
him, "Stay with me and be my advisor and priest. I will give you ten pieces of silver per year, a set of clothing, and your
food." So the Levite agreed. 11The Levite was willing to stay with the man, and the young man became like one of his own
sons to Micah. 12Micah installed the Levite, and the young man became his priest and lived in Micah's house. 13Then Micah
said, "Now I know that the LORD will treat me well, because I have a Levite as my priest."

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The name Mikayehu means 'Who is like YHWH?' — a deeply ironic name for someone about to establish a private idolatrous shrine. The narrator introduces him without genealogy or tribal affiliation beyond geography: me-har Efrayim ('from the hill country of Ephraim'). This anonymity signals a shift from the judge narratives to unnamed individuals acting independently. The full form Mikayehu will be shortened to Mikhah (Micah) by verse 4.

2. The sum elef ume'ah hakkesef ('one thousand and one hundred silver') is identical to the amount each Philistine lord paid Delilah (16:5) — the echo may be deliberate, linking financial corruption across the epilogue and the Samson cycle. The verb alit ('you cursed') indicates a formal imprecation, a spoken curse with perceived supernatural power. Micah's confession is motivated not by moral conviction but by fear of the curse's efficacy. His mother's instant reversal — barukh beni la-YHWH ('blessed be my son by the LORD') — attempts to neutralize the curse with a counter-blessing. The mixing of YHWH-language with what will become idolatry is the chapter's central irony.

3. The infinitive absolute haqddesh hiqdashti ('dedicating I dedicated' — I solemnly dedicated) intensifies her vow's seriousness. The theological contradiction is staggering: she dedicates money la-YHWH ('to the LORD') for the explicit purpose of making a pesel umassekhah ('carved image and cast image') — objects expressly forbidden by the second commandment (Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 5:8). The narrator offers no commentary on this contradiction; the reader must recognize the violation. The terms pesel (carved/sculpted from wood or stone) and massekhah (cast/poured from molten metal) represent two distinct forms of idol-making.

4. Of the 1,100 pieces dedicated, only matayim kesef ('two hundred silver') — less than a fifth — actually goes to the idol. The narrator does not explain what happened to the remaining nine hundred, but the implication of misappropriation or broken vows is hard to miss. The tsoref ('refiner, metalworker, silversmith') is the craftsman who casts the idol. The verb vayehi ('and it was') with the singular suggests the pesel and massekhah functioned as a single cultic object, or that one was overlaid on the other. The idol now resides be-veit Mikhayehu ('in the house of Micayehu') — a private home becomes a shrine.

5. The name shortens from Mikhayehu to Mikhah, mirroring the degradation of his religious practice. His beit elohim ('house of God/gods') is a private shrine — a term that can mean either 'a temple' or 'a house of gods,' and the ambiguity is fitting. The efod ('ephod') was a priestly garment used for divination (cf. Gideon's ephod, 8:27); the terafim ('household idols, teraphim') were small figurines used for domestic divination, condemned throughout the prophetic tradition. The phrase vayemalle et yad ('he filled the hand of') is the technical idiom for priestly ordination/installation — but Micah has no authority to consecrate a priest, and his son is not a Levite. Every element of legitimate worship is present in corrupted form.

6. This is the first appearance of the full refrain that bookends the epilogue: be-yamim ha-hem ein melekh be-Yisra'el ('in those days there was no king in Israel') + ish ha-yashar be-einav ya'aseh ('each person would do what was right in his own eyes'). The refrain serves as both explanation and indictment. It explains the chaos — no central authority — and indicts the people — moral autonomy replacing divine law. The phrase ha-yashar be-einav ('the right in his eyes') deliberately echoes Deuteronomy's command to do ha-yashar be-einei YHWH ('what is right in the eyes of the LORD,' Deuteronomy 12:25) — the substitution of human eyes for divine eyes is the theological crisis of the epilogue.

7. The identification is deliberately confusing: mi-mishpachat Yehudah ('from the clan of Judah') yet vehu Levi ('and he was a Levite'). Levites had no tribal territory; they were distributed among the other tribes' cities. A Levite living in Bethlehem (a Judahite town) and identified with Judah's clan suggests either dual affiliation through residence or a blurring of tribal boundaries in a period of social disorder. The term gar ('sojourning, residing as a stranger') indicates he was not a native but a resident alien in Bethlehem — a Levite without a permanent assignment, drifting. His namelessness here is significant; he will be identified only later (18:30).

8. The phrase lagur ba-asher yimtsa ('to sojourn wherever he might find') reveals the Levite's economic desperation — he has no assigned Levitical city, no support, no destination. He is a religious professional looking for employment. The phrase la'asot darkko ('making his way, going on his journey') suggests aimless wandering. That he arrives at Micah's house is presented as coincidence — but the narrator is building toward a transaction that corrupts both parties.

9. Micah's question me-ayin tavo ('from where do you come?') opens a job interview. The Levite's self-identification — Levi anokhi ('a Levite I am') — is the crucial credential. His availability (lagur ba-asher emtsa, 'to reside wherever I can find') makes him ideal for Micah's purposes: an unemployed religious professional willing to work for anyone who will pay. The exchange is transactional from both sides — Micah wants a credentialed priest, the Levite wants a patron.

10. The offer is remarkably modest: aseret kesef la-yamim ('ten silver per year'), an erekh begadim ('a set of clothing'), and mikhyatekha ('your sustenance/living'). This is subsistence-level compensation — room, board, a small salary. The title le-av ulekhohhen ('as a father and as a priest') is significant: av ('father') here means 'counselor, advisor, patron-figure' rather than literal father — the same honorific appears in Genesis 45:8 and 2 Kings 6:21. Micah is hiring a personal chaplain. The Levite's acceptance — vayelekh ha-Levi ('and the Levite went') — is immediate, no negotiation, no inquiry about the legitimacy of the shrine.

11. The verb vayyo'el ('he was willing, he consented') suggests the Levite needed no persuading — the arrangement suited him. The phrase ke-achad mibbbanav ('like one of his sons') is both domestic and ironic: Micah already consecrated an actual son as priest (v. 5), and now this Levite replaces him — the hired professional displaces the family member. The narrator calls him ha-na'ar ('the young man'), emphasizing his youth and, perhaps, his impressionability.

12. Again the ordination formula: vayemalle Mikhah et yad ha-Levi ('Micah filled the hand of the Levite') — the technical idiom for priestly consecration. But this ordination is doubly illegitimate: first, only God or Moses could authorize priestly service in the normative tradition; second, the Levite serves a shrine with carved images. The phrase vayehi be-veit Mikhah ('he was in the house of Micah') reinforces the domestication of religion — worship has been privatized, and the priest is a household employee.

13. Micah's final statement is the chapter's theological punchline: attah yadati ki yeitiv YHWH li ('now I know that the LORD will do good to me'). His confidence is based entirely on having secured the right religious professional — ki hayah li ha-Levi lekhohhen ('because I have a Levite as priest'). He treats divine favor as a product of proper religious staffing, as if God can be manipulated through correct cultic arrangements. The irony is devastating: Micah has violated the second commandment, set up an unauthorized shrine, and hired a mercenary priest — yet he is certain of God's blessing. The narrator lets his words stand without correction, trusting the reader to perceive the self-deception. This verse closes the chapter that opens the epilogue, establishing the pattern: sincere religious devotion utterly detached from covenant faithfulness.

18

Summary: *The tribe of Dan, unable to hold their allotted territory, sends spies north to Laish. On the way they discover Micah's shrine and Levite. The Danite army steals Micah's idol and priest, conquers peaceful Laish, renames it Dan, and establishes their own cult with the graven image.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The people of Laish are described as 'quiet and unsuspecting' (v. 7, shoqet uvo'teach) — they are peaceful, isolated, and defenseless. Dan's conquest of Laish is not a holy war but a predatory migration: an armed tribe attacks the vulnerable because they can. The stolen Levite serves willingly when he learns he will serve a tribe instead of a household — his ambition upgrades. The narrator's quiet note that the idol 'remained all the time that the house of God was at Shiloh' (v. 31) places Dan's false cult alongside God's legitimate sanctuary.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase am shoqet uvo'teach (v. 7, 'a people quiet and trusting') describes Laish's inhabitants with words that elsewhere describe the righteous — they are destroyed precisely because they trust. We rendered the description sympathetically, as the Hebrew does. The identity of the Levite is revealed as 'Jonathan son of Gershom son of Moses' in some manuscripts — the Masoretes may have altered 'Moses' to 'Manasseh' by inserting a suspended nun to protect Moses's reputation.*

Connections: *Dan's migration fulfills the failed allotment of Joshua 19:47. The cult at Dan becomes one of Jeroboam's two golden-calf sites (1 Kings 12:29) — the roots of northern apostasy begin here in Judges. The stolen idol connects to Micah's shrine in chapter 17. The peaceful Laish contrasts with the war-hardened Canaanite cities of Joshua.*

1 In those days, there was no king in Israel. And in those days, the tribe of Dan was looking for territory to settle in, because up to that point no allotment had fallen to them among the tribes of Israel as a permanent inheritance. 2 The Danites sent five men from their clan — capable warriors from Zorah and Eshtaol — to scout the land and explore it. They told them, "Go, explore the land." The scouts came to the hill country of Ephraim, to Micah's house, and spent the night there. 3 When they were near Micah's house, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. They turned aside there and asked him, "Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What do you have here?" 4 He said to them, "Micah has done such and such for me. He hired me, and I serve as his priest." 5 They said to him, "Please inquire of God so we can know whether the mission we are undertaking will succeed." 6 The priest said to them, "Go in peace. The mission you are undertaking has the LORD's approval." 7 The five men went on and came to Laish. They observed the people living there — secure and unsuspecting, following the customs of the Sidonians, quiet and confident. There was no oppressive ruler in the land, and they were far from the Sidonians, with no alliance with anyone. 8 They returned to their kinsmen at Zorah and Eshtaol. Their kinsmen asked them, "What did you find?" 9 They said, "Get up! Let's attack them! We have seen the land, and it is very good. Are you going to sit here doing nothing? Don't hesitate to go and take possession of the land." 10 When you get there, you will find an unsuspecting people and a spacious land. God has given it into your hands — a place where there is no shortage of anything the earth produces. 11 So six hundred men from the Danite clan set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, armed for war. 12 They went up and camped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. That is why the place is called Mahaneh-dan to this day — it is west of Kiriath-jearim. 13 From there they crossed into the hill country of Ephraim and came to Micah's house. 14 Then the

five men who had scouted the territory of Laish spoke up and said to their kinsmen, "Do you know that in these buildings there is an ephod, household idols, a carved image, and a cast idol? Now consider what you should do." 15They turned aside and went to the house of the young Levite — that is, Micah's house — and greeted him. 16The six hundred armed Danite warriors stood positioned at the entrance of the gate. 17The five men who had scouted the land went inside and took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the cast idol, while the priest stood at the entrance of the gate with the six hundred armed warriors. 18When these men entered Micah's house and took the carved image, the ephod, the household idols, and the cast idol, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" 19They said to him, "Be quiet. Put your hand over your mouth and come with us. Be our advisor and priest. Which is better — being a priest for one man's household, or being priest for an entire tribe and clan in Israel?" 20The priest was delighted. He took the ephod, the household idols, and the carved image, and joined the people. 21They turned and left, placing their children, livestock, and valuables at the front of the column. 22When they had gone some distance from Micah's house, the men from the houses near Micah's were called together and caught up with the Danites. 23They called out to the Danites, who turned around and said to Micah, "What's wrong with you, that you've gathered this group?" 24He said, "You took my gods that I made and my priest, and you just left! What do I have left? How can you ask me, 'What's wrong with you?'" 25The Danites said to him, "Don't let us hear your voice again, or some hot-tempered men might attack you, and you will lose your life along with your household." 26The Danites went on their way. When Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned around and went back home. 27They took what Micah had made, along with his priest, and attacked Laish — a quiet, unsuspecting people. They struck them down with the sword and burned the city. 28There was no one to rescue them, because the city was far from Sidon and they had no alliance with anyone. It was in the valley near Beth-rehob. The Danites rebuilt the city and settled in it. 29They named the city Dan, after their ancestor Dan who was born to Israel. The city had previously been called Laish. 30The Danites set up the carved image for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his descendants served as priests for the tribe of Dan until the day the land went into exile. 31They maintained Micah's carved image that he had made for as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The half-refrain ein melekh be-Yisra'el ('there was no king in Israel') opens this chapter, linking it to the theological framework established in 17:6. The Danites' search for nachalah ('inheritance, territorial allotment') contradicts Joshua 19:40-48, which records Dan receiving an allotment — the issue was their inability to conquer it (cf. Judges 1:34, where the Amorites pressed Dan back into the hill country). The narrator's phrasing lo nafelah lo ('it had not fallen to them') uses the language of lot-casting (the verb n-p-l, 'to fall,' is the technical term for territorial assignment by lot), suggesting Dan's allotment never materialized in practice.
2. The five scouts are anashim benei chayil ('men, sons of valor' — capable, seasoned warriors), sent from Tsor'ah and Eshta'ol — the same towns associated with Samson (13:25, 16:31). The verbs leraggel ('to spy out, to scout') and lachokrah ('to explore, search thoroughly') echo the language of the original spy mission in Numbers 13. The scouts' arrival at Micah's house — presented as a lodging stop — sets up the collision between Dan's territorial ambitions and Micah's private cult.
3. The scouts hikkiru ('recognized') the Levite's voice — implying prior acquaintance, perhaps from his time in Bethlehem. The triple interrogation — mi hevi'akha halom ('who brought you here?'), mah attah oseh bazeh ('what are you doing in this?'), mah lekha poh ('what do you have here?') — probes his situation thoroughly. The questions move from agency (who brought you?) to activity (what are you doing?) to possession (what is your stake here?). Their interest in the Levite is strategic, not pastoral.
4. The Levite's summary is candid: kazoh vekhazeh ('such and such' — thus and so) glosses over the details, but the key admission is vayiskhereni ('he hired me'). The verb s-k-r ('to hire') is commercial language — the same verb used for hiring laborers or mercenaries. The Levite's priesthood is employment, not calling. His matter-of-fact tone suggests no awareness that this arrangement might be problematic.
5. The scouts immediately exploit the Levite's priestly function: she'al na ve-Elohim ('inquire, please, of God'). The request treats divination as a service available on demand. The phrase ha-tatsliach darkkenu ('will our way succeed/prosper?') uses the verb ts-l-ch (hiphil, 'to cause to succeed, to prosper'), seeking a divine guarantee for their military reconnaissance. They want an oracle — and they assume this hired priest at an idolatrous shrine can deliver one.
6. The Levite's oracle is immediate and unqualified: lekhu leshalom ('go in peace') followed by nokhach YHWH darkkekhem ('before/in the presence of the LORD is your way'). The word nokhach ('before, in front of, in the sight of') suggests divine oversight and approval. The oracle is suspiciously convenient — exactly what the scouts want to hear. Whether the Levite actually performed a divinatory ritual (using the ephod) or simply spoke what his audience wished to hear, the text does not say. The narrator's silence is itself a judgment.

7. Laish is described with terms that emphasize its vulnerability: yoshevet lavetach ('dwelling securely'), shoqet uvoteach ('quiet and trusting/confident'). The phrase ke-mishpat Tsidonim ('according to the custom of the Sidonians') indicates a Phoenician cultural orientation. The critical detail is their isolation: rechoqim hem mi-Tsidonim ('they were far from the Sidonians') — too distant for their cultural kinsmen to protect them — ve-davar ein lahem im adam ('they had no dealings/alliance with anyone'). The phrase ein makhlim davar ba-arets ('there was no one causing shame/restraining in the land') may mean no oppressive ruler or no defensive authority — either way, the city is defenseless. The narrator presents Laish's peace not as blessing but as fatal exposure.

8. The scouts return to their base towns — Tsor'ah and Eshta'ol — and face the question mah attem ('what are you?' — meaning 'what is your report?'). The brevity of the question reflects urgency: the Danites need territory and want actionable intelligence.

9. The scouts' report is enthusiastic and action-oriented: qumah vena'aleh aleihem ('arise and let us go up against them'). The phrase ra'inu et ha-arets vehineh tovah me'od ('we have seen the land and look, it is very good') deliberately echoes the language of the original scouts in Numbers (cf. Numbers 14:7: 'the land is very, very good'). The rebuke ve-attem machshim ('and you are being silent/inactive') and al te'atselu ('do not be lazy/sluggish') pressures immediate action. The verb lareshet ('to possess, to take as inheritance') is the same conquest vocabulary used in Joshua — but here it will mean annihilating a peaceful civilian population.

10. The scouts promise three things: a vulnerable target (am boteach, 'a trusting/secure people'), abundant space (ha-arets rachavat yadayim, 'the land is broad of hands' — spacious, wide-open), and divine sanction (netanah Elohim beyedkhem, 'God has given it into your hands'). The claim of divine authorization echoes the conquest language of Joshua — but no divine oracle has been given to Dan; they received only the word of Micah's hired priest (v. 6). The phrase ein sham machsor kol davar ('there is no lack of anything there') portrays Laish as a land of plenty. Every detail is designed to motivate: easy target, rich land, God's backing.

11. The expedition force — shesh me'ot ish ('six hundred men') — is modest for a tribal migration, suggesting Dan's reduced strength after losing their original territory to Amorite pressure (1:34). The phrase chagur kelei milchamah ('girded with weapons of war') marks this as a military operation, not a peaceful settlement. The same number — six hundred — appears as the surviving Benjaminite remnant in chapter 20, creating a numerical echo across the epilogue.

12. The etiological note explains the place name Machaneh Dan ('Camp of Dan') — still in use ad ha-yom ha-zeh ('to this day'), indicating the narrative was composed well after the events. The location acharei Qiryat Ye'arim ('behind/west of Kiriath-jearim') places the camp in Judahite territory — Dan passes through Judah on its way north, a journey that will take them through the hill country of Ephraim and Micah's territory.

13. The narrative trajectory is deliberate: the six hundred armed Danites arrive at the same house the five scouts had previously visited. The phrase vayavo'u ad beit Mikhah ('they came as far as the house of Micah') signals that this is not a rest stop — it is a destination with a purpose. The collision between Dan's military expedition and Micah's private cult is about to unfold.

14. The scouts reveal their intelligence about Micah's cultic inventory: efod uterafim ufesel umassekhah ('ephod and teraphim and carved image and cast image') — four sacred objects that together constitute a full divinatory shrine. The question ha-yeda'tem ('did you know?') is rhetorical; the scouts are proposing theft. The phrase ve-attah de'u mah ta'asu ('and now know what you should do') is a veiled directive — they are telling the force to seize the cultic objects. The narrator lists all four items together for the first time, emphasizing the scale of Micah's private cult.

15. The phrase vayish'alu lo leshalom ('they asked him about peace/welfare' — they greeted him) is the standard salutation formula. The identification of the Levite's residence as beit Mikhah ('Micah's house') reinforces that the Levite is a dependent, living in his employer's household. The greeting is polite — a social convention masking the robbery about to occur.

16. The scene is staged like a heist: while the scouts go inside to distract and greet, the main force — shesh me'ot ish chagurim kelei milchamtam ('six hundred men girded with their weapons of war') — positions itself at the petach ha-sha'ar ('entrance of the gate'). The verb nitsavim ('standing, positioned') implies a deliberate military formation, blocking any escape or resistance.

17. The theft is executed with military precision: the five scouts enter and seize all four cultic objects — ha-pesel, ha-efod, ha-terafim, ha-massekhah — each with the definite article, emphasizing these are specific, known items. Meanwhile, the priest is kept outside at the gate with the armed force, effectively neutralized as a potential obstacle. The narration is rapid and efficient, mimicking the speed of the operation itself.

18. The Levite's protest — mah attem osim ('what are you doing?') — is feeble and quickly overcome. The verse repeats the list of stolen cultic objects, hammering home the comprehensiveness of the theft. The priest's question echoes back to the scouts' question to him in verse 3 — mah attah oseh bazeh ('what are you doing here?') — creating an ironic reversal: the one who was questioned now questions, but has no power to stop what is happening.

19. The Danites' recruitment pitch is blunt and effective. The command hacharesh ('be silent') followed by sim yadkha al pikha ('put your hand on your mouth') is forceful — shut up and listen. Then the offer: heyeh lanu le-av ulekhohhen ('be for us a father and priest') — the same title Micah used (17:10), but now with a larger constituency. The rhetorical question — ha-tov heyotkha khohhen le-veit ish echad o heyotkha khohhen le-shevet ulemishpachah ('is it better to be priest for one man's house or for a tribe and clan?') — appeals directly to ambition. They are offering a promotion.

20. The phrase vayyitav lev ha-kohhen ('the heart of the priest was good/glad') reveals immediate, uncomplicated enthusiasm — no loyalty to Micah, no moral hesitation. The Levite's allegiance transfers instantly to the higher bidder. He personally carries the cultic objects — ha-efod, ha-terafim, ha-pasel — as his professional tools. The phrase vayavo beqerev ha-am ('he went into the midst of the people') means he joined their ranks, embedding himself in the Danite community. The mercenary priest has found a better client.

21. The Danites organize their march tactically: ha-taf ('the children/dependents'), ha-miqneh ('the livestock'), and ha-kevuddah ('the valuable goods, heavy baggage') go lifneihem ('before them' — at the front). This is a defensive formation: the fighting men form the rear guard, expecting pursuit from Micah. The inclusion of taf and miqneh confirms this is a permanent migration, not a military raid — they are relocating their entire community.

22. Micah musters his neighbors: ha-anashim asher babattim asher im beit Mikhah ('the men who were in the houses near Micah's house') — a hastily assembled posse. The verb niz'aqu ('they were called out, mustered') suggests an alarm was raised. The verb vayadbiqu ('they overtook, caught up with') means the pursuers closed the gap. But the narrator has already told us the Danites expected this pursuit (v. 21) and positioned their warriors accordingly.

23. The Danites' question — mah lekha ki niz'aqta ('what is the matter with you that you were called out/mustered?') — is mockingly dismissive. Having just stolen his priest, his gods, and his cultic equipment, they pretend not to understand why Micah might be upset. The verb vayassebbu feneihem ('they turned their faces') shows the rear guard turning to confront the pursuers — an unhurried, confident response from a superior force.

24. Micah's lament is simultaneously pathetic and theologically devastating: et elohai asher asiti leqachtem ('my gods which I made, you took'). The phrase 'my gods which I made' is an unwitting confession — gods that can be made and stolen are no gods at all. His protest reduces to a cry of loss: u-mah li od ('and what is left for me?'). Micah has lost his entire religious apparatus — the gods, the priest, the shrine's contents — and with them, his sense of divine security (cf. 17:13). The narrator lets Micah's words expose the bankruptcy of his religion without editorial comment.

25. The threat is naked: al tashma qolkha immanu ('do not let your voice be heard with us') — be silent or face consequences. The phrase anashim marei nefesh ('men bitter of soul' — hot-tempered, volatile men) is a euphemism for the Danite warriors themselves. The warning ve-asaftah nafshekha venefesh beitekha ('and you will gather up your life and the life of your house' — you will lose your life and your household's) is a death threat dressed as friendly advice. Six hundred armed men against Micah's posse leaves no doubt about the outcome.

26. The confrontation ends without violence — but only because Micah recognizes the power imbalance: ki chazaqim hemmah mimmennu ('because they were stronger than him'). The verb vayyifen ('he turned') and vayyashov el beito ('he returned to his house') describe a defeated retreat. Micah goes home to an empty shrine — gods stolen, priest hired away, religious system dismantled. The narrator offers no sympathy; the chapter's logic implies that what was built on human manufacture and mercenary religion could be taken away just as easily.

27. The narrator returns to the same descriptors for Laish: am shoqet uvoteach ('a quiet and trusting people') — the repetition from verse 7 makes the massacre feel premeditated rather than impulsive. The Danites knew exactly what they would find. The phrase vayakku otam lefi cherev ('they struck them with the mouth/edge of the sword') is the standard formula for military annihilation. The burning of the city — ve-et ha-ir sarefu va-esh ('the city they burned with fire') — completes the destruction. No resistance is recorded; no military engagement — only slaughter of civilians who expected no attack.

28. The devastating phrase ve-ein matstsil ('and there was no deliverer/rescuer') echoes the Judges cycle — but here the one needing deliverance is not Israel but Israel's victims. The verb matstsil (hiphil participle of n-ts-l, 'to deliver, rescue') is the same root used for God's deliverance of Israel. The geographic note — ba-emeq asher le-Veit Rechov ('in the valley belonging to Beth-rehob') — places Laish in the upper Jordan valley near the sources of the Jordan River. The Danites vayyivnu et ha-ir ('rebuilt the city') — civilization replaces the one they destroyed, but the foundation is massacre.

29. The renaming — vayiqre'u shem ha-ir Dan ('they called the name of the city Dan') — claims the conquered territory through naming. The phrase be-shem Dan avihem ('after the name of Dan their father') grounds the claim in patriarchal genealogy: Dan was a son of Jacob/Israel. The editorial note ve-ulam Layish shem ha-ir larishonah ('but Laish was the name of the city at first') preserves the original name as a historical marker. The city Dan will become infamous as the site of Jeroboam's golden calf (1 Kings 12:29), making its founding in idolatry here darkly prophetic.

30. This verse finally names the anonymous Levite: Yehonatan ben Gershom ben Menasheh ('Jonathan son of Gershom son of Manasseh'). However, the Hebrew text contains a famous scribal anomaly: the letter nun in Menasheh () is written as a 'suspended nun' — a letter raised above the line. Remove the nun and the name reads Mosheh () — Moses. The Masoretic tradition preserves both readings: the original text identified this idolatrous priest as a direct descendant of Moses through his son Gershom (Exodus 2:22, 18:3), but later scribes inserted the suspended nun to read 'Manasseh' instead, protecting Moses' honor. The phrase ad yom gelot ha-arets ('until the day of the exile of the land') likely refers to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE — meaning the Danite idol cult persisted for centuries.

31. The closing verse juxtaposes two religious centers: pesel Mikhah ('Micah's idol') at Dan and beit ha-Elohim be-Shiloh ('the house of God at Shiloh') — the legitimate sanctuary where the tabernacle was stationed. The phrase kol yemei heyot ('all the days of the being/existence of') indicates the Danite idol cult operated concurrently with the legitimate Shiloh sanctuary. This creates a geographical and theological polarity: legitimate YHWH worship at Shiloh in the center versus idolatrous YHWH worship at Dan in the north. The chapter ends not with resolution but with ongoing corruption — the idol remains, the counterfeit priesthood endures, and Israel's religious life is fractured from within.

19

Summary: *A Levite's concubine leaves him and returns to her father's house in Bethlehem. The Levite retrieves her. On the return journey, they lodge in Gibeah of Benjamin, where men of the city demand the Levite for sexual assault. The host offers his daughter and the concubine instead. The concubine is gang-raped throughout the night and dies. The Levite dismembers her body into twelve pieces and sends them to all Israel.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This is the darkest chapter in the Hebrew Bible. The Gibeah outrage deliberately echoes the Sodom narrative (Genesis 19) in structure, vocabulary, and horror — but here the perpetrators are Israelites, not Canaanites. The nation has become the thing it was supposed to replace. The phrase 'from the day the Israelites came up from Egypt until this day, nothing like this has been done or seen' (v. 30) calls every tribe to respond. The dismemberment of the concubine — twelve pieces for twelve tribes — makes every tribe a witness to the crime.*

Translation Friction: *The Hebrew is spare and devastating: 'her master rose in the morning, opened the doors of the house, and went out to go on his way, and there was his concubine fallen at the doorstep with her hands on the threshold' (v. 27). The phrase yadeyha al hassaf ('her hands on the threshold') is the most haunting image in Judges — she crawled to the door and died reaching for safety. We preserved the Hebrew's restraint; the text does not narrate the rape, only its aftermath.*

Connections: *The Genesis 19 (Sodom) parallel is unmistakable and deliberate — hospitality violated, mob demand for sexual assault, a substitute offered. The Levite's twelve-piece message echoes Saul's later rally in 1 Samuel 11:7 (cutting oxen, not a body). The Gibeah atrocity leads directly to the near-extermination of Benjamin (ch. 20) and becomes a permanent marker of Israel's moral failure in Hosea 9:9 and 10:9.*

1In those days, there was no king in Israel. A Levite living in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim took a woman
from Bethlehem in Judah as his concubine. 2His concubine was unfaithful to him and left him, going to her father's house in
Bethlehem in Judah. She stayed there for four months. 3Her husband set out and went after her to speak tenderly to her and
bring her back. He had his servant with him and a pair of donkeys. She brought him into her father's house, and when the
young woman's father saw him, he was glad to welcome him. 4His father-in-law, the young woman's father, pressed him to
stay, and he remained with him for three days. They ate and drank and spent the night there. 5On the fourth day they got up
early in the morning, and the Levite prepared to leave. But the young woman's father said to his son-in-law, "Have
something to eat first, and then you can go." 6So they sat down and the two of them ate and drank together. Then the young
woman's father said to the man, "Please agree to stay the night and enjoy yourself." 7The man got up to leave, but his
father-in-law pressed him, so he stayed and spent the night there again. 8On the fifth day he got up early to leave, and the
young woman's father said, "Please, have something to eat. Wait until the afternoon." So the two of them ate. 9When the
man got up to leave with his concubine and his servant, his father-in-law, the young woman's father, said to him, "Look, the
day is fading toward evening. Please spend the night. The day is almost over — stay here tonight and enjoy yourself.
Tomorrow you can get an early start and head home." 10But the man refused to spend another night. He got up and left, and
traveled until he was opposite Jebus — that is, Jerusalem. He had with him his two saddled donkeys and his concubine. 11Wh
en they were near Jebus, the day was nearly gone. The servant said to his master, "Come, let's turn aside into this Jebusite
city and spend the night there." 12His master said to him, "We will not turn aside into a foreign city where the people are not
Israelites. We will go on to Gibeah." 13He said to his servant, "Come, let's press on to one of these towns and spend the night
in Gibeah or Ramah." 14They passed by and continued on, and the sun set on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin.
15They turned aside there and went in to spend the night at Gibeah. He went inside and sat down in the town square, but no
one took them into their home for the night. 16Then an old man came in from his work in the fields that evening. The man
was from the hill country of Ephraim and was living as a foreigner in Gibeah; the local people were Benjaminites. 17He
looked up and saw the traveler in the town square. The old man said, "Where are you going? Where are you coming from?" 1
8He answered, "We are traveling from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote hill country of Ephraim, which is where I am from.

I went to Bethlehem in Judah, and now I am going to the house of the LORD. But no one has taken me into their home." 19W e have straw and feed for our donkeys, and bread and wine for me, for your servant-woman, and for the young man with your servants. We lack nothing." 20The old man said, "You are welcome at my home. Let me take care of all your needs. Just don't spend the night in the square." 21He brought him into his house and fed the donkeys. They washed their feet and ate and drank. 22While they were relaxing, the men of the city — worthless men — surrounded the house and pounded on the door. They said to the old man who owned the house, "Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him." 23The owner of the house went out to them and said, "No, my brothers! Please do not act so wickedly. Since this man has come into my house, do not commit this outrage." 24Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out. Violate them and do whatever you want with them, but do not commit this outrage against this man." 25But the men refused to listen to him. So the Levite seized his concubine and pushed her outside to them. They raped her and abused her through the night until morning. They let her go as dawn was breaking. 26The woman came at the approach of dawn and collapsed at the entrance of the house where her master was staying. She lay there until daylight. 27Her master got up in the morning, opened the doors of the house, and went out to continue his journey. There was the woman, his concubine, fallen at the entrance of the house with her hands on the threshold. 28He said to her, "Get up. Let's go." There was no answer. He put her on the donkey, and the man set out for home. 29When he arrived home, he took a knife, grasped his concubine's body, and cut her limb by limb into twelve pieces. Then he sent them throughout the entire territory of Israel. 30Everyone who saw it said, "Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen since the day the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until today. Think about it. Take counsel. Speak up."

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The half-refrain u-melekh ein be-Yisra'el ('and a king there was not in Israel') opens the most disturbing chapter in Judges. The Levite is described as gar be-yarketei har Efrayim ('sojourning in the far reaches of the hill country of Ephraim') — the word yarketei ('remote parts, far sides') suggests geographical marginality. He takes a pilegesh ('concubine') — a secondary wife with recognized but lesser legal status than a full wife. She is from Bethlehem in Judah, the same town as the Levite in chapters 17-18, creating a geographic echo. The namelessness of both the Levite and his concubine throughout this chapter is significant: they are representative figures, not individual characters.
2. The verb vattizneh ('she was unfaithful/she prostituted herself') is debated. The standard meaning of z-n-h is sexual infidelity, but the LXX (Septuagint) reads 'she became angry with him' (Greek orgisthe), suggesting an alternate Hebrew reading or interpretive tradition. Some scholars argue the verb here means 'to be estranged from' rather than literal sexual unfaithfulness. Either way, she returns to her father's house — beit aviha ('her father's house') — which was her right as a concubine. The four-month separation (yamim arba'ah chodashim — 'days, four months') provides time for the relationship to cool and for the father-in-law to establish the hospitality dynamic that follows.
3. The Levite's purpose is reconciliation: ledabber al libbah ('to speak upon her heart' — to speak tenderly, to win her back). This is the same phrase used of God's courtship of Israel in Hosea 2:16. He brings practical resources — a na'ar ('servant/attendant') and tsemed chamorim ('a pair of donkeys') for the return journey. Her response — vatebi'ehu beit aviha ('she brought him into her father's house') — suggests willingness to reconcile. The father's reaction — vayyismach liqrato ('he rejoiced to meet him') — is enthusiastically hospitable, setting up the extended hospitality sequence.
4. The verb vayyechezaq bo ('he held onto him, pressed him') shows the father-in-law's insistent hospitality — the same verb used for grasping, seizing. The three-day stay (sheloshet yamim) with its pattern of eating, drinking, and lodging establishes a hospitality rhythm that will stretch uncomfortably through verses 5-9. The extended hospitality scene serves a narrative purpose: it delays the Levite's departure until late in the day, which will force the fateful overnight stop at Gibeah.
5. The fourth day introduces a pattern of delay. The father-in-law's invitation — se'ad libbekha pat lechem ('sustain your heart with a morsel of bread') — uses the verb s-'-d ('to sustain, support, refresh') and is a conventional hospitality formula. The phrase ve-achar telekhu ('and afterward you may go') implies the meal should precede departure — a reasonable request that becomes a mechanism of entrapment through repetition.
6. A meal that was supposed to precede departure becomes another occasion for delay. The father's plea — ho'el na velin ('please be willing and stay the night') — uses ho'el ('be willing, consent'), the same verb used for the Levite who agreed to stay with Micah (17:11). The phrase veyitav libbeka ('and let your heart be good/merry') frames continued hospitality as pleasure. The narrator's repetition of eating and drinking creates a drowsy, stalling atmosphere — every hour spent here is an hour lost for the return journey.
7. The verb vayyiftsar ('he urged, pressed, insisted') is stronger than the previous requests — active persuasion bordering on coercion. The pattern is now established: the Levite tries to leave, the father-in-law detains him. This hospitality — excessive, insistent — contrasts sharply with the complete absence of hospitality that will follow at Gibeah. The narrator builds the contrast through accumulation.

8. Fifth day — the same pattern: early rising, attempt to depart, the father's intervention. The phrase vehitmahmehu ad netot ha-yom ('linger until the day declines') pushes departure dangerously late. The verb hitmahmehu ('linger, delay, tarry') is the same verb used in Genesis 19:16 when the angels urged Lot to leave Sodom and he lingered — a Genesis 19 verbal echo that foreshadows what awaits at Gibeah. Every hour of delay narrows the travel window.

9. The father-in-law's final appeal is the most elaborate: hinneh na rafah ha-yom la'arov ('look, the day has weakened toward evening') — the verb rafah ('to weaken, grow feeble') personifies the dying daylight. The repeated hinneh chanot ha-yom ('look, the day is encamping/declining') reinforces the urgency. His advice — vehishkamtem machar ('rise early tomorrow') — seems practical and safe. But this time the Levite refuses. His decision to depart at dusk rather than stay another night will prove catastrophic. The phrase vehalakhta le-ohalekha ('and you will go to your tent' — go home) uses the archaic 'tent' for household, recalling Israel's nomadic origins.

10. The Levite's refusal — velo avah ha-ish lalun ('the man was not willing to stay the night') — sets the tragedy in motion. He reaches nokhach Yevus ('opposite Jebus') — the narrator identifies this as hi Yerushalayim ('that is, Jerusalem'), still a non-Israelite city at this point in the narrative. The detail of chamorim chavushim ('saddled donkeys') and his concubine establishes the traveling party. The mention of Jebus/Jerusalem is crucial for the next verse, where the Levite's decision to bypass a non-Israelite city in favor of an Israelite one will prove fatally wrong.

11. The servant's suggestion is practical: ha-yom rad me'od ('the day has gone down very much' — it is getting very late), and Jebus is right there. The verb nasurah ('let us turn aside') proposes the sensible option — shelter in the nearest city. The servant identifies it as ir ha-Yevusi ('the city of the Jebusite') — a non-Israelite settlement. His practical instinct will be overridden by his master's ethnic preference.

12. The Levite's reasoning — lo nasur el ir nokhri asher lo mibbenei Yisra'el hennah ('we will not turn aside into a foreign city that is not of the sons of Israel') — assumes an Israelite city will be safer than a non-Israelite one. The irony is devastating: he chooses Gibeah, a Benjaminite city, expecting Israelite hospitality — and will encounter behavior worse than anything he might have faced among the Jebusites. The narrative inverts expectations systematically: the foreigner's city would have been safe; the Israelite city will be deadly. The echo of Abraham's and Lot's encounters with foreign cities is deliberate.

13. The Levite offers two Israelite options: ba-Giv'ah o va-Ramah ('in Gibeah or in Ramah') — both Benjaminite towns a short distance north of Jebus/Jerusalem. Gibeah (later Saul's hometown, 1 Samuel 10:26) is closer, and they will reach it first. The Levite's confidence in Israelite hospitality drives the choice. The phrase lekhah veniqrevah ('come and let us draw near') expresses urgency — daylight is failing.

14. The phrase vattavo lahem ha-shemesh ('the sun came upon them' — set on them) marks the transition to night and to danger. The narrator specifies asher le-Vinyamin ('which belongs to Benjamin') — the tribal identification is important for the tribal war that will follow in chapter 20. The setting sun signals the end of safe travel and the beginning of the chapter's nightmare.

15. The Levite enters Gibeah and sits birechov ha-ir ('in the open square of the city') — the public gathering place where travelers would wait for hospitality offers. The devastating phrase ve-ein ish me'assef otam habbaytah lalun ('and there was no one gathering/taking them into the house to lodge') signals a catastrophic failure of the fundamental Near Eastern obligation of hospitality. In a culture where hosting strangers was a sacred duty, the refusal of an entire city to offer shelter is an indictment. The parallel with Genesis 19:2-3 (Lot in Sodom's square) is unmistakable and deliberate.

16. The only person who offers hospitality is himself an outsider: me-har Efrayim ('from the hill country of Ephraim') and hu gar ba-Giv'ah ('he was sojourning in Gibeah') — a resident alien, not a native Benjaminite. The narrator emphasizes the distinction: ve-anshei ha-maqom benei Yemini ('and the men of the place were Benjaminites'). The native population has refused hospitality; only the foreigner-within fulfills the obligation. The parallel with Lot in Sodom tightens — Lot too was a resident alien who alone offered hospitality to strangers (Genesis 19:1-3).

17. The old man's double question — anah telekh ume-ayin tavo ('where are you going and from where do you come?') — is the standard traveler's inquiry. The term ha-ish ha-oreakh ('the traveling man, the wayfarer') emphasizes the Levite's vulnerability as a stranger. The old man initiates contact — vayyissa einav ('he lifted his eyes') — actively looking for someone in need, unlike the rest of Gibeah's inhabitants.

18. The Levite explains his journey and repeats the hospitality failure: ve-ein ish me'assef oti habbaytah ('no one is gathering me into the house'). The phrase ve-et beit YHWH ani holekh ('and to the house of the LORD I am going') is textually uncertain — some manuscripts read 'to my house' (beiti) rather than 'the house of the LORD.' If the reading 'house of the LORD' is original, it adds further irony: a man heading to God's sanctuary will be destroyed by God's own people.

19. The Levite emphasizes that he is not a burden: ein machsor kol davar ('there is no lack of anything') — he has provisions for both animals (teven, 'straw'; mispo, 'fodder/provender') and people (lechem vayayin, 'bread and wine'). He refers to his concubine as amatekha ('your maidservant'), using the deferential second-person form. His self-sufficiency makes the city's refusal to host him even more inexcusable — he is not asking for charity, only for shelter.

20. The old man's response — shalom lakh ('peace to you') and kol machsorrekha alai ('all your needs are on me') — is the fullest expression of hospitality in the narrative. But his urgent warning — raq barechov al talan ('only in the square do not spend the night') — reveals that he knows the danger. The emphatic raq ('only, but') conveys urgency: whatever else happens, do not stay outside. Like Lot warning the angels in Sodom (Genesis 19:2-3), the old man knows what happens to unprotected strangers in this city after dark.

21. The hospitality sequence is complete: shelter (vayevi'ehu leveito, 'he brought him to his house'), animal care (vayavol lachamorim, 'he mixed feed for the donkeys'), personal hygiene (vayyirchatsu ragleihem, 'they washed their feet'), and food (vayokhelu vayyishtu, 'they ate and drank'). The verb yavol (from b-l-l, 'to mix fodder') is a specific agricultural term. The scene is brief and proper — a stark contrast to what immediately follows.

22. The parallel with Genesis 19:4-5 (Sodom) is now explicit and unmistakable. The phrase anshei benei beliya'al ('men, sons of worthlessness/wickedness') identifies the attackers — beliya'al is not a proper name here but a term meaning 'worthlessness, destructiveness.' They nasabbu et ha-bayit ('surrounded the house') and mitdapeqim al ha-delet ('pounded on the door') — besieging it like a military target. Their demand — hotse et ha-ish asher ba el beitekha veneda'ennu ('bring out the man who came to your house and let us know him') — uses the verb y-d-' ('to know') in its sexual sense, exactly as in Genesis 19:5. The narrator forces the reader to see Gibeah through the lens of Sodom: an Israelite city has become indistinguishable from the paradigmatic city of wickedness.

23. The host's protest echoes Lot's words in Genesis 19:7 almost verbatim: al achai al tare'u na ('no, my brothers, do not do evil'). The term ha-nevalah ha-zot ('this outrage/disgrace') is a specific term for acts of gross sexual violation or social transgression — the same word used for Shechem's rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:7) and Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:12). His appeal is to the obligation of hospitality: acharei asher ba ha-ish ha-zeh el beiti ('since this man has come into my house') — the guest is under his protection, and violating a guest violates the host.

24. The host offers two women — hinneh bitti ha-betulah ufilagshehu ('here is my daughter the virgin and his concubine') — as substitutes, exactly as Lot offered his daughters in Sodom (Genesis 19:8). The verb annu ('afflict them, violate them, rape them') is the same verb used for the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:2). The horrifying phrase va'asu lahem ha-tov be-eineikhem ('do to them what is good in your eyes') echoes the refrain of 17:6 — 'what is right in their own eyes' — with devastating irony: moral autonomy has descended to sanctioned gang rape. The host protects the male guest at the cost of the women. The narrator reports this without commentary, letting the moral horror register through the bare facts.

25. The critical action: vayyachazaq ha-ish befilagsho vayyotse aleihem hachuts ('the man grabbed his concubine and brought her out to them outside'). The subject 'the man' most likely refers to the Levite himself — he physically seizes his own concubine and thrusts her out to the mob. The verbs that follow are unflinching: vayyede'u otah ('they knew her' — they raped her) and vayyit'allelu vah ('they abused/mistreated her') kol ha-laylah ad ha-boqer ('all the night until the morning'). The verb hit'allel ('to abuse, treat brutally') describes sustained, repeated violence. The phrase vayshallechuha ba'alot ha-shachar ('they released her at the rising of the dawn') — the verb shillech ('to send away, release') treats her like a used object being discarded. The narrator's flat tone is itself a form of testimony.

26. The image is devastating in its simplicity: vattipol petach beit ha-ish asher adoneiha sham ('she fell at the entrance of the house of the man where her master was'). She crawls back to the only shelter she knows — the house where the man who pushed her outside is sleeping. The word adoneiha ('her master/lord') rather than 'her husband' underscores the power dynamic. The phrase ad ha-or ('until the light') — she lies at the threshold through the remaining darkness, alone, while her 'master' is inside. The narrator does not say whether she is alive or dead at this point.

27. The Levite rises, opens the door, and prepares to leave — vayyetse lalekhet ledarko ('he went out to go on his way') — as if nothing has happened. His first thought is the journey, not the woman he forced outside. Then: vehineh ha-ishah pilagsho nofelet petach ha-bayit ('and there was the woman, his concubine, fallen at the entrance of the house'). The image of her hands al ha-saf ('on the threshold') is one of the most haunting in all of Scripture — her fingers gripping the doorstep she could not cross. The narrator does not tell us what the Levite feels. The silence is deafening.

28. The Levite's words — qumi venelekhah ('get up and let's go') — are staggeringly callous. The phrase ve-ein oneh ('and there was no answer') confirms she is dead or dying — the same phrase used when God does not answer (1 Samuel 14:37, 28:6). The narrator's restraint is excruciating: no description of the Levite's reaction, no grief, no outrage. He loads her onto the donkey — vayyiqqacheha al ha-chamor — like cargo, and continues home — vayyelekh limqomo ('he went to his place'). The flatness of the narration mirrors the Levite's apparent emotional flatness.

29. The Levite takes ha-ma'akhelet ('the knife' — the same word used for the knife Abraham used at the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22:6, 10) and vayyenattecheha la-atsameiha ('he cut her into her bones/limbs') — the verb n-t-ch is the technical term for butchering a sacrificial animal (Leviticus 1:6, 12). He produces lishnem asar netachim ('twelve pieces') — one for each tribe. The verb vayshallecheha ('he sent her') distributes the pieces bekhol gevul Yisra'el ('throughout the entire border/territory of Israel'). The act echoes — and inverts — covenant rituals involving dismembered animals (cf. Genesis 15:10). Saul will later perform a similar act with oxen to muster Israel (1 Samuel 11:7), but here a human body replaces the animal. The narrator reports the dismemberment without commentary.

30. The chapter closes with a communal response of horror: lo nihyetah velo nir'atah kazot ('nothing like this has happened or been seen like this'). The temporal frame — lemiyyom alot benei Yisra'el me-erets Mitsrayim ad ha-yom ha-zeh ('from the day the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day') — spans the entire national history: nothing since the Exodus has been this terrible. The triple imperative — simu lakhem aleha utsu vedabberu ('set your minds on it, take counsel, and speak') — demands a response. The verbs move from internal reflection (simu, 'consider') to deliberation (utsu, 'take counsel') to public speech (dabberu, 'speak'). This call to action launches the civil war of chapter 20.

20

Summary: *All Israel assembles against Gibeah. Benjamin refuses to surrender the offenders, and civil war erupts. Israel suffers two devastating defeats before God grants victory on the third day. Benjamin is nearly annihilated — 600 men survive by fleeing to the Rock of Rimmon.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Israel inquires of God three times: 'Who shall go up first?' (v. 18), 'Shall we again draw near?' (v. 23), and 'Shall we go up once more?' (v. 28). The first two times, God authorizes the attack, and Israel loses. The defeats are unexplained — God permits righteous war to fail, perhaps to purge Israel's own self-righteousness before granting victory. The 25,000 Benjaminite dead (v. 46) represent the costliest internal conflict in the pre-monarchic period.*

Translation Friction: *The battle narratives include numbers that seem incompatible between verses — 25,100 Benjaminites (v. 35) vs. 25,000 (v. 46) vs. detailed counts that add to slightly different totals. We rendered each number as the Hebrew gives it and noted the variants. The phrase vayinnagfu lifnei Yisra'el (v. 35, 'were struck down before Israel') uses the standard holy-war vocabulary — even in civil war, the narrative framework remains theological.*

Connections: *The initial question 'who shall go up first?' (v. 18) echoes 1:1, forming a bookend — the book opens and closes with the same question, but the enemy has shifted from Canaanites to fellow Israelites. The near-annihilation of Benjamin anticipates Saul's tribe — the traumatized remnant produces Israel's first king. The 600 survivors at the Rock of Rimmon (v. 47) are the thread from which Benjamin will be rebuilt.*

1All the Israelites went out and the community assembled as one person, from Dan to Beersheba, including the land of
Gilead, before the LORD at Mizpah. 2The leaders of all the people and of all the tribes of Israel took their positions in the
assembly of God's people — four hundred thousand foot soldiers who carried swords. 3The Benjaminites heard that the
Israelites had gone up to Mizpah. The Israelites said, "Tell us — how did this terrible thing happen?" 4The Levite, the
husband of the murdered woman, answered and said, "I came to Gibeah in Benjamin — I and my concubine — to spend the
night. 5The citizens of Gibeah rose up against me. They surrounded the house at night intending to kill me. They raped my
concubine, and she died. 6I took my concubine, cut her into pieces, and sent them throughout the entire territory of Israel's
inheritance, because they committed a depraved outrage in Israel. 7Here you all are, Israelites. Give your judgment and
counsel on this matter." 8All the people rose as one person, saying, "None of us will go to his tent. None of us will return
home. 9Now this is what we will do to Gibeah — we will go up against it by lot. 10We will take ten men out of every hundred
from all the tribes of Israel, a hundred from every thousand, and a thousand from every ten thousand, to gather provisions
for the army, so that when they arrive at Gibeah of Benjamin, they can deal with all the outrage that was committed in
Israel." 11So all the men of Israel were assembled against the city, united as one person. 12The tribes of Israel sent
messengers throughout the tribe of Benjamin, saying, "What is this terrible thing that has happened among you? 13Now
hand over the worthless men who are in Gibeah so we can put them to death and purge the evil from Israel." But the
Benjaminites refused to listen to their fellow Israelites. 14Instead, the Benjaminites gathered from their towns to Gibeah to
go out and fight against the Israelites. 15The Benjaminites mustered from their towns on that day twenty-six thousand
swordsmen, in addition to the inhabitants of Gibeah, who mustered seven hundred select warriors. 16Among all these
fighters were seven hundred select men who were left-handed. Every one of them could sling a stone at a hair's width and
not miss. 17The men of Israel, not counting Benjamin, mustered four hundred thousand swordsmen — all of them warriors. 1
8The Israelites set out and went up to Bethel and inquired of God. The Israelites asked, "Who among us should go up first to
fight against the Benjaminites?" The LORD said, "Judah first." 19The Israelites got up in the morning and encamped against
Gibeah. 20The men of Israel went out to fight Benjamin and drew up their battle lines against them at Gibeah. 21The
Benjaminites came out of Gibeah and cut down twenty-two thousand Israelite men that day. 22But the Israelite forces rallied
their courage and again formed battle lines in the same place where they had formed up the first day. 23The Israelites went
up and wept before the LORD until evening. They inquired of the LORD, "Should we again engage in battle against the

Benjaminites, our own brothers?" The LORD said, "Go up against him." 24The Israelites advanced against the Benjaminites on the second day. 25Benjamin came out from Gibeah against them on the second day and cut down another eighteen thousand Israelite swordsmen. 26Then all the Israelites — the entire army — went up to Bethel. They wept, sat before the LORD, fasted that day until evening, and offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD. 27The Israelites inquired of the LORD — for the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days, 28and Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron was serving before it in those days — saying, "Should we go out once more to battle against the Benjaminites, our brothers, or should we stop?" The LORD said, "Go up, because tomorrow I will give them into your hand." 29Israel set ambushes around Gibeah. 30The Israelites went up against the Benjaminites on the third day and formed up against Gibeah as before. 31The Benjaminites came out to meet the army and were drawn away from the city. They began striking down casualties among the troops as before, along the roads — one leading to Bethel and the other to Gibeah through the open country — killing about thirty Israelites. 32The Benjaminites said, "They are falling before us just as before!" But the Israelites had planned, "Let's retreat and draw them away from the city onto the roads." 33All the Israelite main force rose from their positions and formed up at Baal-tamar, while the Israelite ambush force burst out from their position west of Gibeah. 34Ten thousand select warriors from all Israel came directly against Gibeah. The fighting was fierce, but the Benjaminites did not realize that disaster was closing in on them. 35The LORD struck Benjamin down before Israel, and the Israelites destroyed twenty-five thousand one hundred Benjaminite swordsmen that day. 36The Benjaminites saw that they were defeated. The Israelite main force had given ground to Benjamin because they were relying on the ambush they had set near Gibeah. 37The ambush force moved quickly and rushed into Gibeah. They spread through the city and struck everyone in it with the sword. 38The prearranged signal between the Israelite main force and the ambush was this: the ambush would send up a great column of smoke from the city. 39When the Israelite main force turned in the battle, Benjamin had already begun inflicting casualties — about thirty Israelites — because they were saying, "They are certainly falling before us, just as in the earlier battles!" 40But then the column of smoke began to rise from the city — a pillar of smoke. Benjamin looked behind them, and the entire city was going up in flames toward the sky. 41Then the Israelite main force turned to attack, and the Benjaminites were terrified, because they realized that disaster had overtaken them. 42They turned and fled from the Israelites toward the wilderness, but the battle caught up with them. Meanwhile, those coming out of the towns were destroying them in between. 43They surrounded Benjamin, pursued them relentlessly, and trampled them down opposite Gibeah on the east side. 44Eighteen thousand Benjaminites fell — all of them warriors. 45They turned and fled toward the wilderness to the Rock of Rimmon. The Israelites cut down five thousand of them on the roads, pursued them hard as far as Gidom, and struck down two thousand more. 46The total number of Benjaminites who fell that day was twenty-five thousand swordsmen — all of them warriors. 47Six hundred men turned and fled into the wilderness to the Rock of Rimmon. They stayed at the Rock of Rimmon for four months. 48The Israelites turned back against the Benjaminites and struck them down with the sword — entire towns, livestock, and everyone they found. They also set fire to every town they came across.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The assembly formula — vattiqahel ha-edah ke-ish echad ('the assembly gathered as one man') — expresses unprecedented unity. The geographical scope — mi-Dan ve-ad Be'er Sheva ('from Dan to Beersheba') — encompasses the entire land from north to south, plus ve-erets ha-Gil'ad ('the land of Gilead') east of the Jordan. The phrase el YHWH ha-Mitspah ('before the LORD at Mizpah') indicates this is both a military muster and a sacred assembly. Mizpah (meaning 'watchtower') was a prominent gathering site in Benjamin. The opening echoes 1:1 — Israel assembles to inquire of the LORD — but this time the enemy is not Canaanites but a fellow Israelite tribe.
2. The pinnot ('corners, leaders, chieftains') of the people — the word pintah literally means 'corner' and metaphorically refers to cornerstones of leadership. The assembly is called qehal am ha-Elohim ('the assembly of the people of God') — sacred language for what is becoming a war council. The army count — arba me'ot elef ish ragli sholef cherev ('four hundred thousand men on foot, drawers of the sword') — represents an overwhelming force. Whether the numbers are literal or use elef to mean 'military unit/clan' rather than 'thousand,' the point is Israel's unified strength against Benjamin.
3. Benjamin learns of the assembly but does not attend — a significant absence that will harden into military opposition. The Israelites' question — dabberu eikhah nihyetah ha-ra'ah ha-zot ('speak — how did this evil come about?') — demands a formal account. The word ha-ra'ah ('the evil, the wickedness') characterizes the Gibeah incident without euphemism.

4. The Levite is identified as ish ha-ishah ha-nirtsachah ('the husband of the murdered woman') — the verb r-ts-ch ('to murder') is the same root as the sixth commandment's lo tirtsach ('you shall not murder,' Exodus 20:13). His testimony begins with straightforward facts: he came to Gibeah with his concubine to lodge. But as the account continues, he will edit the story to remove his own complicity.

5. The Levite's testimony is factually selective: he says oti dimmu laharog ('they intended to kill me') — casting himself as the primary target and victim. He says ve-et pilagshi innu ('they violated my concubine') — using the passive to obscure his own role in pushing her outside. He omits entirely that the mob's demand was sexual assault against him, and that he himself seized his concubine and handed her over. The verb innu ('they afflicted/violated') is the same used for the Egyptian oppression of Israel (Exodus 1:12). His edited account shapes the narrative for maximum outrage while concealing his own moral failure.

6. The Levite reports his own act of dismemberment as a righteous response: va'ochaz befilagshi va'anattecheha va'ashallecheha ('I seized my concubine and cut her up and sent her'). The vocabulary of butchering (n-t-ch) is stated plainly. His justification: ki asu zimmah unevalah be-Yisra'el ('because they committed depravity and outrage in Israel'). The word zimmah ('depravity, lewdness, planned wickedness') denotes deliberate, calculated evil. Combined with nevalah ('outrage, disgrace'), it constitutes the most severe moral condemnation available in Hebrew. The Levite successfully frames the narrative to motivate military action.

7. The Levite concludes with a demand for action: havu lakhem davar ve-etsah halom ('give yourselves a word and counsel here'). The phrase addresses the assembly collectively — kullekhem benei Yisra'el ('all of you, sons of Israel') — making it a national responsibility. His rhetorical strategy has succeeded: he presented a crime demanding collective response while concealing his own role in it.

8. The response is unanimous — ke-ish echad ('as one man') — the same unity formula from verse 1. Their resolve is expressed as a double negative vow: lo nelekh ish le-oholo velo nasur ish leveito ('not one person will go to his tent, not one will turn aside to his house'). The parallelism (tent/house) is a merism: no one will leave until this matter is resolved.

9. The strategy is determined by goral ('lot') — the same mechanism used for land distribution (Joshua 18-19). The lot will determine which tribes lead the attack and supply logistics. The phrase aleiha be-goral ('against it by lot') places the military planning under a quasi-sacred procedure.

10. The logistics are organized by a tithe system — ten percent of the force (asarah anashim la-me'ah, 'ten men per hundred') will serve as a supply corps (laqachat tsedah la-am, 'to take provisions for the people'). The purpose is stated: la'asot levo'am le-Geva Binyamin ('to act when they come to Gibeah of Benjamin') — the action is punitive. The charge: kekhol ha-nevalah asher asah be-Yisra'el ('according to all the outrage committed in Israel') — nevalah again, the term for gross violation of social and sexual norms.

11. The third repetition of ke-ish echad ('as one man') in this chapter, now with the addition of chaverim ('united, joined, allies'). The unity of Israel against Benjamin is total — but the narrator's insistence on this unity also underscores the tragedy: the covenant community is unified, but unified for internal war.

12. Before attacking, Israel offers diplomacy: they send messengers bekhol shivtei Vinyamin ('throughout all the clans of Benjamin') asking for accountability. The question mah ha-ra'ah ha-zot asher nihyetah bakhem ('what is this evil that has occurred among you?') places responsibility on the entire tribe, not just Gibeah — collective accountability for collective failure.

13. Israel's demand is specific and proportionate: tenu et ha-anashim benei beliya'al asher ba-Giv'ah ('give over the men, the sons of worthlessness, who are in Gibeah'). The purpose — unemitem ('we will put them to death') uneva'arah ra me-Yisra'el ('we will burn out/purge evil from Israel') — uses Deuteronomic purge language (cf. Deuteronomy 13:6, 17:7, 19:19). Benjamin's refusal — velo avu benei Vinyamin lishmo'a beqol acheihem ('the sons of Benjamin were not willing to listen to the voice of their brothers') — transforms a judicial demand into a tribal solidarity crisis. Benjamin chooses to protect its criminals rather than submit to inter-tribal justice.

14. Benjamin mobilizes: vayyease'fu benei Binyamin min he-arim ha-Giv'atah ('the sons of Benjamin gathered from the cities to Gibeah'). Rather than surrendering the guilty, they rally for war — latset la-milchamah im benei Yisra'el ('to go out to war with the sons of Israel'). Tribal loyalty overrides justice.

15. Benjamin's total force: esrim veshishah elef ish sholef cherev ('twenty-six thousand men drawing sword') from the outlying towns, plus sheva me'ot ish bachur ('seven hundred chosen/select men') from Gibeah itself. Against Israel's 400,000 (v. 2), Benjamin is outnumbered roughly 15:1 — yet they will win the first two battles, a narrative shock that raises theological questions about divine justice and timing.

16. The seven hundred left-handed slingers — sheva me'ot ish bachur itter yad yemino ('seven hundred chosen men, bound/restricted of the right hand') — are Benjamin's elite unit. The term itter means 'bound, restricted' — possibly trained from youth to use the left hand by binding the right. Left-handedness has a special association with Benjamin: Ehud was also a left-handed Benjaminite (3:15). The phrase qole'a va-even el ha-sa'arah velo yachti ('slinging with a stone at a hair and not missing') describes extraordinary precision. The word sa'arah ('hair') indicates a target the width of a single hair — hyperbolic, but communicating deadly accuracy.

17. The narrator reiterates Israel's force: arba me'ot elef ish sholef cherev ('four hundred thousand men drawing sword'). The addition kol zeh ish milchamah ('all of these men of war') emphasizes that this is a seasoned fighting force. The disparity in numbers makes the first two defeats even more theologically jarring.

18. The inquiry at Bethel — vayyish'alu ve-Elohim ('they inquired of God') — mirrors the opening of the book: mi ya'aleh lanu battechillah ('who will go up for us first?') is nearly identical to 1:1. God's answer — Yehudah battechillah ('Judah first') — is also identical to 1:2. The structural parallel is deliberate: the book ends as it began, with Israel asking who should lead in battle and God answering 'Judah.' But the enemy has changed from

Canaanites to Israelites — the cycle has turned inward. The location Beit El ('house of God') may refer to the town Bethel or may simply mean 'the house of God' (the sanctuary).

19. The advance begins: vayyachanu al ha-Giv'ah ('they encamped against Gibeah'). The simplicity of the verse contrasts with the catastrophe about to unfold.

20. The verb vayyaarkhu ('they arranged, drew up') is the technical term for forming battle lines. Israel deploys against Gibeah with overwhelming numerical superiority.

21. The first battle is a devastating Israelite defeat: shenayim ve-esrim elef ish artsah ('twenty-two thousand men to the ground'). The verb vayyashchitu ('they destroyed, devastated') conveys wholesale slaughter. Benjamin — outnumbered 15:1 — wins decisively. The theological shock is intentional: Israel inquired of God, God directed them, and they lost catastrophically. The narrator offers no explanation.

22. The verb vayyitchazzeq ('they strengthened themselves, rallied') indicates that morale had to be actively restored after the devastating loss. They deploy again ba-maqom asher arkhu sham ba-yom harishon ('in the place where they had arranged on the first day') — same position, same strategy, undeterred by failure.

23. After the defeat, Israel adds weeping to their inquiry: vayyivku lifnei YHWH ad ha-erev ('they wept before the LORD until evening'). Their question now includes a painful qualifier: benei Vinyamin achi ('the sons of Benjamin my brother') — the fraternal language acknowledges the tragedy of civil war. God's answer — alu elav ('go up against him') — is direct but offers no guarantee of victory. The divine response is enigmatic: God commands attack but does not promise success.

24. The second engagement begins: vayyiqrevu ('they drew near, advanced'). The verse is terse — the narrator withholds the outcome for maximum impact.

25. The second defeat: od shemonat asar elef ish artsah ('another eighteen thousand men to the ground'). Combined with the first day's losses (22,000), Israel has now lost 40,000 men — a tenth of their force — in two days. The repeated devastation after divine consultation deepens the theological crisis. God told them to go, and they were slaughtered. The pattern will break only on the third attempt, after a fundamentally different kind of inquiry.

26. After two devastating defeats, Israel's approach changes dramatically. They add fasting (vayyatsumu, 'they fasted') and sacrifice (olot ushelamim, 'burnt offerings and fellowship/peace offerings') to their weeping. The escalation of religious intensity — from simple inquiry (v. 18) to weeping and inquiry (v. 23) to weeping, sitting, fasting, and sacrifice (v. 26) — reflects deepening desperation and, perhaps, deepening sincerity. The shelamim ('peace/fellowship offerings') involve shared meals with God, seeking restored relationship.

27. The narrator inserts a crucial detail: vesham aron berit ha-Elohim ba-yamim ha-hem ('and there was the ark of the covenant of God in those days'). The ark's presence at Bethel locates the legitimate sanctuary and the means of authoritative divine communication. This detail, combined with the identification of the priest in the next verse, grounds the third inquiry in institutional legitimacy that the previous two consultations may have lacked.

28. The priestly identity is now specified: Pinechas ben El'azar ben Aharon ('Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron') — a direct descendant of Aaron, the legitimate high priestly line. The same Phinehas is known for zealous action in Numbers 25:7-13. His presence connects this narrative to the early post-Moses period. The question now includes the option of stopping: im echdal ('or should I cease/desist?') — genuine humility after two catastrophic losses. God's response this time is qualitatively different: alu ki machar etnennu beyadekha ('go up, because tomorrow I will give him into your hand') — for the first time, a promise of victory accompanies the command. The two prior defeats were not divine abandonment but divine preparation.

29. The strategy changes: vayyasem Yisra'el orevim ('Israel set ambushers') — a tactical shift from frontal assault to ambush. The word orevim ('those lying in wait') from the root a-r-v is military terminology for concealed forces. This is the same tactic Joshua used against Ai (Joshua 8:2-22), and the parallel is deliberate — a failed frontal assault followed by a successful ambush strategy.

30. The third day — ba-yom ha-shelishi — and Israel deploys kappa'am befa'am ('as time after time' — as on the previous occasions). The apparent repetition is the ruse: they present the same front to draw Benjamin out, concealing the ambush force behind the city.

31. The plan works: the Benjaminites hunttequ min ha-ir ('were drawn away from the city') — the verb n-t-q ('to tear away, pull out') means they were lured out of their defensive position. Overconfident from two victories, they pursue the apparently retreating Israelites and begin inflicting casualties — kishloshim ish ('about thirty men') — along the mesillot ('highways, main roads'). They think the pattern is repeating: kefa'am befa'am ('as time after time'). But this is the trap.

32. The dramatic irony is sharp: Benjamin's assessment — niggafim hem lefaneinu kevarishonah ('they are being struck before us as at first') — is exactly the false confidence Israel intended to create. Meanwhile, Israel's actual plan — nanusah unetaqquenuhu min ha-ir el ha-mesillot ('let us flee and pull them from the city to the roads') — is working perfectly. The verb nataq ('to pull away, draw out') is the same used in verse 31 for Benjamin being drawn out.

33. The trap springs: the main Israelite force reforms at Ba'al Tamar ('Lord of the Palm Tree' — a place name), while the orev Yisra'el ('Israel's ambush') megiach mimeqomo ('breaks forth from its position'). The phrase mimma'areh Gava ('from the meadow/open area of Gibeah' or possibly 'from west of Gibeah') locates the ambush force. The two-pronged movement closes on Benjamin from both directions.

34. The ambush force — asarah alafim ish bachur mi-kol Yisra'el ('ten thousand chosen men from all Israel') — attacks Gibeah directly from the opposite side. The narrator's comment is chilling: vehem lo yade'u ki noga'at aleihem ha-ra'ah ('and they did not know that disaster was touching/reaching them'). The verb noga'at ('touching, reaching') personifies destruction as something physically approaching — close enough to touch but unseen.

35. The decisive verse: vayyiggof YHWH et Binyamin lifnei Yisra'el ('the LORD struck Benjamin before Israel'). The verb n-g-f ('to strike, defeat') attributes the victory directly to God — the same verb used throughout the conquest narrative. The casualties — esrim vachamishah elef ume'ah ish ('twenty-five thousand one hundred men') — represent the near-total destruction of Benjamin's fighting force (out of 26,700 in vv. 15-16). This summary verse establishes the outcome; the following verses provide the tactical details.

36. The narrator now explains the tactic: vayyittenu ish Yisra'el maqom le-Vinyamin ('the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin') — the retreat was deliberate, ki vatchu el ha-orev ('because they trusted the ambush'). Benjamin's two earlier victories were real, but Israel's third retreat was strategic — and Benjamin could not distinguish the feigned retreat from the genuine defeats.

37. The ambush executes: ha-orev hechishu ('the ambush hurried') vayyifshetu el ha-Giv'ah ('they burst/spread into Gibeah'). The verb p-sh-t ('to spread out, strip, raid') describes a rapid sweep through the city. The phrase vayyakh et kol ha-ir lefi cherev ('he struck the entire city with the edge of the sword') indicates comprehensive destruction — not a targeted operation but the annihilation of the entire population.

38. The moed ('appointed signal, predetermined sign') was smoke: harvot leha'alot mas'at he-ashan min ha-ir ('to increase sending up a rising column of smoke from the city'). The word mas'at ('rising, lifting') describes a thick column of smoke visible from a distance — the signal for the main force to turn and attack the now-trapped Benjaminites. This same smoke-signal tactic was used at Ai (Joshua 8:20-21).

39. The narrative rewinds to show the Benjaminite perspective during the trap. While inflicting initial casualties (kishloshim ish, 'about thirty men'), Benjamin's conclusion is akh niggof niggaf hu lefaneinu ('surely, being defeated he is defeated before us') — the infinitive absolute niggof niggaf intensifies their false confidence. The phrase ka-milchamah harishonah ('as in the first battle') shows they are reading the third engagement through the lens of their earlier victories — a fatal misread.

40. The signal appears: ha-mas'et hechellah la'alot min ha-ir ammud ashan ('the rising column began to go up from the city, a pillar of smoke'). The phrase ammud ashan ('pillar of smoke') deliberately evokes the pillar of cloud/fire that led Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21) — but this pillar marks Israel destroying Israel. When Benjamin turns — vayyifen Binyamin acharav ('Benjamin turned behind him') — they see vehineh alah khelil ha-ir ha-shamayemah ('the entirety of the city had gone up toward the heavens'). The word khelil ('entirety, whole burnt offering') is the same word used for an offering consumed entirely by fire — Gibeah has become a holocaust.

41. The reversal: ve-ish Yisra'el hafakh ('the man of Israel turned') — the retreating force pivots to attack. Benjamin's response: vayyibbahel ish Binyamin ('the man of Benjamin was terrified/dismayed'). The verb b-h-l ('to be terrified, panic') describes the sudden realization of catastrophe. The phrase ki ra'ah ki nag'ah alav ha-ra'ah ('because he saw that disaster had touched upon him') echoes verse 34 — the ra'ah ('disaster, evil') that was approaching unseen has now arrived.

42. Benjamin routs toward the midbar ('wilderness, desert') east of Gibeah. But the milchamah hidbiqathu ('the battle caught up with/overtook him') — there is no escape. The ambush force from the city and the pursuing main force create a pincer: va-asher me-he-arim mashchitim oto betokkho ('those from the cities were destroying him in the midst of him') — Benjaminites are being cut down from every direction.

43. Three verbs describe the annihilation: kitteru ('they surrounded/encircled'), hirdifuhu menucha ('they pursued him without rest/relentlessly'), and hidrikhuhu ('they trampled him down'). The word menucha ('rest, resting place') used with pursuit means 'without pause, without relief' — relentless, unceasing chase. The location ad nokhach ha-Giv'ah mi-mizrach shamesh ('to opposite Gibeah, from the rising of the sun/east') means the fleeing Benjaminites were driven east of their own city.

44. The casualty count begins: shemonah asar elef ish ('eighteen thousand men'), all described as anshei chayil ('men of valor, warriors'). This is the main battlefield toll, with additional casualties reported in the following verses.

45. The survivors flee toward Sela ha-Rimmon ('the Rock of Rimmon') — a rocky outcrop that will shelter the final remnant. Along the retreat routes, Israel vayyolleluhu ('gleaned him' — picked off stragglers) — the agricultural metaphor of gleaning (gathering leftover grain after harvest) is applied to killing fleeing soldiers. Five thousand killed on the highways, two thousand more at Gid'om. The total in this verse — seven thousand — plus the eighteen thousand of verse 44 equals twenty-five thousand, consistent with the summary in verse 35.

46. The summary: esrim vachamishah elef ish sholef cherev ('twenty-five thousand men drawing sword'). The qualifier anshei chayil ('men of valor') is repeated — these were not untrained conscripts but fighting men. The number represents the near-extinction of an Israelite tribe.

47. The remnant: shesh me'ot ish ('six hundred men') — the same number as the Danite migration force (18:11), creating an epilogue echo. They take refuge at Sela ha-Rimmon ('Rock of Rimmon,' possibly modern Rammun northeast of Bethel) for arba'ah chodashim ('four months'). Out of an original fighting force of 26,700 (vv. 15-16), only 600 survive — a 97.8% casualty rate. Benjamin as a tribe is on the edge of extinction.

48. The final verse describes systematic destruction beyond the battle: vayyakkum lefi cherev me-ir metom ad behemah ad kol ha-nimtsa ('they struck them with the edge of the sword — from city, entire population, to livestock, to everything found'). The word metom ('entirety, completeness') indicates total destruction of civilian populations. The phrase gam kol he-arim ha-nimtsa'ot shillechu va-esh ('also all the towns found they sent up in fire') describes the burning of Benjaminite towns throughout their territory. This is cherem-style warfare — the complete destruction normally reserved for Canaanite enemies (cf. Deuteronomy 20:16-18) — turned against a fellow Israelite tribe. The irony is total: Israel's 'righteous' response to the outrage at Gibeah has become an outrage of its own.

21

Summary: *Israel realizes that Benjamin's near-annihilation means a tribe will be lost. Having sworn not to give their daughters to Benjamin, they find wives through the destruction of Jabesh-gilead and the capture of women dancing at Shiloh's annual festival. The book ends: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.'*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The solutions to Benjamin's crisis are as morally catastrophic as the original crime. To keep their oath (no giving daughters to Benjamin), the other tribes destroy Jabesh-gilead — killing men, married women, and children — and seize 400 virgins. When 400 is not enough, they sanction the kidnapping of women from the Shiloh festival. The book ends exactly as it began: with violence against women and institutional collapse. The closing refrain (v. 25) is no longer merely descriptive — it is the verdict on the entire era.*

Translation Friction: *The phrase ish hayyashar be'einav ya'aseh (v. 25, 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes') closes the book with devastating irony: 'right in his own eyes' (yashar be'einav) uses the language of moral uprightness (yashar, 'straight, right') for moral anarchy. We rendered it literally because the irony depends on the word 'right' — these are not people doing wrong; they are people who cannot distinguish wrong from right.*

Connections: *Jabesh-gilead's destruction will be remembered: the survivors are Benjamin's kin, and Saul — a Benjaminite — will later rescue Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11) as his first royal act, closing a circle. The Shiloh festival connects to the annual pilgrimage of 1 Samuel 1. The closing refrain echoes 17:6, 18:1, and 19:1, creating a four-fold chorus that functions as the book's theological conclusion.*

1 The men of Israel had sworn an oath at Mizpah: "None of us will give his daughter in marriage to a Benjaminite." 2 The
people came to Bethel and sat there before God until evening. They raised their voices and wept bitterly. 3 They said, "LORD,
God of Israel, why has this happened in Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today?" 4 The next day the
people got up early, built an altar there, and offered burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. 5 The Israelites asked, "Who
from all the tribes of Israel did not come up to the assembly before the LORD?" For a solemn oath had been taken against
anyone who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah: "That person must be put to death." 6 The Israelites grieved for
Benjamin their brother and said, "Today one tribe has been cut off from Israel. 7 What can we do to provide wives for the
survivors, since we have sworn by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters as wives?" 8 They asked, "Which one of
the tribes of Israel did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah?" It turned out that no one from Jabesh-gilead had come to the
camp for the assembly. 9 When the troops were mustered, not a single person from Jabesh-gilead was present. 10 The
assembly sent twelve thousand of their best warriors there with this command: "Go and strike down the inhabitants of
Jabesh-gilead with the sword — including the women and children. 11 This is what you are to do: Completely destroy every
male and every woman who has slept with a man." 12 They found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young
women who were virgins — who had not been intimate with a man — and brought them to the camp at Shiloh in the land of
Canaan. 13 Then the entire assembly sent word to the Benjaminites at the Rock of Rimmon and offered them peace. 14 Benjam
in returned at that time, and they gave them the women they had spared from Jabesh-gilead. But there were not enough for
all of them. 15 The people grieved for Benjamin because the LORD had made a gap in the tribes of Israel. 16 The elders of the
assembly said, "What can we do to provide wives for the remaining men, since the women of Benjamin have been wiped
out?" 17 They said, "There must be an inheritance for the survivors of Benjamin, so that a tribe is not blotted out from Israel. 1
8 But we cannot give them our own daughters as wives, because the Israelites swore an oath: 'Cursed is anyone who gives a
wife to Benjamin.'" 19 Then they said, "There is an annual festival of the LORD at Shiloh" — which is north of Bethel, east of
the road going up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah. 20 They instructed the Benjaminites: "Go and hide in the
vineyards. 21 When you see the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, rush out from the vineyards and
each of you seize a wife from the young women of Shiloh. Then go back to the territory of Benjamin. 22 When their fathers or

brothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, 'Do us a favor and let them keep the women, because we did not take enough wives for each man in the war. And you yourselves did not give your daughters to them — so you have not broken your oath.'" 23The Benjaminites did this. They took wives for themselves from the dancers — as many as they needed — carrying them off. Then they went back to their inheritance, rebuilt their towns, and settled in them. 24The Israelites dispersed from there at that time, each to his own tribe and clan. They went out from there, each to his own inheritance. 25In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The chapter opens with a flashback to the oath taken at the original assembly: nishba ba-Mitspah ('he swore at Mizpah'). The vow — ish mimmennnu lo yitten bitto le-Vinyamin le-ishah ('no man from us will give his daughter to Benjamin as a wife') — was intended to punish Benjamin through reproductive isolation. The oath's consequences were not fully considered: with Benjamin's fighting men nearly annihilated and no prospect of wives, the tribe faces extinction. The rash oath — like Jephthah's in 11:30-31 — creates a problem that the rest of the chapter struggles to solve.

2. Israel now mourns the consequences of its own victory: vayyisu qolam vayyivku bekhi gadol ('they raised their voice and wept a great weeping'). The phrase vayyeshvu sham ad ha-erev lifnei ha-Elohim ('they sat there until evening before God') describes a prolonged, communal lamentation. The location — Beit El ('Bethel/house of God') — is where they received the promise of victory (20:27-28). Now they grieve the cost of that victory.

3. Israel's lament — lamah YHWH Elohei Yisra'el hayetah zot be-Yisra'el ('why, LORD God of Israel, has this happened in Israel?') — frames the crisis as a divine problem. The phrase lehippaqed ha-yom mi-Yisra'el shevet echad ('that today one tribe should be missing from Israel') uses the verb p-q-d (niphal, 'to be missing, to be absent from a muster'). The irony is sharp: Israel asks why a tribe is missing when Israel itself nearly exterminated that tribe. The question deflects responsibility onto God.

4. Israel builds a mizbeach ('altar') and offers olot ushelamim ('burnt offerings and fellowship offerings') — the same sacrifices offered before the third battle (20:26). The altar-building suggests either that the existing altar was insufficient or that this is a new act of consecration for the crisis at hand. The worship precedes the violent solutions that follow, creating a disturbing pattern: sacrifice, then sanctioned brutality.

5. A second oath surfaces: ha-shevu'ah ha-gedolah ('the great oath') mandated death for any community that failed to attend the Mizpah assembly. The phrase mot yumat ('dying he shall die' — he must surely be put to death') is the standard death-penalty formula from the Torah. This oath will identify Jabesh-gilead as the next target — creating a pretext for obtaining wives for Benjamin through another act of violence.

6. The verb vayyinnachamu ('they were grieved, felt compassion, relented') marks a shift from vengeance to regret. The fraternal language returns: Binyamin achiv ('Benjamin his brother'). The phrase nigda ha-yom shevet echad mi-Yisra'el ('today one tribe has been cut off from Israel') uses the verb g-d-' ('to cut off, to hew down') — a violent metaphor for what was, in fact, a violent act. Israel's grief is real but does not prevent the further violence of the solutions they devise.

7. The dilemma is stated plainly: mah na'aseh lahem lannotarim lenashim ('what shall we do for them, for the survivors, regarding wives?'). Their oath — nishbanu va-YHWH levilti tet lahem mibbnotenu lenashim ('we swore by the LORD not to give them from our daughters as wives') — cannot be broken because it was sworn ba-YHWH ('by the LORD'). The solutions they devise will technically honor the oath while violating its spirit through loopholes.

8. The investigation identifies the absent community: lo va ish el ha-machaneh mi-Yavesh Gil'ad el ha-qahal ('no man came to the camp from Jabesh-gilead to the assembly'). Jabesh-gilead, a Transjordanian city, will later have close ties with Saul and Benjamin (1 Samuel 11:1-11, 31:11-13) — ties that may explain their absence from the punitive assembly. Their non-attendance under the death-oath makes them a legitimate target, but the real motive is obtaining wives for Benjamin.

9. The muster confirms the absence: vayyitpaqed ha-am ('the people were mustered/counted') vehineh ein sham ish mi-yoshvei Yavesh Gil'ad ('and there was no man there from the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead'). The complete absence — not one representative — makes the sentence absolute.

10. The punitive expedition: sheneim asar elef ish mibnei ha-chayil ('twelve thousand men from the sons of valor') — a substantial force for what amounts to a massacre of an Israelite city. The command — lekhu vehikkitem et yoshvei Yavesh Gil'ad lefi cherev veha-nashim veha-taf ('go and strike the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead with the edge of the sword, including the women and the children') — orders the killing of women and children alongside men. The cherem-style warfare that was directed against Canaanites and then against Benjamin is now turned against a third Israelite target. The escalation of violence is the epilogue's most damning feature.

11. The specification: kol zakhar vekhol ishah yoda'at mishkav zakhar tacharrimu ('every male and every woman knowing the lying-down of a male, you shall devote to destruction'). The verb tacharrimu ('devote to destruction, ban') is the cherem vocabulary — the total destruction vow normally applied to Canaanite populations (Deuteronomy 20:17). Only virgins are to be spared — not out of mercy but because they can serve as wives for Benjamin. The grotesque calculus reduces women to reproductive resources.

12. The result: arba me'ot na'arah betulah ('four hundred young women, virgins') are identified and taken. The phrase asher lo yade'ah ish lemishkav zakhar ('who had not known a man by the lying-down of a male') specifies sexual inexperience using clinical language. They are brought to the camp at Shiloh — asher be-erets Kena'an ('which is in the land of Canaan') — a geographical note placing Shiloh west of the Jordan. The 400 virgins will not be enough for 600 survivors, creating the need for yet another scheme.

13. The war ends with a peace offer: vayyiqre'u lahem shalom ('they called peace to them'). The 600 surviving Benjaminites have been at Sela ha-Rimmon for four months (20:47). The messengers bring reconciliation — the tribe that was nearly annihilated is now to be restored.

14. Benjamin returns from exile and receives the Jabesh-gilead women: vayyittenu lahem ha-nashim asher chiyyu mi-neshei Yavesh Gil'ad ('they gave them the women whom they had kept alive from the women of Jabesh-gilead'). The verb chiyyu ('they kept alive') uses the same root as 'life' — spared from the slaughter. But velo matse'u lahem ken ('they did not find enough for them') — 400 women for 600 men leaves 200 without wives. The deficit drives the next solution.

15. The verb nicham ('he grieved, felt compassion') recurs from verse 6. The theological interpretation: ki asah YHWH perets be-shivtei Yisra'el ('because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel'). The word perets ('breach, gap, break') describes a wall with a section knocked out — Israel's tribal structure has a hole where Benjamin used to be. The attribution to God — YHWH asah ('the LORD made') — deflects human responsibility onto divine action, continuing the pattern of verse 3.

16. The elders (ziqnei ha-edah, 'elders of the assembly') take over the problem-solving. Their question repeats verse 7: mah na'aseh lannotarim lenashim ('what shall we do for the survivors regarding wives?'). The reason — ki nishemedah mi-Binyamin ishah ('because woman has been destroyed from Benjamin') — acknowledges that Israel's own scorched-earth campaign (20:48) eliminated the Benjaminite women along with everything else.

17. The principle: yerushat peletah le-Vinyamin ('an inheritance of a remnant for Benjamin') — the surviving 600 must have an inheritance to pass on. The concern — velo yimmacheh shevet mi-Yisra'el ('and a tribe shall not be blotted out from Israel') — uses the verb m-ch-h ('to wipe out, blot out, erase'), the same verb used for God's threat to blot out names from His book (Exodus 32:33). Tribal extinction would constitute an irreversible diminishment of the covenant community.

18. The oath's binding force is restated: arur noten ishah le-Vinyamin ('cursed is the one giving a wife to Benjamin'). The curse formula (arur, 'cursed') makes the oath unbreakable in the ancient Near Eastern understanding — a self-imprecation that would bring divine punishment on the oath-breaker. The solution must therefore work around the oath's letter: no Israelite father can give his daughter, but perhaps daughters can be taken without their fathers giving them.

19. The elders identify an opportunity: chag YHWH be-Shilo mi-yamim yamimah ('a festival of the LORD at Shiloh from days to days' — annually). The detailed geographical description — north of Bethel, east of the main road to Shechem, south of Lebonah — may indicate that by the time of writing, Shiloh's location needed to be specified because the site was no longer prominent (cf. Jeremiah 7:12, 26:6 — Shiloh was destroyed). The festival likely involved dancing by young women, providing the opportunity for abduction.

20. The plan is explicit: lekhu va'aravtem bakeramim ('go and lie in ambush in the vineyards'). The verb a-r-v ('to lie in ambush') is military language — the same root used for the ambush against Gibeah (20:29). The vineyards around Shiloh provide concealment. The elders of Israel are now orchestrating the abduction of Israelite women by Israelite men at a festival of the LORD — the moral collapse of the epilogue reaches its final expression.

21. The plan's execution: when benot Shilo ('the daughters of Shiloh') come out lachul bamecholot ('to dance in the circle-dances' — festival dancing), the Benjaminites are to vachataftem lakhem ish ishto ('snatch for yourselves each man his wife'). The verb ch-t-f ('to seize, snatch, abduct') is unambiguous — this is forcible abduction. The dancing women are participating in a sacred festival; they will be grabbed and carried to erets Binyamin ('the land of Benjamin'). The narrator reports the plan without commentary, but the parallel with the Gibeah outrage is impossible to miss: once again, women's bodies are treated as objects to be seized for male purposes, now with the full sanction of the Israelite assembly.

22. The legal loophole is spelled out: when the women's families protest (ki yavo'u avotam o acheihem lariv eleinu, 'when their fathers or brothers come to dispute with us'), the elders will argue on two grounds. First, appeal to mercy: chonnunu otam ('be gracious to them, do us a favor'). Second, technical innocence: lo attem netattem lahem ('you did not give them') — since the women were seized rather than given, the oath against 'giving' daughters is technically unbroken. The phrase ka-et te'shamu ('at this time you would be guilty') argues that refusing would now make the fathers guilty of causing Benjamin's extinction. The entire argument is a legalistic fiction designed to circumvent the spirit of the oath while preserving its letter.

23. The plan is executed: vayyis'u nashim lemisparam min ha-mecholelot asher gazalu ('they took wives according to their number from the dancers whom they seized'). The verb gazal ('to seize, rob, take by force') is the standard verb for robbery and plunder — it is used for violent theft throughout the prophets (e.g., Micah 2:2). The women are seized, and the Benjaminites return to rebuild: vayyivnu et he-arim vayyeshvu vahem ('they built the cities and settled in them'). Tribal continuity is preserved, but through forcible abduction sanctioned by the assembly of Israel. The restoration of Benjamin is built on layers of violence: the massacre of Jabesh-gilead and the abduction of Shiloh's daughters.

24. The assembly dissolves: vayyithallekhu ('they went their ways') ish leshivto ulemishpachto ('each man to his tribe and his clan'). The phrase ish lenachalato ('each to his inheritance') sends everyone home. The narrative returns to the fragmented, decentralized state that opened the epilogue — no king, no central authority, each person returning to their own territory. The dispersion sets up the final verse.

25. The book's final verse repeats the full refrain identically to 17:6: be-yamim ha-hem ein melekh be-Yisra'el ish ha-yashar be-einav ya'aseh ('in those days there was no king in Israel; each person would do what was right in his own eyes'). As the last word of Judges, it serves simultaneously as diagnosis, lament, and implicit argument. The diagnosis: moral anarchy. The lament: Israel has descended from the conquest generation to a people capable of gang rape, civil war, massacre, and mass abduction. The implicit argument: the absence of centralized authority under God contributes to — or at least coincides with — social and moral disintegration. Whether kingship would solve the problem is left open; the books of Samuel will explore that question. The refrain's repetition at the book's close creates an inclusio with 17:6, framing the entire epilogue as a sustained meditation

on what happens when 'everyone does whatever seemed right in their own eyes.'