Family Disintegration in Judges 17–18

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Abstract: Judges 17–18 depicts the disintegration of a basic unit of Israel’s social life: the household. These two chapters are part of a frame around the Book of Judges that includes 1:1–2:5 and 19:1–21:25. The multiple connections between the end of the frame (17:1–21:25) and the beginning (1:1–2:5) indicate that the end of Judges should be read in conjunction with the beginning. Within the first part of the frame comes the story of Achsah (1:12-15 // Josh 15:16-19), which exemplifies three aspects of the ideal family in the eyes of ancient audiences: the family has a clearly defined family structure, children respect their parents, and parents bless their children. The narrative of Judges 17–18 shows how Israelite households at the end of the period of the judges fall far short of these three elements of ideal families. The line from Achsah at the beginning of the book to Micah at the end thus charts the trajectory of increasing disorder in families and society as a whole. The family theme not only serves as an important element of the frame of Judges but retunes readers to the important role that families play throughout the book.

Key Words: Judges • family • household

The Book of Judges chronicles the deterioration of Israelite society, a process that reaches a climax at the end of Judges in chaps. 17–21. The book depicts this deterioration in various ways, including in the progressive fragmentation of

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households. Scholars point to the stories of Abimelech, Jephthah’s daughter, and Samson as evidence of this theme of family disruption. Families also appear prominently in the well-recognized frame of Judg 1:1–2:5 and 17:1–21:25. In chapters 19–21, for instance, scholars interpret the tragic death of the Levite’s concubine and the internecine conflict as illustrative of—or even climactic of—the familial disorder in Israel.

At the same time, the role of family in the story of Micah (Judges 17–18) has not received as much attention as these other stories in the frame and throughout the book. Scholars do note the household disruption in these two chapters, but chaps. 17–18 are often treated alongside the three following chapters, with the emphasis on chaps. 19–21. Moreover, the concentration on the cultic problems in Judges 17–18, especially with regard to the foundation of Micah’s sanctuary and then the cult at Dan, leads to the relative neglect of the family problems in these chapters. Yet Judges 17–18 forms an essential component of the Judges frame showing familial destabilization. So much of the action of these chapters revolves around Micah’s household, and parental imagery runs throughout the two chapters. Within the Book of Judges, only the story of Samson and Delilah in 16:4-21 rivals the Micah narrative for the amount of text depicting a scene set in a household. Even more, the refrain of individualistic fragmentation that punctuates the last five chapters (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) first appears in the midst of the Micah narrative (17:6).

In this article, I argue that Judges 17–18 fits within the larger motif of family disruption in the Book of Judges by using familial language to highlight the collapse of Israelite households toward the end of the period of the judges. The narrative of these two chapters shows the subversion of three elements of an ideal household: a clear hierarchical structure, a flow of respect from children to parents,


and a bestowal of blessings and inheritance from parents to children. This disruption reflects instability at every level of society. The extent of this collapse becomes especially noticeable in light of the literary and thematic connections that scholars note between the beginning (1:1—2:5) and the conclusion (chs. 17–21) of Judges. The story of Achsah in the introduction (1:12-15) represents a relatively stable and traditional family that serves as a contrasting model to the chaotic family situation in chaps. 17–18. The line from Achsah at the beginning of the book to Micah at the end charts the trajectory of increasing disorder in families and society as a whole. In the first part of the article, I summarize the evidence that scholars use to argue that Judges 17–18 belongs to the larger frame around the Book of Judges (1:1–2:5; 17:1–21:25). In the second part, I describe how Judges 17–18 narrates the subversion of the three aspects of the ideal family as reflected in the story of Achsah: family structure is clearly hierarchical, children show respect to their parents, and parents in turn bestow blessings and inheritance on their children. In the conclusion, I then describe how the family theme in chaps. 17–18 not only is important in interpreting the frame of Judges but also reorients readers to find this theme in the intervening stories of the judges.

I. The Frame of Judges

As numerous scholars note, Judg 1:1—2:5 and 17:1—21:25 currently function as the frame of the present Book of Judges. Many researchers characterize Judg 1:1—2:5 and 17:1—21:25 as among the later additions to the book. Judges 1:1—2:5 breaks the connection between the Book of Joshua and Judg 2:6 and suggests a more piecemeal conquest than that portrayed in Joshua. Judges 17–21 similarly

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6 E.g., A. Graeme Auld, “Judges I and History: A Reconsideration,” *VT* 25 (1975) 261-85, here
differs from its context in that it does not tell stories of judges, and it interrupts the connection between the period of the judges and the last judge—Samuel.7

Chapters 17–21 serve as a unified ending to the Book of Judges as a whole.8 The references to the lack of a king in 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25, with the clear paralleling of 17:6 // 21:25 and 18:1 // 19:1, indicate redactional attempts to unite Judges 17–18 and 19–21 while at the same time looking forward to the rise of the monarchy in Samuel. Both sections begin with similar openings (“and there was a man” [וַיֹּֽאמֶר] in 17:1 and 19:1), feature Levites and Ephraimites prominently, and involve significant north–south movement.9 These chapters also refer to Bethlehem (17:7, 8, 9; 19:1, 2, 18), which only appears elsewhere in 12:8, 10, and they mention Shiloh (18:31; 21:12, 19, 21)—a city absent from the rest of the book. These five concluding chapters accentuate the chaotic state that Israel has reached toward the end of the period of the judges.

Judges 1:1–2:5 evinces literary and thematic connections to 17:1–21:25, indicating that these two sections function as a frame around the book. Three sets of observations serve as evidence for this framing role. First, the frame highlights the trials of the Danites in capturing land.10 The tribe of Dan features prominently in


9 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

1:34 at the end of a description of the individual tribal attempts to conquer Canaan. There, the Amorites force them out of the valley into the hill country. Judges 18 shows the resolution to this narratival problem when the Danites migrate north to find an inheritance for themselves. Samson is a Danite (13:2) so that Judges 17–18 fits with the immediately preceding context as well, but the failure of the tribe of Dan to find land in the south is only present in the frame.

Second, the frame’s negative portrayal of Dan contrasts with the positive portrayal of the tribe of Judah.11 This contrast parallels the larger theme of increasing military and religious problems as one moves northward in the Book of Judges.12 Judah correspondingly has the fewest problems, whereas Dan, which becomes the northernmost tribe, has the most. Judah largely meets with military success in Judg 1:3-20 and vindicates itself as a leader in the period after the death of Joshua in 1:1.13 Indeed, the Achsah story (Judg 1:12-15) serves as an index of the pro-Judah shaping of 1:1–2:5. Joshua 15:16-19 is the original context of the story, as the narrative about Caleb’s family fits better there in connection with the other remarks about Caleb (Josh 14:6-15; 15:13-15) than it does at the beginning of Judges.14 The modifications visible in the Judges version accentuate Judah to a greater extent than the Joshua version in two ways. First, Josh 15:13-14 ascribes

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the conquest of Hebron (former Kiriath-arba) to Caleb, whereas Judg 1:10 credits Judah with the victory (cf. 1:20). Second, although both versions highlight Caleb’s role in motivating the capture of Debir (former Kiriath-sepher), Judg 1:11 connects the attack to a campaign by Judah rather than by Caleb (cf. Josh 15:15). The editor of the Judges Achsah story thus integrates it more closely into the pro-Judah narrative of 1:1–2:5. Therefore, Judg 1:1–2:5 highlights the success and leadership role of the tribe of Judah in the period after Joshua’s death. The tribe’s preeminence anticipates the eventual Davidic monarchy arising from Judah.

Judah also plays an important role in the last five chapters of the book. The Levite of Judges 17–18 comes from Bethlehem in Judah and even somewhat confusingly hails “from the family of Judah” (לֹא מִנֵּי דִוד הַשָּׁם; 17:7). The Levite’s origins in Judah do not explicitly come up again within the narrative, but the fact that the Danite spies recognize the “voice” (כְּלָל) of the Levite in 18:3 likely indicates that they were picking up on his southern accent or had had contacts with him in the south.15 After all, their questions in 18:3 already betray knowledge that he is not from Ephraim: “Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place?” The Levite’s career ultimately places him as the priest of Dan (18:30)—a problematic position in light of the Deuteronomic centralization injunction. At the same time, the fact that a Judean wanderer achieves such a high position both in Ephraim and in Dan testifies to Judahite talents and leadership. Judahites could succeed even as itinerants outside of their home territory. This promising youth’s talents simply were corrupted by those in the north and turned to bad ends. Furthermore, the narrative notes that the migrating Danites encamp in a locale in Judahite territory (18:12). Such a mention of a locale in Judah suggests a Judean provenance for at least the tradition behind the narrative.16

The strongest literary connection between Judg 1:1–2:5 and Judg 17:1–21:25 comes in 20:18, where an oracle declares to the collected Israelite assembly that Judah should go up first in the battle with the Benjaminites.


Judg 1:1-2 | After the death of Joshua, the children of Israel [לכט ושמואל] inquired [_urשאל] of Yhwh [היהו]: “Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first, to battle against them [לכט ובאנה]? And Yhwh said, “Judah shall go up [לכט ובאנה]. Behold, I give the land into his hand.”

Judg 20:18 | The children of Israel [לכט ושמואל] went up to Bethel, and they inquired [רשאלווכו] of God [אלהים], “Who shall go up for us first to battle against the Benjaminites [לכט ובאנה]? And Yhwh said, “Judah first [לכט ובאנה].”

Judges 20:18 thus mirrors the pro-Judah oracle in 1:1-2. Even more, the references to the lack of a king in 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25—especially in conjunction with the anti-Benjaminite tendency in chaps. 19-21 that undermines Saul’s authority—look forward to the Davidic dynasty arising from Judah. The emphasis on Judah in the frame contrasts with the rest of the book, in which the Judahites appear relatively rarely (3:9-11; 10:9; 15:9-13).

Whereas the first two observations relate to Judges 17-18, the third observation relates to chaps. 19-21 specifically. In addition to the close connection between 1:1-2 and 20:18 identified above, Judg 1:21 describes how Jerusalem remains Jebusite, which is an important detail in the Levite and concubine story (19:11-12). Bethel also appears prominently as an Israelite possession in 20:18, 26-28 and 21:2 after its capture in 1:22-25. The collective weeping (בכה) of all Israel followed by sacrifice appears in Judges only in the frame (2:1-5; 20:23, 26; 21:2-4).

No scholarly consensus exists regarding the formation of these chapters. Due to the fact that the connections to 1:1–2:5 are stronger in 19:1–21:25 than in 17:1–18:31, the prologue to Judges likely arose after 17:1–18:31* and after or in conjunction with 19:1–21:25*. At the same time, this prologue anticipates chaps.

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17 See, e.g., Wong, Compositional Strategy, 32-35; Groß, Richter, 91-93, 884; Schulz, Die Anhänge zum Richterbuch, 77, 222; Edenburg, Dismembering the Whole, 307; Nelson, Judges, 345.
19 See Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, 259; Mayes, Judges, 15; Webb, Book of the Judges, 197; Bauer, Warum nur übertretet ihr sein Geheiss!, 142; Wong, Compositional Strategy, 29-31, 40-42; Blum, Textgestalt und Komposition, 274-75; Edenburg, Dismembering the Whole, 304-7; Nelson, Judges, 17, 345.
20 For a summary of the different proposals between 1835 and the 1990s, see Bauer, Warum nur übertretet ihr sein Geheiss!, 57-110. The significantly different recent proposals of Sarah Schulz (Die Anhänge zum Richterbuch) and Cynthia Edenburg (Dismembering the Whole) regarding the compositional history of these chapters testify to the continued scholarly uncertainty.
II. Family Structure

In the first part of the frame comes the story of Achsah (1:12-15 // Josh 15:16-19), exemplifying a relatively traditional family—at least in the eyes of the ancient audiences of the Book of Judges. Caleb gives Achsah to Othniel according to his promise after Othniel captures Kiriath-sepher (1:12-13). Unsatisfied with her dowry, Achsah next petitions her husband to ask for additional land and then goes directly to her father Caleb (1:14-15a). In response, Caleb lavishly grants this blessing in the form of land (1:15b).

Although this story occupies relatively little space in 1:1-2:5, four features highlight its importance. First, this memorable mini-narrative of a woman’s dealings with her husband and father stands out from the larger martial context of Israel’s dealings with the Canaanites. Although other anecdotes punctuate the narrative of tribal conquest in 1:1-2:5 (e.g., the defeat of Adoni-bezek in 1:5-7 and the capture of Bethel in 1:23-26), they contain Canaanite men as important characters. Although the Kenizzites originally had separate origins from the Israelites, the Achsah narrative appears in a context that assumes the close association between the Kenizzites and the Judahites (see Num 13:6; 34:19; 1 Chr 4:15). Second, the very fact that the story is an almost word-for-word repetition from Joshua shows that the editor found it important enough to include, despite the fact that the story needed to be tweaked in order to fit with the pro-Judah emphasis in 1:1-2:5. Third—and relatedly—the story’s inclusion in the introduction, despite its size, heightens its importance. Psychological studies of the primacy effect, for

22 Several scholars point to Achsah’s role as model in the book: Block, Judges, Ruth, 96-97; Schneider, Judges, 17; Smith, “Failure of the Family as a Theme,” 97, 233; Biddle, Reading Judges, 26-28.

23 This reading follows the MT in making Achsah the subject of the petitioning (ㄒככ) as opposed to Othniel. Othniel is the subject in LXXA, LXXB, and the Vulgate. The MT and LXX align to make Achsah the subject in Josh 15:18, the source of the story in Judges. See BHQ, 42*; Lindars, Judges 1-5, 28-29; Joseph Fleishman, “A Daughter’s Demand and a Father’s Compliance: The Legal Background to Achsah’s Claim and Caleb’s Agreement (Joshua 15,16-19; Judges 1,12-15),” ZAW 118 (2006) 354-73, here 369-70; Butler, Judges, 6. Paul Mosca even suggests removing “Othniel” from the verse entirely (“Who Seduced Whom? A Note on Joshua 15:18//Judges 1:14,” CBQ 46 [1984] 18-22), which at the very least highlights Othniel’s secondary role in Judg 1:14-15; the focus is on Achsah.

24 This relationship took different forms at different periods of Israel’s history. See Wright, David, King of Israel, 167-220.
instance, indicate that initial material serves as a significant lens through which to interpret subsequent information. Fourth, the three characters in 1:12-15 in their own way serve as representative figures who prepare readers for the rest of the book. Caleb serves as an exemplary warrior who facilitates Israel’s victories (1:12; see also 1:20). Not only does he represent the elders who outlived Joshua (2:7), but his martial success in some ways prefigures the role of the judges. Othniel in turn becomes the paradigmatic judge in the book, as becomes clear from the correspondences between his narrative in 3:7-11 and the programmatic pattern in 2:11-17. Judges 1:12-15 thus illuminates the origins of this important judge. With regard to Achsah, various scholars observe that she anticipates the crucial role that women play as they take initiative throughout the book. Such women include Deborah, Jael, the woman at Thebez who drops an upper millstone on Abimelech, and even Delilah. As I argue in the rest of the article, not only are the individual characters in 1:12-15 paradigmatic, but the familial relationship between Achsah and Caleb also serves as a model that becomes subverted at the end of Judges.

Three characteristics of Achsah’s family stand out as exemplifying the ideal family in the eyes of ancient audiences of Judges: a clearly defined family structure, respect for parents, and parental blessing for children. Although views of the audiences of Judges changed over time as the book developed, these three characteristics of the ideal family would find agreement among a range of ancient readers. The first element of ideal families that the Achsah story illustrates is that the family structure is clear and hierarchical. Achsah’s father Caleb stands as the authority figure in his family, as he is able to bestow his daughter upon whomever he wishes and can distribute his property according to his desire. Achsah falls under her father’s authority in an unambiguous way.

Whereas Achsah’s family evinces a hierarchical structure with clearly defined roles, the families in Judges 17–18 epitomize disorder by employing parental language in ambiguous ways. In 17:10, Micah invites the Levite to become his “father


and priest” (כהן להב ולבן). Alongside 18:19, this is the only biblical text that refers to a priest as a “father,” although the designation father appears as a sign of respect in some places. The term can denote an older individual (1 Sam 24:12 [Eng. 24:11]), a prophet (2 Kgs 2:12; 6:21; 8:9; 13:14), a husband, or an advisor (Gen 45:8)—all people of some authority. Because “father” never refers to priest elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Micah’s usage here is striking.

At the same time, as Judges 17–18 progresses, the reader grasps the emptiness of the lofty designation of “father” in these chapters. Rather than the Levite holding something analogous to parental authority over Micah, Micah retains the power in the relationship. He consecrates the Levite in 17:12 and provides for him (17:10). Indeed, the narrative never again calls the Levite the “father” of Micah (see 17:12, 13; 18:4-6, 17-18, 20, 24, 27, 30). Instead, when the Levite describes his relationship to Micah in 18:4, he states that Micah hired (שכר) him, casting the relationship in simple economic terms.

Additionally, the Levite repeatedly appears under the designation of “young man” (בני) in the narrative (17:7, 11, 12; 18:3, 15), even after his appointment as priest in 17:12. Such a term ironically contrasts with the Levite’s ostensive role as respected father by highlighting the Levite’s youthfulness. Moreover, immediately after the Levite’s agreement to be Micah’s priest and father, the text states that “he became like one of [Micah’s] sons” (17:11;/screen ym X b l b y[n]). The fact that Micah’s supposed “father” becomes like a son to him shows the vacuous nature of the parental imagery in 17:10. Gale Yee thus notes, “The freelancing Levite agrees to Micah’s offer, but, ironically he does not become a ‘father’ to Micah. Instead, he becomes like one of Micah’s sons in his house. The father-son relationship becomes empty because it is reversible.” In this way, 17:10-11 provides an ironic twist on the paradigmatic Israelite household, with its clear line of authority. Judges 1:12-15 plainly indicates the dividing line between Achsah, the daughter, and Caleb, the father. By contrast, Micah, the ostensible “son” of the

32 Manfred Görg, Richter (NEchtB 31; Würzburg: Echter, 1993) 93; Marais, Representation in Old Testament Narrative Texts, 136-37; Block, Judges, Ruth, 488; Oeste, “Butchered Brothers,” 310; Butler, Judges, 38; see also Schneider, Judges, 236.
33 Block, Judges, Ruth, 489; Amit, Book of Judges, 328; Butler, Judges, 388; Schneider, Judges, 236; see also Mieke Bal, Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 204; Nelson, Judges, 283.
34 Yee, “Ideological Criticism,” 150.
priestly “father,” holds authority over the youthful “father” and provides for him, while the Levite “father” becomes like one of Micah’s “sons.”

When the Danites offer the Levite the chance to become “a father and priest” to them in 18:19, their words and actions further undermine the significance of family language in Judges 17–18. As in the case with Micah, the Levite’s supposed status as “father” of the Danites never again appears. Indeed, the Danites pitch their proposition to become their priest and father largely in terms of the Levite’s personal benefit (18:19). The mercenary Levite then leaves one “family” and joins another. As in the situation with Micah, the fatherly status of the Levite rings hollow. The Levite has no authority analogous to that of a father vis-à-vis the Danites. They are an armed war band (18:16–17) that forcibly appropriates the materials of the shrine that the Levite staffs. When the Levite questions the Danites, they command him to “Shut up! Put your hand over your mouth!” (יהוחיה לך ידך 18:19). Such an abrasive command contrasts with the putative authoritative position they are offering him. If he stays with Micah, he may lose his livelihood, so he is obliged to accept the Danites’ offer. His livelihood with Micah is just as precarious after the plundering of the shrine as it was during his time of wandering through Ephraim (see 17:8-9). He becomes the Danites’ “father,” then, not out of any inherent authority that he has but out of desperation. Given the true power dynamics, the designation of priestly father is thus just as meaningless in the mouth of the Danites as it is in the mouth of Micah.

In addition to the ironic subversion of parental language in Judges 17–18, the absence of Micah’s biological father indicates that something is amiss in Micah’s family from the very beginning. All of Micah’s dealings are with his mother, who seems to be able to dispose of her money at her own discretion (17:3-4). That the Judges narrative sometimes does not provide the father of certain individuals, such as the Levite in Judges 19–20, is understandable, but the domestic setting of so much of chaps. 17–18 means that the omission of any reference to Micah’s father is quite conspicuous. The central role that the mother plays at the beginning of the story highlights even more the fact that the father does not appear. The narrator gives the name of the father of the Danites (18:29) and two generations of the Levite (18:30).

In the Achsah story, her father finds a husband for his daughter and disposes of his property as he wishes, while Achsah’s mother does not appear. The status of

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36 Ibid., 277, 361.
mother holds respect in Judges (5:7; 13:2-23), but mothers generally have a less important role in the book than fathers, or they at least act in conjunction with men. Gideon’s father saves his son’s life through his speech (6:30-32). The identity of Abimelech as Gideon’s son plays a significant part in the narrative of Abimelech (8:31; 9:17-18). Jephthah’s relationship to his father, and his father’s sons, appears at the very beginning of the Jephthah narrative (11:1-3). The story then highlights his status as the father of an only daughter (11:34-40). Both Samson’s father and his mother feature conspicuously in the Samson cycle (13:1-24; 14:2-6, 9, 16; see also 14:19; 16:31). The father of Samson’s love interest at Timnah gives his daughter to one of Samson’s friends and ultimately pays for his actions with his life alongside his daughter (15:1-6). The father of the Levite’s concubine takes his daughter back and plays conspicuously generous host to the Levite (19:2-9).

These other families in the Book of Judges are far from perfect, but they show the central role of the father in the family. The absence of Micah’s father would thus indicate to ancient audiences of the book that his family deviates from the ideal structure. In this way, the families in Judges 17–18 reverse the ideal family structure represented in the Achsah narrative.

III. Respect for Parents

The second aspect of ideal families that the Achsah narrative illustrates and that becomes reversed in Judges 17–18 is respect for parents. Achsah shows respect to her father Caleb both by marrying Othniel in accordance with Caleb’s wishes and by eventually going to Caleb as a source of blessing. Scholars debate the meaning of הָנָּז, which the text employs to describe Achsah’s actions upon encountering Caleb (יהוֹיָּה אִשְׁתִּי; 1:14 // Josh 15:18), but the verb appears to describe a respectful dismounting of her donkey. Three reasons support the idea that הָנָּז

38 Women played a much more powerful and authoritative role in Israelite households than often recognized. See Carol L. Meyers, Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). At the same time, as Israelite society became more complex over time, males played a more influential role in the external relations of the family (ibid., 189-96; Yee, “Ideological Criticism,” 145).

means alighting from a mount. First, the Syriac and targumic renderings of the verb (רָקִ֥ן) are consistent with the idea of downward movement. Second, this downward movement seems to be in the background of the same verb’s appearance in Judg 4:21, referring to Jael’s driving a tent peg into the ground. Third, alighting from a mount was a sign of deference. Rebekah “dismounted from the camel” (חפרלֶא תֶעֶל הָגַּמַּל) before Isaac (Gen 24:64; see also 31:35). Rachel is expected to come down from her camel before her father Laban (Gen 31:34-35). Similarly, Abigail “descended from the donkey” (חֲזָר לֹ֣א תְּפִלָּה תְמוּנָּר) before David in 1 Sam 25:23. In the cases of Achsah, Rebekah, and Abigail, a female on an animal approaches a male. A verb then appears followed by the prepositional complex יַבְּנַל and then the animal with a definite article. The clear meaning of descent from on top of the mount in the cases of Rebekah and Abigail strongly suggests that the verb — appearing in a context similar to the other two examples — also means to dismount. Although Achsah certainly does take initiative in seeking the blessing from her father, bypassing her husband in the process, her actions throughout the story are consistently respectful.

Achsah’s respect aligns with traditional expectations of children’s actions. The ancient Israelites expected children to show deference toward their parents (e.g., Exod 20:12; 21:17; Lev 19:3; Deut 5:16; 27:16; Prov 1:8; 23:22). Failure to render such respect could have major consequences (Exod 20:12; Deut 21:18-21; Prov 30:17). Such respect for parents can be glimpsed in other narratives in Judges. Jotham speaks out for the legacy of his father (9:16-19), and Jephthah’s daughter is obedient to her father even to the point of death (11:36, 39). Samson ignores his parents’ pleas to avoid marriage with a Philistine woman (14:3), and the marriage eventually has deadly consequences.

In Judges 17–18, children do not respect but rather reverse this norm by stealing from and betraying their parents. Micah takes money from his mother without her knowledge (17:2). His confession appears at the beginning of Judges 17, a very prominent place that accentuates his action. His theft would be odious in the eyes of ancient Israelites (see Prov 28:24) and represents a mockery of the deference due to parents. One might steal from an enemy or from someone outside one’s family (as do the Danites in Judges 18), but Micah’s theft affects his very own mother. Indeed, the mother’s kindness toward Micah in blessing him (17:2) and granting the money to him (17:3-4) even after his confession throws into relief

40 BHQ 42*; HALOT, s.v. פָּרָה.
41 The verb is immediately followed by יֵפָנָה. See HALOT, s.v. פָּרָה; Gibson, “שִֽׁנַּח in Judges I 14,” 283; Nicholson, “Problem of פָּרָה,” 265, while acknowledging the continued difficulties in interpretation.
42 On this structural argument, see esp. Gibson, “שִֽׁנַּח in Judges I 14,” 283.
Micah's base behavior toward her and removes any possible justification for his actions.43

Micah's lack of respect for his mother ironically contrasts with his putative respect for his ancestors in the following verses. Immediately after receiving the image from his mother in 17:4, Micah creates an ephod (אֶפְתֹּד) and teraphim (תֶּרַפִּים). Although many aspects of the teraphim's significance in ancient Israel remain unknown, several passages closely associate them with household worship (Gen 31:19, 34, 35; 1 Sam 19:13, 16).44 In this domestic context, the teraphim seem to be connected to ancestor worship. In 2 Kgs 23:24, for instance, the teraphim appear alongside "mediums" (מִדְבּרֵים) and "wizards" (יִדְגֵּנִים)—religious functionaries associated in Deut 18:11 with consulting the dead. Consequently, the evidence suggests that the teraphim were implements used in ancestor devotion, perhaps even images of ancestors.45 Micah's construction of the teraphim indicates his desire to honor his ancestors.46 By the time of the composition of Judges 17-18 and the addition of these chapters to the Book of Judges, teraphim had fallen under condemnation (2 Kgs 23:24). Micah thus honors his dead ancestors in an illicit way by using money that he ultimately disrespectfully stole from his living mother.

In addition to Micah's disrespect of his mother, the Levite's betrayal of Micah is analogous to disrespecting a parent. The Levite is like one of Micah's sons (17:11). Yet, when the Danites plunder the shrine, the Levite abandons Micah, his putative father (and son), and becomes the priest of the Danites (18:20). The Levite even assists in the despoliation of the shrine by carrying the cultic implements. By assisting in the theft from Micah, the Levite mirrors Micah's theft from his parent. Indeed, the betrayal may have begun even earlier, as the Levite does nothing about the plundering of the shrine besides questioning the Danites (18:18). He of course could not have stopped them, but he could have at least informed Micah of the Danites' actions. Instead, Micah apparently does not learn about his loss until the Danites are some way away (18:22).47 Both Micah and the Levite, then,

43 On Micah's actions as disrespectful, see esp. Szpek, "Do Not Reject Your Mother's Teaching?!
46 Indeed, Cox and Ackerman argue that Micah specifically honors his recently deceased father ("Micah's Teraphim," 1-28).
show disrespect toward parents or parental figures in stark contrast to Achsah’s respect for her father.

IV. Parental Blessing and Inheritance

The third aspect of the ideal family that is prominent in the Achsah story but becomes reversed in Judges 17–18 is that parents bless their children. One particularly powerful blessing was the blessing that parents could pronounce at the end of their lives (e.g., Genesis 27; 48; 49; see also Deuteronomy 33). Parents could concretize this blessing by distributing the inheritance to their children at the end of their lives as well. Achsah’s request for a supplementary dowry in Judg 1:12-15 parallels the passing down of inheritance found in parental blessing passages in three ways. First, Achsah goes to her father (1:14-15), who is the typical distributor of inheritance in ancient Israel. Second, the terminology of blessing (בברך) in 1:15 corresponds to the blessing (ברך) that parents bestow on their children at the end of their lives (see Gen 27:12, 35, 36, 38, 41; 49:25, 26, 28; Deut 33:1; see also Gen 48:9, 15, 16, 20). Third, the land that Achsah receives becomes


51 In some contexts—including here—the term הנכירה has the meaning of “gift” or “grant, estate” (Gen 33:11; Josh 15:19; 1 Sam 25:27; 30:26; 2 Kgs 5:15; see also Gen 27:36). See HALOT, s.v. הנכירה I; Baruch A. Levine, In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel (SJLA 5; Leiden: Brill, 1974) 17 n. 39; Paul Kalluweettil, Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near
an inheritance that Achsah can pass along to her offspring. Caleb thus fulfills his familial role of blessing his child. Even though Achsah believes that Caleb’s initial grant is insufficient for her family’s needs, Caleb quickly rectifies the situation with a generous gift.

Whereas the Achsah narrative exemplifies the flow of blessing from parent to child, Micah’s household upends this process. A parent in an ideal household blesses his/her children—as Caleb provides a “blessing” (יהוה) to Achsah in 1:15—but Micah’s mother blesses (יהוה) her son only after unknowingly cursing (יהוה) him. The situation is reminiscent of Gen 27:12-13, where Jacob seeks a “blessing” (יהוה) from his aging father Isaac and strongly wants to avoid the opposite—a “curse” (יהוה). Jacob’s fear of receiving a curse from his parent becomes a reality for Micah.

Ultimately, typical Israelite parents would concretize their blessings on their children by preserving the inheritance and passing it down to them. Micah’s household, however, is a parody of the normal inheritance situation. Micah steals the money that he would otherwise inherit. He does eventually receive back all or part of the money that he stole (17:4), but only after it changes hands several times between him and his mother (17:3-4). In contrast to the typical inheritance situation, in which the inheritance passes from parent to child in a direct, one-time, legally sanctioned way, Micah’s inheritance passes back and forth between him and his mother in such a confusing manner that scholars propose literary-critical seams or textual problems in 17:3-4. Nevertheless, the MT makes sense as it

East (AnBib 88; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1983) 28-29; Hayim Tawil, An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2009) 59-60. See also the Ethiopic barakat and Arabic baraka (Leslau, Comparative Dictionary of Ge’ez, 105); Yochanan Muffs, Love & Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992) 188 n. 1. This differentiation between the distinct meanings of יְהוָה is helpful in an English translation, but the fact that the same word appears in both contexts is telling. One can also note the potential play on words between יְהוָה (“blessing”) and יְהוָה (“springs”)—which parallel the מים (“pools”) that Caleb gives to Achsah. See Hallo, “New Light on the Story of Achsah,” 333.

52 On the dowry’s inheritance by the mother’s children, see Fleishman, “Daughter’s Demand,” 362-72.

53 The different words translated “curse” may admit of differences of nuance, with יהוה tending to appear in judicial settings in contrast to יהוה or יהוה. At the same time, יהוה and יהוה are similar enough to appear as parallel terms (e.g., Jer 42:18; 44:12). See Josef Scharbert, “יהוה,” TDOT 1:261-66, here 265.

54 Indeed, Micah’s dread of the curse could in fact be his motive for returning the silver in the first place, rather than any sense of loyalty to his mother or guilt at his deed. See Amit, Book of Judges, 324, 326; Block, Judges, Ruth, 479-80; Younger, Judges and Ruth, 336; Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 169; Frolov, Judges, 284.

55 For literary-critical solutions, see, e.g., Uwe Becker, Richterzeit und Königum: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Richterbuch (BZAW 192; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990) 226-56;
stands: Micah returns the money to his mother (17:3a), who then dedicates it to Yhwh and returns it to Micah (17:3b). He refuses to take the money and hands it back (17:4a). His mother gives it to a smith and finally returns it to Micah in a finished form (17:4b). Rather than taking the inheritance from a parent in the traditional way, then, Micah steals part of his inheritance from his mother, and then the money shifts back and forth between them. The full ironic reversal of the typical household inheritance situation in Micah’s household is clear. In an ideal household, a parent pronounces a blessing and concretizes this blessing by passing down the inheritance to children. In Micah’s household, Micah steals from his parent, is cursed and then blessed, and next passes the inheritance back to his mother.

Not only is the flawed family situation in Judges 17–18 clear from the ironic reversal of blessing in the Micah–mother relationship, but it also continues in Micah’s relationship to his sons. Immediately after making the ephod and teraphim, Micah installs one of his sons as priest (17:5). Such a deed at first appears to signal his care for his children and establishment of stability in his household in a way that contrasts with his earlier ill-treatment of his mother. Shortly after the consecration, however, Micah installs the Levite as priest (17:10-12). The text does not specify what happened to Micah’s son once the Levite took over his job. Yet the language of the ordination of the Levite matches that used of the ordination of the son.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ordination of Son (17:5)</td>
<td>&quot;And he filled the hand of one of his sons, and he became his priest.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordination of Levite (17:12)</td>
<td>&quot;And Micah filled the hand of the Levite, and the young man became his priest.&quot;</td>
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The Levite goes through the same process as Micah’s son (idiomatically described as “filling the hand”) and receives the same designation—“priest”—rendering Micah’s son’s position redundant.

The text further emphasizes the biological son’s superfluous status by stating that the Levite became “like one of his sons” (sons of Micah). Once again, the
language the text uses of the Levite mirrors its description in 17:5 of the biological son: “one of his sons” (אָחָתוֹ). Micah’s biological son goes from being “one of his sons” to ordination. The Levite proceeds from ordination to being “like one of his sons.” With the Levite, Micah no longer needs the services of his biological son. As a result, it is probable that this son lost his position to the Levite. After all, the priestly son never appears in the text again, and the only priest of Micah’s cult in the encounter with the Danites appears to be the Levite (18:3-6, 15-30). Indeed, Micah’s household cult probably was not large enough to accommodate two priests.

Micah’s neglect of his son evinces the same self-serving attitude and disregard for his family that was on display in his original thievery. Indeed, after he has firmly established the Levite in his new position, Micah exclaims, “Now I know that Yhwh will be good to me, for the Levite has become my priest” (וְאָמַר ה' נַעֲשָׂה בַּעֲשָׂר אֶלָּחֶד). The first-person language in Micah’s mouth indicates that his concern is for his own prosperity. It is thus no surprise that the refrain “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” that also concludes the Book of Judges first appears in the midst of the Micah narrative (17:6; see also 21:25). The refrain finds fitting illustration with Micah. In this way, Micah’s self-serving action of preferring a wandering outsider over his own biological son contrasts with the paradigmatic family situation in which parents provide greater stability to their children by bestowing blessings upon them.

Although family structure is supposed to preserve inheritance and pass it down from parents to children, Micah’s household fails in this responsibility. Micah’s shrine, which stands in his household, is part of the inheritance of his sons, who appear in 17:5, 11. Yet the Danites plunder this shrine, taking even the teraphim—connected as they are to the household and to Micah’s ancestors (18:15, 18, 20). They also induce the Levite, who functions as both a father (17:10) and a son (17:11) to Micah—and thus is like a member of Micah’s household—to abandon Micah and join them. Even though Micah, his household, and the households near him (18:22) chase and confront the Danites, they are not strong enough to take back the stolen items and the priest (18:26). Indeed, the Danites even threaten Micah and his household in 18:25. Although Micah is not responsible for the Danites’ actions, their taking of Micah’s movable inheritance is yet one more blow to the proper functioning of Micah’s household. In summary, Judges 17–18 depicts Micah’s household as not providing a stable inheritance to his offspring. By contrast, in 1:11-13 Caleb assists in the expansion of tribal inheritance, and he then passes down land to his daughter (1:15) that becomes part of her inheritance.

58 Schneider, Judges, 236.
V. Summary and Conclusions

In this article, I argue that the frame around the Book of Judges (1:1–2:5; 17:1–21:25) juxtaposes the figures of Achsah and Micah in a way that highlights the descent into chaos at the end of the book. The family of Achsah (1:12-15) approximates the ideal for the ancient audiences of Judges. Achsah’s household is a clearly defined hierarchy consisting of a series of relationships with corresponding expectations. The children render respect to their parents, and parents in turn bless their children, which ultimately involves passing down an inheritance to them.

In stark contrast to the paradigm of Achsah’s family, in Judges 17–18 no familial or family-like relationship operates in an ideal way. The story in Judges 17–18 functions as a commentary on premonarchic Israelite society as a whole in two ways. First, the anonymity pervading the narrative invites the audience to view the characters as representative figures. Micah is one of the few named characters in Judges 17–21. Nevertheless, Micah’s mother and sons lack names, and the narrative even withholds the Levite’s name—Jonathan—until the very end (18:30). Second, the general statements about Israel in 17:6; 18:1a; and 19:1a (see also 21:25) suggest that the chaotic story in Judges 17–18 reflects chaos throughout Israel; the events of the two chapters are not simple anomalies. In this way, the familial disarray serves as but one part of the larger national disintegration that becomes prominent in the frame of Judges.

Indeed, these narratives accentuate the interconnectedness of the household and national spheres of disorder. In contrast to Judg 1:12-15, in which marriage to Achsah motivates further territorial conquest and then Achsah relies on her relationship to her father to expand her family’s territory, in Judges 17–18 Micah’s actions ultimately serve only to aid the Danites in their retreat from the south to conquer new territory in the north. The connection between the deterioration of family relationships and national chaos becomes even more pronounced in Judges 19–21, as the Levite’s abusive relationship of his concubine spirals into a civil war involving all Israel. These chapters warn of the dangerous corrosion of mores and traditional institutions from the lowest level (i.e., the household) to the level of national leadership.

59 See Marais, Representation in Old Testament Narrative Texts, 133; Block, Judges, Ruth, 474, 482-84; Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 170; Smith, “Failure of the Family as a Theme,” 207, 210; Bray, Sacred Dan, 34; see also Mueller, Micah Story, 54; Webb, Book of Judges, 426. The names of two other important female characters—Jephthah’s daughter and the Levite’s concubine—also never appear. Their stories similarly throw light on the tragic family failures in Israel.

60 Niditch, “‘Sodomite’ Theme,” 371-72, 376-78; eadem, Judges, 190-91. See also Younger, Judges and Ruth, 347; Butler, Judges, 416.
By constructing this frame as one of the final components in the development of Judges, the editors highlight key themes that attune readers to these elements in the rest of the judges stories. For instance, by beginning with the conquest of Canaan (1:1-2:5) and ending with the Danites’ despoliation of Micah’s shrine (18:1-31) and ultimately the Israelite conquest of Benjamin (19:1-48), the frame draws attention to the rise of violence between Israelites in the core (e.g., 9:1-57; 12:1-6). In the same way, the family disintegration in the frame of Judges not only characterizes Israel as chaotic on the eve of the monarchy that dominates the following books of the Former Prophets, but it also retunes a reader to see the splintered family relations throughout the core of Judges: the deadly strife between Gideon’s sons (9:1-21), Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter (11:34-40), and Samson’s fateful rejection of his parents’ marital advice (14:1-16:31). These tragic episodes show how far Israel has fallen from the ideal of Achsah’s family and become signposts that anticipate the familial and national disorder to come—a period in which “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (17:6; 21:25).