Micah's Teraphim

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Determining the proper interpretation of the eight passages in the Hebrew Bible in which the term תְּרָפִים occurs (Gen 31:19–35; Judges 17–18; 1 Sam 15:23; 19:11–17; 2 Kgs 23:24; Ezek 21:26 [in most of the Bible’s English versions, 21:21]; Hos 3:4; and Zech 10:2) has proven to be, in many respects, a vexing problem for scholars. For example, as well documented by K. van der Toorn and T.J. Lewis in their jointly authored “תְּרָפִים” entry in the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, and in addition by van der Toorn in a 1990 article that appeared in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, no consensus has been reached regarding the etymology of תְּרָפִים, although many suggestions have been put forward. How
exactly to envision the תְּרָפִים has also been an issue that has resisted resolution, as the תְּרָפִים of Gen 31:34 atop which Rachel sits seem as though they must be markedly different in size than the תְּרָפִים that Michal puts in David’s bed in 1 Sam 19:13 as a doppelgänger for her fugitive husband. These two passages also illustrate the ambiguity that the term תְּרָפִים can manifest in terms of number, referring both to plural תְּרָפִים (as in the story of the multiple תְּרָפִים on which Rachel sits) and to תְּרָפִים in the singular (as in the story of the lone תְּרָפִים that Michal uses to impersonate David). Even here, though, the matter is confused, since the seemingly singular תְּרָפִים of the David-Michal story has a wig of netted goat hair (כְּבִיר הָﬠִזִּים) מְרַאֲשֹׁתָיו, literally “at its heads” (1 Sam 19:13, 16).

Still, as again has been well documented by van der Toorn in his CBQ article, by van der Toorn and Lewis in the TDOT, and in addition by both van der Toorn and Lewis in other publications,


some things are clear. First, as demonstrated in Gen 31:19–35 and 1 Sam 19:11–17, as well as in Judg 17:5, where the Ephraimite Micah is said to have “made” (𐤊𐤃𐤇𐤁𐤀) תְּרָפִים are some sort of concrete objects. The witness of 1 Samuel 19 also suggests that because that story’s תְּרָפִים has a human-like head and can be used to impersonate David, תְּרָפִים are anthropoid in form. It further seems certain, based on texts such as Ezek 21:26 and Zech 10:2, that תְּרָפִים were used for purposes of divination. In Ezek 21:26, for example, “consulting the תְּרָפִים” is listed alongside two other well-known divination rites from the ancient Near East, belomancy and hepatoscopy. The terms “divination” (קֶסֶם) and תְּרָפִים arguably stand paralleled in 1 Sam 15:23 as well.

Both van der Toorn and Lewis further propose that the specific divinatory practice with which the תְּרָפִים are to be associated is necromancy. They suggest this, first, because the particular term used for divination in the three passages just cited (1 Sam 15:23; Ezek 21:26; and Zech 10:2), קֶסֶם, can be used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in texts that refer specifically to the calling up of dead spirits (Deut 18:10–14 and, according to van der Toorn’s and Lewis’s interpretation, Mic 3:6, 11). In addition, van der Toorn and Lewis posit there is a relationship between King Josiah’s putting away of the מְטָפֵיר in 2 Kgs 23:24, as part of his massive project of religious reformation, and the condemnation of the consulting of the dead in Deut 18:11, so much so that “Deut 18:11,” according to van der Toorn and Lewis, “appears to be the program behind Josiah’s actions.” Indeed, the central point of van der Toorn’s 1990 CBQ article, which he and Lewis re-affirmed in the TDOT, was to argue in support of a proposal that went back to F. Schwall, writing in 1892, and that had recently been revived—in

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6 Although cf. Rouillard and Tropper, “Trpym, riuels de guérison et culte des ancêtres,” 340–61, and especially 346–51, who, while agreeing that מְטָפֵיר have a divinatory function, argue that 1 Samuel 19 presumes another use for מְטָפֵיר in healing rituals, with a מְטָפֵיר functioning as a substitute image of an invalid onto which his or her illness is passed.


1987—by H. Rouillard and J. Tropper: that the themselves are not household god figurines, as many twentieth-century biblical scholars had assumed, but representations of deceased spirits. More specifically (so this proposal goes), are representations of a family’s deceased ancestors. As such, the are especially able and, in fact, perfectly suited to perform the necromantic function of transmitting oracular messages from the realm of the dead to their families’ living descendants.

To be sure, in Gen 31:19, 30, 32, 34, and 35, the synonymous use of the terms (treated as a plural form, “gods”; see 31:32, 34) might suggest that the older identification of the as household gods is correct, and multiple texts from Nuzi have also been used to argue that the cognate term for that is used within them, means “household gods.” Yet at Nuzi, because it is often coupled with , meaning “spirits of the dead,” is better interpreted as meaning deceased spirits in gen-

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eral and a household’s deceased ancestors in particular,¹³ and recently discovered texts from Emar, where ilānu is paralleled by mētū, “the dead,” indicate this as well.¹⁴ In the Hebrew Bible too, ilānu can refer to deceased spirits: in 1 Sam 28:13; Isa 8:19; Num 25:2, as quoted in Ps 106:28; and probably Exod 21:6.¹⁵ This in turn suggests an Israelite understanding of the term terāphim of Gen 31:19, 30, 32, 34, and 35 and elsewhere as representations of deceased spirits or, just as van der Toorn and Lewis have proposed, as ancestor figurines.

In this paper, it is our intention, first, to look closely at the story of Micah’s terāphim in Judges 17–18 in the light of this proposal in order to argue that the identification of terāphim as ancestor figurines is well supported by the Micah account. Indeed, we maintain that this identification actually clarifies certain details of the Micah narrative, especially the heretofore unanswered question of what prompted Micah, in Judg 17:5, to make his terāphim in the first place. After presenting our explanation of this and a related matter—regarding an ambiguity in the interpretation of the term terāphim in Judg 18:14, 17, 18, and 20—we will turn, in Section 2 of our paper, ¹³ Although cf. B.B. Schmidt, Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 123–25, who rejects both the identification of the ilānu with the ateummā at Nuzi and their identification as deified ancestors. Also cf. Rouillard and Tropper, “Tripym, rituels de guérison et culte des ancêtres,” 354, who follow A. Tsukimoto, Untersuchungen zur Totenplege (kispum) im altert Mesopotamien (AOAT, 216; Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 104–5, to suggest a somewhat more complex relationship between the terms ilānu and ateummā at Nuzi: that the ateummā were a family’s recent ancestors who, after a certain period of time, passed on to join a more ancient and deified set of ancestors, the ilānu.


to engage another potential enigma in the Micah story: why Micah, upon the occasion of the Danites’ theft of all his household’s religious treasures (a significant compendium, as we will discuss further below), focuses exclusively on the loss of the תְּרָפִים that he had previously made (Judg 18:24). Our account regarding this issue will illuminate, we will argue in Section 3, the Bible’s other story of the stealing of תְּרָפִים, Rachel’s theft of her father Laban’s תְּרָפִים in Gen 31:19–35. Finally, in our concluding remarks, we will return to the story of the thieving Danites in Judges 17–18 to ask if there are some last subtleties at play regarding their absconding with Micah’s תְּרָפִים, which concern the value of the תְּרָפִים not just to Micah, which we will have discussed in Section 2, but the potential appeal of the תְּרָפִים to the tribesmen of Dan as well.

Before beginning this exposition, though, we must raise two cautions. The first concerns the difficulty that attends any analysis of Judges 17–18, given this text’s well known polemical intent. More specifically, Judges 17–18 polemicizes against the Danite priesthood by ridiculing the integrity of its levitical founder, who was easily persuaded to abandon his contractual obligations to serve as Micah’s household priest in order to take up a post among the Danites that carried greater power and prestige; the text decries as well the sanctuary at Dan that this levitical priest came to serve, by portraying it as centered upon a cult image with a copiously suspect heritage. The image had been cast from silver stolen from Micah’s mother, for example, as well as having come to the plundering Danites by illicit means. In addition, the designating of this cult image using the phrase פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה (in Judg 17:3, 4; and 18:14) or (in 18:20, 30, and 31) פֶּסֶל alone (more on this grammatical ambiguity below) carries negative connotations, given that פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה is deployed pejoratively in Deut 27:15 and Nah 1:14 (cf. also

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17 As Brettler somewhat colloquially but aptly states (in “The Book of Judges,” 409), the Levite opts “to become a ‘big shot’ in Dan rather than remain a ‘hick’ priest” in Ephraim.
Isa 42:17; Hab 2:18) and that the making of a פֶּסֶל is condemned in the second commandment as articulated in Exod 20:4 and Deut 5:18. M.Z. Brettler moreover argues, following M. Noth, that the story implies a negative attitude about the Danites as a people, because of the way in which they “conquer the unsuspecting peaceful residents of Laish.”

Such a polemically charged account cannot, of course, be treated as a straightforward depiction of Israelite cult. Nevertheless, we maintain that the text’s polemics still must, in terms of their underlying portrayal of Israelite religious practice, present a picture that was generally believable to their ancient Israelite audience. This is because, like any polemic, the polemics of Judges 17–18 were generated in an attempt to persuade their listeners to take the side of the polemicists in very real and live arguments that were taking place within the Israelite community at the time of these polemics’ production. Or, to put the matter somewhat more colloquially: polemics aren’t about beating a dead horse. It therefore follows that while there is certainly room for exaggeration in Judges 17–18, and even parody and caricature that can be over the top, the polemics of this text would have needed to “ring true” to their audience in at least their broad outlines, regarding, for example, the possibility that a household such as Micah’s might have employed its own levitical priest and that a female member of Micah’s household (his mother) might have commissioned the fabrication of a cult figurine. More important for our purposes: the account in Judg

17:5 of Micah’s making אפוד ותרפים must point to what an ancient Israelite audience thought was possible within Israelite household cult.

Yet herein lies the issue that is at the heart of our second caution: that what the ancient Israelite audience of Judges 17–18 thought was possible within Israelite household cult, and thus what they understood and assumed regarding this text’s cultic resonances, is not necessarily information that Judges 17–18 explicitly articulates. As we have already noted, for example, Judges 17–18, like the seven other biblical passages that speak of the תרפים, assumes its audience knows what תרפים are, even though we today must resort to hypotheses developed from reasonable conjecture to determine the nature of the תרפים and their significance. Likewise, and more germane for our purposes, the text leaves us in ignorance regarding the several matters (such as what prompts Micah to make his תרפים in the first place) that we have identified above as our primary interest. Our explanations of these matters will thus by necessity be based on hypotheses and (we hope) reasonable conjecture, regarding, for example, the nuances we will propose ancient Israelite audiences would have heard in the Judges 17–18 account (and also in Genesis 31) and the ways in which these audiences would have filled in details that these stories tend to gloss over. Still, we must admit our inferences will become less secure as our essay progresses; indeed, our concluding comments, about the potential value of the תרפים to the tribesmen of Dan who stole them, are the product of considerable supposition. Nevertheless, we have judged this matter to be worth considering, if for no other reason than the fact that, as we have mentioned briefly in the preceding paragraphs, biblical scholarship has generally focused its analysis of the Danites’ thievery only on their taking of the cult figurine Micah’s mother had commissioned.

Indeed, it is our contention that despite a degree of speculation, our discussion of the Danites’ stealing of Micah’s תרפים provides a more coherent interpretation of this theft than is otherwise available in the literature. Similarly, we aim, in discussing the other aspects of the תרפים accounts of Judges 17–18 and Genesis 31 that we will consider, to illuminate details of these stories that scholars have heretofore been unable adequately to explain.

1. “AND MICAH MADE תרפים”

In Judg 17:5, after an initial notice (to which we will return) that Micah had a בית אלדה, or a shrine, we are told ותא אפוד תרפים, “and he made אפוד תרפים.” At one level, this seems a fairly simple and straightforward statement, almost as basic a declarative sentence as one can construct, in fact, according to the norms of Hebrew grammar. At another level, however, this declaration is rife with ambiguity. As is suggested, for example, by our leaving the phrase אפוד תרפים untranslated, scholars disagree, and markedly,
on how to render this expression. For some, אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים is to be understood as a hendiadys and thus refers to only a single object, perhaps a וּתְרָפִים image that was covered with an overlay, or אֵפוֹד, of silver or gold (the term אֵפוֹד is used in precisely this way—to describe the gold plating that covers an image—in Isa 30:22, where we read of the כַת זָהָבֲאֲפֻדַּת מַסֵּ). According to most commentators, however, אֵפוֹד refers to an object other than Micah’s וּתְרָפִים. But what? The overgarment, or אֵפוֹד, that is a part of the priestly vestments? Or a divine image of some sort, as the term אֵפוֹד might mean elsewhere in Judges (Judg 8:27)? Or is אֵפוֹד in Judg 17:5, and also in Hos 3:4 and several passages in 1 Samuel, a synonym for the term הָרִים, “ark,” as van der Toorn in CBQ and van der Toorn and Lewis in the TDOT have argued, meaning that אֵפוֹד in Judg 17:5

19 See, for example, van der Toorn, Family Religion, 250. See also C.A. Faroane, B. Garland, and C. López-Ruiz, “Micah’s Mother (Judg. 17:1–4) and a Curse from Carthage (KAI 89): Canaanite Precedents for Greek and Latin Curses against Thieves?” JNES 64 (2005), 161–86 (164, n. 13), who argue not only that the phrase אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים is to be understood as a hendiadys but that it should be taken as referring to the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה of 17:4 (which they also interpret as a hendiadys; see further below, n. 23), with אֵפוֹד referring specifically to the פֶּסֶל proper and to its molten plating or מַסֵּכָה. Other commentators similarly take פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים to be equivalent, with פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה stemming from one stratum in the history of Judges 17–18’s textual development and the variant אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים from another. See, for example, C.F. Burney, The Book of Judges, with Introduction and Notes (2d ed.; London: Rivington’s, 1920), 409; E.C. LaRocca-Pitts, ‘Of Wood and Stone’: The Significance of Israelite Cultic Items in the Bible and Its Early Interpreters (HSM, 61; Winona Lane, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 60; and G.F. Moore, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges (2d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), 378. However, while Judges 17–18 no doubt has a multi-layered redactional history (see n. 22 below), it seems to us that the plainest meaning of the text—and the one embraced by the final redactor of Judges 17–18, in 18:17, 18, and 20 (although we admit, as we will note at several points in this paper, that these verses are grammatically confused and thus less than clear)—is to see the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and the אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים as distinct objects. See further Albertz, History of Israelite Religion, 1, 37: “the teraphim [...] are here [in Judges 17–18] distinguished clearly from a cultic image of the god proper [i.e., the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה].”

designates a wooden box, like the ark, in which, van der Toorn and Lewis further propose, תְּרָפִים were kept.\textsuperscript{21} Fortunately for our purposes, it is not necessary that we resolve—or even attempt to resolve—this debate, since all of these interpretations agree that whether the אֵפוֹד of Judg 17:5 overlaid תְּרָפִים or was independent, Micah did make the תְּרָפִים on which it is our intention, as we noted above, to focus. More specifically, as we have also noted above, it is our attention to focus, at least initially, on a further point of ambiguity that we find in Judg 17:5: the question of what motivated Micah, at this particular point in the narrative, to make his תְּרָפִים. The text’s silence on this issue does seem to us curious, given that we are told in some detail in the preceding verses exactly what motivated a different member of Micah’s family, Micah’s mother, to consecrate two hundred pieces of silver to Yahweh and commission a metallurgist to fabricate from these פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה.\textsuperscript{22} This is, incidentally, another ambiguous phrase within Judges 17, which is perhaps to be taken, as is perhaps אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים, as a hendiadys, meaning a “cast-metal figurine” (the grammar of 17:4, which refers to the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה using a singular verb, וַיְהִי, argues for this interpretation).\textsuperscript{23} Or the phrase פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה might be understood, as might אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים, as referring to two separate objects, “an image,” פֶּסֶל, and “a molten image,” מַסֵּכָה.


\textsuperscript{22} To be sure, some scholars have proposed that Judg 17:1–4 was an originally separate tale from the next major episode that follows in Judges 17, Judg 17:7–13 (as is indicated by the fact that Micah’s name is rendered as מִיכָה in Judg 17:1–4 and as מִיכָיְהוּ in Judg 17:7–13). Verses 5–6, according to this reconstruction, were added by a redactor to unite the two pericopes. See, e.g., Boling, Judges, 258–59; van der Toorn, Family Religion, 247; also the somewhat similar proposal advanced by Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 168, 170. If these scholars are correct, one could perhaps argue that the contrast we seek to draw here between the description of the mother’s motivations for making her פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה in 17:1–4 and the absence of any discussion of Micah’s motivations for making his אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים in 17:5 is the result only of authorial idiosyncrasy: one author chose to articulate his subject’s motivation, another did not. But one might more readily maintain—as is our preference—that even if a redactor did add 17:5–6, he would have shaped these verses according to the model of 17:1–4 and thus would seek to intimate a motivation for Micah’s craftsmanship. This motivation we will propose presently.

\textsuperscript{23} Scholars who read this phrase as a hendiadys include Boling, Judges, 256; Martin, Judges, 185; Rudnig-Zelt, “Vom Propheten und seiner Frau,” 377, 382; Soggin, Judges, 265; van der Toorn, “Nature of the Biblical Teraphim,” 211; and idem, “Israelite Figurines,” 49, n. 16, with additional references.
(the wording of Judg 18:17 and 18, and perhaps of 18:20, 30, and 31, where the term פֶּסֶל appears independent of מַסֵּכָה, argues for this). Yet whatever the פֶּסֶל מַסֵּכָה, it is clear what has motivated its/their fabrication: after the mother has had stolen from her a cache of eleven hundred pieces of silver, she utters a curse that seemingly condemns the thief but that she seeks to reverse on discovering that the miscreant was her own son. To effect this reversal, she blesses the son in the name of Yahweh and then consecrates a part of the silver to Yahweh as she seeks to evoke the deity’s favor (Judg 17:2–3).

Conversely and curiously, as we have previously suggested, no explanation is given for Micah’s fabrication of his תְּרָפִים. Note also another curious feature of—and yet another ambiguity we find in—the Judg 17:1–5 pericope: that although this tale of family drama is filled with Micah’s kin (Micah himself, his mother, and the son whom Micah is said to appoint to serve his household as priest at the end of 17:5), nowhere in this text, nor anywhere else in the longer Judges 17–18 narrative, is any reference made to Micah’s father. Our hypothesis is that this is because the story presumes the father to be dead and, moreover, quite recently dead. We further suggest, inspired by the proposition that the תְּרָפִים are to be identified as ancestor figurines, that the father’s recent death explains why Micah felt prompted, according to the narrative’s conceit, to make his תְּרָפִים in Judg 17:5: that shortly after his father’s demise, Micah is appropriately depicted as fabricating a תְּרָפִים as a representation of this newly deceased ancestor.

To be sure, Judges 17–18 never explicitly claims that Micah’s father is dead. Nevertheless, we propose that the story has within it

24 Scholars who interpret in this way include D.M. Gunn, Judges (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 231; LaRocca-Pitts, “Of Wood and Stone,” 60–61; S. Niditch, Judges: A Commentary (OTL; Louisville/London: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 172, n. g on p. 177, 181; Rofé, “‘No Ephod or Teraphim,’” 148; and T.J. Schneider, Judges (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 233. See also Bray, Sacred Dan, 64, who revives an old suggestion made by Moore, Judges, 375–76, and by Burney, Judges, 409, 419, by reconstructing an original account in which only the term פֶּסֶל appeared, supplemented later by a glossator who added מַסֵּכָה.

several hints that point in this direction. We note first that our narrative consistently and repeatedly refers to Micah, and not his father, as the head of his household. Indeed, eleven times within Judges 17–18—in Judg 17:4, 8, 12; 18:2, 3, 13, 15, 18, 22, 25, and 26—we find the household in question referred to as the בֵּית מִיכָה, the “house of Micah,” or the “house of מִיכָיְהו” (a longer form of the same name). Perhaps one could argue that the reason the household is always assigned to Micah, and that the father is never mentioned, is a narrative assumption that Micah, after he came of age, moved away from his father’s house and established a homestead separate from his father’s. But this hypothesis is highly unlikely: first, because such a scenario contradicts the model of ancient Israelite family life best indicated by both our archaeological and textual evidence, in which sons do continue to reside, even upon reaching adulthood, within their father’s households; second, because such a scenario cannot explain the presence of Micah’s mother in her son’s home. Were her husband still alive, she should be resident with him in his household. Or, if her husband had divorced her, she would have returned from his household to resume living in her father’s house. The fact that she instead lives with her son could only suggest to an ancient Israelite audience that the father had died and that Micah had succeeded him as the household’s paterfamilias.

That the father is dead is additionally suggested by the fact that, as we have already seen, the mother, as our story opens, lays claim to the ownership of eleven hundred pieces of silver. Unfortunately, because our story begins in medias res, we are not told how the mother came into possession of her silver riches. We can, however, be sure of some ways in which she did not. For example, because it was overwhelmingly the norm in Iron Age Israelite tradition for marriages to be contracted not by the bride’s family bestowing a dowry upon her, but through the groom’s family transferring bridewealth (מֹהַר, usually translated as either “marriage present” or “marriage fee”) to the bride’s father, it cannot be


27 T.M. Lemos, Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine, 1200
supposed that Micah’s mother’s eleven hundred pieces of silver were brought by her into her marriage. Nor does it make sense to suppose that Micah’s mother came to possess her eleven hundred pieces of silver during the course of her married life, given that typically within an Iron Age Israelite household, property would have been held by a woman’s spouse. Yet if Micah’s mother could not have come into possession of her cache of silver pieces during her marriage, and if the norms of Israelite marital practice dictate that she did not bring this silver with her to her nuptials, then it necessarily follows that the mother could have only acquired the silver after her marriage to Micah’s father had come to an end: that is, she has taken over possession from the silver’s previous owner, the father, because he is, as we have suggested, dead.

The father, we have further proposed, must be understood not only as dead but also as recently dead. Again, we must be clear that this is nowhere indicated explicitly in the text. Yet the evidence that points to the father’s recent death is again, we maintain, promoted by several hints found within the Judges 17–18 account. Some of these hints, indeed, seem to us even more forceful than those that pointed to the supposition that the father was no longer living.

We begin by noting the fact that others among the father’s generation are still alive (the mother). This suggests the father’s death is at least somewhat recent, given that, on average, men outlived women in ancient Israel. That the father’s death, moreover, is not just somewhat, but instead quite recent is suggested by the several details in our story that present Micah’s family in the state of household upheaval that a new death would entail. Striking in this regard is the insistence of Judg 17:5 that once the mother’s 펌ל and Micah’s אֵפוֹד וּתְרָפִים are made, Micah installs one of his sons to serve his household as priest. This seems yet another curi-
osity within our story, given that Judg 17:5 begins, as we have previously mentioned, by noting that “the man Micah had a shrine” (הִים 발견ת אלֶלֶה). So why is this already extant shrine only now, at the end of 17:5, getting a priest? Some scholars explain by comparing Gen 28:22 to suggest that Micah’s בית אֱלֶלֶה or “shrine” was a simple מַצֵּבָה, or standing stone, which would not have required a priest to attend it; the presence of a priest, whose primary function in our story is to serve as an oracular specialist (Judg 18:5), only becomes necessary, according to this account, after the fabrication of Micah’s אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים, when a divinatory expert, or priest, would be required to make inquiries using this (or these) item(s). As we will discuss further below, however, we do think our text indicates that Micah’s בית אֱלֶלֶה or “shrine” is better understood as an actual shrine building, or at least a dedicated sacred space. We also think it most logical to presume that this sort of dedicated building or space must have had furnishings in it that would have called for the services of a divinatory specialist prior to the making of either the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה or the אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים. So again we ask: why, in Judg 17:5, is Micah’s previously extant shrine only now getting a priest?

Our suggestion is that the shrine is not getting a priest in 17:5 for the first time; rather, we propose the shrine is getting a new priest in 17:5 because the previous priest had somehow been separated from his post. More specifically, we suggest that just as Micah appointed his son to serve as priest of his household’s shrine in 17:5, the man who preceded Micah in the role of paterfamilias had previously appointed his son to serve as the shrine’s priest. More simply put: we suggest that Micah’s father appointed Micah to

Micah’s family. More specifically, the reference to “son,” according to Boling (and here is the foreshadowing), anticipates the story of the levitical priest who becomes “like a son to Micah” in 17:7–13. The priest referred to in 17:5, that is, is the Levite who is not actually installed until 17:12. This interpretation seems, though, unnecessarily to override the plain meaning of the text, which we, along all other commentators, would take to mean that Micah’s original priest was his biological son who was then replaced by a priestly specialist of the levitical guild. See likewise Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion*, 1, 100; J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (NCB Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Basingstoke, UK: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1986), 341; Gunn, *Judges*, 231; Martin, *Judges*, 186; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 169; McCann, *Judges*, 120; Niditch, *Judges*, 182; and Soggin, *Judges*, 270.


34 Such an argument is put forward by Rofé, “‘No Ephod or Teraphim’,” 148.
serve as priest of the shrine while the father was still alive. But among the transitions that ensue upon the occasion of the father’s death, Micah, according to our story’s logic, was required to assume leadership over the family and thus to pass the priestly role onto a son of the next generation. The implication that follows is crucial for our argument regarding timing: that it is the recent death of Micah’s father and the change in Micah’s household role that stems from that death that drives the change in the priestly office.

Still, there is an event that precedes even the changes in household leadership that Judg 17:5 presumes: Micah’s theft of his mother’s silver, her curse of the thief, the silver’s restoration, and the fabrication of the פסלי ומסכה that results. Unlike the leadership transitions of Judg 17:5, this incident can hardly be said to be normative upon the occasion of a paterfamilias’s death. Nevertheless, we argue that the silver’s theft too is best explained as a consequence of the father’s just prior demise. More specifically, the father’s just prior demise could explain why Micah, at this particular point in his life, is said to try to take the silver to which his father, we have argued above, had previously laid claim. Perhaps, for example, we are meant to reason that as the household’s new paterfamilias, Micah felt that the silver should by rights belong to him rather than his mother. Alternatively, we may be meant to think that Micah perceived that an opportunity to seize the silver more easily became available when its guardianship passed from his father and into female hands. In either case, however, it is the presumption of the father’s quite recent death and the transitions and even turmoil that ensue that explain most convincingly why Micah is said in 17:2 to have made a play for his mother’s silver hoard.

This brings us back to the תרཕים that Micah is said to have made in 17:5, an action that we propose is part and parcel with all the other acts that we have just argued follow closely on the heels of Micah’s father’s death: the mother’s taking possession of her husband’s silver hoard; Micah’s attempting to claim that silver hoard for himself; Micah’s appointing his son to replace him, as we interpret, as the family’s priest; and, we now add, Micah fabricating of a פסלי ומסכה image to serve as a representation of his recently dead father. To put the matter another way: understanding פסלי ומסכה in general as representations of a family’s deceased ancestors, as van der Toorn and Lewis have most recently argued, and understanding Micah’s פסלי ומסכה in particular as a representation of his lately deceased father, elucidates in a compelling way an otherwise unexplained detail of Judges 17—what prompts Micah in 17:5 to make a פסלי ומסכה in the first place? According to our interpretation: on the occasion of his father’s demise, Micah fabricated a פסלי ומסכה as a rep-

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35 See similarly Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife,” 46, who writes—citing Judg 17:5—that “there is ample evidence that the role of priest in the Israelite family had at one time been filled by the firstborn.”
representation of his newly deceased ancestor. We might even suggest that Micah fabricated his Teraphim as the transitional period that his father's death had occasioned comes to a close: first, after the initial turmoil entailed by the silver's theft had been resolved, but more important, after the initial rites of burial and mourning prescribed by Israelite ritual had come to an end and the dead father is finally ready to be enshrined as one of his family's deceased ancestors.

This leads us to consider the issue of Micah's shrine. We suggest, first, that Judges 17–18 means us to envision Micah as placing the Teraphim that he made of his recently deceased father in his Beth El, or shrine, that is mentioned in Judg 17:5 and that the Ephod, if it is a separate object from the Teraphim, was placed in this shrine as well. In addition, we propose that the shrine should be taken to hold Micah's mother's Pefel and Mascot. All this is somewhat indicated by the fact that the account of Micah's mother's commissioning of her Pefel and Mascot in 17:4 and the account of Micah's making of his Ephod and Teraphim in Judg 17:5b bracket the phrase ‘וְהָאִישׁ מִיכָה לוֺ בֵּית הִים’ in 17:5a, a juxtaposition that could readily suggest that all of these cultic appurtenances—the Pefel and Mascot, the Ephod, and the Teraphim—are to be associated in terms of physical location. Likewise, in Judg 18:14, 17, 18, and 20, the terms Ephod, Mascot, Pefel, and Teraphim (once rendered in their composite forms, Ephod and Mascot [18:14] and otherwise as up to four seemingly independent items [18:17, 18, and 20]) appear together, which again could readily suggest that they were envisioned as housed together: more specifically, in the Beth El, which, as we suggested briefly above, we would take to be a dedicated shrine room or shrine building that was within Micah's household compound.

To be sure, and as we have also already mentioned, some scholars have argued, based on Gen 28:22, that Micah's Beth El is to be understood as a Masbeh or standing stone—and consequently as a sacred object in and of itself, rather than being a repository for other sanctified items. But this argument has not found much support in the literature, and it makes no sense if we are to understand Micah's Beth El, as we have just proposed, as housing at least two and up to four items. Nor is it really plausible to think that Micah's Beth El, or shrine, might refer to the sorts of small pottery shrines known from Syro-Palestinian archaeological excavations, such as the small, box-shaped pottery shrines that

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36 But cf. van der Toorn, “Nature of the Biblical Teraphim,” 212, and van der Toorn and Lewis, “תְּרָפִים,” 787, who offer a different account of Micah’s motivation: that since Hos 3:4 intimates that Ephod and Teraphim are among the “standard furnishings of an ancient Palestinian temple,” Micah’s desire was to set up a “real” shrine as opposed to the more modest “family chapel” already extant in his household.

37 Above, n. 32.
were meant to represent, in miniature, shrine buildings, or the small, cylinder-shaped pottery shrine such as was found among the remains of Middle Bronze Age Ashkelon. The scale of these pottery shrines argues against identifying Micah’s with these artifacts. For example, a tenth-eighth century BCE exemplar of the box-shaped pottery shrines that represent miniature shrine buildings that comes from Tell el-Far’ah North stands only 20.8 cm high and is only 12.5–13.9 cm wide and 10.5 cm deep. The cylinder-


40 This shrine was originally published by A. Chambon, Tell el-Far’ah 1: L’âge du fer (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984), 77–78 and Pl. 66b; the measurements given here are taken from Muller, Les “maquettes architecturales” du Proche-Orient Ancien, 1, 53, 341. For further discussion (with drawings and/or photographs), see Bretschneider, Architekturmodelle in Vorderasien and der östlichen Ägäis, 129, 233, and Plate 90 (Fig. 79a–b); Dever, Did God Have a Wife? 114–15, 117; idem, “A Temple Built for Two: Did Yahweh Share a Throne with His Consort Asherah?” BAR 34/2 (March/April 2008), 54–62, 85 (62); Keel and Uehlinger, God, Goddesses, and Images of God, 162 and Figs. 188a–b; Muller, Les “maquettes architecturales” du Proche-Orient Ancien, 1, 53–54, 339–42, and also 2, Fig. 142–44; E.A. Willett, “Women and Household Shrines in Ancient Israel” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1999), 123, 127; and Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 357–38. The date of the shrine is debated in these sources: Dever, Did God Have a Wife?, 115, gives a tenth-century BCE date, as does Willett, “Women and Household Shrines in Ancient Israel,” 118. Keel and
shaped pottery shrine found at Ashkelon is likewise quite small—it stands 25.2 cm tall and is 13.8 cm wide at its greatest diameter.\footnote{These dimensions are taken from Stager, “The House of the Silver Calf of Ashkelon,” 405.} But this small size seems a problem if Micah’s shrine is to hold, as we have suggested above, multiple objects, including Micah’s mother’s פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and Micah’s אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים. Of course, just how significant this problem might be depends on how one interprets the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים: as two, three, or four items. Still, we note that the Ashkelon shrine was specifically manufactured to hold only one piece,\footnote{Stager, “The House of the Silver Calf of Ashkelon,” 405, writes, “a doorway cut into the side of the cylinder [...] is just large enough for the calf to pass through” (emphasis ours). See similarly idem, “The Canaanite Silver Calf,” 577.} an 11 cm long and 10.5 cm high cast-metal figurine of a bull-calf.\footnote{These dimensions are taken from Stager, “The House of the Silver Calf of Ashkelon,” 405; idem, “The Canaanite Silver Calf,” 579.}

The small size of the pottery shrines known from archaeological excavations also signals them as portable. Were Micah’s בֵּית אֱלֹהִים portable, however, we would have expected this shrine to have been included among the list of religious treasures that the men of Dan are said to have stolen from Micah in Judges 18. Yet, although the list of Micah’s religious treasures is confused across its multiple iterations (and so, for example, as we have already mentioned, פֶּסֶל and וּמַסֵּכָה are treated as separate objects in Judg 18:17 and 18 while seemingly as a single figurine in Judg 17:4 and 18:14), in none of the four lists of Micah’s stolen treasures (18:14, 17, 18, and 20) is the בֵּית אֱלֹהִים included. This suggests again that Micah’s בֵּית אֱלֹהִים was not a small and thus easily heisted pottery shrine— and in addition suggests yet again that the בֵּית אֱלֹהִים was not a מַצֵּבָה, or at least not the sort of small-scale (pillow-sized) מַצֵּבָה that the phrase בֵּית אֱלֹהִים is used to describe in Gen 28:22. Rather, Micah’s בֵּית אֱלֹהִים is better interpreted as a fixed, dedicated, sanctified space. This is, in fact, precisely how בֵּית אֱלֹהִים is used in every biblical text other than Gen 28:22 in which the term appears, including a verse that is almost immediately antecedent to Gen 28:22, Gen 28:17. There, Jacob specifically describes the מָקוּם of Bethel as a בֵּית אֱלֹהִים. Likewise in Ps 55:15 (in most of the Bible’s English versions, 55:14), the Psalmist is said to walk בְּ a בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, and in 2 Chr 34:9, בֵּית אֱלֹהִים is used as a synonym for the Jerusalem temple.

Uehlinger, Gods, Goddesses, and Images of Gods, 162, assign the shrine to the late tenth century BCE. Muller, Les “maquettes architecturales” du Proche-Orient Ancien, 1, 53, proposes the tenth to ninth century BCE; Bretschneider, Architekturmodelle in Vorderasien und der östlichen Ägäis, 233, suggests a date of c. 900 BCE; Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 337, dates the shrine to the ninth or eighth century BCE.
As to the specific nature of Micah’s dedicated and sanctified shrine space: we could perhaps think of a “cult corner” or “cult niche,” a “part of a room or courtyard” within a house that was designated for religious purposes and that thus contained a constellation of religious objects and furnishings—such as, say, the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים of Judg 17:4–5. These “cult corners” or “cult niches” have been identified within the archaeological remains of several ancient Israelite houses. Yet while it is certainly

44 This definition of “cult corner” or “cult niche” is taken from Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 123.

45 A fragment of a second model house shrine from Tell el-Far‘ah North, for example, was discovered in that site’s House 440 (see Muller, Les “maquettes architecturales” du Proche-Orient Ancien, 1, 53, 339–40, and 2, Fig. 142; Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 337), in conjunction with several arguably cultic artifacts that belonged to that household’s “cult corner,” which was located in the house’s central courtyard (Loci 440 and 460). These artifacts included a figurine body of a nursing woman, the head of a horse figurine, and a figurine of the “woman holding a disk” type (Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 241). The date of these domestic cult remains is debated: they are from the tenth century BCE according to Dever, Did God Have a Wife? 115, 117; to Muller, Les “maquettes architecturales” du Proche-Orient Ancien, 1, 53–54 (with regard to the model-shrine fragment); and to Willett, “Women and Household Shrines in Ancient Israel,” 118. But they date from the ninth century BCE according to Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 241.

possible that Judg 17:4-5 means for us to envision that Micah’s mother’s פסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and Micah’s אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים were stationed in this sort of “shrine corner” or “shrine niche,” we believe a close reading of the larger Judges 17-18 pericope suggests Micah’s בֵּית, or shrine, was actually a designated shrine room or shrine building, separate from Micah’s house proper.

Two aspects of the Micah story in particular indicate this to us. The first is that the entity that our Judges text calls “the house of Micah,” or בֵּית מִיכָיְהוּ, was undoubtedly made up of more than just Micah’s personal domicile. This is indicated in Judg 18:13-14, for example, in which we are told that the six hundred members of the tribe of Dan who are passing by בֵּית מִיכָה on their way to conquer and take as their tribal fiefdom the northern city of Laish, are urged by the five advance scouts who journey with them—and who in their previous scouting journey had stayed with Micah—to steal the אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים located בַּבָּתִּים הָאֵלֶּה (v 14), literally “in these houses” (plural), or, more idiomatically, at least as we (along with several other commentators) would interpret, “in these buildings” that make up an extended household compound that comprises “the house of Micah.” After the Danites do indeed steal this household’s religious treasures, moreover, they are pursued (unsuccessfully) by “the men who were in the houses that were with the house of Micah” (Judg 18:22), or, more idiomatically (at least, again, as we and several other commentators would interpret), “the men whose homes were within the extended household compound of Micah.” These men we take to be Micah’s sons, possibly his grandsons, and possibly unrelated servants, slaves, and other sojourners—although not the Levite whom Micah is said to have appointed in Judg 17:7-13 to replace his son as his family’s priest. Rather, this Levite flees with the Danites in 18:20, having been persuaded by them that it would profit him more to serve as priest for an entire tribe than it has serving as priest for only one household.

We further propose that there are indications within our story that among the multiple buildings that comprise Micah’s household compound is a dedicated shrine room or shrine building—Micah’s בֵּית אֱ—although we must admit that the text is not definitive in this regard. Still, we argue that this makes the best sense of sev-


eral otherwise enigmatic verses within Judges 17–18. In Judg 18:3, for example, we are told that the five advance scouts who were passing through Ephraim during their journey to the far north to seek land for the Danites were in “the house of Micah,” בֵּית מִיכָה, when they heard the voice of the Levite who had become Micah’s priest in 17:7–13 and recognized it—probably because the Levite is said to have come to Ephraim from Bethlehem and so spoke, like the Danites, with the accent and speech patterns of the South rather than those of the North.47 The five Danite scouts then “turn aside” (וַיָּסוּרוּ) to speak to the Levite “there” (שָׁם). But where is “there,” or to where, specifically, would the Danites have turned, given that the Levite is said in Judg 17:12 to have been, like them, in “the house of Micah” (בֵּית מִיכָה)? Our suggestion is that the Levite was indeed in “the house of Micah” in the sense that he was resident in one of the several buildings that made up Micah’s household compound and that it was there that Micah’s Danite visitors encountered him when they turned aside from the actual “house of Micah”—meaning Micah’s personal domicile—to speak to him. We interpret similarly the grammatically difficult passage found in 18:15, in which the company of the six hundred Danite men on their way to capture Laish follows the advice of the original scouts to detour toward the בֵּית־הַנַּﬠַר הַלֵּוִי בֵּית מִיכָה, literally “the house of the Levite youth, the house of Micah.” Because this phrase approaches the nonsensical, some commentators delete the second half of it, the reference to “the house of Micah,” as an extraneous gloss.48 But we might better imagine a point in the scribal transmission of this verse in which a ב, meaning “in,” that preceded the phrase בֵּית מִיכָה, or “the house of Micah,” was mistakenly dropped.49 If so, then the original text would be rendered בֵּית־הַנַּﬠַר הַלֵּוִי בְּבֵית מִיכָה, “the house of the Levite youth that was in the house of Micah,” or, as we interpret, the house of the Levite youth that was one of the buildings that made up the multi-building household compound of Micah.50

48 So, e.g., the editors of the BHS, note on Judg 18:15; Martin, Judges, 193; and Moore, Judges, 397.
49 This emendation is also suggested by Boling, Judges, 264; Niditch, Judges, 175, seems to embrace such a reading as well. However, Boling’s overall understanding of what is meant by בֵּית מִיכָה differs significantly from ours.
When this verse in Judges 18:15 is read in conjunction with 18:17, moreover, what is implied is that it was the “house of the Levite youth” that the Danites entered in order to steal the compound’s religious treasures. Yet we have already suggested, based on the juxtapositions of the phrases פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים in 17:4–5 and based on the occurrence of the terms פֶּסֶל, הִים, אֵפוֺד, and מַסֵּכָה in conjunction in 18:14, 17, 18, and 20, that Micah’s household’s religious treasures were housed within Micah’s הִים בֵּית אֱ, or “shrine.” Therefore, we now propose that Judg 18:15’s “house of the Levite youth” and Micah’s הִים בֵּית אֱ were one and the same: that Micah’s הִים בֵּית אֱ where the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים were kept was a dedicated shrine room or shrine building that was the Levite’s domain within Micah’s larger household compound.51 Indeed, from at least one premonarchic Israelite village, early twelfth- through mid-eleventh-century BCE Ai (et-Tell), we have archaeological evidence of precisely this sort of dedicated shrine room—a space that was, like Micah’s הִים בֵּית אֱ, or shrine, associated with a multi-building household compound and that held religiously precious objects.52 Among the Iron Age II remains of Tell en-Naṣbeh (Stratum III), A.J. Brody has somewhat similarly identified a room—Room 513—that, although it was also used as a storeroom, held a shrine that Brody theorizes would have served the members of its extended family’s five-building household compound.53

But to suggest this answer to the interpretive question of how, exactly, we are to understand the nature of Micah’s הִים בֵּית אֱ, or shrine, is to raise immediately another interpretive problem, one that is somewhat analogous to the interpretive problem we discussed above regarding Micah’s appointing his son as priest at the

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51 See similarly Bray, Sacred Dan, 63; Miller, The Religion of Ancient Israel, 68; and especially Soggin, Judges, 272, 274.

52 Although excavated by the French archaeologist J. Marquet-Krause in the 1930s and labeled by her as “un lieu saint” or a cult room (Les fouilles de ’Ay (et-Tell), 1933–35 [Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique, 45; Paris: Geuthner, 1949], 23), this room’s religious character has only recently been thoroughly analyzed, especially by Zevit, in his The Religions of Ancient Israel, 153–56. See also the brief discussions of Dever, Did God Have a Wife? 113, and Nakhai, Archaeology and the Religions of Canaan and Israel, 173 (Nakhai is in addition responsible for bringing to our attention the quote from Marquet-Krause cited above).

end of Judg 17:5. Recall that in considering that issue, we noted the need to identify who had served as Micah’s household’s priest prior to the son’s installation, since the statement that begins Judg 17:5, “the man Micah had a shrine” (הִיםי וְהָאִישׁ מִבֵּית אֱלֹהִים), supposes an extant shrine that, as we have now demonstrated, was an actual dedicated space to which some priestly attendant must have been assigned preceding the son’s appointment. It seems in turn logical to presume that this already existent shrine must have had something already in it—and more specifically, we have proposed, extant furnishings that required this previous priest’s ministrations. Yet, if Judg 17:4–5 intimate that the only furnishings of Micah’s בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, or shrine, were the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה that Micah’s mother had commissioned according to Judg 17:4 and the אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים that Micah made according to 17:5, then what was in this shrine building before the fabrication of these objects?

The most plausible answer, we submit, rests on the grammatical ambiguity of the term תְּרָפִים that we noted already in our opening remarks: the fact that תְּרָפִים can have both a singular and plural meaning. In Judges 17–18, we suggest, both are used, at different points in the story. In Judg 17:5, as we would interpret, Micah makes a single תְּרָפִים and an associated אֵפוֺד (however one wants to interpret that term), which he places in his household shrine, alongside his mother’s פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה. In Judges 18, the Danites abscond not only with this single תְּרָפִים, its associated אֵפוֺד, and the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה, but also with several other תְּרָפִים that stood, as we would interpret, in Micah’s shrine prior to Micah’s making of his single תְּרָפִים in Judg 17:5. These other תְּרָפִים we take to be representations of Micah’s previously deceased ancestors, including, presumably, individuals such as Micah’s great-grandfather, his grandfather, perhaps some great-grand-uncles and grand-uncles. In fact, because Judg 18:14, 17, 18, and 20, in listing the treasures that the Danites stole from Micah’s shrine, invoke nothing other than the terms פֶּסֶל, מַסֵּכָה, אֵפוֺד, and תְּרָפִים, we cannot help but conclude—assuming we accept that the shrine must have had furnishings antecedent to its becoming the repository for the mother’s פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and Micah’s אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים—that 18:14, 17, 18, and 20 has a plural referent. Such a suggestion, moreover, could plausibly explain why, in at least 18:17, 18, and 20, the terms פֶּסֶל and מַסֵּכָה are rendered separately, as opposed to the composite phrase אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים that is found in 17:5, for while אֵפוֺד וּתְרָפִים in 17:5 refers, as we have interpreted, to the single תְּרָפִים Micah appropriately made upon the death of his father, along with its associated אֵפוֺד, 18:17, 18, and 20 refer to that or perhaps some other אֵפוֺד in conjunction with תְּרָפִים with which it is not as directly associated.

54 Somewhat analogous is the way בַּיִת in the Judges 17–18 story carries both a singular and plural meaning, as the personal “house” or domicile of Micah that stands within the multi-building, “house of Micah” compound. See van der Toorn, Family Religion, 197–98.
These are the multiple תְּרָפִים that represent Micah’s previously deceased ancestors.

Note, however, that Micah’s making of a תְּרָפִים in 17:5 to augment the תְּרָפִים that, according to our interpretation, are already extant in the shrine only makes sense if we are to understand the תְּרָפִים as ancestor figurines and not as household gods. After all, why, in a household already in possession of a collection of gods, would Micah need to fabricate another? Only if we interpret Micah’s תְּרָפִים to be the latest in a series of ancestor figurines, each produced upon the occasion of a household patriarch’s death, can we elucidate in a compelling way that the contents of Micah’s בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, or shrine, prior to the addition of the items Micah and his mother made in Judg 17:4–5, would have been: the ancestor figurines of the household’s past patriarchs. Indeed, it may be that while, above, we have consistently translated בֵּית אֱלֹהִים as “shrine,” a better translation would be the “house [בֵּית] of the אלֹהִים,” with בֵּית serving here, as elsewhere in the Bible (preeminently in Gen 31:19, 30, 32, 34, and 35), as a synonym for תְּרָפִים and denoting a family’s representations of its deceased ancestors. Interesting to note in this regard are the comments of E. Bloch-Smith, who has drawn on the work of B. Halevi to suggest that Jacob’s בֵּית אֱלֹהִים in Gen 28:22 might not be consecrated to God/Elohim, as commentators usually assume, but rather a marker for Jacob’s deified ancestors, located on his family’s ground.55 The בֵּית אֱלֹהִים of Micah’s household, as we interpret, might be similarly understood: as a repository for (among other things) several generations of Micah’s household’s ancestor figurines, to which Micah—upon the death of his father—added that paterfamilias’s image.

2. “YOU HAVE TAKEN MY אלֹהִים”

Yet as we have seen, Micah’s housing of his paterfamilias’s תְּרָפִים in his household’s פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה, along with his mother’s פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה and his family’s תְּרָפִים of past generations, is, by Judg 18:16–17, disrupted, as the men from Dan who pass through Micah’s Ephraimite homestead on their way to take Laish plunder Micah’s household shrine and take its treasures. Of these, the most precious from the Danites’ point of view is surely the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה. After all, it is this object (if we interpret פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה in the singular) or one of these two objects (if we interpret פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה in the plural) that

becomes the focus of the sanctuary that the Danites, once they have taken Laish, establish for themselves (presuming here, with almost all commentators, that the פסל והמסכה that the Danites enshrine for themselves according to Judg 18:30–31 is somehow equivalent to what is described elsewhere in Judges 17–18 using the compounded phrase פסלה והמסכה). Indeed, if for no other reason than material worth, the פסלה והמסכה would seem to be by far the most valuable of the objects that the Danites purloined (as metals like silver were relatively scarce in ancient Israel and hence remarkably precious).

Nevertheless, as Micah and his household entourage pursue the thieving Danites, he does not challenge them regarding the פסלה והמסכה that his mother had commissioned. Instead, Micah accuses the Danites of stealing “my אהלים that I made” (Judg 18:24). Most logically this is a reference to the אהלים of his deceased father that Micah manufactured in 17:5 after the father’s demise (and perhaps the associated אֵפֹד, depending on how one understands that term), given, we can once more note, the way in which אהלים, arguably with the meaning deceased spirits in general and a family’s deceased ancestors in particular, is used elsewhere in the Bible as a synonym of אֵפֹד. Note moreover that the term אהלים, like אֵפֹד, can have either a singular or plural referent. Thus, while אֵפֹד as a synonym of אֵל in Gen 31:19, 30, 32, 34, and 35 refers to multiple אֵל (the grammar of 31:32, 34 requires this), אֵל in Judg 18:24 can just as readily refer to the single אֵל (according to our interpretation) that Micah fabricated in Judg 17:5. Indeed, the verb used for Micah’s manufacture of the אֵפֹד וּתְרָפִים in Judg 17:5 and the אהלים about which he speaks in Judg 18:24 is the same, עשה, “to make.” Of course, עשה is a very common Hebrew lexeme. Nevertheless, within the context of Judges 17–18, an audience hearing of Micah’s “making” an אהלים in 18:24 would most readily think, we maintain, of the אהלים that Micah “made” in Judg 17:5.

But why is it the loss of his father’s אהלים (and perhaps the associated אֵפֹד) that is so devastating for Micah, and not, say, the theft of the more valuable פסלה והמסכה? One answer might be that since Micah’s mother has used only two hundred of her eleven hundred pieces of silver to make her cast-metal figurine(s), Micah imagines that he can easily replicate the lost פסלה והמסכה and so need not give priority to its/their theft. But we suggest something more is at play here. More specifically: although we have heretofore considered only the role of the אהלים and the deceased ancestors that they represent in rituals of divination, we propose now to take into account deceased ancestors’ function in cementing their descendants’ claim to their families’ נחלות. This term is commonly translated as “inheritance,” but as is well attested in the scholarly literature, its meaning is in fact much more multivalent and complex. Indeed, so multivalent and complex is the term נחלות, as well as the concepts associated with it, that no one definition can adequately gloss every occurrence of the word in the Hebrew Bible, much less...
the use of the cognates of נחלות elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature. Still, it is clear that in several instances in the Bible, נחלות does refer to inheritance in the specific sense of the land each Israelite family claimed perpetually to hold as its inalienable patrimony.56

The biblical witness speaks clearly, moreover, to the need to bury a family’s ancestors together in a tomb associated with this נחלות, even if this required extraordinary measures at the time of death or long after. The premier case is the imperative that the Israelites of the Exodus generation feel, according to the biblical account, to move the body of the long-dead Joseph out of Egypt so that he might be interred “in the portion of the field that Jacob had purchased from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem,” which “belonged to the descendants of Joseph as a נחלות” (Josh 24:32). Likewise, David is said to go to significant effort to exhume the bones of the dead King Saul and his son Jonathan from their original tomb in Jabesh-Gilead so that they might be reburied in the territory of Saul’s tribe, Benjamin. More specifically, they are reburied in the tomb of Saul’s father Kish in Zela (2 Sam 21:13–14), a town which we can take, based on Josh 18:28, to be the נחלות assigned to the Saulides within the Benjaminites’ tribal allotment. Passages such as Josh 24:30 and Judg 2:9 similarly attest to the necessity for burial within one’s family’s נחלות.57

But why is burial within the family נחלות so important? As Bloch-Smith has argued, “ancestral tombs served to reinforce the family claim to the patrimony, the נחלות.” That is, Bloch-Smith goes on to say, “the existence of the tomb constituted a physical, perpetual witness to ownership of the land,” or, more simply put, “the tomb [...] constituted a physical claim to the patrimony.”58 Likewise, H.C. Brichto, in a seminal article whose very title, “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife—A Biblical Complex,” captures perfectly the intricate interrelationship that existed between an Israelite

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57 These latter two references were brought to our attention by Bloch-Smith, Judahite Burial Practices, 111; see similarly eadem, “The Cult of the Dead in Judah,” 222, and Lewis, “The Ancestral Estate,” 608. Cf. as well Josh 24:33; Judg 8:32, 16:31; and 2 Sam 2:32 (as cited by Bloch-Smith, Judahite Burial Practices, 115) and, as Bloch-Smith elsewhere points out (“Resurrecting the Iron I Dead,” IEJ 54 [2004], 77–91 [87]), Judg 12:7 and 1 Kgs 11:43 (// 2 Chr 9:31). In addition see, as noted by Lewis (“The Ancestral Estate,” 608), 1 Sam 25:1 and 1 Kgs 2:34.

58 Bloch-Smith, “Cult of the Dead in Judah,” 222.
family, its deceased ancestors, and the family’s land, claims that “the burial place as the ancestral home” attaches the family “to the soil.”59 “The land represented the family,” van der Toorn affirms, “joining the ancestors with their progeny,” and he adds, “an important reason why the family land was inalienable was the fact that the ancestors were buried there.”60 A family’s tomb, in short, inexorably tied that family to its patrimony, co-mingling the ancestors’ remains with the very earth of their descendants’ homestead. Indeed, so tied are the ancestors’ remains to their family’s homestead that, according to Lewis, in a brilliant reading of 2 Sam 14:16, the נחלת אֵלָהִים itself can be described as the הנחלת אֵלָהִים, literally (interpreting here as deceased spirits in general and a family’s deceased ancestors in particular) “the patrimony of the ancestors” or “the ancestral estate.”61

Yet just as a family’s forebears, or נחלת אֵלָהִים, safeguarded their descendants’ possession of their נחלת אֵלָהִים, or their ancestral estate, through the interring of their bones in the family’s tomb, so too did the figurative representations of these deceased ancestors, the תְּרָפִים, also called the הים אֱלָהִים, participate in the safeguarding of the familial patrimony through their presence in their descendants’ homes or extended household compounds. Indeed, this association of the תְּרָפִים/הים אֱלָהִים with the safeguarding of a family’s patrimony was long ago argued by those who used Nuzi texts concerning the ilānu to argue that the תְּרָפִים were household gods. To be sure, the specific interpretation of the Nuzi texts that took the ilānu and kindred קְרִים to be emblems, and even jural guarantors, of inheritance rights within a family, particularly in the case of property that was being passed to an otherwise irregular heir,62 has been discounted, most pointedly by M. Greenberg in 1962.63 Yet Greenberg still admits that the Nuzi ilānu pertained to issues of family continuity (concerning, especially, the designation of each generation’s paterfamilias). In this, he has been followed by M.A. Morrison, who has similarly affirmed that the ilānu were important markers of family continuity, “passed down from a father to his heir.” More important for our purposes though, Morrison, while like Greenberg eschewing any hypothesis that relates the Nuzi ilānu explicitly to inheritance rights, argues that the ilānu nevertheless were, in some fundamental way, “linked to the immovable property of the family.” Morrison continues: “[Their] transmission [...] from one generation to another represented the continuity of the family

59 Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife,” 5.
60 Van der Toorn, Family Religion, 199.
61 Lewis, “The Ancestral Estate.”
62 See, e.g., Smith, writing in 1931 (“What Were the Teraphim?” 34): the “house gods had a legal significance; the possessor of them had a claim de iure to property.”
line [...] [they] were not only the tie between the family unit and its property but also the very heart of the family.”

Of course, Morrison, who wrote in 1983, still understood the ilānu to be household gods. Yet despite the revised understanding of the ilānu as ancestor figurines that we have followed here, Morrison’s observations regarding their tie to the family’s property should still hold. Indeed, given the analysis of a family’s ancestors that we have discussed above—that one of the ancestors’ key roles within the network of reciprocity that ties them to their living descendants was to help safeguard those descendants’ claim to their property or נַחֲלָה—an interpretation of the ilānu as ancestor figurines helps to explain why these images should be associated with a family’s property in a way that interpreting the ilānu (or in Israelite tradition, the הִים/תְּרָפִים) as household gods never made clear. We therefore conclude that the ilānu/הִים/תְּרָפִים, as “symbolic representations of the human dead,” served not only the divinatory function within their descendants’ households on which we have heretofore focused. In addition, these ilānu/הִים/תְּרָפִים helped bind their family to its נַחֲלָה. Van der Toorn concurs: “The possession of the teraphim may indeed be regarded as a kind of legitimization [...] by keeping the cult of its ancestors, the family proclaimed its right to the land.”

This understanding of the teraphim and the deceased ancestors they represent as guarantors of the נַחֲלָה, moreover, compellingly addresses the question we posed at the beginning of this part of our discussion: why Micah, in 18:24, accuses the Danites of stealing only—as we have interpreted—his teraphim and perhaps the associated אֵפוֺד and why he does not make note, again at least as we have interpreted, of the theft of the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה. The answer is that while the teraphim, as we have seen, is (are) surely very precious, it is (or they are) replaceable. The warrant to Micah’s נַחֲלָה that is safeguarded by his father’s teraphim, however, is not so easily restored.

64 M.A. Morrison, “The Jacob and Laban Narrative in Light of Near Eastern Sources,” B.A 46 (1983), 155–64 (161); see similarly van der Toorn, “Gods and Ancestors in Emar and Nuzi,” 38, who writes of the ilānu both that “the heir in possession of these gods was, in title and in fact, the head of the household” and that the ilānu “represented the identity of the family.” Likewise at Emar, van der Toorn writes (p. 43), “the main heir [...] will obtain the main house, and with the main house also the gods.”


66 Van der Toorn, Family Religion, 235.

67 This contra van der Toorn, “Nature of the Biblical Teraphim,” 211, who sees the פֶּסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה of Judg 18:24 as the “costly” הִים/תְּרָפִים and who writes that “in comparison to the theft of this image, the ephod and the teraphim were the lesser loss.”
We suggest in addition that this understanding of the role the תְּרָפִים play in legitimating a family’s claim to its נַחֲלָה can help explain the story of Rachel’s theft of her father Laban’s תְּרָפִים in Gen 31:19–35. In that story, as is well known, Jacob, after many long years in Paddan-Aram laboring on behalf of his maternal uncle and father-in-law Laban, has finally resolved to return, along with his two wives and many children, to his family’s homestead in Canaan. Before departing, though, Rachel steals her father Laban’s תְּרָפִים.

No reason is given in the Genesis account for this theft, although suggestions among commentators have been numerous. According to the Genesis Rabbah, Rachel stole Laban’s תְּרָפִים with a good end in mind—to bring to an end her father’s worship of worthless idols. A less generous midrashic interpretation, found in the Tanḥuma, takes Rachel’s motivation to be selfish: she feared that the תְּרָפִים, given their divinatory function, could be used to reveal to her father her family’s flight and their route and so abet Laban in his pursuit. Among moderns, some argue that Rachel steals the תְּרָפִים because Laban has otherwise not furnished his daughters with a dowry, which Gen 31:14–16 might suggest that they are owed. Others somewhat similarly suggest that Rachel, in stealing Laban’s תְּרָפִים, “attempts to retain some stake [...] in her father’s household” and “in addition [...] seeks their [the תְּרָפִים’s] apotropaic protection, since she is most likely pregnant at the time of her departure from Haran.” For others still, Jacob has essen-
tially become an adopted son of Laban during his long sojourn in Paddan-Aram and he therefore has a right—that Rachel exercises on his behalf—to Laban’s תְּרָפִים, just as the תְּרָפִים generally were “passed down from a father to his heir” (to quote Morrison once more). Yet another explanation proposes that Rachel steals the תְּרָפִים to preserve her own matri-lineage in the face of the overwhelmingly patriarchal Israelite society into which she has married. Rachel’s theft has also been interpreted as “part of her continuing struggle for primacy within Jacob’s household,” as she sought to “prevail over her sister” and secure “the appointment of her son as his father’s chief heir.”

While all of these explanations are of interest, we feel they suffer by grounding their analyses only in the story of Jacob and his marriages and not considering the larger Genesis narrative in which the Jacob-Rachel-Leah story is embedded: the story of the multiple generations of the Abrahamic family tree, beginning already in Gen 11:26 with the genealogical notices regarding Abram’s/Abraham’s father Terah and Abram’s/Abraham’s two brothers Nahor and Haran. Interestingly, we are not told in this text which of Terah’s three sons is the oldest and thus which is his father’s presumptive heir, but the son Haran, according to Gen 11:28, predeceased his father Terah and so at any rate was removed from his father’s line of inheritance. Abram/Abraham presumably also inherits nothing from his father as—according, at least, to the biblical chronology (see Gen 11:26, 32; 12:4)—he leaves Haran while his father is still alive to follow Yahweh’s command that he go to Canaan and settle there. Nahor, who remains resident with Terah in Haran, would thus seem to stand as the sole heir to his father’s role as family paterfamilias and also as sole heir to his family’s Haran estate.

This paterfamilias position and the family’s property in Haran should next pass on to Nahor’s heir, and although one might presume from the list of Nahor’s sons in Gen 22:20–24 that this would be Nahor’s firstborn, Uz, the Genesis story in fact focuses on the son who is apparently Nahor’s youngest, Bethuel, and then on Bethuel’s son and heir, Laban. Indeed, recall that Jacob, when he is sent by his father to Paddan-Aram many years later, is specifi-

72 Proponents of this view are catalogued in Greenberg, “Another Look at Rachel’s Theft,” 240, and also Lewis, “Teraphim,” 1597, although note that neither Greenberg nor Lewis concurs with this position. Rather, in Greenberg’s opinion, Rachel steals her father’s תְּרָפִים because (in the words of Korte, “Significance Obscured,” 163), “it was customary for women to take familiar household or family gods along on journeys or when moving house”; according to Lewis (“Teraphim,” 1599), Rachel steals Laban’s תְּרָפִים for reasons having to do with their divinatory function, perhaps—as indicated in the Tanhuma long ago—to prevent her father Laban “from using them [...] to detect Jacob’s escape.”


75 Spanier, “Rachel’s Theft of the Teraphim,” 405.
cally sent to the house of Bethuel, Rebekah’s father, and of Laban, Rebekah’s brother (Gen 28:2), a clear indication of how that family’s leadership and inheritance was being passed from the household’s father to the son. The תְרָפִים, we have now repeatedly suggested, are likewise transmitted as a part of the inheritance passed from a household’s father to a son; Laban’s תְרָפִים that Rachel steals, that is, should be taken as the תְרָפִים that have been passed down from Terah through Nahor to the Bethuelite family line. In addition, they should be seen, like all תְרָפִים, as supernatural safeguards that bind Terah’s descendants to their family’s patri-mony in Haran.

In Gen 31:14, however, Rachel and Leah declare themselves no longer bound to the Terahite family’s patrimony in Haran; indeed, they quite specifically state that they no longer have a נַחֲלָה in their paternal home. Yet what guarantee of a נַחֲלָה do Rachel and Leah have in the land of Canaan to which they are relocating? More important, what guarantees a נַחֲלָה to the family ofTerahite descendants who already live in the land of Canaan—and, perhaps most important from Rachel’s perspective, what will guarantee a נַחֲלָה to her two sons, one as yet unborn? To be sure, Genesis posits a grant to a נַחֲלָה in Canaan that is quite potent—a promise from Yahweh—but a promise that has been delivered only in private visions to the chosen members of Abraham’s line (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and that, moreover, involves a long delay until its realization (400 years according to Gen 15:13; 430 years according to Exod 12:40). Might the text thus imagine that Rachel would seek a more immediate assurance that the Abrahamic branch of Terah’s family tree is guaranteed a patrimony? Laban’s תְרָפִים, we suggest, were stolen to fulfill this function.

To be sure, Laban’s תְרָפִים—guarantors of Terah’s descendants’ land grant in Haran—can only fictionally serve as safeguards of Abraham’s descendants’ claims to the land of Canaan. But just as today, cases abound around the world of individuals who use fake land deeds to assert ownership of a piece of property to which they otherwise have no legitimate title, so too, we suggest, does

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our text imagine that Laban’s תְּרָפִים can be used to assert their possessors’ ownership of a piece of property that is otherwise only tenuously denoted as theirs. Indeed, because the תְּרָפִים Rachel stole were at least tied to Abraham’s family—if not to the land in Canaan that family had settled—they may have seemed to an ancient Israelite audience to be more legitimate safeguards for binding the Abrahamic line to their Canaanite patrimony than something like the fake land deeds used fraudulently today. One might even argue that the story of Rachel stealing the תְּרָפִים of the descendants of Nahor and housing them with the descendants of Abraham is used by the biblical writers to put forward one of their prime assertions about Abraham: that despite the narrative arc that has the family’s inheritance handed down through Nahor, Bethuel, and Laban after Terah’s death, Abraham’s descendants are the lineage’s true heirs. Under the terms of this interpretation, the authors of Genesis use the story of Rachel’s theft to demonstrate how the Terahite patrimony, in the form of its תְּרָפִים, comes to be restored to its true owners.

One might immediately object, of course: what of Gen 35:2–4, where, “under the terebinth that was near Shechem,” Jacob is said to dispose of all the אֵלֶים that are in the possession of his household and others of his entourage? If, as many commentators propose, these אֵלֶים were, or included, the תְּרָפִים Rachel had stolen from Laban,⁷⁷ then is not our thesis that these תְּרָפִים serve in the biblical tradition as safeguards of the Abrahamic family’s claim to the land of Canaan utterly undermined? We admit the answer to this question would have to be yes. But we must point out that it is not necessarily the case that the אֵלֶים of Gen 35:2–4 were, or included, Rachel’s תְּרָפִים; some commentators have suggested rather that these אֵלֶים might be divine figurines taken as spoil by the Jacobites after their defeat of Shechem.⁷⁸ Editorially,
the immediate juxtaposition of the Shechem story in Genesis 34 with the story of the Jacobites’ putting aside their תְּרָפִים (at least in the Bible as it has come down to us) might suggest this. Even more of note is that the תְּרָפִים of Gen 35:2–4 are exclusively referred to as “foreign תְּרָפִים,” “foreign תְּרָפִים.” And while the adjective “foreign” might possibly allude to the תְּרָפִים Rachel took from Paddan-Aram, the fact of the matter is that nowhere else in the Bible is the phrase תְּרָפִים or its variants (see Deut 31:16; 32:12; Josh 24:20, 23; Judg 10:16; 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Chr 33:15; Ps 81:10 [in most of the Bible’s English versions, 81:9]; Jer 5:19; Mal 2:11) used to refer to תְּרָפִים. More important, nowhere else in the Bible are תְּרָפִים described as “foreign.” Only once, indeed, are they associated with “foreignness” in any way (in Ezek 21:26, where they are used by the king of Babylon along with other divinatory practices). Instead, even in passages where their use is condemned (e.g., 2 Kgs 23:24), the תְּרָפִים are treated as Israelite. This, for us, throws the argument regarding Gen 35:2–4 somewhat more in favor of those scholars who see the תְּרָפִים as something other than Rachel’s תְּרָפִים. Her תְּרָפִים, we continue to suggest, are brought to Canaan and used by the biblical writers to fulfill one of the standard functions of the תְּרָפִים, serving as otherworldly safeguards of Abraham’s family’s claim to its נַחֲלַת אֱלֹהִים.

Yet other objections might still persist. For example, if Rachel’s תְּרָפִים did in fact serve, in the conceit of the biblical writers, as such important safeguards of the Abrahamic family’s claim to its נַחֲלַת אֱלֹהִים, then why do they never again appear in Genesis (or elsewhere in the biblical text)? In response, we note, first, that it is not just Rachel’s תְּרָפִים that never again appear in the biblical text; once the Jacob and Laban narrative ends, Genesis’s “Haran connection” also draws to a close. Yet until this point in the Genesis narrative, Nahor’s descendants have played an extremely important role, especially by serving as a source for wives for Isaac and Jacob. Why should they so suddenly disappear? The answer is that as a result of Rachel’s theft of the Terahite ancestor figurines, the complex of elements Brichto identified for us in his article’s title—kin, cult, land, and afterlife—are all united in the “promised land.” Thereby, the story line of a divided lineage—as represented both by competing descriptions of the legitimate Terahite נַחֲלָה and by dueling claims to Terah’s תְּרָפִים—comes to an end. More simply put, the dramatic tension that kept Abraham’s family tied to Haran, so to speak, is resolved, and so the story’s Haran-based characters—whether the living relatives still resident in Haran or the deceased ancestors embodied in the תְּרָפִים—can exit the stage. Thereby they give way to what is, from the Bible’s perspective, the next great act that the unification of נַחֲלַת אֱלֹהִים, תְּרָפִים, נַחֲלַת אֱלֹהִים, idoms are probably household gods found among the spoils of Shechem or carried by the captives,” yet adds, “the phrase may also include the terafim that Rachel stole.”
and the Abrahamic family line has made possible: the story of Jacob’s twelve sons and the lineage and נוחלא that through them and their descendants is eventually established for Israel’s twelve tribes.

4. **Concluding reflections**

These conclusions about the role of the תרפים in Genesis 31 as guarantors, in a fictional sense, of Jacob’s family’s claim to the נוחלא of Canaan prompt us, finally, to return to Judges 17–18 and ponder whether there are some last nuances that are played out in that text concerning the role of the תרפים. For example, are there intimations that even though the object(s) of primary value to the Danite thieves who plundered Micah’s אביה was/were the mother’s פסלי מנוכב, Micah’s תרפים—both the תרפים that Micah had made and the other תרפים of his household shrine—were of appeal to the Danites as well, in order that these תרפים might serve the Danites as fictional guarantors of the land they took for themselves in Laish?

Crucial to note here is the reason why, according to Judg 18:1, the Danites were attempting to lay claim to Laish in the first place: because at that point in Israelite history, no נוחלא had come to the Danites “among the tribes of Israel.” Why that is, Judg 18:1 does not say, but the text seems to reflect the same (or at least a similar) presumption as that found in Judg 1:34: that the נוחלא of the Danites should have been, as in Josh 19:40–46, territory in the southwestern part of Israel, but that the Danites either failed to take this land (so Judg 1:34) or lost it (so Josh 19:47), because, according to Judg 1:34, of the resistance put forward by the Canaanite population already settled in those parts. In this respect, Judg 18:1 differs from other Danite tales in Judges, most notably the tale of the Danite Samson in Judges 13–16, which does speak of Samson’s clan, at least, as having established a family burial place (and so, presumably, a נוחלא) within a Danite patrimony in Israel’s southwest. Indeed, commentators frequently acknowledge that Judg 1:1–2:5 and Judges 17–18, 19–21 seem to belong to a different redactional stratum than Judg 2:6–16:31. whereas 2:6–16:31, for example, and especially 3:7–16:31, “explore Israel’s early history by tracing the careers of heroic and charismatic individuals,” using a “recurring, covenantally oriented frame,” Judg 1:1–2:5 and Judges 17–18, 19–21 “tend not to feature heroic individuals” and “themes concerning the transience of power are especially strong.”

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79 See, for example, Boling, Judges, 29–38; Gray, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 188–94; Martin, Judges, 5–9; Matthews, Judges and Ruth, 6–11; Niditch, Judges, 8–13; Soggin, Judges, 4–5 (albeit all with slightly different divisions of the book’s main parts).

80 Niditch, Judges, 12, 180.
writes S. Niditch, we find in Judges 18, “a tale characterized by an aggressive, conqueror’s demeanor.”

Which is to say, as we have already intimated: we find in Judges 18 an aggressive account of the Danites’ efforts to conquer a נוחל that was not theirs and to which, according to the logic of the text, they had little grant, this as opposed, in our text’s conceit, to the territory associated with the Danites in the southwest. This נוחל, Judg 1:34 and especially Josh 19:40–46 imply, was given to the Danites by Joshua, acting on behalf of Yahweh, as part of the distribution of all the lands of Canaan to the tribes of Israel. We might even say that in the view of Josh 19:40–46 and Judg 1:34, Yahweh, as the “god of the fathers,” or the ancestral god, stood as the supernatural guardian who legitimated the Danites’ claim to their נוחל in the south. But within our narrative’s framework, no otherworldly agent links the Danites as emphatically to the נוחל that they sought to capture in the north; there is only the Levite priest’s assurance to the five spies sent by the Danites to seek territory for the tribe’s habitation that “your way is under the watch of Yahweh” (כנף יהוה דר, Judg 18:6). The Levite’s assurance, moreover, might be said to have given the Danite spies only a minimum of comfort, for as C. van Dam points out, such a secondhand endorsement is a far cry from the more typical language used to report Yahweh’s response to an oracular inquiry: the much more emphatic claim that “Yahweh answered” or “Yahweh said” (Judg 1:2; 20:18, 23, 28; 1 Sam 10:22; 23:2, 4, 11, 12; 30:8; 2 Sam 2:1; 5:19, 23). It is thus easy to understand why, from the Danites’ point of view, a more authoritative land grant is desirable. Micah’s תרפה, we might suppose, were stolen to fulfill this function.

But why, one might immediately ask, would the Danites need to make use of representations of Micah’s Ephraimite ancestors who are tied to Ephraimite land, rather than use their own tribal תרפה, who at least—like Laban’s תרפה as we described Rachel’s use of them in Section 3 of our paper above—would have been tied to Danite lineages, even as these lineages’ members sought to use their ancestors’ תרפה disingenuously to safeguard their claims to land other than those ancestors’ נוחל? The answer to this question is to recall that according to the narrative stratum of which Judges 18 is a part, the Danites, unlike Terah’s family, had not been able to take possession of their original נוחל: their need, that is, was not to replace the נוחל of Haran with the נוחל of Canaan, but to estab-

81 Niditch, Judges, 180.
82 Note in this regard Lewis’s provocative suggestion that the concept of the “god of the fathers” might be productively rethought in the light of the notion of נלענ designating “spirits of the dead.” See Lewis, Cults of the Dead, 178–79.
lish a נחלת where none had existed before. But without a pre-existent נחלת, the complex of interlocking elements of “kin,” “cult,” “land,” and “afterlife” on which the potency and even the presence of the תְּרָפִים depends collapses. If there is no “land,” or נחלת, for example, there is no tomb of the ancestral “kin” that lies within it. Consequently, there are no forebears properly ensconced in the “afterlife” who are able to be made present through the “cult” of the תְּרָפִים. Without, however, תְּרָפִים, and when in addition there is no ancestral tomb, there is no agency for legitimating land-grant claims, nor the ability to access necromantic oracles. Indeed, we should remember in this regard that the five original Danite scouts, when they passed through Ephraim during their search for a Danite home, asked Micah’s Levite priest to deliver on their behalf an oracle regarding their mission’s potential success. Why had they not asked this, though, of their own תְּרָפִים? For the same reason, we suggest, that they ended up stealing Micah’s family’s תְּרָפִים to serve as fraudulent safeguards of the Danites’ claim to their northern fief: due to their lack of a pre-existing נחלת and an associated ancestral tomb, the Danites were without the תְּרָפִים that were their entombed ancestors’ counterparts. Thus, they had to make do with Micah’s Ephraimite תְּרָפִים, both as divinatory revealers and guarantors of their נחלת-to-be, no matter how less than desirable these Ephraimite תְּרָפִים might have been.

Or, to put the matter another way: if the analysis of the תְּרָפִים as a “tie between the family unit and its property” (to quote yet again Morrison) is correct, then even fraudulent תְּרָפִים—were something the Danite clans, in order to lay claim to new land in Laish, would feel the need to possess. Indeed, the text of Judges 18:27, in which the account of the Danites’ conquering Laish comes just after the notice that these Danites stole “that which Micah made,” could well suggest an association between the Danites’ taking possession of Laish and their possessing Micah’s תְּרָפִים. Note in this regard that the verb used in 18:27 for “to make” is, as in 18:24, עָשָׂה, and thus again, as in 18:24, the image of the תְּרָפִים that Micah “made” in 17:5 is evoked.

That said, it pushes credulity to suppose that an ancient Israelite audience would grant that Ephraimite תְּרָפִים could have been used by the Danites to help secure a patrimony to which they could otherwise only tenuously lay claim. But in this regard we must recall the polemical nature of the Judges 17–18 story that we noted in our opening remarks and in particular Brettler’s contention that the story’s polemic is not directed just against the Danite sanctuary and its priesthood, but also against the tribe of Dan itself: in Brettler’s

85 Although note two medieval Hebrew manuscripts, which identify—under the influence of Judges 18:31?—the object that Micah made according to 18:27 as the פסל of 17:4. See Bartusch, Understanding Dan, 176, note on v. 27.
reading (following M. Noth), because of the Danites’ violent conquest of the peaceful residents of Laish. The Danites are thereby derided for their generally cutthroat and callow dispositions; indeed, in 18:25, the text describes them in practically these terms: as אֲנָשִׁים מָרֵי נֶפֶשׁ, “bitter-souled men.” Based on the Danites’ illogical appropriation of Ephraimite תְּרָפִים, we might in addition characterize these boorish cads by using R. Alter’s description of their fellow Danite Samson as depicted in the redactional stratum found in Judg 2:6–16:31: as men whose “formidable brawn will not be matched by brain, or even by a saving modicum of common sense.” Under the terms of this interpretation, the incredulity that an ancient Israelite audience might well express regarding the text’s subplot that we have proposed—whereby the Danites irrationally attempt to use Micah’s תְּרָפִים to secure a נַחֲלָה—would become testament to the text’s success at discrediting the Danites’ acumen, which is itself part and parcel of the text’s larger goal of discrediting the Danites in general. If this is the case, then one last nuance in Judges 17–18 has come into play, as the story of the Danites’ misguided taking of Micah’s family’s תְּרָפִים is used in conjunction with Judges 17–18’s other attacks on Dan to promote even further the text’s polemical assault on Dan’s sanctuary and Dan’s people.

Still, we must be clear that there is no definite reference to the תְּרָפִים in the account of the Danites’ conquest of Laish in 18:27 and thus no firm link drawn in the text between the Danites’ taking of Laish and an attempt to use Micah’s תְּרָפִים as guarantors of this newly claimed נַחֲלָה. Hence the caution that we expressed in our introductory remarks: that our concluding comments about the potential appeal of Micah’s תְּרָפִים to the tribesmen of Dan would be the product of considerable speculation. Nevertheless, we cannot help but wonder whether the Judges 17–18 account of Dan’s laying claim to a נַחֲלָה in Laish draws on ancient Israel’s closely interwoven complex of “kin,” “cult,” “land,” and “afterlife” in order to portray the Danites as guilty—among other things—of loutishly seeking to manipulate their culture’s venerable תְּרָפִים traditions.

86 Above, n. 18.