

## ***CAN I HAVE A WORD?: METHODS OF COMMUNICATION IN JUDGES 6\****

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### **Abstract: *Can I Have a Word?: Methods of Communication in Judges 6***

Human-divine communication takes on many forms in the Hebrew Bible. From dreams and prophetic visions to spoken oracles, there are a variety of depictions of communication between humans and the divine. Judges 6 fits within the body of passages in which communication is of vital importance; the chapter focuses on the divine call of Gideon and his response. What precipitates this call is invasion and attacks on resources. Judges 6 begins with Israel encountering Midianites, Amalekites, and other unnamed groups. Israel's livelihood is compromised because its agricultural activities and produce are disrupted by outside attacks. In the midst of these conflicts, Gideon is commissioned by Yahweh to provide needed relief. An uncertain agriculturalist turned warrior, Gideon has two divine encounters before going to battle—one on a wine press and another on a threshing floor. In these encounters, Yahweh communicates via agrarian products and the natural environment, namely the world surrounding Gideon is used to deliver divine messages and approval for war. This article examines these methods of communication using principles of ecological hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** Communication – Agrarian space – Ecological Hermeneutics – Gideon

### **Resumen: *¿Puedo decir algo?: métodos de comunicación en Jueces 6***

La comunicación hombre-divinidad toma diferentes formas en la Biblia hebrea. Desde sueños y visiones proféticas a oráculos hablados, hay una variedad de representaciones de comunicación entre humanos y lo divino. Jueces 6 encaja en el cuerpo de pasajes en el cual la comunicación es de vital importancia; el capítulo se centra en la llamada divina de Gedeón y su respuesta. Lo que precipita esta llamada es la invasión y los ataques de los recursos. Jueces 6 comienza con Israel enfrentándose a los madianitas, amalecitas y otros grupos sin nombres. El modo de vida israelita está comprometido porque sus actividades y producción agrícola son interrumpidas por

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los ataques externos. En el medio de estos conflictos, Gedeón es comisionado por Yahvé para proveer el alivio necesario. Un incierto agricultor convertido en guerrero, Gedeón tiene dos encargos divinos antes de ir a la batalla—uno en una prensa de vino y el otro en un piso para trillar las cosechas. En estos encuentros antes de ir a la batalla, Yahvé se comunica mediante productos agrarios y el ambiente natural, a saber, el mundo que rodeaba a Gedeón es utilizado para entregar mensajes divinos y la aprobación para la guerra. Este artículo examina estos métodos de comunicación usando los principios de la hermenéutica ecológica.

**Palabras clave:** Comunicación – Espacio agrario – Hermenéutica ecológica – Gedeón

## INTRODUCTION

Judges 6<sup>1</sup> is a chapter filled with foreign invaders, divine intervention, miraculous signs, and human actions. In the midst of all of this, Gideon emerges as an uncertain and insecure agriculturalist who is commissioned by God to save Israel from years of attack. Much of Judges 6 hinges on human-divine communication, as Gideon has direct and indirect divine encounters before going to war. In each of these instances, the biblical author<sup>2</sup> utilizes agrarian elements and spaces and the natural environment to depict divine communication and approval. On the surface, the use of agriculture and nature may seem predictable considering ancient Israel was an agrarian society. Naturally, agrarian items and spaces were ubiquitous in the region. Yet, within the call of Gideon there is a prevalence of agricultural and natural elements that serves a purpose beyond the ordinary: the rationale behind Gideon's call is an attack on agriculture; Gideon performs agricultural work during his first divine encounter; two agrarian spaces are the settings for Gideon's divine

<sup>1</sup> The book of Judges contains narratives focused on premonarchic Israel. Many of the stories are legends that may come from the Northern Kingdom before its fall in the eighth century BCE. Judges is within the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings) and reflects Deuteronomistic ideology. Judges also contains less formalized religious practices, such as the rituals described in chapter six.

<sup>2</sup> Like many biblical texts, the Gideon narratives reflect a complex compositional history where multiple oral and written sources have been combined together, likely with more than one author and redactor. Evidence within the text suggests multiple traditions have been combined together (e.g. Two names are used for Gideon throughout Judges 6–8, Gideon and Jerubbaal). Martin Noth notes the composite nature of the Gideon narratives with various elements and traditions incorporated together with a Deuteronomistic introduction, style, and formulae. See Noth 1981: 45–46.

encounters; Yahweh uses agrarian and natural elements when communicating with Gideon. The mere presence of agriculture and nature is not surprising, but the manner in which these elements are utilized in the call of Gideon is noteworthy. To more precisely understand these aspects of the narrative, select principles of ecological hermeneutics will help shed a new light on communication in Judges 6.

## ECOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

There has been growing interest in recognizing and uncovering the relationship between biblical interpretation and ecological issues.<sup>3</sup> The work of Norman C. Habel has been especially influential to scholars seeking a methodology for doing ecological hermeneutics with an intended goal of recovering the lost voice of the Earth in the Bible. Habel<sup>4</sup> proposes a threefold methodology (*suspicion-identification-retrieval*) for achieving an ecological hermeneutic. He rightly notes that in many studies of biblical passages, the land, resources, and non-human elements are forgotten or overlooked. To resist this tendency, he recommends an acceptance of a necessary *suspicion* that a text is likely anthropocentric or that it has traditionally been read with an anthropocentric lens that might bias interpretation. He asserts a need for *identification* of the non-human elements of a passage to raise awareness of the Earth<sup>5</sup> within it. Once these elements have been identified, a *retrieval* of the lost voice of the Earth is possible.<sup>6</sup> There are certainly merits and successful uses of this model. This schema can advance a critical study of ecology in biblical passages while also attempting to articulate the perspective of the Earth.<sup>7</sup> Although there are passages where this methodology is effective, not all texts

<sup>3</sup> There have been several interdisciplinary works published in the 2000s that have sought to address these topics. Recent publications include Habel and Trudinger 2008; Horrell, Hunt, Southgate, and Stavrakopoulou 2010; Trainor 2012; Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen, and Utsler 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Much of the work in developing standards and methods for ecological hermeneutics has been a collaboration of scholars. Habel is highlighted here, but many others are acknowledged in his works, in particular scholars who participated in the SBL Consultation for Ecological Hermeneutics (2004–2006) and scholars active in The Earth Bible Project.

<sup>5</sup> Earth refers to the entire ecosystem including the natural environment and its non-human constituents.

<sup>6</sup> Habel 2008: 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of successful studies include Miller 2008: 123–130 and Turner 2008: 113–122.

fit easily in this framework. For instance, sometimes the non-human elements of a narrative are only minimally mentioned and an inquiry would not produce an adequate analysis of the text. Similarly, sometimes there are overt references to ecological elements, yet the passage is anthropocentric in its focus. Judges 6 fits within the latter category. The interest within the narrative is anthropocentric, but the presence of the Earth is palpable, not for its own sake but for how it is affected by and contributes to humanity. On the surface, my study may not clearly align with ecological hermeneutics since it does not seek to reclaim the lost voice of the Earth. However, my study does provide a meaningful adaptation of this methodology by using it to evaluate a text that has a significant amount of ecological content but with an anthropocentric and theocentric focus. Such a text is not a typical candidate for ecological hermeneutics, but this article will push the boundaries of this methodology to test whether it can shed light on ecologically packed passages. Similarly, there are additional ecological principles that will assist in analyzing texts where ecology figures prominently, as in Judges 6.

Beyond the threefold model, Habel also articulates six principles that can guide an exploration of ecology and the Bible. As noted above, these principles “were refined in consultations and workshops concerned with ecology in general, and ecological concerns linked to theology and the Bible more specifically.”<sup>8</sup> Principles 1 and 3 highlight the intrinsic value of the Earth and the need to celebrate the Earth’s voice. Principles 5 and 6 highlight the mutual relationship between all members of the Earth community and the need to resist human injustices. Principles 2 and 4 are informative to this study of Judges 6, as these concepts can be detected within the narrative:

*“The principle of interconnectedness [Principle 2]: Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival...*

*The principle of purpose [Principle 4]: The universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design with which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.”<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> Habel 2008: 2.

<sup>9</sup> Habel 2008: 2. For more discussion of the principles of ecojustice, see The Earth Bible Team 2000: 38–53.

Principle 2 stresses that members of the Earth community are allies with one another. An implicit assumption is that there is a need for solidarity amongst all living things since the community benefits and suffers on account of others. Principle 4 elaborates on this by emphasizing that all things play a role in promoting and sustaining the universe. The author of Judges 6 strategically uses Gideon's environment as a tool for communication, and these two underlying principles can be detected within the narrative.

Guided by these ecological principles, this study of communication in Judges 6 will also have an intentional agrarian lens. Doing an agrarian reading does not involve following a formal framework but instead calls for a deliberate agricultural attentiveness. On the subject of agrarian reading, Ellen Davis aptly notes it is not a formal hermeneutic but instead, "it is a mind-set, a whole set of understandings, commitments, and practices that focus on the most basic of all cultural acts—eating."<sup>10</sup> In the discussion that follows, ecological principles along with an intentional agrarian emphasis will contextualize this analysis of Judges 6. Ecological elements, natural and built environments, and agrarian, food-centered activities play a significant role in the human-divine communication in Judges 6. Both the environment and agriculture facilitate how Yahweh calls Gideon and how Gideon responds. Right at the beginning of Judges 6, the rationale behind this ecologically packed chapter is the destruction of natural resources and food sources which sets the tone for the exchange.

### ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION (JUDGES 6:1–10)

Prior to the call of Gideon, the land of Israel is under attack. Judges 6 describes Israel dealing with encroachments from the Midianites, Amalekites, and other unnamed peoples from the east. In Judges 6:5, these groups are said to infiltrate and destroy the natural environment:

*"For, they came up with their livestock, and they brought their tents like a swarm of locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came."*

כי הם ומקניהם יעלו ואהליהם יבאו כדִּי־אֲרָבָה לרֹב וּלְהֵם וּלְגַמְלֵיהֶם אֵין מִסְפָּר וַיִּבָּאוּ בֶּאֱרֶץ לְשַׁחְתָּהּ

<sup>10</sup> Davis 2009: 22.

The arrival of these outside groups destabilizes the Israelite community who is dependent upon the land. Poetically, the presence of these unwanted groups is compared to a swarm of locusts, an event that brings chaos and destruction. More specifically, locusts are plant-eating animals that feed on vegetation, which is exactly what the invaders are doing. The mention of locusts also recalls the plague of locusts in Egypt that destroys the land, in particular trees and fields (Exod 10:3–6). The author figuratively compares the human actors to natural animal actions and both result in land degradation.

To further weaken the land and the community, these groups tamper with the Israelite food supply by obstructing the planting of seeds and taking away Israel's livestock (Judg 6:3–4). Both acts take away sustenance, cause instability, and can lead to famine. Attacking the agrarian processes and products serves to debilitate Israelite society by seizing its food, an effective military tactic employed especially when laying siege to an area. These outside groups are vying for possession of this area, and they claim land and interrupt agriculture as a means to gain control. In this context, the land and its products appear to be like pawns in the struggle between Israel and these outside groups.

The text specifies that these attacks on the natural environment and agricultural activities are not happenstance. Rather, Yahweh causes these actions on account of Israel's worship of foreign gods (Judg 6:9–10). Because of Israelite infidelity, their land, resources, and food supply suffer as Yahweh gives Israel into the hand of Midian for seven years (Judg 6:1b). The oppression that the Israelites experience is because of their actions, yet the people do not suffer alone. For seven years, the land is an explicit victim of Israel's unfaithful behavior. Yahweh communicates dissatisfaction with Israelite apostasy not by verbally scolding their behavior, but instead by taking away their environmental and agrarian resources.

The ecological principle of interconnectedness [Principle 2] provides added dimension to what is being described in Judges 6:1–6. One of the foundational principles of ecological discourse is the emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between humanity and the environment. The principle suggests that humanity's actions can have positive or negative effects on the Earth. At the beginning of Judges 6, the author articulates this principle of interconnectedness in a theologically charged manner for his Israelite community. Apparently, it is not just how the Israelites treat the Earth that can have an impact on it. Instead, how the Israelites relate to Yahweh and how well they follow divine commands also impacts the land. So interconnected are Israel,

the land (which is a divine gift),<sup>11</sup> and Yahweh that disobedience to Yahweh can result in the land suffering on account of Israel. The suffering of the land causes Israel to suffer from lack of food.

This symbiotic relationship continues with Israel's response to the attacks. Israel reacts by hiding in the caves, mountains, and strongholds, taking refuge in the land that is under attack (Judges 6:2). While a victim of Israel's infidelity, the land still serves as a safe haven with natural buffers to keep the foreigners at a distance. In this action, the interconnectedness is highlighted not just because the land suffers, but also because the Israelites must rely on the land for their life and survival.

After seeking refuge within the land, Israel cries out to Yahweh for relief, and Yahweh's response is twofold and highlights both land and agriculture. First, Yahweh sends an unnamed prophet to summarize the salvific event of the exodus from Egypt. The reference to the exodus is to remind the Israelites that they were liberated by Yahweh from a land of oppression, and they have been given a promised land that is a tangible reminder of their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The prophet reiterates that the land that enables Israel to survive and thrive comes with specific requirements, namely the faithful worship of Yahweh alone. Moreover, following divine law is essential to maintaining the sustainability of that land. Israel's land and its produce are divine gifts that come with contingencies, and if Yahweh is displeased with Israelite behavior, the land can be used to reflect divine disapproval. In addition to the prophet, Yahweh also responds to their pleas by calling Gideon to lead a military campaign against Midian. As much of the Midianite oppression occurred as an attack on the agriculture, similarly, this second divine response is couched in agrarian terms.

### **CALL OF GIDEON AT THE WINEPRESS (JUDGES 6:11–24)**

In Judges 6:11–24, Yahweh commissions Gideon to lead the militaristic response to the invaders. When Gideon has his first experience of the divine, he is portrayed engaging in agricultural activities on an agrarian space: He threshes wheat at a wine press. Threshing is the act of beating or hitting crop stalks to release grains. Typically, threshing would be performed on a threshing floor;

<sup>11</sup> The gift of land is stated in the patriarchal stories (Gen 15:18–21, 28:13) and after the exodus (Exod 23:31). Within the Deuteronomistic History, the land is highlighted as a divine gift promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut 1:8).

however, Gideon shrewdly uses the wine press in order to keep the crops away from the Midianites who are targeting agrarian products. A wine press is a built agrarian space used for pressing fruit to extract juice to be fermented to make wine. Here it acts as a refuge to protect grain from being stolen.

While Gideon is engaged in agricultural work, an angel of Yahweh<sup>12</sup> appears and is positioned in relation to the natural environment. For example, the angel is described as sitting on a rock that is under a nearby oak tree near the wine press. The specificity of the location of the angel heightens the interest in the environment that is palpable in the narrative. Similarly, the angel communicates with Gideon in close proximity to his agricultural work.

The angel tells Gideon that he will lead the campaign against the Midianite incursions in the land, as Yahweh will deliver Midian into his hand. Like other biblical figures, Gideon first resists this assignment.<sup>13</sup> He explains he is from the smallest tribe, Manasseh, and is not strong enough or worthy of the task. Likewise, Gideon expresses reluctance and uncertainty about the mission itself, and he requests a sign to confirm that it is in fact a legitimate, divine message. The angel acquiesces to communicate the validity of the task by performing a sign using food.

Judges 6:19 describes Gideon retrieving the offerings to present to the angel:

*“So Gideon went and prepared a kid and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the oak and presented them.”*

וגדצון בא ויצג גדי־צזים ואפת־קמח מצות הבשר שם בסל והמרק בפֿך־ור  
ויוצא אליו אל־תחת האלה ויגש

When Gideon returns to the wine press, the angel instructs him on how the offering is to proceed. He tells Gideon to put the meat and bread on a rock, a quasi altar, and pour the broth on top of them in the manner of a libation offering. Then, while holding his staff, the angel reaches out its tip and touches the meat and bread, and fire springs up from the rock and consumes the food. The angel then vanishes from Gideon’s sight. Having seen the fire and the spectacular exit, Gideon realizes he was in the presence of Yahweh and is confident in his mission, although his confidence wanes later in the narrative.

<sup>12</sup> In the narrative, this divine messenger is also called angel of God and Yahweh.

<sup>13</sup> Similar reluctance and uncertainty to being commissioned can be found in figures such as Moses (Exod 3:7–4:17), Isaiah (Isa 6:1–8), and Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–10). For further discussion of commissioning narratives, see Kutsch 1956: 75–84; Habel 1965: 297–323; Akao 1993: 1–11.



This story of Gideon's commissioning portrays non-human elements as instruments of communication between Gideon and Yahweh. The agrarian products—kid, unleavened bread, broth—are symbolic, valuable, and effective. The goat is a sacrificial animal associated with atoning sins (cf. Lev 16:10). Its use here reflects the need to atone for Israel's unfaithful behavior that has caused the land, resources, and food supply to be compromised. The selection of the goat shows that Israel is culpable for what has been happening over seven years. The unleavened bread is an item often provided in grain offerings. This product recalls the wheat-threshing that Gideon was doing at the beginning of the pericope and represents divine gifts of food along with the human creation of an edible foodstuff. The choice of unleavened bread is also reminiscent of the exodus (cf. Exod 12) which was mentioned earlier in the passage. The broth functions as a libation offering that is poured on these items. The goat and bread are more expected in an offering, but oil or wine would be a more typical libation offering. The use of broth could reflect the dearth of resources at hand where oil and wine are unavailable. Alternatively, if the broth is from the goat, this could reflect a sustainable practice of using the maximum allowable parts of the animal so as not to waste. All of these foodstuffs have been targeted during the invasions of the Midianites, so Gideon is offering valuable items, particularly during a time of attack on the food supply. His offering is an important step in restoring the food that is lacking in his community.

This story conveys aspects of the ecological principle of purpose [Principle 4]. The components of the Earth are depicted as dynamic aspects of cosmic design. More specifically in this text, the products of the Earth enable and enhance human-divine communication. The agrarian space and the repeated mentions of nature amplify the interest in food and the environment. The items utilized convey Gideon's interests and also are symbolic of the damaged relationship that exists between Israel and Yahweh. Even after the food offerings are made, the divine response is not articulated orally, but instead occurs as a natural phenomenon. Fire appears as Gideon's sign of the validity of the command. Again, there is a need for Yahweh to convey information and approval to Gideon, and when Gideon seeks a sign, agriculture and the environment are instruments of communication.

After the angel disappears, Gideon becomes aware that he has just encountered Yahweh, and he is immediately afraid because he has seen the face of Yahweh. Yahweh tells him not to fear and then sends him on his first act to end the apostasy that has led to the trouble in the land.

*Antiguo Oriente*, volumen 13, 2015, pp. 169–182.

### EXECUTION OF ORDERS (JUDGES 6:25–35)

After commissioning Gideon, Yahweh commands him to eliminate worship of the gods Baal and Asherah. To accomplish this, Gideon is instructed to destroy an altar erected for Baal, cut down an Asherah pole, build an altar to Yahweh, and offer a seven-year-old bull on it. In the middle of the night, Gideon and ten of his servants complete these tasks. They use a bull to tear down the Baal altar, an irony given Baal's association with bull imagery. To destroy the Asherah pole, they burn it as firewood for the offering to Yahweh. This desecrates the pole while also repurposing the wood for a valid offering to Yahweh. This shows the dynamic aspects of this item; even an illegitimate cultic object can be reimagined and reused for proper Yahwistic worship. The offering of a seven-year-old bull on the new altar shows the return to proper Yahwistic worship, and the seven years coincides with the seven years of oppression by the Midianites and the Amalekites.

After this important event to restore proper cultic activities, the focus shifts back to the impending confrontation with the invading groups. The groups have crossed the Jordan, have encamped in the Jezreel Valley, and are readying themselves for battle. The specifics of where the groups are in relation to the hill country heighten the importance of the land within this narrative, and there is a divine response to these advances. Yahweh fills Gideon with a divine spirit that causes Gideon to sound a shofar to rally his troops. This military action is the divine deliverance promised at the wine press. Nonetheless, even though the divine spirit is within him, Gideon wavers again and seeks to communicate with Yahweh once more. He still is not fully confident in the success of his battle. Interestingly, he chooses another agrarian space, a threshing floor, as the location for additional divine confirmation.

### DIVINATION RITUAL ON THE THRESHING FLOOR (JUDGES 6:36–40)

At the end of Judges 6, Gideon goes to a threshing floor, the location where crops are threshed or winnowed to collect grain. In addition to this agrarian function, threshing floors are also associated with divine presence, control, and blessings, a topic I have written on elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> In Judges 6, Gideon does not thresh at the threshing floor because he strategically uses the wine press

<sup>14</sup>For an overview of these spaces, see Waters 2015: 1–14.

to keep the crops away from the invaders. Instead, Gideon goes to the threshing floor to communicate with Yahweh, and he uses the space, a fleece, and dew as his supplies.

Gideon goes to the threshing floor to perform a divination ritual to receive another sign that his battle will be successful. He waits until nighttime, the optimal time for dewfall, and places an animal fleece on the threshing floor. He asks Yahweh for dew to be formed on the fleece but not on the dry ground of the threshing floor. In essence, Gideon asks Yahweh to make a natural occurrence as a way to discern the divine will. If overnight dew forms only on the fleece but not the threshing floor, then that will serve as confirmation of the success of his battle. The following day Gideon inspects the fleece and finds it soaked with dew (Judg 6:38b). This is the divine confirmation he sought, yet again he makes another request. He asks for the sign to be reversed, with the dew forming only on the ground and none on the fleece, and Yahweh complies (Judges 6:40). Since fleece is absorbent, the lack of dew on it is exceptional. Here, Yahweh has manipulated the dew to behave in an unnatural way as a means to convey to Gideon that his battle will be successful.

Gideon's request is for a display of divine control over the natural environment, and the biblical author affirms that Yahweh governs everything and can use the Earth as needed. Yahweh does not only verbally deliver instructions but can communicate divine intention via the environment. This is an instance of components of the Earth (weather phenomenon, animal fleece, threshing floor) being used in an alternative way for a greater purpose. It illustrates aspects of Principle 4 regarding the larger purpose that all things can serve. In this narrative, Gideon is aware that Yahweh can and will use agricultural and natural components of the Earth in a dynamic way to communicate divine intention.

## CONCLUSION

Comparing the two scenes on agrarian spaces provides a few key insights into how communication works in the call of Gideon. On the wine press, the primary agent is Yahweh. It is his angel who appears and initiates the human-divine exchange. Furthermore, though Gideon chooses the kid, bread, and broth, it is the angel who tells him what to do in order to provide the sign he seeks. The angel is also responsible for the appearance of fire and is closely situated in relation to the natural environment. Gideon's introduction highlights his agricultural roots that permeate the rest of his call narrative. On the

threshing floor, the ritual that is performed highlights human agency at first. Gideon selects the threshing floor, the fleece, and even instructs Yahweh on how the ritual is to happen in order to reveal his intention. This is a reversal of the first scenario where the angel instructs Gideon on the ritual, now Gideon directs Yahweh on how this second ritual is to be performed to determine its effectiveness. In both cases, whether by divine or human agency, agricultural spaces, food, and natural elements are effective in serving as vehicles for communication in these ritual activities.

There is a beautiful metaphor and plan at work in Judges 6 that highlights reciprocity. At the outset, Yahweh causes the land and agriculture to suffer on account of human acts of disobedience, yet in the call of Gideon, these same elements provide confirmation of divine deliverance to humanity. The Earth is both affected by and effective for humans and the divine. The author skillfully uses the environment and agriculture as tangible communicative elements. Though Judges 6 appears to be anthropocentric and theocentric, it showcases the Earth as the linchpin necessary for the outcomes of the narrative. By reading Judges 6 with ecological and agrarian lenses, we obtain a thought-provoking interpretation that elucidates the author's mindset of the interconnectedness between the environment, humanity, and the divine.

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