

## Week 4 - Ehud: God's Left-handed Deliverer - Judges 3:12-30

### Scripture Reading: Isaiah 55:6-9

#### Introduction

After the rather stark and sober presentation of the Othniel cycle that included minimal detail while filling in the blanks of the pattern that governs the major judge cycles, we come to the account of our second judge, Ehud

And, as you saw when you read through the account in preparation for today, there is detail aplenty in this account

And some of the details are enough to make one blush

A few weeks ago, as we were beginning our study of Judges, I had someone ask me who my favorite judge is

I said I was fond of Ehud simply for the humor of the account

Maybe that puts my sense of humor on par with that of a middle-school boy; I don't know - or even care all that much

Because the original readers, the people in the author's day, would have certainly seen the humor in the account

Just like we saw last week how the name Cushan-Rishathaim from Aram-Naharaim or "Cushan - double wicked from two-rivers" was likely a derogatory nickname given by an oppressed people, the Ehud account is intended to mock Eglon, the king of Moab

Clearly, the author isn't interested in sharing only the historical events in this case, as he sketches what one commentator referred to as a "literary cartoon that pokes fun at the Moabites and brings glory to God."

The Israelites of the author's day would not have missed the fact that Eglon means "little calf" and rhymes with the Hebrew word meaning "round or rotund."

They would have delighted in the author's telling of the account that pictures Eglon as a comic figure - an immense dope who meets a tragic end - just like an unwitting, fatted calf going to the slaughter

We'll look at more of the details as we go along, but the point is: no Israelite hearer of the account would have missed the humor implicit in the details that modern readers often find to be more than a bit unseemly

And, as I have pointed out before, we need to keep from being distracted by the details we find in the accounts before us to see what God is doing in each of them

Because God is at work in each of the judge cycles - including this one

Still, this is a passage that has given many people difficulty as they struggled with its coarseness and scatological humor

And it does contain elements that challenge us to consider what it says about God and his part in the account

If you are taking notes, you'll note that my focus this morning is on God, and after we look at the start of a new cycle according to the pattern laid out in chapter 2, the sermon will be all about God and his deliverance

So, let's dig in and see what it reveals about how God works in the lives of his people

After Othniel delivered Israel from the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim, the land had rest for a generation, and then we read in verse 12 of chapter 3 [**Judges 3:12**] -

*The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.*

And so begins another cycle in Israel's downward spiral

## I. The cycle begins anew

In those three verses, we see the first two steps of a judge cycle: Israel sins against God, and God sends punishment

And, whereas God had used a distant oppressor in the Othniel cycle, this time he uses the Moabites, who were relatives of the Israelites as were Eglon's cohorts, the Ammonites and the Amalekites

The Moabites were descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot

We read about how this came to be in Genesis 19

Look with me at **Genesis 19:30-38** where we find the sordid details:

*Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose.*

*The next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day.*

Moab, the father of the Moabites, was the offspring of Lot and his eldest daughter, and likewise, Ben-ammi, the father of the Ammonites, was the offspring of Lot and his younger daughter

Then, in **Genesis 36:12**, we read that Amalek, the father of the Amalekites, was a grandson of Jacob's twin brother, Esau

God had earlier forbidden Israel from encroaching on the territory that he had given to Lot's descendants - you can read about that in Deuteronomy 2

But now God strengthens Eglon and brings the Moabites into the land allotted to the Israelites because Israel had committed apostasy against God with their evil actions

For his part, Eglon seems to be unaware that God is using him, and he appears to operate independently as he forges his alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites and marches against Israel, and defeats them

Then Eglon set up his palace in "the city of palms," which is Jericho on the Israelite side of the Jordan River

This would only be natural because of Jericho's favorable location at an oasis in the Jordan Valley and because it had long been a major Canaanite city until Joshua conquered it

Eglon must not have heard about the curse that Joshua put on Jericho after he had defeated it in **Joshua 6:26**

Either that, or he didn't take the curse seriously

But, in any event, fat and stupid Eglon had defeated Israel, taken Jericho as his basis of operations, and enslaved Israel - all by God's empowerment

In their Canaanized state, Israel has been reduced to less than the Moabites the author portrays so mockingly

This, too, would not have been missed by the original audience

And Israel served Eglon the king of Moab for 18 years before we read in verse 15 [**Judges 3:15a**]

*Then the people cried out to the Lord*

Remember, this is a cry of pain, a wail of distress, and not a cry of repentance

Israel is simply in pain and crying out to have the pain relieved

And, according to our pattern, when God's people cried out in pain, God graciously responded and provided deliverance

## **II. God's deliverance**

The plea for divine aid doesn't go unanswered even though the people don't repent of their apostasy but only complain about the pain it has caused them

Look at the second part of verse 15 [Judges 3:15b]:

*The Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.*

### **A. God's agent**

In that verse, we see God's agent of delivery identified by his name and lineage

Ehud was a Benjaminite which is ironic since "Benjamin" means "son of the right hand," that is to say, "right-handed," and Ehud, we are told, is a southpaw, a lefty

Scholars disagree on precisely what the author means when he calls Ehud a "left-handed man."

The verbiage he uses is that Ehud was "shut up or bound" in his right hand

And some scholars believe that suggests that Ehud may have had some sort of deformity of his right hand or arm or was otherwise handicapped, making him dominant in his left hand

But that theory is excluded when we look at **Judges 20:16** and see an entire contingent of Benjaminite soldiers who are described in the exact same way but are said to be able to: *sling a stone at a hair and not miss*

Being proficient with an ancient sling requires great skill and the efficient use of two hands

Slings were serious weapons of war in those days, and an experienced slinger was capable of launching a stone at somewhere in the vicinity of 200 mph with an effective range well over 100 yards

But there is simply no effective way to load a projectile into the pocket of a sling and then launch it with one hand

What seems to me to be the best understanding of the text is the one followed by the men who translated the Old Testament into Greek that Ehud and the other Benjaminite soldiers from Judges 20:16 were trained to be ambidextrous

The adjective meaning "shut up or bound" would make sense if they worked to be proficient with their left hand by binding up their right hand, forcing themselves to use their left

And it makes sense to train a group to have such dexterity because they would have a decided advantage over right-handed adversaries who were trained to fight sword against shield

Either way, we see Ehud's left-handedness play a crucial role in the account, and the way the narrative unfolds makes it even more doubtful that he would be obviously disfigured or disadvantaged on his right side

And we will also see that Ehud is an exceptionally clever and resourceful man as he's revealed to be opportunistic and a master of deceit

Let's next look at the means God uses to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Moabites

### **B. God's means**

First, in the last sentence of verse 15, we see that the people choose Ehud to carry their tribute to Eglon

The author doesn't make it clear whether this tribute is a stipulated amount that Eglon requires or whether it was a gift voluntarily offered to him as their superior to keep the peace and earn his good graces

I would suspect it would most likely be a forced tribute, but in either case, Ehud is selected to head up the delegation that is tasked with taking it to Eglon in Jericho, making him raised up by God and chosen by his people

There is no reason given for this appointment by his countrymen, but we see that when he realizes he is being sent, Ehud anticipates that he might have an opportunity to assassinate the enemy king

And in verse 16 [**Judges 3:16**], we see Ehud fashion a short, double-edged sword that is said to have been a cubit long. The Hebrew word translated as “cubit” in our text is actually “*gomed*,” a word that is used only here in the Old Testament, and it is not the usual Hebrew word used for a cubit which is “*amah*.”

That has led some scholars to speculate that the sword Ehud made was some fraction of a cubit, meaning that it may have been something less than the 18 inches of a cubit.

Regardless of its length, we know that the sword was able to be concealed along Ehud’s thigh in such a way that he was able to carry it easily and unobtrusively.

We are also told it was double-edged, meaning that Ehud designed it to be a stabbing instrument rather than a hacking instrument.

And, based on the details we will see in just a little while, Ehud likely fashioned it without the addition of a hilt meant to protect the hand of the user.

Based on the description, I suspect the sword may have looked something like the image on the screen.

But, whatever the sword actually looked like, Ehud obviously did well as he fashioned it to slice its way into Eglon’s belly very effectively, as we will see.

And he bound it to his right thigh, the side that would be natural for a left-handed draw and the side that would be unlikely to be searched by Eglon’s guards since people were predominantly right-handed then as they are now.

Then he proceeded to deliver the tribute as arranged and turned back toward home with the rest of the entourage.

But as we see in verse 19, when they reached what is referred to as “the idols” near Gilgal, Ehud returned to visit Eglon while sending everyone else on.

What precisely the author means when he mentions the “idols” is unclear.

Gilgal was the place where the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan to go into the Promised Land and where God commanded them to take 12 stones from the Jordan and set up a marker of remembrance [**Joshua 4:20**].

And the place is called Gilgal because it sounds like the Hebrew word for “to roll,” and the Lord told Israel that “today, I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” [**Joshua 5:9**].

Therefore, some speculate that the memorial pile of stones is what our author was referring to.

However, everywhere else, the same Hebrew word is used, it always denotes sculpted pagan cult images, and it seems unlikely that the author would have used the term “idols” for the sacred commemorative memorial.

So it seems more likely that the Moabites had set up their own cult images at the same location.

And it appears that whatever the “idols” were, they acted as a boundary marker designating the extent of the territory claimed by Eglon because once Ehud had completed his mission and fled past these same objects, he was safe.

But we don’t want to get ahead of ourselves because this is where the story gets good.

Ehud turned back and was admitted once again into Eglon’s presence, and he told Eglon in the last part of verse 19 [**Judges 3:19b**] that he had a “secret” message for him.

Eglon had no way of knowing, as we, the readers, do, that the message was the sword strapped to Ehud’s right thigh, and he accepted what Ehud said in the most obvious way, but he would soon get the point of the “message.”

Hearing that Ehud had a secret message intrigued Eglon, so he called for silence from his attendants so he could better hear the message, and I suspect he did so in a harsh tone because they took the opportunity to leave his presence.

And once Ehud had Eglon alone, he repeated his announcement of a message, but this time he made it even more irresistible by adding that the secret message was a *divine* message.

At which point, Eglon gullibly rose from his seat in expectation of hearing an oracle from God, and Ehud, seeing his opportunity, drew his sword and thrust it into the ample target of Ehud's belly

And we are told that he stabbed Eglon with such force that the handle was also submerged in the fat of the king's abdomen so that Ehud didn't draw it back out to take it with him

Then, just when the reader thinks the account can't get more graphic, the author includes the detail that when Eglon fell down and died, his bowels relaxed and discharged their contents

That seems to be the best interpretation for the obscure Hebrew word used based on the rest of the account, but you will note that it has been interpreted differently in some English Bible versions

But, as we will see, the Eglon's embarrassing elimination will prove to be a most fortunate occurrence because, as we will see, it aids in Ehud's successful retreat

Because Ehud calmly left the king's upper chamber, locked the door behind him, and walked out of the palace

Apparently, the king's chamber had some sort of provision for the king's toileting needs - however, we can't be sure whether it was a chamber pot or some architectural feature that was built in

But Eglon's attendants weren't surprised to find the chamber door locked when they returned and when they got a whiff of the atmosphere behind the doors, they made the natural assumption that the king was using the facilities

So, desiring to give him his privacy, they waited - they waited a long time - they delayed to the point of embarrassment

And when Eglon still had not come to unlock the door and allow them back inside, they procured a key and opened the door to find their king dead on the floor

Meanwhile, while the assassinated king's attendants lingered with indecision outside the locked door, Ehud made his escape past the idols at Gilgal and arrived at a place called Seirah

The details that follow in verses 27-29 seem almost anti-climactic after all the drama and intrigue

But we see Ehud, now a national hero, sound a trumpet to call the people of Israel to arms, and he led the people into battle against the demoralized and likely disorganized Moabite army

They seized the fords of the Jordan, preventing the Moabites from having an escape route, and killed about 10,000 of them - probably a round number indicating that Israel enjoyed a complete victory over them - not a man escaped

As former president Trump might say, "God delivered hugely"

### **C. God's gift**

And in the closing verse of the account [**Judges 3:30**] we read of God's gift to Israel

*So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.*

Again, this indicates rest from war and trouble from without, and the eighty years is likely a round number meant to indicate that Israel had rest for two generations

God's defeat of Moab under Ehud's leadership gave Israel peace for nearly a century afterward and gave the nation an opportunity to solidify its hold on the land and to finally turn fully to proper worship of God through obedience to him

But, once again, their rest was temporary; as we read in **Judges 4:1**, when Ehud eventually died, the people of Israel returned to their apostasy and did again what was evil in the sight of the Lord continuing their downward spiral

### **Conclusion**

What are we to take away from this account?

I would hope that some aspects of it have raised some serious questions in your minds

From a purely human perspective, the Ehud narrative tells of an ambitious, clever, ambidextrous assassin whose heroic and daring actions served to remove an oppressive force from Israel

But we can't help but wonder whether Ehud is truly a hero or a villain and question whether God approved his tactics  
On the one hand, God detests lying - is deception allowed if the cause is right?

Also, we know that God prohibits murder - does this account indicate that God endorses assassination when the official is evil?

These are serious questions that have real-world implications for us

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with whether or not it was right to assassinate Adolph Hitler and was executed for conspiring to do just that after having concluded that there are degrees of evil and determining that God approves of committing a lesser evil to prevent or end a greater evil

Unfortunately, the account of Ehud serves to raise these kinds of questions without giving a definitive answer

One thing that is quite telling, though, is the author's silence regarding God's role in the assassination of Eglon

In Othniel's case, we are told quite clearly that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Othniel when he went to war

And we are told that Ehud fashioned his sword and crafted his plan, but we aren't told of any empowerment by God in those endeavors once God had raised him up as Israel's deliverer

In fact, there isn't any indication at all of spiritual sensitivity or sense of divine calling on the part of Ehud until verse 28 when he rallies the troops saying [**Judges 3:28**]

*"Follow after me, the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand."*

And the author of Judges seems not at all concerned with the morality of the whole affair

He simply recites the facts and describes what happened from his point of view - albeit, I believe, with the intent of highlighting the buffoonery of the Moabites for political effect

And in the telling, we are reminded that the judges were not exemplary people and the tools available for God's use are often relatively crude

Still, the point of the account isn't "Why does God use someone like Ehud?" but "Look at how God cares for his people and works on their behalf"

And make no mistake; the real "hero" of the account is God

Ehud was only God's appointed agent, and if Israel is to be delivered from the oppression of the Moabites, the credit belongs to God alone

God sent the oppression when he strengthened Eglon and he raised up the deliverer to remove Eglon when Israel cried out in pain, and he delivered Moab into Israel's hand, thus revealing the ultimate King of history

And as we progress in our study, we will see God continue to work out his plan using increasingly imperfect people

And that's a reason for us to rejoice because God is still on his throne and working out his plans and using us to further his ends despite our imperfections and weaknesses

Next week, we will skip over the minor judge, Shamgar, and take him up with the other minor judges altogether in a later study

I encourage you to read through Judges 4 and prepare to take our first look at the Deborah and Barak cycle

And I want to remind you once again to look past the intriguing details to see how God is working in the events related in the narrative

Let's Pray