

Last week we looked at the overarching pattern of apostasy and deliverance in the period of the Judges.

There are six cycles that are described in the book of Judges,
 The Mesopotamian oppression and the deliverance by Othniel.
 The Moabite oppression and the deliverance by Ehud.
 The Canaanite oppression and the deliverance by Barak
 The Midianite oppression and the deliverance by Gideon.
 The Ammonite oppression and the deliverance by Jephthah
 The Philistine oppression and the deliverance by Samson.

Each of these six cycles begins with the words,
 “the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD...
 [and] the LORD gave/sold them into the hands of X”

Scattered in between these six cycles are six other judges,
 Shamgar, Tola and Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon.

Two patterns of six judges.
 That makes 12 judges, and no tribe has more than one judge.

Some commentators have pointed out that Leviticus 26:18-28
 repeatedly declares that God will punish Israel for his sins seven times.

Why does Judges only have six?

There is a sense in which the book of Judges is pointing forwards.
 In those days there was no king in Israel.
 The cycles of the judges are incomplete—they are still awaiting the seventh judgment—
 a final judgment which will be worse than the first six put together.

And when you look in the book of Samuel – you see that seventh judgment,
 which will result in the exile of the ark of the covenant –
 when God himself will depart from Israel.

Will Samuel deliver Israel?

Sort of – but then Samuel gets old, and his sons do not walk in his ways...

Will Saul deliver Israel?

At first – but Saul is not a king after God’s own heart!

Only when God raises up David does God finally deliver Israel
 with a king who will lead us to do what is right in God’s eyes!

But that’s getting ahead of ourselves!

In Judges, the narrative is that Israel is looking more and more like the Canaanites
 (which comes to its most striking conclusion in the explicit desire of Israel to be
 “like the nations around us”)

But that is illustrated in the opening cycle of Othniel.

1. “Judah Shall Go First” – Othniel, the Spirit-Anointed Deliverer (v7-11)

⁷ And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. ⁸ Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. ⁹ But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. ¹¹ So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

The first cycle is also the simplest.

There are very few details given.

Simply that Israel sinned by going after the Baals and Asheroth,

and so God sold Israel into the hand of Cushan-Rishathaim who oppressed Israel.

Asherah was the mother of the gods.

Associated with fertility, her cult generally involved prostitution.

Cushan-Rishathaim is said to be the king of Mesopotamia –

which suggests that he may be an Assyrian king,

attempting to reassert Assyrian power in the region.

The name, Cushan-Rishathaim, means Cushan the doubly-wicked.

Many of the names in Judges may be more nicknames!

I suppose that it's possible that a king might like the nickname “the doubly-wicked” – but it's more likely that this is how the Israelites referred to him!

The simplicity of the account and the identity of the wording with 2:11-23 suggests that this is the paradigm for the book.

Unlike most of the Judges, Othniel has no blemish on his record.

Indeed, it is said of him that the Spirit of Yahweh was upon him— something said only of Gideon, Othniel and Samson.

But also notice who Othniel is.

He is the son of Kenaz—the nephew and son-in-law of Caleb— and he dwells in the land of Judah.

He is not an Israelite by birth – but a Kenizzite

(one of the nations to be dispossessed in Gen 15).

Caleb was so integrated into the tribe so as to be chosen as one of the 12 spies.

Now his nephew and son-in-law will become one of the twelve judges.

But while Othniel has the honor of being the first judge and the representative of Judah, the author of Judges also wants to remind you that he is a Kenizzite—a foreigner.

Because it is not his connection to Caleb, or his native prowess, that enables him to defeat Cushan the doubly wicked.

It is because Yahweh raises him up and fills him with his Spirit, and gave Cushan-Rishathaim into Othniel's hand.

In all of the other cycles we will get more details.

Here we learn simply that God gave Othniel the victory, and the land had peace for 40 yrs (a generation)

The basic point of this narrative (and indeed one of the basic points of Judges) is that when God's people abandon the LORD, they invoke his curse.

God is faithful to his covenant—both in blessing and in cursing.

But that faithfulness means that in the end, he will raise up a deliverer,

in spite of our faithlessness, and will dethrone the powers that oppress his church.

The Spirit of the LORD will come upon the deliverer, empowering him to defeat all his and our enemies.

And of course, we have a Spirit-anointed deliverer from the tribe of Judah!

We have Jesus!

And he gives us rest – not just for a generation – but he gives us eternal life!

2. A Left-Handed Son of My Right Hand – Ehud's "Secret Message" (v12-30)

The second cycle contains all of the same elements as the first.

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh.

The LORD brought Eglon of Moab against Israel and they served him 18 years.

Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD and the LORD raised up a deliverer (Ehud)

The LORD gave his enemies into his hand,

and the land had rest for 80 years.

These are the only two cycles that contain all five basic elements.

After this the cycles will start omitting one or two of these literary devices, signaling the degeneration of Israel.

As Israel degenerates, so does the literary structure of Judges!

¹² *And 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.* ¹³ *He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and*

defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. ¹⁴ And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

The Eglon/Ehud story is a satire on Moab (with a bit of fun at Ehud's expense as well!)

There is a certain irony in the choice of Moab as an oppressor.

God had told Israel to leave Moab alone.

Moab and Ammon were the incestuous sons of Lot by his daughters.

They are therefore close relations of Israel.

But Eglon, king of Moab,

was now God's chosen instrument to bring judgment against his rebellious people.

God strengthened him against Israel, and he gathered to himself the Ammonites (his cousins) and the Amalekites in order to attack Israel.

They crossed the Jordan River and took the City of Palms (near Jericho), establishing a fortress for himself on the west side of the River.

It is here at the City of Palms (near Jericho, the site of Israel's first victory)—that a Moabite establishes his throne for 18 years.

Now Eglon is not likely his given name.

It means in effect, "fat cow" and combined with the description of Eglon as a "very fat man" (a term usually used for the fattened calf), you definitely get the sense that the author of Judges is serving him up as a fattened calf going to the slaughter.

¹⁵ Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, and the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.

Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD.

It doesn't say that they repented—merely that they cried out—and the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.

Few descriptions are as packed with meaning and significance as this one!

He is a Benjaminite.

At the end of the book we will hear about the Benjaminite rebellion—

where Israel goes to war against Benjamin,

and only 600 men of the entire tribe survive the judgment.

In Judges 20:28 we discover that this rebellion occurred in the days of Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron.

Eleazar died shortly after the death of Joshua,

which means that Judges 19-21 must have taken place within 40-50 years of the death of Joshua.

If you do the math, that means that Othniel was the same generation as Phineas.
In other words, the events of Judges 19-21
took place during the judgeship of Othniel.

We should note that Judges is not necessarily giving us a sequential list.
3:12 does not say that the 18 years of Eglon's rule
began exactly at the end of Othniel's 40 years of rest
(so there may be some overlap in the chronology of Judges),
but the text strongly suggests
that Ehud is either one of the 600 survivors of Judges 19-21,
or else he is the son of one of those survivors.

And that is where the description in verse 15 is so important:

“The son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man.”

The son of Gera.

We will encounter another son of Gera—in 2 Samuel 16, 19.

Shimei the son of Gera, a Benjamite,

will mock David, calling down curses upon him.

We do not know when Judges was written,

so we cannot know whether this connection

was intended by the human author,

but plainly God did not include it by accident.

Ehud was a deliverer of Israel—and for that we should give thanks,

but unlike Othniel, he does not have the best of connections.

And it gets worse!

We do not have here the ordinary word for “left-handed.”

We have a phrase that means “restricted in his right hand.”

This is interesting for two reasons.

1) Benjamin means “son of my right hand.”

but this an unusual form of ‘Benjamin’—

which highlights the “right-handedness” of his name.

so that means that he is the son of my right hand par excellence

who happens to be restricted in his right hand!

2) but further, the only other place where this phrase is used

is in Judges 20, where it describes 700 Benjamite warriors

who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss—

all of whom happened to be “left handed”

(or restricted in their right hands)

Ehud is either one of these left-handed warriors,

or else he is descended from them.

Given the fact that these sons of the right hand had turned over to the left hand,

the reader is left with a certain doubt as to Ehud's own faithfulness.

And while the LORD certainly raised him up to deliver Israel,
nowhere is it said that the Spirit of the LORD was upon him.
The Spirit of the LORD was upon Othniel, the judge from Judah,
but not upon Ehud, the deliverer from Benjamin.

¹⁶ And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit^[a] in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes. ¹⁷ And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. ¹⁸ And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. ¹⁹ But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he commanded, "Silence." And all his attendants went out from his presence. ²⁰ And Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he arose from his seat.

But now this left-handed son of my right hand is chosen to bring tribute to Eglon.
Before he goes he made a special sword, 18 inches long, and fastened it to his right thigh
(perfect for a left hander to reach under his clothes).

After presenting the tribute to Eglon,
he left the City of Palms—but when he came to the idols at Gilgal, he alone turned back.

Wait... idols at Gilgal?!

Remember Gilgal?

This was the place where Israel had entered the Promised Land.

Two generations ago they had set up the 12 stones here
as a memorial to the great works of Yahweh,
and already they have erected idols to the gods of the Moabites.

But Ehud now returns to the City of Palms,

and says that he has a secret message for the king.

Perhaps the fact that Ehud came from these idols gave him credibility.

Perhaps the fact that he returned alone lured Eglon into a false security.

But either way, the fat, stupid cow says "Hush!"

ordering everyone out of the room so that he can hear this message.

Apparently fearing that someone will overhear this secret message,

Eglon takes Ehud into his cool roof chamber (in effect, the bathroom).

(Cities in this time period frequently had a man-made stream
running under the palace in order to carry sewage out of the city)

Then Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you."

And Eglon—that fat, stupid cow—stood up.

Well, when a very fat man stands up he has to bend over,

and when Eglon bent forward, Ehud struck.

(Read 21-22)

21 And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. 22 And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly; and the dung came out.

Eglon was so fat, the whole sword just disappeared into his belly,
and, as often happens when someone dies, he defecated.

Verse 23 says:

23 Then Ehud went out into the porch^[b] and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him and locked them.

The ESV footnote says that “the meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain.”

The word *hammisderonah* is not obviously related to any other Hebrew word –
except for the word found at the end of v22 – *happarsedonah* –
which is equally difficult to translate –
but through careful study has properly been translated “dung.”

The author of Judges is plainly juxtaposing these two unusual words
in order to help you make a connection between them!

If the dung came out of Eglon –
then what did Ehud come out of?!!

Ehud went out – or perhaps better – went *down* the hole in the middle of the floor...

After all, it says that he closed the doors and locked them.
Locks in those days were a bar that you close from the inside!
If you close the door and lock it – then you are trapped inside!

Besides, our author may be portraying the Moabites as dull-witted,
but it would stretch even their stupidity to suggest that they would let a foreigner
just walk out of an audience with their king alone and without question.
Most compelling is the connection of this unique Hebrew word
with various euphemisms for things scatological in other Semitic languages!

Ehud closed the door, locked it, and then went out the sewer!

He was a hero, but he smelled pretty funny when he finally got out!

24 When he had gone, the servants came, and when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, “Surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber.”

25 And they waited till they were embarrassed. But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them, and there lay their lord dead on the floor.

Meanwhile the servants of Eglon are wondering what is happening.

The door to the roof chamber is locked.

They waited as long as they could—until they were embarrassed

(literally, until they writhed—

after all, the king is hogging the bathroom... and they really had to go!)

Finally, they got the key (probably a stick that could be used to push the bar out of the lock) and opened the door—and there lay their lord dead on the floor.

²⁶ Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols and escaped to Seirah.

²⁷ When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. ²⁸ And he said to them, “Follow after me, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.” So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites and did not allow anyone to pass over. ²⁹ And they killed at that time about 10,000 of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; not a man escaped. ³⁰ So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

Due to the delay, Ehud escaped and came to the hill country of Ephraim,

and sounded the trumpet, calling Ephraim to “follow after me,

for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.”

They went down to the fords of the Jordan to prevent any further Moabites from crossing the river, and slaughtered every Moabite on the west side of the Jordan

—10,000 in all.

So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel,

and the land had rest for 80 years.

The point of the story is not to defend assassination as a means of defeating your enemies: the narrator makes no value judgment either way.

The point is first, that God himself is the one who gives victory over his enemies.

He has been gracious to an undeserving people.

But it’s also worth pointing out that Ehud is never called a judge,

nor does it say that he judged Israel for any length of time.

Ehud was raised up by the LORD to deliver Israel –

and so we should honor him for that!

Likewise, Ehud attributes the victory to the LORD,

“Follow after me, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.”

As we’ll see, as we go through the book, the voices get more and more forgetful of the LORD.

In Gideon’s day (7:20), they will cry out,

“A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!”

But Gideon's son, Abimelech, will say that it was Gideon
 "who fought for you and risked his life
 and delivered you from the hand of Midian." (9:17)
The LORD is entirely absent from Abimelech's retelling of the story.

So Ehud should be seen as a faithful deliverer!

But, especially in contrast with the squeaky clean Othniel,
 Ehud comes off smelling pretty bad.
 Do you want a judge from Judah?
 Or do you want one of those morally-questionable Benjamites?

 Do you want a ruler who has the Spirit of the LORD?
 Or do you want a ruler who stabs his enemies when they're defenseless?
(Is it going too far to see a preview of Saul hurling a spear at a defenseless David?)

But if Ehud smells funny (as he escapes through the sewer),
 Shamgar is a strange character!

3. Shamgar the Son of Anath – One Gnarly Dude (v31)

³¹ After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.

Shamgar comes after the time of Ehud,
 and before the time of Deborah and Barak (since he appears in 5:6)
Shamgar ben-Anath is an enigmatic figure.
 Shamgar is not a Semitic name.
 He may be a Canaanite who had converted to Yahweh.
 Or he may be an Egyptian general who delivered Israel "by accident"
 while fighting the enemies of Egypt.
At any rate "Anath" was a Canaanite goddess.
She was a warrior goddess who could hold her own against the gods.
To be called the son of Anath is to say "he's one gnarly dude!"

In other words, to put it simply—
 all is not well with Israel!

But yet Shamgar indeed delivers Israel by killing 600 Philistines with an oxgoad.
 The weapons in the book of Judges are all over the map.
(Samson, the last judge, will slaughter the Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey).

 An oxgoad is a long eight-foot pole with a sharp point at one end for prodding an ox,
 and a six-inch paddle on the other end
 for scraping off the plow when it got clogged with mud.

It's a fairly unwieldy weapon,
but if you are a big gnarly dude, like Shamgar,
it could be effective!

There is probably a foreshadowing of Deborah, the warrior prophetess,
and Jael, the woman who kills Sisera.

Women and foreigners (named after pagan goddesses no less!)
are delivering Israel from their enemies.

God will deliver his people.

He may use remarkable means to do it!

But he will be faithful to his promises—even when we are faithless.

Dale Ralph Davis comments that

“If Yahweh be the maker of heaven and earth, he has all resources in his hand,
then can he not deliver his people not only by many or by few (1 Sam 14:6)
but also by disciples or by pagans?

If Yahweh raises up Shamgar as a savior for Israel,

surely Cyrus should come as no surprise (Isaiah 45:1-7).

As the former blind man exclaimed: ‘Now that is remarkable!

You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes!’ (Davis, 67)