

ETHICALLY CULTURED INTERPRETATIONS:  
THE CASE OF EGLON'S MURDER (JUDGES 3)

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I. *Reading Ehud*

Until recently the story of Ehud was read as a yet another account of God motivating his elect to complete his will.<sup>1</sup> The Greek versions ("LXX" for convenience) largely adopt the Hebrew story line with minor expansions, as when at 3:30, they explicitly cite Ehud as a Judge when the Hebrew does not. The Targum likewise does not expand much on the story. Facing the many *hapax legomena* in the text, both the LXX and the Targum naturally translate interpretively, without serious deflection of contents. In his paraphrase of Jewish Scripture, however, Josephus turns Ehud into a model for Jewish heroic opposition to tyranny.<sup>2</sup> He is a trusted courtier who had real cause to turn against Eglon and when he resolutely strikes at his heart (never at his belly!), the confrontation lacks any touches that might cheapen Ehud's act.<sup>3</sup> In Rabbinic lore Ehud is deemed a "great scholar" (Midrash *Genesis Rabbah*, 99.3), but hardly any more attention is paid to him. Still, there was only sympathy for the role circumstances forced on Ehud so that when around the 8th century an "Antiochus Scroll" was composed for Hanukkah celebrations, Ehud's deed was duplicated by

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<sup>1</sup> A good review of opinions on Ehud over the centuries is in D. M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Blackwell, 2005), pp. 38–49.

<sup>2</sup> "[Ehud] became familiar with Eglon, and that by means of presents, with which he obtained his favor, and insinuated himself into his good opinion; whereby he was also beloved of those that were about the king. Now, when on a time he was bringing presents to the king... Ehud smote him to the heart, and leaving his dagger in his body, he went out and shut the door after him... On this account Ehud was dignified with the government over all the multitude, and... was a man worthy of commendation" (Josephus, *JAnt*, V/4).

<sup>3</sup> An excellent review of Josephus's portrayal is in L. H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJ Supplement 58; Leiden, 1998), pp. 137–152.

the Hasmonean Johanan.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the rabbis gave Eglon more visibility. A tool of God for punishing recalcitrant Israel, Eglon is said to father Ruth and judged as one of David's ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

Christian fathers generally read the story mystically (especially in the use of right and left hand) or typologically (Christ conquering evil). For most Christian readers since the Renaissance, however, the issue was not how Ehud accomplished his feat, but the morality of assassinating an elect of God. And while such reticence could be swept aside during revolutionary times,<sup>6</sup> any qualm about the deceit with which Ehud carried his mission was attributed to "oriental" zealotry.<sup>7</sup>

The tendency to blame the times for Ehud's ungallant behavior remained constant even when modern biblical scholarship has raised issues about the origins and reliability of the received text. The consensus was that folk material from the Gilgal region (possibly based on some historical kernel) had been reshaped by the Deuteronomist to promote a theology of divine control and of holy wars.<sup>8</sup> Argued was the historicity of Moabite control of Israel at such an early period of their nationhood when there is precious little archaeological concordance. Armed with better knowledge of the languages (grammar

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<sup>4</sup> Johanan, son of Mattathias, hid a sword "two spans long and 1 span wide" under his cloak. With it, he assassinated Nicanor, a governor King Antiochus had sent to force the Jews into impure worship of false gods, after tricking him into dismissing his staff. For a discussion on the "historical background" for this unhistorical narrative, see A. Kasher, "The Historical Background of 'Megillath Antiochus'", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 48 (1981), pp. 207–230.

<sup>5</sup> "R. Jose b. Huna said: Ruth was the daughter of Eglon, the grandson of Balak, king of Moab" (TSotah 47a; TSanhedrin 105b); "R. Jose son of R. Hanina said: Ruth was the daughter of the son of Eglon who was the son of the son of Balak the King of Moab" (THorayot 10b).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Sexby (1616–1658), in advocating the assassination of Cromwell (admittedly not a king), writes, "...and here the Scripture shows us what the Lord thought a fit message to send a tyrant from himself: a dagger of a cubit in his belly. And every worthy man that desires to be an Ehud, a deliverer of his country, will strive to be the messenger" (*Killing Noe Murder*, 1657; cited from <[http://www.arts.yorku.ca/politics/comminel/courses/3025pdf/Killing\\_No\\_e\\_Murder.pdf](http://www.arts.yorku.ca/politics/comminel/courses/3025pdf/Killing_No_e_Murder.pdf)>, 14).

<sup>7</sup> Voltaire is scathing, "...these malignant devotees have incessantly before their eyes the example of Ehud, who assassinated the king Eglon; of Judith, who cut off the head of Holofernes while in bed with him; of Samuel, hewing in pieces King Agag; of Jehoiada the priest, who murdered his queen at the horse-gate. They do not perceive that these instances, which are respectable in antiquity, are in the present day abominable. They derive their fury from religion, decidedly as religion condemns it" (*A Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764, V/I/ii "Fanaticism"; see <[http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/HTML.php?recordID=0060.05#hd\\_lf060-05\\_head\\_007](http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/HTML.php?recordID=0060.05#hd_lf060-05_head_007)>).

<sup>8</sup> G. F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1895), pp. 89–91.

as well as lexicography) of the Ancient Near East, modern commentators tackled the story's many obscure words; but it cannot be said that they improved markedly on the suggestions of medieval Jewish commentators.

In recent days the most striking differences from the traditional interpretations of the story have been in deciding the genre to which the story belongs, and new suggestions begin to crop up mostly in the past half-century, when literary rather than historical evaluations of the Ehud story begin to multiply. Why and how is the focus of a paper I gladly dedicate to Bustenay Oded, a colleague since our days in Jerusalem's *Institute for Advanced Studies* and a fellow Mizrahi. But as judgments on such matters must be based on a faithful attachment to a narrative thread, I give as background an exposition of what transpired by lightly annotating a translation that is more fully justified in an Anchor Bible *Judges* commentary now in progress.

## II. *The account*

### 1. *The adversaries*

3<sup>1b</sup>When Othniel, son of Kenaz, died, <sup>12</sup>the people of Israel resumed offending the Lord. The LORD emboldened Eglon, king of Moab, against Israel because its people did what was offensive to the LORD. <sup>13</sup>He brought Ammon and Amalek to his side, intent to defeat Israel; together, they occupied the City of Palms. <sup>14</sup>For eighteen years, the people of Israel served Eglon, king of Moab. <sup>15</sup>When the people of Israel pleaded with the LORD, the LORD did provide them a rescuer: Ehud son of Gera, of Benjamin, a man with a hindered right arm. Through him, the people of Israel sent tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

The narrative opens on a theme familiar in Judges: Israel loses its attachment to God, who selects Moab as an instrument for teaching it a lesson. Its king's name, Eglon, "calf", is totemic; but it is no more (or less) portentous than many other names given to proper Hebrews.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eglah, one of David's wives (2 Sam 3:5), holds a female equivalent of the name; but there are many more such formations, some of them decidedly unflattering, such as Achbor (mouse), Huldah (weasel) and Shaphan (badger); see J. J. Stamm, "Hebräische Frauennamen", in *Hebräische Wortforschung. Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Walter Baumgartner* (VT Supplement 16; Leiden, 1967), pp. 329–330, with bibliography. Many of the kings of Kish in the Sumerian King List have animal

Eglon, we shall soon learn, is eager to listen to the God of Israel who had commissioned him; but like many leaders in Israel's history, he felt the need to assemble allies, among them Amalek, a tribe that God had fated for extermination (Ex 17:14). This lack of trust, perhaps no less than the tears Israel sheds under his yoke, may have lost Eglon God's support.<sup>10</sup>

Ehud enters the stage, previously unannounced. While he never gets to be "endowed with zeal for the LORD", (וְהָיָה עָלָיו רוּחַ-יְהוָה), or the like) as is said of some other leaders, he is a "rescuer" (מוֹשִׁיעַ). There are hints that he is a leader in Israel, since he is trusted to deliver its tribute and later (3:27) he needed only to blow his shofar for Israel, presumably in wait for a signal, to rally around him. Above all, he was אֶטֶר יָד-יְמִינוֹ. Undoubtedly his Benjamin (בֶּן-הַיְמִינִי) tribal affiliation permitted the writer to pun on this particular characteristic since they both allude to the word for "right", יָמִין; but rather than making him ambidextrous (LXX), shrivel-armed (Targum), left-handed (most modern translations), or in any other way handicapped, this notice highlights his special training. Judg 20:16 relates that of the 26,000 Benjaminites that mustered for its fight against Israel, 700 were marked as אֶטֶר יָד-יְמִינוֹ such that each "could sling a stone at a hair and not miss". So, Ehud had skills that will serve him well for the task at hand.<sup>11</sup> It is debatable whether or not the vocabulary attached to his mission (לְהַקְרִיב אֶת הַמִּנְחָה) has cultic implications.

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names such as Kalibum ("dog"), Kalumum ("lamb"), Zuqaqip ("scorpion"), and Arwium ("lion"), cited from <<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.1.1#>>. Examples from the Mari archives include Ayyalum, "deer", a Benjaminitic leader, and Šelebum, "fox", a prophet.

<sup>10</sup> The theme is picked up from the opening chapter of Judges. When God assigns Judah first responsibility in capturing the Promised Land, Judah promptly invites Simeon to share the burden.

<sup>11</sup> See the good pages on this topic in B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (New York, 1988), pp. 40–42, who nonetheless keeps referring to the left-handedness of Ehud. J. A. Soggin (*Le livre des Juges* [Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament, 5b; Geneva, 1987], p. 49) thinks Ehud's condition must have made him less threatening. Most recent translations (TNK among them) have him "left-handed", leading to exceedingly slippery observations on Ehud's (ab)normalcy and deviance: "Ehud is a left-handed man in a symbolic world in which the 'normal' preferred side is the right..." (Susan Niditch, "The Challenge of Israelite Epic", in J. M. Foley [ed.], *A Companion to Ancient Epic* [Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World; Oxford, 2005], p. 282). An almost parodic misuse of this lore is in G. P. Miller, "Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible: Judges 3:12–30 and 19–21", *JNES* 55 (1996), pp. 113–117. Out of Ehud's "defect", he constructs an incredible setting for scatology and sexual deviance; see below. Unfortunately, he is not alone to do so; for recent examples, albeit with lesser reliance on casual misreading of the text, see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical*

## 2. *The Confrontation*

3<sup>16</sup>Ehud made for himself a two-edged dagger, a forearm in length, girding it on his right thigh under his tunic. <sup>17</sup>Then he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. (Eglon himself was quite an imposing man.) <sup>18</sup>Once he completed presenting the tribute, he dismissed the people carrying it. <sup>19</sup>Having just come back from the hewn images near Gilgal, he said, "I have a secret message for you, O King". Eglon said, "Hush!" All those serving him left his presence. <sup>20</sup>As Ehud was approaching him, he was sitting on the raised chamber of the reception hall that was his, all by himself. So as Ehud said, "I have a divine message for you", he rose from his throne.

The narrative begins to hiccup here, with asides bracketing needed tidbits, arriving to the murder through stagger. The tribute Ehud is to deliver Eglon (15, 17) sandwiches details about the dagger (חֶרֶב, generic in Hebrew for a cutting tool, from knife to sword, excluding razors, מוֹרָא and תַּעַר). It has two-edges, hence perfect for piercing then ripping, with a proverbial capacity to injure (Ps 149:6; Prov 5:4). The blade is a גַּמָּד long, a measurement that escapes exact calibration but short enough not to injure the thigh on which it rested while long enough to penetrate deeply.<sup>12</sup> The next comment is about Eglon: He is איש בָּרִיא מְאֹד of 3:17, not "exceedingly obese", as some would have it, but imposing (Josephus has him as handsome) – a notice that explains why he would lack guards, a crucial element in the unfolding plot.<sup>13</sup>

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*Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), pp. 38–41, and M. Z. Brettler, "Never the Twain Shall Meet? The Ehud Story as History and Literature", *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991), pp. 294–299. D. Jobling ("Right-Brained Story of Left-Handed Man: An Antiphon to Yairah Amit", in Cheryl Exum [ed.] *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Text in Literary Focus* [Semeia Studies; Atlanta, 1989], pp. 125–131) waxes exuberant on the theme of left-handedness, allegedly in response to Amit's restrained essay on Ehud (Y. Amit, "The Story of Ehud [Judges 3:12–30]: The Form and the Message", in C. Exum [ed.], *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Text in Literary Focus* [Semeia Studies; Atlanta, 1989], pp. 97–112).

<sup>12</sup> For the repertoire of Late Bronze daggers, see S. Shalev, *Swords and Daggers in Late Bronze Age Canaan* (Prähistorische Bronzefunde, 4/13; Stuttgart, 2004). I would fancy the dagger bought on the open market that was published long ago by S. E. Freeman ("A Copper dagger of the Middle Bronze Age in Baltimore", *BASOR* 90 [1943], pp. 28–30), even if it was centuries too early to have survived until Ehud's time and was made of copper rather than the bronze or iron dagger of Eglon's time. But it was 32 cm long, had a very fine grip, a 21 cm blade and no cross-piece to separate them.

<sup>13</sup> Human corpulence is normally conveyed by the root שָׁמַן, as in Deut 32:16, Jer 5:28, Neh 9:25, and Ez 34:16 (figurative). In fact, at 3:29 we read about the slaughter or every "stout and prominent man" (כָּל שָׁמֵן וְכָל אִישׁ הִיל) (כָּל שָׁמֵן וְכָל אִישׁ הִיל). The Hebrew בָּרִיא most

The context of their meeting is difficult to ascertain. Certainly Ehud is bringing to Eglon Israel's tribute; but the subject of the two clauses that follows is not easy to establish. It makes sense that Ehud would dismiss those transporting the gifts in order to isolate the king; but as Eglon must certainly be credited with dismissing his court when Ehud offered to share a word from God (v. 19), protocol suggests that with tribute in hand he likewise terminated the audience (v. 18). If so, then the two discharges of servants in fact are the same act, with the narrative sharpening focus on the isolation of the king, as required by the plot. Similarly, it is useful (albeit not crucial) to realize that the Ehud statements of 3:19 and 3:20 are the same. They use approximate phrasing, but different vocabulary, with the earlier דְּבַר-סֵתֶר, "a secret message", more precise than the דְּבַר-אֱלֹהִים of a verse later, for while אֱלֹהִים can mean "God, god, or gods", it can also help create a superlative, so the phrase could mean "the gravest message" or the like.<sup>14</sup>

Who is coming back from "the hewn images of Gilgal" is also subject to interpretation. The פְּסִילִים are monoliths hewn or carved from stones or metal (silver, Isa 30:22) rather than shaped from clay or wood; they could be dressed stones or represent figures, divine, human, or animal. We now know much about their function, but especially from Mari documents, we have also learned much about their production and layout.<sup>15</sup> Given the meaning of Gilgal—something round or in a

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often applies to animals (Gen 41:2, 1 Kgs 5:3) or to plants (Gen 41:5) that are nice and healthy, so also to a good cut of meat (Ez 34:3). Ps 73:4 bemoans the bodily fitness of wicked people and in Dan 1:15 young men who avoid the forbidden ration offered by kings nonetheless appear טוֹב וּבְרִיאָה בְּשָׂר, "nice with healthy flesh tone". While the Targum here has פְּטִים, "fleshy" (applied to animals), the LXX gives ἀστεῖος σφόδρα "very handsome", using the same noun that describes baby Moses, said to be "טוֹב", "beautiful", in Ex 2:2. Josephus simply omits any descriptions of Eglon.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase דְּבַר-אֱלֹהִים itself gives ambiguous meaning. In 1 Kgs 12:22 and 1 Chron 17:3, it does refer to divine messages; but in 1 Chron 26:32 it simply means "divine matters". 1 Sam 9:27 somewhat parallels our situation. Samuel draws Saul aside, isolating him from all, to let him hear God's דְּבַר, which turns out to be anointing him as king and proposing confirmation of his election rather than communicating to him a divine message. A good number of commentators have found irony and multiple meanings in the use of דְּבַר, because it can stand for word (hence message) or act (assassination or the like). Lenzi (*Secrecy and the Gods: Secret Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia and Biblical Israel* [SAAS 19; Helsinki, 2008], pp. 224–227) reviews the formulation in light of his study of hidden knowledge and the gods, concluding that "divine oracles were considered secret even as they were being revealed" (p. 227).

<sup>15</sup> See the dictionaries, under such words as מַצְבֵּה or "pillar". In older literature, there was a tendency to declare all such set stones as "cultic", if not also "phallic" (hence "Canaanite"), likely because of statements in Deut 6:21–22; but recent research has shown how ubiquitous they were in Hebraic lore, functioning as boundary mark-

circle – we may be dealing with an established cultic or ceremonial center (see Josh 4:20–23). Here we have alternatives: rather than a side trip he took *after* he delivered the tribute, Ehud may be returning from Gilgal, one leg of a trip that had him offer Israel's tribute to Eglon.<sup>16</sup> I opt, however, for bringing Eglon from Gilgal (בִּשְׁׁ could be a participle as well as a perfect), a fine place to solicit oracles; but having failed to receive any, he was eager to hear what Ehud was bringing.<sup>17</sup> That he wished to be alone is understandable, for Mari documents substantiate the desire of kings both to receive divine messages and to curb the dissemination of secrets.<sup>18</sup>

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ers (Gen 31:44–49), memorials (Gen 35:19–20), votive statements (2 Sam 18:18; see J. C. de Moor, "Standing Stones and Ancestor Worship", *UF* 27 [1995], pp. 1–20), or avatars (Judg 17:5). Recent studies include C. F. Graesser, "Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine", *The Biblical Archaeologist* 35 (1972), pp. 33–63; T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Coniectanea Biblica, OT Series 42; Stockholm, 1995); E. C. LaRocca-Pitts, "Of Wood and Stone": *The Significance of Israelite Cultic Items in the Bible and Its Early Interpreters* (HSM 61; Winona Lake, 2001); U. Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert", *BAR* 27 (2001), pp. 31–35; and almost any work that deals with Ashera, since they treat pillars as side issues. For the Mari material, see J.-M. Durand, *Le Culte d'Addu d'Alep et l'affaire d'Alahtum* (*Florilegium marianum* 7; Mémoires de NABU, 8; Paris, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Commentators have had difficulty explaining the moves Ehud took in this passage. For him to deliver tribute to Eglon then travel to and from Gilgal is just too awkward and flaccid recreation of events.

<sup>17</sup> The verbal form controlling Ehud's tribute, הִקְרִיב (3:17) normally conveys a cultic function. In Mari documents, kings frequently summoned vassals to meet them at specific shrines where they received tributes as well as renew allegiances. Perhaps Eglon and Ehud traveled together from the hewn images area?

<sup>18</sup> One of King Zimri-Lim's administrators writes, "When my lord was about to set out on a campaign, he charged me, 'You are living in the city of God; report to me whatever oracle that you hear occurring in God's temple'..." (ARM 26 196; see M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian perspectives* (SBL Symposium Series 13; Atlanta, 2001), pp. 26–27). Those same archives make it also clear that the gods of other lands could interfere (for the better they hoped) in political matters. Mesopotamian omen literature is full of warnings against state secrets (*pirištum*, *puzrum*) being traded and it was the practice of kings to force their officers into periodic oath-taking. Samsi-Addu writes his son in Mari (A. 2724 = LAPO 16:49), "Submit to an oath all available administrators: governors, majordomos – administrators at your personal service –, those grouped by sections, palace representatives, lieutenants, and all administrators that remain. Along with scribal officials, Mašiya, Ursamana, Nahiš-re'ušu, Tab-ummanišu, and Rišiya should administer the oath-taking. They themselves should afterwards take an oath". Diviners, who had access to the king's deepest secrets, received a libretto of oaths to prevent them from compromising confidentiality (ARM 26 1). Nonetheless, we have this sad lament of Zimri-Lim, as quoted by one of his officers, "Why is it that confidential information takes to the wind as soon as I tell all of you?" (LAPO 16:55, pp. 178–179).

Where was the king when he was left alone with Ehud? The issue has received much attention. What is certain is that he was in a chamber with a throne, for while **כִּסֵּא**, “chair” may occasionally have mundane meanings (2 Kgs 4:10), whether concretely or figuratively the term is always about a seat of rule when set in a palace or a temple. The term was never taken comically or scatologically, as in the English slang for a “toilet”. It is important to make this observation now, for what will soon ensue.

The king sat **לְבַדּוֹ**, “by himself”, in a **מְקַרְהָ** in which there was a **עֲלִיָּה**. The phrase **אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ**, “just his”, is applicable to either unit, the whole emphasizing his isolation. The versions do not help much because **מְקַרְהָ** occurs only here and below at 3:24: The LXX gives “he himself was sitting in his own upper summer chamber”, while the Targum has something similar, “in the upper room of his summer house”. Most translations (TNK and RSV) give “cool upper/roof chamber” (or the like), deriving **מְקַרְהָ** from a root **קָרַר** that in fact has more to do with flowing (as in water, Jer 3:20) than cooling. Realistically, upper rooms are no place for cooling off, except at night-time, and from the construction of ice-houses in Mesopotamia we know that avoiding direct sunlight is the first step to good insulation. So we are left to our own devices to recapture the setting for the audience.

**עֲלִיָּת הַמְּקַרְהָ** of 3:20 is obviously paralleled by **בְּחֹדֶר הַמְּקַרְהָ** of 3:24. From 2 Sam 19:1, we learn that on learning of Absalom’s death, David took his hurt to a loft above the city-gate (**עֲלִיָּת הַשַּׁעַר**).<sup>19</sup> Relying on Ps 104:3 (God “sets the rafters of his lofts in the waters”) Halpern emends **הַמְּקַרְהָ**\*, **עֲלִיָּת**\*, to a “room over the beams”, the king’s private audience hall, in which are crowded his throne, plus, incongruously enough, an “inner toilet room” (**חֹדֶר הַמְּקַרְהָ**).<sup>20</sup> This is one step removed from Jull who thinks **הַמְּקַרְהָ** of 3:24 is a privy while **עֲלִיָּת הַמְּקַרְהָ** of 3:20 is referring to the same as part of a throne room.<sup>21</sup> All this specu-

<sup>19</sup> See also Neh 3:31–32. The virtuous Shunamite asks her husband to build for Elisha a **עֲלִיָּת-קִיר**, something like a “walled-loft” (that is, one made of packed earth, for permanence) and Josiah destroys the altars on the terrace, a grouping known as “Ahaz’s loft” (**עֲלִיָּת אַחָז**) – 2 Kgs 23:12). From Jer 22:13, we might presume that many luxury houses included such a structure.

<sup>20</sup> Halpern, *The First Historians*, pp. 43–58. For his architectural reconstruction, see p. 37. The inspiration for a beamed room seems to come from L. Stager, “The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel”, *BASOR* 260 (1985), pp. 16, 29, n. 7.

<sup>21</sup> T. A. Jull, “MQRH in Judges 3: A Scatological Reading”, *JSOT* 81 (1998), pp. 63–75.



lation goes beyond anything archaeology has taught us about Syrian palaces, and our crudest imagination should still not have oriental despots receiving guests by toilets. Their foul smell no less than their potential as conduit for vermins would advise against placing them there. Moreover, individuals sought privacy when needing to relieve themselves (Deut 23:13; Saul goes inside a cave when needing to do so, 1 Sam 24:4).

I take *עֲלִית הַמִּקְרָה* of 3:20 as equivalent to *חֲדַר הַמִּקְרָה* of 3:24. The former tells us that it was raised higher than the ground floor, so likely needing steps; the latter suggests that we are dealing with a chamber (*חדר*) with door panels that lock (see below). This chamber is built within the *מִקְרָה* (however the term is to be vocalized), simply identifying an audience room, where things “happen” (verb: *קרה*).<sup>22</sup>

So we have the following scene: Ehud comes before Eglon in an audience chamber where sits Eglon on a platform and on his throne, *כִּסֵּא*. Admittedly, it is difficult to decipher why Ehud rises from this throne, since we have no information that messages (secret or divine) were heard as a Hallelujah Chorus.<sup>23</sup> Whatever his reason for doing so, this act earned Eglon Rabbinic approbation, “Because he rose for God, he became the father of Ruth” (Midrash *Ruth Rabbah*, 2:9; similarly TSanh 60a and Midrash *Numbers Rabbah*, 16:27). As a matter of staging, however, Eglon needed to rise for the slaying to fully succeed

### 3. *Murder, most foul*

<sup>31</sup>Reaching with his left hand, Ehud drew the dagger from his right thigh and stuck it in his belly. <sup>22</sup>Even the hilt sunk with the blade, the fat closing over the blade such that he could not yank the dagger out of his belly *and the bowels spilled out*.<sup>24</sup> <sup>23</sup>Slipping out toward the vestibule, Ehud shut and bolted the doors of the raised chamber behind him.

The HB has some fine lore about assassinations: Sisera's head is bashed (4:17–21 and 5:24–27); Joash is cut down with a sword (2 Kgs 12:21–22); the snoozing Ishboshet is pierced in the abdomen (*חָמַשׁ*)

<sup>22</sup> Perhaps, *מקרה*, a “maqtel” formative from which are constructed such a noun as *מַצְבֵּה*, “pillar”.

<sup>23</sup> Halpern, *The First Historians*, p. 75, n. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Or: *he slipped out toward the vestibule*.

2 Sam 4:5–6); likewise Abner, but while awake (2 Sam 3:27);<sup>25</sup> and Amnon is bludgeoned (2 Sam 13:28–29). Most instructive for our purpose is the following account of Joab's murder of Amasa (2 Sam 20:8–12):

As they neared the Great Stone (obviously a *מַצֵּבָה*) in Gibeon, Amasa came toward them. Joab was in military dress, over which there was a sheathed sword (*חֶרֶב*) tied to a belt on his waist; but as he stepped forward, it fell out. Joab greeted Amasa, "Brother, are you well?" and his right hand grasped Amasa's beard, to greet him with a kiss. Amasa was simply not on his guard against the dagger (*חֶרֶב*) in Joab's *left* hand, so with it he struck him to the abdomen (*חֲמֹשׁ*), shedding his bowels to the ground (*וַיִּשְׁפֹּךְ מֵעֵיו אֲרָצָה*). He died without [Joab] having to strike again.

The literature is full of comments on this passage, with several explanations of how Joab tricked Amasa into letting down his guard. Most often we read that Joab lets his sword slip out of its sheath and then snatches it with his left before plunging it into Amasa's body. More likely to me is that Joab, an experienced officer, purposely drops the girt *sword* to the ground, leaving it there to keep Amasa off his guard. As he comes close enough for his right arm to pull Amasa by the beard as if to kiss him, Joab completely cuts off his vision. He is now in perfect position to have his *left* hand to reach another weapon, this time a *dagger*, with which to stab him. It should be kept in mind that daggers (and the like) were not held with the blade next to the little finger, but with it pointing forward, so maximizing the power of an upward thrust.<sup>26</sup> Through the Renaissance, artists almost exclusively displayed the hold in this way. In Hebrew literature reference to the direction of a hand is normally not stated unless there is reason to do so, as in our Ehud narrative. In the stylized images of lion hunts, Assyrian kings are shown holding a leaping lion by the throat while thrusting a dagger upwards into its belly (see Figure 1). So when Joab drove his left fist upwards, not only was the movement hidden from Amasa, but the blow had enough force to rip open Amasa's belly to

<sup>25</sup> It is obvious, however, that the spot is given as such because earlier (2 Sam 2:17–23), Abner had killed Asahel, Joab's brother. Hotly pursuing Abner, Asahel would not desist, so "Abner struck him in the *חֲמֹשׁ* with a backward thrust of his spear and the spear protruded from his back. He fell there and died on the spot".

<sup>26</sup> H. Maryon *et al.*, "Early Near Eastern Steel Swords", *AJA* 65 (1961), pp. 175–176.



Figure 1: Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, thrusting a dagger into a lion's belly.

the abdomen (חֲמֵשׁ), spilling his guts to the ground and leaving him hemorrhaging to death.<sup>27</sup>

What happens to Eglon could not have differed much except that, either because as an “imposing man” he towered over Ehud or because he stood on a podium, Ehud’s blow struck the חֲמֵשׁ region, so below the חֲמֵשׁ, and the weapon remained fixed there, to the delight of the narrator describing it.<sup>28</sup> Ehud’s target was a choice, not only because there are no bones to stop the weapon, but also because any cut, even when not as deep, will soon fester. Before antibiotics, such wounds invariably led to death, from hemorrhage and resulting complications (blood clots, increase blood acidity, drop in body temperature) as well as eventually from internal poisoning and infections. Still, it is difficult to imagine that such wounds would instantaneously induce shock or lead to death, so we must give credit to the narrator for moving our focus from the scene of the crime to what happened outside Eglon’s chamber. All we read is that, in consequence to the blow, either Ehud or the פֶּרֶשְׁדוֹן (but hardly the dagger, since it is feminine) being the subject of וַיֵּצֵא, “it/he went out”.

<sup>27</sup> Something similar may have taken place in 2 Sam 2:16, when two sets of champions grasped each other by the head and plunged their knives into their opponents.

<sup>28</sup> It is a totally perverse reading of the text for Halpern (*The First Historians*, p. 59) to have Eglon sitting on a “throne” (the double quotes are his, p. 60) when Ehud struck: “The king struggled to stand in bewildered horror, but the Israelite’s right hand restrained him, half-bent”.

There are several proposed solutions to dealing with this phrase, none inspiring thorough confidence.<sup>29</sup> The least inventive is to find equivalence with what is said in consequence of Amasa's murder (see above): his guts spilled earthward, so that פִּרְשֹׁדֹן is equivalent to מְטִי of 2 Sam 20:10. But other suggestions abound. We may follow the Targum and treat פִּרְשֹׁדֹן as related to discharge, from the wound or from the anus; if from the latter, the consequence of violence.<sup>30</sup> By lopping off the last three consonants of הַפִּרְשֹׁדֹנָה, some arrive at פִּרְשׁ, allegedly "feces" (in Hebrew, normally צוֹאָה).<sup>31</sup> More adventurous are suggestions that tie unknown פִּרְשֹׁדֹן to Akkadian *paraštinnu*, a word once thought to mean "hole". (Its real meaning still eludes us.) On this basis, some suggest that Ehud is escaping through a conduit that ends in Eglon's commode<sup>32</sup> while others emend the verbal form into a hifil (וַיִּצִיא) so that Eglon is forcing his dagger through the anus.<sup>33</sup>

But there is good reason to believe that already in antiquity וַיִּצִיא הַפִּרְשֹׁדֹנָה, with an ambiguous subject, was glossed הַמְסִדְרוֹנָה (Judges 3:24), taking Ehud out toward/through some architectural features of the palace (see שְׁדֵרֹת, "pillared porches" of 1 Kgs 6:9) likely the vestibule or veranda.<sup>34</sup> Still, scholars are not easily intimidated that the word occurs nowhere else, and some still thinking of privies, emend into הַמְסִגְרוֹנָה\* (from סָגַר, "to lock").<sup>35</sup> Halpern calls on Arabic *sadira*, allegedly meaning "to be blinded, puzzled", and invents a "hidden" and hollow structure, a drop under the toilet through which Ehud makes his escape.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> For sampling, see B. Lindars, *Judges 1–5. A New Translation and Commentary* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 146–147.

<sup>30</sup> Moore, *Judges*, p. 97, n. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Halpern (*The First Historians*, p. 40) has a choice description, "Eglon expires, and his anal sphincter explodes".

<sup>32</sup> Lastly P. Harlé and T. Roqueplo, *Les Juges* (La Bible d'Alexandrie LXX, 7; Paris, 1999), p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> T. J. Meek, "Some Emendations in the Old Testament", *JBL* 48 (1929), pp. 163–164. M. L. Barré ("The Meaning of *pršdn* in Judges III 22", *VT* 41 [1991], pp. 1–11) promotes another Akkadian connection, this time the verb *naparšudu*, "to flee or escape", allegedly with reference to excrement this time spilling out of the guts. He does not explain how this very East Semitic word got to Hebrew or how were attached to it "the common -*šn*...termination" (according to him, p. 4), not to say also a directional suffix.

<sup>34</sup> One of the Greek versions simply omits הַפִּרְשֹׁדֹנָה וַיִּצִיא it while another version duplicates it.

<sup>35</sup> E. G. Kraeling, "Difficulties in the Story of Ehud", *JBL* 54 (1935), p. 208.

<sup>36</sup> Halpern, *The First Historians*, p. 58.

In making his escape, Ehud shuts the doors of the raised chamber (עֲלִיָּה) behind him; then, once outside, he sets the locks in. Much has been written on how Ehud achieved it, with lack of knowledge of the relevant lock system(s) contributing heavily to the reconstruction of hidden latrines, sewer shafts, or the like. In fact, there were a number of methods to seal and lock diverse rooms. In biblical language, when doors (or door panels) are closed (verb: סָגַר), a bar (בָּרִיחַ, of timber or metal) or a bolt (מְנַעֵל, מְנַעֵל) is set in place to lock (verb: נָעַל) them. To open (verb: פָּתַח, a key (מִפְתֵּחַ) is needed. Those keys can be large and are carried on the shoulder (Isa 22:22). King and Stager suggest that Ehud cleverly manipulated a tumbler lock to keep his victim shut.<sup>37</sup> In use widely and deeply in antiquity, such locks are placed on the inside of a chamber, but can be operated from the outside through a hole in the door (Cant 5:5; and see Figure 2). When a cleverly hollowed bar or bolt is moved into position, tumblers or nails drop by gravity into their notches, setting doors into locked positions. Unless one was experienced in manipulating blindly a key created for a specific lock, to unlock a door (let alone find the required key) must have been relatively cumbersome and time consuming. It is not surprising therefore that Ehud would have had ample time to go a distance before the murder is uncovered.

#### 4. *The Escape*

3<sup>24</sup>No sooner did he leave than his servants came in. When they saw that the doors of the platform were bolted, they said, "He must be relieving himself in the chamber of the reception hall".<sup>25</sup>They got embarrassed waiting, but he was not opening the doors of the raised chamber. So they took the key and when they unlocked it there was their lord fallen dead on the floor!<sup>26</sup>Throughout their hemming and hawing, Ehud was escaping. He moved beyond the hewn images and was escaping toward Seirah....

<sup>37</sup> See their comments in P. J. King and L. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, 2001), pp. 31–33 and more fully L. Stager, "Key Passages", in A. Ben-Tor *et al.* (eds.), *Eretz-Israel 27: The Hayim and Miriam Tadmor Volume* (Jerusalem, 2003), pp. 240\*–244\*. A fine review of how locks worked according to neo-Assyrian texts is in A. Fuchs, *Die Annalen des Jahres 711 v. Chr. nach Prismenfragmenten aus Ninive und Assur* (SAAS 8; Helsinki, 1998), pp. 97–107 (reference courtesy M. Stol). For other mechanisms, see V. J. M. Eras, *Locks and Keys throughout the Ages* (Amsterdam, 1957); H. E. Wulff, "Door Locks in Persia", *Technology and Culture* 7 (1966), pp. 497–503.

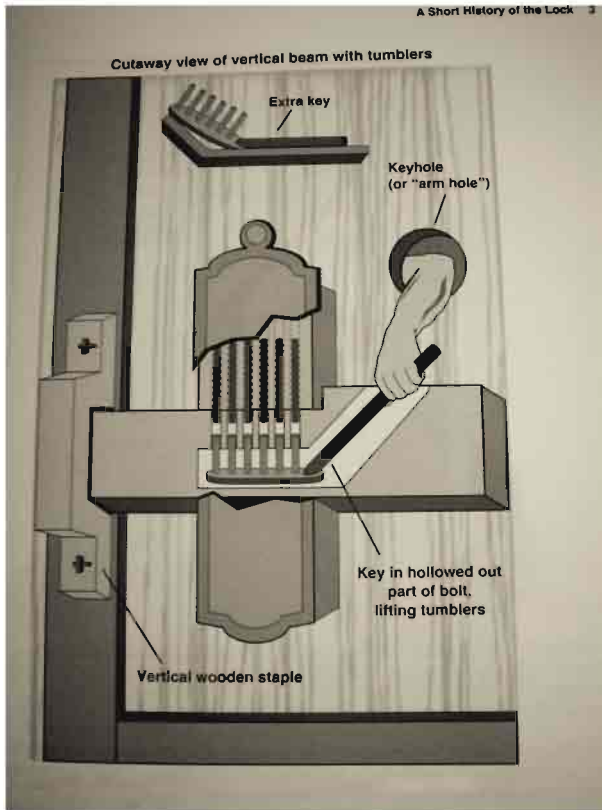


Figure 2: וְיִסְגֹּר דְלֶתוֹת הָעֵלְיָה בְּעֵדוֹ וְנָעַל<sup>38</sup>

For our purposes, we need not follow Ehud as he scampered to rally his kinsmen, but only to review what happened outside the doors of the murder chamber. Hebrew narratives favor razor sharp conjunction of events; in this case Ehud decamps just as Eglon's servants reach the locked chamber. A euphemism describes what the servants *imagined* was happening: Their king was seeking privacy to answer a call of nature.<sup>39</sup> This statement has done much to encourage latrine-

<sup>38</sup> From <http://www.locks.ru/images/informat/History05.jpg>. The image is from Europe; nevertheless it conveys the idea well.

<sup>39</sup> Eglon was *מְסִיךְ הוּא אֶת רַגְלָיו*. The phrase relies on a verbal root (סכך, hiphil) that has to do with placing a cover over something, in this case "the legs". It is difficult to give a precise exposition of what is at stake, the usual suggestion is that squatters are shielding themselves with their robes (see Josephus, *JW* 2, 147–149). It is obviously

driven expositions of events. Jull is not alone in seating Eglon on a latrine rather than a throne when he met his death<sup>40</sup> and others have even reconstructed whole structures to accommodate a privy in the throne room, allegedly in an upper level of the palace.<sup>41</sup> I have had little success ferreting out information on the latrines or privies of pre-Hellenistic Levant.<sup>42</sup> Occasionally I have come across reference to installations that are termed “toilets”, without discriminating between latrines and bath areas (the last requiring impermeable floorings or the like).<sup>43</sup> The meager evidence allows us to imagine that built-in

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used this way in 1 Sam 2:44, as Saul enters a cave to do the same. Rabbinic tradition is that the courtiers were encouraged to think so because of the stink created by the spilled פֶּרֶשׁוֹן, understood as “excrement”.

<sup>40</sup> Jull, “MQRH in Judges 3: A Scatological Reading”, p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> U. Hübner, “Mord auf dem Abort? Überlegungen zu Humor, Gewaltdarstellung und Realienkunde in Richter 3,12–30”, *Biblische Notizen* 40 (1987), pp. 130–140; F. Deist, “Murder in the Toilet (Judges 3:12–30): Translation and Transformation”, *Scriptura* 58 (1996), pp. 263–272. Many ribald readings of the assassination scene are premised on אָסָא being a “seat” rather than a “throne”, thence a “commode” or “toilet”. (The verb כָּשַׁן, is used both for sitting or squatting, see Deut 23:14.) Only in Talmudic time, when Roman communal toilets were introduced, do privies acquire the euphemism אֶתֶּרֶן תִּיבָא “the place of the seat” (T. Ber. 25a).

<sup>42</sup> See Jull, *ibid.*, p. 70, who cites Iron II stones with centered holes in areas E3 and G (“house of Ahiel”). Worth noting is the Talmudic injunction against the construction of privies too close to human habitation, because of its sanitary and olfactory challenges (T. J. Eruvin 5:1) and the notice (cited in Fink) defining the wealthy by their ownership of toilet seats (T. B. Shabbat 25:2).

<sup>43</sup> See O. Aurenche, *La Maison orientale: l'architecture du Proche Orient ancien des origines au milieu du quatrième millénaire* (BAH 109; Paris, 1981); P. M. M. Daviau, *Houses and their Furnishings in Bronze Age Palestine: Domestic Activity Areas and Artefact Distribution in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages* (JSOT/ASOR monograph series 8; Sheffield, 1993); A. Kempinski, and R. Reich (eds.), *The Architecture of Ancient Israel: from the Prehistoric to the Persian periods – in Memory of Immanuel (Munya) Dunayevsky* (Jerusalem, 1992); Stager, “Key Passages”, pp. 242\*–244\* and notes 18, as well as standard reference sets, under such headings as “Sewers”, “Latrines”, “(Personal) Hygiene”, and “Abort” (sub RJA). A. R. George (review of Marc van de Mieroop’s *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* [Oxford, Clarendon Press], *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 62 [1999], p. 551) challenges the opinion that latrines and public toilets were lacking in Mesopotamia and suggests there is evidence to the contrary. At Alalah there seems to be some evidence for privies; see A. Fink, “Levantine Standardized Luxury in the Late Bronze Age: Waste Management at Tell Atchana (Alalakh)”, in A. Fantalkin and A. Yasur-Landau (eds.), *Bene Israel: Studies in the Archaeology of Israel and the Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages in Honour of Israel Finkelstein* (CHANE 31; Leiden – Boston, 2008), pp. 165–195. The evidence from Mesopotamia is more uneven, beginning with the third Millennium on (for example from Ešnunna, Tello, and Old Babylonian Ur). Vertical shafts are also found that suggests urban cesspits rather than sewage systems, with the accumulation periodically dug up (M. Krafeld-Daugherty, *Wohnen im Alten Orient: eine Untersuchung zur Verwendung von Räumen in altorientalischen Wohnhäusern*

“toilets” were holes over cesspits (rather than commodes over sewer lines), and if anything under staircases rather than over them, as Halpern would reconstruct. If so, it makes no sense to locate such fixtures, of all places, near a throne. Ancient folks knew that you cannot leave fecal matter within a structure, as it invited horrid pests, let alone stench. The amount of water required to maintain sanitation would not make sense in an arid climate.

I suggest that what Eglon was *thought* to be using was not a fixed toilet, but a chamber pot.<sup>44</sup> We know about their use broadly, from ancient to modern times (they were good enough for Versailles kings). They were likely made of metal and so their true function is not easily recognized archaeologically; but there are anecdotes that play on their generic shape. A vassal of Zimri-Lim of Mari constructs a very crude image of contempt when a cup of friendship is used as a chamber pot (A. 221 = FM 2 122)<sup>45</sup> and Herodotus (Book 2 172) tells about Amasis teaching his courtiers a lesson by watching them worship a statue made from the gold of a melted chamber pot.

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[*Altertumskunde des vorderen Orients* 3; Münster, 1994], p. 96, n. 453). M. Lebeau (“Eau et sanitaires à l’étage”, *Subartu* 16 [2005], pp. 99–105) makes a case for a seated latrine on the 2nd floor of a temple in mid-third millennium Tell Beydar, with drainage cut into the outside wall, a highly unlikely solution. Some interesting Hittite material on the topic is gathered in A. Ünal, “Ritual Purity versus Physical Impurity in Hittite Anatolia: Public Health and Structures for Sanitation According to Cuneiform Texts and Archaeological Remains”, in T. Mikasa (ed.), *Essays on Anatolian Archaeology* (Wiesbaden, 1993), pp. 119–139. In particular, he cites a text (pp. 126–128) in which soldiers on duty are not permitted to leave the area of the watch to fulfill their needs; presumably because it was at a distance from their guard spot. Another text (pp. 128–129) directs the king and queen to where they may stop at areas called *šinapši* to defecate. (On the above subjects, I have benefited from consulting with Sara Tricoli, David Gimbel, and Benjamin Sass.) Under-reported is the role that pigs and dogs played in ancient hygiene. Even into our own days, they keep latrines and cesspits from becoming major health hazards. For their service, however, they were broadly considered (then as now) as ritually unclean.

<sup>44</sup> Hittite: <sup>dis</sup>*kalti-* (see Ünal, *ibid.*, pp. 126–128); Sumerian: KISI; Akkadian: *karpat šinātim*. Greek lore on chamber pots is collected in B. A. Sparkes, “Illustrating Aristophanes”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 95 (1975), pp. 128.

<sup>45</sup> See M. Guichard, “Au pays de la Dame de Nagar”, in D. Charpin and J.-M. Durand (eds.), *Recueil d’études à la mémoire de Maurice Birot (Florilegium marianum, 2; Mémoires de NABU, 3; Paris, 1994)*, pp. 237–240. Lines 34–44 read: “On another matter; why does my lord not write to Kahat about Akin-amar. Is this man, Akin-amar, just my enemy but not also my lord’s enemy? Why does he remain in good terms with my lord? Once, this man sat by my lord and drank a cup (of friendship). Having elevated him, my lord reckoned him among worthy men, clothing him in garment, and supplying him with a wig. Yet, turning around, [Akin-amar] defecated into the cup he used, becoming hostile to my lord!”



How long did they wait is not necessary to know, but it was enough for them to feel anxious and embarrassed. Having to retrieve a key must have taken time and so did the manipulation necessary to lift the tumblers up, the processes giving Ehud more time to find his way to safety. (Josephus, always striving for realism, gives them until evening.) What they saw on opening the door is an Eglon long dead; but the narrator crafts a description that moves beyond a mere chronology of events. This is achieved by coordinating two participial clauses with Eglon as subject, each headed by *הָיָה*. The effect is to resurrect Eglon, so to speak, and have him refuse to open his own door; but when the doors are forced open, seemingly he falls dead at their feet.<sup>46</sup> By then, Ehud was beyond the very same *פְּסִילִים* that might have played a role in sharpening Eglon's enthusiasm for a message from God. Israel's triumph against its tormentors was about to unfold.

### III. *Ehud as satire*

With a review of the narrative behind us, we pick up on the interpretive trends of recent years. Especially during a period of waning interest in historical reconstruction of early Israel and of rising appreciation of Hebraic narrative arts, Ehud's story began to be read as satire, parody, slapsticks, or even farce, with Moab (via Eglon) as its target and scatology (or coarse humor) as its catalyst. Although there were precursors,<sup>47</sup> Alter's reading was the most influential, nudging the story away from being just a report on a political assassination, edited to suit Deuteronomistic sensibilities. That reading is what one finds in most recent Biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Through skilful manipulation of prose narrative, Alter's account acquires a vision of a tyrant's destruction, "at once shrewd and jubilant":

[Eglon] turns out to be a fatted calf readied for slaughter....[his] fat is both token of his physical ponderousness, his vulnerability to Ehud's

<sup>46</sup> The achievement is operatic; much more so here than when a similar spectacle is replayed at 4:22, with Baraq finding Sisera sprawled dead in Jael's tent.

<sup>47</sup> L. Alonso-Schökel, "Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter", *Biblica* 42 (1961), pp. 148–158; E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Westminster, 1965), pp. 33–34; K. Koch, *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method* (New York, 1969), pp. 138–140.

sudden blade, and the emblem of his regal stupidity. Perhaps it may also hint at a kind of grotesque feminization of the Moabite: Ehud “comes to” the king, an idiom also used for sexual entry, and there is something hideously sexual about the description of the dagger thrust. There may also be deliberate sexual nuance in the “secret thing” Ehud brings to Eglon, in the way the two are locked together alone in a chamber, and in the sudden opening of locked entries at the conclusion of the story.<sup>48</sup>

A good number of studies has followed Alter’s cue.<sup>49</sup> Their authors too find humor in coarse contexts, shaping a burlesque out of a murder in the privy, occasionally with de Sade perversions. Handy considers the story a fine “ethnic joke”,<sup>50</sup> Miles alludes to the “colonialist” dimension of the anti-Moabite satire,<sup>51</sup> and Deist thinks it aimed at “publicly shaming [Eglon] out of his socks”.<sup>52</sup> Even mention of the dagger with “two mouths” is said to bolster the farce because Ehud used it to deliver a דָּבָר, “word, matter” to Eglon. None, however, has achieved as crude an interpretation as has Miller.<sup>53</sup>

Why is Ehud, an Israelite hero, portrayed as suffering from the physical defect of being left-handed? ... [A] dysfunctional right hand in those days was almost certainly taken as a ... token of improper hygiene and of sexual deviance. ... By sending on the men carrying the tribute, Ehud is telling Eglon that he wants to see him in private, i.e. he is offering a homosexual liaison. The storyteller would have demonstrated graphically how Ehud reached between his legs with his left hand and began to remove his clothes; and how he pulled out a *pointed sword*, which he then proceeded to thrust into Eglon’s obese belly so deep that not only

<sup>48</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> For representative opinions, see Y. Amit, “The Story of Ehud (Judges 3:12–30): The Form and the Message”, in C. Exum (ed.), *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Text in Literary Focus* (Semeia Studies; Atlanta, 1989), pp. 97–112; Barré, “The Meaning of *pršdn* in Judges III 22”, pp. 1–11; M. Z. Brettler, “Never the Twain Shall Meet? The Ehud Story as History and Literature”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991), pp. 285–304; more nuanced in idem, *The Book of Judges* (Old Testament Readings; London, 2002); E. S. Christianson, “A Fistful of Shekels: Scrutinizing Ehud’s Entertaining Violence (Judges 3:12–30)”, *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003), pp. 53–78; Halpern, *The First Historians*; Jull, “MQRH in Judges 3”; G. P. Miller, “Verbal Feudin the Hebrew Bible”, pp. 105–117; S. Niditch, *Judges* (OTL; Louisville, 2008), pp. 57–58.

<sup>50</sup> L. K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter: Ehud and Eglon as Ethnic Humor”, *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 6 (1992), pp. 233–246.

<sup>51</sup> J. Miles, “Who are you calling ‘stupid?’” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4 (2008), pp. 1–16.

<sup>52</sup> Deist, “Murder in the Toilet (Judges 3:12–30)”, p. 269.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, “Verbal Feud in the Hebrew Bible”, pp. 114–115.

the sword but also the hilt (i.e. testicles) disappeared and could not be removed.

Without denying that the Ehud episode does contain humorous elements – the scene with the courtiers dallying outside the king's upper chamber must certainly be placed among them – I have reservations about treating it as a satire, parody, or farce.<sup>54</sup> Authors adopt satire when critiquing institutions, activities or personalities, normally of their own place and time, but also those of their neighbors. Satires are by definition intentional and they require a conspiracy of shared assumptions before they can unravel successfully. True, some satires may be too sophisticated for easy reception and authors may strive for an audience by displaying wit, irony, and a humor that might even turn coarse; but by themselves these devices do not define the genre and simply to catalogue absurdist manifestations in a narrative is not enough to define it as a satire. Rather, authors must own a stance from which to launch their barbs, targets must to some degree be transparent and focused, and audiences must be savvy enough to appreciate when details have moved away from the descriptive to the imaginative. To my mind, none of the interpretations of the Ehud story has given convincing reason that the narrative was created as a satire. Moreover, the audience that recent interpreters have in mind for an alleged satire is more likely modern than ancient.

### 1. *The Ehud satirist*

As far as authorship is concerned, we may ask: Who are these alleged satirists and why are they poking fun of God's own choice of Eglon and Moab to punish Israel? Are they in fact also launching diatribes against God for such a choice? Who are the Moabites of Judges 3? Are they the same folks that were born out of incest (as per Gen 19) or are they those who sheltered David's parents when his fortunes were bleak (1 Sam 22:3-4)? Eglon: Is he lampooned for being "fat"? (The Hebrew, as we saw above does not define him so categorically.)

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<sup>54</sup> E. L. Greenstein considers the Ehud narrative to contain "one of the Bible's few extended comical scenes", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3 (1992), p. 331. I note here that the Ehud episode is not mentioned in Z. Weisman's book on political satire in the Bible (*Political Satire in the Bible* [Atlanta, 1998]). Is not easy to say whether he left it out because he dismisses it as satire, is not willing to evaluate the opinions of others about it being a satire, or is simply disciplined about what he is willing to consider.

Is he derided for expecting to live long after occupying God's land, or for having the chutzpah to expect a message from God? Is his name ("Calf-y") enough to provoke sarcasm when Israel was just led by a "Dog" (Caleb) and will soon be saved by a "Bee" (Deborah) and an "Ibex" (Jael)?<sup>55</sup>

Or could it be that the evidence for satire can be harvested from the manner in which he met his death? If so, the premises of scatology and sexual innuendos we read about in recent literature are themselves flimsy. Setting aside the issues of sexuality – which can be proposed whenever one body is said to penetrate the other,<sup>56</sup> – and of feminization – which can be intimated whenever one character (especially one considered corpulent) is said to be dominated by another–, the scatology that has marred recent readings of the episode is itself based on a surprisingly unliterary appreciation of 3:24. As the text has it there, facing a locked door, the courtiers dally outside *imagining* their leader to be defecating. They do not share with us their image of how he was doing it in his chamber; but it is far more credible to presume they pictured him sitting on a chamber pot (as was likely in antiquity) than to turn his throne into a toilet. The incredibly developed literature (especially by Halpern, Jull) on the architecture of toilets in throne rooms is hardly reliable and often fanciful. וַיֵּצֵא הַפֶּרֶשְׁדִּינָה (3:23) is the other phrase that has encouraged a "murder in the toilet" scenario; but as we have seen there are severe difficulties in deciding what it meant, let alone in ascertaining whether or not it belonged to the earliest versions of the story (see comments above).

## 2. *The two audiences for the Ehud story*

By definition, satires (and their congeners) are highly inventive undertakings, and their readers or audience need not invest much in their realism, social or historical; but they do need to recognize them as such to fully appreciate them. Not long ago, I enjoyed the staging of a Jacobean play, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, whose authorship is still dis-

<sup>55</sup> Many Biblical names are potentially comic, for example Cushan-Rishatayim ("Doubly-wicked Cushan" Judge 3:8–11); but writers can make certain that their point is well-taken, as when Abigail tells David "My lord ought not to bother with this worthless man, this Nabal: for as is his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him..." (1 Sam 25:25).

<sup>56</sup> Even the closing and opening of Eglon's doors are read sexually by citing Songs 5:26 (Brettler, "The Ehud Story as History and Literature", p. 293).

puted.<sup>57</sup> A wicked major character gets his just desert through poisoning, tongue slashing, eye gouging, and throat slitting. Blood and gore flowed freely; yet from the spectators, instead of revulsion there was glee and laughter. Recognizing its genre, we were all ready for far-fetched schemes, hyperbolic sentiments, and fully accommodating stock characters. Everyone knew (now, as when it was first staged) that the only historical lesson being imparted was about the joy of retribution.

Given the long and complicated textual history of the Hebrew Bible, it is difficult to know at what stage of the Ehud story the satire might have surfaced: Was it when it was first crafted orally or when first put to writing? When it was finalized as a statement against Moab or when edited into a collection about judges? And what is the audience that appreciated the literate jousting? The folks who witnessed Ehud's spunk? Or were they editors who massaged the story into yet another example of heroics, by Hebrew ancestors but above all by the Hebrew God? Once the narrative was inserted into the cycle of miseries and triumphs that characterize the book of Judges, however, it is difficult to imagine that Hebrews would doubt the historicity of this particular event without compromising the integrity of other narratives about God's control of Israel's fortune. It is not surprising therefore that until recently hardly anyone questioned the realistic way ancient Israel accepted the unfolding of events; and while many may have chortled over Eglon's demise, I do not doubt that some were disturbed by its details. The distancing from Ehud the rabbis established in their lore is itself a sign of taking the events realistically, increasing the prospect that the audiences of antiquity continued to miss reading it as satire. It might also be telling that until modern Israel was about to be reborn as a state Ehud was hardly assigned as a name to a Jewish child, as much in reaction to the grim historicity he evoked as to avoid seeming to extol a regicide when living under Christian and Muslim rulers.

It is wholly otherwise for the most recent audiences to reflect on the story. By treating Ehud as a satire rather than, say, a narrative with potential humorous touches, recent commentators have in effect created a new perception of the story, one that conflates ancient Israel's reaction to it with that of their own. For Alter it is "fictionalized

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<sup>57</sup> The earliest printing of the play is from 1607; see <<http://www.tech.org/~cleary/reven.html>>.

history”;<sup>58</sup> and although he does not claim that it was so for ancient Israel, he certainly implies that it was intentional and ancient. Jull treats it similarly, but seems to know how to harvest from it historical kernels, not at all the genre’s likeliest products.<sup>59</sup> Brettler cautions us against using the Ehud story to recreate historical events during the Judges period;<sup>60</sup> it was not at all meant to be taken so. By crediting Israel with knowingly shaping a farce with pronounced scatology, recent commentators not only assign it a very modern sensibility but also rescue it from glorying in such morally questionable activities as regicide, exacerbated in this case by the murder of God’s tool for punishing Israel. I have strong doubt that this is necessary. In its other traditions, from Genesis to the Maccabees, Israel has shown a healthy interest in taking revenge against its enemies and its tormentors without ever needing to apologize or to weaken historical traditions. If we yield to the temptation to force satire into a potentially unpalatable Ehud narrative through deliberate skewering of its language, contents, or design, it should not be too difficult to do the same for Jael’s murder of Sisera. We might then also find many other traditions that could benefit from ethical refinement.

From Plato to Jefferson, revisionism on hallowed texts has had noble practitioners; but let it be done by theologians, homilists, moralists, or ethicists rather than by biblical scholars.

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<sup>58</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> Jull, “MQRH in Judges 3”, p. 73.

<sup>60</sup> M. Z. Brettler, *The Book of Judges* (Old Testament Readings; London, 2002), pp. 37–38.

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