

JUDGES 3

Judges 3:1–11. Othniel, the First Judge

After establishing the pattern for its narrative as a whole (in Judges 2:11–23), the book of Judges describes the first incident that required a judge to save Israel: remaining Canaanite peoples enticed Israel to worship false gods (3:1–6). This act of “evil in the sight of the LORD” prompted divine retribution in the form of subjugation (verses 7–8). Thereafter, the Lord raised Othniel to be Israel’s deliverer. Othniel’s name probably means something like “God is my strength” or “God is my protection,”¹ which appropriately captures Othniel’s role as judge (see verses 9–11). Othniel belonged to the tribe of Judah (see verse 9), once again reinforcing the primacy of Judah in the eyes of the narrator or compiler of the book of Judges (and giving further evidence of the book’s being a Judean production). Crucially, the text specifies how “the Spirit of the LORD came upon” Othniel, giving him the power or ability to judge Israel and lead them in war (verse 10).

The report of Othniel’s tenure as judge is brief, spanning only a few short verses. Nevertheless, these verses give a prototypical example of how the cycle described in Judges 2:11–23 plays out in the rest of the narrative with subsequent judges such as Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon.²

Judges 3:12–30. Ehud and Eglon

Unlike the brief account of Othniel’s judgeship, the account of Ehud’s experience is both detailed and literarily rich with deep irony and humor. It begins with the standard formula encountered previously in Judges 2:11–23 before introducing Ehud, a lefthanded Benjaminite (verses 12–15). This mention of

¹ Scholars are unsure of the precise meaning of the name, but either of these renderings seems likely. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 of 5 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 904.

² See Judges 3:12–30; 4–5; and 6–8, respectively.

Ehud's being lefthanded serves two purposes: First, it serves a bit of narrative humor and irony since the name Benjamin means "son of the right hand." Second, it is crucial in the story since Ehud concealed his sword on a different side of his body than was usual because of his being lefthanded, thereby eluding its detection (verses 16, 21). Eglon, the king of Moab, Israel's oppressor in this account, was said to be "a very fat man" (verse 17), and his name means "cow." He is, in other words, the "fattened cow" who will soon be sacrificed for Israel's salvation.

Ehud's plan to defeat Eglon was to exploit his greed. After paying a tribute (verses 16–8), Ehud ironically tricked Eglon with what he claimed was a secret message (Hebrew *devar*, "message, thing or matter") from God (verses 18–20). Ehud did indeed have a *devar* from God for Eglon: the dagger Ehud concealed under his cloak, which he used to kill Eglon (verse 21). By using misleading language, Ehud caused Eglon to temporarily drop his guard. The narrator paints a vivid, almost absurd and comical picture of the demise of corpulent Eglon: he was unable to take the dagger out of his belly because of his enormous girth! As if that weren't enough, Eglon also evacuated his bowels upon death, leaving him to die in his own filth (verse 22).

The king's servants, meanwhile, were afraid to disturb their lord, thinking that he was relieving himself in his private chambers (verse 24).³ This allowed Ehud time to escape and rally his forces to defeat the Moabites and lead Israel to deliverance (verse 27–30). The contrast between the descriptions of Othniel's judgeship and Ehud's, put side-by-side in the same chapter, demonstrates the rich diversity in storytelling techniques—ranging from the laconic and terse to the highly literary and descriptive—used by the biblical author to recount Israel's history.

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³ The King James Bible's rendering of Judges 3:24 ("Surely he covereth his feet in his summer chamber") is a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew but obscures the fact that this is almost certainly a euphemism for defecation. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994), 2:754. Robert Alter translated this portion as "And they said, 'He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber.'" He pointed out how "the scatological detail is comic here: they can clearly smell the consequences of the released sphincter, and they use their inference to explain both the locked doors and the long delay." Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 2 of 3 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 92–93.