

Lesson 4

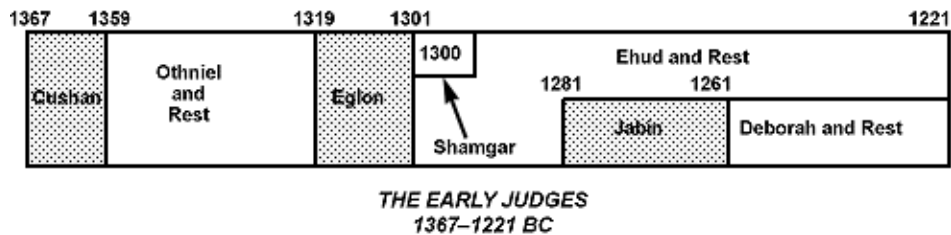
Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar

Judges 3:7-31

Introduction

Judges 3:7-5:31 covers a time between roughly 1367 and 1221 BC. The section lists Cushan, Eglon, the Philistines, and Jabin as the enemies and oppressors of Israel during this time. The judges (deliverers) were Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah. All these judges arose from unexpected places and situations – which denotes a unique way God saves.

All of this was happening because God had decided to drive out the Canaanites from Israel no longer. This led to them making peace with differing tribes and people who should have never been there. All of this led to “accommodation, integration, and finally, apostasy,” compromising the unique identity of God’s people⁸. As mentioned at the end of last week’s lesson, the Israelites married pagan women and served their gods.



Judges 3:7-11 - Othniel

3:7-8 – The Anger of God

Here, we see the pattern so often seen in Judges: a progression from Israel's sin to their punishment. Initially, Israel engaged in evil acts in defiance of God. They decided to forget His commands, character, and all the miracles He performed for them. Subsequently, they worshipped the Canaanite deities Baal and Asheroth. God handed them over to an oppressor named Cushan-rishathaim of Aram. He ruled over Israel for eight years. Who he was precisely is a matter of debate. Some think Cushan could have been a Mitanni king under Hittite influence who sought to expand his dominion into Canaan, resulting in Israel's subjugation and tribute payment for eight years around 1367–1359 BC. His name likely represents a deliberate alteration of his real name to "Cushan-of-double-wickedness," a play on words that resonates with "Aram-naharaim" (Aram-of-the-two-rivers) mentioned in the same verse⁹. This nickname reflects the Israelites' view of him as an evil and oppressive figure, based on their eight-year ordeal under his rule, offering insight into his character from the perspective of those who endured his oppression.

3:9-10 – God Raises Up Othniel

Responding to the Israelites' pleas for help, God compassionately appointed a savior for them, Othniel, known as the "lion of God" and Caleb's younger brother. Despite possibly being around eighty-six years old at the time, mirroring Caleb's undiminished spirit in seeking out challenges, Othniel stood as a symbol of the previous generation's bravery and faith in God during the conquest of Canaan.

God empowered Othniel through the Holy Spirit to lead and rectify the injustices in Israel, particularly the severe oppression under Cushan. Although we are not told about the battle's specifics, we learn that under divine inspiration, Othniel successfully waged war against Cushan, overcoming the "double wicked" ruler and liberating Israel from his tyranny. In this, we see the power of faith and God's intervention in delivering His people through chosen leaders.

3:11 – Rest

Following the defeat of Cushan, Israel experienced forty years of "rest," a term describing not just the absence of conflict but a state of peace, happiness, and well-being. While the text says Othniel's death occurred after this time of rest, it suggests he may not have lived throughout the entire forty years, as this would place his age at around 125—a remarkable longevity that, while not unheard of in early biblical times, was less common in this time. It's more likely that the peace Othniel secured persisted beyond his lifetime, marking a period of stability from approximately 1359 to 1319 BC.

Judges 3:12-30 - Ehud

3:12-14: The Rise of Eglon

Shortly after Othniel's death, and possibly even during the forty years of peace, Israel reverted to disobedience, disregarding God's blessings and commands. This period saw the rise of a new generation that overlooked the historical consequences of apostasy and resumed the same path of defiance against Yahweh that their ancestors had walked. Following this period of rest, Yahweh allowed Israel to face punishment again through a foreign ruler. He empowered Eglon, the king of Moab, who, alongside allies from Ammon and Amalek, launched a successful invasion against Israel. Eglon established his command in the "city of palm trees," near the old Jericho. He subjected the Israelites to his rule for eighteen years.

3:15-16: Enter Ehud

God responded to the distressed pleas of the Israelites by appointing Ehud as their second deliverer. Ehud, a Benjamite and son of Gera emerged as a leader during a period when the Benjamin tribe was recovering from a devastating civil war that nearly led to its extinction, a time when being called a "Benjamite" could have been derogatory.

Ehud's left-handedness, typically viewed negatively in ancient times, provided him a tactical advantage in combat. This trait might not imply any disability in his right arm but instead a strategic enhancement for warfare. It's noted that within the tribe of Benjamin, training to favor the left hand for combat was a practice, suggesting Ehud's skill could continue this martial tradition.

He routinely delivered tribute to Eglon, king of Moab. During these years of Moabite domination, Ehud devised a plan for Israel's liberation. With careful planning and secrecy, he crafted a short, two-edged sword, about 18 inches long, and concealed it on his right thigh under his clothes. Anticipating the guards' routine checks for weapons on the left side, meant for right-handed attackers, Ehud exploited his left-handedness to bring the sword into King Eglon's presence undetected, intending to use this hidden weapon to execute his plan for Israel's freedom.

3:17-26 – Eglon Assassinated

Ehud meticulously orchestrated King Eglon's assassination. Initially, he delivered tribute to Eglon, then ensured his companions passed through Moabite security. Leaving them near Gilgal, Ehud returned to Eglon, claiming to bear a secret divine message. Trusting Ehud, Eglon dismissed his attendants, creating a private setting for Ehud's message. In a gesture of respect for what he presumed was a message from God, Eglon stood up, only for Ehud to fatally stab him with a concealed sword, which sank so deeply into Eglon's abdomen that it disappeared into his body without Ehud attempting to remove it.

What about the ethics of this event? The Bible does not condemn him for his actions. Remember: God *raised him up* (3:15). He and his people were under heavy oppression, and it was his duty as a judge to remove the threat. Finally, there is no indication of personal vengeance driving Ehud.

Ehud's escape from the murder scene involved locking the chamber where he killed Eglon, possibly using a key from Eglon or exiting through an alternative route like a back door or window. The Moabite guards, misled by the locked door and the smell of Eglon's body, assumed the king was occupied and delayed entering. By the time they discovered Eglon's body, Ehud had already fled to Seirah, eluding capture and likely amusing Israelites for years with the tale of Moabite guards' naivety.

3:27-30 – Victory

Ehud rallied the Israelites in the hill country of Ephraim by blowing the trumpet and sharing his successful assassination of King Eglon. Convincing them that God had delivered their enemies into their hands, Ehud led the Israelites to secure the Jordan River crossings to Moab, preventing any Moabite escape. This decisive action resulted in the death of about ten thousand Moabite soldiers.

This victory over Moab at the Jordan River crossings removed the threat from Moab for several years, leading to a time of peace. Israel successfully subdued Moab, ensuring tranquility in that region for eighty years, marking a significant period of stability and relief from external aggression for the Israelites.

Judges 3:31 – Shamgar

Shamgar's brief biblical mention suggests he was a significant figure, possibly a Gentile, known as "the son of Anath," linking him to the Canaanite goddess of sex and war. Despite sparse details, his reputation as an influential leader is hinted at, particularly his role in combating a Philistine threat around 1300 BC. Using an ox goad, a tool for directing oxen, Shamgar famously killed six hundred Philistines, showcasing God's ability to achieve victory through unconventional means. Like other deliverers like Ehud and Jael,

who used simple tools for their feats, Shamgar's success with an ox goad underscores the theme that God empowers willing individuals to accomplish great deeds, regardless of the resources at their disposal.

Conclusion

For roughly 146 years, from 1367 to 1221 BC, Israel grappled with the consequences of failing to fully expel the Canaanites, leading to a pattern of assimilation, compromise, and apostasy that diminished their distinct identity as God's chosen people. Despite these challenges, God's faithfulness shined through as He raised unexpected leaders (an old man, a left-handed man, a Gentile, and a woman) to deliver Israel from the clutches of their enemies—Cushan, Eglon, the Philistines, and Jabin.

Othniel's leadership brought about a significant period of peace, yet following his death, the cycle of sin resumed, culminating in Ehud's daring assassination of King Eglon. Shamgar's remarkable victory with an ox goad further exemplifies that God can use the most unassuming individuals and means to achieve His purposes.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does the cycle of disobedience, oppression, and deliverance in the Book of Judges reflect on the Israelites' relationship with God, and what can we learn from it about faithfulness?
2. In what ways does the story of Ehud challenge our understanding of morality and justice in the context of divine deliverance?
3. Considering Othniel's age and experience, what does his story teach us about God's criteria for choosing leaders and deliverers?
4. Shamgar's victory with an ox goad is one of many examples of God using unconventional means for deliverance. What does this tell us about God's power and the resources He can use for His purposes?
5. The narrative repeatedly mentions Israel's failure to drive out the Canaanites fully. What are the spiritual implications of partial obedience to God's commands?
6. Discuss the significance of Ehud delivering a message from God before assassinating King Eglon. What does this reveal about the role of divine authority in his actions?

7. The Judges era was marked by Israelites repeatedly turning to Canaanite gods. What does this indicate about the dangers of cultural assimilation and forgetting one's spiritual heritage?

8. Reflect on the pattern of God raising up judges in response to the Israelites' cries for help. What does this reveal about God's character and relationship with His people?

⁸ Smith, *The Books of History*, p. 133.

⁹ Smith calls him "Double Trouble of the Two Rivers."