

# Judges 2:1-3:31

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## *Lesson 1 Spring 2013 Series 1*

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Judges stands second in the section known as “The Earlier Prophets”, which consists of the historical books, which narrate the story of Israel from the entry into Canaan to the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C. The traditional name of the Book is *Shophetim* (Hebrew for Judges). This name was determined by the contents of the book which deal, primarily, with a series of national leaders who, by their victories over oppressive enemies, brought freedom from oppression to Israel for a season. The traditional view is that Samuel was the author of this work. He is also credited with composing his own book or books, Ruth and Judges.<sup>1</sup>

The term *shophet* (שפטים) “Judges” has a wider meaning in Hebrew than the English word “judge”. It denotes both judge and vindicator, with the latter role denoting “delivering”, “defending”, “avenging”, and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 152.

“punishing”. The *shophet* was both judge and governor and held power in every way similar to that of an earthly king except there was no hereditary right of succession involved.<sup>2</sup>

The semi-chaotic state of affairs that are depicted in the Book of Judges, just after the glowing and triumphal account conveyed in the Book of Joshua, invites theological clarification. In Judges 1 there is an indication of the chaos that has enveloped Israel and in chapter 2 the theological explanation for this chaos begins to unfold. While Chapter 1 settles for the rather straightforward reporting of human actions, motives and consequences, which are not unanticipated: Judges 2 introduces the motivations and actions of God as a causative agent in the course of the events that are being recounted.<sup>3</sup>

Very unexpectedly, (2:1) we encounter the “angel of the Lord” (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה), with nothing to prepare us for the messenger’s entrance. The messenger appears from Gilgal,

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<sup>2</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012), p. 31.

Israel's first camping place after they crossed the Jordan river after the Exodus. The identification of Bochim is difficult, but its identification with Bethel goes back to Bethel's patriarchal connections (Genesis 12:8; 13:3; 28:19; 31:13; 35:1, 3, 6, 8, 15-16) and the "Oak of Weeping" (Compare Genesis 35:8 with Judges 4:5 in Hebrew to see tremendous similarity).<sup>4</sup>

Note the promise that God will "never" break his covenant with them. In this section God is teaching Israel about his character, who he is. He is a God of integrity, of faithfulness. In verse 2 this integrity and faithfulness of God is contrasted with the lack of integrity and the faithlessness of the people of Israel. They are reminded not to make a covenant with the people of the land (Deuteronomy 31:16; Joshua 24) as they had been reminded previously. They are also indicted for the fact that they have not obeyed the command of God.

Despite the fact that God has made the promise to keep his command the result of this is not all positive for the

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<sup>4</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), p. 39.

Israelites as a part of the words of God to Israel were warnings that there was a consequence to failing to keep the commands of God. A part of God keeping his word is fulfilling the promise to punish Israel for disobedience. The punishment is not nearly so severe as the disobedience deserves perhaps, but it is in the nature of God to keep his word, and therefore to keep the covenant even the punishment aspect. At Joshua 24:19-28 Joshua warns Israel of the consequence of failing to keep their covenant with God in very strong terms.<sup>5</sup>

Verse 3 begins with the phrase **וְגַם אָמַרְתִּי** which is often translated as if it perhaps expresses some kind of new consequence such as “So now I say” NRSV, but what it actually says is “And also I said”. It is a reminder of the

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<sup>5</sup> <sup>19</sup> But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” <sup>21</sup> And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” <sup>22</sup> Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” <sup>23</sup> He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” <sup>24</sup> The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” <sup>25</sup> So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. <sup>26</sup> Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD. <sup>27</sup> Joshua said to all the people, “See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.” <sup>28</sup> So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances. NRSV

covenant terms, and in the context of God being faithful an indication that God will not fail to keep his covenant and in this instance that will result in a negative consequence for Israel. That consequence will be that God will not drive out the people of the land of Canaan. They will become “adversaries” for Israel. The word in the Hebrew here is literally “sides” (לְצַדִּים), but perhaps should be translated as something like “snares” or “traps” in a manner reminiscent of passages like Exodus 23:33; 34:12; and Deuteronomy 7:16.<sup>6</sup> This would also align well with the latter part of the verse that actually contains the word for snare (מוֹקֵשׁ) or in the Old Greek translation at verse 3 *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον) as Paul uses at Romans 11:9.

The response of the people here (verse 4) is a very important theme not only within the context of the Book of Judges but also with regard to the relationship and character of God. The national and religious conscience of Israel is dormant but it is not extinct. The words of the

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<sup>6</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary, p. 169.

messenger draw a response from Israel and this response is an extremely important element of the relationship between God and Israel. This weeping before God then draws them into a time of sacrifice to the Lord. This reaction indicates that Israel knew that they had failed to keep the covenant with God and that they could fully expect God to keep his covenant with Israel which in this instance should be negative for the well-being of Israel in physical terms.

Beginning at verse 6 the writer of Judges moves to a moment of recollection when Joshua was still leading God's people and he was preparing them to go and take possession of their inheritance before God. This is yet another reminder that chronological order is not an important consideration for the author, the theological perspective is what remains central.<sup>7</sup> Central to the message of the Book of Judges is what is said in verse 10 about a generation that grew up after the generation that knew Joshua, "who did know the Lord or the work that he

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<sup>7</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 42.

had done for Israel” (verse 10). This sets up a theological point that is then made in verse 11. This lack of knowledge, true understanding of who God was, and what he had done for Israel, leaves them open to apostasy.

Verse 11 sets out the charges against Israel “that they worshipped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord ...”. They followed other gods (verse 12) and “provoked the Lord to anger”. They “vexed” God by their actions and as a result God hands them over to those who “plundered” them and took away their ability to resist their enemies (verses 14-15). Verse 16 introduces the concept of the judges who would be raised up by God to deliver Israel from the power of those who plundered (יָשַׁע) them (verse 16). The word used here for “deliver” is strikingly close to the name “Joshua” and so it may have brought to mind the way in which these judges acted in a role similar to that of Joshua.

The sending of the judges came as a result of God being moved by “pity” (נָחַם) by their “groaning”. God does not bring the judges in order to bring justice, they are sent because of God’s feelings of pity for his people. They are not

primarily harbingers of the justice of God, for His people, but couriers of the mercy of God. The compassion of God drives him to override his anger and his desire for justice. This being moved to “pity” here does not mean that God changed his mind. The language used here has been described as a “condescension to the imperfection of human speech”.<sup>8</sup>

When the judge died Israel would relapse into apostasy and behave worse than the generation before them, and so the cycle would be repeated again with God sending people to plunder them and then taking pity on them and sending a judge to deliver them from oppression for a season before they would lapse once again into apostasy. In verse 22 the text indicates that God not driving out the enemies before Israel was not only a punishment but also a test of loyalty.

### Chapter 3

Judges takes up where Joshua 13 left off. There are nations left in the land that was promised to Israel that

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<sup>8</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary, p. 173.



have not been conquered. The difference between Joshua 13 and Judges is in the nature of this new generation. They have land, and people left to conquer, but they “did not know either Yahweh or the actions that he had done for Israel” (2:10). They are a generation living under the burning anger of God (2:12, 14, 20). This is a generation that has forfeited the promise of God to drive out these nations before them because of their unfaithfulness to God. In light of this God does not give up on them but makes them a nation under the test (נִסָּה). The test has two prongs: 1. To see if Israel will obey Yahweh (2:22; 3:4); 2. The other prong is to test them in warfare to insure their preparedness for holy war (3:1-2).<sup>9</sup>

The Book of Joshua introduces the hero of God issuing a divine command with the clear expectation that he would obey the law of Moses (Joshua 1:7-8). Judges begins with a command that expects obedience but with a test that anticipates disobedience. In Joshua there was the vision that Israel would drive out the nations before them and

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<sup>9</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, pp. 59-60.

make no alliances with them in order to retain holiness before God and to avoid the temptations of foreign gods. In Judges the reality is that Israel has settled amongst the people of the land and they are living like one big happy family marrying and giving in marriage their children with the people of Canaan. This is a means of securing their relationships with these peoples rather than driving them out or destroying them. They are cementing alliances with the people of Canaan.<sup>10</sup>

Having given this explanation the author now gives a list of the nations that remain and form a semicircle around Israel. Verse 7 moves to the story of Othniel and begins indicating that Israel had forgotten (שָׁכַח) the Lord. This phrase is very common in the Bible and used to denote the faithlessness and ingratitude of the Israelites whenever they abandoned Him and worshipped instead false gods.<sup>11</sup> God had warned Israel not to forget the covenant that they had made with him (Deuteronomy 4:23). Signs of the forgetting

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<sup>10</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 177.

of God are seen in a number of ways: 1. The failure to keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:11); 2. A proud heart (Deuteronomy 8:14); 3. The people perish (Deuteronomy 8:19). The summary of the entire period before the monarchy is that “they forgot the Lord their God” (1 Samuel 12:9-11).<sup>12</sup> They forgot what God did for them in the past so they have no faith to live in the present.

“The anger of Yahweh is kindled against Israel” (verse 8) and they are sold (מָכַר) into the hands of a foreign king. The word used for “sold” here is the same word that could be used for the sale of land, livestock, or slaves. The Septuagint uses the word “to give up” (ἀποδίδωμι) in its translation of this Hebrew word to express the concept that this was something that God did and not an accident or something that indicates that God is in any way passive, he actively “sells” them. This is by no means the end of the story and God is waiting to see their response to this situation and when they respond in a way that

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<sup>12</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 63.

demonstrates at least the hope that their hearts have changed he responds.

### **Othniel**

The response of God is to send a “deliverer” (יִשׁוּעַ), in the Septuagint “a savior” (σωτήρ cf. Luke 2:11), to deliver Israel. Why does God do this? Is it because they repent or because they are obedient? No it is because they “cried out”. Like a baby crying for help Israel, in their despair cries out to this God, this God whom they had forgotten, and he delivers them. The deliverer was Othniel, the younger brother of Caleb. He is not older than 95 at this point and Israel enjoys rest for 40 years until he dies. He does all of this because the “spirit of the Lord came upon him (verse 10) and he judged Israel and fought for Israel and prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

### **Ehud**

The story of Ehud is one that many remember from their childhood in Sunday School class. It is a story that has often been seen as almost comical in an extremely macabre and satirical fashion. The picture that most people hold in

their mind of this story that is perhaps more inspired by our English translations of the Bible and commentators who have perhaps embellished or at least misconstrued the details of this Hebrew narrative. Lawson Stone has produced a masterful rebuttal to the normal manner in which this text is seen and I would encourage you to read that article as you read this text and perhaps it might seem to fit better the list of other Hebrew superheroes that occupy the stories of Judges.<sup>13</sup>

In order to see this text in a new light several words will need to be interpreted, if not translated, in a different way that aligns the ideas that they convey more fully with the design of the narrative of Judges, but also with the way that certain words are used elsewhere in the Scripture. The story of Ehud begins at verse 12 with the phrase, “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel ...”. This begins what will become a common cyclical pattern in the Judges narrative. One of the questions we

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<sup>13</sup> Lawson G. Stone, “Eglon’s Belly and Ehud’s Blade: A Reconsideration”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 4 (2009), pp. 649-663.

might ask even at this point is does someone who is “strengthened” by the Lord seem likely to be a character akin to what we might perceive as “Jabba the Hut”.

In verse 14 the indication is that Israel served King Eglon for 18 years and then there is the transition in the story where once again “the Israelites cried out the LORD”. And once again God answers their call and raises up a “deliverer” for them. This time it is Ehud, who is a left handed Benjaminite. When the Israelites sent tribute to the king, Ehud accompanies the contingent. He has made a special sword for the work he is to do with two edges (literally two mouths **וְלֶה שְׁנֵי פִיּוֹת**). Normally the word *gomed* (**גֹּמֵד**) is translated as “cubit”. This translation is problematic for a number of reasons. One is that this is the only time that this particular word occurs in all of Scripture. Scholars are at a loss as to exactly know how to define this word (*gomed* **גֹּמֵד**), and they have taken it to be a measurement because of the word that follows it. The exact

length of the sword is not possible to determine from an investigation of the meaning of this rare word.<sup>14</sup>

Stone tries to ascertain the length of the sword from the function that it performs so ably and determines that it would be 19.5 inches or longer. This is determined using the remainder of the text, which describes how Eglon is debilitated without even being able to summon help. For a abdominal (בִּטֶן) wound to be so quickly fatal the stroke would have to be precise and extremely deep, otherwise Eglon would be able to cry out or defend himself in some way. The idea of Ehud being extremely fat and that being the reason for the sword being swallowed is disputed by Lawson also. It is the design of the sword and the ferocity of the blow that causes it to be plunged so deeply that the hilt disappears into Ehud, according to Lawson.<sup>15</sup>

He cites several passages that use the term that is translated as “fat man” (בִּרְיָא), which is only used fourteen times in Scripture. Not a single one of these occurrences

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<sup>14</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Lawson G. Stone, “Eglon’s Belly and Ehud’s Blade: A Reconsideration”, pp. 649-663.

refers to obesity. In Genesis 41 the term appears seven times with reference to the seven “fat” cows and “fat” ears of corn of Pharaoh’s dreams. Nothing in the imagery here is meant to suggest that the cows or the corn are fat to the point of being unresponsive or immobile. The cows and the corn are simply well nourished and certainly not intended to be seen as objects of ridicule. This term is used only twice with reference to humans outside the story of Ehad in Scripture. The first of these is at Psalm 73:4, where the text indicates that the prosperous wicked have “no pains in their death, their body is בְּרִיאַ. The Old Greek translation (Psalm 72:4) of the Hebrew Scriptures translates this term as “firmness” (στερέωμα), exactly the opposite of “flabby” or “obese”. The second application of this term used of Eglon, in reference to humans refers to Daniel and his friends. They decline the rich food of the Babylonian royal kitchen and eat only vegetables and water. The author of Daniel indicates their vindication by making it clear that after ten days of this diet they are (טוֹב וּבְרִיאַי בְּשָׂר) “healthier and



better nourished”, literally “good and fat ones of flesh” (Daniel 1:15). This is the description of men in full flower of fitness that have been chosen to serve the royal court and this terminology hardly implies ineffectual obesity.<sup>16</sup>

In the interpretation of Stone, Ehud is a heroic figure who strikes a powerful blow for the freedom of God’s people as his representative “deliverer”. In the more traditional accounts, Ehud perhaps seems less heroic in that he kills a comically obese fat man who then dies an ignominious death. In either account the true hero of the story is God who once more answers the cries of his disobedient people to deliver them from the tyranny of oppression. God delivers them through the mighty hand that not only slew Eglon but also instigated a rebellion that resulted in the deaths of ten thousand Moabites. All of these men are described as “strong and able-bodied men”, but once again in Hebrew, a literal translation would be that they are “fat and strong” men (כָּל־שֶׁמֶן וְכָל־אִישׁ חֵיל).

### **Shamgar**

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<sup>16</sup> Lawson G. Stone, “Eglon’s Belly and Ehud’s Blade: A Reconsideration”, pp. 649-663.

He is the first of what are considered to be six minor judges. His name is not an Israelite name, it is foreign and his father's name is that of a goddess of war (Anath). In this instance we do not have the formula that we had with the first two judges about Israel doing evil nor do we have the duration of the period for which Shamgar was judge. It is the Rabbinic view that he died during his first year of office. Because 4:1 seems to ignore Shamgar it has been suggested that he was unable to protect Israel from Canaanite oppression because Israel was so sinful. In the song of Deborah at 5:6 there is an indication that the period of Shamgar was an extremely dark time for Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Butler thinks that the time of Shamgar should be enveloped as contiguous with the time of Ehud and that as Israel was liberated from Moab by Ehud during this time so Shamgar liberated Israel from the Philistines at the same time. He was an individual liberator of Israel much in the vein of Samson.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, pp. 73-74.

## **Conclusion**

What lessons are we to learn from the stories of these first three of the judges of Israel? We learn about the nature of people, not simply Israel, but that left to their own imaginations and ideas of what is good in their own eyes leads to oppression and evil. We also learn about the nature of God in contrast to the fickle nature of human beings. We learn that despite the covenant that God made with the people he is slow to bring punishment for disobedience and continually goes far beyond the covenant that has been broken by the human participants and continues to bring deliverance where there is neither true repentance, obedience or even faith. There is only desperation and God answers the call of the desperate, and the weak, with strength, faithfulness, and deliverance repeatedly.

# Synopsis

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Judges begins with an assessment of the state of Israel from the time that Joshua died until the rise of the first of the judges. Chapter 1 contains an account very much from the human perspective of things. At the beginning of chapter 2 suddenly there is the appearance of the “messenger” (angel) of the Lord. This messenger reminds Israel of their covenant with God and further reminds them that it is still in force and that God will keep that covenant. This reminder also clearly contains a warning that Israel is not keeping the covenant and this will introduce the punitive aspects of their covenant with God, which entail God removing his blessings from them.

At verse 11, we begin a cycle that will be repeated many times throughout the book of Judges that begins with the people doing “evil” in the sight of the Lord and following after other gods. God not only removes his blessings, “his hand” is against Israel, and

they can no longer withstand their enemies. They are plundered and under the power and control of their enemies and God would send deliverers (judges) when the people cried out to God in desperation and then they would enjoy a time of peace and security under a judge before returning to their evil and their following after other gods and the cycle would begin anew.

Chapter 3 introduces us to the nations that were left to test Israel and prepare them to wage holy war against those who did evil before God. Verse 7 introduces the story of Othniel, the first of the judges and tells of his deliverance and that it lasted 40 years. Verse 12 begins the next cycle and the story of Ehud and his slaying of Eglon and then ten thousand Moabites unfolds. This time there was time of rest for 80 years and finally there is the story of Shamgar that is brief and in many ways seems out of place and out of character, but it may mean that not even a judge

was able to raise Israel from their propensity of evil,  
even for a season.

Through all of this the mercy of God shines  
through in the darkness of the unfaithfulness of Israel.

## Main Points

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1. God is in control.
2. God is merciful.
3. God responds to the desperate cries of his people.
4. For those in covenant with God punishment comes, but always with a desire of turning people back to God and obedience to Him.

# Questions

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1. Do you think that the people of the period of the judges are the same are different than people today? How so?
2. What does this section of Scripture teach us about the nature of God?
3. How do you think God wants to respond to His people?
4. How might what is said here affect how we deal with other people?
5. What might this section of Scripture teach us about making relationships with those that are not Christians?
6. Why do you think people need a leader to follow?
7. What makes a person a leader of people?
8. How might we as God's people identify and support his chosen leaders?
9. What does it mean to be "delivered"?