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EHUD'S MISSION: ASPECTS OF EARLY ISRAELITE RELIGION IN JUDGES 3:12-30¹

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Abstract: The goal of this article is to present the major theological points of Judges 3:12-30 (the deliverance cycle about Ehud and his mission as a judge), and, to arrive at a generalization about Israel's religious fervor in the setting of the Book of Judges. The commentary on the narratological aspects of the material in Judges 3:12-30 underscores a literary feature, i.e. a history of sequential deliverers, who bear the name 'judges', fight the war of YHWH and have an immense practical effect on the Israelite community.

Keywords: *Ehud, Book of Judges, Deliverers, Narratological, Biblical Studies, Old Testament, Orthodox Theology*

1. Culture and Religion in Judges

Among the narratives of the early stages of the development of God's covenant with the Israelites, there's no other historical account that happens to be more replete with violence than the Book of Judges. The horrific cycles of idolatry and divine punishment focus on the political activity of a deliverer, who has been chosen by God to engage in holy war. The social development of the Ancient Near East is marked by the emergence of an Israelite monotheism, as described in the scriptures. Attempts have been made to speculate on the veracity of the entire history of Israel's early settlement in Canaan, still, a preliminary lookback to some of the scholarly treatment on the subject of Hebrew religiosity in the Iron age has to be provided.

¹ Abbreviations: JPS (Jewish Publication Society's 1917 edition of the *Hebrew Bible in English*).

S. N. Eisenstadt hints at the idea of a constructed identity of Israel in the pre-monarchic times, referring to the bond of contractually obligated worship of YHWH.² This type of tribal collective is evident in the organizational focus of Song of Deborah: leaders gather to participate in a military offensive and are variously described as ‚rulers‘, ‚chieftains‘ and ‚princes‘ (Jd. 5:11,14-15). But, how significant is a sweeping victory in battle? How can brute force be connected to the observance of ethical and ritual commandments? W. Zimmerli defines the Israelites as a nation of the calling, as they benefit from the covenant relationship with their deity, while simultaneously being obliged to a responsive attitude.³ The illicit worship of idols inflames God’s anger and is summarized in the formulaic language of doing ‚evil in the eyes of the Lord‘, a phrase repeated throughout several *pericopes* in the Book of Judges. Set in this framework of Israel’s children abandoned to their foes, the institute of judgeship becomes another tangible sign of YHWH’s intervention in the course of the events.⁴ The warrior-type figures from the book manifest the salvific care that began with the Exodus. Every conflict with foreigners is a showcase for the awesome deeds of a deliverer-judge, including the account of Ehud, the kingslayer.

2. Ehud’s raising

Judges 3 neatly fits into the *fabula* of Jd.2:15-18. The largescale consequences of sinning are a withdrawal of providential safety, i.e. ‚abandon‘ of the Israelites so that a Moabite coalition smites them (Jd.3:12-13). Despite the lack of a key phrase like ‚he judged‘, the raising of Ehud is paradigmatic: in Jd.3:15 he arises with an obligation to save his compatriots from the hands of the oppressors, just as Tola (Jd.10:1) and Samson (Jd.13:5).

There is no lofty influence of the spirit of the Lord, occurring with his predecessor Othniel in the very same chapter (Jd.3:10), but the explicit term for a “deliverer”, ‚moshiah‘, מוֹשִׁיעַ, is applied to Ehud, along with a physical anomaly of a ‚restricted right hand‘, iter yad yemino, אִטְרָה יְמִינֵהוּ in Jd.3:15. Ehud’s special skill of left-handedness is exhibited by the members of the house of Benjamin who fight in a devastating civil war (Jd.20:16). Keeping in mind the Benjamite lineage attributed to Ehud is,

² Eisenstadt, S.N. *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, 129–132.

³ Zimmerli, W. *Old Testament Theology in Outline*. Kentucky: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1978, 59–60.

⁴ Soggin, A.J. *Judges: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981, 42–44.

the association may seem disgraceful, if the postexilic editorial additions using “the left hand” in the book actually signify a polemic against king Saul, also a Benjamite.⁵ One issue cannot be overstated: Judges is indeed a structured entity.⁶ Even if the memory of Ehud’s raising has its origin in orally transmitted material, the final form does result from the literary craftiness of redactors.⁷ Nonetheless, the violent nature of Judges 3 is no reason to discredit this particular deliverance story as unnecessary cruel, since affirmations of it do exist, such as the following portrait of Ehud as a dependable man in Midrashic literature:

וְכֵן בְּשׁוֹפְטִים בְּאַהוּד, וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ אֶהוּד חֶרֶב וְלָהּ שְׁנֵי פִיּוֹת (שׁוֹפְטִים ג, טז), שְׁהִיא אוֹכֵלֶת בְּשְׁנֵי עוֹלָמִים, שְׁהִיא עוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה, שְׁפָתוֹב בָּהּ, וְחֶרֶב פִּיפִיּוֹת בְּיָדָם (תהלים קמט, ו), שְׁזוֹר־כָּה בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְלְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

“And so, in Judges, concerning Ehud: And Ehud made him a sword which had two edges (Jd.3:16). This means that he would have a share in two worlds because he was busy studying the Law, about which it is stated: A two-edged sword in their hand (Ps.149:6). Hence he was granted to enjoy the fruits of this world and the hereafter.”⁸

The aforementioned Midrashic application of two textual units from Jd.3:16 and Ps.149:6 dedicated to a weaponry theme urges the reader to laud Ehud rather than to be repelled by him. Furthermore, the acts of the deliverer in Jd.3:15-30 are described at a brisk pace, while creating tension. It will be adequate to emphasize the significance of the gory details in the narrative.

3. A deliverer’s mode

The preparation of Ehud for his task is embedded into the common courtesy of the children of Israel (Jd.3:15-18), as all of them act as subjects of king Eglon. The ‘offering’ to the Moabite court is implied from the evidence of exchanging royal gifts, attested in the Amarna letters.⁹ The

⁵ Amit, Y. *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*. Brill Leiden, 1999, p. 349.

⁶ Klein, L.R. *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*. Sheffield: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1988, p. 11.

⁷ Vriezen, T.C., van der Voude A.S. *Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Literature*. Leiden: Brill Leiden, 2005, p. 281.

⁸ *Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit 14:6*, Metsudah Publications 2005.

⁹ Cohen, R., Westbrook, R. *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 129.

word for ‚carrying‘ the present is a deliberate play on a similar root of the verb ‚to deceive‘, *nasha*, אָשָׁא, while the scheme of eliminating the king illustrates how is shown efficiency during the war in the narrative of Judges (see v.18, “the people that carried the offering”, *haam nosei haminchah*, המְנַחֵה הַנְּשָׂאִי, הָעָם, נְשָׂאִי). The frivolous Moabite guards allow Ehud to enter the privacy of Eglon without checking him for a concealed sword; afterwards, the deliverer gets involved in the most dramatic level of acting on behalf of the Israelite deity:

וְאֶהוּד בָּא אֵלָיו, וְהוּא-יָשֵׁב בְּעֵלְיִת הַמְּקַרָּה אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ לְבָדוֹ, וַיֹּאמֶר אֶהוּד
דְּבַר-אֱלֹהִים לִי אֵלֶיךָ; וַיִּקָּם, מֵעַל הַכֶּסֶּא ,

“And Ehud came unto him; and he was sitting by himself alone in his cool upper chamber. And Ehud said: ‚I have a message from God unto thee.‘ And he arose out of his seat. And Ehud put forth his left hand, and took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly” (Jd.3:20-21, JPS).

Here is where the story shifts to an almost satirical tone, king Eglon’s fat closes upon the blade of his assailant, in an ingenious pay-off of the already established fact that the gentile was ‚overweight‘. The ensuing getaway of Ehud in Jd.3:23-26 further enhances the anticipation of him succeeding, but what is the presupposition? According to one more Midrashic interpretation, the ministering angels reside there to demonstrate a supernatural aid for the killing and approve it.¹⁰

The uncompromising attitude toward enemy kings ranges from impalement (Js.10:26) to cutting of toes (Jd.1:6), so Ehud’s trickery does not deviate from the conventional political practices. The grandeur of the violent deed portrayed in the story in Judges 3 is akin to the numinous category, theorized by Rudolph Otto; according to such imagery and language, the dreadful can be an outlet for expressing religious awe.¹¹ The deliverance from the Moabites shows the extend of God’s authority in each and every part of the sensible realm. Further, the action flows to a stirring of the troops:

וַיְהִי בְּבֹאוֹ, וַיִּתְקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר בְּהַר אֶפְרַיִם; וַיִּרְדּוּ עִמּוֹ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הַהָר, וְהוּא לִפְנֵיהֶם
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַדְפוּ אַחֲרַי, כִּי-נָתַן יְהוָה אֶת-אֵיבֵיכֶם אֶת-מוֹאָב בְּיַדְכֶם; וַיִּרְדּוּ אַחֲרָיו,
וַיִּלְכְּדוּ אֶת-מַעְבְּרוֹת הַיַּרְדֵּן לְמוֹאָב, וְלֹא-נָתַנוּ אִישׁ, לַעֲבָר

“And it came to pass, when he arrived, that he blew a horn in the hill-country

¹⁰ *Genesis Rabbah*, 99.3, Kleinman Edition, 2011.

¹¹ Otto, R. *The Idea of the Holy*. London: Oxford University Press, 1923, 61–62.

of Ephraim, and the children of Israel went down with him from the hill-country, and he before them. And he said unto them: ,Follow after me; for the LORD hath delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand.‘ And they went down after him, and took the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and suffered not a man to pass over.” (Jd.3:27-28, JPS).

The activity of blowing with a ,horn, shofar, שׁוֹפָר, can be designated as an incentive for religious consciousness, its sound causes trembling in the camp at Sinai (Ex.19:16). The horn’s usage in war is famously noted in the conquest of Canaan in Js.6:20 and continued in Gideon’s proclamation to the tribesmen (Jd.6:34). Ehud unambiguously clarifies the work of the Lord in Israel’s salvation, the faithfulness of the divine covenant partner is in the reciprocal ,delivering’ of the Moabites into the hands of the Israelites. Therefore ,the people move in combat as a congregation and mimic the triumphant deliverer by answering the call to ,chase after him, ridefu aharai, רִדְפוּ אַחֲרָי. The current of this ,popular’ and inspiring faith in YHWH has been set apart as a peculiar type of religion by Y. Kaufmann, who defines it as not analogous to the one crystallized in the Later Prophets.¹²

In the hyperbolic denouement from Jd.3:29-30 the heroism is impossible without the Lord’s power infusing the participants. The children of Israel smite an alarming number of ten thousand troops and the emphatic epithets ,oily’ and ,bulky’ are attached to the men on the opposing side. All of this universal appeal to God’s unlimited control in Judges proposes a historiography which can exist solely as a field of theology. The cultural intolerance directed at those outside of YHWH’s covenant, uses the verb ,subdued, khana, כָּנַע, for God’s dealings with Moab as in the formulation of His enduring commitment to the ancestors (Dt.9:3) and in other battles of the judges (Jd.4:23; 8:28; 11:33).

4. Conclusion

Judges 3:12-30 has less to say about the *minutae* of governing in the timeline of the deliverers of Israel, for it substitutes the whole ,writing of the past’ technique with a set of emotionally driven sequences. It aims to advocate the fearful character of the divinity by channeling it via Ehud’s piety. The jarring example of someone refusing to keep back his sword from bloodshed and instead, performing the required work of the Lord

¹² Kaufmann, Y. *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*. London: University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 138.

is, in my opinion, valuable as a plain text. Any figural reading of Ehud's vocation diminishes the impact of the book of Judges, robbing it of the chance to cement itself as a primeval crucible of Israel's national and religious concepts.

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