

Judges 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 20 June 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Judges chapter 3 Now these are the nations that the Lord left to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan.

It was only an order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. These are the nations, the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-Hermon as far as Lebo-Hemath.

They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Ashtoreth. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan Rishithaim, king of Mesopotamia.

And the people of Israel served Cushan Rishithaim eight years. But when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

[1 : 2 0] The spirit of the Lord was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushan Rishithaim, king of Mesopotamia, into his hand. And his hand prevailed over Cushan Rishithaim.

So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of Palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. And the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gerah, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.

And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

[2 : 2 4] Now Eglon was a very fat man. And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, I have a secret message for you, O king.

And he commanded, Silence! And all his attendants went out from his presence. And Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool-roofed chamber. And Ehud said, I have a message from God for you.

And he arose from his seat. And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade.

For he did not pull the sword out of his belly, and the dung came out. Then Ehud went out into the porch, and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

When he had gone, the servants came. And when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, Surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber. And they waited till they were embarrassed.

[3 : 27] But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. And there lay their lord dead on the floor. Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols, and escaped to Syrah.

When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. And he said to them, Follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.

So they went down after him, and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and did not allow anyone to pass over. And they killed at that time about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men.

Not a man escaped. So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel, and the land had rest for eighty years. After him was Shamgar, the son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines, with an ox-goat, and he also saved Israel.

Judges chapter 3 begins with a list of the nations that were left to trouble Israelites in the land. We are told that the reason for leaving these nations was so that the Israelites might learn war.

[4 : 36] Israel needed to recognise the existence of a fundamental conflict. Preserving a seed of the woman required the maintenance of enmity between them and the seed of the serpent, and war was a means of achieving this.

Had Israel enjoyed peace with the people around them, they might have been even more tempted to assimilate to them. Learning war in this context also meant learning dependence upon the Lord.

When you are at peace and at ease and enjoying bounty, it is very easy to lose sense of your need for God. God can use crisis and death as means to keep a forgetful humanity looking to him.

A people that forgets war typically also forgets the cost of things and the virtues required to defend them. A people that have not experienced war can easily become decadent.

When you must put your life on the line for your country, for instance, you need to consider yourself in a different way, considering yourself as part of a story that exceeds your own lifespan, considering the legacy of those who have gone before you, that you are guarding, and the generations to come for whom you want to protect that legacy.

[5 : 45] In the absence of war, it is easy to forget those who have gone before, and those who come after, and to become decadent. The virtues manifested and forged in the crucible of warfare are certainly not the only virtues, and there are some virtues that are best developed in times of peace.

The great exemplars of wisdom in scripture, for instance, people like Joseph, Solomon and Daniel, were not warriors. Wisdom may most thrive in times and places of peace.

However, the main leaders of the people of God in scripture tended to be men who were acquainted with war and characterized by courage and zeal. Such men were better aware of the life and death stakes.

The remaining nations would serve the purpose then of testing Israel to see whether they would obey the Lord and trust in him. The temptation was between abandoning the commandment of the Lord for the seemingly strategic approaches of intermarriage, making covenants with the people around them, and religious syncretism.

Obedying the commandment of the Lord was an option that did not allow Israel to hedge their bets. They had to depend upon the Lord's power, provision, and promise, trusting him to deliver them, and living in dependence upon him.

[6 : 55] We should remember that this dependence also included the modes of war that were open to them. Israel was forbidden to build a war machine of chariots and horses in Deuteronomy 17, verse 16.

People don't usually like to be in such a position of dependence upon God, and Israel was no exception to this. They ended up intermarrying with the Canaanites and serving their gods for this reason.

The judges that the Lord raised up were civil leaders who had settled disputes, but they also functioned as deliverers and avengers. They were not hereditary leaders, but they seemed to hold their position for their entire lives.

We shouldn't think of the judges as if they all came one after another. The judges were primarily regional figures, operating in specific parts of the land, rather than the whole. After the death of Joshua, all Israel went to their various parts of the inheritance, and Israel's life took on a more tribal, local character.

A number of the judges were probably acting at the same time, in different regions of the land. The first judge that we hear about is Othniel. Othniel is either the son of Kenaz, and Caleb's younger brother, or Caleb's nephew, the son of his younger brother.

[8 : 08] Othniel has already been mentioned back in Judges chapter 1, where he married Caleb's daughter, Aksa. This might make more sense if Othniel was Caleb's nephew, and it seems to me that 1 Chronicles chapter 4, verses 13-15 gives weight to that particular reading.

Othniel continues the legacy of Caleb as a brave Judahite leader. He had won the hand of Caleb's daughter by defeating Kiriath-Zephyr, and now the Lord uses him again.

Othniel is filled with the spirit of the Lord for the purpose of delivering the Israelites from a Mesopotamian king. Maybe we should remember Abram's victory over the kings in chapter 14 of Genesis, again from Mesopotamia.

The Israelites had served for eight years under Cushan Rishathayim, and the land enjoys 40 years of rest after the deliverance brought about through Othniel. That's five times as many years as they had been troubled.

Eglon, the king of the Moabites, comes next. He's joined by the Ammonites and the Amalekites against the Israelites. The Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of Lot.

[9 : 14] They lived to the east of Israel. Special restrictions had been placed upon their becoming part of the nation back in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 3-4. Amalek was the sworn foe who had sought to destroy Israel at its greatest point of weakness.

This is mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 17-19. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

Israel's subjection to Eglon continues for 18 years. They have to pay tribute to him, and Ehud is appointed to bring it. Ehud is described as a Benjaminite.

[10 : 40] He's bound in his right hand, which means he's apparently left-handed. And there's an irony here, because Benjamin means son of the right hand. Later in Judges chapter 20 verse 16, we meet 700 more Benjaminite southpaws.

His outwitting of Eglon and his attendance is also given a lot of narrative attention, because it has symbolic purpose. He claims that he has a secret word for the king, which might play upon the word for sting.

His name reminds us of a calf, who has been fattened in preparation for slaughter. They are giving him their tribute, presumably of grain. And the manner of his death, which foregrounds the dagger's entry into his stomach, and the disgorging of his stomach's contents, is a sort of poetic justice.

Of course, the dung has come out of him, but not in the way that they think. Ehud, after he makes his escape, rallies the people to him in Ephraim. Like Joshua, he's associated with Ephraim.

Othniel with Caleb, and Ehud with Joshua. They defeat 10,000 Moabites, much as Judah defeated 10,000 men at Bezek in the first battle recorded in chapter 1.

[13 : 01] The chapter ends with the strange character of Shamgar, associated with Ehud, who may not be an Israelite at all. He's the son of Anath. He kills 600 Philistines with an ox goad.

Israel's weapons were often regular instruments and tools, things that were to hand. They weren't things specially fashioned for war. As James Jordan observes in this connection, Israel was not a people primarily ordered towards military conquest, but towards working on the land.

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