ETHICALLY CULTURED INTERPRETATIONS: 
THE CASE OF EGLON’S MURDER (JUDGES 3)

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I. Reading Ehud

Until recently the story of Ehud was read as a yet another account of God motivating his elect to complete his will.\(^1\) The Greek versions (“LXX” for convenience) largely adopt the Hebrew story line with minor expansions, as when at 3:30, they explicitly cite Ehud as a Judge when the Hebrew does not. The Targum likewise does not expand much on the story. Facing the many *hapax legomena* in the text, both the LXX and the Targum naturally translate interpretively, without serious deflection of contents. In his paraphrase of Jewish Scripture, however, Josephus turns Ehud into a model for Jewish heroic opposition to tyranny.\(^2\) He is a trusted courtier who had real cause to turn against Eglon and when he resolutely strikes at his heart (never at his belly!), the confrontation lacks any touches that might cheapen Ehud’s act.\(^3\) In Rabbinic lore Ehud is deemed a “great scholar” (*Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, 99.3), but hardly any more attention is paid to him. Still, there was only sympathy for the role circumstances forced on Ehud so that when around the 8th century an “Antiochus Scroll” was composed for Hanukkah celebrations, Ehud’s deed was duplicated by

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\(^{1}\) A good review of opinions on Ehud over the centuries is in D. M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Blackwell, 2005), pp. 38–49.

\(^{2}\) “[Ehud] became familiar with Eglon, and that by means of presents, with which he obtained his favor, and insinuated himself into his good opinion; whereby he was also beloved of those that were about the king. Now, when on a time he was bringing presents to the king...Ehud smote him to the heart, and leaving his dagger in his body, he went out and shut the door after him...On this account Ehud was dignified with the government over all the multitude, and...was a man worthy of commendation” (Josephus, *JAnt*, V/4).

the Hasmonean Johanan.4 Ironically, the rabbis gave Eglon more visibility. A tool of God for punishing recalcitrant Israel, Eglon is said to father Ruth and judged as one of David’s ancestors.5

Christian fathers generally read the story mystically (especially in the use of right and left hand) or typologically (Christ conquering evil). For most Christian readers since the Renaissance, however, the issue was not how Ehud accomplished his feat, but the morality of assassinating an elect of God. And while such reticence could be swept aside during revolutionary times, any qualm about the deceit with which Ehud carried his mission was attributed to “oriental” zealotry.7

The tendency to blame the times for Ehud’s ungallant behavior remained constant even when modern biblical scholarship has raised issues about the origins and reliability of the received text. The consensus was that folk material from the Gilgal region (possibly based on some historical kernel) had been reshaped by the Deuteronomist to promote a theology of divine control and of holy wars.8 Argued was the historicity of Moabite control of Israel at such an early period of their nationhood when there is precious little archaeological concordance. Armed with better knowledge of the languages (grammar

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4 Johanan, son of Mattathias, hid a sword “two spans long and 1 span wide” under his cloak. With it, he assassinated Nicanor, a governor King Antiochus had sent to force the Jews into impure worship of false gods, after tricking him into dismissing his staff. For a discussion on the “historical background” for this unhistorical narrative, see A. Kasher, “The Historical Background of ‘Megillath Antiochus’”, Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research 48 (1981), pp. 207–230.

5 “R. Jose b. Huna said: Ruth was the daughter of Eglon, the grandson of Balak, king of Moab” (TSotah 47a; TSanhedrin 105b); “R. Jose son of R. Hanina said: Ruth was the daughter of the son of Eglon who was the son of the son of Balak the King of Moab” (THorayot 10b).

6 Edward Sexby (1616–1658), in advocating the assassination of Cromwell (admittedly not a king), writes, “…and here the Scripture shows us what the Lord thought a fit message to send a tyrant from himself: a dagger of a cubit in his belly. And every worthy man that desires to be an Ehud, a deliverer of his country, will strive to be the messenger” (Killing Noe Murder, 1657; cited from <http://www.arts.yorku.ca/politics/comminel/courses/3025pdf/Killing_Noe_Murder.pdf>, 14).

7 Voltaire is scathing, “…these malignant devotees have incessantly before their eyes the example of Ehud, who assassinated the king Eglon; of Judith, who cut off the head of Holofernes while in bed with him; of Samuel, hewing in pieces King Agag; of Jehoiada the priest, who murdered his queen at the horse-gate. They do not perceive that these instances, which are respectable in antiquity, are in the present day abominable. They derive their fury from religion, decidedly as religion condemns it” (A Philosophical Dictionary, 1764, V/I/ii “Fanaticism”; see <http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/HTML.php?recordID=0060.05=hd_lf060-05_head_007>.