



## Judges - Chapter Three

### I Judges 1:1-3:6 - The Roots of Israel's Apostasy (continues/concludes)

#### I.b Judges 2:6-3:6 - The Unfolding and Consequences of Apostasy (continues/concludes)

#### Summary of Chapter Three

The chapter commences with a list of nations that God allowed to stay in the land to test the Israelites and to allow those that did not have experience of war to gain it. The people failed the test, did not obey the commandments of God and even intermarried with the nations, adopting their gods.

The account then follows the exploits of the first three judges: Othniel, who delivered them from the Aramites; Ehud, who killed the Moabite king and led the Israelites to defeat the Moabites; and Shamgar, who took on the Philistines.

#### I.b.iii Judges 3:1-6 - Nations Remaining in the Land

The final section of the introduction emphasises God's purposes in testing Israel. It concludes with a confirmation that Israel indeed was apostate in this period. The stage is now set for the accounts of the individual judges, a significant number of whom were as much part of Israel's problem as they were sources of deliverance.

<sup>1</sup> Now these are the nations that the Lord left to test all those in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan <sup>2</sup> (it was only that successive generations of Israelites might know war, to teach those who had no experience of it before): <sup>3</sup> 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-hamath.

### Judges 3:1-3

Now these are the nations that the Lord left. God left these Canaanite nations behind because Israel was not faithful in driving them out. One might rightly say that it was a combination of both their choice and God's will.

To test all those Israel. This testing was to see if Israel would truly follow the Lord, as when God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19, and Hezekiah: <<*So also in the matter of the envoys of the officials of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart*>> (2 Chronicles 32:31). Through adversity, God tested Israel in order to refine them. Later in the Book of Judges, Gideon 'tested' God in a display of weak faith in Judges 6:39.

God does not just instantly change every area of the Christian life so that their relationship with him can be proved and improved; so that they will live a life of true partnership with God.

It was only that successive generations of Israelites might know war. This was another reason why God allowed the Canaanites to remain where Israel did not drive them out. God wanted his people to be warriors, and the presence of these dangerous neighbours would make it necessary for future generations to know war. No one likes the struggle against sin, but the battle is good for them. The symbol of Christianity is the Cross, not a feather bed.

The word lords here, *seren*, is Philistine, not Hebrew; the Greeks borrowed it, using it as the basis for their word *tyrannos*, meaning tyrant. The Philistines were part of the mercenary sea peoples mentioned in Egyptian texts as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> Century BC and, according to Genesis 10:14, were descended from the Caphtorim through Noah's son Ham, and they are thought to have links to Crete and the Aegean Sea area.

<sup>4</sup> They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their ancestors by Moses.

### Judges 3:4

They were for the testing of Israel. It was within the power of God to eliminate those pagan nations without any help from Israel. God allowed the troublesome peoples to remain for a reason. The word 'test' here is used in the sense of 'proving.' These nations would remain because God wanted to prove the faithfulness of Israel to himself, and to improve their reliance on him. God had tested Israel with bitter water at Marah: <<*There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test*>> (Exodus 15:25b).

<sup>5</sup> So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; <sup>6</sup> and they took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they worshipped their gods.

### Judges 3:5-6

So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites. God named each of the pagan peoples that stubbornly stayed in the land and the resultant outcome: <<**but they mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did**>> (Psalm 106:35). After the same pattern, some could today make a specific list of ‘pagan territory’ in the life of the believer. Such a list may indeed be helpful in the way that it causes one to identify their enemy.

They took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they worshipped their gods. The book’s introduction ends with a searing indictment of the Israelites’ apostasy through their intermarriage and their infidelity to God.

## **II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel’s Apostasy**

The body of the Book of Judges includes the stories of twelve judges raised up to deliver Israel from successive crises and to ‘judge’ Israel. Their primary function was military in nature. Most judges failed to point people convincingly to the Lord. Indeed, in some cases the judges themselves were not exemplary, e.g. Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

The recurring pattern unfolds in a downward spiral: the first judge, Othniel, was raised up by God and empowered by God’s Spirit, whereas the next-to-last major judge, Jephthah, made a foolish vow and offered his own daughter as a ‘sacrifice,’ and the last judge, Samson, was anything but a paragon of virtue.

### **II.a Judges 3:7-11 - Othniel**

The Spirit of the Lord was on Othniel, the first judge, and he delivered Israel from Cushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia. The section begins by repeating much of Judges 2:11-14. When the Israelites sinned, God gave them into foreign control for eight years. When Israel eventually cried out for deliverance, God provided Othniel as a deliverer.

<sup>7</sup> The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he

sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years.

### Judges 3:7-8

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs. Their ungodly romances led them to the worship of the pagan deities Baal and Ashtoreth. Jesus taught that following him would require that a person to give up the things they love the most (Mark 10:29-30), especially inappropriate relationships.

The Baals and the Asherahs. Baal was the most powerful god of the Canaanites, and Asherah was a popular Canaanite goddess, a consort of El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, who may have been displaced at some point by Baal. The use of the plural forms, i.e. Baals and Asherahs, shows that each was worshipped in many locales, and their local manifestations took on the character of independent gods, for example: the Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:5), Mount Baal-hermon (v.3), Baal-gad (Joshua 11:17), Baal-hazor (2 Samuel 13:23), Baal-hamon (Song 8:11), and Baal-berith, i.e. ‘the Baal of the covenant’ (Judges 8:33). Asherah is also associated with Baal in 1 Kings 18:19 and 2 Kings 23:4.

He sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim. God gave Israel just what they wanted. They did not want to serve God, so he allowed them to be in bondage to a pagan king. Israel reaped exactly what they sowed. In those ancient times, the word Aram-naharaim or Mesopotamia described the fertile, well-watered area that would be today Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq.

The Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years. It was many years of bondage before Israel cried out unto the Lord. It should have been their first thought, although avoiding sin would have been a better first choice.

<sup>9</sup> But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. <sup>10</sup> The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

### Judges 3:9-10

But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord. After the eight years of bondage Israel finally cried out in dependence on God. It often takes many years of bondage and calamity before man looks away from self and looks to God.

The Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites. Othniel of Judah had captured the city of Kiriath-sepher and become Caleb’s son-in-law as well as being his

younger brother, and Othniel's wife was also a woman of faith (Judges 1:13-15). This is the last appearance in the Book of Judges regarding a leader from Judah, the most favoured tribe. The next Judæan leader would be King David.

In his collection of rabbinical fables and traditions titled *Legends of the Jews*, Louis Ginzberg includes two fanciful additions to the story of Othniel:

- “Among the judges, Othniel represents the class of scholars. His acumen was so great that he was able, by dint of dialectic reasoning, to restore the seventeen hundred traditions which Moses had taught the people, and which had been forgotten in the time of mourning for Moses.”
- “Othniel, however, was held so little answerable for the causes that had brought on the punishment of the people, that God granted him eternal life; he is one of the few who reached Paradise alive.”

The Spirit of the Lord came upon him. The OT speaks many times of God's Spirit acting upon individuals, usually to empower them for some service for the whole people of God. In Judges this is described by the Spirit being upon them. Little is known about Othniel, but this was enough to know. The Holy Spirit empowered him for the job God called him to do. Othniel lived by the principle of: **<<Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts>>** (Zechariah 4:6b). Empowered by the Spirit of the Lord, he delivered Israel.

<sup>11</sup> So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.

### Judges 3:11

That the land had rest for forty years after a judge had fulfilled God's work is also seen in v.30; Judges 5:31 and 8:28. In Judges 18:7, some foreigners were also **<<living securely>>**, the same Hebrew word as 'had rest'.

Forty years is an interesting time period in Scripture:

- Both Isaac and his son Esau were forty when they married.
- Moses was forty when he fled Egypt.
- Moses worked as a shepherd for forty years before God called him to lead the people out of Egypt.
- It was the period of time the Israelites ate manna in their wilderness wanderings.
- Joshua was forty when he was sent in to spy out the Promised Land.
- Eli judged Israel for forty years.
- Ishbaal was forty when he became king following the death of his father Saul.
- David and Solomon were both king of Israel for forty years.
- Jehu and Joash were both king of Judah for forty years.

## II.b Judges 3:12-30 - Ehud

Ehud, the second judge, delivered Israel from Eglon, king of Moab. Verses 12-14 give a standard introduction, telling of the Israelites' apostasy and of God's giving them into Eglon's control for eighteen years. The story that follows, of Ehud killing Eglon, is rather graphic, highlighting the rough, even grotesque nature of this period and many of its 'heroes.'



### Ehud Defeats the Moabites

During the time of Ehud, King Eglon of Moab expanded his territory and captured the 'city of palms,' probably to be understood as Jericho. Ehud and the other Israelite delegates were returning from delivering their tribute to Eglon, but Ehud turned back and killed Eglon at Jericho. Then Ehud escaped to the hill country of Ephraim and mustered the warriors of Israel, who captured the fords of the Jordan River to prevent the Moabites from escaping.

<sup>12</sup> The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. <sup>13</sup> In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. <sup>14</sup> So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab for eighteen years.

### Judges 3:12-14

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. After God brought deliverance through the work of Othniel, Israel eventually drifted away from their dependence and obedience towards God. Their victory did not automatically last forever; it had to be maintained.

Moab, situated to the east of the Dead Sea between the Arnon and the Zered, was settled as a kingdom some fifty years before the Israelite invasion.

Ammon, to the north-east of Moab, was established about the same time as Israel in the late 13<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

The Amalekites, who were akin to the Edomites, were a nomadic race occupying the considerable area south of Judah, and were possibly Israel's bitterest enemy; refer to Exodus 17:8-16 and 1 Samuel 15:2-3.

So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab for eighteen years. Israel's sin brought them into bondage. They suffered eight years of bondage before they cried out to the Lord in the days of Othniel. Then they endured another eighteen stubborn years of bondage before they cried out to the Lord once again. Sin always brings bondage, although it comes deceptively. The fish never contemplates the bondage of the hook when it goes after the bait; Satan sets his snares by making the bait attractive and hiding the hook.

<sup>15</sup> But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab.

### Judges 3:15

But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer. This shows the mercy of God. When Israel repeatedly drifted from God, he had every right to cast them off completely. Yet he still responded when they finally did call on him for deliverance.

Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man. In the ancient world left-handed people were often forced to become right-handed. This made Ehud's standing as a left-handed man more unusual, although perhaps not for a Benjamite as commented on below.

It is interesting to consider the origin of Ehud's tribe: <<As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)>> (Genesis 35:17-19). Ben-oni means 'son of my sorrow,' but Jacob renamed him Benjamin meaning 'son of my right hand.' The tribe of Benjamin seemed to have their fair share of left-handers: <<On that day the

*Benjaminites mustered twenty-six thousand armed men from their towns, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah. Of all this force, there were seven hundred picked men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss>> (Judges 20:15-16), and: <<They were archers, and could shoot arrows and sling stones with either the right hand or the left; they were Benjaminites, Saul's kindred>> (1 Chronicles 12:2).*

<sup>16</sup> Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes. <sup>17</sup> Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. <sup>18</sup> When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. <sup>19</sup> But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, 'I have a secret message for you, O king.' So the king said, 'Silence!' and all his attendants went out from his presence. <sup>20</sup> Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof-chamber, and said, 'I have a message from God for you.' So he rose from his seat. <sup>21</sup> Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly; <sup>22</sup> the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out. <sup>23</sup> Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof-chamber on him, and locked them.

### Judges 3:16-23

Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges. If the sword was discovered it would not draw attention to the fact that it was for a left-hander as a single-edged sword might have done. Also, strapping it to his right thigh would make it less likely to be discovered if he were to be searched by the guards as the majority of men would wear their swords on the left thigh, where it would be easily drawn with the dominant right hand.

Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Israel had to pay this tribute money because they were under the domination of the king of Moab. Ehud came to Eglon as a messenger or courier, leading the servants who were carrying the tribute.

When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way. Presents, tribute, etc. in the eastern countries were offered with very great ceremony; with a considerable number of ordinarily slaves, sumptuously dressed, employed to carry items of value, quality clothing and food products to offer to the king. This appears to have been the case in the present

instance. By sending them away, Ehud was protecting them from any retribution following what he was about to do.

**I have a secret message for you, O king. I have a message from God for you.** There seems to be deceit in the first part of the message by saying it is a secret, for God always speaks openly through his Word: <<*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children for ever, to observe all the words of this law*>> (Deuteronomy 29:29), the prophets: <<*I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, 'Seek me in chaos.' I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right*>> (Isaiah 45:19), and through his Son: <<*Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret'*>> (John 18:20). Yet Ehud was right in saying that his message was from God, for the message was, "Those who oppress the people of God touch the apple of his eye and will be judged for it."

**He was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber.** In ancient cities, the coolest place in the house was on the roof like the small roof chamber that a Shunammite couple made for Elisha in 2 Kings 4:10.

**Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly.** Because most men fought with their right hand, it was not expected for a man to use his left hand with a dagger or a sword. This shows how cunning Ehud was and how unexpected the strike was to Eglon.

**He did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out.** This graphic account of stabbing Eglon seems to indicate that the bowel was pierced. He must have suffered a painful death but probably not a prolonged one as it appears he was unable to cry for assistance.

**Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof-chamber on him, and locked them.** This seems to be the calm process of a well planned and executed assassination. Ehud did not flee in panic but took his time so that there would be a delay in discovering the body, allowing him time to escape.

**Joseph was not so measured when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him: <<One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, she caught hold of his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside>> (Genesis 39:11-12). By fleeing he was not only quickly caught but was assumed to be guilty.**

<sup>24</sup> After he had gone, the servants came. When they saw that the doors of the roof-chamber were locked, they thought, 'He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber.'<sup>25</sup> So they waited until they were

embarrassed. When he still did not open the doors of the roof-chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor.

### Judges 3:24-25

He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber. The body of Eglon went undiscovered for some time as the servants believed he sought privacy while using the toilet. This scenario shows how real and true-to-life the Bible is. It describes normal, everyday functions but in a dignified way.

<sup>26</sup> Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah. <sup>27</sup> When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head. <sup>28</sup> 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 allowed no one to cross over. <sup>29</sup> At that time they killed about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; no one escaped. <sup>30</sup> So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

### Judges 3:26-30

The sculptured stones may have been the actual stones set up by Joshua to commemorate the miraculous crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 4:19-24 and thus were a well-known landmark needing no further clarification by the narrator.

The Israelites went down with him from the hill country. Although Ehud was cunning and had great courage, he could not do the work by himself. It was essential for brave and faithful men to rally around him. Ehud led, but he had to have followers. In the same way, God lifts up leaders in the church, but they cannot do the work by themselves. The whole body needs to work together.

Follow after me; for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand. Ehud asked the Israelites to follow him, because he was their leader. Yet he also encouraged them to look with faith to the Lord.

**The essence of leadership is to have people follow their lead. It is not to push them from behind or to send them into situations that the leader would not dare to go themselves.**

And the land had rest for eighty years. Ehud's cunning and courage, coupled with Israel's faithful following of a leader, brought Israel's longest period of freedom

under the 400 year period of the judges. Ehud is a dramatic example of how in the Lord, one man can make a difference, and how God will call others to work with that one man.

The 400 year period of the judges assumes an early date for the exodus in around 1400 BC and is calculated by taking each judge as serving consecutively after each of the periods of rest. However, the period may be shorter if some of the judges served concurrently with parts of the country being at rest, while the next judge was dealing with a problem in another part of the country. A 250 year period of the judges would then accommodate a later date for the exodus that some commentators and historians prefer.

## II.c Judges 3:31 - Shamgar

The third judge was Shamgar, mentioned only here and in Judges 5:6. Shamgar's name is apparently Hurrian, not Israelite, and his designation as son of Anath probably refers to the Canaanite warrior goddess Anath. If so, it is ironic that God used a non-Israelite warrior to deliver Israel from its enemies. Shamgar's activity in single-handedly killing many Philistines anticipates Samson.

<sup>31</sup> After him came Shamgar son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines with an ox-goad. He too delivered Israel.

### Judges 3:31

Who killed six hundred of the Philistines. Shamgar was a man of great accomplishment, yet only one verse describes his work. It is possible that so little is said about Shamgar because his story was so well known.

Shamgar is an excellent example of serving God. He simply used what God put in his hand, in his case, an ox-goad, a stick about 8 feet or about 2.5 meters long, and about 6 inches around at the big end. One end of the ox-goad was pointy for poking the ox, and the other end was like a chisel for scraping the plough clean of dirt. They were often attached to the plough or other ox drawn implement in a way that taught the oxen not to kick out as the sharpened end would stick in them. Thus the phrase was used by the Risen Lord when confronting Saul on the Damascus Road: <<***When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads"***>> (Acts 26:14).

He too delivered Israel. There was nothing spectacular about an ox-goad. However, God can use, and wants to use, whatever comes to hand. Shamgar was merely a labourer doing his job; but he took what was in his hand when prompted by God and he rescued the people of God from their enemies. Shamgar was like Moses and his shepherd's staff or David and his shepherd's sling. God uses simple things to accomplish great things.