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Ehud and Eglon, Story of Thomas Römer

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while often quite original and insightful, suffer from a lack of recourse to ancient versions, not even the LXX. Nevertheless, his work was very influential on the translations of the Jewish Publication Society of 1917 and 1962-82.

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Hans-Peter Mathys

Ehud

1. Son of Bilhan

1 Chronicles 7:10 mentions Ehud (MT ^ʾ*Ēhūd*), son of Bilhan, as one of Benjamin's descendants. The different versions of Benjamin's genealogy in the first chapters of Chronicles differ in most details. This may be the result of genealogies recorded at different times, but confusions were also caused by textual corruption. 1 Chronicles 7:6-12 may be displaced from chapter 8. Ehud, son of Bilhan, is not mentioned elsewhere in the HB/OT; a connection with Ehud son of Gera cannot be established.

2. Son of Gera

Ehud (Heb. ^ʾ*Ēhūd*), son of Gera from the tribe of Benjamin, is the second savior (Heb. *mōšîaʿ*) or judge in the book of Judges. According to Judg 3:15-4:1, he saved Israel from Moab by killing the Moabite king Eglon and by leading Israel in battle against the Moabites. After the king dismissed his servants, Ehud, pretending to have a message from God, thrust a sword into the king's belly. The killing is often portrayed in art. Ehud from Benjamin is also mentioned in 1 Chr 7-8, but the connection to the judge is unclear. 1 Chronicles 8:3 may be an intentional attempt to connect the genealogy with the judge (^ʾ*Ābîhūd* emended to ^ʾ*ābî ʾĒhūd*; see "Gera, Father of Ehud").

According to the sages, Ehud was a great scholar. His sword with two edges (lit. two mouths, *shenei feyot*; Judg 3:16) signified his Torah learning (cf. Ps 149:6) which earned him benefits in both this world and the next (*Tan Wayehi* 14).

Bibliography: ■ Sasson, J., "Ethically Cultured Interpretations: The Case of Eglon's Murder (Judges 3)," in *Homeland and Exile* (ed. G. Gershon et al.; VTSup 130; Leiden/Boston, Mass. 2009) 571-95.

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See also → Eglon (Person); → Ehud and Eglon, Story of

Ehud and Eglon, Story of

- I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. Judaism and Christianity
- III. General Reception
- IV. Visual Arts

I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

The story of Ehud and Eglon (Judg 3:12-30) is the first savior/deliverer-story in the book of Judges. It opens the portion that scholars call "the Book of Saviors" (Judg 3-12*), a source that was brought to the South following the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE and underwent Dtr (and Judaeon) editing.

The Dtr reworking of the original story of Ehud resulted in the addition of verses 12-15* and 27-30 in one or several stages (Becker; Neef). According to the Dtr framework, the Israelites committed evil acts in the eyes of YHWH, who placed them in the hands of a Moabite king. When the Israelites returned to YHWH, he sent them Ehud as a savior who led them to defeat the Moabites.

The original story in vv. 15a, 16-26 probably did not speak about Israelites and YHWH. Rather, it tells of the murder of Eglon the Moabite king by Ehud the Benjaminite. This story, perhaps originally intended as an "ethnic joke" (so Handy), may be dated no earlier than the 8th century BCE, since the localization of the story reflects the political and territorial situation of the 8th or 7th century BCE (Naʿaman; Gaß). The story is often understood as Benjaminite mockery against the Moabites, with no theological or ethical import. It opposes Ehud and Eglon.

Ehud, whose name can be understood as deriving from the Hebrew *hwd*, "glory, fame", is not presented as "left handed", as most translations have it, but rather as one with a "hindered right arm," a pun on the fact that he is a Benjaminite (etymologically meaning, "a son of the right"). This epithet highlights a special training (see Judg 20:16) that allows him to kill the Moabite king with a two-edged dagger.

Ehud's victim, Eglon, bears a name with unknown etymology (according to Knauf it was the name of a town in Gilead, today *ʾAjlân*). Most commentators argue that for a Benjaminite or Israelite audience, the name was understood as meaning "little bull", or "calf", and that the joke of the story is about a fattened calf prepared for slaughter by Ehud (Alter; Gross). The pejorative translation of *bārî* (v. 17) as "fat" has recently been challenged by Sasson (see also Neef), who translates it as "imposing".

However, the suggestion that Ehud's dagger was swallowed by Eglon's belly, "the fat closing over the blade" (v. 22), fosters the traditional understanding that Eglon was indeed a very fat man. In order to assassinate Eglon to whom he has to pay a heavy tribute, Ehud uses a lie, pretending to have a

secret message for the king, which prompts Eglon to send his servants away (v.19). Ehud then presents this message as a divine word (*dēbar ʾēlōhīm*, v.20) and the king respectfully rises from his throne. The rabbinic tradition interprets this behavior positively (*RutR* 2.9: “Because he stood for God, he became father of Ruth”).

Unfortunately, the story is obscure in regard to the circumstances that followed the murder of Eglon. This is due to two *hapax legomena* at the end of v.22 and the beginning of v.23. Some understand v.22 to mean that feces came out of Eglon after he was killed. Others suggest that the dagger came out of the king’s anus (for an overview see Sasson). The idea that Ehud then escaped through the latrines does not fit with any archaeological evidence, since latrines are never installed at the top of a building. Also anachronistic is the assumption that the “throne” on which Eglon was sitting when he received Ehud was in fact the latrines, and that Ehud would then have escaped through the latrines. A more plausible solution is that Eglon was in his private room, and that his servants’ belief that he was relieving himself can be explained by the use of a chamber pot, already attested in Mari (Sasson). The “murder in the toilet” scenario should therefore be abandoned.

One interpretation portrays the encounter between Ehud and Eglon as a homosexual relationship, since the expression “Ehud came to him” (v.20) may be understood in a sexual way. In order to have privacy, Ehud would have offered Eglon a homosexual tryst (Miller). This view seems remote from the literal meaning of the text. The most plausible scenario is that after the murder, Ehud locked out the servants by manipulating a tumbler lock placed on the inside of the chamber that could also be opened from the outside (for a reconstruction of such a lock see Sasson). In its present Dtr context, the story transforms Ehud into a Yahwistic hero; in the original story there was no concern about Yahwism. Ehud and Eglon are both Elohist, and Ehud does not hesitate to invent a word of God in order to accomplish his project. This obvious lie has intrigued rabbis as well as Church fathers (see Sasson; Gross; Gaß), but it was not a problem for the 8th-century BCE author.

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Thomas Römer

II. Judaism and Christianity

Josephus (*Ant.* 5.185–97) describes the situation after the death of Keniaz (HB: Othniel the son of Kenaz) as one in which the people suffered from poor government and did not pay homage to God or obey God’s laws. His Ehud is called Judes, a daring man with a strong left hand. Josephus has him cultivating Eglon with frequent presents, which later help him gain ready access to the king in his inner chambers. Judes smites the king in the heart, not the belly; no mention is made of the king’s corpulence or of his insides pouring out, giving the story a more respectful tone.

In the ancient versions, the OG and the Vg., Ehud is ambidextrous, “using either hand as the right hand.” John Cassian (ca. 360–ca. 435) learns a lesson from this about attaining moral perfection by subordinating the “unfortunate” (left hand) to the “fortunate” (right hand). Everyone has two sides, and with effort and skill a person can turn both hands into right hands and thereby attain perfection of virtue (*Conference of Abbot Theodore*, ch. 10).

The rabbis were troubled by the seeming fact that Ehud had used treachery and deceit to kill Eglon. They explained Ehud’s words to Eglon to mean that the message from God was that God had told Ehud to take his dagger and stick it into Eglon’s belly (*BerRab* 99:3).

Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1100–1155), may have had the story of Ehud and Eglon in mind when he described the death of Constantine, king of the Britons, in his pseudo-historical *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136): “A certain Pict that was Constantine’s vassal came to him, and feigning that he did desire to hold secret converse with him, when all had gone apart, slew him with a knife in a springwood thicket” (6.5; see Fowler: 202).

The Question of Regicide. During and after the Reformation, the morality of regicide was a much discussed issue. The poet and scholar John Milton (1604–1678), relied on the Latin commentary on Judges by Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) to argue that Ehud’s action provides scriptural justification for the occasional need to depose a ruler (Milton 1649: 27). It is no coincidence that his tract was begun during Charles I’s trial and completed soon after his execution. According to Milton, Ehud acted against a tyrant on just principles, as circumstances dictated. Ehud did not receive orders from God; rather, the Israelites cried out to God, “and we