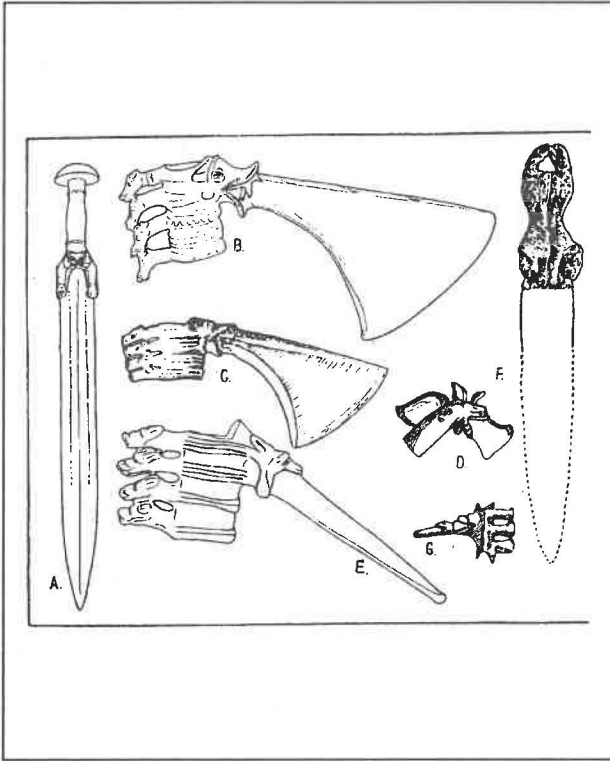


'MURDER IN THE TOILET' (JUDGES 3:12-30): TRANSLATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

The story of Ehud's dealings with King Eglon of Moab is not the kind of story ordinary Bible readers would expect to find in the Bible. To refresh our memories here, in short, is that story.



*'Double mouthed' swords and daggers from the ancient Near East:
the blade protrudes from a carved handle depicting vicious animals
(Meek 1951)*

1. The story

The Moabites teamed up with two of Israel's traditional archenemies, namely the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and forced them into the status of vassalship.

They consequently had to pay annual tribute to Eglon, who erected for himself a palace on Israelite soil at Jericho.

After eighteen years of vassalship and tax paying one of their leaders, Ehud ben Gerah from the tribe of Benjamin thought up a plan to get rid of this burden. Now, Ehud was more than an important leader. Apart from bearing the clan name he could boast a genealogy of three generations. Moreover, he was part of the elite corps of left-handed Benjaminite soldiers.

When he was about to deliver the tribute to Eglon, Ehud had a dagger specially made for him. It was supposed to be a particularly deadly dagger, since its blade protruded from two mouths carved into the dagger's handle. This dagger he strapped under his garment on his right thigh.

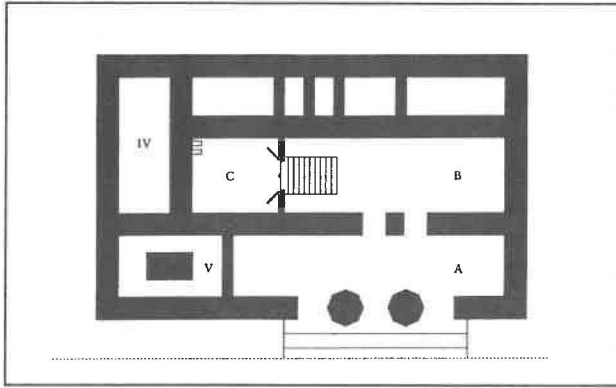
After having delivered the tribute his party left the palace in Jericho. When they reached the boundary stones (פסילים) near Gilgal Ehud sent the carriers away and returned to Jericho. That the narrator makes Ehud turn back precisely at the boundary stones, is important. Such boundary stones often had a picture of the king and/or his gods carved on them. They were intended to remind the vassal of his duties to the Great King and of the fact that the treaty had been witnessed by several gods. For the vassal such boundary stones thus served as a symbol of serfdom.

Arriving at the palace, Ehud publicly announced that he had a 'secret word' for the king. In Hebrew סֵתֶר דָּבָר is, of course, an ambiguous expression. It can either refer to a secret 'word' or a secret 'object'. While Eglon understood the expression in its first meaning, Ehud meant the second. But when the guards searched him for weapons, they inspected his wrong side. He was not your ordinary right-handed soldier and carried his dagger on his right side.

As the treaty terms would no doubt have stipulated, Eglon thought that Ehud's סֵתֶר דָּבָר concerned a report by the vassal leader on some insurrection planned in the hills of Ephraim. Since such messages had to be heard in private, he sent out all his guards and officials - exactly as Ehud had planned.

(A chuckle from the narrator's audience).

Once he was alone in the throne hall, there were but two obstacles to overcome. Firstly, the king was sitting in an elevated throne chamber constructed on rows of (wooden?) pillars. Although a stair case led to the throne chamber, this chamber was 'for him (i.e. the king) alone'. Ehud had to get access to the throne chamber itself. Secondly, Eglon was a very fat man, his massive body symbolising his power and honour. Ehud had to find a way to make him stand up. Otherwise his dagger would not have had the desired effect.



Floor plan of the bet hilani type of palace
A: Waiting hall. B: Throne hall. C: elevated throne chamber
(Halpern 1988)

'I have a word of God for you, o King,' he announced. One again there is double talk. Like דבר סתר the expression דבר דבר may mean 'a word from God' or 'something from God'. While Ehud referred to his dagger as the דבר אלהים, Eglon understood that Ehud had a divine revelation to share with him. So he respectfully got up from his chair.

(Laughter from the audience).

At this point Ehud charged up the stairs, pulled his double mouthed dagger from underneath his cloak and pushed it with such vigour into Eglon's belly that even the handle went in behind the blade, the fat covered the handle and the blade went in the direction of his anus (ויצא הפרשדנה).

(Cheers from the audience).

At this point the story switches to grim humour - no doubt meant to entertain its Israelite audience. Ehud closed the doors of the throne chamber from inside and locked them. Then he escaped through the trap door of the toilet in the throne chamber and, maintaining a pose of ignorance, simply walked out of the throne hall into the waiting hall and fled.

(Violent clapping and loud shouts from the audience)

The king's servants noticed his departure and returned to the throne hall, only to find the throne chamber's doors closed. 'Perhaps the king is relieving himself,'

they said and waited. Now, they were not really wrong, of course. The king was in fact relieving himself. The tip of the dagger's blade reached his anus. But he was not in the *toilet*, as they thought. The only person who had recently used the toilet was Ehud. Their honoured king was relieving himself on the floor of the throne chamber.

After they had waited as long as decency required, they tried to open the doors of the throne chamber. But they were locked! Somebody first had to fetch a key. When they unlocked and opened the doors, they made the gruesome discovery: there was their powerful and honoured king lying dead on the floor with the tip of a dagger protruding from his behind.

(Wild applause by the audience).

By that time Ehud had safely escaped past the boundary stones and into the hills of Ephraim, where he called up his troops, who immediately blocked the passages through the Jordan and killed off thousands of 'fat and courageous' Moabite troops.

(Hurrahs from a satisfied audience: The bastards. It serves them right!).

2. The deuteronomistic framework of the story

What we have just heard had once obviously been an ordinary folk tale about a folk hero. That the Moabites are the antagonists would have added a great deal of flavour to the narrative, since in Israelite tradition they were the scum of the earth born from incest between a drunken father and his two daughters (Gen. 19) and a group who, like eunuchs and people born from incest, were totally unfit to ever be allowed into the 'congregation of the Lord' (Deut. 23:1-4).

But the Deuteronomists saw it fit to include this thoroughly ethnocentric and excessively violent story about a murder in a toilet in its narratives about *divine* salvation:

'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 But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, *the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man*' (Judg. 3: 12, 15).

So, contemplated deception and brutal violence constitute the way in which the God of the Bible and the Father of Jesus Christ raises up deliverers for oppressed people, who cry out to him? And it is OK to scorn your enemies and make them your laughing stock while reciting the 'great deeds of God' to the next generation?

3. Is there a way out?

What shall we do with this kind of story - especially in an ethnically prejudiced and violence plagued country like ours? Commentators have tried all the tricks in

the exegetical and hermeneutical text book to get around the theological problems caused by this kind of narrative in the Bible and to make biblical theological views compatible with today's views of God.

- Historical critics have been quick to dismiss the Deuteronomistic framework of the Ehud story that links it to *divine* salvation as a 'later addition'. Burney (1970:67), for one, says, 'An ancient narrative is introduced by R^{E2} in vv. 12-15a, R^{E2} also closes the narrative in his usual manner in v. 30 'and then goes on to separate the story into two further sources. The problematic text thus seems to have come about as a result of redactional confusion.
- Some commentators choose to explain the violence in the story with reference to the doctrine of God's freedom, at which one can only stand astounded.

'Nobody,' *Die Bybel in praktyk* (Venter 1993: 331-332) says, (my translation), 'expects the Lord to liberate his people through an assassin. God's dealings in these events are in every respect completely different from what we would have expected. His ways of making things happen are too mysterious, too intriguing, too incomprehensible for our understanding. And yet this is how he had Israel saved. The narrative leaves us disconcerted and surprised, [because] we have accustomed ourselves to *our* way of thinking about God. But Ehud turns our fixed ways of thinking upside down. When it concerns the Lord, we are not dealing with just another human being or a phantom of our own imagination. God is unique and lofty and he 'is who he is'. We should therefore always leave room in our thought and expectations for the Lord to act as he sees fit.'

- Others admit some of the moral problems encountered in the text, and try to argue their way out through the employment of dialectical or salvation historical arguments. Gutbrod (1951:193-194), for instance, warns (my translation), 'Where national hatred has been kindled, every means of eliminating the hated enemy becomes justified. Then one unhesitatingly tells about the atrocities committed by one's liberator'. But he then proceeds,

'The narrative only obtains its peculiar meaning through the frame in which it has been cast in the book of Judges ... The narrative is (thereby) incorporated into the basic theme of the book of Judges: 'We were saved, we experienced God's mercy and patience'. But does the wild, nationalistically painted picture fit into this framework? First of all, the new interpretation given to the narrative by the addition of verses 12, 14 and 15 does not take away, justify or excuse anything: deception remains deception, cunningness remains cunningness and assassination. But liberation also remains liberation. Can God then employ an assassin ..., who murders in cold blood, to do his will? This is the question that intrigues *us as long as we view only respectable people as possible instruments in God's hand*. Whoever reads the Bible attentively and views world events from a biblically sensitised perspective, certainly often sees that God not only has mercy on sinners, but also uses sinners to accomplish his work. *God had mercy on the crying, severely oppressed people and*

showed his mercy through a deed, that should be condemned on moral grounds and through a man over whose bravery hangs a dark shadow.'

Herzberg (1953:166 - my translation) also points out the unacceptable nature of Eglon's murder, but then goes on to justify precisely those acts on a theological level. Moab's occupation of Israelite territory amounted to an

'interference with Yahweh's right to the land, which was 'Gods own country'. From this perspective the resistance of the Benjaminites is rooted in a plain higher [than the merely secular, that is], in the kingdom of God, so that Ehud becomes more than a mere liberator in the political and local sense of the word - which he, of course, was in the first place - namely a liberator in the salvation historical ... sense of the word. The deuteronomistic redactional framing of the narrative thus is not a mere subsequent spiritualisation of a basically secular story. Ehud is a link in a chain put together by the guiding hand of God himself, a chain that belongs to his planning.'

This kind of story has obviously embarrassed biblical commentators for quite some time. The explanations offered and the suggestions made for translating the meaning of the story into acceptable categories have not all been very helpful. For instance,

- whether God has been introduced into the story by the author of this or that narrative strand or by a later editor, he is *now* there in the text as an active perpetrator of deception and violence;
- if Bible readers should merely stand in awe before God's freedom to do as he pleases, what would prevent them from once again marvelling at God's freedom in allowing the massacre of people in Natal? Or why would one not justify that violence by following the lead of the narrator's ethnic prejudice and say: 'They are, after all, just a bunch of godforsaken Zulus?' The Ephraimite prejudice against Moabites obviously assisted the God of the Ehud story a great deal in getting them mobilised against the Moabites;
- if one takes a dialectical stand by saying, 'Yes, God does employ assassins *and* yes, assassination is morally wrong' what has one gained in one's understanding of God, or in one's ethical insight? And what should one do with the obvious ethnocentric *Schadenfreude* that permeates the entire narrative? Herzberg (1953:166 my translation) is certainly right: 'The murder succeeds as planned and, rather than with aversion, is described with pleasure';
- if one theologises by saying that the deuteronomistic frame 'elevates' the incident to the plain of salvation history and the kingdom of God, has the problem of the divine employment of brutal violence then been solved in any meaningful way, or has it been complicated even further?

4. Translation

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4. Translation

It would seem that the above efforts at *translating* the Ehud story into (traditional Western) theological categories rather than alleviating the enigma, have succeeded in *confusing* things. It would perhaps have been better *not* to translate these stories into Western theological categories (like the freedom of God, salvation history or dialectical theology) but to first of all try to *understand* them in their strangeness.

4.1 The cultural values and assumptions underlying the Ehud story

Firstly, the fact that the Deuteronomists incorporated this narrative in their story book without editing it theologically, suggests that these redactors could *endorse* the sentiments expressed in the narrative. If Deuteronomy can be looked upon as the ethical basis of the Deuteronomistic History, ethnocentrism (see Deist 1994) and cultural anxiety (see Stuhlmann 1990) belong to the *core values* of the composition as a whole.

Secondly, the rhetoric of the Deuteronomists (who also had a powerful hand in the editing of prophetic books) rests on the culturally relative custom of *shaming* one's opponent. Arguments were not conducted with the aim of rationally convincing the opponent, but with the express aim of publicly shaming him out of his socks, that is, by making him the laughing stock of bystanders. Moreover, if one had been shamed by someone else (like the Israelites by the Moabites) and one appealed the label of shame, one had to shame the opponent even more than one had been shamed in the first place. It is not for nothing that the Ehud narrative stresses the prior *honourable* status of Eglon and his soldiers by describing them as 'fat' people. It is also not for nothing that the narrative ends by stating that, on the day of the battle, Israel *utterly humiliated* the Moabites:

29 וַיִּכְנוּ אֶת־מוֹאָב בַּעַת הַהִיא כַּעֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ
כָּל־שָׁמֶן וְכָל־אִישׁ חֵיל וְלֹא נִמְלַט אִישׁ:
30 וַתִּכְנַע מוֹאָב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא תַּחַת יַד יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Thirdly, cheating and deceiving an opponent was not viewed as a crime or a sin. On the contrary, a person who could achieve that, was looked upon as a *wise* person. It was with *wisdom* that Nathan and the woman from Tekoah could deceive David in pronouncing a sentence of guilty over himself. It was because of his superior *wisdom* and blessing of the Lord that Jacob could secure for himself a huge flock of sheep and goats from the possessions of Laban.

Nowhere in the First Testament is this kind of cheating ever deplored. That Ehud's left-handedness and his ability to use ambiguous words could deceive the Moabite guards as well as the king would therefore not have been looked upon as sins, but rather as divine gifts. The Moabites were defeated amongst other things through their own *foolishness*. And fools *deserved* to be severely punished. Apart from the numerous instances in wisdom literature where parents are instructed to use physical violence in the educational sphere, the Deuteronomic law obliged them to have a stubborn son *executed*. In their own cosmological views such fools

disturbed the cosmic balance and *had* to be eliminated in order to avoid cosmic retribution on the community at large.

Moreover, subduing a foreign nation meant that the cosmic order and creative powers of one's God, emanating from one's capital city (situated on the cosmic centre), were extended to that region as well.

I would suggest that it was precisely the reflection of such cultural assumptions in the Ehud narrative that convinced the Deuteronomists of Ehud's status as a *divinely* appointed saviour and that made them incorporate this narrative in their story book.

4.2 Religious assumptions underlying the Ehud narrative

Perhaps the problems we now experience with the Ehud narrative had had its origins in an ancient translation process. In the ancient Near East violence, death, pestilence, etc. had all been *part* of the constitution of the cosmos. Alongside the god of order there was a god of chaos, alongside the god of life there was a god of death, while the god of pestilence was balanced by the goddess of fertility and regeneration. It was a world in which a balance between positive and negative forces ensured stability and order. The religious logic was a logic of paradox.

The logic of this world view would have created major problems for later monotheist believers, though, because they had to ascribe prosperity *and* pestilence, good *and* evil to the *same* God. There are many passages in the First Testament in which Yahweh is indeed pictured as both benevolent and malevolent, even as a perpetrator of violence and deceit. This is also the logic of the Deuteronomists. Ehud's divine appointment would not disturb them in the least.

However, already in Israelite experience this logic gave rise to serious dispute: how could a God of liberation also be a God of oppression, a God of love a punishing God? But then, if Yahweh did not *cause* evil, who then did? Zoroastrian dualistic cosmology brought relief to some, since it was now possible to blame evil, violence, deceit and the rest on the evil forces in the camp of Ahriman, who in time became identified with *satan*, who once had been a mere accuser in Yahweh's household.

This dualistic solution resulted in such a *transformation* of First Testament religious thinking that it threatened to become an *alternative* to monotheism: it was now possible to ascribe ugly things to Satan and his messengers, but was God then really any longer *in control* of things? And perhaps even more problematic than this was that it now became possible to identify the devil in *individual people*, such as heretics and witches, or in certain groups.

The 'morality' of the Ehud story thus formed part of an extensive theological discourse on the question of who was in control of historical events.

4.3 Transformation in theological interpretation

Biblical interpretation obviously entails much more than providing explanations of the *literary origins* of biblical texts or a mere *translation* of biblical narratives and concepts into western theological categories. Such procedures land us in serious theological contradictions. Merely translated into western theological categories, the Ehud narrative may, for instance, lead us to the conclusion that God has the freedom to have sinners, whom he is supposed to love, executed by treacherous assassins, and that we, as believers should actually marvel at this divine freedom. Moreover, this God might even expect any one of *us* to be the immoral instrument in the realisation of his freedom.

A mere translation may also lead us to conclude that brutal violence may be justified with reference to 'a divine plan' - such as the salvation historical plan. I can only pray that this kind of theological justification for brutality and violence has been buried together with the South African war in Angola and the hunting down of 'enemies of the kingdom of God' by the Ehud's in state security circles.

What we need is a thorough and bold resistance to a palliation of offending biblical cultural values with a view to making them fit into a coherent so-called biblical doctrine of God. But such a hermeneutic should not once again fall into the old trap of distinguishing *in* the Bible between the Holy Writ and Word of God. It should, from extreme examples like the Ehud story, make the necessary deduction that the *whole* Bible suffers, as it were, from its cultural embeddedness and is, therefore, in need of more than mere translation.

I am, under the pressure of contemporary jargon, tempted to say that what we need is a 'hermeneutic of transformation'. It would even sound good to say something like that. The problem is, unfortunately, that I would not be able to tell you what the term means and what its exegetical mechanisms and theological implications would be. I also find a concept like 'imaginative interpretation' appealing, if only I could be enlightened as to what this term really entails.

The only suggestion I can make is that we should at the very least take the *strangeness* of the biblical testimony to God seriously. The moment we do that, we shall also become aware of the strangeness and peculiarity of our *own* theological concoctions. Struggling with the foreignness of the biblical and our own witness may, perhaps, result in something that is less one-sided than the fundamentalist defence of the biblical witness and the arrogance of a theology that may dare to speak about God without reference to the biblical tradition. But what the outcome of the struggle between two foreign entities will be, I cannot imagine at all. But then again, is this not what transformation is all about: a *process* of constant change? And is it not perhaps the essence of faith to embark upon a road of which the destination is unknown?

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