

# Judges Surprise

## Chapter 3

3.02.2007

Chapters 1 and 2 of the Book of Judges are like an overture giving us the pattern and themes of the book. So settle back as the lights dim and the curtain opens for the first 3 Acts of the play. In one short chapter, we cover about 150 yrs, and glimpse 3 judges and 3 traditional enemies of Israel.

Act 1: verses 7-11, 2 characters on stage: a tyrant and a deliverer.

The tyrant oppressed Israel for 8 years. His name rhymes. Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim. In English his name means “the doubly wicked Cushan, king of Syria of the 2 rivers”. It is probably not his real name, but one coined by those who suffered under him. His name is up there with Hitler, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, and the Anti-Christ. Israel suffered greatly, but it was not bad luck, for as I said last week, God sold them into his hands as punishment.

The deliverer is also only sketched. It is Othniel, the son of Kenaz, who in 1:15 had shown himself a good tough warrior, with initiative and flair, who had won the hand of Caleb’s daughter. In 3:6, one of the things that caused Israel’s slide into apostasy was that they married Canaanites. Untouched by that, Othniel defeated the tyrant.

The colour, action and detail are thin. Most of the expressions were used in the overture in chapter 2, such as *they did evil in the sight of the Lord... they served the Baals... the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel... the Spirit of the Lord came upon him etc*

Why so little colour and detail? I believe it is so that the pattern and theology of the judges is hammered in. We are reminded that the story is not really about the tyrant and the deliverer. It is about Israel and God.

When Israel turned from God, he sold them into a tyrant’s hand. When they turned back, he graciously rescued them.

It is a massive hint in the book saying as we progress into the more coloured, more detailed bits, do not lose the focus by concentrating on the tyrant or deliverer. See God’s hand in the harsh and good times. As Romans 8:28 says *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.* Hebrews 12:5-6 says *My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of*

*the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.*

And so it was for Jesus himself. As God’s only Son, he learnt obedience through suffering. He felt God’s rod, not that he deserved it, but he felt it as part of his sonship and as the sin-bearer. and as Pilate interrogated Jesus, he said in John 19:10 *Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you? and Jesus said You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above.*

I do not know who your Pilate of Cushan Rishathaim is, the person you fear because of their power over you, but there is great comfort in knowing that we are never simply the victim, or at the mercy of circumstance. We are always in the hands of our God, whose will is for us to live faithfully for Jesus our Saviour and Lord.

Then in the second Act of chapter 3, more colour, concealment and satire come. The scene opens in a very sombre, matter of fact way. The Israelites again did evil and the Lord strengthened Eglon, king of Moab, to gather allies and to conquer Jericho, and the food bowl of Israel.

The Israelites were forced out of the fertile land, and had to grow crops in the less productive hills, but they had to pay a heavy tribute of food.

This time, the name of the tyrant is not terrifying. Eglon means “Calf”. But his iron hoof stamped on them for 18 years. But when God raised a deliverer, Eglon had become a gullible fatted calf ready for slaughter.

The deliverer is a disabled man named Ehud. The Hebrew word used for left-handed implied his right arm did not function. In that culture, people fought with right hands, so what sort of a warrior was Ehud? The Israelites found a role for this (h)armless man... he helped take the tribute to Eglon. After giving their tribute, they passed the sculptured stones, but Ehud turned back with a special message for Eglon.

In hope of an oracle or a juicy piece of intelligence, Eglon dismissed his bodyguard and left Ehud alone with him. No metal detectors protected the king from this assassin, who had strapped his dagger to the side that bodyguards did not frisk.

There is some colour in the description of the foul deed.

The satire grows as Eglon's courtiers assume their monarch is relieving himself on the chamber pot behind closed doors, so they wait.

By the time they get worried enough to disturb him, Ehud has gone and raised an army to defeat the leaderless Moabites.

In Act 1, everything was plain and clear. Othniel was the people's choice of a leader. Strong, confident, well connected, and a good track record. With God's Spirit was on him he raised the army, went to war and won. But in Act 2, everything was cloak and dagger. Ehud was weak. No one would consider him a born leader.

In Othniel you have the plain ways of God. In Ehud you have God's strange ways. There is a strange way in God's ways, an element which can defy human prediction. His ways can be surprising.

God uses what appears to be very weak and rejected and makes them His way. *The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.* The despised Jesus who was rejected and crucified is now Lord of all. and those who follow him are to be humble, not exercising power like the pagans do, not flashing wealth and might but flaming with love and caring service. In our weakness, He is strong.

However, like a reminder to us not to take pride in our weakness, in Act 3 of Judges 3, we have a 3 line entry about Shamgar. He was strong but probably not a professional soldier. He defeated the Philistines with an oxgoad, a makeshift weapon. And Shamgar's family may not have been Israelites, at least their name suggests they were not orthodox Israelites. For his name is Shamgar son of Anath. Anath was the evil Canaanite goddess of war, the sister of Baal.

Yet God saved his people through him.

Judges 3 reminds me that God does not only work in one way. He is consistent with what he has revealed and promised, but the way he keeps his promises may be very surprising.

So even when things look bleak and like God doesn't care, he may well be working in ways which surprise us in time. As Romans 8:28 says *We know that all things work together for good for those who love*

*God and are called according to his purpose.*