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Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration

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The rather minor character of Ehud in the book of Judges has become a major preoccupation for many biblical scholars in the last three decades. For premodern readers, this story prompted serious reflection on the morality of regicide, possibly deflecting their attention from Eglon's belly or its contents.[1] Matthew Henry in the late seventeenth century was among the first to sensationalize the grotesque aspects of the story, referring to Eglon as "a fat unwieldly man" who "fell like a fatted calf, by the knife, as acceptable sacrifice to divine justice."[2] By contrast, critical interpretation took up the historical settings and compositional development of the text. Thus, while reading the exegesis of George Foot Moore or Charles Fox Burney, one seldom chuckles, but nor does one blush.[3] Then Robert Alter popularized a reading of the story as the parade example not of the ethical implications of regicide but of the aesthetic implications of literary artistry, triggering an

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[1] See the useful summary of the history of interpretation in David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 34–52.

[2] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1708; repr., New York: Revell, n.d.), 2:136.

[3] George Foot Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 89–104; C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes* (2nd ed.; London: Rivingtons, 1920), 67–75. Moore saw Eglon's size as relevant only to accentuate that "a long dirk, hilt and all, was buried in it" (p. 93).

avalanche of vivid, even lurid literary analyses.[4] A generation of interpreters explored the story's every possibility for the humorous or the macabre, stressing Eglon's enormity, Ehud's treachery, and the shortness of his dirk. J. Alberto Soggin expresses contemporary sensibility that finds in the narrative a "great many observations of a humourous kind, though this is a humour which now, at least in the West, seems to be somewhat coarse: there is a large number of jokes based on proper names and on physical defects; there is even a scatological theme which contributes to the ridiculous tension."[5] Subsequent study vividly detailed the material circumstances of the encounter so that today's readers know more about Iron I palace floor-plans, locks, keys, and toilets than they ever imagined the Bible would teach them, though not very much about the morality of capping kings.[6]

The vision of Eglon as a flabby, hulking ruler who was an easy mark for the treacherous trickster Ehud, who did his deed with a short dagger concealed under his clothing and slipped into the king's audience chamber and then into poor fat Eglon, has assumed canonical status for contemporary interpreters.[7] This essay will argue, however, that the current reading, despite its universal popularity and presumed authority, cannot survive critical examination in the light of philology, history, archaeology, and even trauma surgery.

I. Eglon's Belly

Eglon's presumed rotundity has inspired innumerable alliterative clichés like "corpulent king," "portly potentate," or even "crapulous king." These claims, how-

[4] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 37–41; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Alter was not the first, being preceded by Luis Alonso Schökel, "Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter," *Bib* 42 (1961): 149–57.

[5] J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 53; see also idem, "Ehud und Eglon: Bemerkungen zu Richter III:11b–31," *VT* 29 (1989): 95–100. The increasing reliance by scholars on humor or irony to support substantive points of exegesis marks a troubling stage. See Lowell Handy, "Uneasy Laughter: Ehud and Eglon as Ethnic Humor," *SJOT* 6 (1992): 233–46. The dynamics of humor have received little analysis, particularly in a cross-cultural and historical framework. Marc Zvi Brettler (*The Book of Judges* [Old Testament Readings; New York: Routledge, 2002], 29–33) broaches the topic, but appeals to humor based simply on thematic observations such as irony, scatology, or deviancy hardly provide a stable basis for a construal of a story as "comedy" or "satire."

[6] For the most detailed reconstruction of the physical setting of the story, see Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 105–43.

[7] For two convenient examples from different historical and ideological perspectives of incorporating these themes, see Victor Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 58–62; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 156–59.

ever, fail. First, is Eglon really "a young fleshy animal ripe for slaughtering?"[8] Was Ehud's sword really buried in a "sea of paunch?"[9] A simple review of the mere fourteen occurrences of בריא discloses not a single example of obesity. In Genesis 41 the term appears seven times denoting the seven "fat" cows and "fat" ears of corn of Pharaoh's dreams. Neither the cows nor the corn are obese to the point of being unresponsive and immobile. They are simply well nourished and healthy, not objects of ridicule.[10]

The term finds only two applications to humans in the Hebrew Bible outside the Ehud story. First, in Ps 73:4, the prosperous wicked have "no pains in their death, their body is בריא." The LXX (72:4) renders στερέωμα ("firm solid"), exactly the opposite of "flabby, obese." Indeed, English translations pivot around "sound and sleek" and "healthy." The second application of the term to humans refers to Daniel and his friends. Declining the dainties of the Babylonian royal kitchen, the Judean exiles go beyond even Levitical dietary law and eat only vegetables and water. The author signals their vindication by noting that, after ten days of this regimen, they are טוב ובריאי בשר, "healthier and better nourished," literally, "good and fat ones of flesh" (Dan 1:15). The description of young men in full flower of fitness to serve in the court hardly implies ineffectual corpulence.

So then, what of Eglon? Unless this single usage is unique, the narrator in using בריא מאד characterizes Eglon as prosperous, healthy, even attractive: a splendid, strapping specimen, "the realization of full physical, or sometimes moral, potential."[11] Both LXX traditions for Judges translate 3:17b: καὶ Εγλωμ ἀνὴρ ἀστεῖος σφόδρα, "and Eglon was a very handsome man," or even charming and honorable![12] By the same token, the description in Judg 3:29 of the fighters of Moab as כל־שמן ("all robust") cannot imply sluggish, obese enemies, since the phrase is followed by וכל־איש חיל ("all able-bodied"). That these two phrases contain nothing pejorative also appears in every ancient version's rendering, such as LXX:

[8] Gregory Mobley, *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2005), 77.

[9] Halpern, *First Historians,* 59.

[10] For other prime candidates for human consumption, see 1 Kgs 4:23; Hab 1:16. The desirability of animals that are בריא appears in Zechariah's threat that God in judgment would raise up harmful, injurious shepherds who will not care for the weak and wounded, but will devour the most desirable sheep, who are בריא. The positive nuance of בריא appears also in Ezek 34:23, where God declares that in judgment he will separate the fat (בריא) sheep from the lean. While the fat sheep are recipients of judgment, the context (vv. 16–24) stresses God's care for the weak. The strong are portrayed both as בריא and earlier (v. 16) as שמנה, another term encountered in the Ehud story. Again, even with regard to objects of divine judgment, the sense is one of strength and health, not censurable sluggishness.

[11] Robert J. Way, "בריא," *NIDOTTE* 1:735–36.

[12] Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003; Digital edition, Oaktree Software). Perhaps the Vulgate's *crassus* begins the tradition of interpreting Eglon as merely fat and crude.

πάντας τοὺς μαχητὰς τοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ πάντα ἄνδρα δυνάμεως (A). B is more literal with πὰν λιπαρὸν καὶ πάντα ἄνδρα δυνάμεως. But even B is not pejorative. Nor would a narrator such as ours, writing in the heroic tradition, glorify his heroes by asserting the defeat of a flaccid, utterly ridiculous foe. The Bullock of Moab might have been imposing, but he was no preview of the elderly Herod the Great, who would occupy the City of Palms over a millennium later, still less an ancient "Jabba the Hutt."[13]

But what of the statement that Eglon's fat closed over the blade so that Ehud could not draw the sword out? None of the occurrences of חלב in the Hebrew Bible refers to obese bellies, incapacitating or otherwise. A simple survey of occurrences shows that over half the occurrences refer to the *internal* fat covering the abdominal organs of slaughtered animals.[14] These passages stress not the quantity or repulsiveness of the fat but its association with the interior of the animal; it designates in fact the very best parts of the animal reserved for Yahweh alone. It refers as well to the good life, as Israel is said to "eat the fat of the land" (Gen 45:18; Deut 32:14; Pss 63:6 [Heb.]; 147:14 [Heb.]).

חלב refers to human fat in only two contexts. Four references illustrate accusations of arrogance.[15] More relevant to the Ehud story, four other passages depict battle slaughter. 2 Samuel 1:22 recounts, "From the blood of the slain, from *the fat of the heroes* [מחלב גבורים], the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, and the sword of Saul did not return empty." "Fat" here simply parallels "blood" accentuating the carnage of battle. Saul and Jonathan do not appear to have confined their combat to tubby adversaries unable to rise from their chairs. Fat here evokes the slaughter of battle, in keeping with the heroic tradition's relish of grisly death. The association of the fat with entrails calls to mind references in texts such as *Iliad* 20.455–89 (LCL) in which Achilles slashes the belly of Tros, whereupon the liver slides out into the lap of the hapless warrior, followed by a scene in which a sword penetrates

[13] The point is not pedestrian. The narrator's characterization of Eglon as "very fat" has been construed as marginalizing "the Other" by his portrayal as "comical or incompetent." See Uriah Y. Kim, "Postcolonial Criticism: Who Is the Other in the Book of Judges," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (ed. Gale A. Yee; 2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 174.

[14] G. Münderlin, "חלב," *TDOT* 4:391–97; Jean-Pierre J. Olivier, "חלב," *NIDOTTE* 2:137–40. Moore notes this identification (*Judges,* 97). That the fat is specifically the internal fat covering the organs and not subcutaneous fat or the fat intertwined within muscle, visible as obesity, defines its sacredness in Israel's cultic tradition, since it is the middle covering between the skin and the vital organs. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 205–7; Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 69–81.

[15] Münderlin, "חלב," 396. Fat is associated with the face and eyes (though not the belly) in Job 15:27 and Ps 73:7. In keeping with חלב's connection with internal organs, a "fat heart" in Pss 17:10 and 119:70 suggests metaphorically a heart that is covered or protected, that is, insensitive.

literally "in one ear and out the other," and yet another depicting decapitation followed by fluid spurting from the severed spine! And all these are *heroic,* not shameful, deaths.[16] Again, note the use of the term חלב in Isa 34:6–7, which speaks of Yahweh's destruction of the armies of Edom:

חרב ליהוה מלאה דם
הדשנה מחלב מדם כרים ועתודים
מחלב כליות אילים
כי זבח ליהוה בבצרה
וטבח גדול בארץ אדום:
וירדו ראמים עמם
ופרים עם־אבירים
ורותה ארצם מדם
ועפרם מחלב ידשן:

The sword of Yahweh is filled with blood
Glutted with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats
With the kidney fat of rams
For Yahweh has a sacrifice in Bozra
A great slaughter in Edom-land
Wild oxen will go down with them
And bulls with the mighty ones
And their land will be soaked in blood
And their dust will be greased with fat.

Though the text exploits sacrificial language, the stress falls on the savage slash of the blade, not the merciful precision of the kosher knife. No immobilizing obesity here, nor likely with Eglon.

Moreover, the text does not in fact state that Eglon's fat prevented the withdrawal of the sword. The clause sequence is telling:

ויבא גם־הנצב אחר הלהב ויסגר החלב בעד הלהב כי לא שלף החרב מבטנו

The statement in 3:22 that Ehud did not pull the sword from Eglon's belly is a **כי** clause coming after the statements that (a) the grip entered Eglon's abdomen after the blade and (b) Eglon's inner abdominal fat closed over the blade. For the sense that the fat *retained* the blade, **כי** would have to carry the *resultative* import rather than its default evidential sense. The *resultative* tends to be confined to specific contexts such as oath formulas and direct speech.[17] The most straightforward reading of the text in this narrative sequence is not that the fat closing on the blade *pre-*

[16] For a graphic summary of the gruesome ways of death in Homer, see Jaspar Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 91–92.

[17] Walther Theophilus Claassen, "Speaker Oriented Functions of *kî* in Biblical Hebrew," *JNSL* 11 (1983): 29–46.

vented Ehud's drawing the sword out, but was *the result* of Ehud not drawing the sword out. So the text speaks not of the extraordinary blade-retaining powers of Eglon's fat, nor to its prodigious quantity. The text simply stresses the devastating power of Ehud's thrust.

To summarize: the text does not present Eglon, king of Moab, as grossly fat or in any way impeded. The terms used typically denote health, strength, and attractiveness and constitute a portrayal of him as a formidable, healthy, robust man.

II. Eglon the Bovine

Commentators at least since Matthew Henry have sported with Eglon's name, compounded from the word for "calf" and what is taken to be a diminutive ending, with a pejorative or satiric intention, that is, "the fat man with the ridiculous name."[18] Others then suggest that the name shrewdly casts the royal victim as a "fatted calf" sacrificially butchered by Ehud. Meir Sternberg goes even farther, suggesting that the king is "feminized" by Ehud's blade, seen as a phallic symbol in its penetration into the king's belly, though how this squares with Sternberg's equally pointed emphasis on the *snubbiness* of Ehud's dirk is puzzling.[19]

First, the notion of a sacrificial "fatted calf" derives more from English translation than the Hebrew text. Precisely speaking, there is no *fatted* calf in the Hebrew Bible. עגל appears only four times in phrases bearing this English translation, in conjunction with מרבק denoting a "stall-fed calf." Semantically, the reference is not to fat and bears no verbal connection to Judges 3—and verbal connections are required for wordplays.[20] But is this calf sacrificial? While lists of sacrificial animals periodically include עגל, it is nevertheless not a prominent animal for sacrifice.[21] Even then the calf figures mainly in covenant ceremonies both in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 15:9–11; Jer 34:18–19) and in the Sefire treaty (I.A.40), in which the calf is cut (כרת or *gzr*) in two.[22] Half of the calves noted in the Hebrew Bible are cul-

[18] E.g., Soggin, *Judges,* 49.

[19] Claims of a pervasive sexual undercurrent in this story rest on weak philological grounds. Brettler summarizes the principal evidence (*Book of Judges*, 29–33). Comparisons with the Song of Solomon (allusions to doors, locks) fail because the Song sexualizes every metaphor it touches. Is every open door or unlocked lock in the Bible a sign of sex? Likewise, the use of בוא hardly demands a sexual nuance since this verb occurs over twenty-five hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. Is every "entry" phallic?

[20] Amos 6:4 and Mal 3:20 make the stall reference clear and determine the sense of עגל מרבק in 1 Sam 28:24 and Jer 46:2.

[21] Jeffrey S. Lu, "עֵגֶל," *NIDOTTE*, 3:320–21; Helmer Ringgren, "עֵגֶל *ʿegel* עֶגְלָה *ʿeglâ*," *TDOT* 10:445–51.

[22] See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (AnBib 19; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 14–15, 56–57.

tic images, principally the golden calf of Exodus 32 or the bovine images of Jeroboam.[23] Rather than mockery, the name might well be an epithet of Eglon's deity or, alternatively, might express devotion to his God.[24] The proper name עגליו, "Yahweh is a Bullock" or "Bullock of Yahweh," appears on Samaria ostracon 41:1, though without a context.[25] If the personal name of one of David's wives עגלה ("heifer," 2 Sam 3:5) is any indication, undesirable obesity probably does not apply in the term's meaning, unless David preferred portly paramours. Barnabas Lindars notes names compounded from עגל both for persons and places and also observes rightly that animal-based names appear in the Hebrew Bible without obviously pejorative connotations. Ironically, he still falls back on the "fatted calf ready for slaughter" view despite the contradicting evidence.[26]

Second, the form of the name, with the suffix וֹן-, connotes nothing pejorative. The וֹן- suffix is widely taken as a diminutive, following the suggestion of Johan Jakob Stamm.[27] Jakob Barth, however, identified the semantics of nouns formed with this suffix as either abstract or descriptive, or, when designating a group, collectivizing.[28] This analysis is confirmed by comparison with the particularizing suffix *–ân* in Akkadian, which identifies "a specific or particular member of the class or object denoted by the word to which it is attached."[29] No diminutive nuance here, still less a pejorative one. In a proper name, the suffix simply characterizes the person so named by the noun. Eglon, as a personal name, would mean "Bullock

[23] Periodic claims that this story operates with an underlying ironic or comic sacrificial semantics evaporate on close inspection. For a brief summary of arguments in support of this claim, see Brettler, *Book of Judges,* 29–33. Ehud's tribute to Eglon, מנחה, is the most generic term for tribute or offering and in at least thirty-seven occurrences denotes nonsacral "tribute" (*HALOT*, 601–2). The term seems to mean "gift" in the widest sense. It is used in Ugaritic for normal payment of obligations (Heinz-Joseph Fabry, Moshe Weinfeld, "מנחה," *TDOT* 8:407–21; Richard E. Averbeck, "מנחה," *NIDOTTE* 2:978–90). In cultic contexts it in no way demands animal sacrifice. For Eglon as a "sacrifice," apart from חלב, terms associated with animal sacrifice, such as זבח, are absent from this story.

[24] Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (BWANT 3/10; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928), 150–52.

[25] John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 1:10, 12.

[26] Barnabas Lindars, *Judges: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 137–38.

[27] Johan Jakob Stamm, "Zum Ursprung des Namens der Ammoniter," *ArOr* 17 (1949): 379–82.

[28] Jakob Barth, *Die Nominalbildung in den semitischen Sprachen* (1894; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), 316–37.

[29] John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian* (HSS 45; 2nd ed.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 198. In Akkadian the form often denotes "actors in a single incident" (Artur Ungnad and Lubor Matoush, *Akkadian Grammar* [trans. Harry Hoffner, Jr.; SBLRBS 30; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992, Germ. orig., 1964], 43). See also Wolfram von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik* (AnOr 33, 47; Rome: Ponitifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 70–71.

Man" just like "Samson" means "Sun-Man." However much it may entertain interpreters, the diminutive, especially as a pejorative, plays no role in the semantics of the king's name.

What is perhaps most important, the figure of Eglon as an ineffectual "fatted calf" does not square with the literary rendering of the period of Israel's emergence, whether historical or contrived, represented in the book of Judges or other literature of the era. Readers aware of the social and political context of Iron I and the literary traditions it spawned readily grasp that no such person as the contemporary cartoon of Eglon could ever have become a Moabite warlord king or even have figured believably in a fictional tale about that era. Nor would such a story inculcate admiration for Ehud, who would appear trivial compared to Deborah, Gideon, Othniel, Samson, or David, much less their Iron I literary counterparts, Achilles, Hector, Patroclus, or Diomedes.

The Late Bronze/Iron I transition has been termed "arguably the worst disaster in ancient history, even more calamitous than the collapse of the western Roman Empire."[30] The Bronze Age did not go quietly but in trauma, as urban centers from Mycene to Emar and as far south as Gaza fell in flames before fighters from the Aegean and elsewhere.[31] This era saw the collapse of the cosmopolitan city-states of the Late Bronze Age and the twilight of Egyptian hegemony over Canaan.[32] While terming it a "dark age" might be passé, all agree that it was a liminal era in

[30] Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe of ca 1200 BC* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

[31] Jonathan N. Tubb, ed., *Palestine in the Bronze and Iron Ages: Papers in Honour of Olga Tufnell* (Occasional Publication 11; London: University of London, Institute of Archaeology, 1985); William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky, *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C. From beyond the Danube to the Tigris* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1989); Norman Yoffee and George L. Cowgill, *The Collapse of Ancient States and Civilizations* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991); Drews, *End of the Bronze Age;* Seymour Gitin, Amihai Mazar, and Ephraim Stern, eds., *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition: Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries BCE. In Honor of Professor Trude Dothan* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1998); Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300-1100 B.C.E.* (SBLABS 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); Ahimai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1990), 295–367; Oliver Dickinson, *The Aegean from Bronze Age to Iron Age: Continuity and Change between the Twelfth and Eighth Centuries BC* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007). Such a traumatic transition in history naturally also attracts a range of popular theorists and possibly even cranks. See Manuel Robbins, *Collapse of the Bronze Age: The Story of Greece, Troy, Israel, Egypt and Peoples of the Sea* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2001). The collapse of LB has even been blamed on viruses: see Tom Slattery, *The Tragic End of the Bronze Age: A Virus Makes History* (New York: Writers Club Press, 2000).

[32] Ithamar Singer, "Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines in the Period of the Emergence of Israel," in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 282–338.

which one world system had collapsed and its successor had not yet appeared, and competing forces and models emerged. The power vacuum thus created drew in a mélange of tribalesque communities groping toward self-definition resulting in the emergence of tribal confederations and chiefdoms. This development required leaders, "chiefs," who were part politician but mostly warlord, able to command the loyalty and respect of other chiefs and the אנשים רקים, "empty, disenfranchised men," following them.[33] These desperate men took the lead directly in battle. Fierce, capable, and possessed of raw physical courage, not to mention sheer luck, such men inspired the characters in Homer's poems and Sinuhe's tale, not to mention the the portrayals of Goliath and Saul, Samson and David, "mighty men of valor."[34] The possibility of exaggeration and embellishment notwithstanding, these accounts capture the urgent necessities incumbent upon a tribal leader in the liminal era known as Iron I. Failure to meet the standard of charisma, courage, and ruthlessness made for a short career either in life or in legend. The Bullock of Moab would have been cut from this cloth. Ehud took his life in his hands to walk into this beefy strongman's private space alone with murderous intent. But then, Ehud was warlord material, too.

III. The Blade

We turn now to Ehud's dagger. Heroic literature relishes descriptions of the protagonists' weaponry. In *Iliad* books 13–16, which record the most intense combat scenes of the book, Homer recounts seventy-six battle wounds. In only four cases does he omit the name of the weapon employed.[35] On the one hand, commentators emphasize how short the dagger must have been for Ehud to conceal his

[33] Robert D. Miller II, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries BC* (Bible in Its World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). See the literature reviewed in Raz Kletterer, "Chronology and United Monarchy: A Methodological Review," *ZDPV* 120 (2004): 1354; Mobley, *Empty Men*.

[34] For an able analysis of the portrayal of such heroes in ancient lore, see Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death,* esp. 50–102. Not to be overlooked are older works such as Henry Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age (*2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926); Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); and the incisive George Steiner, "Homer and the Scholars" in *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays* (ed. George Steiner and Robert Fagles; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 1–14; Carl Armerding, "The Heroic Age of Greece and Israel: A Literary-Historical Comparison" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1968); Stanley Jerome Isser, *The Sword of Goliath: David in Heroic Literature* (SBL Studies in Biblical Literature 6; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Mobley, *Empty Men*.

[35] Kenneth B. Saunders, "The Wounds in *Iliad* 13–16," *CQ* 49 (1999): 350.

weapon completely.[36] On the other hand, they follow traditional translations that refer to the dagger being a "short cubit" in length, or around twelve inches. But what can we learn about this blade?

The Task

First, the story tells us the job that this weapon must accomplish. A substantial man must be incapacitated or killed so quickly that there is no disturbance or fuss, no opportunity to cry out, and presumably little blood spatter to betray the morbid character of Ehud's visit upon his departure. The text also seems to note the evacuation of the king's bowels, but this event (assuming that the text speaks of it) commonly accompanies death from all causes and says nothing about the blade thrust itself.[37]

The sense of 3:21 ויתקעה בבטנו is a single, devastating thrust of the sword. The verb תקע emphasizes the violence of the thrust. Nothing excludes an angled thrust or even a ripping motion—indeed, the former might be a physiological necessity (see below). When describing penetration by pointy objects, this verb suggests piercing *through,* such as pounding a tent-peg (יתד) into the ground (Isa 22:23, 25) or through Samson's braids (Judg 16:13–14) or even through Sisera's head (Judg 4:21).[38] Clearly the writer intends a devastating, deep thrust, with the blade likely exiting Eglon's back; Ehud "ran him right through."

But how could a single belly thrust accomplish instantaneous incapacitation? Belly thrusts appear only four other times in the Hebrew Bible (2 Sam 2:23; 3:27; 4:6; 20:10), but these instances employ a different term and might not always denote immediate incapacitation or death.[39] Only in the Ehud story do we read of a wound to the lower abdomen, the בטן.[40] Belly wounds are notorious in the annals of com-

[36] Moore constitutes an exception, noting that Ehud wielded a "long dirk" (*Judges*, 93).

[37] Noted by Moore, *Judges,* 97. The rendering of the final clause of the verse has a long controversial history, but need not detain us here.

[38] Jael's peg strikes the ground under Sisera's head (note Judg 4:21, ותצנח בארץ), and Delilah's peg fastens Samson's locks to the wall. The verb also denotes Joab's ramming of three staves into the heart of Absalom (2 Sam 18:14) and the impaling of the body of Saul to the wall of the temple in Beth Shean (1 Sam 31:10 MT).

[39] The four other times in the Hebrew Bible that a stab wound to the lower abdomen causes rapid death do not involve בטן, but rather חמש, which may well be a more specialized term for the lower abdomen. None of these examples exactly fits the story in Judges 3, and at least two explicitly depict gruesome deaths with blood spatter or disembowelment, things not conspicuous in the Ehud story. The Akkadian counterpart, *emsu,* refers to the lower abdomen in medical texts (*CAD* 4:153–54).

[40] This term typically denotes the womb, either literally or metaphorically. That the actual reference is simply the innermost lower abdomen is clear, however, from references not only to the stomach, but also to *male "wombs"* (Mic 6:7; Ps 132:11; Job 19:17). See Cleon L. Rogers, "בטן," *NIDOTTE*, 1:650–52.

bat for a gradual, excruciating death agony. Consider the scene in Homer's *Iliad* when Meriones kills Adamas:

> . . . hounding him as he went, Meriones speared him between the genitals and the navel—a hideous wound, the worst the god of battles deals to wretched men. There the spear stuck. Hugging the shaft he writhed, gasping, shuddering like some wild bull in the hills that herdsmen shackle, trapping the beast with twisted ropes and he fights them all the way as the men drag him off—so he gasped with his wound. (13:656–66)[41]

Note, with this "hideous wound" incapacitation is not immediate. Adamas writhes and struggles like a captured bull.[42] Such a fuss is precisely what Ehud wants to *avoid*. But Eglon drops like a sack of hammers. How could this be?

Not confident of my own capabilities for medical research, I referred this question to a trauma physician with extensive experience with wounds of all kinds, who offered this medical description:

> There are two possible causes for immediate (or almost immediate) loss of consciousness with a belly wound. The first would result in a very rapid death. The aorta is large in the upper-abdomen. If it were transected . . . a human's entire blood volume would/could be spilled in less than 45 seconds. No blood flow to the brain and a person loses consciousness in about 5 seconds. This injury could produce almost immediate incapacitation. It would probably require a sword being thrust completely through the abdomen and exiting to the left of the spine, as the aorta is somewhat protected by the boney spine at that level.
>
> I strongly suspect that this poor king experienced . . . a rapid loss of consciousness from which he never awakened as his blood volume was probably either spilled on the floor or lost within his abdominal cavity.[43]

The blade must traverse the entire abdomen to pierce the aorta. In addition, since the blade enters the lower abdomen, it must travel at a rather sharp upward angle, further elongating the wound's trajectory. The claim that once Ehud was alone with Eglon "it was a simple matter to kill Eglon"[44] is laughably wrong. The stroke required a skilled, deep thrust. Though not a trauma surgeon, Ehud like other expert killers would know the wound's demands on the assassin and the blade. This precise stroke fails if the blade is an inch too short or off target. A minimum length of fourteen to sixteen inches—twenty inches, better—on a big man, to ensure the

[41] In Homer, *The Iliad* (trans. Robert Fagles, with introduction and notes by Bernard Knox; New York: Viking, 1990), 359–60. For the Greek, see 13:567–75 in Augustus Tabor Murray and William F. Wyatt, *Homer: Iliad II* (LCL 171; 2nd ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2:44–45.

[42] On the description of wounds in the *Iliad*, see Saunders, "Wounds," 350.

[43] Personal communication, Jan. 31, 2008. Dr. Joseph W. Richardson, M.D., Emergency Medicine Physician, St. Joseph's Hospital, Lexington, Kentucky.

[44] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth,* 61.

blow's effectiveness. Anything less and our warlord king can fight back, call out for help, or simply thrash about, and the story ends very differently.

The Tool

We turn now to the blade, which Ehud crafts himself.[45] As a precaution, we note that the terminology for edged weapons in the Hebrew Bible remains ambiguous, with Allan C. Emery providing perhaps the best analysis.[46] The assumption that Ehud's blade is short derives from the universal translation of גמד ארכה as "a [short] cubit (was) its length." Of course, by Late Bronze/Iron I standards, a "short cubit" would still be a substantial blade, longer than most excavated edged implements. גמד appears only here in the Hebrew Bible. Interpreters conclude that the word denotes a unit of measure since it governs ארכה, "its length." Both principal LXX traditions for Judges guess σπιθαμῆς ("span"), while the early Jewish interpreters suggest "[short] cubit," all with no known philological basis. The postbiblical Hebrew meaning "shrink, contract" is patently derivative from this guesswork.[47] But must the word denote a unit of length?[48]

What if the author stresses not the sword's *length* but a feature of its *construction* characteristic of its entire length, a concomitant to the note that it is double-edged? Cognates for גמד are hard to find, with only Syriac and Arabic offering candidates. The Syriac counterpart based on *gmd* refers to pressing heavily, with derived senses denoting shamelessness, boldness, or obstinate persistence.[49] The idea of hardness or harshness comes close to the Arabic root *jamada,* which expresses ideas such as freezing, congealing, rigidity, stiffness, and implacability. One use of the word documents a type of sword "such that he who is struck with it becomes motionless," that is, "a sharp, cutting sword."[50] None of these possible cognates is definitive, but they do gesture away from a unit of measure and suggest

[45] For Ehud to craft his own sword, likely from bronze, highlights the OT observation of a lack of metallurgy and weapons among the Israelites (see 1 Sam 13:19–22; Judg 5:8b) and comports well with claims of his membership in an elite warrior class with special abilities and resources. Bronze remained the dominant material in arms and armor throughout Iron I (cf. 1 Sam 17:1–7).

[46] Allan C. Emery, "Weapons of the Israelite Monarchy: A Catalogue with Its Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Implications" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), 137–52.

[47] Noted by Burney, *Judges and Ruth,* 70.

[48] Moore (*Judges,* 94) tersely notes the rabbinic sources. His leap from the word's obscurity to the assumption that it equals the Greek πυγμή (p. 93) set the pace for later commentators, of whom very few seriously question the point. Soggin (*Judges,* 50) admits the uncertainty but offers no alternative.

[49] Robert Payne Smith, ed., *Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 71.

[50] Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), part 2, pp. 451–52, entries related to *jamada*.

instead a characteristic of firmness or rigidity. Might the author be calling attention to the sword as rigid or stiff over its entire length? But how would this characterization distinguish this edged weapon sufficiently to merit mention using this awkward and unconventional terminology? Archaeology provides a possible answer.

The Late Bronze/Iron I transition—the period of Israel's emergence—witnessed the arrival of a new edged weapon in the eastern Mediterranean world: the straight, double-edged long sword known as the Naue Type II.[51] Originating in central Europe in the Late Bronze period, it arrived in the Levant with the Sea Peoples as depicted in the Medinet Habu inscriptions of Ramesses III and the "Trojan Horse" Vase, which offers a gut-wrenching portrayal of this weapon in action.[52] We have scant to no data from Iron I Israel. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith's survey of Iron I Israelite sites reports five daggers, five knives, and no swords.[53] Avraham Faust's study of material markers of Israelite ethnicity does not treat weapons at all, despite the presence of weapons, edged and otherwise, in Iron I Israelite sites, though disdain of arms and armor apparently formed a part of Israel's own self-definition, at least over against the Philistines.[54] Late Bronze era swords in Canaan were, to put it kindly, pathetic. While the curved *khophesh* looks fearsome, it is a single-edged weapon likely to hang up in close-order battle, impossible to carry discreetly, good mainly for post-combat dismemberment of the slain. Nearly all edged weapons from the Late Bronze and Iron I featured the blade attaching to the

[51] Julius Naue, *Die vorrömischen Schwerter aus Kupfer, Bronze, und Eisen* (Munich: Piloty & Loehle, 1903).

[52] Hector W. Catling, "Bronze Cut-and-Thrust Swords in the East Mediterranean," *Antiquity* 22 (1956): 102–26; Nancy K. Sandars, "The First Aegean Swords and Their Ancestry," *AJA* 65 (1961): 17–29; eadem, "Later Aegean Bronze Swords," *AJA* 67 (1963): 117–53. Stephen Foltiny, "Flange-Hilted Cutting Swords of Bronze in Central Europe, Northeast Italy and Greece," *AJA* 68 (1964): 247–57; John D. Cowen, "The Origins of the Flange-hilted Sword of Bronze in Continental Europe," *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 32 (1966): 262–312; Anthony F. Harding, "Mycenaean Greece and Europe: The Evidence of Bronze Tools and Implements," *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 41 (1975): 183–202; Robert Drews, *The Coming of the Greeks: Indo-European Conquests in the Aegean and the Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 203–25; Sariel Shalev, "Redating the 'Philistine Sword' at the British Museum: A Case Study in Typology and Technology," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 7 (1988): 313–42. The most convenient survey remains Drews, *End of the Bronze Age,* 192–208.

[53] Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten in Israel's History," *JBL* 122 (2003): 401–25, esp. 416–20. For comparison with Iron II, see Emery, "Weapons"; Sariel Shalev, *Swords and Daggers in Late Bronze Age Canaan* (Prähistorische Bronzefunde; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2003); Ellen Rehm, *Waffengräber im Alten Orient: Zum Problem der Wertung von Waffen in Gräbern des 3. und frühen 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr. in Mesopotamien und Syrien* (BAR International Series; Oxford: Archeopress, 2003).

[54] Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion, and Resistance* (Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology; Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2006).

grip by a flimsy tang or a short riveted tab. This made for poor slashing and questionable thrusting. Examples of edged weapons from Late Bronze Canaan with a better grip tend to be too short or too dull-tipped to produce the wound needed, and might not even be weapons.[55] The Late Bronze/Iron I Aegean arrival featured one-piece, integrated construction. The hilt and straight double-edged blade were cast in a single bronze (later, iron) ingot, with grip panels riveted directly to the grip tongue, which was as thick and strong as the blade itself, hence Julius Naue's term *Griffzungenschwert*. This sword's blade, though short by Roman or medieval standards, was longer than anything previously used in the ancient Near East apart from ceremonial swords. The Naue II's length, fail-safe grip and double edge made the new sword the perfect melee weapon. It soon became the preferred blade of discriminating marauders right up to the Hellenistic era. It was ideal for Ehud's purpose.[56] This weapon is a rarity in Iron I Canaan—none has been excavated, though Late Bronze and Iron II present a few examples. Thus, the text would understandably pause over the sword's unusual details and custom creation by Ehud himself.[57]

Returning to that distinctive grip, the narrator emphasizes how the grip followed the blade into Eglon's body. Soggin notes how the narrator stresses "the remarkable character of the fact that even the hilt, which would normally remain in the hand of the assailant and outside the wound, penetrates along with the blade."[58] The writer's use of a *hapax legomenon*, הנצב, to describe the grip accentuates the distinctiveness of the sword's construction, again centering on the grip. Examples of the Naue Type II sword typically lack a cross guard, allowing entry of the hilt after the blade. Most also featured a rounded pommel to facilitate a final thrust driving the sword's full length into the opponent.

So how long was this sword? The text says nothing on this topic. Owing to the difficulty of casting a long, hard metal blade, ancient blades tended to be extremely short by later standards. Sariel Shalev's inventory of Late Bronze edged weapons excavated in Canaan shows very few with a functional length over twelve inches, much of which is consumed with the grip. The rare ones that are longer are clearly influenced by the Aegean models and appear in lowland and coastal urban palaces and temples. The whole inventory of eastern Mediterranean Naue Type II swords ranges from 19.5 inches to just over 33 inches, with 24 inches being typical. Ehud's sword could represent a slightly shorter version of this weapon. While other short bladed weapons existed, nothing about their construction would be

[55] See the plates in Shalev, *Swords and Daggers;* also Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study* (trans. M. Pearlman; 2 vols.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 1:172–73, 206–7.

[56] Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 1:10–11; Drews, *End of the Bronze Age,* 192–208.

[57] For Late Bronze examples, see Shalev, *Swords and Daggers,* 60–65, pls. 22–23; for Iron II, see Emery, "Weapons," pl. 77.

[58] Soggin, *Judges,* 51.

remarkable or require comment, especially comment employing the awkward, improvised terminology used in Judges 3.

To summarize: Ehud had to inflict a very specific type of wound for this story, let alone his deed, to be effective. The description improvised by the narrator comports extremely well with the newly introduced, but soon to be commonplace, Naue Type II, at the short end of its documented spectrum of length.

IV. Conclusion

Far from casting Eglon as an ineffectual "fatted calf," the story depicts a chief or warlord of the "dark age" of Iron I as these appear both in history and the lore of the era. Likewise, Ehud appears not as a duplicitous trickster but as a courageous, risk-taking man armed with a custom weapon undertaking a dangerous mission. The portrayal of Eglon is far from dark, ethnic satire, genuine elements of humor notwithstanding. Likewise, descriptions of Ehud's sword suggest a narrator to whom this weapon is new, which he describes awkwardly. The investigation has two implications. First, scrupulous attention to the actual usage and meaning of words in the context of the Hebrew Bible can never be ignored in the quest to discern multiple layers of irony, humor, or ideology in texts. Just as premodern exegesis had to subject claims about a "higher" meaning of Scripture to the text's plain sense, so perhaps postmodern exegetes need to ground their own abstract claims on a more sound analysis of the text's linguistic usage. Second, sometimes stories that seem so safely assigned by contemporary scholars to the realm of undiluted ideology or propaganda unexpectedly undermine purely narratival paradigms of interpretation by surfacing incorrigible linkages to concrete, distinctive realities in Israel's past. The story of Ehud and Eglon still seems to breathe the desperate air of a dangerous time when the world was on fire and a new era was aborning, dark in its birth blood, when desperate men stole into palaces to assassinate dangerous despots. Might this story be as much an artifact of that dark and bloody era as the dagger lodged in its bosom?

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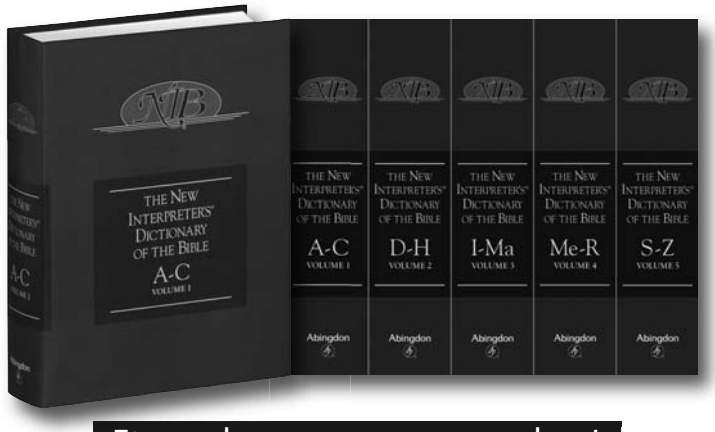

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