

## UMA REAVALIAÇÃO DE JUÍZES 3:12-30

### A REAPPRAISAL OF JUDGES 3:12-30

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the text of Judges 3:12-30. The reason is that the presence of irony in Judges 3:12-30 has been disputed in recent articles. Using narrative criticism and intertextuality as methodology, this paper shows that the cumulative effect of literary features, and Moab-Israel relationship background, results in irony.

**Key-words:** Book of Judges. Moab-Israel. Narrative Criticism. Irony. Food.

**Resumo:** Esse artigo analisa o texto de Juízes 3:12-30. A razão é que a presença de ironia em Juízes 3:12-30 tem sido questionada em trabalhos recentes. Usando crítica narrativa e intertextualidade como metodologia, esse artigo mostra que efeito cumulativo de recursos literários e o pano de fundo do relacionamento entre Israel e Moabe resultam sim em ironia.

**Palavras-chave:** Livro de Juízes. Moabe-Israel. Crítica Narrativa. Ironia. Comida.

The story of Judges 3:12-30 is full of interesting narrative features and has been explored by scholars throughout the centuries. The short yet powerful story of the fat king of Moab and a Benjamite man who is “restricted on the right hand”<sup>1</sup> has been studied since the beginning of the CE, although primarily in an allegorical, typological or homiletical way. From the early years of the Reformation to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discussions were about the ethical and theological elements of the regicide, mainly because of the controversy<sup>2</sup> around Ehud’s treacherous murder of Eglon, king of Moab. The change of focus at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the International Critical Commentary book on Judges by George F. Moore, encouraged new perspectives and considerations, such as historical reliability. One major turning point was Robert Alter’s seminal work, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981).<sup>3</sup>

In this book, Robert Alter calls for a more aesthetic and literary approach to the biblical text, and though he spends only a few pages analyzing the story of Judges 3:12-30, almost every scholar since has referred to Alter to some extent. His main idea is that the narrative is a satire of Moab and that the narrator uses a number of literary devices to that end.<sup>4</sup> However, some scholars<sup>5</sup> dispute the literary devices pointed out by Alter and others after him. They disagree about the use of irony in the text, mainly related to Eglon’s name and the description of his fatness.

This dispute shows the need for a fresh analysis of the narrative. Are there indeed elements of irony? Is there a feature that highlights this possible irony in the narrative? This paper argues that the main element used to infuse irony and humor into the story of Judges 3:12-30 is the relationship between Israel and Moab in the Hebrew Bible, especially related to food and drink.

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<sup>1</sup> PARK, 2015, p. 701-702.

<sup>2</sup> Recently, the story reappears briefly in the same ethical frame in TOLLINGTON (2010).

<sup>3</sup> GUNN, 2005, loc. 532-762.

<sup>4</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 43-47.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, STONE, 2009, p. 649-663.

However, before discussing the narrative features of the story, however, it is essential to define the term “irony.” Irony has been defined as the meaning that emerges from “the dialectical relationship between the said and the unsaid”<sup>1</sup>. This meaning is not necessarily the exact opposite of what may be called the literal meaning, but a meaning that resolves the tension between the literal meaning and its rejection. Wayne Booth explains that sometimes this irony is intended, covert, and fixed and finite in application<sup>2</sup>, and that, in order to realize it, the reader has to follow four steps: 1) Dismiss the literal meaning because of its incongruence; 2) Consider alternative interpretations and realize that they still are “in some degree incongruous with what the literal statement seems to say”; 3) Consider the “author’s knowledge or beliefs”, i.e. consider whether the narrator was aware that the literal meaning is implausible, and intended it to be ironic; 4) Choose a new meaning.<sup>3</sup> Basically, readers must recognize incongruences in the text, realize that the literal meaning is implausible and decide whether to consider this as irony, thus giving the story a “third meaning”.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the analysis should begin by understanding the narrative features of Judges 3:12-30 and looking for incongruences.

The present analysis of Judges 3:12-30 uses the methodology of “Narrative Criticism”, a term that originates in biblical studies. It didn’t start as a theory, or even an organized method, but as a practice.<sup>5</sup> One of the main assumptions of Narrative Criticism is that the literary meaning of a text can only be established by paying attention to its literary form.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, the approach of Narrative Criticism relies also on intertextuality<sup>7</sup> and a “programmatically synchronic attention”<sup>8</sup> to Judges 3:12-30.

## I. Ehud and Eglon: characterization through opposition

The section of Judges 3:12-30 is marked by a pattern established in Judges 2:11-19, which is the following sequence of events: Israel commits evil in God’s sight; God delivers Israel into the hand of its enemies; the people cry out to God; God sends them a savior, a judge; after the deliverance and death of that judge, Israel commits evil again.<sup>9</sup> Othniel’s story, in Judges 3:7-11, is the first to follow this pattern, and in Judges 3:12, following the same pattern after Othniel’s death (Judg 3:11), the narrator states that Israel, again, commits evil and is punished by God, who “strengthened” Eglon, the king of Moab. The verse is in a chiasmic construction, beginning and ending with the evil actions of Israel “in the eyes of the Lord” and centering on God’s strengthening of Eglon. Judges 3:13-14 renders a more elaborate picture, adding that the Moabites supported the Ammonites and the Amalekites in defeating Israel, making Israel serve Moab for 18 years.

However, Judges 3:15 brought new insights to the previous paradigm. Following the report of punishment (Judg 3:12-14), the rescue begins with a significant alteration, mainly because there is no divine engagement in Ehud’s call. Also, since Ehud is called merely a deliverer (מוֹשִׁיעַ),<sup>10</sup> he does not judge (שָׁפֵט) Israel, as Othniel and others do (Judg 3:9-10, for example). Meir Sternberg points out that, while Judges 2 establishes a “cyclical plot,” as

<sup>1</sup> SHARP, 2009, p. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> BOOTH, 1974, p. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10-13.

<sup>4</sup> For more on definition and occurrences of irony, see: MARTINS, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> MOORE, 2016, p. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> As stated by Franz Rosenzweig: “how something is said is not peripheral to what is said” (BUBER and ROSENZWEIG, 1994, p. 61).

<sup>7</sup> FEWELL, 2016, p. 17-20.

<sup>8</sup> FEWELL and CHRISTOPHER, 2016, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> CULLEY, 1992, p. 97-98; AMIT, 2001, p. 448-49; WEBB, 2012, p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> CULLEY, 1992, p. 99; KLEIN, 1989, p. 37; BUTLER, 2009, p. 69.

mentioned above, and while the initial description of the stories and final statements are very similar, some variations occur in the body of the narrative of deliverance, rendering each narrative unique.<sup>1</sup>

The deliverer is presented in a twofold description and, as Alter emphasizes, the biblical narrator is reticent in presenting details; whatever is told in the narrative “usually proves to be for a thematic point”<sup>2</sup>. Since descriptions of humans are rare in biblical narrative, when they do appear it is because the plot requires them.<sup>3</sup> Meir Sternberg affirms: “Ostensible descriptive of the statics of character, all these epithets are implicitly proleptic within the dynamics of action. Not even the most idiosyncratic trait fails to cohere, sooner or later, with the processes of history”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the description of Ehud is the first step to understanding the narrative.

The character is described as “Ehud son of Gera the Benjamite”, and as “restricted on the right hand”. The etymology and meaning of the name Ehud is uncertain<sup>5</sup>, but his connection with the Benjamites is relevant. Etymologically, Benjamin means “son of the right hand”<sup>6</sup>, or alternately “son of the south”, and Ehud’s physical description, after his tribe affiliation, is associated with his right hand: Ehud is אִישׁ אֲטָר יְדִימִינוּ, which literally means “restricted in the right”, as mentioned above. The phrasal construction appears only twice in the Hebrew Bible, both times in the book of Judges (3:15 and 20:16), and both times describing Benjamites. The word for “restricted” or “bound” comes from the root אֲטָר, and its meanings include “to close”<sup>7</sup> or “to shut”<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, in the other text of Judges, the association of Benjamites with their left hands does not seem to be negative at all. In Judges 20:16, the same phrasal construction אֲטָר יְדִימִינוּ is used to describe the Benjamites, but with added detail (“every one of them could sling a stone at a hair and not miss”<sup>9</sup>), more as a specific trait than a handicap. Another text, 1 Chronicles 12:1-2, describes the Benjamites as ambidextrous, suggesting an advantage in war, not a disadvantage.<sup>10</sup> While the term אֲטָר could refer to a deformity or defect,<sup>11</sup> the analysis of the other texts above shows that it is not; in fact, it was seen as advantageous for the Benjamites, and thus for Ehud.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, it is interesting to realize that the narrator did not use a direct description – left-handed – but chose to emphasize the right hand. First, it is a wordplay on the tribe’s name, Benjamin, as mentioned above: the deliverer is a “son-of-the-right-hand”, who happens to be

<sup>1</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 271-272.

<sup>2</sup> ALTER, 1992, p. 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> BERLIN, 1994, p. 34-36; BAR-EFRAT, 2008, p. 48; GUNN and FEWELL, 1993, p. 57; SCHIPPER, 2016, p. 390-391.

<sup>4</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 331.

<sup>5</sup> CLINES (ed.), 1993-2011, p. 142; KOEHLER and BAUMGARTNER, 1994-2000, p. 18; STERNBERG, 1987, p. 330.

<sup>6</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 332; BOLING, 2008, p. 86; NIDITCH, 2011, p. 57.

<sup>7</sup> KOEHLER and BAUMGARTNER, 1994-2000, p. 37. The translation suggested for Judges 3:15; 20:16 is “impeded on the right side”.

<sup>8</sup> CLINES (ed.), 1993-2011, p. 202. The translation suggested for Judges 3:15; 20:16 is “shut in respect of his right hand”.

<sup>9</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 153-154.

<sup>10</sup> PARK, 2015, p. 702-704; ALTER, 2019, p. 891.

<sup>11</sup> SOGGIN, 1981, p. 50. Soggin argues that it is because of Ehud’s deformity that Eglon allowed him to come close. Indeed, various commentators see Ehud as a handicapped person who overcomes his disability to be victorious. Another point is made by Lowell K. Handy, in his article “Uneasy Laughter: Ehud and Eglon as ethnic humor” (1992, p. 233-246), where he argues that Ehud is shrewd, like Jacob, David, etc., an Israelite stereotype: “Ehud simple fits into the Israelite’s self-perception as shrewd individuals, which is often referred to in scholarship as being ‘wise’”.

<sup>12</sup> PARK (2015, p. 703) mentions Near Eastern artwork to point out the advantage of left-handed fighters.

restricted in his right hand.<sup>1</sup> The wordplay is clear because of the choice of words בַּיְמֵינוּ and יְדֵינוּ.<sup>2</sup> Second, as pointed out by Suzie Park, it could be related to the symbolic meanings of right and left in the Hebrew Bible. Here, the right hand is associated with good things as the power and actions of God (Isa 48:13; Exod 15:6; Pss 89:25; 110:1; etc.), morality (Ps 137:5), approval (Gen 48:13-20; Ps 80:17; Isa 41:13; etc.), and purity (Exod 29:20; Lev 8:23; 14:14, 17; etc.), whereas, implicitly<sup>3</sup>, the left hand seems to be the opposite. As Ecclesiastes 10:2 summarizes the concept: “A wise man’s mind is at his right, and the fool’s mind at his left”<sup>4</sup>. Both points explain the emphasis on the right hand, instead of describing the left-hand and its possible negative implications.

The characterization of Ehud proceeds with more detail, now related to his actions. Ehud’s first action is to be Israel’s envoy: “sent the people of Israel, by his hand, tribute to Eglon, king of Moab” (Judg 3:15). This implies that Ehud is empowered by the Israelites to be their messenger to the Moabites. His next actions are: “and Ehud made for himself a sword, and to it two edges, a cubit in length, and he girded it under his clothes, on his right thigh.” (Judg 3:16). Since descriptions are important in biblical narratives, the two details about the sword are relevant: two edges and cubit length. The double-edged sword is literally, in Biblical Hebrew, a sword with two mouths (שְׁנֵי פִּיּוֹת). As mentioned by Sternberg, “In biblical idiom, swords not only have ‘mouths’ but also ‘eat’ (e. g., 2 Sam 11:25) their prey”<sup>5</sup>. The length is specific, a גַּמָּד, a *hapax legomena* in the Massoretic Text, “which is a cubit, about 17 inches. This would be short enough to conceal the weapon strapped to the thigh”<sup>6</sup>.

The initial description of Ehud entails three pieces of information, and then four of his actions. The information is: he is raised by God to be the deliverer; he is a Benjamite; he is restricted on the right hand (Judg 3:15). All of this is presented in one *wayyiqtol*<sup>7</sup> sentence, where God is the subject, and Ehud the direct object. Then, Israel sends through Ehud’s hand a tribute to Moab (Judg 3:15), Ehud makes a sword, girds it (Judg 3:16), and then presents the tribute to Eglon (Judg 3:17) – all of this in four *wayyiqtol* sentences. In the first part, Israel acts through Ehud, sending a tribute to Eglon, and in the last Ehud presents the tribute to Eglon. In between, Ehud performs two actions concerning the sword. He is an active character, a skillful blacksmith, a strategist, and a leader.

Like Ehud, Eglon first appears in a sentence where God is the subject and he is the direct object: “and YHWH strengthened Eglon, the king of Moab” (Judg 3:12). In fact, his title מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב is mentioned along with his name in every appearance in Judges 3:12-17, but from there on, neither of them returns.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Eglon gathers the Ammonites and the Amalekites and goes to war against Israel. These are two verbs of action, always in *wayyiqtol* sentences. However, the first description of Eglon comes in a nominal clause, with just one characteristic: “and Eglon was a בְּרִיאַ מֶאֶד man” (Judg 3:17). Although both characters are introduced to the narrative by an act of God (Judg 3:12, 15), Eglon is presented with only half the actions and descriptions. The king of Moab, strengthened by God, is just בְּרִיאַ; the deliverer, raised by God,

<sup>1</sup> Some commentators understand that to be a pun, which, along with other puns throughout the text of Judges 3:12-30, constitutes one of the main sources of irony. See, for example: HANDY, 1992, p. 236; KLEIN, 1989, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> PARK, 2015, p. 705-707.

<sup>4</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 3, p. 702.

<sup>5</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 333.

<sup>6</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 91. Lawson G. Stone (2012, p. 239; 2009, p. 660-663) presents an interesting discussion about גַּמָּד, arguing that it is not a unit of measure, but something about the sword construction, indicating that the sword was rigid, or stiff.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, JOUON and MURAOKA, 2006, p. 360-367.

<sup>8</sup> BLOCK, 1999, p. 158. Eglon is mentioned without his title in Judges 3:17b and, in Judges 3:19, he is again called “king” by Ehud, but without the complement “Moab”, and without reference to his name.

is a Benjamite and restricted in his right-hand. Eglon is a less active character than Ehud, more of a politician. The narrative focuses on Ehud's actions, with around twenty action verbs, while Eglon is acting much less.

## II. Irony and Food: Eglon and the offering

The meaning of Eglon's name has been discussed and disputed. Since Mathew Henry<sup>1</sup>, commentators have associated עגלון with עגל ("calf"). This is corroborated by the Hebrew Bible's use of other proper names based on animals: for example, one of David's wives is עגלה (2 Sam 3:5), a "heifer", the feminine form of עגל.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that a pun with עגל, "round" is, if unlikely, also possible.<sup>3</sup> There are other possibilities to understand עגלון: it could be linked to the name of a deity<sup>4</sup> or a cultic image.<sup>5</sup> The discussion revolves around the humor in the name, since the name is not עגל, but עגלון, which could be a pejorative use of the suffix ון. Lawson Stone<sup>6</sup> argues strongly against any kind of humor in the name עגלון; based on etymological research; moreover, Barnabas Lindars<sup>7</sup> affirms, correctly, that animal-based names do not have pejorative implications *a priori*. However, Yehuda T. Radday<sup>8</sup> makes a strong case that narrators sometimes use a name to infuse humor. How then to resolve this question?

Moshe Garsiel argues that some names are not explained in the Hebrew Bible, and that their meanings are "interpretations of a *midrashic* (homiletic) nature". In sum, some past or future event "infuses name with meaning", creating a word- or soundplay that Garsiel calls "*midrashic* name derivation", or a pun.<sup>9</sup> Garsiel mentions Jacob's name (יעקב) as an example, because there is an etymological explanation for it ("a short version of the common name" יעקבאל), a literary etymology connected with Jacob's birth in Genesis 25:26 ("he was born while his hand held Esau's heel", עֶקֶב), and a "*midrashic* name derivation" in Genesis 27:36, where a wordplay with עֶקֶב suggests that יעקב means someone deceitful. Sometimes, "without a reason why a person or place has gained a particular name", the biblical writers utilized other "potentialities" to create meaning, "regardless of their reasonable etymology", as in Genesis 27:26 mentioned above, where "Esau exploits Jacob's name for his own purposes".<sup>10</sup> The same Garsiel advocates that Eglon's name is a case of "*midrashic* name derivation", mainly because of the first description of the king of Moab: בריא מאד.<sup>11</sup> The context gives meaning to the name.

Eglon's first description, בריא, has been discussed as well among biblical scholars. בריא can be translated as "fat" and is used in reference to cows, sheep, oxen, and animals (Gen. 41:2, 4, 18, 20; 1Kgs 5:3; Ezek. 34:3, 20; Zech. 11:16); ear of grain (Gen. 41:5); meal (Hab. 1:16); and three times to men (Judg. 3:17; Ps. 73:4; Dan. 1:15).<sup>12</sup> Alter argues that בריא doesn't just

<sup>1</sup> HENRY, 2011, loc. 43909.

<sup>2</sup> SASSON (2014, p. 224) even argues it could be a custom, since there were many names connected with animals in the Hebrew Bible (Caleb, Deborah, Jael, etc.) and in the Sumerian King List, for example.

<sup>3</sup> BUTLER, 2009, p. 69; BLOCK, 1999, p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> ALONSO-SCHOKEL (1961, p. 150) mentions something like "Calf-God"; STONE (2009, p. 655) refers to a proper name on Samaria ostrakon 41:1 to allude to this possibility.

<sup>5</sup> STONE (2009, p. 654-655) mentions Exodus 32, and 1 Kings 12:26-33, two episodes when the Israelites worshipped calves; AMIT (1989, p. 110) made the same allusion before, but without mentioning biblical texts.

<sup>6</sup> STONE, 2009, p. 654-657.

<sup>7</sup> LINDARS, 1995, p. 137-138.

<sup>8</sup> RADDAY, 1990, p. 59-97. He mentions עגלון briefly as an example of humor, translating it as "big calf".

<sup>9</sup> GARSIEL, 1991, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 115, 215.

<sup>12</sup> KOEHLER and BAUMGARTNER, 1994-2000, p. 156; CLINES (ed), 1993-2011, p. 263.

mean “fat”, but is also a wordplay on מרייא, which refers to animals fattened for slaughter<sup>1</sup> in several Hebrew Bible texts (2 Sam. 6:13; 1 Kgs. 1:9, 19, 25; Isa. 1:11; etc.)<sup>2</sup>. Sternberg believes that ברייא is a description of fatness, mainly because of phrasing and wordplay involving the sword and the king’s size: “The undersize sword contrasts with the oversize king, while the sword’s ‘two mouths’ (the Hebrew for ‘two edges’) slyly suggest the reason for his corpulence: to get so fat would require more than a single mouth”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the fact that Eglon’s name is linked to a calf makes his description as “very fat” suggest that he is an animal for slaughtering.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, besides Judges 3:17, the use of ברייא for men does not seem pejorative. In Daniel 1:15, the term is used to describe the excellence of Daniel and his friend, compared to other men who eat only vegetables and drink water, which makes it hard to argue that ברייא has anything to do with obesity; rather, it seems to suggest a “fatness of health and prosperity”<sup>5</sup>. The other text is Psalm 73, where the psalmist envies the well-being of the wicked (Ps. 73:3), including their ברייא (Ps. 73:4). Again, it is hard to argue that ברייא suggests obesity here. Furthermore, the LXX translates Eglon’s description in Judges 3:17 as a “very handsome man”. Based on all these usages, Stone and Sasson propose that Eglon might have been an imposing man, not a grotesquely obese king.<sup>6</sup>

However, as shown by Mieke Bal, a character is constructed through the repetition of relevant characteristics, until the accumulation of characteristics shape the image of the character.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while Stone and Sasson reject the humorous connotation of the phrase עגלון מאד ברייא, the connection of Eglon’s name with עגל – as well as his description as ברייא, which is mainly used for fattened animals – are cumulative data that intentionally create a satiric image of the king of Moab. In addition, the character is constructed in contrast with other characters<sup>8</sup>, and, as mentioned above, there is a sharp contrast between Ehud’s active role and Eglon’s limited activity in the narrative.<sup>9</sup> This is another sign that the king has limited mobility, as an obese person would have.

The data confirming the humorous construction of Eglon’s character adds another layer when we consider the tribute context. Judges 3:17a (“and he presented the tribute to Eglon, king of Moab”) and 3:18a (“and when he had finished presenting the tribute”) cover the tribute presented to the king of Moab, and two important words appear in both verses: the verb קרב and the noun מנחה. In verses 17 and 18, the verb קרב is used twice for Ehud’s presenting the tribute (מנחה) to Eglon, and both times the verb is in the *hiph’il*. It is well-known that in the *hiph’il*, קרב is the term for a cultic offering, the context of almost 90% of its occurrence in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup> The noun מנחה is connected through numerous parallels with sacrificial terms, and while מנחה does not refer to animal sacrifice specifically (it is a technical term for a grain offering), it is associated with the sacrifice, and with incense offering.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> KOEHLER and BAUMGARTNER, 1994-2000, p. 635; CLINES (ed), 1993-2011, p. 486.

<sup>3</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 331-332.

<sup>4</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 45; AMIT, 1989, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> STONE, 2012, p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> SASSON, 2014, p. 229; STONE, 2009, p.651-652. STONE (2009, p. 656-657, p. 660-663) goes further by making his argument around the possible date of this story, Late Bronze and Iron I, based mainly on the description of Ehud’s sword. To him, Eglon was a fierce warlord.

<sup>7</sup> BAL, 2009, p. 126-127.

<sup>8</sup> BAL, 2009, p. 127; BERLIN, 1983, p. 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> The contrast between Ehud and Eglon is the main reason why HANDY (1992, p. 236-238) assert that both characters are stereotypes, and that Eglon’s description is meant make him look stupid. To Handy, Eglon’s name and description mark him as a fictitious character.

<sup>10</sup> GANE and MILGROM, 2004, p. 14-143.

<sup>11</sup> FABRY and WEINFELD, 1997, p. 407-421.

Stone considers מנחה a generic term for any kind of tribute or gift,<sup>1</sup> but, in fact, מנחה “never occurs as a generic term” and its “content must have been variable”<sup>2</sup>. This means the meaning of מנחה is governed by its content (what exactly is offered) or by the verb (what exactly is done). Consequently, קרב in the *hiph'il* (an attested case of a verb referring to a cultic offering) followed by מנחה (a noun connected with ritual offerings, especially grain) indicates a cultic context.<sup>3</sup> Yairah Amit aptly summarizes the connection between מנחה and קרב in the *hiph'il*, noting that “the combination of the two forms appears in the Bible only in the context of ritual ceremonies”<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, one can confidently assume that Eglon’s name and his description as a very fat man are used along with the cultic language to create a sense of incongruity, and the resulting humorous effect. Is Eglon, like an animal, fattened to be slaughtered in a sacrificial offering by Ehud? If Eglon is in fact the offering, what is Ehud taking as an offering? Is it a cultic scene in a secular environment? Or is it a secular scene with a cultic tone? If קרב and מנחה are references to a cultic setting, is the sacrifice meant for YHWH? Even Judges 3:15b-18 seems to be playing with all this ambiguity:

וישלחו בני־ישראל בידו מנחה לעגלון (3:15b)  
 ויעש אהוד חרב ולה שני פיות (...) (3:16)  
 ויקרב את־המנחה לעגלון מלך מאב (3:17a)  
 ועגלון איש בריא מאד (3:17b)  
 ויהי כאשר פלה להקריב את־המנחה (3:18a)  
 וישלח את־העם נשאי המנחה (3:18b)

This short section is marked for an *inclusio* by the repetition of the verb שלח, in verses 15b and 18b. Both sentences start with the verb in *wayyiqtol* and include the noun מנחה. In Judges 3:15b, the people of Israel send through Ehud (שלח) a tribute/offering (מנחה) to Eglon, and in Judges 3:18b, Ehud sends (שלח) the people carrying the tribute/offering (מנחה) on their way. After the first שלח, there is a description of Ehud’s sword, separate from the narrative, without further explanation, (Judg 3:16). Then, in Judges 3:17a, Ehud presents (קרב) the tribute/offering (מנחה) to Eglon, king of Moab. Next, Eglon is described as a very fat man, again without further explanation, separate from the story (Judg 3:17b). Judges 3:18a repeats that Ehud presented (שלח) the tribute/offering (מנחה), now preceded by the verb פלה (‘to finish’), which indicates it may have taken some time.

All this highlights two main ideas. First, it intensifies the natural opposition between Eglon and Ehud mentioned above, since Ehud acts by making a sword and Eglon is just very fat. Second, the term מנחה appears more generically in the opening and closing sentences, but very specifically with קרב in the center. Ehud takes מנחה (Judg 3:15b), probably a grain offering as a political tax/tribute. At some point before his arrival, he makes a sword without explanation (Judg 3:16). The presentation of מנחה gains ritualistic and sacrificial overtones because of the use of קרב (Judg 3:17a), and the description of Eglon as fat appears randomly, omitting his title (king of Moab). The ambiguity and incongruity in the word choices and structure turn the king into an animal and the tax/tribute into a sacrificial offering.<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity and incongruence of the scene leads to an announcement: Ehud will use his sword to sacrifice the fattened calf,

<sup>1</sup> STONE, 2009, p. 655.

<sup>2</sup> FABRY and WEINFELD, 1997, p. 410.

<sup>3</sup> WEBB, 2012, p. 171-172; BUTLER, 2009, p. 228-229; SASSON, 2014, p. 228-229.

<sup>4</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> MACDONALD, 2008, p. 113-114.

Eglon. However, maintaining the ironic tone, the use of מנחה alone in Judges 3:18b does not resolve the ambiguity and incongruity of the scene.

### III. Ehud x Eglon: the assassination

The sequence does not break the cultic atmosphere, but changes the Israelite sacrificial context, returning to the pagan setting of Moab, as Ehud turns back from the פסילים. In other places in the Hebrew Bible, the term הפסילים, with the article, refers to idolatry (See 2 Chr. 33:19, 22; 34:3, 4, 7; Isa. 42:8; Hos. 11:2), specifically a kind of stone sculpture idol. In this context, it is probably a reference to a cultic site or landmark.<sup>1</sup> Ehud's return from this pagan cultic site, as well as his food offering, may have enhanced Ehud's importance for the king, who grants him an audience.<sup>2</sup>

This context features the first spoken words from Ehud and Eglon, after the cultic offering (מנחה) and Ehud's return from the pagan cultic site (פסילים). Ehud's first words are "a secret word I have for you, king" (Judg 3:19). He is not only an ingenious sword-maker, but also a master of communication, adding a humorous tone to the dialogue with a simple wordplay: the word דבר can mean "thing" or "word", and while the king thinks he may receive a secret message from the idols, since Ehud just returned from them, the reader knows that Ehud carries a secret "thing", i.e. a sword under his clothes.<sup>3</sup> Eglon's response is the Hebrew onomatopoeic הַס ("sssh"), and at the end of Judges 3:19, when all his attendants have left, it can be translated as "Silence".<sup>4</sup> Eglon is so eager to hear the secret word that he takes no notice of the almost rudely manner that Ehud addressed him, neither using third person or a locution and sticking just "king" in the very end of the sentence.<sup>5</sup>

There is no clue whether Ehud has planned the whole setup, but he ends up alone with the king in a "cool upper chamber", where he addresses Eglon once more (Judg 3:20). The translation "cool upper chamber" for בעלית המקרה is disputed, mainly because it is not supported by archeological evidence. In order to remain cool, rooms would have had to be insulated from direct sunlight, probably burrowed into the ground, rather than built upward.<sup>6</sup> However, the construction in Judges 3:20 (בעלית המקרה) is similar to the one in Judges 3:24, בחדר המקרה, suggesting an audience room above the ground floor. From the mention of doors (closed by Ehud in Judg 3:23) one can imagine a kind of private chamber near the audience/throne room.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, determining the exact location of the scene is difficult. Robert Alter points out the lack of data about Moabite palaces.<sup>8</sup> Besides, Yarah Amit<sup>9</sup> notes that the reader is constantly left wondering what is going on and where, and because of Eglon's lack of physical movement, it seems the entire action, from the offering to the dialogue and assassination, takes place in the same room. There are spatial ambiguities in the narrative after Judges 3:17: Where exactly did Ehud present the offering to Eglon? How far is the place of the idols from the palace? Is the place where Ehud first speaks to Eglon the same as the one when he addresses Eglon the second time? As a result, the reader's imagination is vital to fill in the narrative.

<sup>1</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 91; WEBB, 2012, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 111-112; WEBB, 2012, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 46; KLEIN, 1989, p. 37-38.

<sup>4</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 91; SASSON, 2014, p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> BLOCK, 1999, p. 164-166; SASSON, 2014, p. 232-233.

<sup>7</sup> WEBB, 2012, p. 173; STONE, 2012, p. 241; SASSON, 2014, p. 233; BLOCK, 1999, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 111-113.

Ehud's second speech in Judges 3:20 is similar to the first in Judges 3:19, but instead of a "secret word" (דבר־סתר), he now mentions a "word of God" (דבר־אלהים). After confirming that he is alone with the king, Ehud speaks again, but with some important differences. First, in a rare direct speech, Ehud addresses the king without any form of courtesy, all the more notable considering his status as a vassal. The second difference, as mentioned above, is that the "secret word" is now "word of God", with the noun אלהים. This sustains the sense of deceit, since אלהים is "much more comprehensive and less definite than the personal name יהוה"<sup>1</sup>. It adds another layer to Ehud's return from the פסילים, because Eglon, seeming to assume his message to be divine, rises from his chair to receive it (Judg 3:20).

Judges 3:19-20 present a staircase structure that points out their similarity and differences, retaining a similar syntactic pattern. Both verses begin with a location, first Ehud returning from the פסילים, and then Ehud and Eglon in the עלית המקרה. After location, both verses present Ehud's speech with the pun on דבר. Ehud has a concealed "thing", a sword from אלהים, since he was raised (קום) by God to be Israel's deliverer (Judg 3:15). Finally, both verses end with an action by Eglon: first he speaks, demanding silence, and then rises (קום) to receive the secret "thing" Ehud carries. God sent (קום) Ehud to deliver Israel from the hand of Moab, who in turn is assassinated by the hand of Ehud after he rises, קום, from his seat:

Judges 3:19 – Location (פסילים)

Ehud speaks (דבר־סתר)

Eglon's response (he says "Silence")

Judges 3:20 – Location (עלית המקרה)

Ehud speaks (דבר־אלהים)

Eglon's response (he arises from his seat)

Judges 3:21-22 describes the assassination *per se*, in a drawn-out, almost slow-motion scene marking a change of pace in the narrative.<sup>2</sup> In Judges 3:19-20, the narrator breaks the flow of the text by using inverted syntactic Hebrew phrases (*vav* + subject + verb + complement), but the regular syntax returns in Judges 3:21-22 (*vav* + verb + subject + complement), restoring motion to the narrative and describing the action in detail. The description of Ehud reaching for his sword, with his left hand moving from his right thigh, harks back to Judges 3:16, when the sword and its hiding-place are first mentioned, and to Ehud's first appearance in Judges 3:15, which mentions his left-handedness.

Thus, information that had seemed disconnected becomes integrated, culminating in the murder of Eglon and signifying that Ehud had it planned all along.<sup>3</sup> The action unfolds in a gripping sequence, because Ehud "sends", שלח, his left hand to pull his sword (Judg 3:21). The same verb, שלח, is used to describe Israel sending Ehud with the offering. The parallel between Israel and its deliverer is recalled: Israel sends Ehud, a left-handed man, to take an offering to Eglon; Ehud sends his left hand to pull his sword and thrust it into Eglon. Ehud's action resembles other actions in the book of Judges and the Hebrew Bible. For example, the verb תקע refers to the killing of Sisera by Jael (Judg 4:21); to Delilah's cutting of Samson's hair (Judg 16:14); and to Joab's killing of Absalom (2 Sam 18:14).<sup>4</sup> Another interesting connection is with 2 Samuel 20:8-10, where Joab kills Amasa with his left hand, using a sword hidden in his garment. All these stories involve similar sorts of deception and violence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BUTLER, 2009, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 114; WEBB, 2012, p. 173-174.

<sup>3</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 107-115.

<sup>4</sup> SASSON, 2014, p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> PARK, 2015, p. 708-710; FROLOV, 2013, p. 112; GUNN, 1974, p. 303-306; NIDITCH, 2011, p. 57-58.

Ehud's thrust (תקע) is so violent that the hilt<sup>1</sup> sinks into Eglon's belly so deeply that the king's fat closes over the word (Judg 3:22) and Ehud is unable to retrieve it. The word for "fat" here is הלב – clearly a wordplay with להב ("blade") in the same verse – and along with the previously mentioned links between קרב and מנחה, it alludes to the context of sacrificial offerings<sup>2</sup>, since הלב "is almost always the fat burned when Israel sacrifices to redress wrongs or obtain absolution"<sup>3</sup>. As pointed out by Meir Sternberg<sup>4</sup>, it is a "macabre joke" that the sword of two mouths (Judg 3:16) eats the fat king while simultaneously being devoured by his belly fat.

Eglon's death turns grotesque when he is described as making an involuntary bowel movement. The word הפרשדנה is from the root פִּרַשׁ, "excrement"<sup>5</sup>, and it is a *hapax legomenon* in the form that appears in Judges 3:22.<sup>6</sup> The text itself is unclear, and one may infer that the excrement is released from Eglon's wound, since Ehud thrusts his sword into Eglon's belly, but it is far more likely that the anal sphincter, in the death spasm, released the excrement. Curiously, the narrative does not state Eglon's death explicitly, creating another gap that adds to a sense of ambiguity. Moreover, if Eglon, the fat calf, is indeed a sacrificial offering, he is certainly not a clean one, since his excrement has poured out.<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. Ehud's escape and Israel's victory

Judges 3:23 is closely related to Judges 3:22, not only because the description of Ehud's escape flows logically in the narrative, but also because of the repetition of two verbs. First, the verb סגר is used to describe fat "closing" over the blade of the sword (Judg 3:22), and then to say that Ehud "closes" the doors of the roof chamber, where he killed Eglon. The word סגר followed by בעד "almost always connotes reaching for security (Gen 7:16; Judg 9:51; Isa 26:20; but see 1 Sam 1:6) or finding privacy (2 Kgs 4:4, 21)"<sup>8</sup>, meaning that as Ehud closes the doors not to be discovered, the sword too was concealed by Eglon's belly. Second, the verb יצא is used for excrement pouring forth (Judg 3:22) and, immediately after, for Ehud's move to escape (Judg 3:23).

The repetition of יצא creates a parallel between two subjects, Ehud's escape and Eglon's excrement, prompting some scholars to argue that it makes Ehud a dishonorable character. This line of reasoning, however dubious, might seem to have added support: first, the absence of Yahweh's name in the entire action from Judges 3:16-27; and, second, Ehud's deceitful strategy to fool the Moabite king.<sup>9</sup> However, the narrative opens with God's raising of Ehud as Israel's deliverer, and it ends with Ehud successfully delivering Israel from the hand of the Moabites.

<sup>1</sup> STONE (2009, p. 661-663) argues that the *hapax legomena* הנצב ("the hilt") "accentuates the distinctiveness of the sword's construction", and suggests that it is a specific Naue Type II Sword, from the Late Bronze/Iron I transition.

<sup>2</sup> BUTLER, 2009, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> SASSON, 2014, p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 336.

<sup>5</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Another possibility is that הפרשדנה refers to some architecture feature through which Ehud escapes, being a cognate from an Akkadian word (BOLING, 2008, p.86-87; SASSON, 2014, p. 236-237), but as BLOCK states (1999, p. 168), the fact that the servants thought that Eglon was relieving himself ends the discussion in favor of the meaning "excrement".

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Exodus 29:13-14; Leviticus 4:10-12; 8:16-17; 16:27; Numbers 19:4-5

<sup>8</sup> SASSON, 2014, p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> KLEIN, 1989, p. 38-39; DIETCH, 2016, p. 524-525; FROLOV, 2013, p. 113-114, and 116-117; TOLLINGTON, 2010, p. 75-76. PARK (2015, p. 708-710) argues that the idea connected to "left" is one of secrecy and even negativity, though it is not clear if that is the case in this story.

The most important point is Judges 4:1 implication that, while Ehud was alive, Israel stayed in God's ways. Besides, Ehud's moves are not equated with the excrement. If anything, Judges 3:22 makes the fat and the excrement subjects of two different verbs (סגר and יצא), personifying them and reducing Eglon to nothing. Once the king of Moab, Eglon is now merely fat and excrement, while Ehud is the subject of יצא and סגר in Judges 3:23, which means he continues to have agency. This is emphasized by the little chiasm<sup>1</sup> with the two verbs in Judges 3:22-23.

Some critiques of the construction of Ehud's character are based on an ethical approach to the narrative, but "characters, especially main characters, in the Bible tend not to be absolutes."<sup>2</sup> Besides, it is risky to understand characters based only on their actions, because "characters are, usually, harder to understand than actions."<sup>3</sup> The main characters in the Hebrew Bible are full of gaps, more so in short stories like Judges 3:12-30, and these gaps make readers jump in, to fill them with the narrator's suggestions or with their own ideas about the character.<sup>4</sup> In addition to that, Ehud is not alone in the narrative, there are other characters. His story begins in Judges 3:15, when he is raised by God as a deliverer, which, along with the final statement in Judges 4:1 (that after Ehud's death, Israel turned again to evil), is an argument for a favorable reading of his character.

However, the gaps and what is communicated create *cruxes*<sup>5</sup> about Ehud (and Eglon) throughout the narrative. There is a constant incongruence between Ehud's appointment by God and his apparently deceitful actions. Ehud is, after all, a liberation fighter getting rid of an oppressive foreign king, so his actions are a military stratagem. Ehud does not lie to Eglon, but uses Eglon's self-confidence against him. Again, incongruence is one of the basic elements of irony.

Ehud's escape is followed by a change of scene, which links with the previous information that Ehud had closed the doors (Judg 3:23). The servants, who have already been mentioned in Judges 3:19, and who left Eglon alone with Ehud, return in a more relevant role. Seeing the doors closed, and smelling a bad odor, they imagine that their king was "relieving himself", an expression used in 1 Samuel 24:4-5 to indicate a bodily function.<sup>6</sup> As stated by Robert Alter, "they can clearly smell the consequences of the released sphincter, and they use their inference to explain both the locked doors and the long delay."<sup>7</sup> In fact, instead of escaping with Ehud<sup>8</sup>, readers are made to remain with Eglon until the servants discover the body, which creates delay and suspense as we wonder along with the servants what is going on, knowing neither Eglon's exact condition nor Ehud's whereabouts.

The servant's inference is grotesque, but not more so than to imagine them finding Eglon on the floor, in a puddle of his own excrement. In fact, the writer creates even more suspense using the word הנה three times. First, the servants see and הנה, that the doors were locked (Judg 3:24); then they wait for a long time and, הנה, the doors are still locked (Judg 3:25). Finally, the servants decide to open the doors and, הנה, the king lies on the floor, dead (Judg 3:25). As in the description of the assassination, the scene is drawn out to create tension, and only after a delay, the reader learns that Eglon is dead.<sup>9</sup> In a flashback<sup>10</sup>, the narrative

<sup>1</sup> The verb order in Judges 3:22 is סגר and יצא, while in Judges 3:23 it is the opposite, יצא and then סגר, making a verbal chiasm.

<sup>2</sup> BERLIN, 1994, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> ABBOTT, 2008, p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> BERLIN, 1994, p. 136-137.

<sup>5</sup> ABBOTT (2008, p. 93): "A crux is an oft-debated element in a work that, depending on how we interpret it, can significantly affect how we interpret the work as a whole."

<sup>6</sup> STONE, 2012, p. 243; SASSON, 2014, p. 238; NIDITCH, 2011, 58.

<sup>7</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> KAWASHIMA, 2004, p. 226, n. 48.

<sup>9</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> BAR-EFRAT, 2008, p. 177.

returns to Ehud fleeing and passing the פסילים (Judg 3:26). Ehud's escape is possible because of the delay – a delay happening both in the plot and in the prose, which is marked by the disjunctive sentences that begin in Judges 3:26.

Ehud gathers the Israelites by blowing (תקע)<sup>1</sup> the shofar (Judg 3:27), but then, strikingly, does not tell them what has happened. Instead, he urges to Israelites to follow him, because “Yahweh has given your enemies, the Moabites, into your hands” (Judg 3:28), without telling them about Eglon's death. As described by Buber and Rosenzweig, there are words that appear repeatedly in a narrative to convey meaning<sup>2</sup> – a device that Alter calls “word motif”<sup>3</sup> – and the ַי in Judges 3:12-30 is such a word. Ehud is restricted in his right hand and by his hand (the left or the right?) Israel sends a tribute (Judg 3:15). After these two appearances, ַי occurs again in Judges 3:21, when Ehud uses his left-hand to kill Eglon. At the end of the narrative, Ehud tells the Israelites that God delivered the Moabites into their hands (Judg 3:28), with the narrator concluding that Moab was subdued by the hands of Israel (Judg 3:30). Through Ehud's hand Israel sent an offering and through Ehud's hand the king of Moab died. Similarly, through Israel's hand the Moabites are defeated.

The story of Judges 3:12-30 is full of gaps, especially concerning spatial development, and these gaps create not only incongruence, but also dynamism and suspense.<sup>4</sup> Even in the assassination scene,<sup>5</sup> it is unclear where the action takes place, and spatial questions accumulate from the beginning. For example: Does Ehud make his sword before or after being sent to take the offerings to Eglon? Does Eglon see Ehud at the פסילים, or is he told about him by someone? Where are the offerings presented to Eglon? Is it the same place as in the first dialogue scene in Judges 3:19? Did the second dialogue take place there as well? Where exactly is Eglon killed? The omission of relevant information draws the reader into the narrative, creating a sense that the chain of events was so perfect that indeed it was God's plan.<sup>6</sup> God gives Eglon the strength to defeat Israel and then sends Ehud to end the oppression, leaving Moab to the hands of the Israelites.

Finally, as pointed out by several scholars, the conclusion of the story shows a parallel plot within the narrative.<sup>7</sup> What Ehud did to Eglon, Israel does to Moab.<sup>8</sup> The Moabites are even called שמן (Judg 3:29), in a reference to their fatness. While it may be a positive description, mainly because of the complement איש חיל (“valiant man”)<sup>9</sup>, the double meaning is clearly intended<sup>10</sup>, especially with the terms בריא מאד (Judg 3:17) and חלב (Judg 3:22), building up humor throughout the narrative. The narrative seems to use a derogatory stereotype that Israel has of Moab in the Hebrew Bible<sup>11</sup>, and to appreciate this, a brief explanation of that relationship is necessary.

## V. Israel and Moab: food and irony

<sup>1</sup> The writer uses the same verb for the assassination, תקע, which means “to thrust”, but can also mean “to blast”, creating some internal cohesion.

<sup>2</sup> BUBER and ROSENZWEIG, 1994, p. 114-115.

<sup>3</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 116-119.

<sup>4</sup> AMIT, 2001, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 101-103.

<sup>6</sup> AMIT, 1989, p. 99-100.

<sup>7</sup> CULLEY, 1992, p. 99-100; AMIT, 1989, p. 99-105; AMIT, 2001, p. 46-49; FROLOV, 2013, p. 107-110.

<sup>8</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 47; STERNBERG, 1987, p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> STONE, 2012, p. 244; BUTLER, 2009, p. 73; BLOCK, 1999, p. 170; BOLING, 2008, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 2, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> HANDY, 1992, p. 237-240; JONES, 1996, p. 137.

In the Hebrew Bible, Moab's origin is explained in the larger context of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18-19). Lot and Abraham started the journey to Canaan together (Gen 11:30-31; 12:4-5), but at some point, they took different directions, and so Lot, Abraham's nephew, came to dwell in Sodom (Gen 13:5-12), a city of very wicked men (Gen 13:13). Because of Abraham's intercession (Gen 18:16-33), God decided to send two messengers, to rescue Lot and his family from the imminent destruction of the two cities. The messengers were almost abused by Sodom's wicked men, and to save them, Lot offered his two daughters to be abused (Gen 19:4-9). In the end, the messengers and Lot and his two daughters managed to escape Sodom and Gomorrah, if almost against their will (Gen 19:17-28). After barely escaping the destruction of Sodom, Lot and his daughters dwelled in a cave near Zoar (Gen 19:30).

In the cave, Lot's daughters make him drink wine and lay with him, and both conceived from their father, Lot (Gen 19:31-38). The first-born daughter calls her son Moab (Gen 19:37). The name is a pun, meaning "from the father"<sup>1</sup>, although the actual etymology is surely different.<sup>2</sup> The daughters used Lot to make his "seed live" through him (Gen 3:32), and in an ironic note, their sons, Moab and Ben-Ammi become the fathers of the Moabites and the Ammonites, and not Lot, who disappears from the story after that. Lot offers his daughters to strange men like objects, and, using wine, his daughters in turn use Lot as an object.<sup>3</sup> Hence, Moab's origin relates to drinking wine, sex, and incest.

After rhapsodists of the region sing a strange taunting song against Moab (Num 21:27-30)<sup>4</sup>, the next relevant story is in the Balaam cycle (Num 22-24). Overcome with fear of the people of Israel (Num 22:3), Balak, the king of Moab at the time, sends messengers to persuade the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. By the second time the messengers ask Balaam to curse Israel, God allows Balaam to go, but only to say "the word" (הַדְבָר) that God bids (Num 22:20, 35), to which Balaam responds: "The word that God puts in my mouth, only that will I speak"<sup>5</sup> (Num 22:38). Balaam has a word from God, but it is not one that Balak, king of Moab expects, because the prophet blesses Israel every time he speaks, including oracles directed against Moab (Num 24:17, for example).<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that "The failed attempts to curse Israel take place at Moab's high places, and Balaam's oracles are preceded by sacrificial rites."<sup>7</sup> The cycle begins with the Moabites' fear of Israel eating all their food (Num 22:4), and ends with Balaam trying another strategy to curse Israel: to send the daughters of Moab to pervert the Israelites through sex (Num 25:1-2; Num 31:15-16).

Deuteronomy 23:4-7 [3-6] states that no Moabite (or Ammonite), not even a tenth-generation descendant, shall come to the Lord's assembly. Two reasons are given for this prohibition: inhospitality<sup>8</sup>; and the recruitment of Balaam to curse Israel. Since, when Israel comes out of Egypt, Moab did not share food and water with Israel, their relationship could not be peaceful. Also, Deuteronomy 23:1-3 [1-2] mentions the exact inverse (a son with a mother)

<sup>1</sup> GARSIEL (1991, p. 33) mentions the literary proximity of מאבִּיהֶן ("by their father") in Genesis 19:36 with מואב in Genesis 19:37 to make this connection.

<sup>2</sup> SASSON (2014, p. 224) calls the possible pun "dreadful", and argues that there is no plausible etymology for Moab. ALTER (2019, vol 1, p. 64) offers a possible meaning to Moab, "desired place", but states that both names, Moab and Ben-Ammi, are etymologized to refer to the incest. Rashi and Ibn Ezra both agree with "from father" (CARASIK, 2018, p. 176).

<sup>3</sup> FEWELL and GUNN, 1993, p. 62-63.

<sup>4</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol. 1, p. 554.

<sup>5</sup> ALTER, 2019, vol .1, p. 561. SHARP (2009, p. 143) suggests that God's allowance could be a sign of irony, because God could be playing both Balaam and the Moabites.

<sup>6</sup> SHARP (2009, p. 134-151) argues that Balaam's oracles and speeches are full of ambiguities, as he tries to manipulate God and Balak. Another irony, then, is that Balaam's voice is unreliable in the narrative.

<sup>7</sup> JONES, 1996, p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> Moab's (and Ammon) behavior is a contrast to how the Israelites should behave (MACDONALD, 2008, p. 92-96, p. 211).

of the incestuous relation that gives birth to Moab, making Moab's exclusion from God's assembly a strong statement. This animosity is extended to the prophets, who constantly mention Moab as an enemy of Israel, always affirming his future destruction (Amos 2:1-3; Isa 11:11-16; Ezek 25:8-11; etc.) and even comparing Moab with Sodom (Zeph 2:8-11).

The hospitality concerning food seems to come up again in the Book of Ruth, in the Moab-Israel affair. First, "The story assumes that Moab is a land blessed with plentiful food supply"<sup>1</sup>, which seems to be historically accurate.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the food available in Moab, the Israelite men who moved there die (Ruth 1:3-5) for no clear reason. They seek food in Moab, but encounter death. Ruth, the Moabite woman who returns to Israel with Naomi, uses a tactic involving food and drink to approach Boaz (Ruth 3:1-8). While Ruth is presented in a positive way, there is prejudice among some of the population (the kinsmen, for example) against Moab: the epithet "the Moabite," which is repeated throughout the book, refers to her. The fact that Ruth seeks Boaz, along with implications from other stories of manipulated sexual situations in Ruth 4:11-12 (Leah and Rachel with Jacob, and Tamar with Judah), reminds the reader of the origin of Moab.<sup>3</sup> Besides that, it is ironic that a Moabite (Ruth) is fed in abundance by an Israelite (Boaz), in an inversion of the book's beginning (Ruth 1:1), and especially of Deuteronomy 23:4-7 [3-6].

Isaiah 25:6-12 and Jeremiah 48 share several relevant points about Moab. One parallel is the imagery of excrement, since, in Isaiah 25:10, "the hand of Yahweh" will thresh Moab as a "straw is threshed in a cesspool" or dung-pit; likewise, in Jeremiah 48:26, Moab wallows in his own vomit. Curiously, in Isaiah 25:6-12, Moab is excluded from a banquet with food and wine, prepared by Yahweh for Israel<sup>4</sup>, while, in Jeremiah 48:11, Moab has been drunk since his youth and continues to be drunk through judgment (48:26). In addition, Moab's fertility (farmland and wineries) ceases – and Moab's abundance vanishes (Jer 48:30-36). Not only does Moab not participate in the Israelite banquet, there will be no more banquet in Moab. Finally, in both texts, Moab is arrogant and defeated by Yahweh (Jer 48:26, 29-30, etc.; Isa 25:11). An analysis of some prophetic texts dealing with the Moab-Israel relationship shows that they are "clearly involved in a war of insults"<sup>5</sup>.

The Moab-Israel pattern involves some sexual references, which means one can read certain scenes in Judges 3:12-30 as sexual. Robert Alter points out a linguistic innuendo in Judges 3:20, the construction בּוֹא אֵל, which elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible refers to sexual intercourse.<sup>6</sup> Another nuance, noted by Marc-Zvi Brettler, is that, in Judges 3:23-25, "disproportionate space is given to the opening and closing of doors", and that "to open" and "locked" are a "set of words that are well-anchored in metaphors for sexuality in ancient Israel."<sup>7</sup> In addition, Susan Niditch argues that the thigh where Ehud hides his sword is an "erogenous zone" and "also the seat of male fertility."<sup>8</sup> Some scholars may not discern any sexual undertones in the assassination scene<sup>9</sup>, but given the Moab-Israel relationship throughout the Hebrew Bible, it is perhaps a remote possibility.

<sup>1</sup> JONES, 1996, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> MILLER, 1992, p. 882-883.

<sup>3</sup> FEWELL and GUNN, 1993, p. 104-105a; FEWELL and GUNN, 1993b, p. 164-165.

<sup>4</sup> A very close relation with Deuteronomy 23, mentioned before.

<sup>5</sup> JONES, 1996, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> ALTER, 2011, p. 45. NIDITCH (2011, p. 57-58), and BRETTLER (2002, loc. 622) agree with him. The construction בּוֹא אֵל is used, for example, in Genesis 16:2, 4; 29:21; 30:3, 16; 38:9, 16; Deuteronomy 21:13; 22:13; 2 Samuel 3:7; Ezekiel 23:44 (EVEN-SHOSHAN, 1989, p. 152).

<sup>7</sup> BRETTLER, 2002, loc. 615.

<sup>8</sup> NIDITCH, 2011, p. 57-58. The link is very dubious, but a possibility.

<sup>9</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 532 n. 4; STONE, 2009, p. 654 n. 19; etc.

In conclusion, the presentation of and attitude toward Moab throughout the Hebrew Bible is negative and satirical,<sup>1</sup> with the repetition of certain elements. Since “stories talk to one another”, and every story “exposes the presence of other stories lurking in the background”<sup>2</sup>, Judges 3 becomes a part of this derogatory view of Moab in the Hebrew Bible, as it follows the same pattern.<sup>3</sup> The association of food and drink, arrogance, sexual situations and excremental imagery are a constant in the texts dealing with Moab, and it is similar in Judges 3:12-30. Thus, to deny the strong current of irony in the narrative of Judges 3:12-30 is to ignore the overall narrative of the Moab-Israel relationship in the Hebrew Bible. As stated in Jeremiah 48:26, “Moab shall become a mockery”.

## Conclusion

Through the cumulative narrative features in Judges 3:12-30, one can see that the gaps (the spatial lacunas, for example), the word choices (especially קרב e מנחה when Eglon is described as בריא מאד (בריא מאד), and the wordplay (e.g. Ehud’s tribe and restriction; the word/thing - דבר - דבר) create a sense of incongruence. The literal meaning does not resolve the incongruences and the alternative is an intended humorous effect through irony. The relationship between Israel and Moab is a strong argument in that direction, since there is a pattern throughout the Hebrew Bible that also appears in Judges 3:12-30. Ironically, Moab did not give Israel food (Deut 23:4-7), plotting to destroy Israel by means of starvation – or by means of a “word” and sex in Numbers 22-25 – but Moab’s king ended, in Judges 3:12-30, dying from Israel’s food offering and the “word” concealed on Ehud’s thigh.

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<sup>1</sup> HANDY, 1992, p. 238; JONES, 1996, p. 154-155.

<sup>2</sup> FEWELL, 2016, p. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> The book of Ruth seems to be a clear exception, although the food pattern is present.

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