

Reading the Ehud Story (Jdg 3:12-30) in the Light of Linguistic Playfulness

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1. Introduction

The Ehud story (Jdg 3:12-30) has been considered as a thought-provoking or bizarre narrative, producing diverse and interesting interpretations. In the middle ages, Ehud was understood as a “type” or “fore-runner” of Christ.¹⁾ In contrast, a modern biblical scholar J. Alberto Soggin concludes that Ehud simply represents the Israelites in a “secular” story which has no real political or theological interest in the ancient narrative.²⁾

Why do such extremely different interpretations exist? One reason is that the methods of reading the story are different. For a long time, the Ehud story has been read as a historical narrative. Recently, however, modern analytical approaches have taken the interpretation in another direction. Structure and characteristics of this short narrative have been emphasized.³⁾ Most of all, a genre identification plays a central role in understanding the nature of a narrative.⁴⁾

Biblical scholars contend that knowing a genre is the key to interpreting the story of Ehud. However, they disagree about the genre of the Ehud story. Baruch Halpern, for example, identifies this story as a history by proving its historicity and illustrates how some of Israel’s historians have treated it as historical

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- 1) David M. Gunn, *Judges*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 36.
- 2) J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges*, J. Bowden, trans. The Old Testament Library Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 53-56.
- 3) Lowell K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter: Ehud and Eglon as Ethnic Humor”, *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 6 (1992), 233.
- 4) Tremper Longman III, “Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory, and the Evangelical”, *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985), 61.

sources.⁵⁾ Robert Alter, on the other hand, argues that it is a “prose fiction” on the basis of his literary analysis and classifies it into a genre of humor.⁶⁾ Lillian R. Klein demonstrates verbal irony, one of the characteristics of humor, in this story.⁷⁾ In the category of humor, Lowell K. Handy asserts that it is an ethnic humor,⁸⁾ and Marc Brettler claims that it is a political satire.⁹⁾

This paper will investigate the Ehud story with a linguistic approach. In particular, I will interpret this story in the light of linguistic playfulness, containing elements of a political satire and ethnic antipathy.¹⁰⁾ In this way, this story may be read as an ethnic polemic and a political sarcasm, mocking the Moabites. Though the Ehud story has a number of elements to show the characteristics of an ethnic and political satire, I believe this story was written on the basis of a historical fact, not a created fiction.

For this study, it needs to know what genre the Ehud story belongs to. To prove the genre of this story, it is helpful to use Hermann Gunkel’s method of genre identification.¹¹⁾ Gunkel suggests that a text’s genre can be classified according to three criteria: (a) “mood and thought(s) of the text”; (b) “the linguistic forms”; (c) “the social setting”.¹²⁾ In addition, because this study

5) Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 39. He assumes the building structure of Eglon’s palace, the routes of Ehud’s flight, and so on.

6) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 37-41.

7) Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, JSOTSup 68 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 37-39, 47.

8) Lowell K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter”, 233-246.

9) Marc Brettler, “Never the Twain Shall Meet? The Ehud Story as History and Literature”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991), 285-304.

10) See Tom A. Jull, “מִקְרָה in Judges 3: a Scatological Reading”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 81 (1998), 73; Marc Brettler, “Never the Twain Shall Meet?”, 303. There is a tendency to reject the historicity of the Ehud story because it belongs to the genre of humor. The genre identification, however, does not demonstrate whether the event really happened or not. It may present a historical event in the manner of humor. Though I suggest the way of reading this story, namely humor with wordplay, I do not deny its historicity.

11) Brettler insists that Gunkel’s model (in a modified form) of genre identification offers a useful interpretive tool, because it helps to group together certain terms and characteristics. Here, Gunkel’s criteria to classify a genre can be legitimately applied to a genre of humor. The Ehud story is one such text. See Marc Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 86-87.

12) Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, M. Horner, trans., Biblical Series 19 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 10-39. Though Gunkel’s form critical method is a useful tool for categorizing a story according to genre, I do not agree with some radical form

argued that the Ehud story can be read as a satire, it is required to investigate the humorous characteristics of the text. J. William Whedbee claims that the four elements must be examined in order to discover the comic nature of a text: (1) “plot-line”; (2) “characterization of basic types”; (3) “linguistic and stylistic strategies”; (4) “functions and intentions”.¹³⁾ With the help of Gunkel and Whedbee, I make a study plan of how to read the Ehud story as a humorous satire. First, I will analyze the use of words in the text, in that “the shape and meaning of any literary text will naturally be dependent to some extent on its linguistic fashioning”.¹⁴⁾ The word analysis is especially important to the Ehud story, since there are many of wordplay in this narrative. This investigation will demonstrate how the characterization of Eglon and Ehud is made by analyzing their Hebrew names. Second, I will examine the mood of this story which presents its comic nature. For example, the murder scene and the description of the waiting servants contain many humorous elements. Here, I will also show a plot-line of scenes briefly, which displays the humorous nature of the narrative. Third, in order to manifest that the story displays a tendency of a political satire and ethnic antipathy, I will examine historical background. However, because this study mainly focuses on how the Ehud story can be read as a satire by using textual-linguistic and literary analysis, the social and historical circumstances will be explained in short. Though I receive help from Gunkel’s method of genre identification, my methodology is linguistic and literary approaches, not form criticism. In this study, therefore, the historical background of the relations between Israel and Moab refers to the circumstances that the biblical narrative itself describes in the pre-exilic period, not the social setting that the form critical method establishes, so-called “Sitz im Leben”. In the final section of this paper, I will compare the Ehud story with the Samson story which were written in a similar manner of humor. This comparison will demonstrate that they share common genre characteristics of humor in the book of the Judges. First of all, however, we must know what humor is and its characteristics, since humor is a

critics who argue that genre identification may determine the historicity of biblical narratives. We cannot say that a story is fiction because it belongs to the genre of a satire. A historical fact can be told in a way of a satire.

13) J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6-11.

14) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, x.

matter of definition.¹⁵⁾ So, knowing the nature of humor in ancient Israel is an essential prerequisite for proving the Ehud story as humorous.

2. The Characteristics of Humor in Ancient Israel

The first step is to ask how humor is defined. After defining the characteristics of humor we can prove the genre of the Ehud story as a humorous satire. It is difficult, however, to define humor because we do not have a clear concept of humor. Social background, cultural characteristics, and individual diversity are among the many different factors in forming and defining humor. Perhaps, the general meaning of humor is to make fun or feel hilarity, but this is too broad a definition for use in the literary field.

According to Athalya Brenner, humor has two opposite characteristics: on the one hand, expressing joy, merriment and amusement, but also, on the other hand, mockery, derision and scorn.¹⁶⁾ Brenner develops this duality from the semantic field of humor; to some extent, it deals with the field of joviality and hilarity, but on the other extreme, it shows the field of contempt and ridicule. Two opposite characteristics can also exist together in humor, with the result that “humor may serve to evoke pity as well as protest, comprehension as well as contempt, and relish as well as religiosity”.¹⁷⁾ Considering these opposite characteristics of humor, we may identify the nature and category of humor in the area of literature. The spectrum of humor is broad in literary territory: “from light-hearted comedy to rhetorical means of exposure such as irony, sarcasm, parody, farce, and burlesque”.¹⁸⁾

What, then, are the important characteristics of humor in the historical

15) Francis Landy, “Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis”, Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 92 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 100.

16) Athalya Brenner, “On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament”, Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 92 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 39-40.

17) Yehuda T. Radday, “On Missing the Humour in the Bible an Introduction”, Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 92 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 24.

18) Athalya Brenner, “On the Semantic Field of Humour”, 40.

background and in the emotions of the ancient Israelites? Quoting Freud's book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Francis Landy presents the characteristics of Israelite humor as follows: "Oppressed peoples like the Jews develop a very sharp, highly ambivalent comic repertoire, in which the national anguish finds bearable expression".¹⁹⁾ A large number of people have thought that there are not many humorous passages in the Old Testament (the OT), because the OT itself gives a grave nuance and its instructive purposes express loftiness.²⁰⁾ Humor, however, is not just only a light-hearted joke or a cause of amusement. Humor can be made in the midst of persecution or in times of ordeal, and at this time the characteristics of humor may be cynical or aggressive.

Whedbee plainly expresses such characteristics of Jewish humor as "a weapon of an oppressed and marginalized people to help its survival amidst the perilous conditions of exile".²¹⁾ If the Ehud story is read in this respect, we can say that it is a humorous story which was characterized by cynicism against an oppressor, the Moabites. J. Clinton McCann properly notes the humorous nature shown in the book of the Judges with the historical background:

Abuse and injustice are no laughing matter; however, humor in some form is often one of the few means of resistance for marginalized people. Given the likelihood that many of the stories originated in the period of 1200 to 1020 B.C., when elements of Israel struggled against the more organized and powerful forces of the Canaanite city-state system, the humor in some of the stories may amount to an act of resistance by an oppressed group ... Part of the original purpose may well have been to entertain, but the humor also communicates hopeful resistance by a clearly weaker force.²²⁾

When humor targets hostility at other nations and ethnics, it becomes a satire, especially in situation of political resentment and ethnic scorn. According to Arthur Koestler, "[t]he satire is a verbal caricature which distorts characteristic

19) Francis Landy, "Humour as a Tool", 100.

20) Athalya Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour", 40.

21) J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, 3.

22) J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 23.

features of an individual or society by exaggeration and simplification”.²³⁾ These exaggerations and simplifications are observed in the Ehud story.

3. Linguistic Analysis

An examination of linguistic forms and stylistic strategies is helpful to identify a story’s genre. Forms and styles of words used in the story serve as the tools of showing the characteristics of the story, such as symbols, allusions, and nicknames. Sometimes, words themselves have double meanings which may present direct opposites or ambiguities. However, if the usage of these words is for contempt or ridicule of certain people or nations, these words may be satirical elements and make the story a satire.²⁴⁾ In the Ehud story, nicknames, symbols, puns, and wordplay with double and different meanings especially function as devices for a satire.

3.1 Eglon

The notion of names has significance in ancient Israel. Names present a person’s role, function, or position, so a close relationship exists between a person and his name. Often a name alludes to or reveals a person’s characters. In an essay entitled “Humor in Names”, Yehuda T. Radday explains the usage of naming like this: “An author may for instance use a proper name in order to characterize a person, mostly negatively; in order to show that its bearer is imaginary; to provoke fun at him or to link him (to his disadvantage) by association, location or slight homophony to another”.²⁵⁾

A derivation of a name for contempt or ridicule is termed “pejorative name derivations”, and so it can be a satirical device.²⁶⁾ A name is often determined at

23) Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 72.

24) Ze’ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 32 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 9.

25) Yehuda T. Radday, “Humour in Names”, Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTSup 92 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 59.

26) Ze’ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, 15.

the time of birth in some circumstance and it is common for infants to be given animal names because of their symbolic significance.²⁷⁾ However, if an animal name is given to an adult, this name is used to insult or ridicule that individual. Animal images show individual traits of weakness such as physical defect, peculiar behavior, or discernible appearance. A political satire especially uses animal imagery and this might help to explain the use of the fat calf-related name Eglon.²⁸⁾

The name of Eglon (עִגְלוֹן) has an etymology, the Hebrew עִגְלָה, which means calf or bull. This name can also be derived from the term עָגַל or עָגוּל (round or rotund).²⁹⁾ Eglon, therefore, is described as a fat calf by virtue of his name.

The physical description shown in his name alludes to his dark doom. Eglon's fat expresses two signs.³⁰⁾ The first is physical difficulty in moving because of his obesity, which makes him vulnerable to Ehud's swift thrust of the double-edged dagger. The second is the symbol of regal stupidity that is contrasted with Ehud's cleverness. The Moabite King Eglon, therefore, is the principal target for the offering sacrifice, and the name itself shows his fate, namely a fat calf ready for slaughter.³¹⁾

The satire comes from the name of Eglon, and the name makes a ludicrous caricature of the enemy king. From the beginning, a reader or hearer can catch an important clue as to how the story should be understood and how the story proceeds.³²⁾

3.2 Ehud

As the name of the Moabite king Eglon has a meaning connected with his

27) Ibid., 10.

28) Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom, *Satire's Persuasive Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 218-221.

29) M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, Phyllis Hackett, trans. (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University, 1991), 215. עִגְלוֹן is a diminutive form of עִגְלָה. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 158.

30) Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians*, 39.

31) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 117.

32) Graham S. Ogden, "The Special Features of a Story: A Study of Judges 3:12-30", *The Bible Translator* 42 (1991), 409.

fate, so also the Israelite judge, Ehud (אֶהוּד), has a name related to his role. Ehud is a composite word of two elements, אֵי (where) and הוֹר (majesty), which indicates “Where is the splendor, majesty?”³³⁾ Though this name reflect the dismal phases of the times like Ichabod (אִיכָבוֹד, “Where is the Glory?”) in 1Samuel 4:21, the name Ehud cast a glow of a hope to the people of his own days.³⁴⁾ From the beginning of the story, therefore, Ehud is described as a “deliverer” or “savior”.

According to Christie Davies, “[a]mong the stock figures in the repertoire of the ethnic humorist are those used in this story for the two principal characters”: a “stupid” character and a “canny” character.³⁵⁾ Stupidity comes from vain or foolish action which leads to self-destruction. A canny personality is characterized by cleverness, craftiness, and shrewdness. Above all, a canny character can manipulate a stupid character and the progress of the story manifests their respective peculiar characteristics. Two opposite characters often appear together because a narrative progresses in a dynamic relationship with each other.³⁶⁾ From this point of view, the Ehud story can be a typical example of ethnic humor with Eglon and Ehud, representing their respective groups, namely the Moabites and the Israelites.

Interestingly, the canny character, Ehud, is especially portrayed as “left-handed” (אֶמְרֵי יְדֵי-יְמִינֵוֹ, Jdg 3:15). Left-handedness can also be a device to make this story ethnic humor, because Ehud’s physical characteristic (left-handed) is contrasted with that of Eglon (very fat). However, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of Ehud’s left-handedness, since there are some different exegetical understandings. I believe left-handedness is not a physical defect but a distinctive physical advantage in war, if we read this story as ethnic humor.³⁷⁾

There are three possible interpretations for Ehud’s left-handedness. First, the term, “left-handed” in a literal meaning can be construed as “a man restricted in his right hand”. It implies that Ehud has a physical defect in his right-hand; that

33) Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 160; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges*, 49.

34) Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 160.

35) Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 15.

36) Lowell K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter”, 236.

37) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 114.

is, he is a handicapped man because of a physical abnormality.³⁸⁾ This interpretation has a problem, however, because it takes the term “left-handedness” too literally. In Judges 20:16, the seven hundred chosen soldiers who are left-handed are depicted as skillful warriors who can sling a stone at a hair and not miss. Halpern claims that “[t]his excludes physical deformity: it would be comical to invent elite brigades organized on such a principle”.³⁹⁾ As a typical example of ethnic humor this story must show two figures with opposite traits, stupidity and craftiness. Ehud’s feature must be superior to that of Eglon. If Ehud is a disabled man, it cannot satisfy the characteristics of ethnic humor.

A second interpretation understands “left-handed” as “ambidextrous”, that is, skilled in the use of both hands.⁴⁰⁾ But this is not reasonable in the light of the usage of ambidexterity in the OT. As it is described in 1Chronicles 12:2, ambidexterity is positively expressed with the use of both hands and not just the left. “It is doubtful whether ambidexterity would ever be expressed by describing restriction of the use of one of the hands”.⁴¹⁾ So, this interpretation cannot properly explain the term “left-handed”.

The final interpretation is that left-handedness implies the superior ability to handle a weapon and an excellence in war. This matches well with the description of left-handedness in Judges 20:16. Ehud as a skillful warrior proficient in handling weapons is contrasted with Eglon as a fat calf ready for slaughter. Ehud’s left-handedness, therefore, is not a deformity, but an excellent talent. The detailed description of the handling of a dagger with the left hand in Judges 3:21 demonstrates the swiftness and prominent skill of his left hand; (1) Ehud reached with his hand, (2) took the sword from his right thigh, (3) and thrust it into Eglon’s belly. Yairah Amit properly explains Ehud’s left-handedness:

The reference to Ehud’s left-handedness and repetition further on the word “hand” focuses the reader’s interest upon Ehud’s talents and guides

38) Barry G. Webb, *The Book of the Judges*, JSOTSup 46, (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1987), 131.

39) Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians*, 41.

40) The Greek Old Testament translates “left-handed” as “ambidextrous” (as following the lead of the LXX’s *amphoterodexios*). See Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 161.

41) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 117.

him toward the conjecture that Ehud the Benjaminite is going to act with his left hand. The mention of his left-handedness and the tribe of Benjamin are absorbed by the reader in the context of war. Judges 20:16 and 1 Chronicles 12:2 indicate that the warriors of the tribe of Benjamin were known for fighting with their left hands; the combination of “left-handed” and “from Benjamin” seems to have been an idiomatic expression used to refer to daring warriors from the tribe of Benjamin. The characterization of Ehud by this idiom indicates, not only that he was a superb fighter having special talents, but is also a key to creating the hypothesis of what is about to happen.⁴²⁾

3.3 “Left” Contrary to “Right”

In Judges 3:15, Ehud is described as a left-handed person, but in the same verse, he is also called a Benjaminite (בֶּן־הַיְמִינִי) a “son of the right hand.” Such this portrayal seems to be contradictory. In this expression, we may discover a play on words, namely a humorous intention in Ehud’s description. As for the word “Benjamin”, the author uses the odd form of בֶּן־הַיְמִינִי rather than the expected בֶּן־יְמִינִי, which explicitly reveals author’s intention to contrast between “right” and “left.”⁴³⁾ However, it is difficult to explain this contradictory and ironic interaction between “right” and “left” in this verse. Though irony is actually an important element of humor, irony itself is seldom explained clearly. If we try to explain a pun, we may effectively spoil the pun.⁴⁴⁾ The simple irony itself of Ehud being a left-handed person but a son of the right hand may have provoked laughter for the original hearers.

3.4 Secret Message

A word which has a double meaning plays an important role in making a story humorous or ironic. The phrase “secret message” (הַבְּרִיטָה) is literally “a word of hiding.” The Hebrew word הַבְּרָ has several meanings, “word”, “message”, “thing”, or “matter.”⁴⁵⁾ So, the “secret message” may imply “a hidden thing”, for

42) Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing*. Jonathan Chipman, trans., Biblical Interpretation Series 38 (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 1999), 179-180.

43) Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 160. In the general form of בֶּן־יְמִינִי, הַ is added.

44) Graham S. Ogden, “The Special Features of a Story”, 410-411.

instance, “a hidden dagger”. In a common sense, stupid Eglon naively understands what clever Ehud says.⁴⁶⁾ When Ehud says to Eglon that he has a secret message from God, Ehud’s intention is to assassinate Eglon. The secret message is actually the secret thing, namely the dagger hidden under his cloak. That is wordplay.⁴⁷⁾

4. Mood of the Text

The mood of the text is one of the elements to identify the Ehud story as a satirical humor. This narrative consists of several subsequent scenes and each scene has a humorous mood. I will illustrate the humorous moods of some scenes and explain a plot-line of the final battle scene briefly. Amit divides several scenes of the Ehud story, providing the following structure based on a scenic principle⁴⁸⁾, and I will examine the humorous moods of some scenes according to Amit’s structure:

Exposition—Situation of subjugation (3:12-15)

 Description of preparing the dagger—Dagger tactics (3:16)

 Description of offering the tribute—Tactic of offering the tribute
(3:17-18)

 The murder scene (3:19-23)

 Description of the waiting servants—Tactic of fooling the attendants
(3:24-25(26))

 Description of the battle and the victory—Battle tactics (3:27-29)

Conclusion—Situation of quiet (3:30)⁴⁹⁾

4.1 The Portrayal of Offering the Tribute (vv. 17-18)

45) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 117; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 165.

46) Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 165.

47) Graham S. Ogden, “The Special Features of a Study”, 412.

48) Scenic principle means that “a story proceeds along but one plot-level that can be sectioned into blocks according to scene changes”. See Robert H. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 102.

49) Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges*, 174-175.

The stage for the assassination appears in the presentation of the tribute. The offering of tribute actually indicates a sacrificial offering. The sacrificial implication is exposed in Ehud's offering action. In verses 17-18, the tribute (מִנְחָה, "offering") that Ehud presents to Eglon is the typical expression of offering a sacrifice.⁵⁰ The word מִנְחָה is repeated three times (vv. 15, 17, 18) and מִנְחָה is combined with the hiphil pattern of the root קָרַב two times (vv. 17, 18), which gives cultic atmosphere to this description.⁵¹ About 158 times, מִנְחָה is commonly used in relation to the temple cult or ceremonies in the Bible. When מִנְחָה is especially combined with the hiphil pattern of the root קָרַב, it is exclusively used in religious ceremony.⁵² Therefore, if the religious use of the collocation of מִנְחָה הִקְרִיב is changed into the secular use to present a tribute in verses 3:17, 18, this expression may serve as a rhetoric device to show a double meaning.⁵³

Ehud pretends to bring tribute to Eglon, but it is in fact Eglon who becomes the thing offered in sacrifice. Taking into consideration that Eglon's name means "fat calf", this gives a hint that Eglon, the "fat calf", will be slaughtered as a sacrificial offering. Sacrificial undertones in Eglon's name clue the audience in on this arrangement.⁵⁴ Moreover, in the murder scene of Eglon, the sacrificial knife and partial evisceration of the animal are described in detail.⁵⁵ As McCann says, "Eglon, the one who exacted tribute from Israel, ends up, in essence, being slaughtered as if he were Israel's sacrificial offering to God".⁵⁶

4.2 The Portrayal of the Murder Scene (vv. 19-23)

The murder scene will be the climax of the story and its original hearers may have burst into laughter. If we were ancient Israelites, the sight of Eglon's

50) Marc Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, 81.

51) Considering that the name of Eglon stands for a calf, the act of the Ehud's presentation of the tribute to Eglon inversely indicates Eglon's doom as an offering. "The calf appears both as a central cultic object (Exo 32; Deu 9:18; 1Ki 12:32; Hos 8:6; etc.) and as an offering (Lev 9:3; Mic 6:6)". See Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges*, 184.

52) Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges*, 184. For example, see Lev 23:16; Num 28:26.

53) Ibid.

54) J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, 45.

55) Marc Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, 82.

56) J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, 45.

corpse lying flat on the ground in the bathroom, after being stabbed by a dagger in his belly, would be shockingly funny.⁵⁷⁾ The description of the assassination of Eglon by Ehud is given in ludicrous detail. It illustrates a typical scatological satire, that is, bathroom humor. We can read Judges 3:22, the climatic moment description of murder, as following:⁵⁸⁾

And even the hilt (נֶזֶב) entered after the blade;
and the fat (חֵלֶב) closed in over the blade,
because he did not remove the dagger from his belly;
and the excrement came out.

This satire focuses on Eglon's obesity. The storyteller relates the vivid murder scene with Eglon's fat, presenting two stages. First, Eglon has a great deal of fat, so when Ehud stabs him with a dagger which is only a cubit in length, even the hilt of a dagger penetrates his belly after the blade and disappears. Second, because Ehud does not remove the dagger from Eglon's belly, Eglon's anal sphincter explodes and excrement comes out.⁵⁹⁾

The word "fat" (חֵלֶב) is a sacrificial term in Leviticus 3-6, and it is used for the choicest parts of the sacrifice.⁶⁰⁾ Eglon has fattened himself due to Israel's tribute, but his fat body is submitted to the fate of sacrificial offering; he is the fat calf. Another feature of Eglon's fat is vulnerability. His fatness can be a target for Ehud's swift thrust of the dagger. Eglon thus becomes a plump, defenseless, and stupid target.⁶¹⁾ It is a dark yet humorous image of stout Eglon being murdered as he rises from the seat in his bathroom.

In this murder scene, scatological characteristics also appear. Though there are many interpretations about what "the cool chamber" (חֲדַר הַמְקָרָה, v. 24) means, this phrase can be properly translated as "the toilet chamber" or "the throne room with the toilet facility incorporated".⁶²⁾ The assassination is performed in the toilet chamber, and Eglon meets his fate there. After Ehud thrusts his dagger

57) Tom A. Jull, "מקרה in Judges 3", 64.

58) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 118.

59) Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians*, 40.

60) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 118.

61) *Ibid.*, 117.

62) Jull explains the meaning of "the cool chamber" (חֲדַר הַמְקָרָה) in detail. See Tom A. Jull, "מקרה in Judges 3", 63-69.

into Eglon's belly, Eglon evacuates the contents of his bowels on the floor.⁶³⁾ Eglon's excrement is vividly described at his death, and a scorn for the king of the Moabites is expressed in terms of a scatological satire.⁶⁴⁾

There are some classic instances of a toilet satire in the Hebrew Bible. In 1Kings 18:27, on Mount Carmel, Elijah taunt the prophets of Baal. His scornful sayings include: "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating or he has wandered away (כִּי שֵׁיחַ וְכִי־שָׁיג) or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened" (NRS). Gary A. Rendsburg argues that the two words (שֵׁיחַ and שָׁיג) form a hendiadys, expressing one idea, namely excretion.⁶⁵⁾ The phrase including these words, therefore, can be translated as follows: "he may be defecating/urinating".⁶⁶⁾ Mockery using excrement is a typical scatological satire.

Another instance related to the toilet is the case of King Saul. He goes into a cave to relive himself (1Sa 24:3). At that time David and his men are sitting in the innermost parts of the cave and have a good chance to kill him. However, David only cuts off a corner of Saul's clock and spares his life. It happens in the cave but the nuance is related with the toilet. Action in the bathroom is considered private by the Israelites, so the expression for Saul's activities used is simply "he covered his feet". This is a euphemism for defecation and urination.⁶⁷⁾ In the case of the Ehud story, the servants of Eglon wait outside of the cool chamber because they think that the king must be relieving himself, that is, covering his feet. This event, therefore, is related to the toilet. With the excrement from the corpse of fat Eglon, this story becomes a scatological satire.

4.3 The Portrayal of the Waiting Servants (vv. 24-25(26))

The following scene also presents the characteristics of a scatological satire. After the assassination, Ehud goes out through the vestibule and shuts the doors and locks them. Without knowing about the death of their king, the courtiers

63) Tom A. Jull, "מִקְרָהּ in Judges 3", 71.

64) Marc Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, 82.

65) Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Mock of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988), 414-417.

66) *Ibid.*, 416.

67) Tom A. Jull, "מִקְרָהּ in Judges 3", 68.

come to the king's cool chamber and find the doors locked. They incorrectly think that the king is having a discussion with Ehud leisurely while relieving himself in his private toilet. While they are waiting, Ehud escapes.

In this scene, we can imagine the courtiers' funny actions. They wait until they are embarrassed as they smell the odor of excrement from the exploded anal sphincter of Eglon.⁶⁸⁾ The sickening odor from the cool chamber also functions as a decoy for the courtiers to tarry while Ehud escapes.⁶⁹⁾ The courtiers are also a target of a satirical humor, like their king. Alter explains the satirical characteristic of this scene vividly with a retranslation in his own words:

The courtiers' erroneous assumption that their bulky monarch is talking his leisurely time over the chamber pot is a touch of scatological humor at the expense of king and followers, while it implicates them in the satiric portrayal of the king's credulity. This last effect is heightened by the presentation of their direct speech at the end of verse 24, and the switch of the narrative to their point of view in verses 23 and 24. Let me retranslate these clauses literally to reproduce the immediate effect of seeing the scene through their eyes that one experiences in the Hebrew: "The courtiers came and saw, look, the doors of the upper chamber are locked They waited a long time and, look, he's not opening the doors of the upper chamber, and they took the keys and opened them, and, look, their lord is sprawled on the floor, dead."⁷⁰⁾

4.4 The Portrayal of the Battle and the Victory (vv. 27-29)

This scene is the great victory over the Moabite troops at the fords of the Jordan. The successful assassination of Eglon by Ehud leads to the subsequent triumph of the war against the Moabites by the Israelites. If we include verse 26b in the battle scene, this combat can be framed by a repetition of the word, "to escape" (יָצָא), which opens and closes this scene:

A. Ehud "escapes" (יָצָא) to Seirah (3:26b)

B. The victory of the Israelites over the Moabites (3:27-29a) –

68) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 119.

69) *Ibid.*

70) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 40.

“executing the other sacrifices”

A'. No one “escapes” (מָלַט) (3:29b)⁷¹⁾

The word מָלַט implies the liberation from the Moabites’ oppression. While the Israelite warrior Ehud can escape from the Moabite courtiers, the Moabite troops cannot escape from the Israelite troops.

Another satire appears in relation with “fat”. In verse 29, the Moabites are described as “vigorous (וְנָשְׂ) and strong (חַיִל)” men, and the word וְנָשְׂ (“vigorous” or “lustful”) generally means “fat” or “stout”.⁷²⁾ Like their fat king, the stout Moabites’ troops are slaughtered like a sacrificial offering at the fords of the Jordan. It seems that they march to their destruction in a ludicrous display of stupidity and no one among ten thousand Moabites can survive.⁷³⁾ It may provoke a big laugh at the end of the story.

As Handy notes, this final scene provides a crescendo for the three-part presentation.⁷⁴⁾ The fat and stupid Moabites are all destroyed by superior Israelites in turn: one dumb Moabite (Eglon the king), two dumb Moabites (the courtiers), and finally ten thousand dumb Moabites (the Moabite warriors). This plot-line intends to make the story a satire based on the ethnic stupidity of the Moabites.⁷⁵⁾

5. Historical Background

Knowing the relationship between the Israelites and the Moabites is helpful for understanding the characteristics of this story as an ethnic and political satire. It is impossible, however, to recognize the relationship between the two nations during the period of the story’s composition because we do not know when it was written. Though the date of the final edition of the book of the Judges is open to dispute,⁷⁶⁾ in order to understand the story’s stylistic features it will

71) K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges and Ruth*, 119.

72) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 41.

73) Lowell K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter”, 241.

74) Ibid.

75) Ibid., 242.

76) According to K. Lawson Younger Jr. (*Judges and Ruth*, 23), “[t]he reference in 18:30 to ‘the time of the captivity of the land’ seems to refer to the Exile (either 722 or 586 B.C.) and

helpful to survey the relations between Israel and Moab in the pre-exilic period.⁷⁷⁾

It is confirmed throughout the Bible that the Israelites view their eastern neighbors with contempt and the Moabites are the representative ethnic group among them.⁷⁸⁾ The origin of the Moabites is presented in Genesis 19:29-39. They are the offspring of Lot and his elder daughter, so they are born in incestuous sin. In Numbers 22-24, when the Israelites are trying to enter Canaan, the Moabites attempt to stop their entry. Knowing that their military force is weaker than that of the Israelites, they hire the false prophet Balaam to curse Israel, but he blesses the Israelites instead. As a result, God prohibits the Moabites from entering into God's assembly.

David conquers them without difficulty and subordinates Moab to Israel. Later, Mesha king of Moab rebels, but Joram king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah thoroughly defeat him and ruin his land. From that time on, Moab declines as a nation little by little in accordance with the prophets' words. Amos 2:1-3 announces the death sentence on Moab; Isaiah 15-16 prophesies the coming destruction of Moab. Even more so, human sacrifice committed by the Moabites (2Ki 3:26-27) is an abominable sin in the sight of the Israelites. It is reasonable for the Israelites to hold them in contempt.

6. A Comparison with the Story of Samson

According to Robert G. Boling, the story of Samson is full of memories and allusions to the judges from Deborah to Jephthah.⁷⁹⁾ In this respect, the exploits of Ehud are similar to those of Samson,⁸⁰⁾ and this may imply that the Ehud narrative is related to the Samson narrative. Handy also argues for a strong relationship between the two stories and insists that "both stories have a heavier dose of the comical than do others which appear in the narratives of the judges in the book of Judges, which as a whole contains irony and a liberal amount of

suggests that the final edition of the book came from the Exile or afterwards".

77) Marc Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, 83.

78) Lowell K. Handy, "Uneasy Laughter", 238.

79) Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, Anchor Bible 6A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 232.

80) *Ibid.*, 87.

humor throughout”.⁸¹⁾

As Klein notes, Ehud and Samson are similar in their use of wordplay to handle their enemy.⁸²⁾ However, the results incur opposite consequences. Ehud uses wordplay for the deceit of his people’s enemy, but Samson’s wordplay is more self-conscious in form and leads to self-destruction and the ruin of Israel.

The structure of the book of Judges is a spiral of progressive deterioration. As the story progresses, the internal problem increases and the role of humor changes accordingly.⁸³⁾ The series of judges starts from the bare stereotype of Othniel, goes through the disastrous vow of Jephthah, and ends with the bumbling fool Samson. With this trajectory, the first judge narrative may be expected to be light-hearted and the final judge narrative somber. Comparing it with the Ehud story, Handy shows three important dark elements constituting the Samson narrative: an incompetent leader of his people, a person outwitted by the Philistines, and a savior who saves by killing himself.⁸⁴⁾

The figure and activity of Samson is explicitly contrasted with that of Ehud. The Ehud story gives a positive image of the Israelites as clever but the Samson story takes a pessimistic view of the Israelites. The Samson story is humorous, but “it is a humor laced with angst”.⁸⁵⁾ Though the two stories progress in opposite directions, the contrasted humorous dispositions of the two stories can categorize them into the same genre of humor.

7. Conclusion

Knowing the genre is the key to understanding the meaning and intention of a narrative. In this study I have demonstrated that the Ehud story can be understood in the light of the genre of humor. Though this story deals with a historical event, it may be read as a political satire with ethnic contempt. In order to show the characteristics of humor in this story, three criteria for the genre identification are employed: linguistic analysis, mood of the text, and historical

81) Lowell K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter”, 242.

82) Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 128-129.

83) J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, 23.

84) Lowell K. Handy, “Uneasy Laughter”, 243.

85) *Ibid.*, 244.

background. The words such as “Eglon”, “Ehud”, “left” contrary to “right”, and “secret message” have the double or implied meanings which may burst into laughter. The descriptions such as the offering of the tribute, the murder scene, the waiting servants, and the battle and the victory are full of disdain, ridicule, and mock against the Moabites. In addition, the investigation of the relations between the Israelites and the Moabites in the social and historical situations demonstrates that the Israelites had antipathy and contempt against the Moabites. In conclusion, the Ehud story is full of linguistic playfulness, which leads us to read this story as a political satire, mocking the Moabites ethnically.

<Keywords>

Judges 3:12-30, Ehud and Eglon, Humor, Political Satire, Wordplay, Double Meaning.

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<Abstract>

Reading the Ehud Story (Jdg 3:12-30) in the Light of Linguistic Playfulness

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This study is to present a way of reading the Ehud story (Jdg 3:12-30) as humor in the light of linguistic playfulness. Though this story deals with a historical event, it may be read as humor, especially a political satire with ethnic antipathy. In order to discover the characteristics of a narrative, genre identification methods are helpful to disclose its characteristics. On the basis of three criteria to identify the genre of a story, the humorous nature of this story is examined: linguistic analysis, mood of the text, and historical background. The words such as “Eglon”, “Ehud”, “left” contrary to “right”, and “secret message” have double or implied meanings which may burst into laughter. The descriptions such as the offering of the tribute, the murder scene, the waiting servants, and the battle and the victory are full of disdain, ridicule, and mock against the Moabites. The investigation of the relations between the Israelites and the Moabites in the social and historical situations demonstrates that Israelites had antipathy and contempt against the Moabites. In consideration of wordplay, scornful mood, and historical circumstances, therefore, the Ehud story has the nature of humor, which can be read as a political satire with an ethnic contempt against the Moabite.