



EHUD'S ESCAPE

By Brian Janeway

Ehud the Left-handed Judge

“For sheer melodrama—gruesome murders, sexual exploits, superhuman feats of strength, a bizarre mutilation—no tabloid can offer you more.” So reads the introduction to the book of Judges in the Quest Study Bible. Such a juicy enticement to begin the study of Scripture! Hopefully, this study will be motivated by more noble incentives!

The Book of Judges

In the book of Judges, we encounter the stories of Israel’s “judges,” from the root *spt*, meaning “to deliver” or “to save” in this particular context. But the general meaning of the word is multifaceted and encompasses many functions obscured by the simple rendering. They include the actions of “govern,” “decide,” “rule,” “vindicate,” and “deliver.” With cognates in both Akkadian and the Mari archives, it is often used in the Old Testament in parallel with *dyn*, implying a predominately legal function of the word “judgment.” Whereas the root *dyn* is used only 25 times, the use of *spt* is attested in 180 references.¹

The book of Judges contains a series of “cycles” wherein Israel experiences God’s blessing, falls into spiritual complacency and idolatry, suffers at the hand of enemies, repents of its evil ways, and is delivered by one of the judges. Rabbinical tradition holds that the prophet Samuel authored Judges. The book itself, however, makes no claims of authorship. It seems likely a prophetic associate of Samuel’s was the actual author, based upon certain chronological indicators in the text (“in those days there was no king in Israel,” 17:6, 18:1, 21:25) and its place in the prophetic division of the Hebrew Bible.²

The Time of the Judges

The period of Judges is entangled in the discussion over the date of the Exodus and Conquest. Many modern scholars want to compress the events of Judges into an intolerably short period of about 200 years. But a straightforward reading of the text (like 11:26, where Jephthah claims the Israelites had been in the land for 300 years) along with 1 Kings 6:1 (480 years from the time of Solomon) dates Judges to ca. 1400–ca. 1050 BC (the appointment of Saul), a span of approximately 350 years.

Taken at face value, the Ehud story probably dates to about 1300 BC. A left-handed man of the tribe of Benjamin whom “the Lord raised up as a deliverer” (v 15), Ehud is only mentioned two other times (1 Chr 7:10, 8:6), both in genealogies. Thus we have a left-handed, or more precisely right hand-bound (*itter*), hero from the tribe whose name means “son of the right hand”!³ Yet, Benjamin is noted for such warriors. Judges 20:16 speaks of “700 picked troops” who, with their right hands *itter*, could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (see also 1 Chr 2:12).

The Israelites had been oppressed by Moabite king Eglon for 18 years when Ehud arrived on the scene, empowered by God. After delivering tribute to Eglon, probably grain or produce in baskets, he returned to give the king a “message from God” (v 20). Cundall⁴ makes the interesting observation that Ehud used the general word for God, Elohim rather than Yahweh, the name of Israel’s deity. Perhaps the generic term was something to which even a Moabite king could relate! In private company with Eglon, he revealed his hidden weapon and coolly dispatched the corpulent king. Ehud’s escape was made good by the ignorance of the king’s attendants who sat idly as he blithely exited past them. By the time they realized what had transpired, the Israelites rallied behind their “deliverer” and routed the Moabites—“about 10,000 men... all robust and valiant” (v. 29, NASB). After Ehud’s deliverance, the land enjoyed 80 years of peace.⁵

Eglon’s Palace at Jericho

Verse 3:23 would seem to be a rather straightforward sentence, with *misdaron* usually rendered “vestibule.” The LXX renders it that way as do most commentators. Gray⁶ states that the locative ending indicates a feature outside the “cool upper chamber” as the place from which Ehud went out. The “cool upper chamber” is the feminine noun *aliyya*. Gray suggests this is a portico, or more likely “an outside stairway.”

Boling⁷ translates it “by the way of the porch” (lit. “in the direction of the porch”). In this reading, Ehud would not have exited the same way he came in but somehow went over the side.

Burney⁸ notes the preformative (m) commonly used to denote the place of the action described by the verb. In modern Hebrew, Assyrian and Aramaic, the root means “to arrange in order or in a rank.”

The conventional understanding of the “cool roof chamber” or *aliyya* is echoed by Martin⁹. Eglon was understood to be within a simple construction on the building’s flat roof that served as a “summer” palace allowing circulation of air in the hot Jordan Valley. Yet, it is highly doubtful he went to the roof to escape the withering heat of the Jordan Valley. Respite was much more likely in the lower levels of the building.

Ehud’s Escape

The means of Ehud’s escape has long befuddled scholars. How could he walk right in on an unguarded Eglon and terminate “His Royal Corpulence”? Why wasn’t Eglon’s Moabite retinue able to foil the devious plot of this “Benjaminite Bond” (“that’s Bond... James Bond”)? Archaeology can help illuminate these strange events in the king’s palace.

Halpern¹⁰ offered a plausible reconstruction to this passage. In the ancient Near East, left-handed soldiers had an advantage. Just as with modern left-handed boxers, ancient southpaw warriors presented a problem to conventional battle tactics, mismatching “blade against shield, shield against blade.” By this subterfuge, Ehud passed the guards with his cubit-length sword strapped undetected to his right side.

However, this does not explain the ease of his escape. The *aliyya* where Eglon was seated has been variously translated “cool upper chamber,” “portico,” “outside stairway” and “platform with pillars.” Yet, the term is best understood as an architectural one: “the room over.” According to Halpern,¹¹ it is always used in this sense. Most often an enclosed, upper story space (1 Kgs 17:19, 23; 2 Kgs 4:10; Jer 22:13) it never indicates more than a single room. The attendants call it a *heder*, or “chamber” in 3:24. Following

Stager, he argues this architectural phrase *aliyya hammqera* (3:20) actually means “the room over the beams.” A similar idea is expressed in Psalm 104:3, where Yahweh “lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters” (NASB)¹²

In 3:20, Ehud gained an audience with the king and “entered unto him,” apparently crossing a threshold into the proposed *aliyya*, where the king was already seated.

As Halpern¹³ noted, the *bit hilani* plan is well attested in both Assyrian and contemporary Iron Age (ca. 1200–500 BC) structures from Syria.¹⁴ While only the first floors of these structures survive, wall thickness and remnants of staircases suggest a second story.

The floor plan of these buildings had several common features, focusing on two main rooms—a long, pillared portico and an inner throne room parallel to it, with the entrance through the broad side.

It was common for *bit hilani* palaces to contain a throne room with the core elevated, as was Solomon’s (1 Kgs 10:18–20; 2 Chr 9:17–19). The same was said of Solomon’s Temple, where the Holy of Holies stood ten cubits above the floor (1 Kgs 6:2, 20). Inside this throne room Halpern¹⁵ suggested the king’s *aliyya* was situated. He speculated that the platform was partitioned from the audience hall by a wood screen and not, in essence, a separate room.

Halpern¹⁶ reconstructed the events of Judges 3 as follows: Ehud gained an audience with Eglon (3:19), crossed to where the rotund ruler was seated atop his *aliyya*. The same crossing over is reversed (3:23) when Ehud escapes the locked *aliyya*. In 3:24, he exited past the unsuspecting guards. They sat two doors removed from the king in the *aliyya*. Without this spatial separation, the guards would have suspected foul play upon seeing the closed door of the *aliyya*, locked by Ehud as he departed.



A.D. Riddle, BiblePlaces.com

Excavations at Tel ‘Eton (or Khirbet Aitun in Arabic) in Israel’s lowlands has been identified as the ancient Canaanite, then Israelite, town of Eglon. It was eventually destroyed by the Assyrians under Sennacherib in the 8th century BC. The 15 acre site is located at an important ancient crossroads just below the Hebron hills. Above is pictured a possible location for Eglon’s palace in addition to the Jericho discoveries (see page 24).

Covering His Feet

Instead, they thought their monarch was “performing the offices of nature”.¹⁷ This phrase is the well-known euphemism for defecation also attested in 1 Samuel 24:3. In the Saul story, the infinite construct is used (*hasekh*) yielding “to relieve.” For the corpulent king Eglon the Hiphil participle is used, meaning “relieving himself” to indicate an ongoing action, or so they thought! The word comes from the root (*s-kh-kh*) meaning “to overshadow or screen.” The phrase means literally “to cover one’s feet,” with “feet” functioning as the direct object of the reflexive verb.

Down and Out

So how did the stealthy Ehud escape unnoticed? Did he lock himself inside the *aliyya* or outside it? Halpern¹⁸ believes on lexical grounds that Ehud locked himself **inside**. His argument is strengthened by the fact that in verse 23 the verb “to close” from the root (*s-gh-r*) is used in association with the preposition *b’dw*. In every case of the verb “to close” being used with “upon” or “behind,” the object of the preposition is shut inside the structure in question.

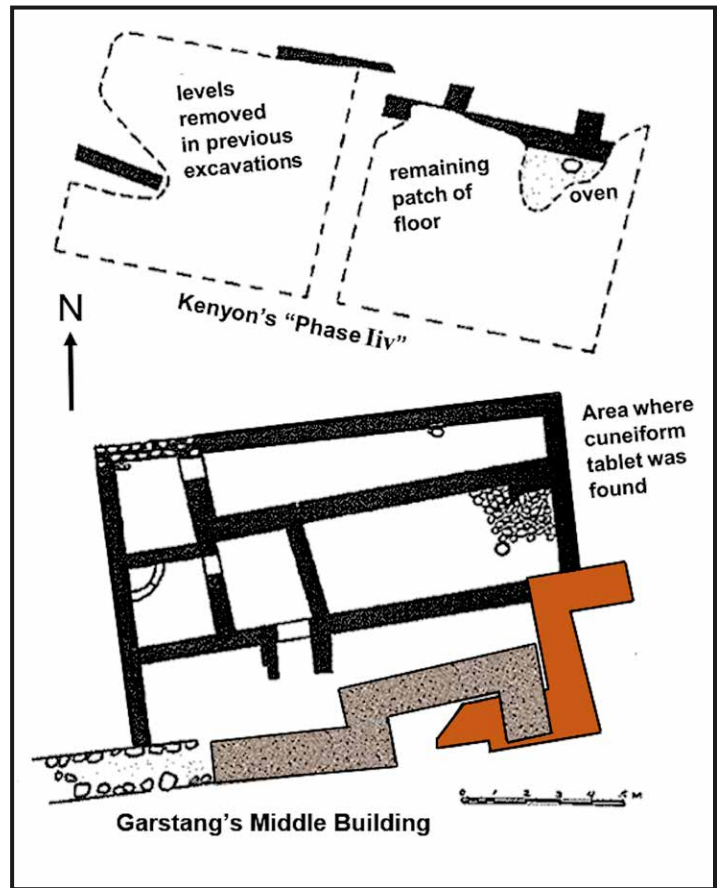
Commentators have long taken the object of the preposition to be Eglon, but Ehud is the last subject mentioned. He closed the doors of the *'aliyya* from the inside.¹⁸

So what of the *misdaron*? A clue to this feature is given in 3:25. After Ehud's departure, the courtiers checked on Eglon only to find the doors of the *'aliyya* locked. Assuring themselves the king was only "covering his feet," after an unknown period of time, they felt compelled to do something. Burney's¹⁹ rendering of *bosh* is best, indicating that the attendants waited not "until they were utterly at a loss" (RSV), but rather "as long as shame demanded" ("to the point of embarrassment," NIV).

The argument is made that *misdaron* should not be linked to the root (*sdr*) to mean "portico, row of pillars" but rather *sadira*. The root means "to be blinded, puzzled" in Hebrew, Targumic, and Arabic. The usage reminds one of the phrase "to cover one's feet." The term aptly applied to the area "under the beams" and means something on the order of "the hidden place." The word is *mistarim*, meaning "the hidden space" beneath the temple floor. It appears that the *'aliyya* contained a toilet, as inferred from the courtiers' reaction to the locked doors. "What the king deposited from above can only have fallen through the floor." The king's "throne" was in fact a commode!

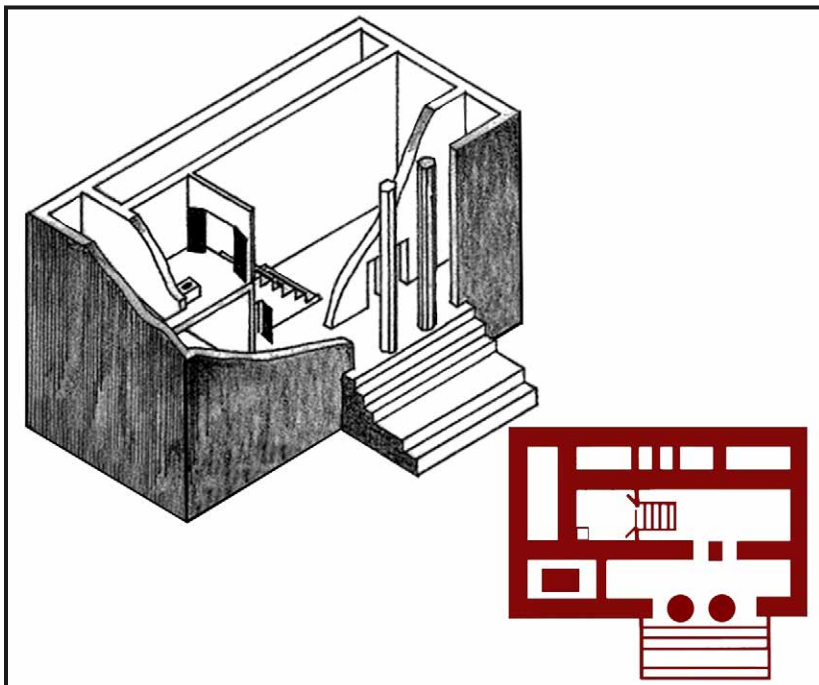
Indoor toilets are well attested in *bit hilani* palaces. The "hidden space" underneath would have been accessed by orderlies through the audience hall. In the absence of any other means of egress from that room, the *misdaron* is the most probable avenue of Ehud's escape.²⁰ Halpern²¹ muses,

The terms having to do with excrement have caused difficulties; crowded into the space of a few verses is the highest concentration of rare and unique vocabulary in the literature of ancient Israel.



Bryant G. Wood

Plan of late 14th century BC (Late Bronze IIA) structures on the southeast slope of the tell at Jericho.



Gene Fackler



Palestine Exploration Fund, London

Garstang's Middle Building was excavated in 1933 on Jericho's southeastern slope. Its date corresponds well with the date of the palace of Eglon, the Moabite king in Judges 3:12–25: an isolated structure with evidence of wealth (expensive imported pottery), administrative activity (an inscribed clay tablet) and constructed toward the end of the 14th century. It was also occupied for only a short period of time and then abandoned, paralleling the Bible's description of an eighteen year oppression by Eglon and the subsequent rout of the Moabites by Ehud and the Israelites.

A typical architectural design of an Iron Age palace in Syro-Palestine and throughout the ancient Near East was called a *Bit-hilani*, likely first appearing in north Syria. The main feature was a portico or colonnaded porch. Based on archaeological evidence at Jericho (Garstang's Middle Building), Eglon's palace was likely a *Bit-hilani* in construction and plan.



Aerial view of Jericho, looking south. The trenches and squares visible today are from Kathleen Kenyon's excavations in the 1950s and the more recent Italian-Palestinian excavation which began in 1997. The area under consideration in this article is just right of the road running along the tell's left (east) side where excavations by John Garstang found evidence for the destruction of Jericho by the Israelites. The "Middle Building" may be Eglon's palace. Two 8x8 m squares excavated by Kathleen Kenyon was where she found similar evidence for Israel's destruction (ca. 1400 BC), but misdated it to 1550 BC and attributed it to the Egyptians.

Toilets were very uncommon in the ancient Near East during the Old Testament period but are well attested in *bit hilani* palaces. The “hidden space” underneath would have been accessed by orderlies through the audience hall. In the absence of any other means of egress from that room, the *misdaron* is the most probable avenue of Ehud’s escape.

Right: Two stone toilet seats have been found in excavation at the City of David. This one was found in Area G and sat in a small room above a cesspit. The house in which it was found was destroyed in 587 BC. The toilet seat over the cesspit appears to be similar to the *misdaron* in Eglon’s palace.



Todd Bolen, BiblePlaces.com

The continuing theme of scatology is prominent in Jull’s²² treatment of the term *mkerah*, translated as “the cool roof chamber” (v 24). It was the doors to this room that the courtiers found locked after Ehud’s departure. Traditionally derived from the root (*krr*), “to cool,” the upper story was not a logical place to escape the blistering heat of Jericho, as noted previously.

Following Stager and Halpern’s derivation from the root (*krh*), Jull concurs with the translation implying wooden beams. But he takes issue with the rendering “room over beams.” He thinks it more likely that rooms were named after their function rather than their mode of construction. The same tendency applies in English (bedroom, bathroom, dining room, etc.). He contends that the term *mkerah* actually means “toilet chamber” and its equivalent in verse 19 is “royal toilet”²².

Jull²³ cites Deuteronomy 23:10–13, where *k rehlay lah* has been translated too narrowly. Rather than merely “nocturnal emission,” it should encompass other “nocturnal accidents” of bodily fluids. The Mishnah offers a more precise term for “nocturnal emission”—*keri*. He relates the root (*krh*), with at least one derivative referring to toilet activity and another meaning “to meet, happen, or befall.” This is done euphemistically. Just as “covering one’s feet” masked the private nature of the activity in the Israelite mind, so did the term *mkerah*.

Additional examples exist in the Old Testament. *Siah*, “to dig a hole,” has also been understood euphemistically for defecating. Hence, Elijah’s taunts of the prophets of Baal has God’s prophet indicating that Baal is perhaps too busy relieving himself to hear the cries of his priests (1 Kgs 18:27).²³

Returning to Judges 3:12–30, the *mkerah* is now to be seen as “the place of happening,” euphemistic for a place of defecation and urination—a toilet. Contra Halpern, Jull considers *’aliyya ham kerah* not to include the entire throne room but merely the private “royal toilet.” This better explains the sense of privacy implied by Ehud’s “secret word” to be given to “His Corpulency.” Two Iron II “toilets” have been excavated in the City of David.¹⁰ Both were situated within closed chambers, fitting the proposed understanding of our text and reflecting the biblical attitude of privacy toward toilet activity.²⁴

What can we now say regarding Ehud’s escape in light of this scatological exegesis? Ehud interrupted Eglon busy on his “throne.” Aghast at this shocking lack of decorum on the part of the upstart Benjaminite, King Eglon arose from his “performance of the offices of nature” only to be met with a two-edged sword. This stealthy Semite then escaped the *hadar ham kerah* the only way he knew, through the *misdaron*, that is, down the cesspit.

Endnotes for this article can be found at www.BibleArchaeology.org. Type “Endnotes” in the search box; next, click the “Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes” link; then page down to the article.



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