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Ehud, Stigma and the Management of Spoiled Identity: A Sociological Retelling of Judges 3:12-30 with Goffman as Conversation Partner

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Abstract The story of Ehud, and his assassination of the Moabite King Eglon (Judges 3:12-30), continues to entertain readers and hearers alike, as it has done for centuries. The story also perplexes, largely on moral grounds. This paper utilises the sociology of Erving Goffman and insights from disability studies, to re-tell the story of Ehud as someone who is doubly stigmatised. That is, Ehud not only carries the stigma of left-handedness but is also disabled; moreover, the Moabite King is also disabled/immobile because of his obesity. I take the biblical text as conveying that Ehud is left handed by necessity given the impairment in his right hand/arm. Adopting a social model of disability, I apply Goffman's account of the management of spoiled identity developed in his book *Stigma* (1963) to explore how the narrative depicts various dimensions of social stigma and Ehud's moral career as he attempts to manage his spoiled identity and the degrees of societal acceptance and rejection he experiences in different contexts. The key arguments of Goffman are summarised before I apply central concepts from Goffman to the biblical story. Concepts include 'moral career', the distinction between social, personal and ego (self-) identity, and the key distinction between a person with a stigma being discredited (because the impairment is obvious and seen by all), on the one hand, or bearing a stigma that is discreditable (that is, it would discredit them if found out), on the other. I show how the processes of concealing, passing and revealing operate in Ehud's moral career, and in particular how his gaining entry to the presence of fat King Eglon revolves around an ironic inversion of Ehud's normal practice of concealing his impairment, which can be clearly seen given Goffman's perspective. However, if Ehud was attempting to gain admission to the able-bodied male society through his 'able-bodied action' I argue that the stigma of his impairment is never fully forgotten in the cultural memory of ancient Israel and this accounts for

the ambiguity in the treatment of Ehud. The paper concludes with a note that this sociological re-telling of the Ehud story has elements of disablism within it given the limitations at source of Goffman's view that the stigmatised desire to pass as 'normal'.

The Ehud Story and Its Reception

The story of Ehud, and his assassination of the Moabite King Eglon (Judges 3:12-30), continues to entertain readers and hearers alike, as it has done for centuries. The story also perplexes. Whilst there are textual conundrums, confusions about Moabite architecture (Halpern 1998, 39-76), and a complex debate about layers of the story and sources (see the commentaries), it is largely on moral grounds that the story challenges¹. The character of Ehud and the morality of his actions has often been commented upon as interpreters have grappled with assessing his "desperate enterprise" and "hazardous adventure" (Milman n.d, 86) and whether the actions of this hero are indeed to be celebrated, and even replicated in situations of oppression and tyranny. For some he is a divinely inspired hero, perfect in deed and body, an ancient 007- the Benjaminite James Bond (Barsley 1966, 115-18; Halpern 1998); whereas for others he is an example of duplicity and secrecy, flattering to deceive, offering presents but with a deadly intent. For Boling, Ehud is a "devious prophet-diplomat", who performs a "Single-handed diplomatic

¹ As indeed do many of the stories in the Book of Judges, including the actions of Jael, and the praise given her, and those of Jephthah. On the former see the wonderful discussion by the then Dean of Lichfield, H. Mortimer Luckock (1905)

treachery” (Boling 1975, 85, 86). The action is cowardly and barbarous.² For the Moabites he was no doubt seen as a one-armed bandit, assassin and terrorist. Even when it is acknowledged that “all is fair in love and war”, or that Yahweh can use any person and any means for the restoration of his people (and hence Ehud’s actions are legitimate and the murder of Eglon permitted) commentators like Matthew Henry and John Kitto in the history of interpretation, feel that the conclusion should not be drawn that such methods have divine sanction in the present³. It was felt in Victorian times, when evolutionary thinking was influential, that the fact that his actions are legendary and celebrated by the Hebrew writer only illustrates the relative ‘backward’, pre-modern state of Israelite society, morality and religion at the time of its composition.⁴

The diversity in traditional assessments of Ehud’s character and deed is reflected in sociology likewise given the different sociological perspectives that

² John Kitto (1861:338) for example commented: “Such deeds as that of Ehud, when prompted, as his was by patriotism, have won the praise of men, as in the case of Brutus and others. We cannot praise his achievement, nor sympathise with it, attended as it was by circumstances of barbarity and deceit. Some allowance may be made for the views, different from ours, but in which human nature is still prone to relapse, of the obligations and rights of patriotic enthusiasm...we can only say that God has often in the history of the world, as in the instance of Jehu, made the wrath and cruelty of man to praise Him, and to accomplish his decreed purpose”.

³ For example, Palmer 1892,160, wrote “The inspiration of faith and patriotism does not however relieve Ehud, more than it would Ulysses, from the charge of barbarity; Deborah from that of commending treachery; Gideon from that of avarice; Jephthah from that of superstition; or Samson from that of lust. In estimating the men, their inspiration, and the acts which they performed, we have to remember the times in which they live, the people to whom they belonged, the little knowledge of God which was possessed, and the fact that the knowledge which men had was held for the most part in germ, waiting for the development in later, brighter, and better times”.

⁴ An evolutionary point that would draw on comparative sociological research at the time (Chalcraft 2004), and which also coloured theological reflection about the stages of revelation. See Rogerson (2014).

have or could be utilised to interact with the story. Ehud can be seen sociologically as an example of the charismatic type of leader as conceptualised by Max Weber⁵, or as a potentially deviant and dangerous character whose efforts are praised because they are carried out during war time against a hated enemy but whose actions, were they to be perpetuated within the society during times of peace, would be classified as criminal and destabilising of the social order (Chalcraft 1990). It is also possible, as I present in this essay, to read the story with Erving Goffman's *Stigma* in hand, to see Ehud as a character with a physical impairment who is disabled in the society and to consider the narrative as exploring various dimensions of social stigma and Ehud's 'moral career' as he attempts to manage his spoiled identity, and the degrees of societal acceptance and rejection he achieves/receives.

⁵ Weber's conception of charismatic leadership (1952; 1978), and its application to Ehud (Weber mainly applies the concept, in *Ancient Judaism*, to the figure of Jephthah), would serve to elevate and legitimate Ehud. The charismatic qualities that Ehud's claim to charisma would rest upon would be in the sphere of cunning and subterfuge, and the ability to craft a bespoke weapon. Charismatic leaders are ontologically super-human, whereas deviants are ontologically in- or sub-human (Katz 1972). As the Samson saga shows there is a very fine line between charismatic leadership and deviance with the challenge to the social order presented by charisma also threatening an anomic chaos- the men of Judah have Samson agree to bind him to hand him over to the Philistines to end the cycle of violence and protect their own property (Chalcraft 1990). The ambivalence is felt in the narratives. Eric Christianson alerted us to the notion of 'charismatic killers'- the *film noir* quality of the narratives of the heroes in the Book of Judges. The relationship between charisma, stigma and deviance is a rich vein to mine.

Goffman as Conversation Partner

I show how Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) is a fascinating sociological text with which to think about Ehud⁶. There is sociological art as well as literary art. The literary art of the narrator/s of the Book of Judges has often been commented on (e.g. Alter 1981,37-41; Ryken 1992, 23-5), and the Ehud story has been praised from this point of view. For William Robertson Smith, a pioneer in sociological and anthropological approaches, the literary art serves to bring history to life so that he feels himself "in living contact with the earliest strain of Hebrew patriotism and religion" and that "lively and detailed reminiscences" gives a certain charm to the narratives. He observes, "The importance of such documents for the scientific historian lies not so much in the events they record as in the unconscious witness they bear to the state of things in which the narrator or poet lived" (1880,764). A modern day sociologist is apt to agree with Robertson Smith that the narratives, through their artifice, give a "prominence

⁶ After utilising Goffman it is necessary, through the use of contemporary disability studies, to offer some correctives to Goffman's 'deficit model' and the way that the narratives Goffman provides, and hence our own reconstruction of the Ehud story, draws on a 'normalising' ideology, which views disability and the management of stigma from an able-bodied perspective. That is, the attitude might be taken by some as disablist (Goodley 2014). The narrator may well have been disablist as are indeed Ehud's fellow Israelites and the Moabites. See my final comments below.

to ordinary human emotions and combinations". These can be further explored making use of sociological work such as that by Goffman.

The insight into human nature and motivation that the narrative shows clearly evidences that the narrator has an empathetic knowledge of human relationships and that they were a keen observer of group social life. A concern with the workings of their own society and an investment in the social order on the part of the Hebrew writers does not render them modern day sociologists, but does acknowledge that, as with literary abilities, reflexion upon society does not begin in modernity. People with impairments have existed at all times in the history of society, even whilst what disables varies across time and space. It is not remarkable therefore that stories can be found in ancient literatures that are relevant to disability studies⁷.

Eric Auerbach (1968, 3-23) famously spoke of the way in which Hebrew narrative, as compared with Greek classics, is "fraught with background". This invites the reader to use their imagination to fill in the gaps⁸ that are not

⁷ What would be considered remarkable is a sympathetic treatment of the physically and mentally impaired along the lines of the so-called 'social model' of disability (see further below). It would be more likely for the 'Religious Model of Disability' to be operative. This model, which holds root in their reading of the Bible, judges disability to be a result of error and sin. As Mitchell reports: "The Religious Model of Disability views disability as a punishment inflicted upon an individual or family by an external force. It can be due to misdemeanours committed by the disabled person, someone in the family or community group, or forbears. Birth conditions can be due to actions committed in a previous reincarnation" (2013,223)

⁸ It is interesting to see how each commentator has to provide connections and motivations and explanations to account for the action narrated given the gaps in the original story, to provide coherence and understanding, using what is provided as point of departure for speculation. To argue that it is only sociology that is filling the gaps with its informed imagination, is plainly to ignore what commentators have always done.

narrated in the text itself and extend the purview of the narrative. In my reading of the Ehad story I attempt to fill the gaps with plausible motivations, encounters and events through the use of Goffman, who has studied many examples of the experience of stigma and its management⁹, and has produced conceptual distinctions and theorised shared patterns of experience based on the evidence he viewed.

Goffman, then, provides some useful concepts and formulations to consider representations of/aspects of the micro and interactive world of deviance/disability and social order in the Hebrew Bible. The story can be retold with Goffman in hand. I am using Goffman- not as a model or theory, but as a cross textual resource, as a body of sociological ideas that are good to think with, that are suggestive and provides a way of talking- concepts- in reading the biblical narratives. It involves using sociology like a literary discourse or literary theory that is fruitfully brought into inter-textual dialogue with the biblical narratives. The biblical narratives themselves are also valued in this way as literary and ideological productions. Hence in this method,

⁹ Within sociology, Goffman is well known for his style of research and communication. As *the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* has it: "He broke almost all the rules of conventional methodology: his sources were unclear; his fieldwork seems minimal, and he was happier with novels and biography than with scientific observations; his style was not that of the scientific report but of the essayist and he was frustratingly unsystematic" (Scott 2014,287). No wonder then that I find his work a suitable conversation partner for engaging with the narrative dimensions of ancient Israelite social life. This is a far cry from some of the positivist assumptions of those who see the use of sociology as utilising a social science that can finally 'nail down' the meaning of the biblical text and its place in social processes (see Chalcraft 2010, 2014).

sociological and literary-textual analysis show an affinity rather than being aligned at opposite ends of a social science and humanities polarity.

Erving Goffman's Sociology and the 1963 Stigma Study

Goffman¹⁰ concentrates in his research on the face-to-face interactions of people in social encounters and the ways in which social order and individual integrity are achieved by a variety of actors working together in on-going social life. How individuals and groups present themselves, and maintain the images, and control the flows of information, about themselves are a constant preoccupation of Goffman in a series of famous studies (1959, 1961, 1967, 1971) Goffman's approach is often labelled an interactionist one, or better still as a dramaturgical perspective on social life. One of these studies in particular, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (hereafter *Stigma*) was published in 1963 and despite its age is still a point of reference, though in need of refinement and supplementation given the period when it was written and developments in sociology, and in disability studies in particular, since then (see Hunt 1966; Denzin 2002; Orne 2013; Cameron 2014a:147-50; Brune 2014).

Goffman, the Stigmatised Individual and Value Consensus

¹⁰ For introductions to Goffman and critical assessments see, for example, Burns 1992; Ritzer 1996_352-361; B Williams 1998:151-162.

Goffman often selected to research his chosen themes through looking at the experiences of people whom society regularly thought of as deviants or as otherwise marginal. Through looking at how deviants and those discredited attempted to gain a secure sense of self, or a modicum of social order, for themselves and for their encounters with so-called 'normals', Goffman was able to isolate techniques and processes, and relationships, that also revealed how the 'normal world' worked. As such, deviance exists within the normal everyday world and both 'deviant' and 'normal' know how the world works and in certain situations are able to mimic the ways of the other¹¹.

Goffman works from the assumption - and it is a perspective that will play a significant role in our Goffmanian retelling of the Ehud story- that the stigmatised understand and share the values and goals of the wider society- which is the very society that mistreats the discredited and to which nevertheless the discredited wish to belong. As Goffman wrote: "The stigmatised individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact" (1963, 17).

Goffman's Stigma: the management of spoiled identity.

¹¹ One is reminded of the ability of David to mimic 'a madman' to escape the suspicions of the Philistines who are taken in by his performance (1 Samuel 21:12-15).

Goffman is referring to “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” on the basis of their stigma (1963,9). A stigma is “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (1963,13). Stigma, Goffman reminds us at the start of his study, is of classical Greek origin and referred to marks placed onto the body of a person by those in authority to indicate that they are deviant, and have committed a criminal act. For the ancient Greeks stigmas are “bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor- a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places” (1963, 11).¹² In contemporary times the meaning of stigma, what can count as stigma and the feelings of shame evoked by stigma, show disconnections with ancient perceptions. The difference that Goffman emphasizes in contemporary notions of stigma are that whilst stigma is still communicated by ‘visible’ signs, crucially, in most instances, the physical stigmas are the result of accidents, disabilities at birth, or the onset of illness and disease in later life, rather than State interventions onto the body. Today, Goffman observes, “Stigma... is

¹² The mark of Cain as recounted in Genesis (chapter 4) would be an example were it not for the fact that the main function of the mark made on Cain’s forehead by Yahweh is not the identification of Cain as murderer, but as a warning that to take revenge on Cain – on this particular deviant- will cause 7 more murders, including the killing of the perpetrator. Of course recognising Cain is also to remember that he committed the first murder. In the latter case, the mark is a stigma in accordance with classical norms.

applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it” (1963,11).

Goffman distinguishes between three types of stigma:

1. Abominations of the body, including impairments, disfigurements, and loss of limbs
2. Blemishes of individual character-past but lasting moral and social failures that constitute the biography of the person, knowledge of which by others is discrediting, such as a history of mental illness, periods in prison, and depending on the culture and gendered expectations, being divorced or being childless
3. Tribal stigmas of race, nation and religion (where a person’s religion can be outwardly identified or is inextricably linked with ethnicity) which equally affects all members of a family by association and joint heritage

(Goffman 1963,16)

It is with the first of these types that we are mostly concerned in our interaction with the Ehad story, though aspects of the third type are not irrelevant to his case. Degrees of visibility of the basis for a stigma clearly vary depending on the type of stigma involved.

The Discredited and Discreditable

Goffman asks, How does the person with the stigma, who wishes to belong to the society and 'pass as normal' respond to their stigma? The question the person with a stigma constantly has to keep in mind, according to Goffman, especially when meeting strangers, is whether the stigma is immediately apparent and incapable of being covered or concealed or, on the other hand, whether it has yet to be uncovered. In the first instance, the person is already *discredited* and needs to work on managing the tensions that his obvious stigma creates in a situation of interaction, withdrawing or restoring impressions and relationships: that is, adopting strategies and mechanisms to manage their already spoiled identity. In the latter case, the person with a stigma, who is still *discreditable*, needs to assess what the level of risk might be in relation to the stigma being revealed, and must work to 'pass as normal' and to keep the balance between the *virtual* self (the self that is expected and anticipated by normal others) and the *actual* self that is becoming known by others. There are three main strategies for managing spoiled identity, including withdrawal from social encounters, continuing as normal and ignoring the fact by 'covering', fully aware that the social encounter is

conscious of the impairment but proceeding anyway, and, finally, 'Passing'¹³.

Passing is "the management of undisclosed discrediting information about the self", Goffman writes (1963,58). The discredited or discreditable individual constantly has to consider "to display or not display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where" (1963,42)¹⁴.

The decisions about displaying and telling then revolve around whether the stigma is already known or has yet to become known by others, and so the decision will be influenced by the social settings in which the person with a stigma finds themselves in and the amount of knowledge held about him already by others in that setting. Moreover, the degree to which a stigma or impairment disables the person in the eyes of others, and in the eyes of the bearer, depends on social setting and what attributes are considered normal or necessary in that setting: what attributes are anticipated as being held by all present. In such situations where the stigma clearly shows that there is a

¹³ As Barnes and Mercer observe: "For those with a visible stigma, the dilemma is how to manage the tension involved in social encounters and recover their status and identity. Responses range from corrective surgery (removing skin blemishes) to heroic feats (blind person learning how to ski), although it may also be possible to exploit the stigmatised condition for 'secondary gain' or as an excuse for not doing certain things, (2010:48).

¹⁴ The stigma has to be managed. What Goffman has in mind is different from the type of management followed by Gertrude Lodge, the woman with an 'afflicted arm' in one of Thomas Hardy's *Wessex Tales*, namely the short story, *The Withered Arm*, who seeks a cure. The impairment has been brought about by magic, so she manages her disfigurement by seeking out all manner of remedies and cures. Of course, she keeps her arm covered and is ashamed of the affliction but the logic of her thinking is that since supernatural events have brought about her infirmity then only supernatural forces can restore her: in this case, placing her withered arm against the neck of a recently hanged person.

discrepancy between what Goffman calls a *virtual* identity (attributes that are anticipated as being held by all those present) and an *actual* identity (what attributes are held), the person's differentness becomes a problem that can disrupt the interaction and the pursuit of shared goals. "He possess a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the *normal*" (1963,15 his italics). The important sociological point here is that stigma (and in the case of physical impairments, disability) is "less a question of attributes (which must be present for sure) and more a question of relationships" (1963,13).

In the analysis of Ehad's story therefore it is essential to determine in which social settings and with which social groups Ehad is interacting and in which of those groups his stigma is of consequence to himself and others, such that his impairment becomes a disability. In speaking in this way, of relationships rather than attributes, the *social model of disability* (Barnes 1998; Oliver 2009, 30-42; Shakespeare 2010; Campbell 2014d) is guiding the research in contrast to what is known as a medical model of disability. The development of the social model of disability in sociology occurs largely after Goffman's work, and many disability scholars feel that Goffman's approach lies closer to the medical than the social model. However, Goffman's awareness of variable social

settings and the importance of relationships would tend to tell against such a reading of his work. In Goffman's development of the concept of the moral career of the stigma carrier, further evidence can be provided of his commitment to what is now called the social model of disability.

It is necessary to now include Goffman's concept of the moral career of the stigmatised person, since this allows us to see that the differing social settings and social groups in which interaction takes place, and in which the stigma may take on now more and now less significance, occur not only synchronically in the 'everyday round' of the stigmatised's life, but also diachronically as the stigmatised individual in their biography can move from one setting to another as they progress through life. In other words we expect Ehad's moral career to entail changes of attitude to him and changes in his own attitudes to himself and other social groups. The 'plot' of the story revolves, sociologically, around these changes.

Moral Career

With the concept of the moral career Goffman seeks to capture "The regular sequence of changes that career entails in the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others" (1963:119). In *Asylums*, for example, Goffman distinguishes three phrases of the career of the mental

patient: the stage when they are a pre-patient; the stage of being an in-patient, and thirdly the stage of being an ex-patient (Goffman, 1959).

He writes in *Stigma*: “Persons who have a particular stigma tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in conception of self- a similar ‘moral career’ that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of personal adjustments” (1963, 45).

Goffman theorises that there are two major moments in the early moral career of the stigmatised that lay down experiences that can have significance thereafter in the person’s biography and their management of their spoiled identity. These experiences will impact on the stigmatised sense of identity and senses of belonging to particular social groups and can include oscillations about in which groups the stigmatised feel they belong and about which ones they will want to keep at distance or feel hostility towards. Goffman speaks of ‘affiliation cycles’ (1963, 45-52). There will be groupings to which attachment is possible on the grounds that the stigma carried is shared by others as well.

For Goffman, the first important socialisation process is the process by which the person with the stigma learns societal norms, including prevailing attitudes to stigmas and impairments. The second socialisation process of modal significance are the moments when the individual learns not only that they have a stigma, *but also what the consequences of having that stigma generally*

are. Depending on the moment in the biography, at what stage of life, a stigma is acquired (e.g. whether from birth, or later in life), the timing of the latter learning will be different.

These learning experiences may have taken place during interactions with social groupings that are both new, wider and more diffuse than the social groups in which the individual till then has been most familiar. For example, moving beyond a family setting to wider social groupings. In the case of Ehud moving from the protective family and kin setting to the wider clan and tribe, particularly in the context of Moabite oppression and the de-militarisation of the tribe, is a change of great psychological and sociological consequence, as I argue below. These experiences 'prepare' Ehud for the movement into the sphere of the court of the oppressing Moabite forces where he is judged according to stereotype given the lack of personal relationships or intimate knowledge of Ehud and his abilities.

Social, Personal and Ego Identity

Goffman also distinguishes between social, personal and ego identity (self-identity), and these are helpful concepts to appreciate the ways in which for example, social information about a stigma might be conveyed and the extent

to which the flow of information can be controlled. In the case of a physical impairment to lower or upper limbs, the impairment can be seen visually, (unlike for example an impairment such as Diabetes type 2, and or past history of mental history. In contemporary discourse 'hidden disabilities' are increasingly being acknowledged). Visible impairments would render the person *discredited* rather than discreditable, since the stigma is already known about. In new social situations if the impairment could be covered then it becomes *discreditable*- the impairment could be discovered by others at some point in the interaction or at a later time or willingly revealed. The visual information would provide the basis for placing the individual into a category where their own personal history and personality would not be considered, but rather a social identity, such as being seen as belonging to the social category, as blind or lame or mobile-challenged, could be assigned. The personal identity of the stigmatised person, which, whilst being a member still of a category, is unique to them and their own biography and history, is to be distinguished from the social identity, and moreover depends on the people involved in the interaction knowing something about the person and having a relationship. In addition to the personal and the social identity of the stigmatised Goffman introduces the notion of an ego-identity (self-identity). If you will, the ways in which the individual concerned has attitudes towards

themselves and their social and personal identity as experienced in the society. In these ways we can see that in some social settings the social identity of the stigmatised is all that is known, whereas in others both the social and the personal identity is known, a connection between them can be made which one would expect to show some consistency. But importantly Goffman does not leave out the significant ego-identity from analysis, which is essential if any sense of the impact *on* the individual of these stigmatised identities is to be considered and moreover, if *their* attitudes to the social groups and individuals who hold this information about them are to be understood, and indeed what the impact might be on the motivations for action that the individual may decide to act upon in the light of them.

Reading Ehud through Goffman: Ehud's Moral Career: An Exegesis of the Text

If we read the story with Goffman as our inter-text, we can provide a reconstruction of how Ehud's impairment impacted on his social identity, his self-image and actions as directly linked to his discredited/discreditable status as a person with a disability. We can provide motivations for the character of Ehud since, following Goffman, he would attempt to manage his spoiled identity and forge new social relationships. To begin with it needs to be established that Ehud has an impairment and to be aware of in which social situations his stigma rendered him disabled in his own eyes and in the

perceptions of others. That is, to ask: In which social situations could Ehud reveal his impairment with minimal tension, and in which social situations would he wish to conceal his impairment? Were there situations where it would be necessary or preferred to completely reveal his impairment ?

Ehud's Moral Career: The Stages of Social, Personal and Ego

Identity and Various Group Alignments.

Ehud was Left-Handed and Eglon was very fat¹⁵

These two statements about Ehud and Eglon are of modal significance in the narrative. They are also the entry into the fact that this story is about impairment and disability. For Ehud is impaired in his right hand which renders him left handed by necessity. The impairment can be covered over and is not always visible but the impairment cannot be removed and in relation to certain tasks reveals itself, to the extent that in the perspective of various social

¹⁵ Richard Rogers in his 1615 commentary sees no particular interpretative significance in the record that Eglon was fat. He wrote: "...which may seeme to be uttered to no end, seeing it is neither set downe to his commendation, nor to his discommendation. Fatnesse of body is to bee thought of, as a thing neither with a man nor against him in it selfe. For some are more disposed thereto naturally than other, though they both have one diet, and alike kinde of easie life; euen as we see how one tree waxeth great and tall in the same soyle, where another is both small and low, as one Oke in comparison to another". However, Rogers recognises that indulgence can lead to fatness and laziness and renders a person incapable of performing their labour and calling. Those that "give over themselves, and let the bridle loose to excesse in eating, drinking, sleeping, playing, idlenesse, ease, and such like, and get fat that way, may little reioyce in it, and shall wish that they had by labour in their callings, and other good means, taken themselves downe..." (p. 167). On the other hand, In a sermon of 1773 James Murray uses Eglon's fatness to severely criticise an exploitative and tyrannous ruler, who has become fat because of his rape of the land that he is occupying: "he lived on the fat of the earth and the substance of the people: Israel paid for his voluptuous entertainment; eighteen years plunder might well make him fat; the worms would get the better feast". (1773:2).

groups in particular settings Ehud is seen as disabled. Eglon, King of Moab, is relatively immobile on account of his size, his obesity rendering him an ancient Jabba the Hut, unattractive and greedy for sensuous pleasures. The Ehud story can be read as exploring impairment and disability and, in turn, commentators reactions to the characters can also be seen as reflecting attitudes to stigmatised impairments, often shared in the social group to which they themselves belong. Such attitudes no doubt have influenced the translators of the Bible into English, both before and after the King James version of 1611. That is to say, that in this tale of disability, built around concealing and revealing, one attribute that is also unexpectedly revealed, is the attitude of the translators and commentators, old and new, to disability¹⁶.

Ehud and his Hand: Does Ehud have an impairment?

There are alternative ways of assessing Ehud's left handedness in the history of interpretation based on understandings of the original Hebrew. Ehud can be seen as left handed (the left naturally stronger than the right), or as impaired

¹⁶ This is one reason why I give quotations from commentators in the history of interpretation. They have not been given to show how modern interpreters build on the past or to make a contrast between pre-critical exegesis and exegesis founded on the higher criticism. Rather the intent is to show, from a sociological point of view, how interpretations are rooted in social and cultural context and that moreover, that context includes attitudes to disability. I hope to return to the sociological analysis of examples from the history of the interpretation in later work. For an examples discussing Joshua 7 see Chalcraft 2019.

in the right hand and lower arm (and hence left-handed by the necessity of the disabling impairment) or seen “an ambidexter, who could use his left hand as well as his right” (Milman, n.d, 86), equally strong and skilled in both hands and able to use the left hand when least expected and hence catch his enemies unawares. (rather than being ambidextrous and unable to do anything with either hand!). So is he left handed, ambidextrous or is he in fact carrying an impairment which society considers a disability ?

Taking the Hebrew of Judges 3:15 to mean that Ehud *was left handed by necessity* because he *was lame in the right hand*, means we can consider this narrative from the perspective of its treatment of how an impairment has consequences for Ehud in relation to particular social groups and situations. 3.15 reads in the REB: “The Lord raised up for them a deliver, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left handed man”. This is a short but packed verse. Literally, a Benjaminite means “the son of the right hand”. Whether this is a reference to the geographical location of the tribe of Benjamin contemporary to the narrator or from previous times is a moot point, but the striking fact is that this particular son of the right hand is actually left handed¹⁷. Or, if we

¹⁷ Below I engage with the possibility that all Benjaminites are left-handed, and simply saying that someone was from the tribe of Benjamin would conjure up the fact of their abilities in their left hands. This does not mean that all members of the tribe carried physical impairments in the right hand. What is more likely, is that, perhaps following the example of their heroic ancestor, they adopted techniques to cultivate specific fighting abilities in their left hands to take a ‘southpaw’ advantage in any military encounter with other troops that fought right-handedly.

prefer the description, this son of the right hand is deformed in the right hand. In either case, it suggests something not quite right in the house of Benjamin with respect to Ehud. He is part of this tribe and inheritance but not fully part of it. He will end up acting as Yahweh's left hand man.

Sometimes in versions of the Bible, Ehud's marginal status as a person with physical impairment is indicated in the margin, and hence not seen as central, but in any cases the main text carries the note of infirmity and 'left handedness' is in the margin, and hence his marginal status as carrying an infirmity is directly present. The Geneva Bible for example, reads in the main text, "a man lame of his right hand" and in the margin it reads, "Or, left handed". On the other hand (if you excuse the pun) the 1611 edition of the King James notes in the margin that the situation was one of "shut of his right hand" as the literal rendering of the Hebrew; whereas in the main text it states he was "a man left handed". It is not a question of denial of the Hebrew or ignoring the fact of the impairment that characterises some later commentary when the marginal readings are *not* provided¹⁸. Rather, if they found the text directly saying, and without marginal comment, that Ehud was lame of the

¹⁸ In the Matthew Bible the verse reads "a man that could do nothing handsome with his right hand" (1537); The RV has "a man left handed", whilst the RSV and the REB choses "he was left handed"; JPS "a left handed man", the NEB has "who was left handed"; *The Brown Dictionary of the Bible* has "was left handed, or rather lame of his right hand" (1818).

right hand or, that he was left handed, this was the textual reality with which they had to deal. Reacting to the fact brings out responses that are interesting sociologically since they may convey attitudes towards disability held at the time in the context, or at least by the writer themselves. This cannot be gone into detail here. Two examples will suffice: Such is the case with Richard Rogers' commentary/sermons on the Book of Judges published in 1615.

An other thing in this verse is, that this Ehad, who was given them as a deliverer, is said to have bin lame, but in what part of his body? even on his right hand, that member which might worst be missed, especially in a valiant captaine and man of war, as he was, and now called to shew his strength and skil, wherein we can say no lesse, but that God doth that which is strange and marvellous in our eyes. For he sheweth us hereby, that he when it pleseth him...useth weake meane as to effect and bring great matters to passe, that his glory may be more easily seene... (Rogers, 1615:161).

Rogers then sees no difficulty in accepting that Ehad is lame in his right hand and rather than this diminishing the status of the hero actually serves to confirm his heroic quality and moreover the power of God. Having an impairment does not impact on Rogers' assessment of the character or motivations of Ehad. In contrast, the re-telling of the Ehad story by Josephus is noteworthy for the manner in which any sense of impairment is completely absent; rather Josephus emphasises the physical prowess of Ehad and his skills

as a soldier and leader. One suspects that in the Greek context in which Josephus was writing, the idea of a Jewish hero who was less than the embodiment of charismatic male heroism could not be countenanced.

Josephus, in *Antiquities Book 5*, wrote of Ehud that he was

“a man of very great courage in bold undertakings, and of a very strong body, fit for hard labour, but best skilled in using his left hand in which was his whole strength; and he also dwelt at Jericho”.

In the Hebrew it would seem clear that Ehud was left handed by necessity.

The first thing we are told is not that he was left handed, or used his left hand in an action, but rather that his right hand was ‘closed up’. He does not use his left hand explicitly until verse 21. In the Hebrew (if “closed up in the right hand” refers to impairment and is not a circumlocution for saying left handed) the audience does not know that Ehud can use his left hand until verse 21, since the dagger could be made to order rather than have been made by Ehud using his right hand in the process. Some commentators have argued that this description of ‘closed up right hand’, is actually a way of saying that someone was left-handed, as another way of saying a person was left-handed. This does not seem plausible. In either case, what we are told about Ehud is meant to alert us to something that is significant for the manner in which the story is to unfold. The story works better- having more narrative interest and tension- if it is understood that the feature we have been informed about is in fact

something that makes it difficult for Ehud to undertake his mission- we have already been told that Yahweh has raised him up as a deliverer. We know that the feature is striking since it runs counter to the general knowledge held about members of the tribe of Benjamin- that they are sons of the right hand. The question raised is what will he do to overcome the difficulty or how will he use his attributes to achieve the task?¹⁹

What we find in the history of interpretation is that in the majority of cases, Ehud is seen as skilled in his stronger left hand and any sense of impairment is not mentioned or is passed over or quickly denied. Park (2015,703) writes that “Ehud was far from handicapped”²⁰. I want to move Ehud’s impairment back into the main text from the margins of versions of the Bible and in so doing show how the marginal disabled character of Ehud, and his moral career, is the central dynamic of the story. Amongst contemporary commentators, the opinion of Soggin comes closest to what I have in mind:

¹⁹ In terms of typical narratives about disability, this situation puts us straight away into a tragic narrative of disability, of how someone with an impairment will rise above their disability and achieve in spite of it to the marvel of all able-bodied audiences. The disability then is used as an entertaining narrative device that relies on the stereotypical and if you will disablist perspectives and expectations of an able-bodied reading audience. (Titchkosky and Michalko 2014; Mitchell and Synder 2010). It is difficult to escape this narrative logic, especially if reading the Ehud story with Goffman in hand. But there are features of the narrative which challenge some narrative expectations. For example, the active agency of Ehud and his resolve to carry out, and to successfully execute, the murder of the oppressor of Israel, and hence to challenge the low esteem in which he is held by others, means he is not a passive victim. His challenge to societal norms, however, is not successful, and disablism persists, as I argue.

²⁰ I would suggest that Park’s use of ‘handicapped’ is a result of not adjusting language in the light of the social model distinction between impairment and disability, that is also supported by disabled activists.

In our case however, everything is in favour of a real physical defect, of a kind that would seriously diminish the capability of a fighting man and make him seem to be harmless. In fact this is the only way in which we can explain how he could ever be admitted into the presence of the king without any search of any precautionary measures. Another element of the story, which is also implicit, is of course that no one would suspect skill with the other hand, the left one. Thus if we adopt the translation left handed, we must suppose that Ehud was left-handed of necessity (Soggin 1981, 50)

The Stigma of Left-Handedness.

For some readers, the fact that Ehud is said to be left handed (in many translations of the Hebrew as we have seen) might be sufficient to alert them to the prospect that there is something unusual about Ehud, something not ordinary. Ehud would indeed carry a stigma, the stigma of left-handedness. The prejudices held against the left-handed would operate to raise doubt about his abilities; this would not constitute a disability, but certainly would seem most incongruous given the predilection of the left handed to be clumsy and 'cack-handed'. The left handed have often been viewed suspiciously and with disdain. As Charles Dickens observed, it was common practice in the

culture “to say of any proceeding that is inauspicious, artful, sly, or secretly malicious, that it is ‘sinister’- that is, left-handed” (Dickens 1870, 468)²¹.

In many non-western cultures the left hand is the hand used for hygienic purposes, and to eat with the left hand is viewed as quite disgusting. In addition, left handed people are sinister in more ways than one. For example, a psychologist writes that Ehud displays the pathological tendencies of a left-handed person given his solitary and single-minded and relentless fashioning of his own dagger. In this way showing the tenacity and obsessiveness they see as characteristic of left-handed persons! (Culpin, 1931).

The prejudice against the left handed (or picking up the narrative clue that there is something amiss about Ehud in the eyes of the story-teller) is reflected in biblical commentary, as would be expected. Moore, for example, in 1895 stated about the meaning of the Hebrew in 3.15 that:

‘ The literal and original meaning seems to have been, a man with his right hand drawn up, contracted by accident or disease; but in usage it has come to signify no more than one who had not the natural use of his right hand, left handed. He took advantage of this defect, in

²¹ Dickens also helps us understand that men shook hands with their right hands since it was this hand that carried any weapon and if a weapon was being carried shaking hands could not take place. Shaking hands with the right hand then showed the participants that both parties were trustworthy and not intending any violence. Dickens does note however- “A man cannot well stab another while he is engaged in the act of shaking hands with him, unless he be a double-dyed traitor and villain, and strike to aim a cowardly blow with the left, while giving the right and presenting to be on good terms with his victim” (Dickens, 1870:467). It would be intriguing to know what Dickens thought of Ehud.

consequence of which his movement excited no suspicion until he struck the fatal blow’.

(Moore 1895,93)

Moore, in his commentary, gets over the difficulty by suggesting that what once referred to an impairment is, by the time of the writing of the Ehud story, simply a way of saying that a person was left handed. Robert Boling is of similar opinion, as he writes, “This roundabout way of saying left-handed is an indication that left-handedness was considered peculiar and unnatural” (1975,86). Interestingly however, the left-handedness is seen as unnatural, peculiar and as a ‘defect’. This not only indicates the universal attitude to left-handedness, but shows that the commentators feel that the plot requires the notion of ‘defect’, and that the defect was used to Ehud’s, and ultimately ‘Israel’s, advantage.

Ehud’s act would be ‘left handed’ on this account whether he carried it out with his left or right hand, since it is the *quality* of the act rather than the act itself that is being judged. However, as we have argued, his impairment means he has to be left handed, which also carries a stigma in many settings as we have seen. So Ehud is **doubly stigmatised**. The left-handedness for sure is an element of his experience and stigma but is not the sole or the sufficient cause of his stigma. He has to use the stigmatised left hand because he has an impairment in his right hand/arm, which is the cause, in many social settings,

for his disabled stigma. Once the double stigma is recognised, the workings of the plot function more smoothly and the full force of this narrative of disability can be felt.

Ehud has an Impairment but is it a Disability: Medical and Social Models of Disability

In the sociology of disability one of the fundamental changes in outlook over the last decades has been the shift from what is known as the medical/individualising model to a social model of disability (Cameron 2014, 137-40). The distinction between impairment, on the one hand, and disability, on the other, is one of the major shifts to be understood. It was not until the 1990's (Barnes and Mercer 2010) that disabled activist criticism of the medical model was taken seriously and impacted on sociology. The social model is not a theory or an explanation of particular instances of the disabling processes in society with respect to particular impairments, but rather is a basic, but essential, orientation. As Barnes and Mercer explain their own use of terminology: "We differentiate, 'impairment' as a medically classified bio-physiological condition, from disability, which denotes the social disadvantage experienced by people with an accredited impairment" (Barnes and Mercer 2010,11).

In Sociology and in biblical studies, it is essential to grasp that the social model provides the point of departure for the majority of work in the social sciences and humanities. The interest in disability in the Bible is not driven by a medical model commitment to classify 'scientifically' what impairments and disorders may be attested in the biblical literature. An example of the pre-social model approach to health and illness in the Bible is provided by the volume edited by Bernard Palmer entitled *Medicine in the Bible* (Palmer 1986). In the chapter on leprosy for example, considerable attention is paid to identify the precise type of degenerative skin disorders attested in the Bible, rather than, for example, looking at the ideological system of the Levitical priests and their normalising gaze (Browne 1986; cf. Wynn 2015)²². We are not concerned with identifying conditions as if we are embarked on some attempt to cure them or alleviate the suffering experienced. The interest rather is in the social experience of impairments and the disabling organisations and attitudes of the society in which individuals with the impairments lived. Having some sociological knowledge of the manner in which certain impairments or conditions tend to typically be experienced by people and tend to be typically reacted to by social groups in society can aid in the sociological reconstruction of social processes

²² Wiseman's interesting chapter on "Medicine in the Old Testament World" includes a section on 'deformities', but does not mention Ehud (Wiseman 1986,22-4). "Physical deformities and handicap were referred to in all ages and areas" (p.22).

and experiences in ancient biblical social and narrative worlds. However, a keen sense of cultural difference and the vagaries of context needs to be constantly entertained (see further below)

A medical model was concerned with “intervention in disabled people’s lives by health and social welfare professionals” (Barnes and Mercer 2010, 1); moreover, public attitudes to disability corresponded and the ‘victims’ of these personal tragedies were chiefly characterised by “imaginative concern, mawkish sentimentality, indifference, rejection and hostility” (Thomas 1982, 4 quoted in in Barnes and Mercer 2011,1) . “The central thrust of the individual model is to cast disability as a personal tragedy where the person with an impairment has a health or social problem that must be prevented, treated or cured’. (Barnes and Mercer 2011, 24) The impairment is a pathology and a social problem (Oliver 1996:30, quoted in Barners and Mercer 2010, 24). The consequences of the medical model for narrative can be summarised as: “Plotted as a problem, the notion of life disability is limited to elimination, cure or overcoming” (Titchkosky and Michalko 2010,103). Just as the crowd applauds a successful athlete at the Paralympics, so too do able-bodied readers of a disabled person achieving through overcoming or in spite of their impairments: “The crowd applaud because they are participating in a

ceremony which validates their own sense of normalcy” (Cameron 2014e, 116).

The social model, on the other hand, provides the disabled with a much more active voice and an ability to challenge attitudes and arrangements and have them change and improve. Oliver illustrated the differences between a medical model and social model mode of thinking, by comparing a question that is asked by the authorities to assess disability and its implications with a way of posing the question from the perspective of the organisation of society (the social model). For example, rather than the following question being appropriate, Does your health problem/disability prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?, Oliver suggests asking, What is it about the local environment that makes it difficult for you to get about in your neighbourhood? (2009, 32). Shakespeare clarifies, “Impairment is distinguished from disability. The former is individual and private, the latter is structural and public. While doctors and professions allied to medicine seek to remedy impairment, the real priority is to accept impairment and to remove disability”. (Shakespeare 2010,268). He goes on, “the Social model demonstrates that the problems disabled people face are the result of social oppression and exclusion, not their individual deficits” (269).

The social model has itself been criticised by activists and theorists and it is important to take on board these points of view in order to work with a comprehensive range of interests in the field. Hughes (2007, 676) reminds us that “the body is a limit and that one cannot afford to ignore the tyranny of nature and the frailty of human existence nor, in particular, the impact that biological necessity has on the conduct of individual and social life”. Different impairments have different implications for health and individual capacity and they also “generate different responses”. (Shakespeare and Watson 2002,11-12; quoted in Hughes 2007,676). Shakespeare suggests that the social model’s weaknesses include “the neglect of impairment as an important aspect of many disabled people’s lives” (2010:269). It risks implying that “impairment is not a problem” (2010:270). Whereas in fact “people with impairments are disabled by society as well as by their bodies, the social model suggests that people are disabled by society not by their bodies” (2010, 270). As we will see in the case of Ehad one of the important things to keep in mind is that, “In practice, it is the interaction of individual bodies and social environments which produces disability” (Shakespeare 2010, 270).

Social Context Determines the Significance to Personal and Social Identity of an Impairment.

Disability is a universal experience of humanity. Yet, which impairments are considered as carrying a social stigma and render the individual 'a second class citizen' varies from culture to culture across time and space. Impairments certainly existed in the biblical social world, and disabling practices took place (Schipper 2005; Avalos, Melcher and Schipper 2007; Junior and Schipper 2008; Belser and Morrison, 2011; Classens, 2013). It is not necessary to await the arrival of industrial capitalism and the valuing of physical labour for impairments to have been seen as disabling. For sure, the work ethic of capitalist culture leads to a deficit model of what people with impairments 'can't do' whereas in time of the Second World War for example the need for everyone to be involved in productivity results in the incorporation of able and disabled in all manner of activities, with an emphasis on 'what can be done'.

Ehud's impairment is not necessarily disabling. If we adopt the perspective of the social model, and appreciate the role of situational and contextual dimensions, this bodily feature, would be more or less disabling depending on specific roles and performances required in the society. For example, H.G. Wells in his story, *The Country of the Blind*, fully grasped the ways in which social arrangements and social attitudes rendered a difference between people into a disabling feature. In other words, he anticipated the 'social model of disability' by about a century. Wells' story narrates the ways in which

a fully-sighted explorer (Nunez) finds himself in 'the country of the blind'. He is soon disabused of the notion that in the country of the blind "the one-eyed man is king". Since the society is long accustomed to the culture of deafness, Nunez's behaviour and inability to competently, and quietly, navigate his way through the society- its physical structures and its ideologies- only serves to convince them of his deviance and idiocy. Here the fully sighted are disabled.

In a militarised context the impairment of having one as opposed to two hands (as the majority of the population would have) would be most apparent, especially in a technological situation where sword fighting, or bowing were the main means of combat. But even in a military context having one arm might have a range of cultural meanings. For example, whilst having one arm might preclude from military action, if the loss had been incurred in previous battles, that loss, whilst tragic, could be stamped with a heroism that marked the bearer as a war veteran of distinction. Moreover, there are numerous examples of 'one-armed' soldiers who were formidable fighters, including in one on one hand-to-hand combat (Linker 2013).

Ehud soon learns that in the 'country of military activity' not having two fully functioning and strong upper limbs, renders him incapable of acceptance and disabled in his own eyes and in the eyes of those who are gate-keepers to a

male society that expects each man to be able to defend self, family and society.

Not fit for Military Action

The narrator recognises that Ehud is different; and that difference rests on an impairment. For the narrator it is a disability. Ehud would be excluded, for example, from Gideon's fighting force, the selection of which is narrated a few chapters later in the Book of Judges (chapter 7). The fighting force that goes with Gideon to disrupt the Midianite camp require both hands to hold the trumpets and the empty jars. Gideon's army has been reduced by stages, firstly excluding those who were "fearful and trembling" and secondly through eliminating those who do not lap water from the river like dogs with their tongues (presumably keeping their hands free for sudden combat). There was no need to initially begin the selection by distinguishing the able-bodied from the non-abled bodied, since it would have been established practice that only the able-bodied could take part.

Ehud's lack of fitness for military action would have been pronounced in any situation where the family, clan or tribe was under threat of occupation or conquest and all men would be required to take up arms to defend the

territory²³. In the story it is unlikely that Ehud was of age when the Moabites subdued the Israelites. We are told that “The people of Israel served Eglon the King of Moab 18 years” (3.14), and then cried for a deliverer.

In the period when he reached adulthood, none of the men of his society would be in a position to carry arms, since any show of resistance to the Moabites would have brought about repercussions. Since no males could carry arms, Ehud’s inability to do so would be of less significance but its import would arguably not be completely inconsequential. One can imagine that the able-bodied men would tolerate Ehud but, perhaps on the psychological grounds that he reminded them of their own current impairment, not fully embrace his companionship. In *Stigma* Goffman briefly considers the case of the ‘in-group deviant’ whom he distinguishes from an ‘out-group deviant’. The former is accorded more loyalty, as one of their own, than the latter, but the former nonetheless is not a full member of the group, but more of a mascot, or the fool or figure of fun. “In many close-knit groups and communities there are instances of a member who deviates, whether in deed or in the attributes he

²³ If we presume Ehud to have been between 18 and 25 at the time of the story, for the majority of his life his family and clan had been subjected to Moabite occupation and oppression. The occupation would involve not being able to bear arms nor to muster the fighting men together; one activity that was permitted involved the gathering of tribute to periodically pay to their overlords. If Ehud had lived through a period of freedom, followed by Moabite occupation changes in his status and outlook might be linked to these changes in so far as demands for military action on the part of clansmen would be heightened whilst defending territory, and after defeat, the humiliation of the fighting men who become ‘disabled’ would be shared by Ehud in equal measure. Within the extended family Ehud’s up-bringing would have been such that his impairment would be treated sympathetically and we would imagine that a degree of insulation from those outside the immediate close-knit family and village setting would have been provided.

possesses, or both, and in consequence comes to play a special role, becoming a symbol of the group and a performer of certain clownish functions, even while he is denied the respect accorded full-ledged members” (1963,168)²⁴.

Perhaps it is this context that provides the immediate backdrop of the selection of Ehud to present the tribute (see further below). As Goffman writes: “He (the in-group deviant) is often the focus of attention that welds others into a participating circle around him, even while it strips him of some of the status of a participant” (1963,168).

There clearly then are different perceptions of group membership and alignment in this context depending on whether it is seen from a disabled or able-bodied point of view²⁵. For the able-bodied interaction with Ehud could lead to unwanted “stigma by association” (Goffman, 1963:43). For Ehud the de-militarised fellow tribesmen represented a group which shared a stigma and from whom support might be expected, and towards which feelings of shared reality and comradeship, being in the ‘know’ about the nature of stigma and its experience, would be anticipated: they would constitute what Goffman calls, from the stigmatised’s point of view, the “own and the wise” (1963:31-

²⁴ Goffman references the work of R. Dentler and K. Erikson here, “The Functions of Deviance in Groups”, *Social Problems* 7: 98-107. 1959.

²⁵ Distinguishing the able-bodied and disabled in this binary fashion here is not meant to imply that the able-bodied are not without their own issues and deficiencies or to draw a firm line between the categories. Indeed as Goffman is at pains to point out the distinction rarely holds. What I am seeking to convey is that in the military context the male social group has certain expectations and presumes each member to have the requisite attributes so not having the attributes renders those without disabled from this point of view.

45). As Goffman observes: “Wise persons are the marginal men before whom the individual with a fault need feel no shame nor exert self-control, knowing that in spite of his failing he will be seen as an ordinary other” (1963,41).

It is likely that the able-bodied felt a stigma of being a conquered peoples (Fanon 1965; cf. Sherry 2010). From this point of view, the able-bodied men have been rendered immobile (movement restricted, loss of freedom and autonomy), ‘disabled’ in the society to their shame. This might result in Ehud being able to identify, in his *own estimation*, with the males of his society since they now shared, from his perspective, a similar stigma- an inability to carry arms or take military action²⁶. Ehud might feel he would not need to cover his impairment as carefully as hitherto since it would make little material difference in this context. Perhaps an empathetic understanding of their experience of stigma led Ehud to appreciate that not only was he also a member of this society sharing experience and circumstance but that he would want to do something about, and could do something about the situation, and resolved to do something about the situation, and liberate the able-bodied men from their inability to act. Through the execution of his plan he could use his impairment to act in an able-bodied military fashion to achieve the

²⁶ Remembering here that this is an implication of thinking about the narrative in terms of Goffman’s perspective that the stigmatised person shares the values of the wider society and wishes to belong and pass as normal. See above.

liberation of his people. However, what Ehud has yet to appreciate fully (since it had yet to occur) was that to liberate the able-bodied from their disability might lead to the return to a situation where Ehud, even though a liberator, was different from the other males: their disability could be removed, whilst Ehud's, in this social context, remained. With the oppressor gone, the full force of the military and masculine values of the public social group would be felt and physical impairments become once more a disability. Ehud's group affiliations and alignments are changeable, with resultant impacts on his social, personal and self-identity.

Making Ehud's Dagger

Ehud's fashioning of his own bespoke blade with which to execute the assassination is intriguing since one would expect him to need the full use of both hands to complete the task successfully. The motivation to do so, stems in part from his plan, but also in significant part derives from his being able to prove to himself (in the first instance, and to others once the deed of killing Eglon is carried out) that he can achieve what the 'normals' can achieve. He may well have practised to develop a way of successfully performing a skilled able-bodied task which most would consider him ill-qualified to achieve. As Goffman writes "...the stigmatised individual can also attempt to correct his condition indirectly by devoting much private effort to the mastery of areas of

activity ordinarily felt to be closed on incidental and physical grounds to one with his shortcoming” (1963, 20). In addition, of course, the narrator may wish us to understand that he may have had help. It is the apparent anomaly between a one-handed man, on the one hand, and the skilful production of a double edge sword, on the other, that probably leads some commentators to consider Ehud ambidextrous, or able in both hands but more able in the left, rather than to continue with the suggestion that had an impaired right hand.

Josephus, as we have seen, has difficulty contemplating a less than perfect physical specimen as the physique and appearance of Ehud. In this way, Ehud conforms to Josephus’ ideal of the Jewish warrior in a Greek speaking cultural context. However this image of Ehud makes for difficulties in accounting for the apparent ease by which Ehud gains access to king Eglon²⁷ and is the reason why, Soggin defends the notion that Ehud was indeed impaired in his right hand. It certainly seems like a high degree of neglect for the Moabite guards to only pat down on one side of the body, not to mention how awkward such a practice would be given the imbalance it creates for the guard!

If Ehud was able to work the smithy and fashion a blade for himself, perhaps this was the occupation in which he was gainfully employed on a regular basis,

²⁷ Josephus deals with this neglect in the following way: “It was then summer time, and the middle of the day, when the guards were not strictly on their watch, both because of the heat, and because they were gone to dinner” (114). The guards were literally out to lunch!

so that his impairment did not restrict him from a productive contribution to his own society. If this was not the case, Ehud's impairment, as known among his own neighbours, would be part of his personal identity and could have restricted his involvement in agricultural activity or crafts. The impairment need not be concealed in this setting. In preindustrial times historians of disability suggest that the people with impairment were well integrated into the community and tasks were found for them that they could perform or they excelled in their own specific spheres. Whilst it is not the case that 'disability' only emerged in industrial settings, - for example in ancient Israel certain impairments would disqualify a person from the priesthood or offering sacrifices, and we have argued, from the military actions- it is the case that the impact of impairment on social status and involvement would vary from context to context.

In everyday mundane existence Ehud's impairment might not have meant he was unable to live independently and provide for himself and his family; however, in times of crisis that required use of arms and military action, Ehud's impairment would certainly not have placed him in a position to fully participate. And it is in a time of crisis that the story of Ehud is set.

For many, the use of prosthetic aids offsets an impairment providing a way to enhance abilities so as to achieve more, from the wearing of glasses to

improve sight, to the fitting of artificial limbs. Ehud is not given a prosthetic arm with which to achieve an ambidextrous use of both hands in his resistance to the Moabites. Rather, he fashions a dagger for the left hand, which enhances the power of his left hand, added to its sharpness and reach, which more than compensates for his lack of a useable right hand²⁸

Choosing Ehud to send the tribute

The text reads, “The people of Israel sent tribute by him...”. From the perspective of the unravelling of the plot this notice, with its ambiguity, is enticing; the present that will be given will be more than the agricultural produce; rather it will be the delivery of a deathblow. At this stage in the story, this outcome is not yet known or anticipated. The ambiguity is to be savoured once the story has been heard and is rehearsed or re-told. Since the people of Israel do not know of Ehud’s plan, their choice of Ehud is not so as to help conceal the ‘secret weapon’ that is Ehud and his hidden dagger. Ehud did not have the ability to physically carry the tribute, but he was selected because he was dispensable. As we argued above, Ehud did not command the full

²⁸ I am not disabled myself (but am left handed for writing!), and so am aware that my theorising about impairments and disability is made possible through the use of Goffman and other disability theorists: these sources work for me as a prosthetic enhancing my limited gaze, experience and reach

respect of his social group and was not fully integrated into his own community on account of his stigma.

Was he also selected on account of his impairment, such that the Moabites would not be threatened at all and as such of advantage to a subject people who wished to present no challenge? Or, on account of his impairment was Ehud sent as an insult to the Moabites, in so far as the strongest and best, who would honour the overload, did not present the tribute but arguably one of the weakest, which showed them no honour or respect at all. Did the narrator wish to emphasise at this point that Ehud is a metaphor for an incapacitated Israel?²⁹ As we know, Ehud's selection to present the tribute suited him (and Yahweh) perfectly. Perhaps he volunteered. Was Ehud particularly adept at performing the correct degrees of humility and obeisance, having learned these attributes in his social encounters with others in general and those in authority hitherto- this was the attitude others expected him to take as a disabled person. In this way his willingness to take the tribute would persuade the people of Israel to send tribute by him.

Ehud has the sanction of divine choice. The plan to murder Eglon is not known to anyone but Ehud (and possibly Yahweh), so it cannot be that Ehud has been

²⁹ Such a use of Ehud-to use the fact of impairment/disability to represent something else that is not held in esteem or is a situation of which one is ashamed is to treat disability stereotypically, and is a representation that the disabled activist would certainly resist. Comparing the colonised with the disabled, with the intent of negative connotations for both, is of similar ilk (see Hevey, 2010; Sherry 2010)

chosen by the people of Israel to present tribute *on these grounds*. It is Ehud who knows that he can gain access to the court of Eglon, and to Eglon in person on account of the lack of threat that he poses. It is the obviousness of his infirmity that, rather than excluding him from action, provides the grounds for his admittance and ability to fulfil his plan. It is now an advantage to have an impairment and be seen to have an impairment. It is an advantage to be himself. He is publically spoiling his identity to manage the overthrow of the Moabites. The control of information that he may well have exercised in many encounters in his life, and which he thought could be relaxed amongst the demilitarised able bodied men, is now fully revealed.

This dimension of 'passing' is striking in the light of Goffman's ideas. Since the stigmatised person is usually motivated to conceal their impairment so as not to be discredited, Ehud now finds himself in a situation where revealing fully his impairment is his intention and his means to an end he has conceived himself. Ironically, he has chosen to reveal his impairment, his disability, to liberate himself and his people from disability, to achieve full able-bodied-ness. But in a further ironic twist, the actual truth, the fact that he carries a lethal prosthetic, the dagger, underneath his cloak, is not revealed. So while it may seem that Ehud has finally revealed all, that his purpose is very much 'on his

sleeve', in fact, a secret remains, and that secret is only effectively revealed at the climatic pitch of the tale.

The question then becomes does his self-identity as a full member of the society become his social identity: is he accepted by the society as a full member or does he remain on the margins as a person with a disabling impairment?

Murdering the Fat King.

Eglon's bulk and immobility, - an ancient Jabba the Hut- is used to ridicule him, and denigrate the enemy. This is commonly acknowledged in the literature as is the force of the scatological humour found in the narrative (Chalcraft, 1990). There is also the possibility, however, that Eglon's disability is dwelt on to add to the back-handed complement that the narrator is paying to left handed Ehud- a hero of Israel for sure, a liberator, but a disabled liberator who after all, only defeated the obese immobile King of Moab. The defeat of an invalid King could tend to in-validate the heroic action of his murder. That is, the more Eglon is disparaged the less heroic Ehud remains. It is here in this ambiguous treatment of Ehud that arguably we can hesitatingly conclude that Ehud's moral career, his progression across the lines from 'passing as normal', to concealing of impairment, to recognition of impairment, to full presentation of his disability, to disabled hero, rests finally in the realms of an identity still

overshadowed by past social identity and personal identity as disabled. His self-identity could be one of satisfaction at liberating Israel whilst his social and personal identity remains overshadowed by a persistent infirmity that has often labelled him as disabled. Even though Israel herself had once been similarly disabled, so that all her able-bodied warriors were de-militarised – and de-masculinized on its account- what maintained the national pride was defeat of the oppressor. Facing up to one's own disabilities takes courage.

Into Your Hand: The Massacre of the Lusty Able Bodied Moabites at the Jordan Fords

Ehud tells the rallied Ephramites, who he had himself summoned to arms through the blast of the trumpet in the hill country, and who had himself led to the Jordan fords, that “the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand”. In the Othniel story, the enemy is delivered into the hand of the charismatic leader. Similarly, Jephthah is promised victory over the Ammonites in such terms and the record of his victory states: “the Lord gave them into his hand” (11:32). Whilst Ehud has been raised up by Yahweh the text does not say of him that the spirit of the Lord came upon him, nor that he judged Israel. Moreover, the enemy is not delivered into his own hand, but

into the hand of the collective: “So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel” (15.30).

For this period of time, from the murder of Eglon to the victory at the Jordan fords, Ehud does not carry the stigma of his impairment, and being far from disabled, is part of the full scale mobilisation of the fighting men. In terms of the acceptance of the society of Ehud this is the high point of his career. But the bulk of the action, and the carrying out of the slaughter of the Moabites, moves away from the one act that precipitated the whole, to a multitude of actions at the Jordan fords. The able-bodied men of Israel defeat en masse the able-bodied men of Moab. “And then the land has rest for 80 years” (3.30).

The fully able-bodied character of the Israelite fighting force, and the Moabite fighting force, is explicitly mentioned by the narrator: in contrast, Ehud’s disabled body and Eglon’s obese body stand out as different. There is an immobility about Eglon, and the stewards and attendants’ inability to act swiftly on account of their knowledge of the habits of their obese ruler, render them unable, static. Ehud’s movement in contrast to Eglon is swift and rapid and brings results. Ehud’s mobility is nearer to that of the warriors. Ehud has been mobile, and has blown the trumpet and rallied the troops. The text says, verses 27 and 28, Ehud announced to the gathered Israelites who had heard and responded to the “sounding of the trumpet in the hill country”; “Follow

after me; for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand". It says that Ehud "was at the head" of the warrior Israelites. The left hand of Ehud, on account of his impaired right hand, has served to deliver, through Yahweh, the Moabites into the hands of the Israelites.

It is significant that the text records that the Moabites who were killed were, unlike Eglon, fit, and unlike Ehud able bodied. But if Ehud's aim, from a Goffmanian perspective, was to gain admittance to the able-bodied, to be considered able-bodied, or be known to share the same values of the able bodied, 'the normals', to what extent has this been achieved by him by the end of the story?

The boundary between able-bodied and dis-abled bodied is no longer at the forefront of the narrative. Rather, the boundary is now the river Jordan, and the Israelites allowed "no-one to cross over". A Moabite cannot pass as an Israelite. Yet Ehud it seems does not pass over from the disabled to the able-bodied in the mind of the narrator. His impairment and his disabled status does not alter. Ehud was able to pass into the court of King Eglon and subsequently gain access to his private presence because he was not a warrior; his presentation of self was one that need not conceal his bodily impairment, but rather emphasised it; if Ehud's social experience up till then had been one of needing to conceal or compensate his impairment, this occasion was one

where the concealment was not required. The management of his spoiled identity was not required; rather the spoiled identity was his passport into the King's presence. Indeed, his spoiled identity- that he was not an able-bodied Israelite, and moreover not a member of the fighting force given his impairment- was precisely what gave him passage and allowed him to conceal something else, namely, the mission he had devised and the sword, which he had crafted to achieve his end, could be concealed on his right thigh, where no one would suspect. Given the attitudes to disability it would probably not occur to the Moabite guards to search Ehud at all, since what threat could a man with a withered right hand/arm pose to them? Ehud managed 'to pass' as non-threatening not by trying to pass as able-bodied (which was his more common experience) but by presenting himself as he 'naturally/normally' was. This interplay of normality and 'passing as other than you are' makes for a fascinating narrative, which draws us into the intrigue. The subterfuge of Ehud is one of revealing and concealing, and what is revealed to us and concealed from us as readers is also part of the process.

The End of the Story and the close of Ehud's Moral Career

Ehud wins his place of esteem in the society on account of his daring deed and joins the ranks of the judges of Israel in the collective memory. This achievement perhaps more than balances his stigmatised situation prior to the deed but his impairment is remembered and perhaps not only to retell his exploits. His left-handedness is still a characteristic attribute. Perhaps the narrator wishes to disparage a Benjaminite ancestor hero.

The complexities are compounded when it is remembered that these “sons of the right hand” are legendary for having among their able-bodied warriors a select group who were particularly skilled in their left hands. It seems most likely that these are warriors who have the ability to use both hands, but who have a special ability to use their left. This might give them an advantage when faced with hand to hand combat with warriors who were accustomed to fighting right handed men like themselves. It would seem unlikely that there would be so many people with impaired right hands

Concealing, Revealing and Passing

Since Ehud kept his plan from the knowledge of his fellow group members, and even from the bearers of tribute, we can see that he successfully concealed from them something essential and known to himself. This is in contrast to his

inability to hide his impairment from his associates. Yet it his disability that is precisely the personal attribute that enables him to pass as a mere inactive bearer of tribute to Eglon, and conceal his weapon, and thereby not draw any attention to himself or any over-zealous searching of his person. So the very attributes that he could not conceal in his own social group and which 'qualified' him to be selected to send the tribute, are now revealed purposefully to conceal that he, on his own initiative is a warrior, and thus becoming 'full bodied' like the members of the social group. The social group, that is, whose normal warriors have been subdued by the enemy and discredited and, at the moment in time, are less useful and dangerous than Ehud now is in the presence of Eglon. The message is revealed in secret and the King dies behind locked doors alone. When Ehad reveals his secret – which derives from his stigma and is symbolic of his stigma- it is not *he* that is disempowered or discredited and dying a social death, but the foreign king who is discredited and killed. Eglon is left dead lying helplessly in his blood and excrement. This will be the first time that a conscious revealing of Ehad's stigma has been to his own advantage and will serve, so he hopes, to his being credited with the heroism due to an effective warrior (and by implication a fully able bodied warrior) rather than the usually discrediting outcome. It is alas only in his own mind that he now belongs to the able-bodied class of

warriors- he is not seen this way by the Moabites, and the Israelite narrator, perhaps compelled by a desire to disparage an ancestor of the Benjaminites, or not willing to face head on the shame of the disabling of all the fighting men of Israel, the character and story of Ehud remains somewhat ambivalent.

Ehud wins his place of esteem in the society on account of his daring deed and joins the ranks of the judges of Israel in the collective memory. His left-handedness/impaired right hand is still a characteristic attribute. If the narrator wishes us to understand that Ehud was attempting to 'normalise' himself, from this perspective he has failed, and gained as much as he lost.

The fact that disabled Ehud kills a disabled ruler moves the deed outside of normal action. A somewhat fortuitous outcome that can be fully exploited by the normal and somehow attributed to them, since the actions of Ehud are something of an embarrassment. The initiating action of the revolution is attributed to Ehud but the victory is achieved by the full bodied. Moreover, the action cannot be used to fully integrate Ehud into the societal community. The normal need to manage the spoiled identity of Ehud, and this needs to be in terms of not experiencing stigma by association with the deviant assassin. Ehud then is treated after the event in the same way that he was treated beforehand. Expected to share the values and goals and sufferings of the group, and criticised if he does not, but not allowed to actually consider

himself a normal member of the group, but as a stigmatised one, and with all that follows from that status, Ehud remains stigmatised and deviant.

Disability Narratives After Goffman

The above sociological re-telling of the Ehud story, is based on a conversation with the sociological ideas of Goffman, as found primarily in his *Stigma: The Management of Spoiled Identity*. I have defended Goffman's approach as one which is conscious of the importance of social context to the experience of disability, and also one in which can be found a respect for carriers of stigma who confront society and its labels with courage and resistance. Nevertheless, since Goffman's approach is premised on the idea that people with stigma are motivated to be accepted as normal and share the values and norms of 'normal society', reading the Ehud narrative with Goffman means that motives and social processes imagined to reconstruct the plot sociologically are read in this light and hence the reading is open to the charge that it is conceived from a normative able-bodied perspective (even despite attempts to counter balance the perspective). The slogan used in contemporary disability studies/activism that says, "nothing about us, without us" strikes home and reminds me that this reading of the Ehud narrative now needs to engage with other conversation partners beyond Goffman, whether that be through

ethnographic research with disabled readers/hearers of the Ehud narrative, and/or through further engagement with disabled scholars within and without sociology and Biblical Studies.

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