Judge Othniel: Model of a Deliverer

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INTRODUCTION

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXT

Significance of the Text

Twelve judge-stories in Judges 3:7-16:31 relate recurring cycles of retribution (sin-punishment-deliverance) that are episodes in Israel’s history during the time Israel was settling in Canaan after their exodus from Egypt. Two themes seem to be evident in the book of Judges. The first is the role of God in the history of his people. The second theme, kingship in Israel, can be seen in the repeated phrase, “there was no king in Israel” as it appears four times in the book of Judges (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

The twelve judge-stories are grouped into two sets, six major judges and six minor judges. Othniel’s story is the first in the lineup of judge-stories and is counted as one of the six major judge-stories. The major judge-stories seem to be patterned after Othniel’s story, which is itself a rendition of the sin-punishment-deliverance retribution pattern that was laid out in 2:11-19 when talking about God’s role in the history of his people. Othniel’s story is a short, bland story with few details beyond the fact that Israel sinned, God sold them into slavery, and God raised up a deliverer. The only descriptive details in the story are the names of the main characters.

A question immediately arises when reading Othniel’s story. Why is his story so generic and colorless compared to the other judge-stories? Also unclear is what Othniel’s story has to do with there being no king in Israel. The text calls Othniel a “deliverer” yet his positive influence on God’s people as a judge only lasted until he died. Exactly what does deliverer mean in the context of judgeship in Othniel’s story? Does it have anything to do with there being no king in
Israel? This paper will attempt to shed light on these and other issues as part of the investigation of Judges 3:7-11.

**Historical and Social Setting**

The text of Judges does not indicate who wrote the book. While the judge-stories chronologically follow Joshua’s conquest of Canaan as stories depicting Jewish life in Canaan after Joshua’s death, most scholars seem to agree that the book of Judges is a collection of stories that were originally propagated as oral tales and/or songs that came later to be written down and then subsequently edited at least twice before being canonized in its current form. The first person to put the stories into written form may have been Samuel or one of his contemporaries. Payne makes a case for Samuel because the Jewish Canon includes the book of Judges with the Former Prophets, and Samuel was a prophet. Others cite the repeated phrase in Judges “there was no king in Israel” to suggest that the writer had to have been living during a time when there was a king in Israel somewhere “in the first half of the monarchy around 1050-1000 B.C.E.” (Payne 629; MacDonald 237-238; Hyatt 1084).

The prophet Samuel may have been the person to first write down the old songs and legends but basing that conclusion solely on the phrase “in those days there was no king in Israel” is a weak argument. “Those days” could as easily have referred to a different time period altogether, an age when the action in the original songs and stories actually took place, possibly a much earlier date in antiquity than Judges. A more persuasive argument is the timing of the song-poem transcription into text based on the repeated phrase “there was no king in Israel” to suggest that the writer had to have been living during a time when there was a king in Israel.

Most scholars postulate two subsequent redactions to Samuel’s compilation. Myers and Rogerson date the first revision to 612-310 B.C.E., with another being done during the exilic
period around 586 B.C.E. (41) Boling agrees with Myers and Rogerson and dates the first revision “perhaps by the mid-eighth century B.C.E., when both Israel and Judah were at a peak of national revival (368). Amit is in the same ballpark with the dates but sees the first revision as “[reflecting] the shocked mood in Judah after the downfall of Israel in 722 B.C.E” (355). It is possible that the first revision occurred “at the time of King Josiah after the Book of the Law was rediscovered [2 Kings 22-27; 2 chron. 24-35] around 620 BC” (Vine xi). It makes sense that after Samuel transcribed the songs into text, a later king, probably Josiah, would have wanted to edit the stories to make a point to Judah in the aftermath of the Northern kingdom’s downfall.

Scholars are quite unified on the opinion that a Deuteronomistic (D) editor was the writer of a second redaction sometime after the Babylonian exile. Payne disagrees with the two-revision hypothesis and sees only one redaction of Samuel’s compilation by “post-exilic Priestly (P) editors on evidence contained in the text of Judges and also because two redactions “unnecessarily discredits the unity and authenticity of its contents” (Payne-Judges 629).

Othniel is the story’s main character, described in the biblical text as “the son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother” (Judges 3:9). Some scholars see Othniel as this same person, Caleb’s actual relative, and his story chronologically congruent with events in the book of Joshua (Henry 332; Lilley 853). Smith, however, thinks it is possible that Othniel’s story was constructed the way the minor judge stories were constructed, as summaries of earlier legends that were then assigned to a biblical personality derived from a list of Bible names, to make an editorial point (Smith-Judges 135). Othniel is the only judge with a past history of military success as recorded in Josh 15:17, and Othniel’s family military identity continued forward in his progeny in 1 Chron. 27:15 after a kingdom was established in Israel. Othniel is also the only judge of the twelve to be from the tribe of Judah. The other named character in the story is King Cushan-
rishathaim of Aram-naharaim. Amit translates Cushan-rishathaim as “dark double-wickedness” (361). It would be hard to see these main characters as anything other than historical persons, although it is possible that the story related in 3:7-11 was fictionalized to make a point.

Geographically, the story is set in Canaan after the days of the Exodus. Israel lived amongst many nations in Canaan, nations the Lord “left in place to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience” (Judg. 3:2 NIV). Significant to the text, the Israelites had begun to intermarry with the surrounding nations (Judg. 3:6). Presumably Hebron is the setting of Othniel’s story as that was his uncle Caleb’s inheritance (Josh. 14:13). Hebron, also known as Kiriath-arba, is where David would later be anointed king of Israel (2 Sam. 2:4) and is also one of the places where the returning exiles settled after their Babylonian captivity (Neh. 11:25).

Literary Context

Webb classifies the book of Judges as a theological narrative, and Othniel’s story as a historical narrative, although some scholars see Othniel as a formula story that sets the stage for repeat cycles of disobedience-punishment-rescue-disobedience (Webb 53, 22; Meyers 118). A model structure of twelve elements runs through Othniel’s story and is repeated, although none perfectly, in the judge-stories that follow his (Hamilton 114). In turn, the Othniel account has phrase-repeats from earlier points in Judges. For example, “Othniel, son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother” (3:9b NIV), is a word-for word repeat of 1:13a, and “Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (7:1 NIV) is a repeat of 2:11a. These repeats are important as they tie Othniel to what went before in Joshua and what comes next after Othniel. Also, Webb sees a chiasm the way “judge” is sandwiched between two occurrences of “king” in 3:9-10 (159-160).
Although some scholars see Judges as covering the same period as the book of Joshua due to the similarity of certain pieces of narrative, Webb points out that while the books do contain some overlap in material, most of it is not identical (19). There is wide agreement that Judges is not simply “an anthology of judge stories but a long and complex narrative” (Webb 157). The major judge-stories were intended either to make a theological point about kingship in Israel, or were intended for didactic purposes, or were intended for both. The second story-set contains “archival notes about so-called minor judges”, that were added much later by a Deuteronomistic (D) editor. The D editor also added a prologue at that time, essentially restaging the book of Judges into a “sermon addressed to the Judean exiles” (Payne-Judges 629; Webb 20).

Othniel’s story is the only one of the judge-stories thought to be the result of D editing for the purpose of making a transition from Joshua to Judges. Highly stylized language was used in Othniel’s story lending weight to the idea that his story in particular was the work of a D editor (Smith 138).

Three pieces make up the book of Judges, a prologue (1:1-3:6), the two sets of judge stories (3:7-16), and an epilogue (17-21). Othniel’s story, while numbered with the six major judges, is seen as both a conclusion for Judges’ prologue in chapters 1 and 2, and also as an “opening story” to transition the narrative from the prologue to the judge stories that all follow Othniel’s model, but to a lesser degree. (Boling 368; Smith 136; Myers and Rogerson 118).

The pericope, 3:7-11, begins with the phrase, “The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (NIV). The same phrase begins the next judge’s story in verse 12, suggesting the phrase bookends the pericope. Green expands the window by including vv. 5-6, but there does not appear to be a literary reason for doing so (636). In fact, “many commentators make Judg. 2:6-3:6 the introduction to the main section of the book, Judg. 3:7-16:31”, and count 1:1-2:5 as a
prologue to the whole book of Judges. Their argument is that Joshua is dead in 1:1, alive in 2:6, and dead again in 2:8 (Hamilton 100).

**PRESENTATION OF TEXT**

**Scripture Passage**

Judges 3:7-11 (NRSV)

7 The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs. 8 Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. 9 But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother. 10 The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. 11 So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.

**Text Critical Notes**

There are no apparent text critical issues in Othniel’s story. It should be noted, however, that two versions of Judges were preserved, in Codex Alexandrinus (A) and Vaticanus (B), which “differ in so many details from beginning to end” that certain scholars have found it necessary to “print the two texts side by side” to separate the text critical issues in the book of Judges as a whole (Webb 67-68). Smith sees this as a positive thing because comparing the two texts will sometimes tease a formerly hidden meaning into view. In Smith’s opinion, “late [Deuteronomistic] alterations [did] little except to obscure the text” (136).
Outline of Passage

I. Israel Sins (vv. 7-8)
   A. Israel Forgets the Lord God
   B. Israel Sold to Foreign King

II. Israel Saved (vv. 9-11)
   A. The Lord God Raises Up Othniel
   B. The Lord God Frees Israel

ISRAEL SINS

Othniel’s story begins with, “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs (v. 7). Canaanite religion at the time of Judges was “remarkably advanced at the time the Israelites settled into Palestine” with their concept of Baal, or Lord, being an overarching term for the master who takes care of everything (Smith 137). “The Lord God was ‘master’ and ‘husband’ to Israel and therefore they called him ‘Baal’ in all innocence, but naturally this practice led to confusion of the worship of the Lord God with the Baal rituals” (Payne-Baal 108). Henry notes that in worshiping other gods “they forgot the Lord their God” something they should have been inclined to remember because, in Deut. 16:21-22 (NIV), Moses specifically warned Israel not to “set up Asherah poles beside the altar you build to the Lord your God” (Henry 332).

Justly displeased at Israel’s disobedience, God dispatched a king from outside of Israel, King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim, and sold Israel to this foreign king (v. 8). Israel was to learn the hard way, once again, that the theology of retribution says: “worship of the Lord God brings victory while worship of other gods brings defeat” (Webb 22). Israel served the foreign king for eight years. Webb makes a poignant point about the verb “to serve”, עָבַד (’âbad), as it
occurs in 3:6 and 3:7, saying, “those who choose to serve foreign gods will be made to serve a foreign tyrant” (Webb 159). The word means “to work” and by implication to work as slaves (Strong). In 3:6, Israel had served the Canaanite gods, were enslaved by the gods, and in 3:7 we see the consequences. Yahweh sold them to serve (עָבַד) the foreign king—same word, same slavery, the first by choice, the second by force.

King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim may have been a real person, but scholars agree he was an unknown figure and Cushan-rishathaim was likely not his real name (Smith 138; Boling 373). The rhyming of rishathaim and naharaim is notable and adds credence to the thought that the name is a pseudonym. Aram is mentioned in Numb. 23:7, “Balak brought me [Balaam] from Aram to the king of Moab from the eastern mountains,” which lends credence to Aram being a real place not more than two generations removed from the time of the Judges. A reference very similar to Balaam’s shows up in Habakkuk in a segment talking about the power of the saving acts of God:

“I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction;
the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled.
Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord?
Or your rage against the sea,
when you drove your horses,
your chariots to victory? (3:78 NRSV)

Habakkuk’s description would locate the unknown king somewhere to the southeast of Hebron, an idea Smith finds to be the most the plausible of all the theories on Cushan-rishathaim’s identity. Henry agrees, citing the mention of “the rivers” as being the “two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, as implicit in the name Cushan-rishathaim of Aram. Whether real or not, King
Cushan-rishathaim is the king of “dark double-wickedness”, and if Amit is correct in the translation of the name, he certainly would have evoked a sense of dark hopelessness to Israel’s enslavement, almost begging the question, “Who can overcome such a king as this? (Smith 138; Henry 332; Amit 361)

The sin of Israel forgetting God was not a new occurrence in Israel’s history. From Exodus through Judges we see evidence that Israel was susceptible to enticement. For example, when Moab could not get Balaam to curse Israel in Numbers 23, Moab set a trap for Israel by having their women seduce the men of Israel to sacrifice to their gods, and Israel did. Moab, interestingly enough, is located in the same area as Smith’s “most plausible explanation” for King Cushan-rishathaim. Whether real or not, he evidently was a legendary character. If so, it would make sense to use a model villain in a story where Othniel is the model judge.

Because Judges, in the Jewish Canon, is filed with the “Former Prophets, the books of which span the 561 years from Moses to the Babylonian exile as one literary unit”, some scholars, Hyatt for one, see the Balaam incident as notable and applicable to Othniel’s story. The thinking is that, in Numbers 23:21b, Balaam ties both the Lord’s presence with Israel to their (future?) acclamation of a king, saying “The Lord their God is with them, acclaimed as a king among them” (NRSV). The Balaam prophecy indicates there is a king in Israel able to overcome even such a one as King Cushan-rishathaim. Who is that king? Othniel’s story seems to have been designed to prompt the original audience to ask themselves that same question. The implied answer is: a yet future king (Hyatt 1084).

This could reference an anticipated fulfillment of a prophecy given by Moses. “When you [Israel] have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,
you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose’” (Deut. 17:14-15 NRSV). The phrase, “you may indeed set over you a king”, would be a future anticipation of the prophecy from the viewpoint of Othniel’s time in history. Later editors, however, in putting Othniel’s story first in the judge-story line up may have been calling attention to Moses’ prophecy. For the later editors Moses’ prophecy would have been already fulfilled. Reference to King Cushan-rishathaim in Othniel’s story may have been intended as a literary device, an editorial contrast between the days where there was no king in Israel and the days that there would be a king in Israel. On the ground, however, at the time of Othniel’s story, the only flesh and blood king was a foreign king to whom the Lord God had sold Israel into slavery for their sins.

GOD SAVES

“When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer…” (v. 9). At the Israelite’s cry of faith, when at the time there was no king in Israel, the Lord God raised up a judge to be their deliverer. Othniel means “Lion of God” (MacDonald 241). This is reminiscent of Gen. 49:9 (NRSV), a prophecy of Moses that says, “Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness—who dares rouse him up?” Henry sees Gen. 49:9 as a commentary on the strength Judah will have in the future, a strength comparable to a lion. Henry also sees this as a prophecy that the Messiah will come from the tribe of Judah (91).

The Gen. 49:8 tie to Othniel is in his name. For Othniel’s name to mean “lion of God” it seems probable that there is more than the simple telling of a story in the meaning of his name. Othniel delivered Israel with the strength of a lion, a strength so strong that even a dark double-wickedness could not prevail over it. In Othniel’s name, too, we see something more than a
judge. The lion’s whelp of Gen. 49:10 will be the rising of a king from the tribe of Judah. Othniel, although not himself a king, is from the tribe of Judah. What is more, Othniel is from Hebron, a city known for its association with David’s crowning as king, something both King Josiah’s and the post-Babylonian exiles would have immediately identified in the meaning of Othniel’s name. Othniel, although not a king, sounds like a king. It seems in his story that Othniel is being deliberately compared to King Cushan-rishathaim. A king is higher than a judge. Yet Israel is delivered through Othniel’s office as judge.

Davis describes Othniel as a “paradigm of salvation” because God’s pattern, laid out in 2:11-23, is played out in 3:7-11. The Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother (v.9). Deliver (יָשַע yâsha’) means to save in the sense of generously helping someone who is weak. We see this in Exodus 2:17 where the same word, יָשַע yâsha’, describes how Moses delivered the priest of Midian’s daughters from some greedy shepherds who would not let the girls water their flocks. Strength and deliverance are paired together. As a paradigm of salvation, the original audiences would have identified four things that happened when Othniel became Israel’s deliverer. First, God raised him up (קֻם qûm) which Strong defines as to ordain or strengthen (v.9). Second, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel (v.10). Then, Othniel judged Israel, and finally went out to war (Davis 48).

Othniel was a military chief, nevertheless, it was the Lord God who freed Israel (v. 10). “The Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into [Othniel’s] hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim. Mighty as Othniel was in his own strength, as proven by his past history when he captured Debir (1:13), Othniel could not do with without the Lord. If the Lord had not put his Spirit on Othniel, the judge would likely not have been successful in his own strength
against the king of dark double-wickedness. Othniel may be a paradigm of salvation, but that salvation ultimately came from the Lord God, the true deliverer in Othniel’s story.

Othniel was not a king, he was a judge. Judge can have several different meanings. In Hebrew, “shaphat (to judge) and its derivative shophet (a judge) can mean ‘adjudicate’ but also ‘rule’”. Or it could mean “to restore order and authority”. Scholars see the major judges (except for Samson) as military chiefs (they do not ascribe military leadership to the minor judges), which on the surface might seem that “to judge” is to restore order and authority. The military definition fits Othniel’s judgeship, but the text gives no indication that Othniel, in fact, adjudicated, ruled, or restored authority. Henry points out that the disturbing events in Judges 17-21 (the Danites idolatry and the war with the Benjaminites) happened “under or before the government of Othniel, who, although a judge, was not such a king in Israel as would keep men from doing what was right in their own eyes (Amir 355; Lilley 853; Boling 367-368; Henry 332).

If Henry’s assessment of the timing of the Danite affair is accurate, although the land had rest for forty years after Othniel’s defeat of King Cushan-rishathaim (v. 11), rest evidently did not refer to a restoration of morality or a permanent orderliness regarding God’s people. Total moral collapse followed the announcement of Othniel’s death where the text tells us that, “once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord” indicating that moral compliance during Othniel’s judgeship had to have been shallow at best, perhaps sporadic, as evidenced by the Danite affair.

In Othniel’s story, Amir sees King Josiah’s audience and the later D editor’s, post-exilic audience, as a model regarding the role of God in history and Judean kingship as “the preferred kind of leadership”. Henry sees a clear relationship between Othniel’s story and the message of
the book of Judges. By starting with Othniel and ending with events that happened during Othniel’s judgeship, the editor closed the circle of the judges in a way that points to a coming king. Amir agrees with Henry and says that Othniel, the model judge/deliverer, a Judean, came to be “idealized as a national leader”. The expectation was thereby raised for a Judean king through Othniel’s model position and also because none of the judges in the subsequent judge-stories were able to break the pattern of sin and deliverance by the end of the book (Amir 355; Henry 332; Amir 391).

As to the role of God in history, Davis agrees with Amir that the “primary stress [is] on the Lord God’s power via his Spirit coming upon Othniel” to save Israel from the foreign king. “God raised up a savior for the sons of Israel” (3:9 NASB), “witnessing to the truth that Yahweh, little Israel’s God, is the Lord of history” (Davis 51-53).

At this point in the investigation of 3:7-11, a new question arises. If we agree with the scholars that Judges underwent two editorial redactions of Samuel’s compilation of stories, what point was the D editor making to the post-exilic audience? It seems clear that the first editor, Josiah, may have used the judge-stories to urge Israel to commit to the leadership of a Judean king, especially if the redaction was written in the aftermath of the Assyrian exile. Josiah’s carpenters would have found the law during the temple restoration and Josiah would also have had all the conquest and monarchy records in his annals of the kings, so it is not hard to understand that he would have made the connection between Deut. 17:14-15 and Gen. 49:10 (that a king from Judah would arise in Israel), and commissioned the revision of Samuel’s work to make that point, but what would the same judge-stories have said to a Babylonian post-exilic audience? The D editor redacted and arranged Josiah’s stories into the form we have today. What point was the D editor making?
One answer might be that in restaging the book of Judges into a sermon addressed to the Judean exiles, the D editor might have been urging the people not to return to the morality of the days of the judges, a legitimate fear because as time progressed, it became less and less likely, after the exile ended, that a king would ever again rule in Judah. Enslin writes:

“Dreams of a restoration after the Babylonian captivity had proved disillusioning. Persian policy permitted Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple but squelched efforts to restore the kingdom. The Jews were forced to change from a nation with its own king to a religious community with a priest at its head.”

Without a physical king to restrain evil in the land, the D editor may have been warning the post-exilic audiences not to live the way the people lived during the days of the judges. It may have also been a reminder that the model judge, Othniel, speaks forward toward a king from Judah (1106).

In conclusion, although Othniel had a past track record of being a successful, military leader, deliverance power was not inherent in Othniel. He was a judge. Under the Spirit of God, Othniel mastered King Cushan-rishathaim, however, unlike a judge, a king is “the embodiment of an institution”, a monarchial institution the coming of which was prophesied by Moses. Webb notes that because “judge” was sandwiched between the two occurrences of “king” in 3:9-10, the text appears to be setting up a “clash between judgeship and kingship”. Kingship, like judgeship, “will have its place in Israel’s ongoing history and prove useful in its time. But it too will fail through human sinfulness” (Webb 160; 35).

CONCLUSION

SUMMATION
The judge-stories were legends written down by Samuel. The stories purportedly happened during the time of Israel’s settlement of Canaan after the Exodus, although they may have been legends that were adapted by later editors to make a point pertinent to their respective audiences. There were two revisions to Samuel’s work, King Josiah’s and the D editor’s post-exilic redaction, each of whom edited the stories for their own purposes. King Josiah was advocating for the continuance of the Judean monarchy. The D editor was offering cautionary tales to the returned exiles warning them not to go back to the immorality of the days of the judges, a reminder that those who choose to serve foreign gods will be made to serve a foreign tyrant. Do not forget the Lord God. An encouragement is also implied in the way Othniel’s heritage and name speak to the promise of a coming Judean king, a deliverer who is stronger than any king of dark double-wickedness.

“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25 NRSV). This verse, which caps the miserable descent of Israel from its highpoint under Othniel to the book’s ugly, and incomplete ending, makes a complete circle of the stories in Judges. Othniel starts the book and Othniel ends the book. His story is bland and colorless because he is a model rather than a player in the acts of the judges. Othniel’s story serves both as a model for the judge-stories to follow, as the retribution cycles continue throughout the book of Judges. Also, because he was a member of the tribe of Judah, his story foreshadows the coming of a model Judean king as prophesied in earlier scriptural texts. The prophetic element in Othniel’s story seems to be encouraging monarchial rule of God’s people, a feature that suggests God recognizes human institution as having value in restraining evil. Kingship is an institution; judgeship is not.
Human institution, no matter how good the human ruler is, cannot conquer evil forever. The Lord God is the real hero in Othniel’s story. Although he ordained Othniel, gave him His Spirit, granted him authority as a judge, and sent him out to fight the evil king, it was the Lord God who gave the king into Othniel’s hand.

Although Othniel and the unknown foreign king, whose attributes matched the legendary King Cushan-rishathaim’s, were real people in the history of the Middle East, the actual story related in 3:7-11 was most likely not a strictly accurate, historical event, but rather a story that was carefully crafted to make a point. Othniel’s bland story is a transitional story from Judges’ introduction in 1:1-3:6 to the detail-packed, savior stories that followed after Othniel’s story but failed to copy his model in all points.

Othniel’s story is a benchmark for the role of God in history. As a model story, Othniel’s story harks back to Balaam and forward to Habakkuk as a historical reference to the power of the saving acts of God, who acts on his own initiative and for his own purposes, to deliver his people. The text reveals how easy it is for the people of God to succumb to forgetting the Lord their God in a land where a plurality of religions coexists. The Holy Spirit played a pivotal part in the rescue of God’s people from the king of dark double-wickedness. Othniel’s story reveals God’s anger at his people’s apostacy but also his generous heart to engineer circumstances designed to generously deliver God’s people from their enslaving weakness. It also shows God’s ready response to his people’s cry of faith as their deliverer.

**APPLICATION**

It is tempting to think of the book of Judges as being such days of dark double-wickedness in Israel’s history as to make a person wonder why God allowed the book to be included in the Bible. Did anything good come from the time of the judges? Certainly, good
came from the period of the judges. There was faith in Israel in those days. This speaks to us today in a time when many people wonder if Jesus were to return would he find faith in the land? (Luke 18:8) The New Testament writer of Hebrews makes this point. Although Othniel was not listed in Hebrews 11 (faith’s hall of fame), Othniel is the model judge for the judges who were listed. Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah – the faith-list includes these judges, and points the reader to the application in Heb. 12:1-2 (NRSV), which says:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Othniel and the judges are in the great cloud of witnesses encouraging New Testament Christians to look to Jesus for deliverance from sin. The judge-stories lend meaning and instruction to our own stories today or they would not have been included in Hebrews 11. For God’s people, faith often runs deeper than what a person’s surface actions might suggest. Paul makes much the same point in his sermon to the people of Antioch Pisidian in Acts 13:19-23. In the sermon Paul references the judges in his gospel, when, after recapping the story of Israel’s exodus, he notes, “and after that he gave them judges (13:20)”. Them Paul said, “and when the people desired a king, God gave them David the son of Jesse… and from David’s “posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (13:23). Paul paired God’s raising up delivers in the Old Testament to God’s giving us a King, Jesus the Savior, in the New Testament. Paul’s connection of Jesus to Judges is hard to miss. The writer of Hebrews and Paul both tied the period of the judges to the coming of the Savior, Christ the King.
Othniel is the model story in Judges who set the stage so that the New Testament writers could make the association between judge-stories and God as the deliverer of his people throughout history. God is the God of history. His work throughout history, from Judges to today, witnesses to the power of his saving acts. He engineers the circumstances of history to put into effect the salvation of his people. God’s anger at apostacy is evident in Othniel’s story but also God’s generous heart to save his people from their enslaving weakness. God responds to his people’s cry of faith. What was true then remains true today.

Second, we see a reference to the Spirit of God in Othniel’s story. The Spirit was with Othniel but everyone else did what seemed right in their own eyes. In the church age, the Holy Spirit is for all God’s people not just the leader (John 14:16-17). In the church age, evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence is that God’s people no longer do what is right in their own eyes but are guided by the Holy Spirit. In Judges, the people of God found it difficult not to be corrupted by the plurality of religions around them, but on this side of the Cross, the presence of other gods does not have to cause God’s people to forget him, because his Spirit lives in them. Through his Spirit, God strengthens the hearts of his people “so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father…” (1 Thess. 3:13). Holiness is possible on this side of the Cross. Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, “deliver us from evil”, we are crying out in faith to God to save us. It is the same prayer we heard in the voices of God’s people as they cried out to him for deliverance in Othniel’s story. God’s deliverance, as foreshadowed in Othniel’s model story, resounds in Jesus Christ the King whom God has raised up to save his people from every evil that seeks to enslave them in our day.
WORKS CITED


