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The First Cycle: Othniel

3: 7-11

The first cycle: Othniel DIG: What was so evil about the Ba'al's and the Asheroth (1 Kings 23-24; 2 Kings 23:4-7)? Who was Cushan-Rish'athayim and how powerful was he? What role does the Ruach play in Othniel's deliverance from the Arameans? What contrast can be drawn between Othniel and Samson?

REFLECT: When have you burned with rage? Yearned for peace? How was the Lord involved? What cycles have you gone through? Is it easy or hard for you to repent? Is there anything that is keeping you from repenting right now? Do you feel like you have to be an Othniel? Or can you be content with faithfulness?

Othniel's ability to deliver Isra'el was only the result of the empowerment of the Spirit.

As Warren Wiersbe relates in his commentary on **Judges, the weapons we fight are not the weapons of the world**. This statement could have been made by a space alien in a science-fiction novel, but it wasn't. **The apostle Paul** wrote those words to the believers in **Corinth (Second Corinthians 1-:4)**, reminding **them** of a principle every believer needs to take to heart: When **Ha'Shem** goes to **war**, **He** usually chooses the most unlikely soldiers, hands **them** the most unusual weapons, and accomplishes through **them** the most unpredictable results. For example, **Ha'Shem** gave **Shamgar** an **ox goad**, and with **it** he **killed six-hundred men (3:31)**; **Jael** used a **hammer** and a **tent peg** to kill **the general of Jabin's army (4:21)**; **Gideon** routed the whole **Midianite** army with only **trumpets, jars and torches** as weapons (**7:19-20**); **Samson** slaughtered a **thousand Philistines** using **the jawbone of a donkey (15:15)**, and young **David** killed **the giant Goliath** with a **stone** hurled from a **shepherd's sling (First Samuel 17:40b-51a)**. Though our **world** has changed dramatically since the days of the **judges, the world** system is still the same because human nature hasn't changed (**First John 2:15-17**). As long as we're in this **world, God's people** are involved in

a spiritual battle against Satan and his demons (**Ephesians 6:10-19**), and our **Lord** is still looking for men and women who have what it takes to win that spiritual battle: the power of **God** as seen in **Othniel (3:7-11)**, the effective strategy of **Ehud (3:12-30)**, and the persistent courage of **Shamgar (3:31)**.⁶⁰

Rebellion (3:7): The first cycle begins with the negative fact that **the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of YHVH, and forgot ADONAI their God (3:7 Hebrew)**. This is a very common phrase, found in many books of the Bible, to express the faithlessness and ingratitude of the Israelites when they abandoned His worship for that of false gods. And served the images of Ba'al and the Asherah poles (3:7c Hebrew). Thanks to archaeological discoveries, we now know that **Ba'al** was in fact the most important member of the **Canaanite** pantheon. He was avidly worshiped throughout the land as the god of storms, wind, and rainfall; his weapon of choice was the thunderbolt. **Asheroth** is the plural of **Asherah**, both forms indicate a female goddess, the consort of **Ba'al** and the goddess of fertility (cf. **Judges 10:6; First Samuel 7:4** and **12:10**).⁶¹ Those **Asherah groves (Deuteronomy 16:21; Judges 6:26; Second Kings 13:6, 17:10, 23:6, and 23:15)** were probably regarded as a dwelling place of the deity. The name was transferred to the deity itself from the idols of this goddess, which consisted of wooden columns called the **Asherim**, hence **Asherah** or the **Asherah poles** – wooden poles, or tree trunks – which were set up beside the pagan altar, and used as an object of worship.⁶²

Of course, **Ba'al** and **Asherah** could easily tolerate the inclusion of other gods in the pantheon, even **the God of Isra'el**. In polytheism, there is always room for more gods. But the reverse was not, and is not, possible (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy, to see link click Bw - Sh'ma Isra'el**). Since **ADONAI** is the absolute and transcendent **One**, neither dependent upon the whims of fate nor subject to its limits, the worship of any other forces – even when these could be understood as being ultimately subject to **His** authority – is intolerable. But what developed in ancient **Isra'el**, under the pervasive influence of **Canaanite** culture, was the combining of **His** worship with the **Canaanite** gods, a process known as syncretism.⁶³

Retribution (3:8): The author begins with the cause of **Isra'el's** retribution. **Then Ha'Shem burned with anger against Isra'el**. Are we surprised that **God** became angry? **And He turned them over to Cushan-Rish'athayim** (meaning doubly-wicked Cushan), king of Aram. Aram, rendered **Syria** in the **LXX** (the

Septuagint, the “official” Greek translation of the TaNaKh), is the name given to the area populated primarily by the Arameans, one of the most powerful ethnic groups in the late second and early first millennia. The territory extended from northeast of the Sea of Galilee to the Taurus mountains in the north and eastward beyond the Habur tributary of the upper Euphrates River. **Rish’athayim** literally means, *Syria of Two Rivers*, and it refers to the very fertile land that lies between the Orontes River and the Euphrates River, or two rivers. Four times in **Judges** we’re told that **Ha’Shem** “sold” **His people to the enemy (2:14, 3:8, 4:2, and 10:7; cf. First Samuel 12:9; First Kings 21:20 and 25, Psalm 44:12)**. **The Jews** acted like slaves, so **YHVH** treated **them** like slaves. Had **they** been faithful to **God, He** would have sold **their enemies** into **their** hands (**Deuteronomy 32:20**). For **Cushan** to have extended **his** tentacles as far as **Judah** in southern Canaan meant that **he** was a world-class emperor, who held **the Israelites** in **his** grip for at least **eight years (3:8 NIV)**. **He** was the most powerful of all **the enemies** of **Isra’el** named in the book of **Judges**.⁶⁴

Repentance (3:9a): There’s no evidence that **the people of Isra’el** repented when **they cried out to ADONAI (3:9a NIV)**. It took **eight years** before **Isra’el** realized that continuing to worship **Ba’al** and **Asherah** was of no benefit to them and wouldn’t free **them** from oppression. Today, we have an instant remedy for our **sin: If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (First John 1:8-9)**.



Restoration (3:9b-10): What is the most striking in **the cycle** is the irony of **ADONAI's** response. Even in **God's anger**, there is hope for **Isra'el**, for **He** will not allow **Isra'el** to serve **Ba'al** forever. While **Isra'el** actively sought appeasement with **their Canaanite** neighbors, preferring spiritually sinful coexistence, **Ha'Shem** consistently thwarted any possibility of a long-term relationship by introducing **judges**, or **deliverers**. In the scene first seen here, but replayed many times throughout history, **the people of Isra'el** painfully discover that, try as **they** might, **they** cannot abandon **their** unique mission **on the earth** (see the commentary on **Genesis Dt - I Will Bless Those Who Bless You**), neither by passive detachment nor, like **Jonah**, by actively running away (**Psalm 139:7-8**).⁶⁵

The LORD responded to **their** plight and **raised up one who would rescue them (3:9b NIV)**. It was the **Exodus** experience all over again: **God heard their groaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (2:24-25)**. The Hebrew word for **deliverer** or **savior** is *movshia*, a word used in three different ways. First, in the book of **Judges**, it is used by heroic **men** (and **Deborah**) who **save the nation** in time of **war**. Secondly, *movshia* is used of **YHVH (Isaiah 43:11, 45:15 and 21)**. And finally, *it* was also used by **Isaiah** of the **Messiah in Isaiah 19:20**. The name of **the deliverer** here was **Othniel, a Kenizzite**, and a relative of **Caleb (3:9b NIV)**.

When **God** called **Othniel**, **he** was available and **the Spirit of ADONAI came upon him (NIV)**. This is the first time that the supernatural empowering of **the judges** is revealed. **Not by force, and not by power, but by My Spirit**, says **ADONAI-Tzva'ot (Zechariah 4:6 CJB)**. This was the secret of **Othniel's** strength, as it was with **Gideon (6:34)**, **Jephthah (11:29)**, and **Samson (14:6 and 19, 15:14)**; and it must be the source of our **power** today: **But you will receive power when the Ruach Ha'Kodesh comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)**.

Othniel's ability to deliver **Isra'el** was the result of **the Spirit**, but there is no stereotyped formula. It is always used in the context of being empowered to accomplish a specific task or mission. It is noted that **the Spirit of ADONAI took possession of Gideon (RSV)**, and **He began to stir, impel, or rush upon Samson (13:25, 14:6, 19, and 15:14)**. Since **Shavu'ot, the Spirit of Truth** resides permanently in every believer (see the commentary on **Acts AI - The Ruach Ha'Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot**).⁶⁶ The result of **Othniel's** empowerment

and mission was twofold: First, **he judged Isra'el**; and secondly, **he went out to war, and ADONAI gave him victory over Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram (3:10 Hebrew)**. Just as **God** gave **Isra'el** into the hands of **their enemy**, **He** then gave **Isra'el's enemy** into the hands of **their deliverer**.

Rest (3:11): So there was rest (peace) in the Land for a generation, about forty years. **This round number signifies a generation, during which time the achievements of the judge had the effect of keeping grateful people loyal to ADONAI.** What was obvious is that the repentance of **this generation** failed to transmit to the next generation. Only once did **rest** last for **eighty years**, and in that instance, **it** extended for two **generations**. Otherwise **rest** lasted for either **forty years** or even less: here in **3:11**, **forty years**; **Ehud** in **3:30** for **eighty years**; **Deborah** in **5:31** for **forty years**; **Gideon** in **8:28** for **forty years**; **Tola and Jair** in **10:2-3**, combined had **rest** for **forty-five years**; A combination of **Jephath, Ibzan, Elon**, and **Abdon** in **12:7-14** had **peace** for **thirty-one years**; and **Samson** in **16:31** had **rest** for **twenty years**. Notice the general downward progression. **This first cycle** lasted **until Othniel son of Kenaz died (3:11 Hebrew)**.

As Michael Hattin relates in his commentary on **Judges**, **Othniel's** successful tenure also points to a popular misconception concerning the political situation during the period of **the judges**. Unlike **his** predecessor **Joshua**, **Othniel** is most certainly a regional leader. There is no indication whatsoever that **he** exercised any sort of national rule, and everything that we know about **him** and **his** exploits places **him** within the southern region of **the tribe of Judah**. In other words, as the first of **the judges**, **Othniel** introduces us to a new period in **Israelite** history, an era during which **the tribes** act independently and are the objects of external threats that tend to be confirmed to particular areas of **the land**. Rarely did any **judge** transcend his tribal affiliation to achieve more widespread rule, certainly not for sustained periods much beyond the immediate necessities of the hour of battle. Though the text invariably speaks of **Isra'el** straying from **God** and of oppressors harshly ruling over **Isra'el**, the dynamics at play were local. **Isra'el** didn't stray from **ADONAI** as a consequence of some sort of widespread movement decided upon in a national poll, but rather because in every region of the land there were **Canaanites** whose cults attracted the surrounding, local **Israelites** to **their** way of life. Therefore, to be more accurate (if less dramatic), it was **tribes of Isra'el** that strayed from **God**. **Cushan-Rish'athayim** and the other oppressors that followed **him** did not subjugate **Isra'el** as a **nation**, but only a **tribe** or two that were the

focus of **their** oppressive campaign.⁶⁷

When people think about the book of **Judges**, most of us have heard of **Samson**. But only a few, if any, have ever heard of **Othniel**. It is a great irony that the worst of **the judges** in moral character and success in delivering **Isra'el** is the best-known **judge**, while the ideal **judge** is virtually unknown. The Bible gives us numerous examples of men and women who walked with **God**, but **Othniel** stands out because of **his** simplicity. In spite of those things that might hold believers back, **Othniel** serves as an example of one who was not limited by **his** background as a **Kenizzite**, a minor, lesser-known clan or nomadic people that eventually blended into **the tribe of Judah**. Background should not limit our service to **Messiah**. No matter what our human deficiencies, we can be faithful to **God's** calling in our lives. In the book of **Judges**, besides possibly **Joshua (2:8)**, **Othniel** is the only **man** who is pictured so positively, but **he** is the least known.

In an age when many choose a different path, not uncommonly bringing on themselves oppression that is the result of sin (like a **Cushan-Rish'athayim**), it is wonderful to see a model like **Othniel** who simply walks in tandem with **ADONAI** and overcomes evil. While it is inferential from the text, it is apparent that like any godly believer throughout the ages, **Othniel** loved **his** fellow **Israelites**. **He** could not stand by and watch **them** suffer. In other words, **his** motives were not self-seeking but seeking others. **He** acted, and this is really important, in accordance with **the Lord's** will – **YHVH** raised up a **deliverer, a savior** (Hebrew: *mosbia*). If we walk with **ADONAI** and our eyes are on the needs of others rather than our own self-interests, we will want to act in accordance with **God's** will. The simplicity and faithfulness of **Othniel** is in radical contrast to the complexity and self-gratification of the final judge of the book of **Judges, Samson**. The message is not that we "ought to be an Othniel." Rather, we should demonstrate faithfulness to **God's** call for us, whatever it is.

Ultimately, **this first cycle** serves to bring glory to **God**. While the human character is **Othniel**, this passage is not a biography about **him**. Instead, the human character highlights **ADONAI's** involvement in the affairs of **His people**. In **Othniel's** day **Ha'Shem** punished evil, had compassion on **His people**, and brought **restoration** and **rest**; **Othniel** was simply **God's** tool to accomplish those results. So also today, **God** still acts to punish evil, and **He** still has compassion on **His people** and still brings restoration and rest.⁶⁸

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being such an awesome **Father**. The*

greatness of **You** love and wisdom inspires me to walk closely with **You**, listening carefully to everything with a joyful heart of love for **You**. The eyes of the heart of **Caleb's** nephew **Othniel** clearly saw what others did not see. **He** saw the greatness and power of **Isra'el's** almighty **ADONAI**! **His** heart was in the right place and **he** wisely turned away from **his** ancestry background of worshiping false idols, and turned to follow **You, ADONAI, the One** and only living **God**! Knowledge of **the Almighty** must move into the heart to offer worship and praise to **the One** and only **Living God** who works wonders to save **His people**. **Othniel** had this faith, like his uncle **Caleb's** strong faith. **They** took knowledge and transferred what **he** knew to be true into a response of action that trusted **You** in all circumstances. May this generation living now follow **Messiah's** example to believe and to follow you at all costs for you are such a wonderful heavenly **Father**! In **Messiah's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen