Among the early texts of the Hebrew Bible are a number of stories that present important characters—both Israelites and non-Israelites—in an unfavorable light. I will argue that these stories may have originated, within the culture of ancient Israel, as part of a rhetorical institution common to many societies, especially those in which human interactions are organized outside the control of a powerful state. That institution I refer to as "verbal feud."

In verbal feud, competing groups tell stories reflecting honor on themselves and dishonor on others, or retaliating against rivals' stories. Verbal feud served the important social functions of defining a community, enhancing its identity, and strengthening its internal ties by emphasizing the defects of rival groups. Because the feud was kept at the verbal level, it was less dangerous than would be an institution of blood feud (although verbal conflict could, and undoubtedly did, escalate into violence in some cases). Verbal feud, moreover, provided entertainment, especially for third parties who could take delight in the malicious stories emerging from the competing sides.

To illustrate the institution of verbal feud, I will draw on two texts from the Book of Judges which contain a complex structure of boasts and insults about the tribe of Benjamin: the story of Eglon and Ehud in Judges 3:12–30 and the account of the civil war between Benjamin and the other Israelite tribes in Judges 19–21. First, however, I set forth a general typology of verbal feud in order to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of the texts in question.

I. A Theory of Verbal Feud

The Hebrew Bible amply illustrates that the prevailing culture in ancient Israel was greatly concerned about honor—not only the honor of the individual, but also that of

* For generous comments and other guidance, I thank Alan Avery-Pecka, David Bevington, Miguel Civil, John Collins, David Cohen, Wendy Doniger, Mary Douglas, Robert Ellickson, Donald Horowitz, Robert Miller, Harvey Minkoff, Susan Niditch, Christa von Neicken, I. Mark Ramsayer, Richard Ross, Martha Roth, Raymond Westbrook, and participants at a University of Chicago Work-in-Progress workshop. Debra Klein provided valuable research assistance.
1 I use the term "verbal feud" in preference to "verbal duel" (flying) because the conflicts among competing groups discussed in this paper appear to have persisted for extended periods of time—perhaps generations or more. For documentation of "verbal dueling" in Old English and Homeric Greek sources, see Ward Perkins, _Verbal Duelling in Heroic Narrative: The Homeric and Old English Traditions_ (Princeton, 1990). A very recent article specifically discussing flying in the Hebrew Bible, although not addressing the texts considered here, is M. R. Eaton, "Some Instances of Flying in the Hebrew Bible," _JSOT_ 61 (1994): 3–14. To the best of my knowledge, the only other work which has identified a phenomenon resembling verbal feud as a distinctive feature of the early biblical sources is Susan Niditch's important _War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence_ (New York, 1993), pp. 90–105. Niditch's insightful treatment identifies the taunt as a stylized feature of fighting behavior among groups of heroes operating under a chivalric code of conduct with regard to war.
family, clan, and tribe. An honorable man was generous, hospitable, brave, and productive, the father of respectful sons and chaste daughters. One's honor was a valuable asset. It elevated a man in the eyes of his peers, enhanced his children's marriage prospects, reassured allies and vassals, awed enemies, and aided in commercial dealings.²

Honor did not exist in the abstract; a hermit was neither honorable nor dishonorable. Honor was socially constructed. The construction of honor was a complex interaction among various constituents in the society, involving both a person's actions themselves and the subsequent recording, transmission, and evaluation of the deeds.

Individuals and groups sought to acquire, maintain, and enhance honor as today they might seek status or wealth.³ Honor might be gained or lost by actions. But because honor was a social construct, it was equally important how a person's actions—real or invented—were evaluated by others. In oral traditions, including the rich oral tradition of ancient Israel,⁴ such information was embodied in stories which were easily remembered and passed within the culture.⁵ People would establish and enhance their own honor with laudatory stories about themselves or their ancestors; their rivals, on the other hand, would seek to diminish their honor with stories that were denigrating, mocking, or parodic.⁶

This rhetoric of boast and insult worked within local territories or clans to establish social pecking orders among persons who were part of a small social group. Similar principles operated across clan boundaries. When clan groups became hostile, a likely outcome was the formulation and emission of stories which claimed honor for the group in which the story originated and satirized or denigrated the rival group.⁷ Once created, such stories would easily become stereotypes—part of the more general culture of a region, especially if the insults were witty or telling.⁸

² For advantages of a reputation for honor in other settings, see, for example, Martha T. Roth, "Mesopotamian Legal Traditions and the Laws of Hammurabi," Chicago-Kent Law Review, forthcoming; Rudolph M. Bell, Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy since 1890 (Chicago, 1979); William Ian Miller, Bloodletting and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland (Chicago, 1900), p. 393.

³ For analysis of similar mechanisms of social control in close-knit social settings, see W. I. Miller, Bloodletting and Peacemaking: Sally Engle Merry, "Rethinking Gossip and Scandal," in Donald Black, ed., Toward a General Theory of Social Control, vol. 1 (Ottawa, 1984), p. 27.


⁶ For an example from Andalusia, see Julian Pitt-Rivers, The People of the Sierra, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1971), p. 32.

⁷ The phenomenon is essentially one of ethnocentrism. See W. G. Sumner, Folkways (New York, 1906), pp. 12–13:

Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excites its scorn. Obnoxious epithets are derived from these differences. "Pig-eater," "cow-eater," "uncircumcised," "jabberers," are epithets of contempt and abomination. . . . The most important fact is that ethnocentrism leads a people to exaggerate and intensify everything in their own folkways which is peculiar and which differentiates them from others. It therefore strengthens the folkways.

I use the term "verbal feud" to denote the phenomenon of stories designed to enhance or diminish honor. The term refers to relations between groups that are rivalrous in some sense. The idea of feud is appropriate because the stories appear to have been created in a process of attack and retaliation similar to that observed in classic feuds.

One can distinguish four major types of feud stories, several of them with distinct subtypes. Boast stories claimed honor for a particular clan or group. Boast stories are common in many social contexts, especially ones in which the state does not exercise powerful control over human interactions. Some boasts constituted public claims to valor prior to battle, usually made in the presence of women. Another form of boast was the vaunt, a celebration by the victor or the victor's people after the conquest of a hated foe. Boasts could also include self-laudatory claims about one's wealth, hospitality, ability to produce male children, and other qualities deemed desirable by the society. Part of the function of the boast appears to have been to encourage people to strive to achieve socially desirable qualities and to subject them to ridicule if they failed.

A second major type of verbal feud story, the insult, attributed dishonor to a rival group. If a characteristic of the boast is that it claimed for the boaster desirable features far above the norm, the insult attributed undesirable features to the subject which were far below the norm. Typical insults included claims that the subject was dominated by his wife or dishonored by his children, that he or members of his family were guilty of sexual perversion or licentiousness, that he came from impure ancestry, that he was cowardly in battle, that he was poor, lazy, incompetent, and so on.

Although boast and insult stories could exist independently, they tended to become linked together in the form of a contest between adversaries—termed in English literature a "flying": "an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable setting." Flyings are portrayed as actual contests in which the competing sides hurl insults at one another with the victory going to the party able to articulate and marshal the superior evidence: it is "not just a prelude to violence but itself the oral equivalent of war."
Boasts and insults could be met by counterboasts or counterinsults emanating from the rival group. Two techniques with more complex structures can also be identified: *parries* and *ripostes*. Characteristic of these techniques is that they implicitly acknowledged the existence of the rival's stories and recognized that these stories had received some credibility in the wider culture.¹⁴

The *parry* was a response to a boast of a rival group. Parries came in two main variants. The parody mocked the pretensions of the group within which the boast story originated. The good qualities which the boasting group claimed for itself would be exaggerated and thereby shown to be ridiculous and self-defeating.¹⁵ Boasts could also be countered with taunts, which were stories or other expressions which claimed that the boasting party conspicuously fell short of the qualities asserted in the boast.¹⁶ Taunts would often be included within the framework of vaunts, when the victor would joyfully contrast the brave boasts of the enemies before the battle with their abject failure in actual combat.¹⁷

The *riposte* was a response to an insult by a rival group. If an insult story attained such widespread currency that simply ignoring or denying the insult would not be effective,¹⁸ the insulted party would then need to respond with a story which took the insult and threw it back on the originating group. Riposte stories can be distinguished from counterinsults in that they implicitly accept as partially true the substance of the original insult, but they turn the insult back on the opponent by claiming that the bad qualities attributed to the insulted group are, in fact, good and that the party making the insult is the one legitimately to be criticized for the shortcoming involved.

Over time, the process of boast, insult, parry, and riposte generated a richly nuanced literature in the broader culture. The principal mechanism for the creation of this literature was probably a class of itinerant artists who would offer performances tailored to the

---

¹⁴ Modern studies of interethnic relations support the proposition that the self-image of a people is sometimes influenced by stereotypes held by other peoples. For example, in a study of the attitudes of French and German people toward one another and themselves, Reigrofski and Anderson found that "the French self-image may be in part an assimilation of the national stereotype of the French held by the Germans, and vice versa"; Reigrofski and Anderson, "National Stereotypes and Foreign Contacts," in Kresselberg, ed., *Social Processes in International Relations*, chap. 5, p. 79.

¹⁵ A biblical example may be found in Genesis 19:1–11, where Lot's exaggerated pride in hospitality is mocked when he is portrayed as offering his daughters to the Sodomites in order to protect his angelic visitors.

¹⁶ For interesting treatment of taunts in a variety of biblical texts, see Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 92–94.

¹⁷ Biblical examples include Moses' taunt of the Egyptians after the miracle of the Red Sea in Exodus 15:9: "The foe said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil. My desire shall have its fill of them. I willbare my sword, my hand shall subdue them. You [Yahweh] made your wind blow, the sea covered them. They sank like lead in the majestic waters." A similar taunt is found in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5:30, where the Canaanite princess is shown credulously believing that Sisera's return has been delayed because he is fulfilling his boast, when in fact he has been defeated in battle, humiliated, and killed.

¹⁸ American politics offers examples of cases where because of widely held beliefs the denial of an insult merely reinforced the popular impression. Consider the following widely disbelieved statements: "I am not a crook" (Nixon); "I am not a liberal" (Dukakis); "I am not a wimp" (Bush).
tastes of the audience. These storytellers came equipped with a stock of motifs that they could adapt to the needs of a particular situation. These artists would have facilitated the propagation of verbal feud, because negative, satiric, or denigrating stories about other groups would always be in demand. Storytellers would gain from the continuation of verbal feud not only because it satisfied an audience, but also because when a negative story got back to the affected group, that group might commission a retaliatory story.

Remnants of what must have been an extraordinarily rich literature of verbal feud are recorded in the Bible. The textual analysis is complicated, however, by the fact that those who wrote down this literature and those who edited the written record had their own polemical purposes in mind, which often had nothing to do with contests for honor among rival groups in ancient Israel. The process of revealing the underlying oral tradition is thus subject to some uncertainty.

Nevertheless, elements of a literature of verbal feud can be identified in the Bible. I will illustrate this thesis by analyzing two stories concerning the tribe of Benjamin which, I believe, originated in this culture of verbal feud. One is an insult story and the other, a riposte. The stories are illustrative only in the sense that the phenomenon of verbal feud appears to have been quite widespread and can be detected at work in a fairly large group of early biblical texts.

II. The Crime of Gibeah

The remnants of an insult story can be found in Judges 19:1–21. We learn here of a Levite who lives in the hill country of Ephraim. His concubine deserts him and returns to her father in Bethlehem in Judah ( Judges 19:2). After four months, the Levite appears in Bethlehem to recover his concubine (Judges 19:3). The girl’s father shows him great hospitality and urges him to stay past the usual three days, but on the fifth day, in the late afternoon, the Levite and concubine depart for home despite her father’s urging that he stay (Judges 19:4–10). The hour grows late, but rather than spend the night in Canaanite Jerusalem, the travelers press on to the Benjaminite town of Gibeah. They sit in the open streets of the town, but no one will give them shelter except an old Ephraimite who finds them upon returning late after work in the fields (Judges 19:15–21). Their host makes sure their feet are washed and gives them food and drink.

Meanwhile, scoundrels of the town surround the house, hurling themselves against the door and shouting, “bring out the man who has come into your house, so that we can be intimate with him” (Judges 19:23). The Ephraimite tells them, “please, my friends, do not commit such a wrong. Look, here is my virgin daughter and his concubine. Let me bring them out to you. Have your pleasure of them; do what you like with them; but do not do that outrageous thing to this man.” (Judges 19:23–25).

The Levite then takes his concubine and thrusts her outside for the mob, who proceed to rape and abuse her to death (Judges 19:26–29). The Levite takes the body home to Ephraim, cuts it into parts and sends the parts throughout Israel in order to muster the tribal

confederacy against the Benjamites (Judges 19:29–30).\textsuperscript{20} When the Benjamites close ranks, a bloody war breaks out which the other Israelite tribes win only after thousands of casualties (Judges 20). Eventually, after complex diplomatic procedures, Benjamin is allowed back into the Israelite community (Judges 21).

Certain elements of verbal feud can be found within the story. Beneath the overlay of military tactics and intra-tribal diplomacy is an insult story, with somewhat humorous connotations, directed at the tribe of Benjamin.\textsuperscript{21}

There are two insults contained in the story. The first, which commands the greatest narrative attention, focuses on the egregious lack of hospitality displayed by the Benjamites of Gibeah.\textsuperscript{22} Not a single Benjaminite is willing to shelter the weary travelers sitting conspicuously in the public area of the town.\textsuperscript{23} The only one who will help is an Ephraimite, himself a resident alien. The Gibeahites engage in the worst imaginable breaches of the obligations of hospitality which Israelites owe to one another. Instead of offering their own homes to a fellow Israelite, as the story implies they should have done, they attempt to destroy the home in which he has lodged; instead of protecting him against harm, they attempt to harm him; instead of safeguarding his property they steal and destroy a valuable possession (the concubine). The Benjamites, moreover, have breached hospitality not only toward the Levite, but also toward the Ephraimite who is a resident alien in their midst.

The theme of the Benjamites' lack of hospitality is developed by contrasts with earlier parts of the story in which hospitality is in issue. By pressing the Levite to stay longer than the customary three days, the concubine's father displays hospitality greater than is required under the circumstances, even if he acts out of an ulterior motive.\textsuperscript{24} The Ephraimite in Gibeah takes in the travelers, ensures that their feet are washed, and gives them food and drink, even though they have brought their own provisions, and offers his own daughter to protect the stranger within his gate. The exemplary behavior of the father-in-law and the host highlights the wickedness of the Gibeahites who display the opposite of hospitality to the visitors. Similarly, the Levite's decision not to stay in foreign Jerusalem but to press on to Gibeah, where he expects a warmer welcome, emphasizes the gravity of the Gibeahites' breach.

The contrasting forms of hospitality are emphasized by the theme of men giving and taking women: the father who gives back his daughter to the Levite, the Ephraimite who

\textsuperscript{20} The cutting up and dispersing of the concubine's body as a call to arms is a common theme and brings to mind the disemboweling and distribution of the yoke of oxen in 1 Samuel 11:7.


\textsuperscript{22} The story's emphasis on hospitality has been noted by many commentators. See, for example, J. Alberto Soggin, Judges (Philadelphia, 1981), p. 53.

\textsuperscript{23} The text implies that strangers in a town would go to a public area such as a city square inside the gate and wait until someone in town offered to take them in, i.e., that the meaning of the Levite's party waiting in the street would have been perfectly clear to the citizens of the town. Nidsch notes this expression of stranger status in "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19–20," p. 367.

\textsuperscript{24} The theme of a girl's father attempting to induce a visiting groom to remain rather than taking the girl away is found elsewhere in the Bible and no doubt was a popular literary motif in a society where the departure of a daughter to live with a husband carried with it the possibility that the parents would never see their child again. Cf. Genesis 24:50–61 (Rebecca); Genesis 29:15–28 (Rachel and Leah).
offers his daughter to protect a guest, the Levite who gives his concubine to protect his host, and the mob who take and destroy the concubine who is not theirs to have.

A germ of verbal feud survives in this story in the claim that the Benjaminites failed to respect the guest rights of their fellow Israelites. It is not difficult to infer the identity of the group within which the insult originated: Ephraim. The Levite’s home is in Ephraim, and his host in Gibeon is an Ephraimite. Underlying the current version of the story, which is told from a pan-Israelite perspective, is a rivalry between the neighboring tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim.

The other aspect of verbal feud in this story is the account of the Benjaminites’ sexual behavior. The Gibeannahites are prey to deviant lust and lose control of their behavior as a result. So depraved are the Benjaminites that they thrust themselves against the doors of the house and shout for the object of their lust to come forth. They accept the concubine only as a substitute for the male whom they desire, and they rape and abuse her to the point of death. This is an accusation of extreme sexual and moral deviance against the tribe of Benjamin.

As in the case of the theme of hospitality, the theme of sexual deviance is developed by contrast with the earlier part of the story. The Levite has been denied sexual gratification to which he is rightfully entitled when his concubine runs away, but rather than succumbing to his immediate impulses, he waits four months before setting out in pursuit ( Judges 19:2). He travels to Bethel, not with the intention of forcibly reclaiming his concubine, even though he may have had the right to do so, but rather with the intent to appeal to her with reason and persuasion ( Judges 19:3). The Levite’s deliberation and control is contrasted with the Gibeannahites’ frenzy, his use of reason and persuasion is contrasted with the Gibeannahites’ use of force, and his legitimate claim to the concubine is contrasted with the Gibeannahites’ theft. A similar point is made with images of houses and doors, which are enlisted as sexual metaphors: the battering of the closed door by the Gibeannahites symbolizes their intent to violate sexually an inappropriate object (the Levite or the concubine), while the joyful opening of the doors when the Levite arrives at his father-in-law’s house symbolizes the re-establishment of his sexual rights to his concubine as a result of appropriate behavior.

---

25 Arguably, the protagonist is made a Levite rather than an Ephraimite because Levites themselves owned no tribal territory and therefore were representative, in a sense, of the nation as a whole. By making the injured party a Levite, the narrative generalizes the conflict from a dispute between neighboring tribes ( Benjamin and Ephraim) into a matter affecting the entire Israelite people. The roots of the story in a verbal feud between Ephraim and Benjamin is maintained in the detail that the Levite made his home in Ephraim.

26 In addition to the tribal rivalry, one can detect a possible political polemic against Saul and his family, given that the story designates Saul’s tribe of Benjamin and the Saulite stronghold of Gibeon. See the insightful treatment in Yaakov Amit, “Literature in the Service of Politics: Studies in Judges 19–21” in H. G. Beentje, Y. Yeoman, and B. Uffenheimer, Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature (Sheffield, 1994), pp. 28–40. The story may have reflected a commercial rivalry as well: the travelers elect to stop in Gibeon rather than travel further along the central highway to the town of Ramah on the Ephraim–Benjamin border. These highway towns probably enjoyed a trade in providing lodging and provisions for travelers and would have competed with one another for this business. The story might well carry a message that the travelers would have been much better off had they pressed on the few extra miles to the hospitable Ramah rather than stopping at the degraded Gibeon.

27 In her book on Judges, Mieke Bal notes the importance of doors and houses to the development of the Gibeon story, but she does not identify the images as sexual metaphors. See Mieke Bal, Death and Dyssymmetry: Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges (Chicago, 1988), pp. 181, 192.
The themes of sexual deviance and inhospitality are connected in that the events here are described as occurring within a city,²⁸ a locale sometimes characterized in the Bible as inhospitable²⁹ and tolerant of licentiousness.³⁰

One other element of the story should be noted in this regard. The text relates that the Gibeahites who went into battle against the Israelite coalition were all left-handed (Judges 20:16). The reason for this narrative detail is not stated, although the author ties the left-handedness of the Gibeahites to their ability with the sling. This feature is too striking to be a mere detail, given the extreme improbability that all seven hundred warriors from Gibeah would be left-handed. What does it signify?

It is likely that this detail of left-handedness was part of an original narrative of verbal feud. The Benjaminites were reputed in the culture to be left-handed.³¹ The reputation undoubtedly originated in a play on words: ben-jamin is literally “son of the right hand.” In the literature of verbal feud, the derivation of the term as “son of the right hand” would have been a boastful claim by the Benjaminites, given the positive connotations of the right hand. Rival groups parodied the Benjaminite claim with the mocking assertion that, despite the name, the Benjaminites were, in fact, left-handed.

The alleged left-handedness of the Benjaminites was far more than a mere physical detail. In many cultures, including cultures in the ancient Near East, the left hand is associated with impurity or deviance.³² The right is the place of honor and sovereignty, virility, strength, goodness; the left the place of vassalage, subservience, evil, and weakness. The right side is associated “the idea of sacred power, regular and beneficent, the principle of all effective activity, the source of everything that is good, auspicious, and legitimate”; from the left comes “the ambiguous conception of the profane and the impure, something feeble and incapable which is also maleficent and dreaded.”³³ The right is masculine, the left feminine.³⁴ In many cultures, including Near Eastern cultures, the left hand may not be used for eating; it is commonly associated with matters of personal

²⁸ This story has a close parallel in the account of the angels’ visit to Lot in Sodom in Genesis 19:1–11. Like the Ephraimites in Gideon, Lot resides in Sodom as a resident foreigner, like the Ephraimites, Lot takes in strangers and offers them hospitality for the night, and like the Benjaminites, the Sodomites attempt to break down the door in order to have intercourse with the men inside. Lot, too, remonstrates with the Sodomites and offers his daughters, claiming that they are virgins. Stories about visits of country folk to the “big city” and the sexual license they find within the city’s walls were no doubt popular forms of entertainment in ancient times, offering rich opportunities for burlesque as well as for more serious exploration of the differences in morals between rural and urban settings.

²⁹ The economic reason behind the different treatment of guests in rural settings and cities appears obvious: people in rural settings had a strong incentive to encourage guests to come through by providing them with hospitality and protection during the period of the guest right; people in walled cities, on the other hand, did not have the same incentives because many of the advantages that such travelers might offer were available in the city in any event.

³⁰ Cities were places where prostitutes did business; see Joshua 2:1–34, and they probably were places where homosexuals could find companionship which would not have been available in rural society.

³¹ See Judges 3:15; 1 Chronicles 12:2.


³⁴ ibid., p. 12. For the association between the left side and women in African cultures, see Heinz A.
hygiene that discourage its use in the preparation or ingestion of food. The left hand is expressly disfavored in ancient Israelite ritual.

The claim that the Benjaminites were left-handed thus implicitly attributed impure features to them, including, very possibly, femininity and associated sexual deviance. The connection between left-handedness and deviance will be further illustrated in the story of Ehud, treated in the next section of this article.

III. The Saga of Ehud

I now turn to another story involving Benjaminites and a theme of sexual deviance: the story of Ehud and Eglon. This story is quite different from the preceding one. The tone is comedic—indeed, coarsely so—and the Benjaminite protagonist is portrayed as a hero rather than a villain. This is a riposte story, in the sense that the negative attributes claimed about Benjamin in the culture are turned around and delivered back, with interest, to an opponent.

This story recounts how Eglon, the obese king of Moab, forms an alliance with other Israelite enemies, the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and subjects some Israelite territory to vassalage for eighteen years (Judges 3:13-14). To deliver the Israelites, the Lord raises up Ehud the Benjaminite, a “left-handed” man (Judges 3:15). Ehud is sent by the Israelites to pay tribute to Eglon. He makes himself a two-edged sword “about a gomel in length,” which he fastens under his clothes on his right side (Judges 3:16). After Ehud presents the tribute, he sends on the men who had carried it and turns back towards the king. “Your majesty,” he says, “I have a secret message for you.” (Judges 3:19). Eglon thereupon dismisses all his attendants.

The scene now shifts to the roof chamber of Eglon’s summer palace, where Ehud and Eglon are meeting in private. Ehud comes up to him and says, “I have a message for you...
from God." Eglen arises from his throne, and at that moment Ehud reaches with his left hand, draws the sword from his right side, and drives it into Eglen's belly. Ehud's fat closes around the hilt of the sword, and he cannot draw it out. Ehud then makes his escape after shutting the doors of the chamber and locking them.

The king's courtiers, noting that the doors are locked, conclude that Eglen "must be relieving himself" in the cool room (Judges 3:24). After waiting until they are at a loss, they take the key and open the door, only to find their master lying dead on the floor. Ehud, meanwhile, makes it back to Israelite territory, musters the Israelites on Mount Ephraim, and descends on the Moabites, freeing Israel from tyranny for eighty years (Judges 3:26–30).

In analyzing this story, we may start with the theme of left-handedness, which also played a role in the preceding tale. Why is Ehud, an Israelite hero, portrayed as suffering from the physical defect of being left-handed? An obvious, but too facile, answer is that Ehud's defect is what makes the story work, since it is apparently only because of his defect that Ehud is allowed into Eglen's chamber without having his concealed weapon discovered. A search would probably have checked the left side of the body, where a right-handed person would keep a sword for easy reach in the event of conflict.

Although it is true that the defect makes the story work, the defect itself is prior to the story. A dysfunctional right hand in those days was almost certainly taken as a mark of other defects. In particular, Ehud's defect could be a token of improper physical hygiene and of sexual deviance. If so, the root of this story appears to be an insult story told about the Benjamite tribe, of which Ehud is the representative, to the effect that the Benjaminites are sexually deviant and unclean. Yet this underlying story has been rejected and the thrust returned, quite literally, to the Moabites.

The sexual theme is carried forward with the thinnest of disguises, except that it is Eglen, the Moabite, who is portrayed as the homosexual, and it is the Benjaminites Ehud who gains the better of him by pretending to offer a homosexual liaison. The sexual imagery is so explicit that it hardly needs amplification. For starters, the name "Eglen"—apparently a pun on "calf"—is obviously a comedic, sexualized image and, by contrasting Eglen with a bull, contains an apparent attribution of femininity and lack of virility.²²

Ehud is sent by the Israelites to make tribute to this Eglen. In preparation for his visit, Ehud is shown taking a sword with two edges (that is, a sharp sword suitable for puncturing or stabbing rather than a one-sided sword which would be more useful for slashing) and girding it "on his right thigh, under his cloak" (Judges 3:16)—where the penis might lie.²³ The sword, moreover, is of a size and shape which would raise in the mind of the audience the image of an exaggerated phallus. In analyzing this story, it is useful to imagine it being told orally and played as a broad farce. The teller would use exaggerations of the location of the weapon, observing that the thigh where Ehud's sword is placed is the "seat of male fertility"; Niditch, War in the Hebrew Bible, p. 117. In Muslim cultures today, the left hand is used for holding the genitals; see J. Chelrod, "A Contribution to the Problem of the Pre-eminence of the Right, Based upon Arabic Evidence," in Needham, Right and Left, p. 240.

²² See Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 39, for a similar interpretation. Compare the figure of the evidently homosexual Pardoner in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, where the effeminate character is implicitly contrasted with a virile stallion: as the narrator says, "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare"; Geoffrey Chaucer, The Tales of Canterbury, ed. Robert A. Pratt (Boston, 1966), p. 22, General Prologue, l. 691.

²³ Niditch recognizes the possible sexual connotations of the location of the weapon, observing that the thigh where Ehud's sword is placed is the "seat of male fertility"; Niditch, War in the Hebrew Bible, p. 117. In Muslim cultures today, the left hand is used for holding the genitals; see J. Chelrod, "A Contribution to the Problem of the Pre-eminence of the Right, Based upon Arabic Evidence," in Needham, Right and Left, p. 240.
gerated gesture to describe the crafting and placement of the sword, and one can imagine the narrator specifying the size—"a gomed in length"—in such a way that the phallic allusion could not be missed.

Ehud comes to Eglon to give tribute, and afterwards tells Eglon that he has a secret message from God for him—an obvious pretense, since Ehud has no particular religious qualifications, and in any event Ehud worships an entirely different god. By sending on the men carrying the tribute, Ehud is telling Eglon that he wants to see him in private, i.e., he is offering a homosexual liaison. Eglon obviously gets the message because he dismisses his retinue and takes Ehud upstairs to a private room. It is hardly plausible that a king would agree to such an inappropriate meeting with a vassal without his retinue present, unless the purpose of the meeting were something that the king would want to do in private.

The inappropriateness of the meeting is then emphasized by the events in the roof chamber. Rather than remaining in a subservient position before the king, as would be expected under the circumstances, Ehud comes to the throne on which Eglon sits, saying "I have a message from God for you" (Judges 3:20). Ehud, in turn, rather than remaining seated on the throne as a king would be expected to do under the circumstances, rises to meet him. Eglon sees all this as the prelude to a homosexual encounter, and his expectations appear to be fulfilled when Ehud reaches with his left hand under his clothes to draw forth the phallic object. Again, one can imagine the sexual content of the story being underscored by a performance involving exaggerated gesture and emphasis. The storyteller would have demonstrated graphically how Ehud reached between his legs with his left hand and began to remove his clothes; and how he pulled out a pointed sword, which he then proceeded to thrust into Eglon's obese belly so deep that not only the sword but also the hilt (i.e., testicles) disappeared inside and could not be removed. The homosexual theme is then completed—undoubtedly to the further delight of the audience—when Ehud makes his escape by an upper door and locks the doors behind him. Eglon's courtiers come to check on him but, finding the doors locked, conclude that he is "covering his feet" in the cool room (Judges 3:24). The "feet" are apparently used here as a euphemism for private parts, an interpretation that has led some scholars to conclude that the meaning was "moving his bowels." Equally plausibly, however, the phrase could be slang for sexual intercourse. To similar effect is the translation, based on a different vocalization, that Eglon was "pouring out his male member" in the cool room. This can be translated as "urinating," but might also have been slang for sexual activity.

In any event, the courtiers, we are led to believe, are fully aware of Eglon's predilections and know enough to leave him alone when he is closeted with another man.

---

44 The Hebrew davar, "word," also carries the meaning "thing." By davar Ehud means his sword, rather than any spoken word. But the text here may make a double pun, if in ancient Hebrew, as in other languages, the word "thing" was also used as slang to refer to genitals. In like manner, the idiom that Ehud "comes to" the king is also used for sexual entry. See Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 29.

45 The sexual connotations of Ehud's act are noted in passing by Bol in Death and Dyssymmetry. Niditch carries the analysis further, noting the possible intertwining of the political and the sexual in the language and imagery of the story: Niditch, War in the Hebrew Bible, p. 118. Alter recognizes the presence of sexual wordplays in the story and also the "hideously sexual" nature of Ehud's dagger-thrust, see Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 29. Further elaboration of the possible sexual meanings in the story is found in Brettler, "Never the Twins Shall Meet," p. 205.

46 Compare Ruth 3:47; 1 Samuel 34:3.

47 Niditch implies obliquely that there may be a sexual content to this language, asking rhetorically, "what does that curious phrase involving private parts mean?"; see War in the Hebrew Bible, p. 118.
Otherwise they would surely have found it extremely odd that he would lock himself in a room with a bringer of tribute from a subject people.

The other major humorous element to this story is scatological rather than sexual. The thrusting of the sword into Eglon’s belly would have opened up his intestines, resulting in the spilling of feces. This gives yet a different meaning to the courtiers’ remark that Eglon was in the upstairs room “covering his feet.” Again, the scatological element of the story, like the sexual, contains a reversal of charges. Ehud may have been said to have improper personal hygiene because of his left-handedness; yet it is Eglon, not Ehud, who ends up dead on the floor in the midst of his own excrement.

This text is a form of riposte story. In it, the Benjaminites admit a key element of the charges laid against them, which was too firmly entrenched in the culture to deny—that they were characterized by left-handedness. What is denied is that the left-handedness is associated with any negative trait. Rather, the sexual deviance is projected outward to the king of Moab. It is the king’s own homosexual impulses which result in his downfall, and it is the Benjaminite, Ehud, who administers poetic justice by killing him in a violent parody of an act of homosexual intercourse. By like token, it is Eglon, not Ehud, who is defiled with excrement as a result of Ehud’s actions. The text even asserts that the riposte cannot be returned: the sword by which the riposte is administered is buried in the belly of the Moabite king and cannot be withdrawn.

The left-handedness of Ehud is thereby reversed in its connotation. Far from being a mark of shame, it is now a source of power. Because he is left-handed, Ehud is able to conceal his sword and (literally) single-handedly deliver his fellow Israelites from bondage. The denigrating term is adopted as a badge of honor. The story thus contains a warning that anyone (Ephraimites included) who attributes homosexuality or other defects to the Benjaminites by virtue of their left-handedness risks experiencing the kind of retribution that a fierce, left-handed Benjaminites warrior is capable of exacting.

In addition to a sexual riposte, the story of Ehud contains a riposte, from the Benjaminites perspective, to the allegation of inhospitality which underlies the Gibeath story. Ehud is in the role of a guest when he visits Eglon in the cool room of his palace. In what appears to be an egregious violation of norms of hospitality, Ehud kills his host. This riposte story thus contains an acknowledgment that the Benjaminites sometimes act in ways which could be considered inhospitable. Yet the story clearly portrays the setting in which Ehud acts as false or inducted, such that killing the host was not only appropriate, but honorable. Ehud does not come in the role of an honored guest, but as a supplicant and vassal; he does not receive food and drink from his host, but rather must bring tribute to his host. The host is concerned with his own pleasure, not that of his guest. The story thus tells us that Ehud’s breach of his obligations as a guest is apparent rather than real—and that fellow Israelites should be grateful that they have such rough and ready warriors as the Benjaminites in their midst whose apparent lack of good manners can be handy in a crisis.

In this paper I have discussed the phenomenon of verbal feud in the culture and literature of ancient Israel. In verbal feud, individuals or groups attempted to enhance their own

48 This interpretation is well known in the commentaries. See, for example, Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 39; Soggin, Judges, p. 52.
honor by telling boastful stories about themselves, while seeking to dishonor rivals with insults. If a boast story became entrenched in the broader culture, a competing group could attempt to vitiate its force by circulating parodic or taunting stories about the boasting group. If an insult story became entrenched, the strategy would then be to protect one's own honor by means of a riposte, which accepted part of the attribution contained in an insult story but reversed the honor-value of the story by administering the insult back with interest. I have illustrated the functioning of verbal feud in ancient Israel by a detailed analysis of two texts from the Book of Judges involving the tribe of Benjamin, one an insult story and the other a riposte.

The ancient Israelite verbal feud appears to have served a social function that is an issue for all human societies: the definition and maintenance of a community in relation to other groups. Behavior filling similar functions to the ancient verbal feud is not difficult to identify. Every society, great and small, seems to have a stock of stories about its neighbors, many of them negative or denigrating. That we should discover such stories in the literature of ancient Israel is hardly surprising. A challenge for future scholarship is to identify and analyze other contexts in which a rhetoric of verbal feud appears to have influenced the development of the biblical text.