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BUT YOU ARE THE GOD OF THE LOWLY, HELPER OF THE OPPRESSED

God in the Prayer of Judith (Jdt. 9:1–14)*

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"What God is There?" (Chapters 1–7)

A Contest Between Gods (1–3)

The early chapters of the Book of Judith record the boast of "Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians … the Great King, the lord of the whole earth" (2:4–5), that he would "accomplish by [his] own hand" (2:12) the destruction and plunder of the lands of those who had refused to join in the war against [the unknown] King Arphaxad "in the great plain that is on the borders of Ragau" (1:5).

It is in the fourth chapter that we first meet the Israelites living in Bethulia who, upon hearing of the exploits of Holofernes (chief general of Nebuchadnezzar's army), were duly impressed and "greatly terrified at his approach" (4:2). They therefore "cried out to [their] God (cf. Exod. 2:23) with great fervor and humbled themselves with

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much fasting" (4:9). The reader is informed by the narrator, in a clear reference to the God of the Exodus, that "the Lord heard their prayers and had regard for their distress" (4:13; cf. Exod. 2:24–25, 37ff).

Ironically, Achior, "the leader of all the Ammonites" (55), issues a warning to Holofernes, expressed in good Deuteronomistic theology, that the history of the Israelite people shows that "their Lord and God will defend them, and [you] shall become the laughing stock of the whole world" (5:20–21; cf. Jdg. 2:11–23).

Displeased with Achior's "prophesy," Holofernes sets the terms of the contest with the question "What god is there except Nebuchadnezzar?" (6:2; cf. Deut. 32:39–40). He had thrown down the gauntlet.

The tension set up in the narrative—between Holofernes' claim that Nebuchadnezzar is to be worshiped as a god (3:8) and the narrator's assurance that Israel's God had heard the prayers of the people and "had regard for their distress" (4:13)—recalls the contest between the Yahwist prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of the Ba'al in 1 Kings 18:21–40. Both Elijah and Judith pray to the God of Israel before confronting the enemy (1 Kgs. 18:36b–38; Jdt. 9:1–14).

Judith reproaches the elders of Bethulia, accusing them of "putting the Lord Almighty to the test" (Jdt. 8:13) and asserting that God has the freedom to choose to deliver the people "if it pleases him" (8:17).

Abandoned Because of Our Sins (4–7)

The general picture presented in Part I of the book is that of a small and powerless people seemingly abandoned by their god, and facing a great and powerful army whose king was being proposed as the only god before whom there was no other.

- It is a situation similar to that of the proto-Israelites in Egypt (Exod. 1:8–14).
- It also reflects the circumstances first faced by northern Israel while under attack from Assyria in the first quarter of the eighth century BCE (2 Kgs. 17:5–6),

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and by Judah in the last quarter of the sixth century as the historical Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army entered the city of Jerusalem, destroyed its temple, and carried off its ruling class into exile in Babylon (2 Kgs. 24:10–16).

- It is also reflective of the situation faced by the Jewish people under the rule of King Antiochus IV during the Maccabean period (see 1 Macc. 1:20–40).

These first seven chapters act as a foil for the second half of the book (chapters 8–16) in which the lowly, weak, and helpless will be saved/vindicated by the God of Israel who will be victorious over the powerful military might of Nebuchadnezzar's army through "the hand of a woman." And it will be seen once again that Israel's God is "the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel" (9:14) in fidelity to the covenant commitment.

The narrator juxtaposes the concluding statement of the first part of the book ("they [the Bethulians] were in great misery" [7:32c; cf. Jdg. 2:15]) and the introduction of the heroine in the beginning of the second part ("now in those days Judith heard about these things" [8:1; cf. Jdg. 2:16]), thus signaling the role Judith is to play in the remainder of the book. As in the Book of Judges, where the phrase "and they were in great distress" (Jdg. 2:15) is immediately followed by the statement that "the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them" (v. 16), so Judith is introduced into the narrative immediately after the reference to their "great misery." Is the author suggesting that Judith is to play the role of "judge" (*shophēt*) or charismatic leader similar to the judges of old (in particular of Deborah)?

The God of Judith (Chapters 8–16)

A God Not to be Coerced (8:11–17)

In the most explicitly theological chapter of the book (chapter 8), Judith sets forth her theology in contrast to that of the leaders and

people of Bethulia. With a directness bordering on boldness, Judith speaks to Uzziah and the elders of Bethulia who had given God a time limit of five days to save them, after which they would surrender in order to save their own skins, even at the price of slavery.[1] Judith chides the people's leaders for putting God to the test (v. 12) and for trying "to bind the purposes of the Lord our God" (v. 16).[2] She says:

> You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test—but you will never know anything! You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart, nor find out what a man is thinking; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought? (v. 13b–14)

She speaks of the freedom of God to save or not to save as is God's wont. God has power to protect or destroy (see 8:15). God is radically free and is not to be threatened or cajoled.[3] God may send suffering as a test; such is not punishment (see Deut. 8:2–5, 16; Jgs. 2:22–23; Job 5:17–18; Tob. 12:14). Judith's radical monotheism[4] puts all in God's hands, for good or ill. According to Judith, the people are only to call upon God, trust God, and wait for God's deliverance if indeed it is God's good pleasure to deliver. She is confident, however, that God

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[1]Judith finds Uzziah's oath, by which he had promised to surrender the town to the enemy if God did not come to their help within five days (8:11; cf. v. 9), especially reprehensible. It is the time limit put on God rather than the idea of surrendering that provokes Judith's homily on the nature of faith in God (8:12–17).

[2]This is reminiscent of God's answer to Job out of the whirlwind (chapters 38 and 40) but, as J. C. Dancy remarks, Judith is "more explicit than Job in giving up the desire for detailed knowledge of God's plan and in relying instead on God's goodness" (J. C. Dancy, "Judith," in John Dancy, Wesley J. Fuerst, & R. J. Hammer, *The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha*, Cambridge Bible Commentary [Cambridge: University Press, 1972], 99).

[3]There is a clear reference here to the LXX of Num. 23:19.

[4]I first heard the phrase "radical monotheism" from Prof. James A. Sanders (Union Theological Seminary, New York) in the summer of 1967 in an explanation of Amos 3:6b: "Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?" (RSV).

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will work deliverance through her because the people have not fallen into the same sin as their ancestors, namely the worship of gods made with hands; because of this, they have reason to hope (8:20). But Judith's God will also hold them responsible for the desecration of the trust in God (8:21–23). Judith thus envisions a liberation to rank with the Exodus, a liberation that "will go down from generation to generation among the descendants" (8:32) of Israel.[5]

A God Who Scourges Those Who are Close (8:18–27)

Rather than tempt God by surrendering, Judith urges the Bethulians to give thanks to God, who is testing them as their ancestors were tested (cf. Gen. 22; 29). She refers to the testing of Abraham (Gen. 22), Isaac,[6] and Jacob (Gen. 29). She understands their situation not as punishment (since they did not do the thing that merits punishment, viz., idol worship or apostasy) but as discipline, for "the Lord scourges those who are close to him in order to admonish them" (Jdt. 8:27; see Prov. 3:12).

Judith's God is a God who educates through suffering, a God who chastises in order to admonish or test. Suffering is understood as pedagogy, as educative. In contrast to the wavering faith of the people, Judith exudes confidence; she is confident that "the Lord will deliver Israel by [her] hand" (8:33b).

God in the Prayer of Judith (9:1–14)

It is in her prayer, which contains the greatest concentration and variety of epithets for God, that we have access to her deepest

[5]See Irene Nowell, "Judith," in Dianne Bergant & Robert Karris, eds., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 851.

[6]The reference here is not clear. Cary Moore writes that "Isaac's 'testing' may have been his silent acquiescence to Abraham's intention to offer him as a human sacrifice (Gen. 22:9–15). Then again, as one reads the story of Isaac (Gen. 21–28), one might argue that Isaac's entire life was just one big test" (*Judith*, AB [Garden City: Doubleday, 1985], 183).

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understanding of God. Judith, in the privacy of her rooftop tent (see 8:6, 36), "prostrated herself … [and] cried out to the Lord with a loud voice" (9:1). Judith also resorts to prayers of petition at several points in the narrative. Aside from her long prayer of petition in 9:2–14, she prays at each step in the process leading to Holofernes' decapitation (12:8; 13:4–5, 7) in order to petition God's help in what she is about to do. After her glorious victory over the enemy, she offers praise to God in thanksgiving for help given (13:14). Finally, her great Song of Victory (16:1b–17) brings the entire narrative to its conclusion. This sequence of lament/petition and praise punctuating the narrative at strategic points underlines a basic theological conviction of the book: that persistent prayer and unwavering fidelity to God's law is essential for victory.[7]

The prayer of Judith is one among a sizeable number of prayers from the period of early Judaism. Coming together informally or within more structured settings,[8] Jews recited hymns and prayers that became fixed only later in this period.[9] The "institution of fixed communal prayer" was a radical innovation of the Second Temple period, as J. Heinemann has shown. "Fixed prayer, in and of itself constituting the entirety of the divine service, was a startling innovation in the ancient world, which both Christianity and Islam inherited from Judaism."[10]

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[7]Norman Johnson, *Prayer in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series II (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1948), 7.

[8]Such as at the *h'burah* meals, the Synagogue, the *Bet Midrash*, and, in particular, the Temple. See James Charlesworth, "A Prolegomenon to a New Study of the Jewish Background of the Hymns and Prayers of the New Testament," in Geza Vermes & Jacob Neusner, eds., *Essays in Honor of Yigael Yadin* (Allanheld: Totwa, 1983), 265.

[9]Charlesworth, "A Prolegomenon to a New Study of the Jewish Background of the Hymns and Prayers of the New Testament," 265.

[10]Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns*, Studia Judaica, Band IX (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 14–15.

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Very little knowledge about Jewish hymns, odes, and prayers that were composed during the period of early Judaism was available until the latter part of the 19th century, when only one Jewish hymnbook, the *Psalms of Solomon*, had as yet been recovered.[11] Several hymnbooks, however, have been either recognized or discovered since that time, such as the Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers (in the *Apostolic Constitutions*)[12] and the *Hodayoth* (1QH).[13]

God of My Ancestor

Judith's prayer places her in continuity with tradition as she calls upon God as the God of her ancestor Simeon, "into whose hand you put a sword to take revenge" (9:2a). With this unique designation for God, Judith explicitly evokes the story of Simeon's avenging of the rape of his sister Dinah by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, in Genesis 34:1–31 (Jdt. 9:2–4). Her poetic summary of the biblical episode (vv. 2–4) forms part of the argument that she advances in her prayer.

The Book of Genesis condemns both Simeon and Levi for their trickery against the subsequent slaughter of the Shechemites (Gen. 34:20; cf. 49:5–7). But Judith rehabilitates Simeon in her reappropriation of the Genesis narrative as a metaphor of the present predicament of her people. Her equation of the rape of Dinah with the imminent siege of Bethulia is reinforced by the assonance between the name of the town and the Hebrew word for "virgin," *bethula*. Two other passages dealing with rape are also evoked by Judith's use of the phrase "it shall not be done" (9:2) from Genesis 34:7. The first comes

[11]James Charlesworth, "Jewish Hymns, Odes, and Prayers (ca 167 BCE to 135 CE)," in George W. E. Nickelsburg & Robert A. Kraft, eds., *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 411.

[12]David Fiensy, "Prayers, Hellenistic Synagogal," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 5, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

[13]Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus* Vol. 3, ed. & rev. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, & Martin Goodman (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 787.

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at the end of the story of the unnamed concubine from Bethlehem (Jdg. 19:30). In the second instance, the phrase is spoken by Tamar, daughter of David, to her half-brother Amnon, who has managed to trap her in his bedroom through deception (2 Sam. 13:12).

The repetition of the phrase "it shall not be done" links these rape cases together and interprets them, against the background of the commandments of YHWH, as something that jeopardizes the covenant relationship between God and people.

Defender of Widows

Although the phrase "defender of widows" does not appear in Judith's prayer to describe the deity, the Book of Judith certainly intends to present her as making a special appeal to God under this ancient title: "O God, my God, hear me also—a widow" (9:4; see also 9:9; LXX Ps. 42:4). This appeal is consonant with the Deuteronomic characterization of God as one "who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing" (Deut. 10:18; see also Ps. 68:6 [:5 NRSV]; 146:9; Sir. 35:17).

Divine Warrior (9:7)

Judith evokes the archaic imagery of the Divine Warrior in both her prayer and Victory Song. In a statement reflecting the LXX of Exodus 15:3, she exclaims the following:

> They do not know
> that you are the Lord who crushes wars;
> the Lord is *your* name. (Jdt. 9:7; cf. 16:2; emphasis mine)

The third person *kyrios onoma auto* ("the Lord is his name") of the LXX has been changed to second person in line with the direct address characteristic of the entire prayer.

God of the Lowly (9:11)

Beginning with a chiastically arranged affirmation that God's "strength does not depend on numbers, nor [God's] might on the powerful" (see 1 Sam. 17:45–47; 2 Chr. 16:8–9; Jdg. 7:2), Judith

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constructs a litany of ten divine titles that are divided into two by the words *nai*, *nai* (lit. "yes, yes").[14]

> But you are the God of the lowly,
> helper of the oppressed,
> upholder of the weak,
> protector of the forsaken,
> savior of those without hope.
> Please, please, God of my ancestor,
> God of the heritage of Israel,
> Lord of heaven and earth,
> Creator of the waters,
> King of all your creation,
> hear my prayer! (9:11–12)

The first group of five titles speaks variously of the God of the lowly as the one who helps, upholds, protects, and saves the oppressed. The words helper, protector, and savior (*boethos*, *skepastes*, and *soter*) also appear in the same order in LXX Exodus 15:2, demonstrating just how significant the influence of the LXX form of the Exodus passage was for the Book of Judith.

Tapeinoun, which is the frequent LXX translation for *'anah* in the Hebrew Bible, is the very first word we find in the Bible that is used to express oppression (see Gen. 15:13–14). Appropriately enough, *'anah*/*tapeinoun* is also the first word used in the Book of Exodus to describe the oppression suffered by the proto-Israelites, the descendants of Abraham in Exodus 1:11–12.

This exodus experience of oppression and liberation takes on a paradigmatic function in the tradition of Israel, and becomes operative in the ancient collection of laws in Exodus 20:22–23:33 known as the Book of the Covenant, in particular Exodus 22:21–24 (*NRSV* adapted); see also Ps. 94:5–8 (4–7 *NRSV*).[15]

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[14]Toni Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 70 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 91.

[15]Thomas Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World: The Bible, the Reformation and Liberation Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 16.

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The central image of God in Judith—the God of the lowly—draws its inspiration from this tradition. Hanks calls attention to three words for oppression in this brief passage from Exodus: *yanah*, *lahats*, and *'anah* (twice). "The relationship between poverty and oppression is made clear by the three common classes of poor and weak persons: immigrants, widows and orphans."[16]

The theme of God's strength in weakness is a motif from the holy war tradition. We find it, for example, in the story of Gideon (Jdg. 7:2) and also in the story of David and Goliath, a story that contains significant parallels with the story of Judith and Holofernes (1 Sam. 17:43–47). A third example from 2 Chronicles provides an apt commentary on the situation described in the Book of Judith (2 Chr. 16:8–9).

King of All Your Creation (9:12)

The second group of petitions directed to God as "God of my ancestor" and "God of the heritage of Israel" moves into creation language, as Judith requests God to hear her prayer as Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, and King of all creation. This creation language is picked up again in the second part of the victory hymn (16:14).

> Let all your creatures serve you,
> for you spoke,
> and they were made.
> You sent forth your spirit,
> and it formed them;
> there is none that can resist your voice.

This litany brings together the images of God as Savior and as Creator, a theological innovation usually accredited to the great theologian of the Exile, Deutero-Isaiah.[17]

[16]Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World*, 16.

[17]See Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970).

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God of All Power and Might (9:14)

Judith concludes her prayer with a reference to God as "the God of all power and might" who alone protects the people of Israel (9:14). This is one of the important ethical doctrines of the First Testament, but it is definitely not unique when compared with conceptions in neighboring cultures. The only real difference is that YHWH is considered to be the only protector of Israel.

Conclusion

Exemplifying the weak and the lowly in her own person, the widow Judith sets out for the camp of the enemy with absolutely no protection, save that of her faith in the God whom the tradition remembers as the one "who executes justice for the orphan and the widow" (Deut. 10:18). The God of Judith is manifest not in military might and power but in the faith and piety of a young (and seemingly) vulnerable widow through whose hand Holofernes and his entire army is effectively routed.

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