

Week 60, Lecture 186.¹ Judith's Prayer, Chapter 9

Outline in NABRE ² [For reference -- no need to include this in the lecture]

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| I. | Assyrian Threat (1:1–3:10) | chapters 1-3 |
| II. | Siege of Bethulia (4:1–7:32) | chapters 4-7 |
| III. | Judith, Instrument of the Lord (8:1–10:10) | chapters 8-9 |
| IV. | Judith Goes Out to War (10:11–13:20) | chapters 10-13 |
| V. | Victory and Thanksgiving (14:1–16:25) | chapters 14-16 |

Context. In chapter 8 we read Judith's speech to the city elders.

Judith rebuked them for their lack of faith. She accused them of testing God.

Uzziah acknowledged that she was correct. However, he was bound by an oath he could not break.

He recommended that this holy woman pray for rain.

At this point Judith decided she needed to take matters into her own hands.

She told the leaders they must open the city gates when she was ready and let her depart.

She promised them God will win victory through her. Furthermore, they were not to ask any questions. They agreed.

Chapter 9, Judith's Prayer. 9:1 Then Judith fell upon her face, and put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing; and at the very time when that evening's incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said,

Time of Incense Offering. Judith joins her prayer with the prayers & sacrifices being offered in the Temple. She has uncovered her sackcloth -- a penitential gesture. Nobody else is there. She wants to be sure God sees it!

A Loud Prayer. She cries out with a loud voice: this is a prayer of desperation.

Story from Dr. Elizabeth Kübler Ross -- a mother whose daughter was diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer.

"It is better that she should scream in your office."

Judith's prayer to God is not a quiet one.

9:2-4, Judith Remembers Simeon. ² "O Lord God of my father Simeon, to whom you gave a sword to take revenge on the strangers who had loosed the girdle of a virgin to defile her, and uncovered her thigh to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her; for you have said, 'It shall not be done' -- yet they did it. ³ So you gave up their rulers to be slain, and their bed, which was ashamed of the deceit they had practiced, to be stained with blood, and you did strike down slaves along with princes, and princes on their thrones; ⁴ and you gave their wives for a prey and their daughters to captivity, and all their booty to be divided among your beloved sons, who were zealous for thee, and abhorred the pollution of their blood, and called on you for help -- O God, my God, hear me also, a widow.

My Father Simeon. The reference is to the son of Jacob **not** mentioned in her genealogy in chapter 8. Specifically the reference is to the story of the "Rape of Dinah" in Genesis 34.

Jacob's daughter Dinah went out to visit the local women. Shechem, a Hivite, raped her.

According to the story, he actually had tender feelings for her, and asked his father Hamor to get her as his bride.

Dinah's brothers are understandably angry, but Hamor tries to pacify them.

He promises that he will give whatever bride-price they ask. He says they can be good neighbors.

¹ Lectures numbered consecutively. This is this week's 1st lecture, but its number reflects its place in the **total** sequence.

² NABRE, Introduction to Judith. This introduction has been approved by the USCCB, and ultimately by Rome. It is thus part of the hierarchical magisterium of the Church.

“Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves” Gen 34:9

They say that they cannot give their sister to people who are uncircumcised.

So Hamor convinced all the men of his village to be circumcised.

On the third day after that, while the men were still recovering, **Simeon** and Levi, enter the town kill them all.

They grabbed their sister, and took her back home.

Jacob complains to his sons -- he and his family are a tiny minority. Now they will be hated by all.

Simeon and Levi reply “Should he treat our sister as a harlot?”

Praise for God’s Past Actions. ⁵ "For you have done these things and those that went before and those that followed; you have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. Yes, the things you did intend came to pass, ⁶ and the things you willed presented themselves and said, ‘Lo, we are here’; for all your ways are prepared in advance, and your judgment is with foreknowledge.

You have done these things. Judith sees the action of **God** in the slaughter perpetrated by Simeon & Levi.

The author of the book of Judith displays none of the ambivalence found in Genesis.

Judith does not regard the slaughter of all the males as over-reaction.

She remembers also that all their wives and daughters were enslaved. All of their property was confiscated.³

Zeal. She is proud of the zealous action of her ancestor Simeon and his brother Levi.

Their zeal has kept their family’s blood from becoming “polluted.”

When the bible speaks of “zeal” it is not thinking of a “spiritual” virtue. Concrete killing is usually involved.

See for example the story of the zeal of Phineas, grandson of Aaron (Num 25:6-8).

Judith will display some of that zeal in this story.

9:7-10, Prayer for Help Now. ⁷ "Behold now, the Assyrians are increased in their might; they are exalted, with their horses and riders; they glory in the strength of their foot soldiers; they trust in **shield and spear, in bow and sling**, and know not that you are the Lord who crush wars; the Lord is your name. ⁸ Break their strength by your might, and bring down their power in your anger; for they intend to defile your **sanctuary**, and to pollute the **tabernacle** where your glorious **name** rests, and to cast down the horn of your altar with the sword. ⁹ Behold their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads; give to me, a widow, the strength to do what I plan. ¹⁰ By the **deceit of my lips** strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman.

Judith vs. the Assyrians has echoes of David and Goliath. They have all the good weapons; she has God on her side.

Concern for the Jerusalem Temple. Judith “reminds” God that this is not just about her little village.

In case God has not noticed, the Assyrians have designs on the sanctuary in Jerusalem.

She reminds God that this is the place his **name** rests. Destruction of the Temple would be a direct insult to God.

By the **Deceit of My Lips.** This is a preview of one of her main weapons.

She is asking for God’s help to make her a convincing liar. She will ask again in her conclusion (v. 13).

Commenting on another lie -- the story where Jacob stole the blessing by telling Isaac, “I am Esau, your firstborn”

St. Augustine said, *Non est mendacium, sed mysterium* “It’s not a lie; it’s a mystery!”

It might very well be a mystery -- it’s also a damned lie!

This **raises** the question:⁴ **does God use evil to achieve his purposes?**

³ Gen 34:27-29.

⁴ It certainly does **not** “**beg** the question!” In recent years it has become fashionable to use this phrase as a synonym for “raise the question.”. To “beg” a question is to **assume what needs to be proved**. The juror who says “I know he is guilty because he is a criminal” is **begging** the question. To **beg** questions is always bad. To **raise** questions is usually good.

9:11-14, Conclusion of Judith's Prayer. ¹¹ "For your power depends not upon numbers, nor your might upon men of strength; for you are God of the **lowly**, helper of the **oppressed**, upholder of the **weak**, protector of the **forlorn**, savior of those **without hope**. ¹² Hear, O hear me, God of my father, God of the inheritance of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! ¹³ Make **my deceitful words** to be their wound and stripe, for they have planned cruel things against your covenant, and against your consecrated house, and against the top of Zion, and against the house possessed by your children. ¹⁴ And cause your whole nation and every tribe to know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!"

Judith's God is for the "little people."

I once heard a rabbi describe Jews as "people who earn like Episcopalians, but vote like Puerto Ricans."

This is because of their belief in a biblical God who has special concern for the poor.

I think these ideas are especially relevant in times when there are crises over refugees and immigrants.

Post-Lecture Note. One of the students in class used the phrase I was searching for when she reminded me, "One does not have to be a Marxist to have a **Preferential Option for the Poor**."

Week 60, Lecture 187. Journey to the Assyrian Camp, Chapter 10.

Context. In chapter 8 Judith has told the city leaders that she was going to act.

In chapter 9 she prayed to God for help. Now she begins to carry out the actions she has promised.

IV. Judith Goes Out to War, Judith 10-13⁵

10:1-5 Judith's Preparations. **10:1** When Judith had ceased crying out to the God of Israel, and had ended all these words, ² she rose from where she lay prostrate and called her maid and went down into the house where she lived on sabbaths and on her feast days; ³ and she removed the sackcloth which she had been wearing, and took off her widow's garments, and **bathed** her body with water, and anointed herself with precious **ointment**, and combed her hair and put on a **tiara**, and arrayed herself in her **festive attire**, which she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. ⁴ And she put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets and bracelets and rings, and her earrings and all her ornaments, and made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all men who might see her. ⁵ And she gave her maid a bottle of **wine** and a flask of **oil**, and filled a bag with parched **grain** and a **cake of dried fruit** and fine **bread**; and she wrapped up all her vessels and gave them to her to carry.

Remarks on vv. 1-5.

After taking off her penitential garb, she **bathes!** Even though water is rationed, and people are dying of thirst!

For Judith, making a good first impression is more important than slaking thirst.

At this point, many people probably would have been glad to drink the bath water!

Whether the bath is **historically** plausible or not, it creates **dramatic** tension.

She puts on cosmetics, jewelry, and her **glad rags**.

I stole "festive attire" from the NAB / NABRE. RSV had "gayest attire" -- a dated phrase

The Greek says literally "her garments of joy." I think "**glad rags**" nails it -- but is probably too informal

The point is: **She is dressed to kill!**

Judith's Food and Drink

She takes a supply of food with her. She will not be defiled by pagan food.

⁵ The Major Sections designated by Roman numerals are adapted from the NABRE.

This is reminiscent of the concerns of Daniel and his companions in Daniel 1.
Those who studied Esther will remember that eating pagan food **never** came up even once.
The Judaism espoused by Judith is **much more observant** than that espoused by Esther.
Yet Esther made the Jewish canon, and Judith did not!

10:6-8. Judith & the City Elders. ⁶ Then they went out to the city gate of Bethulia, and found Uzziah standing there with the elders of the city, Chabris and Charmis. ⁷ When they saw her, and noted how **her face** was altered and her clothing changed, they greatly admired her beauty, and said to her, ⁸ "May the God of our fathers grant you favor and fulfill your plans, that the people of Israel may glory and Jerusalem may be exalted." And **she worshipped God**.

The Elders Are Impressed!

Judith's beauty is astonishing. Perhaps they had forgotten how beautiful she had been before she was widowed. Note that **her face** comes in for special mention. More on that later.
Precisely why "**she worshipped God**" at this point is not clear.

10:9-10, Judith Departs. ⁹ Then she said to them, "Order the gate of the city to be opened for me, and I will go out and accomplish the things about which you spoke with me." So they ordered the young men to open the gate for her, as she had said. ¹⁰ When they had done this, Judith went out, she and her maid with her; and the men of the city watched her until she had gone down the mountain and passed through the valley and they could no longer see her. (no comments necessary.)

10:11-23, Assyrians Take Judith Captive. ¹¹ The women went straight on through the valley; and an Assyrian patrol met her ¹² and took her into custody, and asked her, "To what people do you belong, and where are you coming from, and where are you going?" She replied, "I am a daughter of the **Hebrews**, but **I am fleeing from them**, for they are about to be **handed over to you** to be devoured. ¹³ I am on my way to the presence of Holofernes the commander of your army, to give him **a true report**; and **I will show him a way** by which he can go and capture all the hill country without losing one of his men, captured or slain."

Judith has prayed for God's help to be a good liar.

Here she tells 4 lies:

- 1) she is fleeing from the **Hebrews** (I would have expected "Israelites")
- 2) they are going to be **handed over** to the Assyrians
- 3) she will give a **true report** to Holofernes
- 4) she will **show him a way** by which he will conquer with no losses

They believe all of her lies. It looks like God is answering her prayer!

10:14-19, Judith's Beauty: Uproar in the Enemy Camp. ¹⁴ When the men heard her words, and observed **her face** -- she was in their eyes marvelously beautiful -- they said to her, ¹⁵ "You have saved your life by hurrying down to the presence of **our lord**. Go at once to his tent; some of us will escort you and hand you over to him. ¹⁶ And when you stand before him, do not be afraid in your heart, but tell him just what you have said, and he will treat you well." ¹⁷ They chose from their number a hundred men to accompany her and her maid, and they brought them to the tent of Holofernes. ¹⁸ There was **great confusion** in the whole camp, for her arrival was reported from tent to tent, and they came and stood around her as she waited outside the tent of Holofernes while they told him about her. ¹⁹ And they marveled at her beauty, and admired the Israelites, judging them by her, and every one said to his neighbor, "Who can despise these people, who have women like this among them? Surely not a man of them had better be left alive, for if we let them go they will **be able to ensnare the whole world!**"

Our Lord. The Greek word is *kyrios*. The Assyrians are referring to Holofernes. The Greek word is like the Spanish *Señor* or the German *Herr*. It can refer to God or to a human master. The ambiguity of this word will be useful to Judith later as she tells more lies.

Her Face astonishes them -- as it had the city elders -- more on this shortly.

Her arrival causes **great confusion**.

The Greek *sundromē* means literally “running together.” (confusion = “flowing together”)

KJV Apocrypha “concourse” is very literal. RSV, NRSV “great excitement.”

Some paraphrase the idea. “a crowd gathered” (NAB NABRE)

I think the NJB and the CEB get the sense

A crowd began forming around her (NJB)

The soldiers . . . turned out in droves (CEB)

Able to Ensnare the Whole World!

Ironically, the Assyrians immediately recognize the “danger” in such beauty.

But they are like moths drawn to a candle, helpless to resist.

10:20-23, Judith Meets Holofernes. ²⁰ Then Holofernes' companions and all his servants came out and led her into the tent. ²¹ Holofernes was resting on his bed, under a canopy which was woven with purple and gold and emeralds and precious stones. ²² When they told him of her he came forward to the front of the tent, with silver lamps carried before him. ²³ And when Judith came into the presence of Holofernes and his servants, they all marveled at the beauty of **her face**; and she prostrated herself and made obeisance to him, and his slaves raised her up.

Her Face

The phrase occurs only 15 times in the entire Bible, **all** of them in the OT, and 5 of the 15 are in Judith.

Sometimes the expression is “**neutral**.”

A woman can fall on “her face” (= prostrate herself) to show reverence / respect

Ruth to Boaz (Ruth 2:10);

To David: Abigail (1 Sam 25:23, 41); The wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:4); Bathsheba (1 Kgs 1:31)

Also, Judith to God, as she began to pray (Judith, 9:1)

Other references have **negative** connotations

2 references are to harlotry (Hosea 2:2 and Gen 38:15, the story of Tamar -- who seduces Judah)

Sirach 25:17 refers to a “wicked wife” who darkens “her face.”

Num 12:14 refers to God’s rebuke of Miriam as if her own father had spit in “her face.”

Lam 1:8 states that sinful, filthy Jerusalem turned “her face” away (from everyone? from God?)

The 5 occurrences in Judith are the **only times** that the beauty of a woman’s face is **regarded positively**.

Spoiler alert!

In chapter 13 Judith will in effect claim, “I got him with my face!”