Was Judith an *Esheth Chayil*?

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INTRODUCTION

How do you deal with a woman who embodies the traditional representation of Israel [and at the same time] her independence and sexuality subvert the metaphoric connection between character and [the] andocentrically [male-dominated world which] determined [and, in orthodoxy, continues to determine] community? (Craven 2003: 203)

In other words, how do you deal with a woman who tells men to “stuff” it?

BACKGROUND

The Book of Judith, a deuterocanonical book, tells of a beautiful widow, Judith, who saves her town Bethulia/Betilua (located in Samaritan territory) from the invading Seleucid Greeks (Moore 1985: 69). The current consensus is that the story was originally written in Hebrew. Carey A. Moore offers strong linguistic grounds. Numerous even egregious anomalies are obvious mistranslations of a missing Hebrew original. The LXX version of Judith gives every indication of being a translation of a Hebrew text... Further evidence...is to be found in the LXX’s quite literal rendering of Hebrew idioms, such as “all flesh” (2:3), [and] the many idioms involving the word “face” (2:7, 19, 25, 3:2, 9). (Moore 1985: 66)

Frank Zimmermann (1938) also argues effectively for the Hebrew origin of The Book of Judith. Like Moore, he cites the frequency of mistranslations in the Greek texts from what had to be Hebrew words and phrases (1957: 239). He strengthens his claims by identifying parallel mistranslations in The Story of Susannah’s Greek translations—in reverse. Another series of supports substantiating his assertion regarding Judith’s Hebrew origin can be found in his review of Yehoshua M. Grintz’s *Sefer Yehudit* (The Book of Judith). Zimmermann compliments Grintz:

He provides a good retroverted text/translation, what its Hebrew original may have been like in the Persian period. (Zimmerman 1958: 266)

He cannot, however, resist pointing out—appropriately—a number of mistakes in Grintz’s Hebrew syntax and style (1958: 265).

Associated with Chanukah, Judith appears to have been written during the Second Temple period, probably at the same time as the Maccabee uprising, Most likely either toward the end of the reign of
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John Hyrcanus I (135-104 BC or at the beginning of the reign of Alexander Janneus (103-78 BC). (Moore 1985: 67)

Based on the sound changes to £, kh and gh, Richard Steiner (2005) concurs with the majority opinion. The Book of Judith is Hasmonean. Grintz (1957) argues for dating Judith in the Persian period. As to the author’s identity James Charlesworth (1974: 454), James Duncan (1894: 430), Philip Ensler (2002: 107) and E.L. Hicks (1885: note 1), Samuel Lachs (1984: 298) and Robert Pfeiffer (1949: 301) credit a clever Palestinian Pharisee with writing this most engaging narrative, dating it around the late Hasmonean period, the last third of the second century BCE.

The Hagiographa was canonized in either the first or second century BCE (Moore 1985: 62). Perhaps because only Greek, Arabic, Syriac, and other non-Hebrew translations existed, unlike The Book of Daniel, The Book of Judith was excluded by the then Jewish mainstream from the Hebrew canon. Could there be other reasons?

THE STORY

Judith is the archetype of the unconventional, beautiful, brainy woman for whom militarism, faulty theology, foolish vows, apostasy, terrorism, persecution, widowhood, sex, murder and even death hold no fear. Nothing deters Judith. God is on the side of this courageous femme fatale who, unflinching, had accomplished Israel’s deliverance through prayer, slashing sword and inspiring word. The spineless leaders of Bethulia—icons of male ineptitude—neither help nor hinder Judith. (Toni Craven 2003: 203-204)

Why did the novelist describe the Bethulia’s men as so useless? Are we to think they are so lacking in hope? Grasping at straws? Bowing to what they see as the inevitable? Perhaps setting the stage for their personal survivals at the expense of their constituents and the rest of the Jewish people? You could say they had good reasons. Judith 7:19-22 details their situation (Moore 1985). The entire Assyrian army surrounds them. The town cisterns are nearly dry. Bethulia’s men demand that the town’s elders hand it over to Holofernes. What was their rationale?

For although we shall become slaves, our lives will be spared; and we shall not witness with our own eyes the death of our little ones or our wives and children. (Moore 1985: 7:27)

Amy-Jill Levine (1992: 20-21) notes that all the men are inept (the townsmen and Holofernes), weaklings (Uzziah), cowards, and bad theologians (leaders and townsmen), making the Deity “the only fit male companion for Judith.” Immobilized in the concrete of sexist Israelite society the townswomen are powerless as well, but not because they are cowards:

The women of Bethulia are weak from thirst, robbed of their voice by their husbands (4:12) and controlled by the town leaders (7:32). Even Judith’s maid lacks her freedom . (Levine 1992:21-22)

When Judith the widow hears the willingness of the townsmen to surrender to Holofernes within five days, “She sent a maid…to summon Uzziah, Chabris and Charmis, the elders of her town (8:10).” She laid before them a series of alternatives:

For if we are captured, then all Judea will be exposed,
and our sanctuary will be looted; .. The slaughter of our brothers, the captivity of the land, the desolation of our heritage—all this he will bring upon our heads .. let us set an example for our countrymen. (Moore 1985: 8:21-24)

To save her city, her religious center Jerusalem, and her people—in other words all the Jews in the Homeland—Judith has no compunction. She feels no guilt, harbors no second thoughts, experience no qualms. She lies. She tells the town elders:

I will indicate a way by which... he [Holofernes] can go and conquer all the hill country without risking life or limb of his men. (Moore 1985: 10:13)

Familiar with and no doubt impressed with reports of widow Judith’s piety and wealth, Holofernes is astonished at her beauty. Dazzled, he willingly suspends judgment as she explains her motivations to betray her townspeople. Her outrage at their abject willingness to violate religious laws—like *kashruth*—is apparently convincing.

Before she presents her plan—how none of his soldiers will be at risk—Judith requests permission for herself and for her maid to leave his encampment every night for three nights to bathe and to pray (12:7-9). On the fourth day, Holofernes invites Judith to a feast—just the two of them.

Accustomed to easy access to the Assyrian women in Nebuchadnezzar’s palace, Holofernes must have seen Judith’s pious actions as exquisite foreplay. He was more than ready to have sex with her that night. He rationalizes:

For we will be disgraced if we let such a woman go without having her, because if we do not make [rape?] her, she will laugh at us. (Moore 1985: 13:12)

One way or the other Holofernes would force her to give him access to her body and to her townspeople. What a delightful way to “fight” a war! Privileged habits of thought, actions, and expectations undo us all. Holofernes is in for a fall.

Judith’s response to his invitation is a verbal double-edge sword:

Who am I… that I should refuse my lord? I will do whatever he desires right away, and it will be something to boast of until my dying day (my italics). (Moore 1985: 13:14)

Delighted with Judith’s apparent acquiescence Holofernes drank more than usual, perhaps in the belief that his performance would be enhanced. In any case, he became dead drunk (13:2). Left alone, Judith took up Holofernes’ sword and chopped off his head in two strokes. She then gave his head to her maid waiting just outside the tent to put in her food sack. The two women then left the camp, purportedly to bathe and pray, as was their custom (13:6, 8-10).

Upon returning to Bethulia, Judith, like Deborah before her, took charge of the battle to come (14:1-5). The Greeks were defeated and according to the Epilogue, peace remained in Israel during Judith’s long life (105 years) and long after as well.

**ESHETH CHAYIL - “A WOMAN OF VALOR?”**

Part of the so-called Wisdom literature and applying linguistic analyses, *Esheth Chayil*’s Aleph to Tav acrostic structure was most likely composed in its present form during the Achaemenid era, around 550–330 BCE, in more than enough time to be added to the end of Proverbs in the Tanakh (Brenner 1993:11). An Alphabetic Ode or “Golden ABC (Toy 1977: 52),” it is the only segment of Proverbs to employ the Hebrew alphabet,
the beginner’s key to literacy. There are a number of problems with this segment. Two of the most egregious are the quality of the text and its contents.

The Book of Judith is a well-written narrative, beautifully and excitingly paced, and contains multiple layers of meaning and action. Esheth Chayil is, at best, mediocre. Commenting on the difficulties of the alphabetical format (Yehuda haLevi worked that format very well), Crawford H. Toy (1899: 542) recognizes one positive aspect: its mnemonic usefulness: “[It] is often rhetorically bad, inducing unnatural diction in the order of couplets (Toy 1899).” He also points out an obvious gaffe: “Nothing is said of [her] intellectual interests or pursuits (1899: 542).”

David Bernat comes from a structural perspective. He identifies Esheth Chayil’s as a فﻑصﺹوﻭ/wa´f, “an Arabic word meaning ‘description,’ … a list or catalogue… of physical traits (Bernat 2004:28, 33), in many respects analogous to the Song of Songs/ שיר ה‎ש‎רioms.

William Gesenius (1954: 275) defines valor, חיל which is grammatically masculine in both singular and plural as “strength, power, might (especially warlike).” He refers to several sections in the Hebrew Bible where the phrase ‘osóh cháyil/חיל can mean “to acquire wealth” and “to shew oneself strong, to display valor.” leader of the army,”soldiers,”/ח‎י‎ל/ in the day of thy warfare.” His sources range from Genesis to Deuteronomy, from Psalms to Job, even to Sanhedrin and Kituboth (an honest man).” חilians semantic field contains referents to war and to attributes associated with warriors (male).


Based on the above, coupling “woman” with “warrior” is an oxymoron. After all, Talmudic prescriptions designate women as qinyan, moveable property, albeit belonging to a living domesticated category—like a chicken. The first place we see Esheth Chayil translated as “a virtuous woman” is in Ruth 3:11, Boaz’s response to Ruth’s story (“a kind woman” is more accurate). Christine Roy Yoder’s (2003) rendering of Esheth Chayil as “A Woman of Substance” is probably much closer to the true intention of text, one who brings with her the wealth her owner craves. My translation of the title is “A Valuable Woman.”

א begins with “A valuable woman. Who can find one? Her price is beyond pearls.” The author must be referring to the Talmudists’ transformation of girls and women from people to qinyan, moveable property, like a chicken or a two-wheeled cart. Per the tractates they composed and compiled in Seder Nashim, The Management of Women, under Talmudic law women are acquired, e.g. owned.

The twenty-one remaining letters are a hotchpotch of characteristics, awkwardly fitting a particular letter.

ב and ג refer to her owner’s complete dependency on her. She will take care of him. He will be able to sit with the other rich men at the gates (playing backgammon? poker?). ה and ח both refer to her purported willingness to work for him day and night,
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never sleeping. ָ, ֹ, ַ, ָ, ֶ, ָ, ַ, ֳ, ֵ, ֶ, ָ refer to the many jobs she must accomplish. She gives to the poor. She cares for everyone—children, servants—in his household—except herself.

is fascinating. In the first segment, the author states he does not care if she is unattractive and charmless. His obvious concern is with his comfort. The second segment is also a bit odd. He threatens her with the Deity’s retribution if she does not accede to his demands, that of becoming his perfect woman. Does the author have a direct line to the Deity who will accede to the author demands?

is confusing. The first segment: “Tnuh lah me prei yadehah/Give her from the fruits of her hands.” Was the writer grudging a woman her earnings? Was he living in a world where women and girls are already qinyan, men’s property? Was he referring to the Seder Nashim requirement compelling a woman to hand over her earnings to her owner as long as he maintains her? As an Esheth Chayil she is maintaining him.

The second segment of is also a bit odd: Ve haleluhah basha’arim ma’asehah. “Let her works praise her at the gates.” A more accurate translation is “Acclaim her and her accomplishments publically.” A less awkward Hebrew version, which also matches this English variant, is Basha’arim haleluhah ve ma’asehah.

What a woman! A paragon! So intelligent! So capable! So politically savvy! What is she doing at home?

She and not her owner should be “sitting at the gates.” She and not the slothful man who owns her is more than likely better qualified to create the laws, hear the disputes, judge them well—just as her Biblical ancestors—Devorah, Huldah and others—did.

DISCUSSION

Once again, the rib is pulled out of Adam’s side (Genesis III: 21). Men undoubtedly wrote the Book of Judith and Esheth Chayil. Both “women” are so “feminine,” expressing many men’s ideals of womanhood current in their time periods—and today.

Judith resorts to “feminine wiles” to defeat Holofernnes. Using a sword to chop off his head is actually “feminine,” much like chopping off the head of a chicken with an axe. Her only “masculine” actions for which there are “feminine” precedents—e.g. Devorah—are notifying Bethulia’s elders of her plan and leading the townsmen into battle and to ultimate victory against the Greeks.

Esheth Chayil appears to be on the other end of the continuum. A woman’s beauty and “feminine wiles” are usually of considerable importance to most men. Yet, it is condemned in the first part of ָ, 31:30. “Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain.”

Freedom to learn (if that is the author’s goal) can only be achieved with financial, emotional, and physical support. That this man deems a woman’s beauty irrelevant is not surprising. Rachel Adler’s comments on Talmudic comparisons of men’s vis-à-vis women’s beauty are telling:

[Beauty is] a reflection of moral and spiritual perfection…
a recognized motif in misdrashic and aggadic literature.
[According to the rabbis] Female beauty...is regarded
as devoid of any spiritual dimension and indeed is
considered to have great potential for evil because it
heightens the possibility of female visibility...[Comparing

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it to] an act of war... It is Satan in drag...whose power will
mitgaber/מ jlong or “overman”...its object [a man/men]. (Adler 1998: 12-

The ideal of woman as caretaker, sexual partner, parent, and breadwinner remains
viable today. Ira Levin’s (1972) sci-fi novel The Stepford Wives is an updated version of
Esheth Chayil with beauty and charm added as essential features. So popular was Levin’s
book that Hollywood produced not one but two film versions—with two different
endings.

No doubt well aware that brains and talent have nothing to do with biological sex,
the Talmudists deliberately linked literacy to religious learning, limiting it to men. To
sustain the luxury of learning they needed to create and maintain a cadre of support—a
separate class of slaves. Capitalizing on their already extant privilege, they designated
women qinyan. They then spent an inordinate amount of time and effort to lay out
innumerable and highly detailed prescriptions and proscriptions which they compiled in
the tractates of Seder Nashim/The Management of Women—from which women were
excluded access.

Incorporating Esheth Chayil into the religious canon was a “no-brainer.” Adding
insult to injury, they then at least once a week required Jewish men to exhort women and
girls to obey the dictates of Esheth Chayil—in Hebrew, a language few understood. Or
was it to remind men to relish their privileges?

Daniel Boyarin concurs with the misogynist meaning of the text—though with
reservations:

The texts deny to women any power in the social or
cultural structure. In such cases, reading only the
misogyny or androcentrism of the texts can itself be
a misogynistic gesture, for it leads us to negate the
possibility that women had in fact a much more active,
creative role than the texts would have us believe. (Boyarin 1991: 30)

Naturally, women and men through the centuries modify, manipulate, manage,
make over, muddle through their life situations, and when possible, metamorphose
themselves. ², ³

But a misogynist text is a misogynist text, even when its crushing sexism can be
somewhat mitigated through incorporating associated volumes ex officio applying
intertextual analyses, and perhaps further mitigated by individuals manipulating
circumstances, like Judith.

For more than two thousands years and most likely even longer, most Jewish
women were denied literacy in Hebrew and Aramaic. But their exclusion from the
schoolroom, and limiting their options to that of serving those who have rights over
them—fathers, brothers, potential owners, sometimes mothers—was unequivocal.
Subjugation must have done “something” to their psyches. As Tamar Ross states,
Irrespective of their origins, binary distinctions
become internalized over the course of time.
Irrational emotions, collective memories, customs,
routines, mystical and even magical meanings gradually
accrue to them, and all these interweave to form the
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invisible thicket that constitutes our identity. 
(Ross 2007: 221)

From infancy, girls were and remain irremediably cast into the female mold of the rabbinical binary system—and sort of joined by a goodly number of men. It is amusing that learning Torah, the elitist “occupation” in Orthodox Jewish life, open only to men, is unappealing to many Jewish men. Their lack of talent as scholars leaves them open to the appellation “like women.” For women and untalented men their common “occupation” is to support the scholars—*Esheth Chayil*.

And where does Judith belong? She is a biological female and therefore a servant of men. Yet, her widowhood, her wealth, and her piety are somewhat analogous/parallel to, at least with respect to status, to the Torah scholar. She prays—from a written text? Is she a privileged literate woman? She could be. And so could the *Esheth Chayil*, particularly if she brought to her owner a substantial dowry. Was the wealth she administered hers? Such a woman would be much more effective if she were literate, but not learned?

Is Judith is an *Esheth Chayil*? Yes. Her owner is the Deity. She risks everything for him. On a very small scale, she maintains “his household,” gives to charity, remains devoted only to him. SELAH.

Notes:

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2 From his Cairo Geniza researches, Shlomo Dov Goitein (1970) identifies a number of Jewish women scribes and copyists from all over the Middle East. To date there are no indications that any of them were Yentl.

3 Daniel Boyarin (1991: 32-33) recognizes the ordeal of the [suspected!] errant wife and her ordeal as an unequivocal example of sexism. There is no parallel ordeal for her errant owner. Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud’s Eliezer/El’azar’s view—teaching women Torah/literacy is *tifluth*—almost universally prevailed for nearly

BIBLIOGRAPHY


