

Two Devout and Daring Disciples

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Abstract

This article analyzes the story of Esther and Judith, whom we can designate as devout and daring disciples. Both of them at the risk of their lives ventured to bring liberation and salvation to the covenant community. Prayer and fasting were the tools they employed. In Judith we have the portrait of an authentic and brave woman disciple, who prompted into action the cowardly men leaders.

Keywords: Prayer, Fasting, Disciple.

Introduction

Although we do not have much explicitly in the books of Esther and Judith about the divine formation, still we can trace out here and there some insights. Thus it would be an injustice if we had excluded these two valiant women from our consideration.

Part One: Esther

Historical Period

Esther was the queen of the Persian King Ahasuerus who reigned during 486-465 BC. Jews had already lost their country, and were forced to live under the Persian Empire.

The English translations of the book do not have similarity in chapters and verses. A number of additions are opted. For practical purpose I

follow *The Jerusalem Bible* and Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (The Anchor Bible).

The Called One

The Lord had a definite design to be fulfilled by Esther. She has to save the Jewish race from total extermination. Of course Esther was not aware of this call. Unexpectedly she found herself in a critical situation, and was forced by Mordecai, her uncle, to plead the king for the Jews, even at the risk of her life. He tells her: “Perhaps you have come to the throne for just such a time as this” (4:14).

Significant Names

Her original Hebrew name was Hadassah (2:7), which meant myrtle, an evergreen shrub with sweet-smelling leaves and pink or white flowers. Indeed, she was bodily and spiritually a most beautiful plant, attractive to God and humans. The Persian name Esther (2:7), which meant star, was probably given to her by Mordecai, in order to conceal her Jewish identity. Indeed, Esther by her faithful life to Yahweh, gleamed as a star, and attracted others like a myrtle.

Her Formation

The divine Formator from the very beginning of her life, was endeavoring to make her a modal disciple, even though Esther was not conscious of this fact. She was an orphan girl, who had lost father and mother. Her uncle Mordecai, in the divine providence, adopted her as his daughter (2:7). The Lord used him as his representative to make Esther an ideal formee. She was totally devoted to her uncle.

Yahweh’s Beloved Daughter

We have glimpses of Esther’s commitment to Lord in her prayer (only in Greek version, 5:18-29) to the Lord before undertaking the great risk of her life. Some of its elements are pointed out below:

Addresses

Esther begins her prayer by addressing Yahweh “*My Lord Our King, the only One*”. She continues to use the designation Lord (5 times). He is addressed “King of gods”, “Master of all Power”, “God of Abraham”, and “God alone”. Yahweh’s supreme quality is that he is “just One”.

Reflection I

- The term Lord indicates that Yahweh is the supreme and Almighty God, whom no other deities (who are the creations of humans) can challenge. Esther calls him *my* Lord, the first person possessive adjective that means mine and mine alone. She has complete confidence in Him. He will vindicate her cause, and utterly destroy her adversaries. Esther puts it more forcefully by entitling him “Master of all power”. The Assyrian god is nothing in His eyes, a powerless idol.

- *Our* king: Now Esther, as a member of the Jewish community, calls him *our* king. Persian Ahasuerus is not their king. Indeed Yahweh is the only king. Also He is king of gods. That means the Assyrian deity could not claim to be a king at all.

- “God” and “God of Abraham”: Yahweh is not only Lord, but God of creation and of salvation history which begins with Abraham. The people Israel are the children of Abraham, the children of the everlasting covenant that Yahweh had established with their Patriarch. Because of its everlasting nature, the covenant will last forever, and no earthly power can blot out the chosen race out of the earth. Hence the Assyrian king’s threats will become futile.

All these titles given to Yahweh show the deep-rooted faith and fidelity of Esther. She serves as a model for other formees. We find in the addresses personal and community dimensions (*my... our*). An authentic disciple will not forget that he/she is a member of the community, the joys and sorrows, dangers and temptations of it affect him/her. In *Magnificat*, Mary, the archetype of disciples, sees in her story, the very story of Israel.

Self-Designation

Esther calls herself “*your* handmaid”. Here she associates herself to Hannah, the mother of Prophet Samuel (1 Sam.1:11, 16, 18) and Abigail, the devout wife of King David (1 Sam.25:24-31). Mary, who was raised to the status of the mother of God addresses herself as your handmaid (in old Malayalam *adiyatti*), one whose position is always under the divine Master, Lk.1:38).

Reflection II

The self-designation “*your* handmaid”, is the most fitting title for a humble and faithful devotee of Yahweh. The more one receives the

graces from the divine Formator, the more one grows in humility, fidelity and utter dedication to the Lord.

Avowal of the Sinfulness of Israel

After addressing the Lord Esther recounts the gracious history of Yahweh's choosing Israel as his covenant people out of all nations and making them His heritage. With tears in her eyes she confesses that the ungrateful people sinned against their beloved God by turning to the heathen deities. It was then just from His part to punish them by handing them over to the enemies.

Reflection III

The OT figures like Ezra the priest together with Nehemiah, the cup-bearer of the Persian king, who had returned to Jerusalem, publically confessed the sins of Israel, which brought out God's punishment (Ezra.9:1-15). The people also weepingly participated in the act of confession (Ezra.10:1-2; Neh.9:1-37). The devout Esther followed the same traditions of the leaders of the covenant people.

The Sacrilegious Acts of the Enemies

Then Esther elaborately presents before Yahweh what the enemies are planning to do: "They want to blot out *your* heritage, to stop the mouths of those who praise *you*, to quench *your* altar and the glory of *your* House, to open the mouths of the heathens for the praise of idols, and to idolize forever a mere mortal king."

Reflection IV

This long list of the heinous sins of the enemies will naturally provoke the Lord. Esther uses the second person singular, adjective (*your* heritage; *your* altar; *your* House), and pronoun *You*. As one who had a living experience of Yahweh's action in the history of Israel, she uses the most effective method to make the Lord immediately decide to thwart the evil designs of the enemies. Is not this the portrait of a fully trained disciple?

Petitions

Esther has recourse to make petitions that will certainly hasten the divine intervention. She prays:

- Do not relinquish *your* scepter, Lord to non-existent gods
- Do not let them laugh at our downfall
- Turn their designs against themselves
- Make an example of Haman who schemed this evil

Reflection V

This model disciple speaks as if Yahweh wanted to relinquish his own scepter to non-existent gods. How can He, the true and the only God do it? This will never happen. Esther compels Yahweh to turn the enemies' designs against themselves, since He is all powerful to do it. Finally the devout disciple explicitly mentions the name of Haman, the conspirator. How skillfully and effectively are articulated these petitions! How can Yahweh connive at this artful supplication?

A List of Faithful Acts

The devout disciple recounts the history of her faithful life. Nine items are mentioned, of which the Lord is fully aware of:

- I hate honours from the godless
- I loathe the bed of the uncircumcised
- I loathe to wear the crown of my queenship, and do not wear it when I am not at court
- I have not eaten at Haman's table
- I do not take pleasure in the royal banquets
- I do not drink the wine of libations
- I do not take pleasure in queenship
- I am not delighted in anything except in You, Lord

Reflection VI

This long list of the sacrifices that Esther, the faithful disciple of Yahweh has undertaken for His sake, will certainly touch the heart of the divine Formator. She hated everything that the Assyrian queenship brought upon her. Such a life, if known in public would have entailed great perils. Still Esther was not ready to make any compromise. Her only delight was in her divine Master. Is not this the portrait of an authentic disciple of the Lord?

The personal petition of Esther will be studied later.

A Pleasant Being

The beautiful Esther was selected as one of the girls who were brought to the palace of the Persian king Ahasuerus (2:8-14). He wanted to choose one among them as his queen. Esther pleased the custodian of the girls and won his favour, because of her modest and pleasant behavior. Before going to the king all other girls used to take whatever they wanted. Now Esther declined to ask for anything. She won the

admiration of all who saw her. As the king saw her he set the royal diadem on her head and proclaimed her queen (2:16-17). This elevated position did not make the formee haughty. She continues to live as a faithful devotee of the Lord.

A Threatening Situation

The crooked Haman plotted against the Jews and compelled the Persian king to sign an edit, ordering the slaughter and annihilation of the Jews on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (3:7-15).

Mordecai's Reaction

When Mordecai learned about it, he tore his garments and put on sackcloth and ashes, and wailing bitterly, came as far as the king's gate (4:1-3).

A Shocked Esther

The maids of Queen Esther informed her of it. She was quiet shocked. The queen sent cloths for Mordecai to put on, but he refused them (4:4-8). Then Esther summoned her faithful Hathach to find out the true reason. Mordecai told him about the tragedy that was going to happen to Jews. Esther was asked to speak to the king, and save the Jews from death.

Intimating the Possible Mortal Risk

As Esther knew the demand of her uncle, she sent the following reply (4:10-11): No one can approach the king in the inner court without being summoned; that person will then be put to death, unless the king extends the golden scepter to him/her. Now she has not been summoned to the king for the last thirty days.

Reflection VII

A disciple should be a prudent person. He/she is supposed to look at the eventual consequences of the action, even if it is demanded by the dearest one. Esther provides an example of such a behavior. In the light of her words Mordecai is given a chance to change, or mitigate, or stick to his position.

The Harsh Words

Mordecai, who loved Esther as his own daughter, appears to be very strident in his reply (4:12-14). He threatens her that in case she preferred to remain silent, later she will be forced to pay with her life.

The uncle had recourse to this tone in order to inject in her the courage to undertake the risk. He reminds her that God had in His mind this plan in making her the queen.

A Resolute Disciple

Never had Esther thought to save her life at the risk of the total extermination of her people.

Preparation with Fast and Prayer

With losing a moment she asked Mordecai (4:16-17) to gather all the Jews, and fast for her for three days. She, with her maids will do the same. After three days she will approach the king, disregarding the law. She thus concludes: "If I perish, I perish".

Reflection VIII

An ideal disciple will never depend upon his/her own fast and prayer to face the critical situation. Esther needed the fast and prayer of all the Jews. Here we have a model for the new covenant community, every member of which has to be united in penance and prayer for the realizing the dream of its Founder. Esther, with her maids spent three days in penance, in order to get the courage to approach the king. In the last words of her message to Mordecai she expresses her willingness to die, if the king does not welcome her: "If I perish, I perish." The authentic disciple totally commits herself to the will of God; if He wants him/her to drink the bitter chalice of death, he/she will say: "Let your will be done".. Esther was using prayer and penance not to force the Lord to change His will for her favour.

Personal Petitions

We now return to the omitted parts of the prayer of Esther (4:3-4, 12-14, 19). It consists of the following supplications:

- Come to my help (twice)
- I have no helper but you (twice)
- I am alone
- Give me courage
- Put persuasive words into my mouth when I face the lion
- Change his feeling into hatred for our enemy (Haman), that the later and all like him may be brought to their end
- Listen to the voice of the desperate
- Free me from my fear

Reflection IX

This is the pitiable figure of an *agathi*, who is convinced of her nothingness and non-havingness. For the sake of *gathi* she, in her loneliness and dread, clings to the Lord who can listen to the wretched and help her. Particularly she supplicates for the courage to go to the king. Only the Formator can put persuasive words into her mouth and dispose the king to hate Haman, the enemy of Jews. Indeed, this is the ideal petition of a genuine disciple, who out of the depths of her non-beingness cry to the Lord, appealing him to hear her voice (Ps. 130:1-2).

An Agathi at the Inner Court

On the third day Esther dressed herself in her full splendor in order to go to the king (5:1-15). She was invoking “God who watches over all persons and saves them.” Her heart was shrinking with fear. The fast had weakened her body. Committing herself to the Lord she proceeded. At first the king looked on her, blazing with anger. But the divine Master changed his heart “inducing a milder spirit”. As Esther fainted, Ahasuerus sprang from his throne in alarm and took her in his arms, speaking soothing words, and laying his golden scepter on her neck.

Reflection X

Esther was a faint-hearted person, very much afraid of the imminent misfortune. It is repeatedly said that she fainted. Still she dared to face the possible catastrophe. That shows her fidelity to the Lord.

A Courteous and Gracious Attitude

Esther maintained a humble and honourable attitude when she spoke to the king:

- “My Lord you looked to me like an angel of God, and my heart was moved with fear of your majesty. For you are a figure of wonder, my Lord, and your face is full of graciousness.”

- “Would the king be pleased to come with Haman today to the banquet I have prepared for him.”

- “If I have found favour in the king’s eyes, and if it is his pleasure to grant what I ask and to agree to my request, let the king and Haman come to the other banquet I intend to give them tomorrow”.

Reflection XI

This should be the ideal behavior of a noble disciple. Esther, with the help of the Lord could maintain calmness and composure at the emotive situation, in which an ordinary person, if let to himself/herself, would have burst out. But Esther in a mild way expresses the fear that gripped her at the anger of the king. In inviting him she uses the courteous words: “Would the king be pleased.” The invitation for the second banquet has more gracious and humble expressions: “If I have found favour in the king’s eyes, and if it is his pleasure to grant what I ask and to agree to my request...” She uses two conditional clauses. Of course the divine Formator would have inspired her to speak in such a way. Only a slow but steady procedure would have brought out the desired result.

A Successful Articulation (7:3-6)

Even at the first banquet the king asked Esther to disclose her request, promising even a half of his kingdom to her (5:6). Also in the second banquet the king pressed her to reveal her request, repeating the promise of half of his kingdom. The queen, under the divine impulse, thus spoke: “If it please your majesty, grant *me my* life – that is what I request; and the lives of *my* people – that is what I desire. For we are doomed, *I and my* people to destruction, slaughter and annihilation.” Her words are articulated in such a way as to put focus on her, whom Ahasuerus loved as his own soul. Immediately the king cried out: Who is the villain, who wants to commit such an outrage? “The persecutor! The enemy! This wretch Haman” – one can find here denouement. Of course it was the Lord who had put these impressive and evocative words in the mouth of his beloved disciple. The king arose in anger and left the banquet to go into the palace garden. When he returned he found Haman huddled across the coach where Esther was reclining. At that the king flew into a rage. The attendants swiftly threw a veil over Haman’s face. At the royal command they hang him on the same gallows which Haman had erected for Mordecai.

Vengeance, a Mark of the Disciple? (9:11-15)

At Esther’s request (“How can I bear to see the calamity and destruction that are about to fall on my people”, v.8), the king issued a written revocation of the letters proclaimed by Haman in all the provinces. Indeed, it was written by Mordecai giving the Jews the right to assemble in self defense and to destroy their attackers (8:11). That was

indeed what had happened. The Jews seemed to have found their joy in killing many men and ten sons of Haman (9:11-12). Now a disturbing question: Was not Esther the cause of the acts of vengeance? Is it proper to a disciple of the Lord? Let us study the texts in detail. The queen had asked the king to let the bodies of the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows (9:13). A close analysis will make the meaning of her words clearer. The ten sons were already killed by the Jews. She is only asking the king to put the dead bodies on the gallows, so that it would become a reminder for all the future persecutors of the covenant people. Moreover, in her earlier request Esther was asking for the life of her people. Never had she demanded their slaughter. It was the spontaneous response of the Jews who were undergoing persecution and eventual slaughter. Hence it is wrong to accuse Esther, the disciple of the Lord to have instigated the people to take revenge.

Part Two: Judith

Historical Period

Judith is generally designated as a Deutero-Canonical book. We do not have the original Hebrew text. Only the Greek version exists. It is not easy to decide the historical period of the events narrated in the book. One may say that it was written in the second century BC. King Nebuchadnezzar of Assyria commissioned Holofernes, his military commander to attack Bethulia of Judah. The General seized the town's water supply outside its walls. After 34 days the people began to die of thirst, and they demanded the chieftain Uzziah and his two colleagues to surrender the town and become the slaves of Assyria. Uzziah told them to wait for five more days. If Yahweh does not come to their help then they can submit to the Assyrian rule.

The Called One

The name Judith means Jewess, a Jewish woman. She represents the ideal person of the Israelite religion. Yahweh had chosen her to deliver the people out of the clutches of Holofernes, even though she was not aware of that mission. The author, while introducing Judith, mentions at least sixteen named ancestors. This is the longest genealogy of any woman in the Bible. At that time Judith was a widow for three years and four months, 8:1-8 (that is forty months). The number 40 is rich in biblical symbolism. The Israelites had to wander alone for forty years in the wilderness without having fine linen clothes and luxurious dishes. Only then they were gifted with the land. The case of Jesus, the

fast of forty days in the wilderness energized him to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come in Him. Now Judith fasted and did penance in a solitary place which she has erected on the roof of her home.

She strenuously fasted every day except for religious feasts which had to be observed in joy and thanksgiving. Everybody held Judith in great esteem, “since devotedly did she fear God” (v.8). The Lord inspired her whom He had destined for the task of liberating Israel, to commit herself totally to Him, as well as engendered in his formee filial awe forwards the Holy Formator.

Reflection I

The name Judith, the disciple of Yahweh meant Jewess. Likewise the called ones of Messiah (the anointed one) should live as the anointed ones, Messiahites. They should willingly and lovingly embrace at least inner solitude and silence. The modern formators should strive to cultivate in the candidates love for silence and solitude, without which nobody can persevere in the religious/priestly call. Also bodily and mental penance is to be fostered. Jesus the paradigm of the called ones, provides the best example.

Judith Reprimands

As the desperate news of the fatal promise of the chieftains to surrender the town to the Assyrian king reached the ears of Judith, she summoned the chieftains to her shelter (8:9-10). The fact that a widow could command the chieftains of the town to come to her upper room, indicates Judith’s authority and hold on the citizens of Bethulia. Then the zealous devotee of Yahweh mercilessly chided them for their decision that lacked faith and trust in the Lord (8:11-27).

Reflection II

A true disciple is not supposed to continue in solitary prayer when the country is threatened by catastrophe. The formed one, after seeking the divine guidance, should actively get involved in the predicament. He/she should become the divine mouth-piece, and even dare to challenge the lack of faith, dejection and inactivity of the leaders.

Words of Castigation

After using polite words (“please listen to me”) she immediately begins to lash out at their lack of faith in the God of their covenant (8:11-17): “Who are you to test God this day and to set yourselves above

God among the mortals?” (v.12). They are unable to fathom God, who made all things, or sound His mind or unravel His purposes. “You have no right to demand guarantees where the designs of the Lord are concerned... We have to wait patiently for Him to save, and plead with Him to help us. He will hear our voice if such is his good pleasure”.

Words of Trust

Judith assures the leaders that, since the Israelites are remaining faithful to the Lord, He will not allow them to be defeated by the enemies (vv.18-20). Now actually Yahweh is testing them, just as He had tested their ancestors (vv.18-27).

Result of Eventual Surrender

Judith reminds Uzziah and his companions of what will happen if they capitulate to the Assyrians (vv.21-23). The whole Judah will be captured, our sanctuary will be looted and we shall answer with our blood for its desecration; our people will be slaughtered; the remaining ones will be exiled and our heritage will be desolated. We will be reduced into slavery and will be looked down by the Assyrians as an outrage and a disgrace.

Reflection III

Through the lips of the disciple, the Lord himself was speaking. Judith gave complete freedom to her Master to communicate his great annoyance and irritation, without caring much about the possible negative reactions of the chieftains. This is indeed a true mark of the called ones. The communion that they maintain will enable them to throw in the face the cowardice of the authorities.

“A Lame Duck”

Uzziah could not refute the most convincing argument of the devotee of the Lord (8:28-31). Indeed he was forced to acclaim her wisdom, good sense and sound judgment. He merely asked her to pray that God may send a downpour to fill our cisterns, so that the people can have water to quench their thirst.

A Resolute Disciple

Uzziah’s self-apology did not impress Judith. She had already decided, or more accurately, Yahweh had disclosed to her that He was going to use her as his daring instrument to save Bethulia and Judah from the

aggressive Assyrians (8:32-34). The faithful and devout disciple had absolute certainty about it:

- "I am going to do something, the memory of which will go down among the children of our people for endless generations (literally, "to generations of generations"), v.32.

- "The Lord will make use me to rescue Israel", v.33 b.

This was indeed a prophetic utterance. The Lord will give beforehand this assurance only to those who are very closely united with the Him. Those who are most beloved to Yahweh will obtain this boon. Jesus the dearest Son of God could foresee the coming events and his part in the act of salvation. Mary in her *Magnificat* sings: "Behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me." (Lk.1:48-49). Perhaps one may be inspired to find a remote similarity with this assertion in the words of Judith, whom Fathers of the Church envisage as the pre-figuration of Mary.

An Apathetic Blessing

Uzziah and his companions immediately approved Judith's decision (vv. 35-36). It seems that that they wanted to leave her presence at the earliest opportunity. Although they were responsible for the security and the safety of orphans and widows, the passive elders were not at all concerned of it. Did Uzziah believe that Yahweh will deliver Israel by the hand of Judith, as she had given assurance? Most probably the elders had considered her words as babbles of an obsessive woman. The intelligent Judith could sense this disinterestedness of the leaders. Although their attitude was not unexpected, still it wounded her heart, since Judith was a sensible woman. But she would have offered this sacrifice to her beloved Master.

However Uzziah blessed her, as it was expected from an elder:

- "Go in peace", v. 35a

- "May the Lord go before you to take revenge on our enemies", v. 35b.

The last invocation is similar to the benediction given by Deborah the prophetess to Barak, who was not disposed to lead the Israelite army against their enemies, Jg. 4:14. The prophetess had dedicated herself to the cause of Yahweh. Hence her blessing would have supernatural and positive effect. We cannot say the same concerning the invocation of Uzziah, who had no faith in his own words.

The Disciple as Suppliant

As the called one Judith was well aware of the fact that by herself she is nothing and can do nothing. At the same time she firmly believed that with the Master she could do everything. Before the Almighty the arrogant Assyria can never hold down. In order to induce Yahweh to come to the help of Jews, Judith had recourse to prayer and penitence (9:1-14). She started praying during the time when the incense is being offered in the Jerusalem temple, thus joining with the official liturgical prayer of the covenant community. First she prostrated herself, put ashes on her head and wore sack cloth – the signs of radical humility.

Divine Appellations

- Lord the God of *my* father Simeon, v.2
- God, *my* God, v.4
- God of the humble, v. 11
- The help of the oppressed, v.11
- The support of the weak, v.11
- The refuge of the forsaken, v.11
- The savior of the despairing, v.11
- God of *my* father, v.12
- God of the heritage of Israel, v.12
- Ruler of the heaven and the earth, v. 12
- Creator of the waters, v.12
- King of your whole creation, v.12
- God of all powerful and might, v.14
- The sole protector, v.14.

Reflection IV

All these titles attributed to God are most pertinent to the existential context. Judith uses three times the first personal singular adjective (*my*), thereby expressing her intimate relationship with the Master. She addresses God of father Simeon, to whose tribe she belonged. Gen.34:25-29 narrates how the sons of Jacob under the leadership of Simeon by guile struck down the Shechemites since they had raped their sister. Now the Assyrian general had decided to ‘rape’, i.e. to assault Israel, the bride of Yahweh and desecrate His sanctuary, to defile the tabernacle and to knock off the horns of Yahweh’s altar. The people of Bethulia are humble persons, the oppressed, the weak, the forsaken and the despairing. Yahweh is the only help, the support, the refuge and the savior and the protector of these *agathies*. It is He who

has created heaven and earth and the waters. He is the only powerful Lord who can crush down the arrogant Assyrians who are planning to destroy the heritage of Yahweh.

The Contents of the Prayer

Trust

Those who trust in horses and chariots will be defeated; those who trust in Yahweh will be victorious.

Power

Those who trust in armaments trust in human power; those who trust in Yahweh trust in divine power, Who exercises his power by mighty 'hand', Ex.3:19-20; 6:1; 13:9.

Victory

Victory belongs to the lowly and vulnerable, who have no hope except in the power of God, Judith 9:11.

Judith does not trust in horses and chariots. She does not trust in human power. She has no hope except in the power of God who can win the victory for her. Thus she asks for a strong hand through which Assyrians must be crushed, 9:9-10.

In the prayer of Judith we can find three essential traits that the called ones should cultivate. His/her entire trust is in the mighty hand of the Master, who can defeat the arrogant empires who gloat over their military might.

Certain allusions from the song of sea (Ex.15:1-18) are evident in Judith's prayer.

- Horses and riders: 9:7 -> Ex.15:1
- The Lord who crushes wars, the Lord is your name: 9:7; 16:2
- >Ex.15:3 (Greek text)
- Ally... protector... Saviour: 9:11 -> Ex.15:2 (Greek text)
- Bring your fury: 9:9 -> Ex. 15:7

Put into my *hand* the strength I need (v.9): The term 'hand' looms large in the book: 8:33; 9:2, 9; 13:14; 15:10; 9:10; 12:4; 13:15; 16:5.

Reflection V

It is noteworthy that the disciple does not pray for her own physical survival or honour. Judith's only concern was to save her people. She firmly believes that the Master has blessed this dangerous and deceitful

task. Nothing will happen to her without the knowledge and consent of Yahweh. This is indeed the characteristic of this called one who had attained spiritual maturity.

Preparations

After finishing the prayer Judith arose from her prostrate position, removed her sackcloth, took off her widow's dress, bathed, anointed herself with costly perfumes, dressed her hair and put on her best dress. Then she put sandals on her feet, put on necklaces, bracelets, rings, earrings and all her jewelry (10:1-4). After prettying herself up, she handed her maid provisions for them (v.5), and set out.

Reflection VI

The disciple knew well that she had to entice Holofernes with her beauty that is a divine gift. Now she uses it to the service of God, since the Master intends to use the beauty as a weapon to liberate the people. The disciple wields this weapon to best of her ability. A true formee will not hate his/her body, but will use it for the purpose designed by the Master.

Towards the Enemy's Camp

As Judith and her maid reached the town gate of Bethulia, the three chieftains met her. All of them were amazed at her luring beauty. Uzziah and his colleagues blessed her: "May the God of our ancestors grant you favour, and fulfill your plans, so that the Israelites may glory and Jerusalem exult" (10:8). This time their words seem to have come out of their heart. Judith responded by rendering obsequiousness to God. As the town gate was opened to her, she with her maid proceeded towards the Assyrian camp. To the military patrol who intercepted them Judith told that she, a fleeing Hebrew wanted to communicate a secret message to Holofernes, how to capture Bethulia without a single lose of soldier, vv.11-13. The troop was captivated by her beauty (vv.14-17), the divine weapon that exterminated them all afterwards. They escorted her and delivered her into the hands of Holofernes, v.15 (actually Holofernes was delivered into her hands).

In the Camp of Holofernes

The military general is presented in v.21 as resting on his bed under a canopy. Later he was murdered by Judith on the same bed under the canopy. As soon as Holofernes appeared, Judith prostrated herself and did obeisance to him, vv.22-23. The Assyrian general spoke first (11:1-

5), exhorting Judith to take courage, since she has decided to serve the Assyrian king. Actually she has already taken courage, because she was serving Yahweh, the true king of all the earth.

The Words of Irony

Judith responds by making a long speech (vv.5-19). She waves her words through three topics: the destiny of Holofernes, the message of Achior and its effect on the Jews, and the deed that she herself will accomplish.

- If he follows her advice “God will do the deed perfectly” with him, v.6. Holofernes presumes that this means he will be victorious (actually his opponent Yahweh will be victorious).

- Judith continues to deceive him when she refers to “the power of him who has sent you to set all creatures aright”, v.7 (Holofernes wrongly presumed that she was referring to Nebuchadnezzar).

After showering flattery on the military general (v.8) the disciple deals with the issue of Achior, vv.9-10. She began by telling the truth. Then she turns to deceit by reporting the imagined guilt of her people, violating dietary laws concerning first fruits and tithes, and laws regarding the sanctuary, vv.11-15. The statement of v.16 is full of irony: “God has sent me to accomplish with you things which will astonish the whole world whenever people hear about them.” The Assyrian general understood these words in the positive sense, but the disciple of the Lord has meant it about his destruction.

Reactions of the Assyrians

The words of Judith delighted Holofernes and all his attendants, vv. 20-21. They were struck by her wisdom and exclaimed: “In terms of beauty and brains, there is not another woman like this from one end of the earth and to the other.”

A Devout Disciple

Judith continued to lead a life proper to a disciple even in the enemy camp, 12:1-9. She kept the dietary laws. Every morning before dawn she used to leave the camp to beseech “to the Lord, the God of Israel, to guide her in her plan to deliver the children of his people”, v.8. She kept ritual purification. She used to bathe in the spring of the camp.

Reflection VII

An authentic disciple will take pains to lead a religious and rigorous life in the midst of most difficult situations. They will sacrifice comforts, security and rest for the sake of the Lord. Judith fully depends upon the prayer for the success of her plan. It is indeed the Lord who will be delivering his chosen people. Further she had another thing in her mind. If it is known that she is following daily her religious practices, nobody will suspect her on the crucial day and question her. Also the pious disciple waits till the last possible day for deliverance, putting her whole trust in Yahweh.

The Crucial Encounter

At the Banquet

On the fourth day Holofernes asked Judith to participate in a banquet, with the motive to seduce her, 12:10-13. Judith accepted the invitation by saying: “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” (v.14). Here as in 11:5-6, “my Lord” is ironic. The attendant understood it as referring to Holofernes, while Judith was only affirming her obedience to God. The realization of the divine plan will bring her great joy during her remaining days on earth. There remained in the room only Holofernes and Judith. Because of his intense desire to take possession of her the general drank a great deal of wine and fell into a deep sleep (12:20; 13:1-4).

Supplication before Assassination

Then approaching the drunkard, Judith prayed silently: “Lord, God of all power, look in this hour upon the work of *my* hands, for the greater glory of Jerusalem, for now is the opportunity to come to the aid of *your* inheritance, and to carry out *my* plan for the destruction of the enemies who have risen up against *us*.” (v.5). Drawing Holofernes’ own sword, she uttered “Lord, God of Israel, give *me* the strength now”, v.7.

Reflection IX

- Appellations

- * Lord
- * God of all power
- * Lord God of Israel

The disciple firmly believed that Yahweh is the only Lord of the entire creation, who possesses the total and irresistible power, He is God of Israel, whom He has chosen as *segulla*, his cherished possession, which he will never forsake. Thus Judith had no doubt that the divine Master will certainly come to her aid.

- Possessive personal adjectives/pronouns

- * The work of *my* hands
- * Carry out *my* plan
- * Give *me* strength
- * *Your* inheritance
- * Enemies who have risen up against *us*

The called one lived in inconceivable intimacy with the divine Master. Thus she could identify my hands as your hands, my plan as your plan. Your inheritance is my inheritance, and the enemies risen against us are indeed Yahweh's enemies. The strength that she is asking for is really the Lord's strength itself.

- Entreaties

*Look in this hour upon the work of my hands for the great glory of Jerusalem

* Now is the opportunity to come to the aid and to carry out my plan.

The disciple reminds the Lord to put his whole attention on this hour of her work, since it is for the greater glory of Jerusalem, in which he has set his throne. She prompts Yahweh to make use of the present opportunity by coming to her aid and to help to carry out her plan and to give her strength for it. Authentic disciples will continue their earnest prayers till the success of the work that He had entrusted them.

A Heroic Deed

Then fixing her mind on the Lord she took the sword of Holofernes, struck at his neck twice with all her might and chopped off his head (13: 6-10). Then she rolled his body off the bed and tore the canopy down from the bedposts. Immediately Judith gave the head to her maid, who put it in her food bag. All on a sudden both of them left the camp and bypassed the valley and climbed the slope to Bethulia, v.10b.

At the Assembly of Bethulia

Words of Judith

From a distance Judith shouted to the guards on the gates: “Open! Open the gate! God our Lord is with us, still displaying his strength in Israel and his might against our enemies, as He has today”, 13:11. Her cry to open the gate is intimately attached with the presence of the Lord amidst them. He has today displayed his strength to his chosen people, and his might against his enemies. No single word is uttered about her part in it. This is indeed the characteristic of the mature disciple, who attributes everything to the divine Master.

The Flocking Together of the Citizens

All came running to welcome her to Bethulia, 13:12-13.

The Lauding Disciple

Then Judith raised her voice, eulogizing the Lord: “Praise God! Praise Him! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has shattered our enemies by my hand this very night!” (13:14). Her very soul was vibrating in these words. She repeats praise thrice since Yahweh is mercifully present with his people by chopping off the head of the enemy through her hand. Indeed it is his work; she served as his instrument. Here we find the ideal attitude of the formed ones. After saying this Judith showed them the head of Holofernes, vv. 15-16.

The Blessing People

The amazed people fell on their knees and worshipped the Lord saying:”Blessed are you, Our God, who this day has confounded the enemies of your people” (v.17). The verb *eulogeo* (bless) occurs seven times in chapters 13-15: 13:17, 18 (twice); 14:7; 15:9, 10, 12.

The Blessing Uzziah

It was now the turn of the chieftain Uzziah to bless Judith and Yahweh, vv.18-19 ab. To his words of blessing the people responded:” Amen, Amen”, v.19c.

Judith as a Leader

Assassination of the Assyrian general was only the first act. The enemy has to be wiped out. Judith assumes the leadership and gives orders, 14:1-4.

The Blessing of Achior

At her request Achior was summoned, vv.6-10. He fell at Judith's feet and did obeisance to her, saying: "Blessed are you in every tent of Judah! In every nation those who hear your name will be in dread." Then the Ammonite Achior embraced the Jewish religion.

The Annihilation of the Assyrians

The Fake Attack

At Judith's order the head of Holofernes was hung on the city wall. Then they made a fake attack on the Assyrian camp, 14:11-13. The soldiers notified their leaders who went to the tent of Holofernes where they found him headless. This news caused complete disarray among the Assyrian troops, 14:19-15:3.

The Wiping out of the Enemies

Uzziah brought the armies of the other tribes and they annihilated the Assyrians, 15:4-7. They looted the camp and collected a lot of booty.

The Blessing of the High Priest

Joakim, the High Priest with his council came from Jerusalem to see the wonderful things the Lord has done for Israel, 15:8-10. They blessed Judith saying:

"You are the glory of Jerusalem!
You are the great pride of Israel!
You are the highest honour of our race!
By doing all this with your own hand
You have deserved well of Israel,
And God has approved what you have done.
May you be blessed by the Lord Almighty in all the days to
come!"
All the people answered, Amen

Reflection X

In this blessing Judith appears as a paradigm of the whole people. Her fidelity to God is symbolic of the fidelity of the Israelites as a whole. Her victory by her own hand is the victory of the covenant people. God is pleased with her, as with the chosen nation. God's blessing is called down upon her forever. This hymn is analogous to *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46-55), in which Mary symbolizes the new covenant people.

A Dancing Community

The vocation of the called ones is to grow into a singing and dancing congregation, the culmination of which is found in heaven, as Rev.4:6-11; 5:9-14; 7:9-17; 11:16-18; 14:1-5 articulate. Judith crowns herself with olive leaves and leads all women in dancing and singing. All the men of Israel, armed and garlanded followed them with songs of praise to Jerusalem, 15:12-14. The text of 16:1-17 presents the hymn of praise sung by Judith. The song opens with a call of praise (v.1) and continues with the reasons for praise (vv.2-12). There is a new beginning in v.13 (“I will sing a new song to my God...”). Additional reasons for praise are given in vv. 13b-16. The hymn concludes with a woe utterance on the fate of the wicked, v.17.

Reflection XI

“The Lord is God; He crushes warfare,” v.2 – this may be understood as the theme of the whole book of Judith. Indeed it is the citation of the Greek version of Ex.15:3, the victory hymn of Miriam in the song of Moses. Judith’s song, as well as her victory may be compared to other verses of Exodus chapter 15.

- Announcement of the song: 16:1, 3 -> Ex.15:1
- Declaration of the divine power: 16:2-> Ex.15:2-3
- Description of the powerful and boasting enemy: 16:3-4-> Ex.15:4-5, 9
- Hand of woman: 16:5-> Ex.15:14-16 (hand of the Lord)
- Nations are dismayed: 16:10-> Ex.15:14-16
- Divine power: 16:14-> Ex.15:8

Judith’s hymn may also be compared to Deborah’s victory song in Jg.5. There the woman prophet exhorts the people to have hope in the Lord. The woman Jael by guile kills the military general. Jg.5:3 announces the singing of a new hymn (Jdt.16:13). The mountains tremble at the power of Yahweh (Jg.5:5; Jdt.16:15). Jg.5:24-27 is a song of praise for the woman whose hand Yahweh used to bring deliverance, see Jdt.16:5-9. Both hymns conclude by contrasting the fate of the Lord’s friends with that of His enemies, Jg. 5:31; Jdt.16:15b-17.

The hymn of Judith is called a “new song,” 16:1, 13. That phrase is common in the Psalms of Yahweh’s kingship, see for example Ps.96; 98. Such Psalms also describe the great eschatological battle of the nations (see Ps.48:5-8; 98:2; 99:1-3; Joel.4:1-2; Is.66:16, 24; Jdt.16:17).

Yahweh has won the victory and will bring the new creation (Ps.96:11-13; 98:7-9; Is.66: 22-23; Jdt.16:14). The people will rejoice and sing a new song to the name of Yahweh (see Ps.96:1; 98:1; Jdt.16:1, 13). Much of the imagery throughout the Book of Judith reflects the Exodus event and the feast of Passover. Her victory would then be symbolic of Yahweh's final victory over evil, the preservation of the sanctuary, and the deliverance of the people.

A Worshipping and Offering Community

When the procession arrived at Jerusalem all the people fell on their faces before God, and purifying themselves, offered burnt offerings and votive offerings and their gifts. Judith dedicated all the possessions of Holofernes and gave to God his canopy as a votive offering. The Jews with Judith stayed at Jerusalem and spent those days feasting and singing in front of the sanctuary (16:18-20). Here we find a living portrait of the elected ones who find their joy in worshipping and offering and adhering to the temple.

One Faithful till Death

The people returned home and Judith lived on her own estate leading a prayerful and ascetic life (16:21-25). She enjoyed a great reputation throughout the country. The disciple emancipated her faithful maid. Before death Judith distributed her property among the relations. She lived up to 105 years old. The whole Israel mourned her for seven days.

Reflection XII

The fame and glory did not affect the lifestyle of the disciple. Till death she led a life of prayer and penance, dedicating herself faithfully to the Master. Further she set free her maid, and distributed all her wealth among the relations. She died as an *agathi*.