

WOMEN AS HEROES IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY:
THE ROLES OF SUSANNA, ESTHER AND JUDITH

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There are many memorable narratives from ancient Judaism, yet there are three stories in particular which offer as central figures women who function in independent and decisive ways. The stories of Susanna, Esther, and Judith invite analysis for their lively depiction of women in ways that both confirm and contradict patriarchal assumptions. In these narratives there are defining examples of the use of prayer by women. The prayers employed by these women in their struggles are at times distinctly feminine, yet at other times are indistinguishable in form from prayers of men. In each narrative, the plots involve the power of eroticism and the tension created by male desire, which makes the women both vulnerable and powerful. Perhaps the most striking feature of each narrative, and one which offers a contradiction of patriarchal assumptions, is each woman's capacity to make decisions and speak for herself and for others in ways which preserve each heroine and ultimately preserve society.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient stories invite contemporary readers into an unfamiliar world, which may become somewhat more familiar with some knowledge of ancient history. The ancient Jewish narratives of Susanna, Esther (in its Greek expansion), and Judith all are dated approximately to the second or first century BCE. All three depict societies in which men obviously hold judicial, political, and military power, as well as extensive power in the domestic setting.

In these societies and these stories gender roles have clear distinctions, with women's roles taking a secondary position to those of men. Yet these narratives also show their female protagonists in roles which allow decision making and heroism. Susanna, Judith and Esther display actions which may be atypical of Jewish women in ancient times. A literary analysis of these characters may take its starting place from a discriminating survey of what historians have observed about gender roles in ancient Israel and Judaism. That overview, then, prepares for close literary analysis of each story, attentive to how the narratives both confirm traditional gender roles and disrupt them. For each, the analysis relies on Lawrence M. Wills' translation: *Ancient Jewish Novels: An Anthology from the Greco-Roman Period*. In these narratives, the female protagonists offer prayers on behalf of themselves and others and through these prayers reach solutions to their respective dilemmas, revealing that God listens and speaks to women as well as men. Their most effective weapon is their sexual attraction, which serves to make them both at risk and dominant. As representatives of a society that is known as unapologetically patriarchal, these women take on the roles of saviors of their communities, or of themselves, and succeed in marvelous fashion. In these women the reader sees characteristics of independence,

daring, and courage as they strive to resolve the conflicts in which they find themselves enmeshed.

CHAPTER I

SUSANNA, ESTHER, AND JUDITH AMONG OTHER ANCIENT WOMEN

Fascinating narratives with strong female protagonists survive from ancient Judaism to entertain and enlighten. The Hebrew Bible provides some, but not all of these stories. Others come from the body of texts known as the Apocrypha. Among the most engaging of these works are the stories of Susanna, Esther, and Judith. In order to read the narratives of these heroines perceptively, it is helpful to seek a preliminary historical perspective on the roles and expectations of women in Ancient Israel and Judaism. With the historical basis in mind, analysis of the stories may add to the overall understanding of women's lives long ago.

A range of scholars have done respected and extensive research on women and ideology in ancient Israel and Judaism. Some evidence comes from archeological findings from the excavation of ancient sites and significant artifacts in the form of papyri and inscriptions in stone plaques and markers. Biblical texts often cloak the women's lives in the steady configuration of patriarchy, but also tell lively stories of admirable female characters. Information that can be gathered from rabbinical writings further pushes a patriarchal agenda to a point where one must question whether what the rabbis say about the roles of women in Jewish society is in fact a proposed ideal rather than a reality. At times, artifacts give evidence for women's activities and experience that create tension with the literary texts, whether Biblical or rabbinic.

With this goal of preparing to read these three apocryphal stories in mind, a review of the historical literature in very broad strokes may set the context for the narratives to be considered,

with particular emphasis on the Greco-Roman period, the time when most scholars agree Susanna, Greek Esther, and Judith were composed.

The ways that the Hebrew Bible describes the lives of women varies, and no single statement can be made about the women in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, some unity and coherence exists. The roles of women held value for society even as they were held within limitations. The Ten Commandments dictate that a woman's role as mother is to be held in esteem. According to Carol Meyers, The Decalogue and the Covenant Code are "...dedicated passionately against the exploitation of any group of human beings or even animals. The admonition is to honor both the father and the mother" (Meyers 98). The fifth commandment in its entirety states: "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord God gives you" (NRSV Exodus 20:12). Yet, the Biblical texts which also connect this honored role to women led to some of the limits which were placed on women in ancient Israel. The commandment to honor your father and mother places value on motherhood, which represents the woman's essential value or function in society. Phyllis Bird observes, "Consequently, she was rewarded for it by honor, and protected in it by law and custom which 'exempted' her (indirectly) from military service and 'excused' her from certain religious and civic obligations" (29). Thus it would seem that statements which initially appeared to represent men and women in equal terms may also reveal inherent restrictions.

In spite of restrictions on women which appear to be implicit in early biblical law, there are famous Hebrew Bible women who have positions as respected members of their communities who have occasion to act in decisive, authoritative ways. Deborah, Miriam and others known as "wise women" are evidence of women in positions of authority, and evidence

that such authority was natural in its occurrence. “They occupy a kind of exceptional position, a non-recurring charismatic participation. It is important to recognize that, however limited in proportion to males such leadership may have been, it was thoroughly accepted and acceptable. No notion of female inferiority intruded” (Meyer 101). They are presented as leaders of their communities. Miriam is described as a prophetess and leads women in a victory song in Exodus 15; she seeks leadership in the community as a whole in Numbers 12. Deborah is a judge, and also has responsibilities in military affairs which she shares with her general, Barak (Brenner 62). Other noted women who have prominent roles are found in the stories of Abigail, Naomi, Ruth, and Esther. Abigail intervenes on her husband’s behalf in a conflict with David, Naomi and Ruth are widowed women who make their own way in the world, and Esther is a queen who is able to take advantage of her position in order to save her people. These women find their own ways to navigate within the systems imposed upon them. As Susan Niditch has observed,

All of these women share two traits: their husbands are foolish or absent; and they present an appearance of subservient ‘female’ behavior, dressing for success, dealing obsequiously with spouses or future spouses, flattering, and using language well and convincingly. The wisdom tradition in Proverbs suggests a similar combination of savvy and subservience as the means of obtaining political success in dealing with the powerful, for spheres of politics and gender are often mirror images. (34)

As Old Testament authors write the stories of women judges such as Deborah, the authors introduce them without giving any special attention to the fact that they are women. It is the Old Testament commentators centuries later who marvel at the notion of the authority of such women in ancient times (Bird 41). One could presume that part of the surprise is found in the fact that in

the Hebrew Bible stories penned by men, women are even mentioned. Esther and the non-canonical narratives of Susanna and Judith offer some parallels to the biblical women in Susan Niditch's commentary as far as their spousal relationships are concerned. Susanna's husband is absent as she resolves her dilemma, Esther's king might be judged as foolish as easily as she manipulated him into giving her what she wanted, and Judith is a widow plotting her own course in life. In addition, they are each certainly capable of circumventing any restrictions that might have applied to them as they each exert some measure of authority to resolve their respective dilemmas.

The Hebrew Bible is the product of a patriarchal world and, according to Bird, was created by male, elite, religious specialists. As it appears today, the Hebrew Bible represents the theological perspectives which were dominant at the time the male authors and editors were at work producing the document. One viewpoint suggests that the women of the Hebrew Bible are presented from the male viewpoint and rather than being portrayed as suppressed, or viewed without sympathy, it is simply that their voices are not heard. Their lives are written about from the observations of men (Bird 53). Since the stories written are not told from the women's perspectives, they may represent only isolated bits of data about the female side of life in biblical times.

Rather than interpret the available information as an indication of restrictions placed on the lives of women, it may be that only certain events are portrayed by the male authors and incidents exhibiting less restrictions for women are simply not included, just as Susanna and Judith whose stories are omitted from the canon. The authors place emphasis on what they perceive as the dominance of the male in the presence of the patriarchy. Lineage is expressed in

terms of the male and significantly fewer females are mentioned. “The importance of patrilineal organization in ancient Israel may be seen in the prominence of genealogies and genealogical narratives in the Hebrew Bible. The genealogies, which serve a variety of social and political functions, account for the great preponderance of male names over female names” (Bird 56). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that in her story, Judith is allowed her own genealogy. Even so, in most biblical narratives men are in the forefront, and regardless of the level of responsibilities of the women, life in the world of the Hebrew Bible is defined in masculine terms as is the world of political tradition.

Even though it may be difficult to separate the political and religious law and tradition, women in the period of formative Judaism had limited freedom in either realm. The late first-century Jewish historian Josephus contends that women are, in the eyes of the Law, inferior to men in all ways, and that in the eyes of God their value was but half of that of a man (Archer 284). The Mishnah, compiled around 200 C.E. but preserving earlier traditions, constantly links women with minors and slaves. Participation in synagogue is an example of such treatment. Rabbinic texts at times present a restrictive view of women’s participation. Leonie Archer discusses this point. She states that the synagogue was a location for the public reading of the Torah-and the cyclical scripture readings were meant for education as well as worship. “As a general extension of women’s exemption from the time-gearred precepts and in consequence of their non-obligation to study Torah, women were not required to attend synagogue” (Archer 280). Archer thinks it is likely that domestic duties, especially the care of infants and young children kept women from the synagogue on the occasion of planned observance. However, if they were not required, could that not be a convenient way of indicating that in their reduced

capacity as individuals, it was simply not necessary for them to participate in public religious ritual?

In spite of the lack of requirement of religious study for women, there is some evidence of women who were sufficiently educated that they were capable of reading from the Torah. Many scholars conclude that women were in theory eligible to read from the Torah scroll, but it was not customary for them to do so. They were not allowed to read before an entire group out of respect for the congregation. According to Raphael Loewe, women were not allowed to read as representative of a congregation which included men because a woman could not be considered to be like everyone in the congregation (44). In other words, she is not the same as the men in the congregation. A Hebrew “officiate” meant literally “agent of a group” and could not be a woman (Archer 281). Women did not measure up and would not be allowed by law to represent men in such a capacity.

Archer further holds that women’s participation in religious observance in the home was also limited. Prayers were led by men; on ceremonial occasions sons, not daughters repeated the prayers in order to train for future roles. Women participated in the Sabbath ritual of lamp lighting and bread baking, but the bread was blessed by the men. Women did take positions of public mourning and other activities associated with the dead. Yet, while they were in prominent positions in funerals, Rabbinic texts suggest that women delivered no benedictions or performed any religious duties. Codes included few references to funeral rituals and because funerals were isolated, unpredictable events they were not part of any recurring annual cycle of observance. (Archer 282). The role of the women in public mourning could also serve to insulate the men

from any improprieties related to the handling of the dead. Thus, rules were made for women, but they were about men.

Some sources contend that all activities ascribed to women as representing their unique roles in the practice of the Jewish faith may in fact be designed to protect men. The three precepts required of Jewish women --baking bread and lighting candles on the Sabbath, and Niddah-maintaining menstrual purity-- per Judith Wegner were not binding on women at all but were crucial to preventing men from transgressing. Kraemer elaborates on this idea by stating that as far as women in antiquity are concerned, "...except for prescriptions of the rabbis themselves, we have no evidence for women separating dough, baking Sabbath bread, lighting Sabbath candles, or observing Kashrut, or Niddah, the laws of menstrual purity" (Kraemer 2004, 107). However, the rabbis prescribed a particular punishment for women who failed to observe these religious duties; women who committed these three transgressions would die in childbirth (Wegner 155). While rabbinical writers have led scholars to believe that Jewish women lived restricted lives, excluded from religious observance, evidence from the Greco-Roman diaspora suggests a different perspective.

Archaeological evidence from the first century C.E. shows some Jewish women led very active lives. Kraemer emphasizes the use of non-rabbinic evidence for a view of Jewish women in Diaspora communities to "assess its historic reliability." The writings of rabbinic Judaism may be seen as but one strand (Kraemer 1991, 44). Women who were financial supporters of synagogues are widely documented. In Hamman Lif in North Africa, a stone mosaic commemorates a donation from Juliana, financing the entire floor of the synagogue. In Kyme in western Asia Minor, a gift by a woman by the name of Tation paid for an assembly hall and an

enclosed courtyard. She was honored with a crown and a seat of honor in the synagogue, which contradicts the notion that men and women were separated in synagogues in ancient times as is the modern Orthodox Jewish practice (Kraemer 1992, 106). It also contradicts the notion that women were unlikely to attend synagogue services at all, let alone participate in the service in some manner. Inscriptions in stonework in Rome, Asia Minor, and various other locations in the Mediterranean which date from the first century C. E. and earlier tell the stories of women who were converts to Judaism, who were wealthy and independent heads of their own households as mothers, grandmothers, or widows and served as synagogue officers.

Ancient donor inscriptions honor the financial contributions of Jewish women to synagogue and communal life... Since many of these inscriptions would have been ordered and paid for by women, their very existence demonstrates women's presence in communal life and occasionally allows us, then, to hear something of real women's voices. (Kraemer 1999, 54)

Other women's voices from antiquity are heard in papyri which have been discovered which tell of recorded legal events in women's lives.

In the search for information about the lives of women outside of literary examples, to circumvent the problem of bias she feels exists against works that may have been written by women or works which show women in a favorable or an independent light, Kraemer looks to documents that would not have been copied or handed down in some way in order to seek accuracy. She makes use of papyri burial records, divorce agreements, personal letters, and tax registers to piece together information about the lives of women in antiquity. She remarks, "...men are still disproportionately represented in burial and dedicatory inscriptions.... But these

materials yield substantial information about women, particularly about Jewish women and pagan women, and after the third century or so, about Christian women as well” (Kraemer 1992, 10). With information provided by the papyri, it is possible to reconstruct the lives of two women from antiquity: Berenice, a Herodian from the first century, and Babatha, a Maozan from the second century. (Kraemer 1999, 54). The dry climate has preserved documents written on papyrus and found in a cave where Babatha hid them or perhaps hid herself at the time of the Bar Kochba revolt. Babatha was probably born around 100 C.E. and likely died in the revolt against Rome (132-135 C. E.) (Kraemer 1999,53). Her papers include marriage contracts, loan documents, guardianship papers, and land registration among others. The documents are written in Greek, Aramaic, and a regional language. The transactions are from various legal jurisdictions and illustrate diverse cultural and legal environments in the region. They reveal the presence of women in ancient communal life and offer evidence for real women’s voices (Kraemer 1999, 54). They demonstrated a degree of freedom for a woman that cannot be discerned from the Hebrew Bible or rabbinical sources. Babatha had a very active life, was married more than once, had a son, owned property, and was the mistress of many of her own affairs. Interestingly, as is claimed about many women in antiquity, she does not read or write since a scribe is always employed in the preparation of the documents and an agent signs on her behalf (Kraemer 2004, 147). The life of another woman from antiquity is preserved in the writings of Josephus.

Berenice was a Herodian princess born in 28 C.E. and one of five children of Agrippa I and Cypros. She was the great-granddaughter of Herod the Great and became the lover of Titus, a Roman general and later emperor. A range of sources actually tell the story of Berenice. Josephus offers the greatest detail, but ancient inscriptions offer information as well. She married a man from an elite Alexandrian Jewish family. When he died, her father married her to her

husband's brother, Herod. She had two children with Herod and became a widow for the second time at the age of twenty-two. She next ruled as Queen with her brother, Agrippa II. She arranged her own marriage when she weds for a third time. She married Polemo, King of Cilicia. According to Josephus, the union failed quickly and Berenice filed for divorce (Kraemer 1999, 54). Once again, the actions of a woman appear inconsistent with other writings from the same time period. Are the freedoms that seem inherent in Berenice's life typical of the lives of women in antiquity or does her elite status allow her special latitude? An investigation beyond the scope of this document would be necessary to answer such a query, but it is important to note the historical significance of the records of the lives of both Babatha and Berenice and what their information contributes to the body of knowledge about women within Judaism in the Greco-Roman period.

The stories of Judith, Esther, and Susanna are important narratives that must be understood within ancient Israel and Judaism yet can also contribute their own evidence to the complex picture. Judith, a widow still mourning her husband several years after his death, overrules the Jewish elders of her village and takes it upon herself to save her community from a feared Assyrian general. Accompanied by her maid, Judith marches into Holofernes' camp pretending to seek asylum. After attracting Holofernes' desire, she severs his head with his own sword and returns triumphantly to her people. In the novelistic Greek expansion of the Biblical book in her name, Esther hides her Jewish identity and becomes King Artaxerxes' queen. Through her privileged position she is able to prevent annihilation of the Jews in the region and allow destruction of enemies of the Jews by revealing how her Uncle Mordecai had once acted to save the life of the King. In the stories of Daniel is told the tale of Susanna. As a married woman in her own garden, she is falsely accused of an adulterous relationship by two elders who spy on

her as she bathes. They make the accusations against her in retaliation because she refuses to lie with them. She makes her own appeal to God before the court that has sentenced her to death. Stirred by God to speak on her behalf, Daniel comes forth in support of her and condemns her accusers. While ancient Judaism holds gender roles that traditionally have clear distinctions, with women's roles taking a secondary position to those of men, these narratives show women in roles which allow decision-making capability. Given what the stories reveal about women in antiquity, the authors of these stories may have sought for them to have a function beyond their entertainment value.

Consideration of these works in their historical contexts can lead to a possible purpose behind the writing of stories which are clearly more than just a folktale. In 76 B. C. E., Shelamzion ascended the Hasmonean throne in Palestine. She was the only Jewish queen during the Second Temple period. She ruled successfully, but it is likely that her ascent received opposition. Because she was a king's widow and not a direct descendant to the king she exhibited considerable bravery in occupying the throne. In an earlier example of such a change in rule, a queen had not been successful in keeping the throne, so Tal Ilan has proposed that propaganda may have been attempted on behalf of Shelamzion in the form of narratives such as the stories of Susanna, Esther, and Judith (132). The stories show women in strong, assertive roles, and one woman is even a queen herself.

All three narratives are set during times of oppression or domination of the Jews. Because the women in these narratives are acting as agents who deliver their households, their communities, or an entire region from dangerous circumstances, they each serve a political purpose apart from the propaganda Tal Ilan proposes. As the women are able to demonstrate

resistance to patriarchal domination, they mirror the possibility of the Jews resisting domination by those groups who would control them.

While the works do not openly support women's leadership, they do question some of the conclusions about women's roles and disrupt a natural order of man's rule over women. They may have paved the way for a woman to potentially achieve power yet not pose a threat to men. Propaganda, or not, the narratives offer a possible glimpse into the lives of women in this time period or into ways it was possible to think about and tell stories about and with women.

CHAPTER II

SUSANNA

Of the three narratives offered for consideration in this work, Susanna's story will be the first surveyed. An investigation of the unique characteristics of this tale from the second or first century B.C.E. offers insight into the lives of women during the diaspora. Although Susanna represents women of particular socio-economic circumstance, she is important to all because of the perception of women her story offers to contemporary analysis. Susanna's story was included in early versions of the book of Daniel as part of his story, but her narrative can still confirm the value of a woman's voice. Susanna exemplifies a woman's capacity to make choices as she refuses the advances of the elders and as she is vindicated, their deception is exposed; her actions provide proof of the importance of a woman's own prayers to God; and in her narrative she is revealed as a woman who is an entity separate from her husband and her parents. The messages in Susanna's tale are sometimes didactical, sometimes political, but always gender-related.

The story of Susanna itself is set during the exile, but the setting may not reflect the actual time of its creation. The situation of the Jews in Palestine portrayed in the story lends credence to dating the story around 100 B.C.E. "Jews in Palestine enjoyed a bit of self-independence under the Hasmonean dynasty as well as during the Hellenistic period" (Clanton 127). The events in the narrative may correlate to times during Hasmonean Rule. Clanton's conclusions following investigation of the Old Greek and Theodotion versions of the text lead to placement of Susanna's story in the first century B.C.E.

This conclusion has significant interpretive implications for the story of Susanna in that it provides a more solid chronological basis for understanding the book and its possible purpose. It also offers historians and interpreters a window into a period of time in which women and their stories were vying, albeit cautiously, for recognition and perhaps even autonomy. (Clanton 140)

Thus the historical context of the narrative is an important consideration in identifying Susanna's story as a woman's story that stands on its own merits. Historical context may also shed light on a possible purpose for the narrative as in the theory proposed by Tal Ilan mentioned earlier, which suggests that the narrative is one of several stories which may have been written as propaganda for a queen who reigned during the first century B. C. E. Whatever motives may be uncovered, Susanna represents a story about a woman who makes her way through a distressing situation.

Various interpretations of Susanna's role in her narrative give different perceptions of Susanna as a woman. According to LaCocque, Susanna is not a feminist publication. Instead of vindicating Susanna, it vindicates the themes of innocence and justice (38). However, a work need not be labeled feminist to be a story of the actions of a strong woman. Some critics suggest that the story is not just a story of a virtuous woman avoiding seduction. The positive image is offered "but at the cost of representing a woman as an object of others' stories and not the subject of her own" (Glancy 289). Yet Susanna does seem to be the subject of her own story. The action revolves around her and her heroic pursuit of her own innocence in a manner inconsistent with common perceptions of women of her era. She feels the freedom to choose her own fate.

Susanna acts decisively on two distinct occasions in her narrative. First, she cries out in the garden and thwarts the attack by the elders and her resistance to the attack is not anticipated by the reader. She is on the grounds of her own home, but the elders who appear daily in her household to carry out the business of the Jewish court launch an attack against her in their lust for her. Yet Susanna is able to refuse them. The actions she takes shape the plot of the narrative. First, when the elders make their proposal to her, she makes her own decision: “Susanna groaned aloud and said, ‘I am trapped either way! If I do what you ask, it would mean death for me, yet if I do not, I shall never escape your clutches! Yet it is better for me to refuse and fall into your hands than to sin against the Lord’” (Wills 55, LXX Dan 13:22-23). She makes a choice. Susanna refuses the advances of the elders because they are asking her to sin on their behalf. She would prefer to face death from the results of their false accusations than give in to their demands, even though as a woman in antiquity, she would likely face death from any form of infidelity once her husband was made aware of the situation. Susanna’s choice leads her to a trial before the very elders who attempted to attack her. It is under these circumstances that she takes the second decisive action: she prays.

Susanna’s story confirms that women’s voices are heard by God. As Susanna’s trial and the sentencing proceed hastily the next day, the story represents both a personal and a community crisis (McDowell 12). There are four references to prayer in the narrative: the first occurs as Susanna looks to the heavens after the elders’ testimony against her. She senses that she has only one avenue of appeal. In her first prayer, she beseeches God silently. “The two elders stood before the people and placed their hands upon her head, but she gazed up through her tears into heaven, because she remained faithful to the Lord” (Wills 56, LXX Dan 13:34-35). The elders give their testimony, and the gathered assembly takes the word of the elders. With the

sentencing, Susanna finds herself facing death. Her second prayerful appeal comes as she protests her innocence to God, though it seems that she has no voice before the court. She analyzes her own plight and appeals to God as God is "...the agent of her own deliverance" (Glancy 301). As she relies on her religious training and her abiding faith, she cries her prayer aloud to God who knows the truth: "O eternal God who perceives all hidden things and knows all events before they come to pass, you know also that they have brought false witness against me. Now I am about to die, even though I have not done any of the wicked things they have charged against me" (Wills 56, LXX Dan 13:42-43). No one expresses any surprise that Susanna has made a prayerful, public petition on her own behalf. With regard to Susanna's petition, C. A. Moore states: "In societies where a woman's word isn't worth much, the story says that God pays attention to the powerless so the community should also" (Levine 306). There are no astonished gasps from the crowd. Prayer from a woman is presented as a natural and accepted course of action. Susanna, of course, is successful.

Whereas the first two prayers are examples of Susanna's own supplication, the last two are prayers of thanksgiving on her behalf and involve the community and Susanna's family. As truth is revealed, the assembly blesses God: "The whole crowd then cheered, and blessed the God who saves those who place their faith in him" (Wills 57, LXX Dan 13:60). Here the narrator takes the opportunity to reinforce the lesson of the need to be faithful to God. The community supports Susanna in her vindication, and all is well. In the final reference, her family thanks God for her innocence and redemption: "Hilkiah and his wife praised God for their daughter, as did her husband Joakim and all her relatives, because no wickedness was found in her" (Wills 58, Dan 13:63). Here the author gives the reader one of the few glimpses into Susanna's family structure. They are willing to rejoice with her, but they are largely absent as the trial is underway.

Their participation in the celebration simply underscores that they are a family of faith and prayer has a meaningful place in their lives.

As a daughter who had received a religious education, Susanna was prepared to offer prayers in an attempt to save herself. However, McDowell notes that in the prayer sequences there are no particular words offering a female perspective and that Susanna appears powerless (McDowell 71). Yet is there a reason for a female perspective in a prayer? Is she any more powerless than any other convicted criminal? Would a man's prayers have been any more powerful? LaCocque offers the view that the intent of such stories is to make the point that women can become God's instruments, even when they use their feminine resources (2). On the other hand, the notion that women could not be instruments of God was a convention created by man. It is also likely that the importance some sources have placed on Daniel as Susanna's source of deliverance came from a masculine perspective on the narrative.

Susanna's prayers are answered through a young man named Daniel who is in the crowd at the time of her trial and sentencing. It is Daniel's voice that speaks and offers the solution which uncovers the deception of the elders, but the message is from God and Daniel's role is but as a mouthpiece for that message. It has been argued that Susanna validates the traditional role: "...given the fact that Susanna rarely acts and speaks for herself and that she is finally saved by Daniel, the character of Susanna seems to accept her assigned place as a woman in the author's fictional world" (Clanton 131). Yet she does speak when necessary. She speaks to God when she senses that no one else will listen to her. Her presence as a female character in the story is significant. Otherwise, why not just tell another story with a male protagonist? Daniel could have come forward to save a man from false accusation as well as he comes forward to serve as a

spokesman for Susanna. According to McDowell, Susanna's role is a one of ordinary domesticity, and thus subordinate even as she serves an important function in the liberation of her people from the corrupt elders (9). The reader is able to draw the conclusion that Susanna returns to her life as it had been, but if she chooses to continue to enjoy a life of domesticity, that fact alone does not negate any intended purpose behind the narrative. The impression she leaves is still one of a woman who makes her own choices and makes an appeal for her own innocence.

As God speaks to her through a young man named Daniel, there is no perception of women being meaningless in God's eyes. Daniel chastises the crowd for their willingness to condemn a woman of Israel without a proper investigation. The message Daniel carries is that Susanna's side must be heard.

The Lord heard her cry. As she was being led away to die, God aroused the holy spirit of a young boy named Daniel, and he called out, "I am innocent of this woman's blood"...
"Although you have not examined the case closely nor investigated the facts, are you ready to condemn a woman of Israel? Return once more to the court, for these men are falsely accusing her." (Wills 56, LXX Dan 13:44-46, 48-49)

When he conducts the interviews of the elders, he exposes their treachery and deceit. He is acting on her behalf as a messenger from God.

As Susanna's innocence is confirmed, the elders are found guilty of deception, and the work presents a lesson about authority. Susanna's character endures an attempted assault, a trial and conviction, and finally an appeal for her innocence. Her actions serve as a testament to a strong female character capable of thought and independent action, and she does not fall prey to

the corrupt officials. In contrast to the elders, Susanna and Daniel are faithful and obedient. Susanna's story can be seen as "...a subversive piece of literature Susanna satirizes the Jewish 'establishment'. It contrasts the virtuous Susanna with the lecherous elders and wise children with aged scoundrels" (LaCocque 27). The elders are revealed as fallible individuals who are out for their own personal gain. They seek to punish Susanna under false pretenses because she does not succumb to their desires.

Besides revealing the strength of a woman in a desperate situation, Susanna's narrative makes a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. "Daniel is making it clear that the dividing line between righteous and wicked does not run along the gender divide. It is not women who are wicked and men who are righteous (even when they are elders) but rather it runs along the divide between the Jews and the non-Jews. The wicked elders are not true Jews (despite their impeccable ancestry) for their behavior is that of the Canaanites" (Ilan 146). The author portrays Susanna as a true Judean. At the beginning of the narrative, in a reference to the marriage of Susanna and Joakim, the author foreshadows a problem with the elders in the following lines: "In the year they were married, two elders of the people were appointed as judges, concerning whom the Lord had said, 'Iniquity came forth out of Babylon, from elders who were judges but only seemed to govern the people.' These men also frequented the house of Joakim, where they heard the cases of those who brought suit" (Wills 54). The events in the story reveal the iniquity and present an indictment of male leadership and behavior that is both criminal and incompetent. The elders take advantage of their positions and believe that their positions will make their deceptive testimony more credible than Susanna's. In evaluating the purpose of the work, McDowell states: "...the purpose of the book does not seem to be primarily to make an argument about women, but to show that in spite of corrupt male leadership, there are

true, faithful Jews like Susanna and Daniel who are righteous. Susanna plays the role of a woman who suffers because of corrupt leadership (69). Her piety and faith are in contradiction to the deceptive and corrupt nature of the elders.

According to Clanton, the results of Susanna's trial and sentencing and Daniel's questioning of the elders are illustrative of an issue which arose regarding the treatment of witnesses in the first century B.C.E. The Pharisee leader Simeon ben Shitah, supposedly the brother of Salome Alexandria (76-67 B.C.E.), was a member of the temple tribunal and thus had the power to offer opinion (Clanton 128). Rabbinic works cite Simeon in the issue of witnesses. He encourages that they be questioned carefully to determine if their statements are false. The most important connection between Simeon and the notion of false witnesses pertains to an incident involving Simeon's own son who had been sentenced to death in a trial. Before Simeon's son could be executed, the witness against him confessed to the crime. Simeon's son wanted his own execution to be carried out so that his accuser could be executed as well. This decision is based on a law from Makkot 1:16 known as "Life for life." False accusers were not put to death unless the one they accused had been punished: an "action taken in response to an action already committed" (Clanton 128). The Pharisees later expanded this view to include the intent of the false witnesses. "The case of Simeon's son preceded this stance on the part of the Pharisees and may have even occasioned it" (Clanton 128). The elders who falsely accused Susanna are put to death in her stead.

Susanna's portion of the Book of Daniel was omitted from the canon which came to represent the Jewish Bible. Might Jewish elders have left Susanna's story out of their scriptures due to its negative portrayal of community leaders? The elders would have set the canon, and the

story would have served no purpose for them. However, Susanna's character could have served there as an example of honesty and virtue for women. "But Susanna's sex and class impede any unambiguous reading of her character as a paradigm of righteousness or her setting as the epitome of the patriarchy" (Levine 307). Thus, gender issues alone are unlikely to have been sufficient for its exclusion. Around 100 C.E., rabbis made choices about books, or parts of books to be included in the canon. They regarded the literature of the Second Temple period as not definitive in its presentation of faith and the practice of faith. The narratives of Susanna and Judith both were victims of this viewpoint (LaCocque 5). However, Susanna's prayerful appeal to God for deliverance makes her a good example of a faithful servant to be followed by all.

Susanna's family may have been the people who taught her to be a faithful servant, but they are unable to assist her in her time of need. The text indicates that on the day of the trial when she is summoned "She came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives" (Wills 55, LXX Dan 13:30). As the elders command that she remove her head covering, the author reveals that her family members weep for her, but no one steps up to aid her. She seems on her own and forced to act independently in a setting in which she may not have desired independence. In the narrative she seems to be recognized as an entity unto herself in a time period that would belie such freedom on the part of a woman.

Conspicuously absent from the list of her devotees at the trial is the name of her husband. Even the manner in which she is introduced as a married woman seems curious. The author describes "...a man named Joakim, who was married to Susanna, the daughter of Hilkiah"(Wills 54, LXX Dan 13:2). He is married to her rather than she is married to him. At the close of the story as her family rejoices in her acquittal the text reads, "On that day, innocent blood was

spared. Hilkiah and his wife praised God for their daughter, as did her husband Joakim and all her relatives, because no wickedness was found in her” (Wills 58, LXX Dan 13:63). The husband once again appears as an after thought. She has stood alone during the trial and her husband seems only incidentally involved after she is found innocent. In Susanna’s case, her husband is mentioned along with her father who is offered as proof of her lineage. He is named as a valued member of the Jewish community, yet where is he as his “house” is about to be violated? In refusing the elders, Susanna acted to protect herself, to protect the sanctity of her husband’s household and to maintain her faith and obedience to God. She has freedoms within the perceived patriarchal setting. She acts in her own prayerful appeal to God and as her own agent. Her prayers are answered as God speaks through a young boy who is present at the time of her trial. Daniel is the messenger, but the blessing is Susanna’s alone.

CHAPTER III

ESTHER

In this look at the lives of women in antiquity as expressed through narratives of the first century B.C. E., the second woman in consideration is Esther, as her story is told in *Greek Esther*. In this version of the story of Esther, the narrative in the Hebrew Bible is expanded and is presented to appeal a readership that sought to have “the same kind of reading experience that other peoples of the Mediterranean world would come to find in Greek novels” (Wills 29). Esther’s story is the second example of a narrative that reveals a peek at the life of a woman in ancient times. It is a more familiar story to modern readers than Susanna’s since the Hebrew version is included in the canon and it likely was more widely read. However, its familiarity does not mean it is not still open to interpretation. Timothy Beal offers a perspective on the re-consideration of the familiar biblical narrative. While there can be no “fresh start” for the reader as the reader has “already begun,” it is still possible to invest in the story in a new way. “Thus, it is not inappropriate to continue asking questions that struggle with the issues of determination--determinations of the reader and determinations of the text” (Beal 87). So, even a seasoned reader may make different determinations about Esther in a close reading of the text. Esther’s narrative reveals anxiety in the patriarchy, evidence of eroticism as a powerful tool, and proof of answered prayer for those individuals whose piety is more covert.

Like Susanna, Esther is a heroine of elite status, but she comes from humble beginnings. As a young girl she loses both of her parents, and her cousin Mordecai becomes her guardian. Mordecai is a high official in the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes. When the king casts aside his wife Vashti, who makes her own contribution to the narrative, the search begins for a new queen. The king decrees that many young women should be brought to Susa to live under the

care of his harem keeper, Hegai. Esther is among these young women. When Esther moves into Artaxerxes' harem in order to begin a year-long preparation before being presented to the king, she begins a personal journey that will culminate in the deliverance of the Jews of the region from certain annihilation. In fact, the Persian setting may be important as an attempt to show the Jewish audience how to lead successful lives in the years of the Roman diaspora (White 165). In her journey, Esther utilizes deception to get what she wants, makes her own prayerful appeals to God for assistance, and chooses to challenge the ruler of the realm.

While the narrative is the story of Esther, there is another woman whose challenge to authority exposes anxieties within the patriarchy. The woman is Queen Vashti, Esther's predecessor. Vashti's refusal to appear wearing her crown when summoned by her husband at the close of a week of revelry leads to the loss of that crown. According to Bea Wilder, custom would dictate that under these circumstances Vashti's refusal would have been expected of a wife. In Persian feasts, wives participated only until the drinking began, at which time the concubines or courtesans took over. If Vashti had appeared before the king's drunken guests, she would have been compromising her dignity as a married woman (116). Instead, her refusal evokes rage on the part of the king, and leads him to seek the advice of those present as to what must be done. Apparently, a law can be immediately placed into effect to handle such insubordination on the part of wives, queens included. The exaggerated response reaches near comic proportions as the offense and the remedy are explained:

It is not just the king whom Vashti has wronged, but all the rulers and officials of the king. Because she has defied King Artaxerxes, the wives of other rulers of Persians and Medes will dare show similar disrespect to their husbands when they hear what she has

done. If it please the king, let him proclaim a royal decree-written according to the laws of the Medes and the Persians, so that it cannot be altered-that Vashti not be permitted to come before him again, and that her crown be given to another better than she. Let this law be proclaimed throughout the kingdom, so that all of the women from the richest to the poorest will give honor to their husbands. (Wills 32, NRSV Esther [Greek] 1:16-20)

For men in a patriarchal society, this king and his advisors are certainly insecure. Poor Vashti is that inappropriate female role model with whom a man would not want his wife to associate, lest she be encouraged to think for herself and refuse to be paraded before her husband's drunken friends at the next party. "Vashti is the supplement that Esther requires. Her erasure marks on Esther's character re-member the extremes to which this ridiculous patriarchy will go in order to maintain itself, and the extreme to which each woman must go to resist it" (Beal 106). One must wonder exactly how fast the news of Vashti's insubordination would have traveled across the region. Vashti's refusal represents a courageous act in the face of a male-dominated society, yet the king's response makes the men's position in that society look tenuous at best. According to Wills' commentary, "Some have argued that the literary and satirical qualities of the Hebrew Esther have been diluted in *Greek Esther*" (Wills 29). Yet in the scenes which describe Vashti's failure to comply with the king's demands, satire abounds. The king and his contemporaries are left scrambling to legislate their own respect after Vashti denies them her presence. The brief event sets the stage for Esther and her future manipulation of the king.

Esther's role as a woman whose eroticism becomes power begins as the king begins his search for a new queen. Esther is among the young women who join the harem of women who are the king's potential replacements for the troublesome Vashti. Under the care of Hegai, the

harem keeper, she is soon one of his favorites. In analysis of this event from a contemporary viewpoint, a young woman placed in a harem to win the favor of a man by sexual means is considered degrading, yet in ancient times it was an accepted means of gaining a position of power. Esther is able to take advantage of the opportunity presented to her to improve her standing among the other young women (White 168). For Esther, her sexuality gives her power, while for Susanna, hers leads to her victimization. When Esther is called before the king, he is instantly taken with her. Her beauty and her charms are irresistible to him. “And when she entered into Artaxerxes the king in the seventh year of his reign, in the twelfth month (that is, Adar) the king immediately fell in love with her. He preferred her to all of the other virgins, and placed the queen’s diadem upon her head” (Wills 34, NRSV Esther [Greek] 2:16-17). Esther, a Jewish woman becomes queen of a gentile nation. The king has crowned a woman queen about whom he knows nothing.

The facts about herself that Esther has withheld from the king form the basis of a deception which frames the narrative. Deception offers another comparison with Susanna’s story; Susanna has the deception of the elders used against her, yet in Esther’s story, the deception is of her own doing. On the advice of Mordecai, she does not reveal to anyone that she is a Jew, and although those at court are aware of Mordecai’s heritage, they are unaware of Esther’s connection to Mordecai. There is much speculation as to why Mordecai would ask Esther to carry out this deception, but the most logical is so that there would be no legal obstacle to the throne. Or, it may have been a plot device designed to increase tension when later as Haman plots to destroy the Jews, he is unaware that these are the queen’s people (White168). Esther’s hidden Jewish identity becomes a central element as she is called upon to help the Jews in King Artaxerxes’ kingdom.

While the author reminds the reader that Mordecai had brought Esther up in the Jewish tradition and to keep God's laws, she has bedded down with a man before becoming his wife, and is living in a household that does not keep Jewish customs. Since she later prayerfully confesses these sins, it seems possible that her altered lifestyle may be a reason for her acceptance of the challenge that Mordecai lays before her a few years into her queen ship. A man named Haman has been promoted over all others at court and demands that all those serving under him bow down before him. Mordecai refuses to do so. When asked by the other courtiers why he disobeys his superior, Mordecai tell them that he is Jewish. White speculates that Mordecai's refusal may be an attempt to show who is the stronger of the two: the Jew or the gentile. Yet the possibility exists that this action too was merely a plot device to lead Haman to attempt to destroy the Jews (White 169). When Haman discovers Mordecai's insubordination, rather than simply murdering the Jew Mordecai, he plots to kill many more Jews. He takes his plan to King Artaxerxes.

There is a people scattered among the nations throughout your kingdom, whose laws are different from all other peoples, and who disobey the laws of your majesty. It is not expedient for you majesty to tolerate them. Therefore, if it please the king, publish a decree that they should be destroyed, and I shall deposit ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury. (Wills 35, NRSV Esther [Greek] 3:8-9)

The king agrees to the plan and gives Haman his royal seal for the written declaration ordering the destruction of the Jews in his kingdom. When the news reaches Mordecai, he plunges himself into mourning and dresses in sack cloth and covers himself with ashes as he runs through the town. Now is the time when Esther is called into action.

The moment has arrived for Esther to begin her intervention on behalf of the Jewish people. Mordecai sets up the action as he sends word to her that she must appeal to the king that the lives of her people must be spared. “Go call upon the Lord, then speak to the king concerning us; by this you can deliver us from death” (Wills 37, NRSV Esther [Greek] 4:8). Esther is initially fearful as a request to come before the king without his summons can be a punishable offense. Esther’s actions in response to the rising conflict are the mirror image to those of Vashti. “She does voluntarily what Vashti has refused to do. She comes to the king unbidden. Thus, the joke, finally, is on the males in the story: see what a seemingly obedient female can achieve?” (Brenner 75, 1995). Mordecai reminds her that it is time for her to break her silence about her heritage and even suggest she may have been destined for the task before her. “And what is more, who knows whether it was for this purpose that you have become queen” (Wills 38, NRSV Esther [Greek] 4:14). Well, the implication is that God knows and is in control of the events. God is acting through humans, Esther has been elected for this purpose, and she has a directive to carry out. There is no great exclamation that a woman could save the day. There is merely the circumstance that she is closest to the king and thus the logical person for the job.

As Esther considers what has become her destiny, the reader becomes aware of her covert piety. Up this point in the narrative, the reader has no indication of Mordecai or Esther participating in any religious observances. Their faith has been demonstrated not by any religious observance but by decisive behavior. Yet as she prepares to take on Mordecai’s challenge, she returns to the traditions of prayer and fasting. She appeals to Mordecai to ask the Jews in Susa to fast along with her, and he makes the first prayerful request. He offers praise and acknowledges the overall superiority of God, and as he asks for deliverance of the Jews, he includes an explanation for his treatment of Haman which has led to this terrible chain of events. “You

know, O Lord, that in refusing to bow down to an arrogant Haman, I was not acting out of haughty pride or a desire for status, for indeed I would have gladly kissed the soles of his feet in order to save Israel. But I did this because I could not give greater honor to a person than I do to God” (Wills 38, NRSV Esther [Greek] 14:2). Suddenly, Mordecai is overtly religious, and offering religious reasoning as to his behavior which has so provoked Haman. Esther too makes her appeal as she sheds her finery and turns to mourning clothes (NRSV Esther [Greek] 14:2).

Prayers in *Greek Esther* serve to make a direct connection to God which Hebrew Esther does not attempt. The prayers help to allay the anxiety created in Hebrew Esther in the author’s omission of the mention of God in the text. As Esther begins her prayerful appeal, there is no special introduction to a prayer which is delivered by a woman. On the surface, her prayer is as Mordecai’s: for the continued protection of the Jewish people. Her prayer includes a type of confession. “But now we have sinned before you, and you have therefore handed us over into the hands of our enemies, because we have heaped great honors upon their gods” (Wills 39, NRSV Esther [Greek] 14:6-7a). Here she speaks of the lives she and Mordecai live among the gentiles. The sins she refers to are not gender-related, but the character of her prayers soon changes. This admission could be an acknowledgement of her marriage to the heathen king and her participation in his lifestyle for many years. She goes on to ask that the enemies of the Jews be caught in their own trap and that Haman in particular be punished. As her prayer continues, her requests and confessions are more feminine in nature as she addresses her sexual relationship with the king. She asks for courage in her approach to the king and that his heart will be changed. Next, she brings up her own offenses and claims she never really cared for the queen’s honors bestowed upon her: “You know that I despised the veneration I received from the lawless and loathed bed of the uncircumcised or of any foreigner” (Wills 39, NRSV Esther [Greek]

14:15). These are admissions only she, as a woman, could make. Just as Mordecai seeks to clear his conscience about any role he may have inadvertently had in instigation of their troubles, she adds that she had not experienced any happiness until this moment, except in the Lord himself. She seems to believe it is necessary to make things right between herself and the Lord before she asks for help to carry out her duties. Thus, in spite of the gendered nature of Esther's prayer, both she and Mordecai have the same intent in mind: forgiveness.

In spite of the assistance she requests from God, Esther's plan for deliverance of her people depends on her own seductive nature. As a queen, she may dress the part, but she actually has no real authority other than that she is the chief wife. "She resorts to feminine and sexual charms, wine and merriment in order to make the king change his mind and to trap Haman; for apparently no other means of persuasion is available to her" (Brenner 1985, 31). After three days of prayer and fasting, Esther is ready. She dresses in her beautiful clothing, makes herself lovely for the king, and makes her way to his chambers accompanied by two of her servants. She is so taken by his appearance on the throne that she faints. Is this a tactic on the part of Esther in order to soften the king's heart over her sudden uninvited appearance in his presence? At any rate, she comes to Artaxerxes as the embodiment of her feminine beauty (NRSV Esther [Greek]15:5). According to the text, the Lord is already coming to her aid: "God then changed the spirit of the king to gentleness..." (Wills 40, NRSV Esther[Greek] 15:8). Esther has made it past her first obstacle by gaining access to the king. He reassures her by indicating that permission is required of others to approach, but not to her. After she recovers her senses, Esther uses the opening to make her first request, and she asks the king and Haman to come to a banquet she is giving the next evening. After this first banquet, she invites them to a second. In this manner she lulls Haman into a false sense of security and hopes to catch him off guard on the second evening. In

the meantime, Haman tries to enjoy his newly discovered social status but is dismayed to see Mordecai in the courtyard. After discussing the problem with his wife, Haman determines that Mordecai should be killed without delay and orders a gallows be constructed. Of course, in the end, the gallows are used for Haman's hanging.

On the second evening, Esther's is secure in her position and her calculations as to how to rid the court of Haman and his evil plan are complete. She makes her wishes clear: "If I have pleased you, my request is that you spare my life and the life of my people.... And the one who has denounced us is not worthy of his position in the king's court" (Wills 43, NRSV Esther [Greek] 7:3). Esther is bravely making her appeal to the king, but at the same time, the king seems unaware of the proclamation he has just allowed issued in his own name. When Haman is identified as the offender who is not worthy of his position at court, Artaxerxes demands that he be hanged on the gallows meant for Mordecai, but this action is an angry response to what the king at that moment perceives as Haman attacking the queen. In actuality, all Haman has done is to attempt to throw himself quite literally on the queen's mercy. With Haman out of the way, and Mordecai free to assist her, Esther really gets busy.

Apparently, revocation of the order to kill all of the Jews in the kingdom is not sufficient for Esther; she seeks revenge for generations of persecution. With the king's seal in their possession to serve as his endorsement, Esther and Mordecai create a new decree which exposes Haman as an evil-doer and champions the rights of Jews to live as they please in observance of their own laws in the king's designated provinces. However, after an initial declaration of a more peaceful existence for all, the decree sets aside a day for the Jews to seek further protection for themselves. "Further, give to them the reinforcements that they need so that on the thirteenth day

of the twelfth month that is Adar, on that very day they may exact vengeance on those who were arrayed against them in the hour of their affliction” (Wills 46). Thousands and thousands are killed in Susa and the surrounding area. Mordecai takes a respected and honored position at court and many come to fear him. Esther asks the king for yet another day of destruction and even more lives are lost. The purpose for the revenge is not at all clear in the story. After Esther secures the safety of her people at the moment, it seems that she wants to secure it for the future as well, eliminating as many enemies of the Jews as possible. If the purpose of the narrative itself is as Tal Ilan claims and it is indeed propaganda for the reign of a queen in the first century B.C. E., perhaps the message is that a queen may be as ruthless as any king in doing what is necessary to rule her kingdom.

In *Greek Esther*, the reader follows the unfolding narrative of a young Jewish woman of humble beginnings who through a set of fortuitous circumstances is given the opportunity to become a queen. As queen, her position in society allows her to avert disaster for her people. Although the central theme of the narrative deals with a threat to the Jewish people, it does challenge some staid ideals about gender hierarchy. “[T]he author of Esther is not propagating a feminist revolution to overthrow the present patriarchal order, but it does challenge some of the more blatant assumptions of its promoters about the thoroughly negative and subordinate nature of women” (Ilan 145). If circumstances are as her cousin Mordecai suggests, she was in fact chosen by God for this role of deliverer. So, here is a tale written in first century B.C. E. that has not only a female protagonist but a female protagonist who was chosen by God. She is able to use her feminine wiles not only to take the crown, but also to take advantage of the position it offered her. Whereas Susanna’s eroticism leads to her victimization, Esther’s gives her power over a king. Esther’s power is as much rooted in feminine beauty as it is in the possession of the

queenship itself. Esther exercises freedoms that even a queen might not be thought to enjoy. Esther's ability to accomplish what may seem the impossible task reflects Elizabeth Janeway's position on women in many societies: "Women have nearly always been among the weak in any society, and the adjustments that women have made during the centuries spent as subordinate partners in power relationships illuminate the whole range of power situations" (quoted in White 167). Esther's success should not come as a surprise; she is acting in the same manner as many women before her, and modeling behavior for those who will follow after her, as she takes control as the female protagonist in the patriarchal society. After news of Haman's decree reaches her, she carefully considers her position of advantage described by Mordecai and acts on it in a steady, determined manner as she reaches her goal of safety for her people and beyond.

CHAPTER IV

JUDITH

The story of Judith displays by far the most daring events of the three narratives. Judith's actions are the most unilateral in nature and the choices she makes are entirely hers. Many of the same elements revealed in the narratives of Susanna and Esther are included in Judith's story. Judith, too, chooses the action she plans to take, offers prayers for guidance in her chosen mission, and utilizes a measure of deception in order to reach her goal. In addition, the element of eroticism as a powerful tool is also present as Judith makes use of her feminine wiles. The results are the same as they are for Susanna and Esther; Judith's exploits also lead to preservation of the Jewish people. Again, the reader may look to a story composed in the first century B.C.E. and surmise that the restrictions which appear to govern the lives of women which are described in later rabbinical sources may indeed not be in place. In a story with illogical beginnings, and a deliberately incorrect historical chronology, the author is free to set a dramatic backdrop for the achievements of the widow Judith as she represents the agent of change. The story opens on the establishment of the first eighteen years of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar and his regional conquests, all designed to set the stage for his general, Holofernes' fearsome nature. Almost half of the narrative is devoted to the build-up of the military presence in the region. The author places the emphasis on the male, military complex that has achieved victory after victory in the name of King Nebuchadnezzar. They have now set out to make the Jewish community of Bethulia their next conquest. As Judith's community of Bethulia comes under siege, the people become anxious and frightened. The men in the village are incapable of coming up with a solution to the problem of a blockade imposed by Nebuchadnezzar's troops, commanded by Holofernes, which have deprived the people of food and water. When Uzziah and the ruling

elders are prepared to bargain with God over the need to either sin or surrender, the widow Judith steps forward to make things right. In a society which is completely and unapologetically patriarchal, a woman takes on the role of savior of the community and through exposure of weakness in the leaders of her community, prayer, and deception, she succeeds in marvelous fashion.

It is impossible to know the author's motives in creating the character Judith, a remarkably wise and capable woman, and allowing her heroine status in the midst of a patriarchal society. Some answers may lie in an attempt to examine uniqueness in Judaism not present in other patriarchal groups of the Middle Eastern region. One scholar speculates hopefully, "Israel is the name given to an egalitarian social body in contrast with the feudal societies of the region...YHWH is equally the god of all members of the federation united by the Covenant. One could therefore expect that the ideal of equality could be extended to the relationships between the sexes" (LaCocque 11). One might expect it, but the impression is that such equality was not present in antiquity. However, Judith certainly seems unaware of any inequality. As Judith's portion of the story opens, it is she who establishes the uniqueness of Israel's faith. According to Craghan, when Judith insists that Bethulia must resist the Assyrians, she "sees Israel's faith as the willingness to be different from all the other nations....To give up is, in effect, to deny the power of the Lord and his plan for his own people" (66). It is Judith who picks up the thread of tradition for the Hebrew people that has been dropped by the elders of Bethulia. As she prepares to take the lead, the reader is reminded of aspects of the stories of Moses. Just as Moses is the inspirational and spiritual leader of the Jewish people in the stories of Genesis and Exodus, Judith serves this function for the people of Bethulia. She drives home the point that keeping the people together can insure the perpetuation of the faith, and she sends

this message as a woman. Craven notes that "...all faithful members of the community have access to everything that made Judith great" (233). They all have access to the divine: the one true God. From the beginning of her story, Judith is prepared to demonstrate this access.

Judith enters her own narrative in medias res; the reader's introduction to her character is as an independent woman in her community. Her very introduction is atypical for her times. From the beginning, "Judith subverts her patriarchal society. She is introduced with her own genealogy, the longest of any woman in the Hebrew Bible (Judith 8:1). She is a rich, beautiful, presumably childless widow--all potential threats to the patriarchal order" (Crawford 12). Yet she has a well-respected place in the community and her independence is not called into question. After her husband's death, "She continued in charge of his estate, yet no one spoke ill of her, because she was very reverent toward God" (Wills 104, Judith 8:7-8). Her acceptance is bound in her religious affiliation with her community and gives the impression of a woman's unquestionable access to God.

Judith's first action in the narrative is authoritative. She learns of the elders' plan for a potential surrender to Nebuchadnezzar's forces, and in her first scene in the narrative, she chastises Uzziah and the elders as a mother might scold her children. "But who are you to test God today and put yourself in God's place among the people? You are trying to test the Lord Almighty, but you will never understand anything! Indeed, you cannot even search out the depths of the human heart, not comprehend a person's innermost thoughts. How then could you possibly search out God...?" (Wills 105, Judith 8:12-14). Realizing that God is under no real obligation to save the village, she trusts that he will and sets out as his spokeswoman. Showing that God has the power to save, but he may or may not do so is a part of the didactic function of

the text (Nickelsburg 108). Judith's role is to revive the patriotism of the Jewish community and remind all of their God's omnipotence, and she chooses a unique manner in which to fulfill the obligation.

The power of prayer and a woman's employment of it is Judith's first line of defense against Holofernes' army. The story of Judith is unusual, because of the number of prayers included for a narrative of its length: "...all of the prayers are by women, include women, or are asking a woman to pray....Of the fifteen prayers, ten are by Judith herself; four are by an assembly including both men and women, and one is by the town magistrate asking Judith to pray" (McDowell 46). Uzziah begins by asking Judith to pray for rain in order to fill the cisterns in the town so that they might withstand the siege that has halted their water supply. His request seems small-minded given the plan that Judith is formulating as she announces, "...the Lord will save Israel by my hand" (Wills 106, Judith 8:33). In the first private prayer that Judith offers, she begins, "O Lord of my forefather Simeon to whom you gave a sword to use for vengeance against foreigners who stripped a virgin's garments to defile her..." (Wills 106, Judith 9:2). She makes reference to Simeon's revenge for the rape of his sister, Dinah. With this and other feminine references, she molds the prayer into a message with a gender-specific perspective (McDowell 48). Such gender-identification is either not present, or much less prevalent in the prayers of Susanna and Esther. By comparison to Susanna's prayers, which demonstrate no gender-specificity, and Esther's, which had only minor feminine overtones (particularly when compared to Mordecai's), Judith's prayers are distinctly female. They are clearly the appeal of a woman as she continues in her first private prayer with the words "O my god, listen now also to the plea of a widow...Set forth your wrath against them, and give into my hand - the hand of a widow!- the strength my plan requires" (Wills 107, Judith 9:9). As Judith makes her appeal for

strength, she is acting for the community, “Still, the fact should not escape us that the character presented in Judith as the mediator of God’s salvation and as an example of faith and piety in the midst of a crisis, is a woman”(McDowell 46). As Judith prepares herself with prayer, she is acting on the strength and confidence she possesses as a Jewish woman prepared to do what some would see as a man’s job.

Deception is sometimes seen as a man’s job, as it played a significant role in the elders’ indictment of Susanna; in Judith’s story, she perpetrates the trickery. Deception is already on her mind, as Judith implies as she nears the close of her prayer: “Grant, I pray that my deceitful speech wound and maim those who have plotted evil against your covenant” (Wills 108, Judith 9:13). By now she has planned her means to access Holofernes’ camp. Yet she cannot go to him in her widow’s garment; instead, she bathes, anoints herself and dresses in her finest clothes in order to make sure she gains the general’s attention. Intertwined with her deception is her use of her feminine wiles. Just as eroticism was a powerful tool for Esther, it is even more a means to an end for Judith.

Her use of deceit and specifically her sexuality may seem offensive and chauvinistic. For the author, it is the opposite. Judith wisely chooses the weapon in her arsenal that is appropriate to her enemy’s weakness. She plays his game, knowing that he will lose. In doing so, she makes fools out of a whole army of men and humiliates their general.

(Nicklesberg 108)

Her work begins as she quietly and secretly leaves Bethulia accompanied only by her maid.

While it seems natural that Judith should employ her feminine wiles in defeat of her adversary, her use of deception is not always admired. It is ironic that when a woman decides to use beauty to get what she wants, she is seen as a wanton woman, but when a man uses his strength to get what he wants, his actions are deemed heroic. When something needs to happen to save Bethulia the men are caught without ideas, and Judith and her good looks lead the way. Although she asks for his guidance, she does not wait passively for God's action. Her wisdom is practical, resourceful, and no detail in planning escapes her. "Deceit is her *modus operandi*, her conversation is a string of lies, half truths and double entendres" (Nickelsburg 105). She is a master in the art of deception and never seems to flinch as she waltzes her way into the enemy camp. M.P. Coote suggests that although lying and deceit are not normally tolerated in heroes, they may be essential to the work at hand. A person who "...can move across boundaries from this world to the 'other world' and must use lying and deceit to cross over there...and return without getting caught" (quoted in Alonso-Schokel 53). And it is in exactly this manner that Judith perpetrates her deceit. She misrepresents her devotion to her Hebrew community in order to win the favor of Holofernes. She begins by explaining to the guards that approach her as she and her maid pass through the valley. She says "I am a Hebrew, but I am fleeing from them because you will soon devour them. I am on my way to meet Holofernes, commander-in-chief of your army, to give him reliable information. I shall show him a path by which he can take control of all hill country without losing a single life" (Wills 109, Judith 10:12-13). Of course she lies. At least one life will be lost very soon.

Judith is careful and calculating as she demonstrates consistency in her comings and goings from the tent Holofernes supplies for her. After she has convinced him of her desire to serve Nebuchadnezzar, her actions are never questioned. She leaves the tent at the same time

each morning and each night for prayers and for bathing. In Holofernes' camp, bathing and prayer together have significance as religious purification rituals as Judith prepares herself to act on God's behalf (McDowell 51). When she has gained the trust of Holofernes, indeed she has lulled him into complacency as he awaits the surrender of the people of Bethulia. After four days have passed, Holofernes invites her to dine with him. She makes herself up, and joins him. "He had been waiting for just such an opportunity to seduce her from the very first moment he saw her. 'Drink up,' he said, 'and join us in revelry.'" She replies eagerly as this is the opportunity she has been seeking as well. "'Yes, I shall drink, my lord...for this is indeed the greatest day in my life'" (Wills 113, Judith 12:17-18). As Holofernes lies on his bed in a drunken stupor, and her maid waits just outside of the curtain of the tent, Judith offers one last prayer for strength, and uses his own sword to sever his head from his body. In killing the general, Judith has accomplished two feats: saving herself from his assault on her own person and delivering her own people from danger.

Suddenly, the reader is aware of Judith's masterful plan and her careful establishment of a specific routine makes sense. As Judith and her maid carry the head of Holofernes back to Bethulia, they duplicate their actions of every other evening in camp. Except this time, they continue past the spring and on to the gates of their town, announcing their arrival: "Open the gates, I beg you! Our God is with us, who brings forth his strength in Israel and his might against his enemies, as he has done today" (Wills 114, Judith 13:11). It is morning before the Assyrians realize what has occurred. The reaction of the other Assyrian generals upon learning of Holofernes' death speaks of amazing insecurity. One general is gone, many remain, and a valley full of Assyrian soldiers still stand at the ready, but the chaos which ensues allows the meager army from Bethulia to achieve victory. Bagoas, Holofernes' servant, exclaims "One Hebrew

woman has shamed the house of King Nebuchadnezzar!” (Wills 114, Judith 14:18). Only one woman has accomplished a great deal. It is as if the insecurities of the patriarchy which surface with Vashti’s refusal in *Greek Esther*, have taken down an entire army. “Struck with fear, to a man they lost their nerve and broke and ran, pouring across the plain and over the hills” (Wills 116, Judith 15:2). It has been established that Judith’s role is not only to save the Jews, but also to remind them of the power God has over their lives and of the protection that he offers pious Jews. However, it is more difficult to accept the Bethulian’s defeat of the Assyrian forces than it is to accept Judith cutting off Holofernes head with his own sword. How is it possible that the removal of the head of one man symbolically beheads the entire bunch, from the generals to the foot soldiers? The striking result of Judith’s deception and seduction is total defeat of the Assyrians at the hands of one woman who is doing the work of God.

Judith herself seems a bit surprised at what she has been able to accomplish. As she presents the head to the elders she is exhilarated. “The Lord struck him down by the hand of a woman! As the Lord lives, who protected me as I went, it was my face that seduced him and led to his destruction, and yet, he never committed a sin with me to defile or shame me” (Wills 114, Judith 113; 15-16). She was able to use her eroticism as power to overcome Holofernes, but she herself did not fall prey to him. She has freed herself as well as her people. “Judith is a model of human liberation. As a woman and a widow, she does not enjoy a privileged position in a male-dominated society. Yet, she is the one who boldly suggests the means of countering the Assyrian war machine” (Craghan 66). Her defeat of the Assyrian war machine is much celebrated. Prayers are once again an important part of the narrative, and women lead the celebration.

Judith's victory is celebrated in Jerusalem as well as Bethulia. The high priest Joakim blesses her for her accomplishments. "Through you has come the exaltation of Jerusalem, through you Israel has been glorified! You are the pride of our people" (Wills 117, Judith 15:9). The priest's words make no exceptions for Judith's gender; the blessings are heartfelt and generous in nature. As the celebration continues, "All of the women of Israel' gather to see her and bless her; some even dance in her honor. In turn, she distributes branches to her companions. These women, who then 'crowned' themselves with the olive wreaths, reveal their transformation into active agents" (Levine 218). Judith leads the group in a hymn of thanksgiving, and praise which in part describes her deeds:

She made up her face with precious oils,

And fastened her hair with a tiara,

She chose out her own linen garments to bring his downfall,

Her sandal bewitched his eye,

And her beauty captivated his heart,

While her sword sliced through his neck!

(Wills 118, Judith 16:7b-9)

Judith returns to her home, but her fame follows her for the remainder of her life.

Although she lived independently, and in solitude, as she mourned the death of her husband, Judith does not seek to change much about her lifestyle as she returns to Bethulia. Sidnie White Crawford observes that "...Judith does not resubmit herself to the patriarchal norm.

She remains a widow with control over her own inherited wealth. Several commentators, clearly disturbed by this, have tried to marry her off. ... But Judith will not be subsumed into the Patriarchal order so easily” (Crawford 13). However it may be argued that Judith was never living under the patriarchal order in the first place. In her move to subvert the weak decision-making by the community’s elders, she asks no one’s permission for an audience as Esther does; she summons the elders herself and informs them that they are in error. So, is there some movement in place to bring this wayward woman under control in spite of what she has accomplished?

In spite of the plaudits from the elders of Bethulia, and celebration in the visit of the high priest Joakim, there are careful and calculated efforts made to restore Judith to the status quo once the Assyrians are defeated. The story is written in the framework of tradition, but it is not traditional. The events in the story could prove dangerous to men. Suppose women were allowed to criticize male leaders, acted independently, refused to marry (or re-marry) and had money or servants of their own. Such a situation could certainly threaten a community (Craven 223). In the words of A.J. Levine, it is necessary to make Judith’s actions look “kosher.” The concluding Psalm “reinforces traditional gender roles first by the irregularity of conquest by the ‘hand of the female’ and by giving full glory to the deity” (Levine 221). She submits to the priest, and gives up evidence of her presence in the camp. Everything returns to normal. Even though she achieves some measure of independence as she returns to her estate and never remarries, she “...becomes other to her past” (Levine 221). Yet the image of a mother who has taken care of her children and made everything right lingers. Judith chooses the position she plans to occupy in her community. One can presume she did not choose to return to her widow’s weeds and humble abode on the roof of her deceased husband’s home yet she does choose to return, live out her life,

and to never remarry. If she chooses to return to the status quo, so be it. Every good patriarchy deserves a matriarch.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The stories of Susanna, Esther and Judith are marvelous tales from the second and first century B.C.E. As heroines of their respective narratives, they offer a wealth of information about women of their time period. While there are many conclusions that have been drawn about the purposes behind the writing of these ancient works, the purposes will never fully be known and all is at best educated speculation. The best analysis comes from the heart of each narrative and the messages conveyed to any generation of readers. The narratives themselves give the twenty-first century reader a peek at the lives and the freedoms of their heroines within the context of their histories, but in addition, tell the stories of three women whose stories still capture the imagination. Each delivers a message from patriarchal times of access to a protective and caring deity, courage in the face of a daunting personal danger, and revelation of poor performance on the part of elders or kings.

All three of the narratives may be viewed from two perspectives: from the point of view that it is highly significant that these narratives have central figures who are women, and also from the point of view that this same fact is unremarkable. As the plot progresses in each story, it is not necessarily a key point that the action either revolves around a female character or is being carried out by a female character. In the story of Susanna, her femininity, indeed her eroticism is what leads to the central conflict. She is victimized because of her beauty and desirability; however, as she prays for deliverance, her prayers are of a quality in which gender is not discerned. She is delivered from her death sentence, and the corruption of the elders in her community is exposed because she is a faithful servant of God and he answers her prayer, not

because of her gender. There is the same two-fold representation in Esther's narrative. Certainly she uses the power of eroticism in order to gain the position of Artaxerxes' queen, and a portion of her prayers for guidance and assistance from God are gender specific, but once she gains access to the king's favors, she carries out her plan to save the Jews as a strong-willed, determined hero. Finally, as soon as Judith appears in her narrative, she assumes control of the action. Gender references appear in Judith's story in her prayers as appeals to God as simply a widow seeking a means to deliver the Jews from danger, and in her powerful seduction of Holofernes as she enters his camp. Yet as she carries out her plan to take over the elders' decision-making power and marches into enemy territory to defeat a powerful adversary, her gender is not questioned. Alice Ogden Bellis offers a description of Judith that is applicable to all three heroines: "Not only is she independent. Not only is she able to act in ways that are thought of as masculine and feminine. She is also able to give of herself in ways that are public, constructive, and self-chosen" (Bellis 222). Thus, the works provide examples of women as role models in ancient times that are important as leaders in what is construed as a heavily patriarchal society. In addition to serving as examples of individual triumph in struggles in the midst of the patriarchy, the stories of these three women may also serve the political function of exemplifying the struggles of the Jewish people in times of oppression. Successful resolution of an individual's conflict may equate to success in survival of a people struggling against oppression.

The search is on constantly for wonderful women role models for today's adolescent women. Any of these stories could fill the bill nicely. At times it seems that the patriarchy is still alive and well, flourishing in even what is seen as a liberated America. With regard to Judith's narrative, Craven writes: "As a feminist, I have secretly hoped that study of the book of Judith would bring us closer to recovering an appreciation of a mentality within ancient Israel that from

time to time broke with the patriarchy” (232). There seem to be several such breaks just in the narratives discussed here, so it is likely that these events are but a few of many. The patriarchy can exist only where women allow it to exist. In her discussion of the origins of the patriarchy, Gerda Lerner writes an indictment frightfully applicable to the twenty-first century:

The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of the knowledge of their history; the dividing of women one from the other, by defining ‘respectability’ and ‘deviance’ according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. (217)

The lessons in Lerner’s statement for women today are lessons about education, tolerance and acceptance. Interestingly, even by her own standards, Judith does not fall prey to Lerner’s prediction. Prior to her defeat of Holofernes, she was a respected member of the community in her own right. “She continued in charge of his estate, yet no one spoke ill of her, because she was very reverent toward God” (Wills 104 Judith 9:7-8). It can be argued that Judith did not cooperate with the system of the patriarchy in her ancient Hebrew community. She largely ignored the system and she got away with it for the rest of her life in Bethulia. It is pleasing to envision Judith as an aging matriarch after she had accomplished what led to the defeat of the Assyrian army; one might also have a vision of Esther as she may have quietly lived out her life at court with her cousin Mordecai nearby, and Susanna could have enjoyed many more walks in her garden after revealing the treachery of the elders who lashed out falsely against her. It is

important to realize that each woman in her respective narrative makes a contribution to the salvation of God's chosen people, both the men and the women.

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