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ESTHER AND JUDITH: CONTRASTS IN CHARACTER

Sidnie White Crawford

The books of Esther and Judith are often paired with one another. For example, in the arrangement of the books of the Septuagint the book of Judith follows Esther. In the comments of Church Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria and Augustine, as well as in modern commentaries, the books of Esther and Judith are often grouped together, compared and contrasted. This pairing occurs even in the world of art, for example in the work of the Renaissance painter Artemesia Gentileschi, who uses both women as subjects. The reason behind this pairing is clear: both are books which take their name from their female heroine, and in both books it is the Jewish heroine who saves her people from imminent destruction at the hands of the Gentiles by her courage and resourcefulness.

The book of Esther is part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, in which it is part of the Writings or *Ketubim*. It tells the story of a young Jewish orphan named Esther and her cousin and guardian Mordecai, who are residents of the Persian capital of Susa. The Persian king Ahasuerus is searching for a new queen, having deposed his first wife Vashti for disobedience. Esther enters the king's harem, wins his favor, and is crowned queen. Meanwhile her cousin Mordecai, a royal courtier, gets into a quarrel with Haman, the king's second-in-command, refusing to bow or do obeisance to Haman. Haman determines to get revenge on Mordecai by arranging the slaughter of all the Jews in the Persian Empire. Mordecai goes to Esther to enlist her help in this crisis. Esther, through a series of skillful political maneuvers, brings about Haman's downfall, saves the Jews, and installs Mordecai as the king's chief counselor. The events narrated in the book of Esther are now celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Purim.

The book of Judith is found in the Apocrypha, a group of books contained in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Bible. These books are part

of the canon in the Orthodox Church(es), and are considered 'deutero-canonical' by the Roman Catholic Church. In the book of Judith, the nations of the Levant, or the eastern Mediterranean coast, are being subdued by Holofernes, a general in the army of King Nebuchadnezzar. The Jews of Bethulia, a small town on the road to Jerusalem, resist, but as their water supply runs low their resolve crumbles. At this point Judith, a beautiful, wealthy widow, promises to save Bethulia from Holofernes. She leaves Bethulia accompanied only by her maid, enters the enemy camp and by seduction and flattery wins the confidence of Holofernes. One night in his tent, after Holofernes has passed out drunk, Judith takes his sword, cuts off his head and escapes in triumph to Bethulia. The exultant Bethulians decimate the panicky enemy forces. Jerusalem is saved, and Judith is celebrated as a great hero.

As can already be seen in the plot summary, an extensive list of similarities can be drawn up for the two books, which demonstrates that the books of Esther and Judith are closely related on several levels. For the purposes of my comparison I am referring primarily to the version of Esther found in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, which is the text translated in most English Bibles. I will specify when I am referring to the Septuagint (LXX) or to the Alpha Text (AT) editions of Esther.

On the literary level, both books are examples of Jewish novellas of the post-exilic period, and both are historicized fiction. Esther purports to be set in the Persian capital of Susa during the reign of Xerxes (486–465 BCE). Although the character and events portrayed in the book receive no outside corroboration and in fact contradict what we know of the reign of the historical Xerxes (e.g. his queen was one Amestris throughout his reign), the author's subterfuge is so successful that debates about the historicity of Esther continue to this day.¹ The fictional nature of Judith is much more apparent, since the book begins with a whopping historical blunder, identifying Nebuchadnezzar as the king of the Assyrians ruling from Nineveh (Jdt. 1.1). Nebuchadnezzar was in fact the Babylonian emperor who caused the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, 25 years after the downfall of the Assyrian Empire and its capital Nineveh in 612 BCE.

Both books rely heavily on humor and irony to convey their message. Two brief examples will suffice. In Est. 6.1-11, Haman is humiliated as a

1. See Laniak 1998: 3 n. 5, who states, 'I do not count myself among those who reject the book of Esther as a source of history'.

result of his own inflated ego. The king has discovered in the royal archives that Mordecai had saved the king's life but has not yet been rewarded. Discovering Haman in the court, Ahasuerus asks him, 'What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?' Haman asks himself, 'Whom would the king wish to honor more than me?' The ironical answer is, of course, his enemy Mordecai. In the ensuing scene Haman is forced to bestow upon Mordecai the very honor he dreamed of for himself: Mordecai is arrayed in the king's robes and mounted on the king's horse, while Haman leads him through Susa proclaiming, 'Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor!' The reader is meant to chuckle at this scene; the rabbis made it even more humiliating by adding the detail that Haman's own daughter empties a chamber pot over her father's head as he passes by (*b. Meg.* 16a).

The author of *Judith* likewise freely employs irony. *Judith*, being wined and dined in Holofernes' tent as a prelude to seduction, makes a deeply ironic comment, 'I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life' (*Jdt.* 12.18). Holofernes assumes that she is referring to the prospect of sexual intercourse with him; the reader knows that she is actually referring to his imminent demise at her own hands.

The structure of the two books is also similar. Both books contain relatively lengthy introductory episodes that are crucial to the main conflict of the plot; in *Esther* the deposition of Vashti in ch. 1 paves the way for *Esther* to become queen, while the first seven chapters of *Judith* narrate the wars of Nebuchadnezzar and Holofernes' siege of Bethulia. Both books use a chiasmic form in which the main conflict is resolved in a series of reversals. The main reversal, or denouement of the plot occurs through the action of the heroine, when *Esther* accuses Haman before the king (*Est.* 7.6) and when *Judith* beheads Holofernes (*Jdt.* 13.6-9).

Many parallels can be drawn also on the level of character. *Esther* is described as beautiful of face and figure (*Est.* 2.7), as is *Judith* (*Jdt.* 8.7). *Esther* is an orphan, *Judith* a widow; both are protected groups in Jewish society, but they are also marginalized members of that society. This marginalized status, along with their already secondary status as women in a patriarchal society, serves to make them role models for the Jewish community under alien domination, although with very different results. *Esther* is the epitome of the cooperative courtier; she achieves her goals by working within the system, not fighting it (White 1989). *Judith*, on the contrary, is a model for successful Jewish resistance to foreign rule.

The sexuality of both characters is prominent. Esther wins the king's favor in what Michael Fox has characterized as a 'sex contest' (Fox 1991a: 28). Judith murders Holofernes at a banquet that is supposed to culminate in his sexual conquest of her (Jdt. 12.10-20). Both women recognize the value of their sexual appeal, using clothing and appearance as weapons: Esther puts on her royal robes for her unsummoned appearance before the king (Est. 5.1), while Judith beautifies and adorns herself with all the apparel and jewelry given to her by her dead husband (Jdt. 10.3-4). She 'astounds' all who see her with her beauty. In the LXX edition of Esther, her act of adornment is even more emphasized (Add. D.1-5). Esther is 'radiant with perfect beauty'. These heroines do not rely only on their beauty, however. Both use speech and rhetorical skills in order to achieve their goals. Esther's speeches to Ahasuerus are masterpieces of a courtier's skill, while Judith uses deceptive speech as a means to lull Holofernes into a false sense of security. In fact, Judith specifically prays for her 'deceitful words' to be successful in defeating the enemy (Jdt. 9.10, 13). LXX Esther also petitions God for 'eloquent speech' before she appears before the king (Add. C.13). Esther and Judith thus resemble other 'wise women' in the biblical tradition, who use speech as a means to accomplish their goals with male antagonists, as does the 'wise woman of Tekoa' in 2 Sam. 14.4-17.

Other characters in the two books can also be paralleled. The male Gentile characters, Ahasuerus and Haman in Esther, Nebuchadnezzar and Holofernes in Judith, share several characteristics. Ahasuerus and Nebuchadnezzar are both foreign kings who dominate the Jewish community. Nebuchadnezzar, however, is a shadowy but malign figure, while the more prominent Ahasuerus, albeit mercurial and thus dangerous, proves ultimately benign. In fact, Ahasuerus has aspects of the buffoon in his character. Nebuchadnezzar and Haman, however, are both implacable enemies of the Jews, and in both cases a biblical basis for their hostility can be traced. Haman, as a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, is the hereditary enemy of the house of Saul, Mordecai's ancestor (see 1 Sam. 15.1-33). Nebuchadnezzar is the historical king of Babylon who destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 587 BCE. The Nebuchadnezzar in Judith, through Holofernes, shows the same enmity toward the rebellious Jews of Bethulia.

On the simple level of character, Haman and Holofernes possess overweening pride and display a tendency to overreact to provocation (as does Ahasuerus). These characteristics are demonstrated in Haman by his boasting to his friends and family in Est. 5.9-14; he is proud of his posi-

tion, but typically adds, 'Yet all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate'. Holofernes assumes that the defeat of the Bethulians is assured by his military prowess, but nevertheless flies into a rage when Achior attempts to warn him that they are defended by God (Jdt. 6.2-9). In the end, Haman and Holofernes are defeated and publicly shamed by the actions of the two women, Esther and Judith. This humiliation at the hands of women subverts the norms of their respective societies, both of which are male-dominated and patriarchal. The women, in addition to being women and therefore of secondary status in society, are also representative of the Jews. Note that Judith's very name means 'Jewess'! The Jews in the post-exilic period were dominated by foreign powers and thus politically in the cultural position of women; the Gentile male's defeat by the Jewish woman thus resonated along political as well as gender fault lines.

The details of the plot and the roles of the minor characters also present numerous parallels. As Andre LaCocque points out, 'the sequence [of the two stories] is the same: life threat, deliverance, vengeance, triumph, institution of a commemorative festival' (LaCocque 1990: 71). The similarities are even more marked than that. The book of Esther opens with Queen Vashti's act of rebellion against the king, which sets in motion the plot of the story; likewise Judith opens with the rebellion of King Arphaxad. From a broad focus at the beginning of the stories the focus narrows to the Jewish protagonists. In Esther the initial episodes, the rebellion of Vashti and the gathering of the maidens into the king's harem, encompass the entire Persian empire, while the later episodes concentrate on Esther, Mordecai and the fate of the Jews. In the case of Judith the opening chapters involve the rebellion of numerous nations against Nebuchadnezzar, while the final chapters revolve around Judith and the Jews of Bethulia.

At their introductions, both Esther and Judith lead secluded lives: Esther in the royal harem and Judith in her tent on the roof of her dead husband's house. Both of them leave the relative security of their quarters to confront danger on behalf of the Jews. They perform beautification rituals before leaving security and confronting danger, and both achieve their ends at dinner parties. Esther gives two dinner parties for Ahasuerus and Haman, while Judith attends a dinner party given by Holofernes. The various eunuchs and maids who surround Esther and Judith play crucial roles in the furtherance of the plots, and the women (and also Holofernes, in the case of his eunuch Bagoas) rely on their loyalty. In most paintings of Judith, in fact, her maid is almost as prominent as Judith herself.

The minor characters in the books often play similar roles. Zeresh, the wife of Haman, warns him of his ultimate downfall at the hands of Mordecai the Jew (Est. 6.13). Achior the Ammonite warns Holofernes that the Jews cannot be defeated if they remain loyal to God (Jdt. 5.20). Both warnings prove correct; because of the actions of Esther and Judith, Haman and Holofernes, the enemies of the Jews, end up dead, as well as 75,000 enemies of the Jews in Esther and the Assyrian army in Judith. The Jewish triumph causes the conversion of Achior in Judith and at least the self-identification of many Gentiles with the Jews in Esther.² The Jews at the end of both books engage in extensive rejoicing, in which Esther and Judith play leading roles. In neither book is there overt divine intervention; both stories rely on the political acumen and bravery of their respective heroines. It is human action that saves the Jews of Persia and of Bethulia.³

All of these similarities are striking; however, there are some important differences. First, there are no equivalents to the characters of Vashti and Mordecai in the story of Judith. There is no other female protagonist who sets the stage for Judith; Judith is unique. Vashti, on the other hand, serves as a foil for Esther; the contrast between Vashti's disobedience and Esther's obedience proves to be very important in the portrayal of the character of Esther.

Likewise, Mordecai is a unique character. The minor character Uzziah in Judith cannot be compared to Mordecai; Mordecai is a major figure in Esther. As Esther's guardian he at first controls her actions ('for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him', Est. 2.20). He discovers the plot of the eunuchs against Ahasuerus (2.21-23); his later reward for that deed will cause Haman's first humiliation (6.10-11). It is his refusal of obeisance to Haman that results in the danger to the Jews of Persia; the Jews of Bethulia are in danger because of their refusal to capitulate in a war. Mordecai galvanizes Esther into action against Haman; Judith needs no urging from anyone. Finally, at the end of the book of Esther Mordecai has gained in stature and power, becoming the king's second-in-command; there is no equivalent to this in the book of Judith.

2. The question of whether the word מְתִיבֵיהֶם in Est. 8.17 refers to actual conversion is unresolved (Levenson 1997: 117), although LXX Esther understands it to mean conversion through circumcision.

3. This is not so in LXX Esther, where God intervenes to make the king sleepless (LXX Est. 6.1) and causes the king to accept Esther when she appears unsummoned before him in the throne room (Add. D.8).

Two other differences also bear mentioning. The book of Esther is set in Persia, in the diaspora, and thus the concerns and the interests of all the characters reside in the diaspora. They display no interest in the biblical land of Israel or its institutions; the exile from Judah gets only a passing reference in Mordecai's genealogy (Est. 2.6). The Jewish characters' lives are in Persia and they have every intention of remaining there. Gentile rule is not a problem for the author of Esther as long as it is benevolent. Judith, however, is set in Israel (albeit in a fictional location), and displays a great interest in and concern for Jerusalem, the temple and its institutions. In fact, the triumphant Jews of Bethulia travel to Jerusalem and remain there for three months, offering sacrifices and feasting. The author of Judith envisions a Jewish community governed by a high priest from the temple in Jerusalem. For the author of Judith, unlike the author of Esther, Gentile rule is never benevolent and must be opposed. Thus the geographical and political stances of the two stories are very different. This is the result of the different dates of the books. Esther, written in the eastern diaspora in the late fourth or early third centuries BCE (Crawford 1999: 856), reflects the relatively benign rule of the Persians over their subject peoples. Foreigners could and did rise to prominence in the Persian court; witness Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes I (Neh. 1.11). Judith, however, was written around or after 150 BCE (Wills 1999: 1076-79), the time of the Maccabean revolt against the oppression of the Greek Seleucid emperors. For the author of Judith, foreign rulers are the enemy.

The establishing of the festival of Purim in the book of Esther also constitutes a major difference between the two books. The final form of the Hebrew edition of Esther is what has been called a 'festival legend'. The book's *raison d'être* is the establishment of the festival of Purim. As it is stated in Est. 9.28, 'These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants'. In fact, Purim, since it was not a festival established by Moses in the Torah, did have trouble winning acceptance among all the Jews. However, its popularity proved too strong in the end for it to be abolished. So the story of Esther in many ways now rides on the coattails of the festival of Purim, rather than vice versa. The book of Judith does not seek to establish a permanent festival, although the story of Judith, because of its connection with the Maccabean revolt, was later associated with the festival of Hanukkah (another festival not established by Moses).

Most striking is the difference in the role that religion and piety play in the two stories. The lack of religious piety in the Hebrew version of Esther is notorious. God is not mentioned by name at all. Neither Esther nor Mordecai display any concern for any of the laws of Judaism, even though one of Haman's calumnies against the Jews is that they have a law different from every other people (Est. 3.8). Esther becomes the sexual partner and then the wife of a Gentile; she lives in his palace and eats his food with no recognition of the laws of kashrut; in fact, since Ahasuerus and his court, including Haman, have no idea that she is a Jew, she must be quite assimilated. There are no prayers, sacrifices or other acts of conventional religious piety; Mordecai does don ritual mourning garb when he hears Haman's decree (4.1), and Esther orders all the Jews of Susa to fast for three days before she appears unsummoned before the king (4.15). However, the reason for the fast is unclear, and the purpose (to capture God's attention?) is unspecified. I have argued elsewhere that there is an implied theology in Hebrew Esther which assumes a belief in God and God's action in history, but the fact remains that this is only implied, not directly stated (Crawford 1999: 866-70). Jewish identity in Esther is ethnic, and Jews can successfully hide that identity; Esther does not reveal 'her kindred or her people' (that is, her ethnic origin—Est. 2.20), while Mordecai must tell the other courtiers in the course of his quarrel with Haman that he is Jewish (Est. 3.4). The result is an extremely limited definition of what it means to be a Jew, a definition peculiar to the Hebrew edition of Esther.

The book of Judith, on the other hand, wears its piety openly. When Judith the character is introduced, the reader learns that 'no one...spoke ill of her, so devoutly did she fear God' (Jdt. 8.8). She fasts, prays and offers sound theology to the leaders of Bethulia (8.11-27). Before Judith puts her plan in motion, she prays in sackcloth and ashes to God; the text carefully reports that she does this just as the evening incense offering was being made in the Temple (9.1). In her prayer she quotes biblical texts and petitions God directly for help in his capacity as savior and protector of Israel (9.2-14). When she ventures into the enemy camp, she continues her prayer life, as well as refusing all food from the Gentile Holofernes and undertaking a nightly purification ritual (12.1-2, 7-8). Judith never has sexual intercourse with a Gentile, or anyone else for that matter, choosing to remain a widow for the rest of her life. Finally, at the end of the book Judith leads a triumphant procession of singing and dancing women,

echoing such biblical heroines as Miriam and Deborah; when the Bethulians arrive in Jerusalem she dedicates all the spoil of Holofernes to the temple (16.19). The other Jewish characters in the book are also pious: the Israelites pray and fast at the approach of Holofernes, they are merciful to Achior, and at the end of the book they purify themselves and offer sacrifice. Thus the book of Judith remedies all the religious deficiencies of Hebrew Esther: God is central to the story, the Law is observed, the purpose of ritual observance (prayer, fasting, sacrifice) is understood and emphasized, and the heroine is not defiled by sexual relations with a Gentile. Of course, the same process is going on in the Additions to Esther in the LXX: God becomes a central character, both Esther and Mordecai pray (Add. C) and Esther claims to observe the dietary laws (Add. C). LXX Esther, however, cannot gloss over the fact that Esther is the sexual partner of the Gentile Ahasuerus; the best it can do is have her declare that she 'abhors the bed of the uncircumcised' (Add. C.15).

Given the long list of similarities between the books of Esther and Judith at the literary level, in character and in plot, I believe that one of the models for the author of Judith was the story of Esther; he created a story in many ways parallel to Esther, but made two major changes: he set the story in Israel and made the heroine a model of religious piety.⁴ These changes make Judith a more acceptable heroine for ancient Jewish society. However, both books have generated a lot of controversy in the past, and continue to create a lot of controversy today. Why is this?

First of all, both books had difficulty gaining acceptance into the canons of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, which were formed in the early centuries of the Common Era. The Hebrew form of Esther was finally accepted into the Jewish (and hence the Protestant) canon, while one of the Greek versions of Esther became part of the LXX, the canon of the Orthodox Church(es). The Roman Catholic canon contains the Hebrew book of Esther in its Old Testament form, but takes the Additions found in the LXX and places them at the end of Hebrew Esther. The canonical history of Esther is thus quite complicated.

Explanations for Esther's ultimate acceptance into the Jewish canon usually boil down to statements about the popularity of Purim and the appeal of the story to a wide audience. These considerations seemed to be enough to overcome objections to Esther raised in rabbinic circles in

4. I have argued elsewhere that another model for the author of Judith is the story of Jael and Deborah in Judg. 4–5 (White 1992).

the first four centuries CE, objections that included the secular nature of the book and the non-Mosaic character of the festival of Purim. Esther, although accepted into the Christian canon, continues almost until the present time to be denigrated by Christian commentators for its secular nature, the sexual activities of its heroine and its supposedly anti-Gentile bias.⁵

The book of Judith's canonical history is also complicated, even though it emphasizes piety and does not insist upon the permanent establishment of its festival. Judith is not part of the Jewish (or Protestant) canon. It is part of the LXX, the canon of the Orthodox Church(es). The Roman Catholic Church places Judith in the Apocrypha, which has 'deutero-canonical' status. So Judith gained canonical status in some Christian circles, but not in all Christian circles, and not in Judaism. There are many reasons why the book of Judith was not accepted into the Jewish canon. Although most scholars think that Judith was written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek, by the time the Jewish canon was being formed the Hebrew original may no longer have existed. Only Hebrew or Aramaic books became part of the Jewish canon; hence Greek Judith was excluded. Also, no books written later than the Persian period (538–332 BCE) were included in the Jewish canon; Judith, written in the second century BCE, fits this category.⁶ There was no such rule for the LXX. There are also minor reasons for Judith's exclusion: the halakhic stance of the book sometimes differs from that of the rabbis (e.g. Achior did not undergo the full rabbinic ritual of conversion), the book contains obvious historical errors, and the book supports the Hasmonean dynasty, which was out of favor with the rabbis (Moore 1985: 86-91). I would also suggest that the character of Judith herself made the patriarchal societies forming the canons uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that she was excluded from the Jewish canon without a fight, while in Christian circles a lot of interpretation took place to allay this discomfort. Esther, on the other hand, becomes a very popular figure in later Jewish tradition. In Christian tradition Esther and her book are treated more ambivalently, but she has often functioned as a role model for women. Why Esther—why not Judith?

Feminist biblical scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries uncovered the patriarchal culture and assumptions that underlie the litera-

5. For a thorough discussion of Esther's canonical status in early Christianity, see Moore 1971.

6. The book of Daniel, while written in the second century BCE, presents an evidently convincing fictional setting in the Babylonian and Persian courts.

ture of the Bible. The books of the Bible were written by men for men, and it is the goal of feminist scholarship to expose that reality, but also to discover 'between the lines' the voice of women from the biblical world. Esther and Judith, both heroines of their respective books, have thus been singled out for particular scrutiny in feminist biblical scholarship. The results have been ambivalent. Neither Esther nor Judith wins universal praise as a feminist heroine, nor do they receive universal condemnation.

Esther has been a particularly troubling figure for feminist critics. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucinda B. Chandler, writing in *The Woman's Bible* in 1895, praise Esther for 'her unfaltering courage and entire self-abnegation' (Stanton and Chandler 1972: 92). However, the most fulsome praise is reserved for Vashti:

Vashti stands out a sublime representative of self-centred womanhood. Rising to the heights of self-consciousness and of self-respect, she takes her soul into her own keeping, and though her position both as wife and as queen are jeopardized, she is true to the Divine aspirations of her nature. (Stanton and Chandler 1972: 88)

Esther is almost damned by faint praise. This ambivalence concerning Esther continues in feminist scholarship to the present day. To quote Alice Laffey: 'In contrast to Vashti, who refused to be men's sexual object and her husband's toy, Esther is the stereotypical woman in a man's world' (Laffey 1988: 216). Esther Fuchs says of Esther, 'she is an agent rather than a genuine hero' (Fuchs 1999: 80). What these critics are sensing is that the book of Esther, although its main character is a woman who acts with considerable skill and bravery to save the Jews from destruction, leaves the patriarchal worldview of the Hebrew Bible intact. As Kristin De Troyer notes, 'The book of Esther is a magnificent short story. Yet it also has a hidden agenda. Between the lines it transmits a code, a norm of behavior for women. This code and this norm is delivered completely from a male point of view' (De Troyer 1995: 55). It is Esther's essential adherence to this norm that makes her sometimes suspect conduct acceptable to her mostly male audience, and may have played some role in her book's eventual canonization.

Esther upholds the patriarchal norms of ancient Jewish society in several ways. First of all, she is married (even if it is to a Gentile), a proper role for young women. Her primary characteristic is her beauty; as the object of men's gaze and the king's possession her beauty adds to his honor. In this she is identical to Vashti. Further, she is obedient. She obeys Mordecai, she obeys Hegai; she also obeys the social system in which she

is located. Esther does not try to alter the patriarchal structure of her society; rather, she works from within the system to gain her ends. And that system is centered on the power of the man over his household. The text identifies the importance of this power center from the first chapter. Vashti defies Ahasuerus's command to come before him and his guests during his banquet (Est. 1.12). Her defiance causes an uproar among the king's (male) councilors because 'this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands' (Est. 1.17). The assault is on men as husbands, against the patriarchal household order. So great is the threat that it must be countermanded by law: 'all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike' and 'every man should be master in his own house' (Est. 1.20, 22). A Talmudic commentator found this passage amusing, because to him the decree was self-evident. Of course men rule their own houses (*b. Meg.* 12b). Thus Esther's obedience is a desirable characteristic. It may be objected that Esther is disobedient in her central action in the book, her unsummoned appearance in the throne room. It is true that she is disobedient to the law, but she is not personally disobedient. She does not defy Ahasuerus; rather, she relies on their personal relationship to override the impersonal decree. And the personal husband-wife relationship does take priority, as the king states clearly in LXX Esther, 'What is it, Esther? I am your husband/brother. Take courage; you shall not die, for our law applies only to our subjects' (Add. D.9-10). Thus Esther's primary obedience to her husband remains intact.

Esther further fulfills gender stereotypes by her actions. When she gives orders, as in Est. 4.15-16, it is only to servants and family members (the Jews of Susa being broadly construed as family members); she does not take power publicly. She leaves the private quarters of the women only briefly; both her dinner parties take place in private, with only eunuchs (evidently) as witnesses. She does not slay Haman; Ahasuerus sentences him. After Ahasuerus gives her Haman's property, Esther turns its management over to Mordecai. She receives permission from the king to thwart the edict against the Jews, but it is Mordecai who writes the letters and gives the commands. As for the establishment of the festival of Purim, according to the present form of the book Mordecai writes the initial letter and Esther merely confirms it. Only one verse gives a hint that Esther actually exercises public power on her own, 'The command of Queen Esther fixed those practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing' (Est. 9.32). Finally, at the end of the book Esther completely disappears, and all

the adulation is reserved for Mordecai, 'for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants' (Est. 10.3). The result of this survey is an Esther who upholds the patriarchal system that undergirds her book. Now, I do not wish to fault Esther for failing to be a twenty-first century feminist! It is unreasonable to expect an ancient character to think and behave as a modern woman. Given the constraints placed upon her, Esther's actions and attainments are wholly admirable. I do think, however, that it is precisely the fact that Esther does uphold the patriarchal social order that helped the book to be accepted eventually as canonical and helps to maintain its popularity.

How does Judith fare under the same scrutiny? According to Alice Bellis, Judith is 'perhaps the strongest Hebrew hero in all of biblical literature' (Bellis 1994: 219). Unlike Esther, however, Judith subverts the patriarchal social order of the period. Her main action in the text, and the one that forms the subject of every representation of her, is shocking in a patriarchal world. She herself, at the culmination of an erotic scene, murders the man Holofernes by cutting off his head. The mixture of sex and death in this scene is both irresistible and appalling to a male audience, while many women find it empowering.

But this is not the only way in which Judith subverts her patriarchal society. She is introduced with her own genealogy, the longest of any woman in the Hebrew Bible. She is a rich, beautiful, presumably childless widow. All of these terms pose some kind of threat to the patriarchal order. Wealth is meant to be owned and controlled by men, as the book of Esther demonstrates. Judith is not only wealthy in her own right, but her female servant (Jdt. 8.10) manages her property. Judith is beautiful; that is a necessary characteristic in a heroine, but also dangerous if not properly controlled. As a childless widow, Judith is an anomaly in Second Temple Jewish society. Widowhood did give a woman a kind of emancipation, making her a legal entity in her own right, but it was not seen as a desirable state, especially for young women. Remarriage was seen as the best solution for a young widow. There are other famous young biblical widows—Abigail, Bathsheba, Ruth—but they all remarry. Judith is under a further obligation, as a childless widow, to produce an heir for her deceased husband through the law of levirate marriage (Deut. 25.5-10), but she seems to be disregarding that obligation. In this she differs from another biblical widow, Tamar, who goes to extraordinary lengths to perform the levirate obligation (Gen. 34). In fact, since Manasseh has been dead for over three years, it can be inferred that Judith is enjoying her

emancipated status.⁷ So, in spite of her reputation for piety, Judith's conduct undercuts the patriarchal order.

Her actions too pose a threat to that order. Her first action is to summon the elders of Bethulia and upbraid them for their cowardice. She ignores Uzziah's request that she pray for rain (Jdt. 8.31); rather, she declares that she will devise a plan and carry it out. All of these actions stand in contrast to Esther, to whom Mordecai appeals, and who acts in response to his appeal. Judith then prays and prepares to carry out her daring plan. Although her prayer contains numerous pleas for God's help, the plan is hers and requires her initiative to carry it out.

Judith's activities in the enemy camp continue to subvert the patriarchal order. She is a woman unprotected by a male in the all-male sphere of the army camp; only her status as a widow allows her to make the journey at all. She places her sexual virtue in extreme jeopardy, such that she needs to reassure the Bethulians upon her return that it is intact (Jdt. 13.16); and finally she herself wields the sword that kills Holofernes. Again, we may contrast Esther, who is always under the protection of either Mordecai or Ahasuerus, who uses her sexuality only to convince her own husband to heed her, and who allows the males around her to carry out the violence on her enemies. Further, although both Judith and Esther rely on rhetoric to carry out their respective plans, Judith's rhetoric is not simply skillful, but deceptive. In other words, she lies. It is in a good cause, but lying nevertheless. In fact, Judith can be compared to the 'strange woman' so vehemently warned against in Proverbs:

With much seductive speech she persuades him;
with her smooth talk she compels him.
Right away he follows her,

7. The circumstances of Judith's widowhood, although on the surface unremarkable, foreshadow darker undercurrents in her story. Several verses are set aside to discuss Manasseh's death (Jdt. 8.2-5); he is overcome by heatstroke, and dies at home in his bed. Judith then lives in a tent on the roof of his house, leading a chaste and pious life. The parallels with the death of Holofernes are striking; Holofernes is overcome with wine and he retires to his bed, where he dies. Judith then emerges from his tent, still a chaste and pious widow. Both the men in Judith's life, in other words, are the victims of mysterious ends, and she reaps the benefit. Notice also the final scene with Achior the Ammonite (Jdt. 14.6-10). When Achior sees the head of Holofernes which Judith has cut off, he falls down into a dead faint. Judith once again has a man swooning at her feet, overcome by her actions. Judith's assumption of the masculine role, and the consequent demasculinization of the men around her, is thus emphasized. I would like to thank Susan Houchins for bringing this to my attention.

and goes like an ox to the slaughter,
 or bounds like a stag toward the trap
 until an arrow pierces its entrails. (Prov. 7.21-23)

Finally, at the end of the book, Judith, unlike Esther, does not resubmit herself to patriarchal norms. She retains her anomalous status as a widow, her control over her wealth, and her female servant as her second-in-command. Judith is not subsumed back into the patriarchal order. Any marriage that she might make would continue to undercut the masculine ideal of the patriarchal household, because Judith has already decapitated that ideal. Judith is, in fact, a dangerous woman, dangerous to men because she does not fulfill, and in fact subverts, the gender expectations of her society. According to Pamela Milne, one of the messages of the book is that 'a woman's beauty and sexuality are dangerous to men because women use their attractiveness to deceive, harm and kill men' (Milne 1993: 43).⁸ This is apparent in Judith not only in her actions toward Holofernes, but in the mysterious death of her husband Manasseh and Achior's fainting spell at the sight of Holofernes' decapitated head. Judith can be acceptable as a Jewish heroine only because her danger is turned away from Israel, toward the enemy. She makes no special claims on Israel beyond saving it. Judith does not retain any leadership position in society; she does not advocate any permanent public role for herself or for any other woman. Her actions and character are unique, but only by remaining unique can they be tolerated by her society. Judith was not considered an acceptable role model for a woman, although she may have been for a Jew. Toni Craven makes the interesting comment that 'the Book of Judith may have stood as good a chance as the Book of Ruth of becoming part of the Hebrew canon had Judith been a male in this story and had Achior been a female' (Craven 1983: 118). However, Judith as a dangerous female must be and is marginalized; this is demonstrated by her exclusion from the Jewish canon (like Vashti's exclusion from the court) and her treatment within Christianity (see presently).

Our initial question—Why is Esther so popular and not Judith?—can be answered at least partially like this: the book of Esther, in spite of its theological problems, presents an acceptable model for gender roles in Second Temple Jewish society. The book, while problematic on other levels, is not threatening to that society's status quo. Judith, on the other hand, portrays a dangerous subversion of gender roles. Women like Judith

8. See also Levine 1992: 17-30.

were not acceptable in ancient Jewish society, and her book becomes marginalized. In Jewish tradition Judith gradually disappears. In Christian tradition Judith reappears in many guises. She is praised as a model of justice, fortitude, sexual chastity, temperance and humility. She is also used as an anti-model of seduction and eroticism. These two interpretive strains cause an ambiguity in the figure of Judith in Christian tradition, which is not present in the figure of Esther.⁹

What does this mean for the feminist reader of the Bible? Unfortunately, although Esther and Judith are both admirable heroines, neither of them achieves complete emancipation, either for themselves or other women, from the roles and expectations that society places on women. They represent steps along the way, but the journey is not yet complete.

9. See the fascinating study of Margarita Stocker (1998: 61). Stocker states, in the course of a discussion of the use of Judith as a symbol for the struggle of Dutch Protestants for emancipation in the sixteenth century, 'It is significant that, once the Dutch republic was secure, Judith's role in the proselytizing dramas was gradually overtaken by Esther, the canonical Bible's docile yet reforming wife'. Esther is sometimes damned in Christian tradition as 'too Jewish' (e.g. Martin Luther; Paton 1908: 96), but never as 'too feminine'.