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Zooming in and Out: Stories of Judith in the Construction of Jewish and Christian Identity

Reworking and repurposing old stories is an ancient tradition. Later authors find use in taking texts that preceded them and using them to new ends. These goals can be to “update” the text to a more contemporary historical-cultural context, or to retell the story with a different polemical focus. One of the earliest recognized modes of biblical interpretation was neither running commentary or midrashic exegesis, but Rewritten Bible. The Book of Chronicles draws much of its material from the Book of Kings, but ignores the recurring focus on the continued existence of the High Places and paints a more complex picture of many Jewish leaders. Less total forms of “rewriting” – though perhaps more blatant as well – are edits, additions, and subtractions made to earlier-completed works. The Greek translations of Esther are replete with added sections that “fix” what the later author perceived as flaws in the earlier work. The most subtle type of reworking is one that could be reasonably labeled more precisely “intertextual interpretation” than “rewriting.” Taking key elements of an earlier story, plot or recognizable phrases or *leitworten*, but placing them in a new context. This new story though affords the opportunity to highlight a different message, and the educated reader, noticing the comparisons between the two stories, will notice the contrasts more sharply.

Excepting the latter case, these reworking of stories function similarly to “rewriting history.” The work of a historian is to interpret the past and create some narrative from a bundle

of information. As Michael Brenner titled his work on Jewish historians *Prophets of the Past*, he explained:

Historians cannot predict the future, but they have the power to interpret the past. In their hands, the past is shaped in the same way that the future takes on form in the eyes of the classical prophets. Thus for the poet and scholar Friedrich Schlegel historians were “prophets facing backward.”¹

The role of the prophet is not just to see the future, but to make sense of it and provide guidance for the present. So too the historian, though facing backwards, make sense of the past, and explicitly or implicitly, provide guidance for the present. Historians are storytellers, deciphering what is worth telling and how to tell it, and what to leave the audience with to take away. So when an author changes a story, he both rewrites the history and provides a new message for the present.

The Jewish canon does not contain many stories about women. It also does not contain many stories set in the diaspora. Both of these are quite reasonable given the context of Jewish social history – set for most of the time in the land of Israel and with male political and military leaders. The most notable exception to this rule is the Book of Esther. It is set in the Persian exile and the titular queen is the heroine of the story. The story is relatively folksy and simple, if the narrative itself is complex and humorous: Jews are in exile; they face a mortal threat from a political enemy; Jewish heroes pull the right levers of power and save the day. This story became entrenched in Jewish consciousness, and Purim became a central holiday in the Jewish calendar.

¹ Brenner, Michael. *Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

The story of Esther is not without its problems. As the Jews returned to the Land of Israel, established the Second Commonwealth, and later gained more military autonomy, Esther seemed out of place within Jewish identity. It is a story about – and on its face almost celebrating – Jewish life in exile, with its heroes not in total control but reduced to manipulating a stronger political power. This ran contrary the nationalism rising during the Hasmonean period.²

Furthermore, Esther – both the book and the character – are apparently secular. Famously the book makes no mention of God’s name; Esther never prays in her time of need; she lives like any other queen in the palace, eating from the king’s food and sleeping with him. The book devotes much energy to questions of Jewish vs. Persian identity: Mordechai’s lineage is given and he is repeatedly marked by the epithet “the Judean,” whereas Esther originally hides her Jewish identity but ultimately takes hold of it. However the religious distinction of the Jews is almost glossed over entirely. This stands in direct contrast to other diaspora narratives: Daniel refuses to eat from King Nebuchadnezzar’s table and is miraculously saved for his righteousness; Joseph does not sleep with his non-Jewish master and does not eat with the Egyptians either. Esther does not look to be a worthy heroine for the Jewish people under their own control and following the religious revivals of Ezra and Nehemiah. (The later books of Maccabees reveal an even stronger sense of religious zealotry.)

Jewish writers in the Second Temple period responded to these challenges by rewriting the story. Six additional passages appear in the Septuagint’s version of Esther, which portray the title character not eating the king’s food and write prayers for both Esther and Mordechai. These

² This tendency can be read even earlier: Chronicles heavily criticizes king Ahaz for seeking aid from Assyria in his local skirmishes, and indirectly blames him for the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and ultimately Judah.

reveal an attempt to “save” or repurpose Esther as a role model for a generation with a different *weltanschauung*.

The author of *Judith*, too, was sensitive to issues with Esther. He wrote a narrative that recalls much of the Book of Esther but with a very different heroine. In this apocryphal book a mortal threat faces the Jewish people and a woman goes from her people into the enemy leader’s home to ultimately manipulate him at a banquet and defeat him. Judith is introduced much in the same way that Mordechai and Esther are: her lineage is traced, she “was informed of all that happened” (*Judith* 8:1, *Esther* 4:1), and her significant relative died before the story begins. Unlike Esther, though, Judith is *frum*:³ she brings her own food and refuses to eat from Holofernes’ table. She argues that the Jews’ downfall will follow their laxity in observing laws of tithes – arguing such strictness is required even in a life-preserving situation. Though her beauty is described in detail, she is markedly celibate, even in saving the Jewish people. The setting of the story even supports this theme: Bethulia can be loosely translated as “place of virgins.” Judith prays before enacting her plan, and sings a song of praise to God following her plan.⁴

Other elements of *Judith* reveal a very strongly Jewish outlook as well. The book repeatedly refers to the Temple and its centrality to the people: It is the place where the priests live and eat their tithes, it is where the law comes from, and it is where the people bring sacrifices following their victory. God is referenced time and time again, as is Jewish history.

³ Properly religiously observant

⁴ The story also recalls the early biblical characters Deborah and Yael, who use their military leadership and sexual manipulation, respectively, to defeat the Canaanite enemy, and also sing a song of praise to God afterward.

The enemy of the Jews in *Judith* is fascinating. The antagonist is Holofernes, general of the army of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Assyria. Though entirely anachronistic, the work portrays the enemy as the collective body of the three major enemies of the Jews in the recent past: Assyria, Babylonia, and Greece. By painting this picture, the author of *Judith* wishes to make a claim about what the enemy of the Jews is, and by contrast, what Judaism stands for. The enemy trusts in the shield and spear, arrogant in their reliance on physical might (*Judith* 9:7), whereas the heroine in her beguiling speech and acknowledgment of the supremacy of God (9:10), and in the furthering of Jewish history (9:13). The book also utilizes a non-Jewish observer to teach the God of Israel's supremacy: Achior, king of the neighboring Ammonites, learns of Judith's actions and immediately accepts God and converts to the house of Israel (14:10) – affirming a Judaism that is both religious and nationalistic. To affirm the essential Jewish-ness of the work one can also look to the titular character: She is Judith, she is the essential Jewess.

The Old English poem *Judith* is remarkably different: While the Jewish work attempted to insert a strong Jewish ethos to a familiar story, the Old English text takes the story and strips all elements of Jewishness away. Judith's theology is quite clearly Christian: She prays to the Trinity and she plays up the distinction between body and soul. Sexual purity is emphasized far more than in the Jewish work: Whereas Jewish Judith merely did not resort to Esther's banality and her character is defined more by her guile, military tactics, and leadership, OE *Judith*'s character seems to be defined by her purity of body and purity of faith. Judith was rewarded at the end "because she had true faith." Beyond the differences in theology, Jewish-ness is absent from the work. Jerusalem is totally erased, as is the Temple and the ideas of sacrifices and priests. References to Jewish history and the God of the Jewish ancestors are replaced by the universal "God of beginnings." Even Judith's people are not distinctly Jewish. Not the

“Israelites” or “those who dwell in Judea” or even “Jews;” rather we learn of the “Hebrews,” a term not common to Jewish history and with different connotation than Jew, and in other references simple of the “home defenders.”

The deities, both supported and enemy, are different as well from the Jewish book to the Old English poem. In the Jewish work God is the God of Israel and is distinct from a pantheon of other “false” gods. The enemy is varied – Nebuchadnezzar is asserted as a god, as is the Greek sense of physical superiority and the other gods of the Ancient Near East. The God of Israel stands distinct, but within a crowd of others. In the Old English poem, there is God Almighty in Heaven (and by extension the Trinity), but the enemy is plainly derided as a heathen. There is no conflict between named parties: simply the believer against the un-believer. A similar distinction arises when looking at the peoples: the Jewish people are one people among many nations listed from the region and the enemy Assyria. In OE *Judith*, all “others” can be categorized by a single title: pagan. In the imagination of OE *Judith*, the Christians are not among a crowd, they are contrasting a muddled singular body. Succinctly, both the God and people of Jewish *Judith* are particular; the God and people of OE *Judith* are universal.

One of the major jobs of any historian is delimiting his history. The start (and endpoint) of any historical era determines what the essence of that era is – and what it is distinct from. Regarding the question of when the modern period in Jewish history began, Brenner notes six different beginning points for six different historians who carried six different interpretations. Did the modern period begin with intellectual revolutionaries like Mendelssohn or Spinoza, as argued Graetz and Baron? In their view the defining mark of modern Jewish history was intellectual developments and the Haskalah. Did it begin with the cataclysmic rise and fall of

Shabbetai Zvi, as Scholem argues, focusing on the spiritual differences between communities? The Zionist Benzion Dinur puts forth the claim that the modern period began with Yehuda He-Hassid's journey to the Land of Israel, wishing to demarcate Jewish history solely around the people's relationship with the land: dwelling, exile, return. These historians had to write their narrative, finding a beginning, middle and end. They had to answer questions about who the protagonists were, what quests were involved, what the theme was.⁵

Medieval Christians, too, had to answer serious questions about their history. Delimiting Christian history appropriately was a particularly crucial question. The precise relationship that Christianity maintained with its past raised different challenging questions. If the history of Christianity begins at any point before the birth of Jesus, then the problem of the Jews arises. Jesus, and the faith he proclaimed, emerged out of the Jewish people living in Judea at the turn of the millennium. They lived as a people and practiced their own monotheistic faith. While Jesus successfully found a following among the Jews, and his disciples spread the faith across Europe, most Jews remained non-Christians. If Jesus came from the Jews, then, why were the Jews not like him? If Jesus was truly a Jew, maybe the surviving Jews were more authentic to the true faith than Christians themselves?

In this respect, the physical instance of a Jew was significantly less threatening than the existence of the Jews as a conception. They represented the shadow of the past onto the present, a challenge that needed to be reconciled. Some responded by portraying the Jews as the fools of history, blind to the truth that was revealed to everyone else. The poem *Elene* argues that Jews

⁵ Brenner 23

are unable to properly read their own scriptures, their continued existence a product of their own mistakes rather than supremacy of religion.

Judith, however, does not make a point about the Jews. It instead chooses to skirt the problem entirely. There are no Jews in the entire work as such but “Hebrews.” (This is an appropriate place to note that the Epistle to the Hebrews is addressing not the Jewish people but specifically the Jewish Christians; further the message of the work is the refocus these Hebrews away from Judaism to proper Christianity. Thus Hebrews can be a mark of a particular race whose ethos is subsumed under its Christianity.⁶) Instead of Jerusalem, Bethulia itself is “the brightest of burgs.” The heroic tale of Judith the heroic, faithful, pure woman is removed completely from its Jewish context. It could be set anywhere, at any point.

OE *Judith*'s way of dealing with the problem of an earlier Jewish history is to ignore it completely. Jerusalem is erased, the history of the Jews is erased. The enemy is now the heathen – an enemy that is relatable to mid-first millennium England. The poem was created while England was dealing with native heathens, not Jews. *Judith* was originally written to bolster a particularly Jewish sense of identity. But the Old English poem wants its audience to relate to a universal Christian heroine, not a Jewish story. Thus it rewrites the story as universal and Christian. In this manner Jewish history becomes entirely irrelevant; therefore the Jewish present does not constitute a threat.

⁶ Britannica, Editors of. “Letter to the Hebrews.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 22 Jan. 2015, www.britannica.com/topic/Letter-to-the-Hebrews.