

Judith's Shadow

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Readers who are familiar with the Book of Judith among the 'Deuterocanonicals', or 'Apocrypha', as Christians from the Reformation tradition know such books in the wider canon of the Christian Bible (cf. Trebelle Barrera 1998:147-257; Pagán 2001:164_168; Kohlenberger III 1997:introductions), would notice the presence of a woman in the shadow of Judith, the story protagonist. This woman remains unnamed and enters the plot just as the central action starts. Judith has just rebuked two elders of her town Bethulia for the decision taken by Uzziah, the governor, and his council, that they would capitulate to the besieging Assyrians if no help came in view (Jdt 8). In the same breath, Judith announces that she is about to embark upon an initiative "that will go down through all generations of our descendants" (8,32, NRSV); but furnishes no information on what she was plotting, and no one was expecting anything spectacular (see 8,31). There follows a long prayer (Jdt 9) and then a flurry of action during which Judith transforms herself into the stunning and beautiful woman that she was (10, 3-4). It is at this stage that this mysterious woman enters the scene.

According to the NRSV, Judith considers this woman as 'her maid' (10, 2) whom she calls in order to help her in the preparations for a mysterious expedition. We are not told whether this maid changes clothes or indulges into any toiletries. She helps 'her mistress' to prepare a number of food and drink items (10,5) and then sets out with her towards the gates of the city and thence to the camp of the Assyrians and finally to the tent of the feared Holofernes, the commander-in-chief of the besieging army.

This woman remains in her mistress's shade: the various groups of men notice Judith and comment upon her astounding beauty; but they never ever pay any tribute to the woman who is constantly with her (Jdt 10). She accompanies Judith during her stay in the Assyrian camp (11-12) and is with her till just before the fatal action is about to happen (13, 3). It would seem that Judith wants no one to disturb her

during the climatic moment when she has in mind to kill her targeted victim as he sleeps, for which she sends ‘her maid’ outside his bedchamber wherein they are. On beheading the commander-in-chief, Judith herself comes out and gives his head to “her maid” who places it “in her food bag” (13, 9-10). Then they hurry back to Bethulia. This mysterious woman disappears from the narrative thread altogether except for the end of the story when the narrator is bringing his narrative to a close. It is here that we read following NRSV “She set her maid free” (16, 23).

Who is this woman who shares with Judith the highlights of her adventure? Is she aware from the beginning of what Judith her mistress is up to? Does she realise the ambiguity of her mistress’s words to Holofernes as she seeks to persuade him that the Jews have sinned against God and hence their downfall is inevitable (Jdt 11)? How does Judith look at this ‘her maid’? Why should she think of doing a good thing towards the end of her life in giving ‘her maid’ her freedom?

The term used in the Greek text to refer to this woman is *habra* which is employed only for her in the text. In 16, 23 this is translated differently by different versions in English: ‘maid’ (NAB, NJB, NRSV, REB), ‘maidservant’ (CCB), ‘handmaid’ (Douay), ‘serving-maid’ (Knox). It would seem that the word was accepted as a neologism into Latin, for the Vulgate renders the lexeme in 16, 23 by the word *abra* which is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *habra*. This was maintained by the *Nova Vulgata* (1998). Italian versions choose *serva* or the now rarely used *ancella* (why not *domestica*?). The French usually opt for *servante* (PdV and BJ) or *suivante* (TOB). Maltese translations usually render the word by *qaddejja* which means ‘female servant’ (cf. MBS and BS). There is a tendency therefore in versions for the word *habra* in Jdt 16, 23 to be translated by the word ‘maid’ or its equivalents.

Unfortunately for our text, the word/concept ‘maid’ is slightly ambiguous. According to the *Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus*¹ ‘maid’ in English carries these nuances: a young unmarried girl; maiden; a female servant; a housemaid; a spinster. At least in English (and Maltese), the term implies a contractual relationship between a ‘maid’ and ‘her mistress’ or work giver. The maid is paid by her mistress or employer for her service; she may change her mistress to go and work for another. And, allowing for any contractual conditions, she may be released from her duties;

1. HarperCollins Publishers, Glasgow 1987, 603

but she may never be 'given her liberty', 'emancipated' (NJB) as Judith's 'maid' is, since a maid is normally in modern parlance a free woman.

One should note that while in the text the lexeme *habra* is reserved for this particular woman in the story, other terms are employed in the 'Book of Judith' that belong to the same semantic domain. In 8,7 the word *paidisk_* is used to mean 'female slave', though one should notice that in 12,13 the same term is politely given by the butler of Holofernes to Judith herself with the meaning of 'pretty girl' (NRSV, MBS, DHH). It is meant as a compliment. The term *doul_* is found on Judith's reverential though beguiling lips as she addresses Holofernes in 11, 5. In this verse Judith also calls herself the commander-in-chief's *paidisk_*, and here she may be playing with his point of view². A similar shift of point of view happens in 12, 15. 19 where the butler looks at Judith's *habra* as her *doul_*. This means that while the narrator is conscious of other words which more or less belong to the same semantic domain and applies them to this mysterious lady, he or she reserves *habra* only in reference to Judith's maid. What does this word mean, therefore?

A *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 2nd Edition, Part 1, edited by J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie³ defines *habra* as a 'favourite, faithful, or devoted slave'. The dictionary suggests that the word may have been a neologism, at least with this meaning, and cites for its definition Amusin 1986:121; Harl 1986:204 and Wevers 1990:13. The problem with this definition is that the dictionary refers to the Greek translation of Gen 24,61; Ex 2,5(twice), Est 2,9 and 4,4 but leaves the Book of Judith completely out where the word features no less than seven times: 8,10. 33; 10, 2. 5.17; 13, 9 and 16, 23 and it always refers to the same character in the story. The choice of the *Lexicon*'s not to include references to Judith may have been simply editorial, space; but this definition fits this character perfectly. She is highly trusted by Judith her mistress who sends her on important errands (8, 10) and takes her with her on this secret and dangerous mission. Only when the final act of actually killing the general is about to be carried out that Judith asks her

2. The presence of different and at times, may be, conflicting perspectives is discussed by Linda Day in "Faith, Character and Perspective in Judith," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 95(2001) 71-93. Her work is insightful though not always aware of the subtleties of the language of the story and also of the 'authorial intention' of building the character of Judith as a positive not a negative one. One may find a number of other essays on the personage of Judith in Athalia Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995.
3. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 1992, 1.

faithful 'maid' to step out of Holofernes's bedroom, surely to avoid having to deal with reactions of horror from her companion which would thereby alert the guards that something strange is being perpetrated in their chief's tent. The narrator though reports of no impulsive reaction from this woman when later on her mistress hands over to her female companion waiting outside the bedroom of the general the head of the dead Holofernes that she may throw it into their food bag (13, 9-10).

This woman proved herself to be faithful indeed to Judith. But she was Judith's 'slave', not simply her 'maid'. And it is for this reason that Judith, towards the end of her life, feels the need to grant freedom this faithful slave of hers. In this she is not original as such was an established custom in the context of slavery: that people who would possess slaves, on their deathbed, would often free those slaves who proved to be faithful and good (cf. Wettinger 2002). In including this detail, the narrator means to enhance his portraiture of Judith as a positive character (*contra* Day).

Such exegesis was recognised only by a handful of Bible translations. The Bible of the Italian Catholic Bishops' Conference reproduced the nuance of special relationship between Judith and her slave, but preferred the archaic word *ancella* derived from the Latin *ancilla* that means both 'maid-servant' as well as 'female slave'.⁴ Their translation of Jdt 16, 23 reads: *alla sua ancella preferita aveva concesso la libertà* 'to her preferred slave woman she conceded freedom'. Therefore this version of the Bible opts for an ambiguous term (the same term is employed by NV but not by BLC which uses the more current lexeme *serva*, maidservant). I have come across only two versions which chose an unambiguous term for the Greek word *habra* of Jdt 16, 23. TEV reads the relative clause in the verse: "and set her slave woman free." One should read the recently published UBS *Handbook on Tobit and Judith* (2001) on Jdt 8, 10. The other translation where Judith's slave real status is recognised is the Spanish *Santa Biblia. Dios Habla Hoy* where we read *Dio la libertad a su esclava*, 'she gave freedom to her slave'.⁵

4. Cf. *The Englishman's Pocket Latin-English and English-Latin Dictionary*, Routledge, London 1955.

5. I was informed by my colleague Dr Seppo Sipilä, who offered many useful comments to an earlier edition of the paper, that the new Swedish Bibeln (2000) translates the word throughout the book by *slavinna* which means 'female slave'; so does the new Finnish version (2003) which renders the word by *orjator* that carries the same meaning. With this note I wish to acknowledge and thank my colleague for his valid contribution.

One may wonder whether this short essay has not been an exercise in futility. After all, recognising that this mysterious woman in the Book of Judith has been Judith's slave rather than her maidservant has not improved our knowledge of this book a great deal. However, the author of the book has considered this detail worth including as a prop to his positive evaluation of Judith the main character; and translators should make every effort not to neglect anything that the authors of Scripture thought useful for their narrative strategy in telling their story. Probably the narrator needed to include the character of this slave in the story both to underline Judith's status as a woman of worth, who moves about accompanied by her attendant (the slave as a status symbol), and to have a witness in front of her Jewish post-exilic society that "it was my face that seduced him to his destruction, and that he committed no sin with me, to defile and shame" (13, 16). This slave can testify to this oath of her mistress and in this way she is able to protect her against 'shame' (cf. Klein 1995; Van der Jagt 2002; Stiebert 2002).

Short Bibliography

A number of Bible versions are referred to by abbreviations only:

- BJ: La Bible de Jérusalem(1978).
- BLC: La Bibbia in Lingua Corrente(1985).
- BS: *Bibbja Saydon*. Societas Doctrinae Christianae, Malta (1977.1982.1990).
- CCB: Christian Community Bible. Catholic Pastoral Edition (1988).
- DHH: Santa Biblia. Dios Habla Hoy (1992).
- Douay: Holy Bible. Douay Version(1956)
- Knox: The Holy Bible by Ronald Knox(1956)
- MBS: Il-Bibbja. Malta Bible Society.
- NJB: The New Jerusalem Bible (1985).
- NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989).
- NV: La Bibbia Nuovissima Versione dai Testi Originali(1983).
- PdV: La Bible Parole de Vie (2001)
- REB: The Revised English Bible (1989).
- TEV: Good News Bible. Today's English Version (1992).
- TOB: La Bible. Traduction oecuménique (1995).

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