

Judith's Prayer of Thanksgiving

Judith gives great praise and thanks to God, "Break into song for my Lord, sing in honour of him" (16:1f) and "Lord you are great, you are glorious" (16:13). She stresses how the might of the Assyrians was destroyed by God using her as a tool, a simple woman (16:5f). She acknowledges God as creator "For you spoke and things came into being" (16:14) and stresses the importance of a genuine trust and fear of the Lord, "But whoever fears the Lord is great"

The Story of the Book of Esther

Esther, who is married to the Persian king is assisted by Mordecai, a court official, in thwarting a plot by the chief Minister, Haman, to destroy the Jews. It ends in the massacre of all Haman's family.

Two Major Prayers (ch.4)

Mordecai's prayer of petition to God to save the Jews.

Esther's similar petition, but specifically asking for the ability to influence the King in favour of her people.



Both pleas reflect a spirituality based on God's covenant promises:

Mordecai: "Now, Lord King, God of Abraham, spare your people, .. do not overlook your heritage you redeemed from Egypt"

Esther: "Come to my help for I am alone .. I have been taught that you Lord have chosen Israel out of all the nations ..to be your heritage .. Save us from the hands of the wicked" and "Put persuasive words into my mouth"

Both prayers are personal in their tone and recognise God's power :

Mordecai: "Everything is subject to your power .. You have made heaven and earth ..you are master of the universe"

Esther: "You have knowledge of all things .. O God whose strength prevails over all"

Our Catholic Faith Prayer and Spirituality 2010-2011

5. Prayer in the Books of Judith and Esther



1. Is There Any Significance In These Books Portraying Women As The Saviours of Israel?
2. How Do These Books Encompass All That Is Old Testament Spirituality?
3. Why Are Israel's Enemies Massacred?

The Books of Judith and Esther

The Book of Judith, like that of Tobit, is Deutero-Canonical, and while the Book of Esther is accepted as canonical by Protestants, this only applies to the original Hebrew book and not to the longer Greek version accepted by Catholics. Both books were written in the 2nd. Century B.C. Their purpose is to show that no cause is lost if God decides otherwise. They stress that the power of prayer and a lifestyle centred on God can triumph over apparently unassailable odds. God's power is shown as being irresistible, delivered even through women, traditionally seen as physically weak. The Books express hope and trust in the covenant relationship with God. They reflect petition, praise, repentance and thanksgiving. In fact, they encompass all that is typical of O.T. spiritually.

The Story of the Book of Judith

The Jews are threatened by the army of Holofernes, depicted as a General of Nebuchadnezzar the King of Assyria ! (the Book is historically inaccurate, but its purpose is not to reveal history). The point of the story is emphasised on the one hand by an account of how great an army the Assyrians had and, on the other, by a history of God's special relationship with the Jews, recounted to the Assyrians by an Ammonite mercenary, Achior (5:5ff).



Despite their covenant with God, the Jews are shown as being only lukewarm in their faith because, although initially resisting the Assyrians and praying to God for his assistance, they finally want to surrender. It is then that Judith, a young widow, criticises them for not having more faith in God,. She prays to God for deliverance and fearlessly goes to Holofernes, beguiles him, and kills him by decapitation. The Jews massacre the Assyrians, then give thanks to God at the Jerusalem Temple.

Judith's Prayer for Assistance

Judith begins by recounting the passage in Genesis where Simeon revenged the rape of his sister, Dinah, by the Shechemites (Gen.34). "Lord God, my ancestor Simeon you armed to take vengeance on those who had undone a virgin's belt" (9:2)

This is a prelude to show her trust in God who is in control of everything "For you have made the past, what is happening now, and what will follow" (9:5). God has, in fact, planned all that occurs "What is, what will be you have planned, what has been, you designed". He is praised as creator "Master of heaven and Earth, Creator of the waters, King of your whole creation" (9:17).

She recognises that earthly power counts for nothing before God, "Trust as they may in shield and spear .. in you they have not recognised the Lord" (9:7).

In fact, she understands God as a god of "the humble, the oppressed, the weak, the forsaken, the despairing" (9:11) and, importantly that the Jews are his special people "God of the heritage of Israel" (9:12), and "Against your covenant, against your holy dwelling-place" (9:13).

Judith knows that as a woman she is physically weak, but recognises that she can overcome the Assyrians by God's help through using a woman's charm, "By the guile of my lips strike down master with retainer, break their pride by a woman's hand" (9:10).



Actually, there is a ruthlessness in her prayer and conduct that is quite frightening and somewhat uncomfortable to read, "Hear my prayer, give me a beguiling tongue to wound and kill" and she is shown as lying repeatedly and deliberately to Holofernes to achieve her aim (11:5f).