

The Abject, Liminality, and Mutable Identity: Esther, Judith, and Jezebel

The inter-textual comparison of the stories of Esther, Judith, and Jezebel reveals an attitude towards both the female body and female sexuality that is prevalent in the Hebrew Bible: that which is unmitigated and uncontrolled is dangerous. While these three female characters engage in similar actions, because of Jezebel's unadulterated use of perceived sexuality, she is abhorred for her actions, while Esther and Judith are praised. These differing attitudes towards similar characters occur primarily for two reasons: female power and sexuality is only permissible when used in a specific context marked by a period of transition—and only those who conform to Israelite cultural norms (as outlined in the Hebrew Bible) are permitted to act in this state of liminality. Liminality is marked by clothing change, and can only be achieved through abject practices. Abjection is used in this sense both as a form of debasement and as “that which disturbs identity, system, and order.”¹ Controlling the body allows for control of one's identity, and entering the period of liminality allows for the female to briefly act outside of established gender norms in order to instigate social progress for her community. However, one can only remain in the transitional period for a limited amount of time—reincorporation into the private sphere must occur, because to remain in the liminal state is to invoke the danger that results from uncontrolled female sexuality.

Esther

Esther engages in abject practices that lead to an identity transformation, which allows her to successfully operate in the public sphere in order to create

¹ Childers, J. W., & Hentzi, G. (Eds.). (1995). *The Columbia dictionary of modern literary and*

social change for the Jews living in the Persian Diaspora. While Esther is not physically reincorporated into the private sphere—she remains as Queen and is still an influential political figure at the end of her story—she is symbolically reincorporated into the private sphere when she is written out of her own story—all the glory is given to Mordecai in the interpretation of the Book of Esther.

Esther begins her identity change by fasting—in fact, she calls for a fast from the entire Jewish community, which solidifies her Jewish identity, and begins her rite of passage which transforms her from head concubine to Jewish Queen of Persia.² This fast is explored in greater detail in the Greek Additions:

She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn, she covered with her tangled hair. (Est 14: 2)

Esther enters the pre-liminal period instigated by abject practices in order to prepare herself for acting in the public sphere. Fasting and debasing of the body function as purification rites, cleansing Esther of all remnants of her former identity. She thus functions in contrast to the feasting and banquets of Ahasuerus's court, setting herself apart from the Persian royalty.³ In the Greek Additions, she removes her queen's garments, puts on the garments of mourning, and then re-robes herself in her queen's garments before entering the king's chamber. Each of these changes in clothing signifies a change in identity. The removal of the queen's clothing and putting on of the mourning garments signifies her entry into the pre-liminal phase

² Wyler, Bea, and King Ahasuerus. "The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen." *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*. 128 – 129.

³ Oren, D. (2009). Esther: The Jewish Queen of Persia. *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 18(1), 153.

of preparing for the transitional period between abjection and reincorporation. Although the entire Jewish community engages in the fast, Esther does so in isolation. She alone must act in order to save her people. The debasement of the body allows for a transformation of identity to occur: when she re-robes herself in her queen's garments, she has effectively altered her identity to that of a politician. She is now permitted to act outside of her prescribed gender role and function without negative repercussions in the public sphere—the king's throne room.⁴

When Esther enters the king's chamber, she is in a state of liminality. Though it is strictly prohibited, even fatal, to approach the king uninvited, because she is in the liminal period, she is briefly permitted to act in the public sphere in a role that is outside of the prescribed norm. She functions as one of the king's advisors, skillfully maneuvering her way into his inner circle before revealing Haman's plot.⁵ In the chiasmic manner of this story, Haman's planned pogrom is reversed, and it is the anti-Semites who are persecuted rather than the Jews. The death of Haman unites the Israelite Diaspora community and instigates social change. The corpses of Haman and his sons are used in an abject manner—their display serves as a warning to all those who would oppose the Jews in Persia, and invokes fear in the hearts of their enemies, even causing some people to convert to Judaism in order to save themselves. Not only is Esther's identity mutable after performing abject practices, but so also are the citizens of Persia—their fear leads them to join the powerful minority.

⁴ Zucker, David J. "Entertaining Esther: Vamp, Victim, And Virtuous Woman." *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 2 (2012). 8 – 9.

⁵ Bronner, Leila L. "Reclaiming Esther: From Sex Object to Sage." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 26 (1998): 8 – 9.

While Esther still remains in a position of power at the end of her story, she is symbolically reincorporated into the private sphere in the interpretation of the text. The credit for revealing and reversing Haman's plot is often given to Mordecai, who is said to be the true hero of the story, while Esther is said to function as his puppet.⁶ Esther is essentially written out of her own story, and the nuances of her exhibition of power are lost in interpretation. Although it was briefly permissible for her to act outside of prescribed gender norms, it was unacceptable for Esther to remain in the state of liminality that allowed for this deviant behavior. Transitional states are dangerous, and can only be utilized for a short period of time before the subject must return to his or her original form.

Judith

Judith successfully utilizes abject practices in order to lead to an identity change that results in a series of events ending in social progress for the Israelites with the decapitation and symbolic sacrifice of Holofernes. However, much as Esther was unable to permanently remain in the state of liminality that permitted her to function outside of social norms, so also must Judith revert to her original state after she serves her purpose in the transitional period.

By subjecting herself to fasting, wearing sackcloth, wallowing in ashes, and prostrating herself, Judith prepares to do the work of the "God of the lowly" (Jdt 9:1, 11). This abjection of the body creates a clean, purified state that allows for identity change to occur. Judith then transitions from her abject state to her new identity:

She rose from where she lay prostrate. She called her maid and went down into the house where she lived on Sabbaths and on

⁶ See mention of Purim as "Day of Mordecai" in 1 & 2 Maccabees

her festal days. She removed the sackcloth she had been wearing, took off her widow's garments, bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment. She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her (Jdt 10: 2 – 4)

Judith's change in identity occurs as a result of purification rites: first, she debases herself, then, she cleanses herself. The change of clothing and her physical movement into her house signifies a change of identity—she is no longer an outlier in society—no longer a widow in mourning. Judith has taken off her widow's garments, and has put on the garments of the seductress, using her beauty as her armor in order to prepare for battle.⁷ She thus enters a state of transition between abject practices and reincorporation into society, and is briefly permitted to act outside of the prescribed gender norms.

Judith's identity change is successful, and is legitimized through the male gaze. The men of Bethulia and the entire Assyrian military are enchanted by her beauty—she has successfully transformed herself into a seductress (Jdt 10: 7, 14, 19b). Her change in identity allows her to successfully navigate the public sphere—the realm of men. She is accepted into the Assyrian encampment, and her motives are not questioned because she is beautiful.

It is important to note that Judith does not assimilate into the Assyrian culture—instead she maintains her Jewish identity through practicing kosher eating habits and through abstaining from sleeping with the Gentile men. Perhaps her

⁷ Newsom, Carol Carol Ann, and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. "Judith." Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. 383.

nightly bathing ritual, in which she washes off her make-up, can be considered a cleansing rite that allows her to maintain her Israelite identity, even when surrounded by Assyrians (Jdt 12:7). Although Judith's social place in Israelite society is mutable (she is able to easily switch between being a widow and a seductress), her cultural identity is immutable. She must still maintain her Jewishness (as her name implies) in order to successfully implement God's plan and be considered a revered Israelite woman.⁸ Perhaps Judith serves as a corrective for Esther—she is able to bring about social progress for her people without breaking *kashrut* and without sleeping with the enemy.

Much as was the case in Esther, “the reverse occurred”: the Assyrians were planning on destroying and plundering the Israelites, but they were the ones who were plundered and destroyed (Jdt 15: 6 – 7, 11). Holofernes is essentially offered as a sacrifice to Yahweh: his decapitated head is displayed on the gates of a Bethulia as a warning to all those who oppose the mighty Israelite regime, and his spoils are given as votive offerings (Jdt 14:11, 16: 19). In this case, the abject is used to strengthen the Israelite community while weakening the Assyrians—Holofernes' decapitated body causes the entire battle camp to flee, while his displayed head unites the Israelites, inspiring them to plunder the Assyrians for thirty days.

However, after Judith decapitates Holofernes, she must reincorporate herself into the private sphere in order to be accepted into Israelite society. Judith cannot remain in the public sphere forever—though it is she who instigates the victory over the Assyrians by decapitating Holofernes, it is the men of Israel who must bring this

⁸ Freeman, David Noel. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. “Judith.” (1992). 1.

victory to fruition by plundering the battle camp (Jdt 15:3). Judith must revert to her original state as a widow—it is no longer permissible for her to function as a seductress. Her dedication of the spoils of war to the temple completes her rite of passage as initiated by abject practices: she moves from a pre-liminal state of isolation from the community (she lives outside of her house and fasts on all days except festal days and the Sabbath) to a liminal state (the seductress who is permitted to function in the public sphere) to the post-liminal state of being reincorporated as a revered and accepted part of the Israelite community.

Judith effectively uses practices of self-debasement and self-care in order to control her identity—to control the body is to control the identity—and she is able to briefly act in a plane of reality that is separate from social norms. Though Israelite code of conduct prohibits murder and Israelite culture prohibits the incorporation of women into the public sphere, Judith is able to circumvent this, and is revered for doing so because it brought about social progress for the Israelites. The pinnacle of her achievement, however, is her successful reincorporation into her own culture—she returns to her state of widowhood and remains in the private sphere until her death (Jdt 16:21 – 25).

Jezebel

Although her methods are similar to Esther's and Judith's, Jezebel is ultimately unsuccessful in her attempt to instigate social change for the Israelite kingdom at the expense of a man's life because she is a foreigner who does not assimilate into Israelite culture. In fact, her worship of foreign gods is seen as dangerous to Israelite culture, and the remains of her corpse embody this danger. In

Jezebel's case, she herself is transformed into the abject, and her place in the public sphere is ridiculed because she fails to reincorporate herself into the private sphere. However, this outcome is predictable, as she was doomed from the beginning because she is not an Israelite.

Jezebel functions as a seductress even before she paints her face and robes herself in finery. She seduces Ahab into worshiping other gods besides Yahweh, even to the extent that he employs prophets of Ba'al and Asherah in his court and she slaughters the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18: 4, 19). She uses her power over Ahab's court in order to acquire Naboth's vineyard by falsely accusing Naboth of treason—she accuses Naboth of the same crime as Esther accused Haman, yet Jezebel is painted in a vastly different light than Esther (1 Kings 21). Though she does not literally seduce anyone, she functions as a symbolic seductress, or trickster figure, because of her ability to exercise control over Ahab's kingdom. Therefore, her change of clothing when Jehu is approaching Jezreel does not constitute a change in identity that is drastic enough to guarantee her survival—in fact, as a trickster figure, she is in a constant state of liminality that is not a result of abject practices leading to a mutable identity, and therefore, this identity is not socially acceptable for her to possess. Jezebel never “purified” herself through fasting, wallowing in ashes, and prostration; consequently, she never had permission to operate as a seductress or to reside in a state of transition. Ironically, it is the eunuchs, who represent liminality of gender, that actively dispose of Jezebel. She is dangerous to society because her liminality is permanent rather than temporary—she has no intention of incorporating herself into Israelite culture or of incorporating herself

into the private sphere. The death of Jezebel at the hand of the eunuchs represents the danger that results from remaining in the liminal period for too long.

While Esther and Judith are lauded for the symbolic sacrifice of a foreign man because it leads to the liberation of the Israelite people, Jezebel is abhorred for the murder of Naboth. The irony in this is that much like the deaths of Haman and Holofernes led to an improved situation for the Israelite elite, so also did the acquirement of Naboth's vineyard. The symbolic sacrifice of Naboth advanced the Israelite elite—but in this case, Naboth was sacrificed to the Canaanite gods, and not to Yahweh. Naboth was also an Israelite, which may contribute to the negative portrayal of Jezebel—he may have been sacrificed “by the hand of a woman,” but this woman did not have permission to briefly operate in the public sphere because she was not Israelite.

As a foreign woman, Jezebel is symbolically abject to Israelite culture, which is actualized by her corpse—the dogs that eat her leave so little that the question of whether or not she was even human arises. Because Jezebel was unwilling to assimilate into the Israelite culture, and because she permanently operated outside of the private sphere, she is viewed as dangerous, and her behavior, although mirrored by the behavior of Esther and Judith, can never be permissible.

Conclusion

Esther's and Judith's abject practices illustrate the dangers of the female body and female sexuality—their bodies must be cleansed of impurities before they are permitted to operate in the public sphere in a period of transition. The female body is not pure in its natural state—it must be purified before the woman is

permitted to instigate social change. To permanently remain in the state of liminality that allows for incorporation in the public sphere is dangerous, as illustrated by the violent death of Jezebel. The woman must return to the private sphere after she has accomplished her goal of survival of the community. These biblical stories outline the dangers that result from mutable gender identity—it is impermissible to remain in a period of liminality and to operate permanently outside of the prescribed gender norms. The conclusion that arises from the comparison of these three stories is that women are only permitted to act outside of prescribed gender roles for a certain period of time, and only if acting as such will instigate social change. Only a certain amount of mutability is allowable—they can change their social identity, but not their cultural identity. Jezebel failed to incorporate herself into Israelite culture, and functioned entirely in a state of liminality—this is why her character is viewed as dangerous.

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