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An Awe-Inspiring Feat: The Ideal Jewish Woman in Reality

In Proverbs, a biblical book of conventional wisdom, a king's mother details the traits befitting for his wife (*New Revised Standard Version*, Prov. 31). Diligent in maintaining her household, the ideal woman "rises while it is still night" (Prov. 31.15). Gifted with intelligence and a caring heart, she is loved by her family and praised for "[fearing] the Lord" (Prov 31.30). She is the aspirational model for Jewish womanhood. However, what if a woman does not have a family? If she does not have a household to maintain, how can she demonstrate her capability and devotion? What if she is not born Jewish, but marries into a Jewish family? Is the chance to exemplify the ideal Jewish woman gone forever? The surprising answer is, "Not quite." In the transition from theory to practice, the taken-for-granted family transforms to accommodate real-life situations, allowing a woman to still exhibit traits of the ideal Jewish woman. The titular characters of Judith and Ruth serve as prime and comparative examples, respectively, for this discussion, and in doing so, reveal a post-exilic worldview that accounts for different realities within one religious community.

For Judith, the pursuit to exemplify the ideal Jewish woman is complicated by the fact that she is a childless widow. Not only does she not have a household to maintain, but she also has a status so marginalized and powerless that she (with orphans and foreigners) is explicitly protected by God, who "executes justice" for her (Deut. 10.18). However, while reality complicates the aspirational model, it does not eliminate the possibility for the model's

attainment. Judith's marginalized life allows her to "[open] her mouth with wisdom," as the ideal woman does, by causing God--the wisest of all--to be her main companion (Prov. 31.26). In the story, Holofernes, chief general of the Assyrian army, is leading the murder and plunder of numerous countries in the region. Her community is distraught, for how can they survive a superpower's blows when they have only recently returned from exile? The people plead for the elders to surrender in five days, and they relent (Jth. 4). Revealing her unique perspective, Judith alone disapproves of the decision and reprimands the elders for believing that they know best and for "putting the Lord Almighty to the test" and on their schedule (Jth. 8.13). After all, if they cannot even understand "the human mind," how can they "comprehend [God's]?" (Jth. 8.14). Her closeness to God can be seen in this passage, which aligns with Job 38, where God compares the vastness of his knowledge to the limitedness of Job's through a barrage of rhetorical questions. Thus, a learned reader of the Bible may recognize that Judith understands the contrast between temporary, fallible human beings and the omnipotent, omnipresent God. Indeed, even those of her time do so. The elders call her a "God-fearing woman," who speaks from a wise, "true heart" (Jth. 8.28). Her words, aimed to save her community, are evidence of her intelligence, her piety to God, and her devotion to her family (the community).

However, Judith cannot become the ideal woman if she only exhibits a few of the ideal's traits. Does she have the last notable trait: a noble character? How can she, when she is not guaranteed a stable, comfortable life, with food on the table and a roof over her head? While it seems impossible, Judith's "noble character" shines even in the midst of enemies and temptation (Prov. 31.10). Embarking on a quest of "vengeance," she departs for Holofernes. The elders "[trust] in her," as the husband of the ideal woman "trusts in [his wife]," by not questioning her plans (Prov. 31.11). Instead, they act as her family by praying over her journey (Jth. 8.35). After

Judith is welcomed into Holofernes' camp, and given food and wine, she chooses instead to partake of her own kosher sustenance, revealing her devotion to her Jewish principles. When Holofernes asks how they can replenish her supply, she answers that she will not “use up [her] supply...before the Lord carries out by [her] hand what he has determined” (Jth. 12.1-4).

Replenishment is not needed, for she trusts that God has given her everything she needs; her close relationship to God is apparent. During her stay, she demonstrates her high moral principles by holding fast to her religion: she keeps herself clean, praying nightly and staying in her tent. Her “noble character” shines.

Indeed, Judith may have all the traits of the ideal woman. However, how can she fulfill the ideal's main goal: “girding herself with strength” and “making her arms strong” to maintain her household (Prov. 31.17)? While this work, in the traditional sense, is inaccessible for Judith, it is adapted for her situation. Her representative family--her community--needs safety from an enemy army, and thus the act of maintaining her household transforms into securing the safety of her people. In the final stage of the story, Holofernes “holds a banquet” and invites Judith to his tent, “for it would be a disgrace if [they] let such a woman go without having intercourse with her” (Jth. 12.12). At his tent, she stays clean, continuing to eat and drink from her own supply, while Holofernes drinks until intoxicated and asleep. In the dead of night, Judith decapitates him with two swings of his sword (Jth. 13.6). Though violence is not found in Proverbs 31, both Judith and the ideal woman gather strength to maintain their households. For both, their actions show that they are “capable,” and “far more precious than jewels” (Prov. 31.10). Through this violent act, Judith brings peace to her people and maintains her household.

Finally, the household must recognize the ideal woman's hard work. Proverbs 31.31 says, “Let [the ideal woman's] works praise her in the city gates,” and though her work is unusual,

Judith *is* praised for her devotion to maintaining the household by killing Holofernes. Uzziah, a magistrate of the town, calls her “blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth,” and “all the people said, ‘Amen’” (Jth. 13.18-19). This elevation of Judith even resembles the elevation of the ideal woman by her husband, who says, “‘Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all’” (Prov. 31.29). Through the story of Judith, one woman rises above her marginalized role to bring comfort to her makeshift family (her community). Transforming into a real-life example of the ideal woman, she is a cause for hope for other women who have suffered loss since the exile and may not have a traditional family to care for. Indeed, the worldview in Judith reveals how, even with unique situations, a woman may strive to exemplify the ideal woman and do good in her community.

However, what if a woman is not Jewish? Ruth is a Moabite who married into a Jewish lineage. She can perhaps exemplify the ideal Jewish woman if she maintains her household well, but how can she do so, when she is a childless widow? In Moab, she does not even have a Jewish community who can become her family. Thus, Ruth creates her own family, entirely devoting herself to Naomi, her mother-in-law, by saying, “‘Where you go, I will go...your people shall be my people’” (Ruth 1.16). Once they arrive in Bethlehem, she gleaned tirelessly for them. As the ideal woman “works with willing hands” and “provides food for her household,” so does Ruth, with the only difference lying in the *makeup* of her household (Prov. 31.13, Prov. 31.15).

For Ruth, maintaining her household includes an unusual task: ensuring that her deceased husband’s lineage continues. “[Rising] while it is still night,” (as an ideal Jewish woman does), she approaches Boaz, a kinsman who can redeem his relative’s property and bear sons in the relative’s name, at midnight (Prov. 31.15). By not “going after young men, whether poor or rich,” her devotion to her family, a trait of the ideal Jewish woman, is further shown (Ruth 3.10).

In the end, she is able to complete this unusual task, and her work is recognized and praised by the community, just as the ideal woman's work is recognized and praised by her family. When Ruth and Boaz marry, she bears an heir, causing the women of the town to praise God (Ruth 4.13-15). Ruth's son continues the lineage that results in King David, an important figure in Jewish history, and thus the phrase "let her works praise her" is satisfied for generations to come. Though Ruth is a Moabite, she nonetheless exemplifies the ideal Jewish woman by embracing and caring for her husband's community wholeheartedly.

The ideal Jewish woman is simply that--an idealized version of a woman that resides in theory and is complicated by reality. For Judith and Ruth, the two women are childless widows, and thus, the traditional family and sphere of work in Proverbs 31 must change to accommodate their situations. With Judith, the family is replaced by the community and the town's elders, and "maintaining her household" means the decapitation of an enemy chief general. With Ruth, the family is replaced by the community of her mother-in-law. Her work is a son, who continues her husband's lineage and includes the revered King David. Diligently caring for their families, Judith and Ruth reveal a post-exilic worldview that understands the different situations Yahweh followers may be in. In a chaotic reality that has continually hurt the Jewish people through battles, enslavement, and exile, the stories of both women indicate that it *is* possible to fulfill what a Jewish woman is called to strive for. By doing so, even amidst untraditional realities, Judith and Ruth demonstrate how one can strike wonder in the hearts of other believers, leading them to praise God and renew their faith, day by day. For a woman, the highest form of achievement lies in maintaining her household. For a believer of faith, it is in leading others to God. Existing at the intersection of these two realms, Judith and Ruth arguably deserve their places in the Hebrew Bible.

Works Cited

New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha. Oxford University Press, 1999.