

A LESSON FROM *JUDITH*

Ancient Assyria sends a powerful army to subjugate all the kingdoms of the west. Israel is one of the kingdoms threatened, for she chooses to resist her oppressor rather than submit to his yoke. Upon entering Palestine, the invading army seeks first to conquer Bethulia, a little Jewish town. Knowing that the Hebrews will not surrender, the general devises his strategy. Resistance can be weakened by cutting off the town's water supply and soldiers are deployed to accomplish this.

Within the town faced with imminent destruction, the Hebrews murmur at their lot. One of their leaders is so affected that he promises to surrender the city, if aid does not arrive in five days. In this crisis a widow woman of spotless reputation, who fears the Lord, espouses the cause of the city. Arrayed in her finest garments, she gains access to the enemy general's tent, and slays him while he is in a drunken stupor. News of the leader's death passes quickly through the camp causing great fear. No thought is given to the order of battle; panic is the rule of flight. Nothing remains for the Hebrew soldiers but to pursue, slay those they can catch, and collect booty from the camp.

The reader has no doubt recognized the summary of the narrative found in the book of *Judith*. The Assyrian general is Holofernes; the king is Nabuchodonosor. If the names of the characters and the name of the center of action are accepted without interpretation, we are left with many difficulties. For instance, we know that Nabuchodonosor was king of Babylon and that Ninive was destroyed by his son, Nabopolassar. This narrative depicts Nabuchodonosor as an Assyrian king reigning at Ninive. Holofernes, the Assyrian general, bears a Persian name. Although they are made contemporaries, Nabuchodonosor lived in the sixth century and Holofernes in the fourth. Bethulia is unknown in name; its position does not correspond exactly to any town in the area described by the author.

Is there any explanation for the apparent inconsistencies and liberties of the sacred author? Was he writing history in the modern sense, or pure fiction? Might there be some other explanation? That the author was not writing a scientific history is certain; otherwise the difficulties would persist. A historical nucleus prevents us from labelling the book as a pure fiction. The course between these two positions and the answer offered by exegetes



is that the liberties taken by the author are explained by the fact of his using a literary form. The particular form ascribed to this book is apocalyptic. To grasp this form some consideration of the existence of forms, their function and significance is required.

The *Bible* is not one book; it is a library, a collection of books having authors of varying backgrounds and written in different ages. Unlike the orderly arrangement found in the modern library however, the Bible exposes different forms of literature to the reader without any warning. It could be prose, poetry, a fable or parable. The burden is placed on the reader to discover in what form the Word of God is expressed.

Classifications of the books of the *Bible* come down to us from Old Testament times. For instance, a common division in the Christian era places *Old Testament* books in three general categories: historical, didactic and prophetic. Yet modern biblical scholars find this division inadequate. The books of the *Bible* simply will not fit snugly into the compartments determined by the canons of western literature. Through intensive research and study and with the help of technological advances made in such fields as archeology, paleography, linguistics, etc., the exegete has learned of literary forms common to Semitic peoples but almost completely unknown to us. The discovery of these literary forms has greatly enlightened our understanding of the *Bible*, for they clarify the intention of the author. Guided by *his* intention, we can give a proper interpretation to the book. We thus avoid judging him by false norms. In the words of Pius XII:

Let the interpreter, then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research, endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed.¹

Literary forms, then, are the commonly accepted patterns of writing used in a given age and culture to express ideas and indicate to readers or audiences the author's purpose. This purpose is not always simply the communication of truth. St. Paul explicitly states this in reference to Scripture. He writes: "All Scripture is inspired by God, and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correcting, for instructing in justice; that the man of God may be perfectly equipped for every good work" (II Tim., 3:16-17). The habit of looking for theoretical truths originates in a Greco-Latin back-

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spirito* (Washington: N.C.W.C. Press, 1943), p. 18.

ground. The *Bible* however should be approached at Semites. Then we will meet God as He presents Himself, a God Who acts in history, speaks to us, reveals Himself and demands our faith and love.

Even when a particular truth is communicated in the *Bible*, it is measured by the purpose of the author, i.e. what he wishes to communicate and only as much as he affirms. His purpose is discovered through the literary form used. A concern for material accuracy, to know the facts, to discover what happened, is an attitude common to us but not necessarily as important to the Semitic people. The thing signified, the meaning was their main concern. A correct approach to the Bible must therefore include this principle; otherwise we will be looking for what is not there. A noted exegete tells us:

Twentieth-century westerners, brought up on Aristotelian logic and used to the strictest methods of historical research, may find difficulty in adapting themselves to the somewhat crude simplicity of ancient times. But it is for them to make the effort, for God chose to speak to them, not directly and in their own language, but through the intermediary of ancient orientals and their customs.²

Men have read the *Bible* for centuries and profited immensely, both spiritually and culturally. God, the Font of Revelation, has not let His Word remain hidden from mankind. Yet, using a knowledge of literary forms, we may make even greater progress. The function of these forms has been described as, "a probing light which enables the reader to pierce the very depth's of the biblical author's mind and so understand his message not only in its main points but precisely and in all its amplitude and depth."³ To understand the message precisely and in all its amplitude and depth is the goal to be achieved. Is it verifiable? Let us return to the book of *Judith* and see.

All of us grasp the central message of the book—God is the master of history and is victorious over His enemies. The theme is made more salient by God's using a woman, the weakest of means in an ancient's eyes, to vanquish the enemy.⁴ Recognizing this book as close to the apocalyptic

² This comment by Fr. Benoit is found in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica. Prophetia*, trans. into French by Frs. Synave and Benoit (Paris, 1947), p. 368.

³ Ellis, P. F., *The Men and the Message of the Old Testament* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn., 1963), p. 111.

⁴ Skehan, P., "Hand of Judith," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (January, 1963).

form enhances the teaching and gives a proper perspective to the historical and geographical inconsistencies. The apocalyptic form has for its theme the certain victory of God over the forces of anti-God. The book of *Judith* presents Nabuchodonosor in direct opposition to God (note his discourse in 2:5, and that of Holofernes in 3:8) and narrates the victory of God. The purpose of the form used is to encourage the nation and instill a renewed confidence in God. Judith fulfills this characteristic as we see in 9:14.

The main reasons for judging *Judith* as apocalyptic lie in its symbolism.⁵ These three characteristics of the apocalyptic symbolism are found in here: first, a vast army intent on subjugating Israel; then, a synthesis of the forces of evil in one symbolic leader; finally, the world empires unite the forces of paganism against God.

The vast army is spoken of in the first chapters of the book. Nabuchodonosor is a fitting symbolic leader, for he was seen by the post-exilic Jews as the enemy *par excellence* of God because of his destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 B.C. Four great empires are united: Assyria, Babylon, Media, and Persia. The number four denoted universality. Judith, whose name signifies the Jewess, represents the side of God, identified in the book with the nation of Israel.

Historical inconsistencies were employed to fasten our attention to this religious drama and the author's solution. It was a device readily understood in that age. The inconsistencies are not contrary to inerrancy, for the sacred author is responsible *only* for the truth that he intends to convey. Nor is it unworthy of God, for He did not deceive the Hebrews and we cannot decide which modes of expression do or do not suit God.

Thus it is that modern biblical scholarship, through the method of form criticism, has contributed to the fuller appreciation of the book of *Judith*. Moreover it has done this for the entire ensemble known as the *Bible*. The message understood, we can only whisper with the Apostle:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For "Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counsellor" (Rom. 11:33-34)?

—Patrick Burchill, O.P.

⁵ It should be noted that the proposal making *Judith* midrashic apocalyptic and not haggadic alone is original with Fr. Ellis. cf. Ellis, P. F., *Men and Message of the Old Testament*, *op. cit.*