

FROM JUDITH TO MARY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SALVATION HISTORY¹

Marchelino Joshua²

| Graduate Student of Theology
Faculty of Philosophy
Parahyangan Catholic University
Bandung, Indonesia

Abstract:

In the Scriptures, Judith emerges as a prominent heroine of Israel, demonstrating her strength and intelligence to liberate her people from the grasp of oppression. On the other hand, Mary, Jesus' mother, is revered as the Mother of God, who, through profound humility and obedience, embraces her pivotal role in the narrative of humanity's redemption. This article aims to explore the significant parallels between these two remarkable figures, highlighting how they embody feminine qualities such as courage, intelligence, fidelity, and humility. These traits enable them to serve as divine instruments in the fulfillment of God's salvific plan. Utilizing exegetical methods and theological reflections, the author emphasizes how Judith and Mary exemplify an active essence of femininity that transcends the patriarchal limitations traditionally placed on women's roles in religious narratives. Both figures are positioned not merely as recipients of salvation but as active agents engaging in the divine work of salvation. This analysis can provide fresh insights into the contributions of women throughout the history of salvation and underscores their relevance in the ongoing struggles for liberation in contemporary contexts.

Keywords:

women's role • presence • Judith • Mary • exegesis • theological reflections • feminism • history of salvation

Introduction

The endeavor for women's rights to achieve parity with men, commonly identified as the feminist movement, finds its origins within religious contexts.³ In relation to this, two predominant hypotheses arise regarding the persistent subjugation of women throughout history. *First*, the worldview, shaped predominantly by a masculine framework, has led to the perception of women through this same masculine lens.⁴ Consequently, the authenticity and identity of women have been determined primarily by male perceptions. *Second*, religion, with its inherent normative rigidity, has further reinforced this masculine worldview. Catholicism, in particular, has developed within a tradition largely characterized by patriarchal structures.⁵ For women, this presents a significant impasse, leaving them with limited alternatives other than to acquiesce to the roles and identities ascribed to them.

There are two Scripture passages that pose the greatest challenge to the feminist movement, Genesis 2:22 and Genesis 3:6.⁶ Respectively, these texts recount the creation of Eve (woman) from Adam's (man's) rib and humanity's fall into sin, which was initiated by Eve's actions. The danger these texts pose to women lies in their irresponsible interpretation. Rosemary Radford Ruether identifies such irresponsible interpretations as the result of a masculine worldview that has flourished within the Catholic Church.⁷ These passages are frequently used as a basis to justify the subordination, and consequently, the oppression of women. This, in turn, culminates in what Ruether refers to as the exclusivity of salvation. Salvation, which constitutes the Church's mission in the world, is perceived as being relevant only to men.

The history of salvation unfolds over the long span from the Old Testament to its culmination in the New Testament. A name that is inextricably linked to the pinnacle of God's salvific work through the event of the Incarnation is Mary. Pope Leo XIII referred to Mary as co-redemptrix.⁸ This designation not only highlights Mary's participation in the history of salvation but also seeks to recognize her full identity as a woman. Interestingly, the involvement of women in the history of salvation

began as early as the Old Testament. Judith emerges as a key figure in the liberation of Israel from Assyrian oppression. The significant narrative space dedicated to Judith in this story is unusual in the patriarchal tradition of the Jewish people and can serve as an inspiration for understanding the role of women in salvation history.

This article seeks to explore the symbols of women's participation in salvation history as found in the stories of Judith and Mary. Judith is viewed as a prefiguration of Mary's presence in salvation history.⁹ This interconnection ultimately demonstrates how women are not only counted among those saved by God but are also empowered as instruments in the realization of God's salvific work. To achieve this aim, this paper will proceed in several steps. *First*, it will present exegetical notes on the stories of Judith and Mary, further illuminated by the teachings of the Magisterium. *Second*, based on these findings, Judith will be compared with Mary to highlight the similarities between the two. These similarities will serve as a point of reflection for assessing the role of women in salvation history.

Judith, A Heroine

The Book of Judith is a historical narrative that romanticizes a series of events that are factually grounded in history.¹⁰ The book recounts the story of a Jewish woman named Judith. In Hebrew, 'Judith' means 'Jewish woman', 'praised', and more literally 'Woman of Judea'. Judith lived during the Second Temple period, after the Israelites returned from the Babylonian exile. Judith is a prominent figure due to her actions: beheading Holofernes, a commander of the Assyrian army under King Nebuchadnezzar. However, there is a dynamic process leading up to this act that has also been a subject of discussion among scholars. Among readers, this dynamic has created a tension in evaluation, oscillating between the categories of the ideal and the non-ideal. In the Book of Judith, readers encounter a juxtaposition of piety towards God and violence towards fellow human beings.

Judith was a widow. Her husband, Manasseh, died from a sunstroke while harvesting barley (Jud. 8:2). Therefore, Judith was classified as a widow. In ancient Judaism, the status of a widow was a social status. This social status was identical to a situation of misfortune. However, the widowhood status attached to Judith did not immediately make her low in the social strata of the Jewish people (Jud. 8:8). On the contrary, Judith had a positive image among the Israelites. At least three things made Judith so: her beautiful appearance (Jud. 8:7a), her abundant wealth (Jud. 8:7b), and her piety (Jud 8:6, 8b). Judith's piety was expressed through fasting. She did this everyday except on the eve of the Sabbath, on the eve of the new moon, on feast days and on all the days that the Israelites considered joyful.

According to Musa W. Dube, within the context of a robust patriarchal culture, such as that present in ancient Jewish tradition, the concepts of beauty and goodness significantly impact a woman's social status.¹¹ These attributes empower women to navigate and endure the challenges posed by male dominance. Notably, despite her status as a widow, Judith's character parallels those of the esteemed figures within Israelite society, indicating that her social position does not detrimentally affect her standing in the community.

The Book of Judith, in its entirety, chronicles the endeavors of Judith, a widow, as she strives to rescue her people, the Israelites, from the encirclement of Holofernes and his military forces. Consequently, the narrative of Judith serves as a profound source of inspiration regarding the role of women in the history of salvation, particularly highlighting their active engagement in pivotal moments. Nevertheless, it is essential to conduct a meticulous selection of information from the Book of Judith to ensure that this study remains directed toward its intended objectives. The subsequent sections provide an interpretation of selected verses from the Book of Judith.

Judith 8:11-12

¹¹ They came to her, and she said to them, "Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you,

promising to surrender the city to our enemies unless the Lord turns and helps us within so many days. ¹²Who are you, that have put God to the test this day, and are setting yourselves up in the place of God among the sons of men?

Judith 8:11-12 serves as the prelude to the speech delivered by Judith before the elders of Bethulia. This is a reaction to the decision made by the elders, represented by Uzziah, regarding the emergency situation faced by the Israelites. Judith begins her speech by evaluating the elders' decision, which she deems fundamentally erroneous and lacking in faith in God's protection. Two notable aspects emerge from the aforementioned text in the Book of Judith. *First*, although the meeting with the elders is initiated by Judith (Judith 8:10), it is, in fact, the elders of Bethulia who approach Judith. Judith 8:11 illustrates that the elders come to meet her rather than the other way around. *Second*, the beginning of Judith's speech contains both a critique and a clear expression of her dissent regarding the decision made by the male elders of Bethulia.

Based on this context, and considering Judith's social status as a widow, she can be assessed as a patriotic, courageous, and principled Israelite. At first glance, Judith 8:11-12 appears to highlight Judith's piety by contrasting her with the decision of the elders of Bethulia. However, some scholars argue that Judith 8:11-12, particularly verse 12, portrays Judith as challenging the assumptions inherent in the patriarchal traditions of Judaism, which assert that men possess greater authority than women to speak on behalf of God.¹² By questioning the elders' right to make erroneous decisions and act in God's name, Judith demonstrates that the elders of Bethulia are overstepping God's prerogative. Consequently, Judith also opens the space for alternative interpretations of God's will. In this regard, Judith's voice represents an interpretation from the women of Israel, resulting in a decision that starkly contrasts with that of the elders of Bethulia. For her actions, M.D. Coogan refers to Judith as an advocate for Israelite women.¹³ Judith not only paves the way for alternative interpretations but also creates an opportunity to foster a more egalitarian community.

Judith 10:3-4

³ and she removed the sackcloth which she had been wearing, and took off her widow's garments, and bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment, and combed her hair and put on a tiara, and arrayed herself in her gayest apparel, which she used to wear while her husband Manas'seh was living. ⁴ And she put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets and bracelets and rings, and her earrings and all her ornaments, and made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all men who might see her.

The text above represents a critical segment within the Book of Judith that necessitates a careful reading of Judith's story of heroism. A cursory reading could lead to interpretations that ultimately undermine her narrative of bravery. There exists a notion that Judith is preparing for an act of seduction. Consequently, the victory that Judith ultimately achieves may be perceived as deriving from an act of infidelity. In relation to the status of women within Jewish tradition, this narrative can serve as a reference that further diminishes their standing.

Defending Judith's actions requires consideration of her social status. As a widow, Judith lacks a husband to provide her with protection. However, her faith in God and her love for Israel motivate her to take action amid the precarious circumstances confronting her people. While a direct confrontation with the enemy is unavoidable, it may also result in a significant defeat. Judith thus emerges as a figure who embodies a nation in despair, seeking to confront its adversaries. Despite being a widow without protection, the only strength remaining within Judith, which she ultimately harnesses to face her enemies, is her beauty.¹⁴

From a widow without any protection, Judith now transforms into a widow imbued with strength. This strength intrinsic to her is manifested in her beauty. In other words, Judith does not focus on her current circumstances but rather on what she is capable of achieving. At this juncture, Judith's actions—specifically, adorning herself to enhance her beauty—merit a defense. Judith is often labelled as a seductress, particularly for the sake of achieving specific objectives due to her actions. However, there is no indication in Judith 10:3-4 that Judith beautified herself with the intent of seducing her enemy. If, in the end, her adversary is indeed enticed, such an outcome occurs independently of Judith's intentions.

In other words, Judith focuses solely on her internal dynamics without considering the broader consequences of her actions.

In the Old Testament, a woman's beauty has never been regarded as a source of strength. Conversely, beauty is often perceived as a weakness for women, as they are frequently objectified by men.¹⁵ Esther is noted in the Hebrew Bible as the first to utilize her beauty as a form of strength. Now, Judith replicates this action. Whereas women were previously imprisoned by their beauty, Judith demonstrates that women can fully harness their beauty. Furthermore, Judith illustrates that a woman's beauty deserves defense against the accusation of being a significant weakness in the eyes of men. Judith's beauty indeed ensnares Holofernes, leading him to overlook the fact that Judith remains his adversary.

Fundamentally, Holofernes retains the option to treat Judith as an enemy. However, he becomes ensnared by her due to his own carelessness (Judith 12:16-20). The direct cause of Holofernes's defeat is not Judith's beauty but rather his decision to accept Judith, which ultimately leads him to become infatuated with her. Thus, while beauty does serve as a source of strength for women, it is not intended to harm anyone, particularly men. God's creation of woman reveals how God's beauty and strength are at work in the history of salvation.

Judith 16:5

⁵But the Lord Almighty has foiled them by the hand of a woman.

The text above is an excerpt from the song of thanksgiving that Judith delivers to God after achieving victory over Holofernes. This song of thanksgiving appears to be a recapitulation of the events that transpired, beginning with the arrival of Holofernes and his forces and culminating in Judith's triumph. The song is primarily directed toward God, who once again demonstrates God's power by saving the people of Israel. In Judith 16:5, Judith specifically provides testimony of her direct involvement in the history of Israel's salvation as an instrument of God. She employs her identity as a widow to refer to herself, which stands out in the context of salvation history. This is significant because God's salvation can indeed manifest through the participation of a widow—an individual who is often marginalized in society and lacks anyone to assist her.

Judith's methods for achieving victory are frequently viewed as immoral. It is important to note that such judgments may arise when the Book of Judith is assessed through the lens of modern moral categories. Ellen Juhl Christiansen argues that this approach to the Book of Judith is fundamentally misguided.¹⁶ Christiansen emphasizes that all actions of Judith that may seem immoral can be justified when considering the relevant context, namely, warfare. To defeat Holofernes, Judith deceives him, leading to his complacency, which ultimately increases her opportunity to kill him.

The actions taken by Judith in relation to herself may be deemed immoral; however, they are permissible under certain circumstances, especially when they yield beneficial outcomes.¹⁷ Upon reviewing the heroic narratives within the history of Israel, Judith's actions are not entirely unprecedented. Similar to other tales of heroism in Israel's history, debates regarding the moral evaluation of heroic actions persist. The resolution lies in contextualizing these actions. Such actions can inspire and offer valuable insights for the life of faith but must remain confined to specific situations.

In addition to considering the context, a defense of Judith's actions can also be grounded in the intentions of the author of the Book of Judith. There is a disconcerting aspect within the Book of Judith. It has been established that the author is someone who pays attention to the history of the Israelites and, as such, possesses a thorough understanding of Israelite traditions. This is evidenced by the numerous references to ancient Jewish texts. It is difficult to accept the reality that an author of this nature would leave ethical and moral dilemmas unaddressed in their writing. The moral issues present in the Book of Judith become more acceptable if the author is viewed as intentionally overlooking them. Therefore, it can be inferred that the author's emphasis is not on moral quandaries.

It is likely that the author's primary intention was to craft a narrative that requires theological interpretation.¹⁸ The actions taken by Judith should be viewed as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. This end is the salvation of the people of Israel, the chosen people of God. When understood in this light, the Book of Judith can evoke certain

themes, particularly the theme of God liberating God's people from the hands of their enemies through the agency of unexpected individuals.

Mary, Mother of God

Mary, Mother of God, plays a central role in the history of salvation, a role that has been explored and developed through theological reflection over the centuries and through the official teachings of the Church. Her unique relationship with Jesus Christ, her Divine Son, along with her active participation in God's redemptive plan, establishes her as a figure of great significance, not only in the devotion of Christians but also in the dogmatic theology of the Catholic Church. Throughout the Church's reflection on her life and mission, several important documents have outlined and established Mary's role in the history of salvation, emphasizing her as a model for the faithful as well as an active participant in the work of salvation.

The essence of Mary's role in salvation is her *fiat*—her wholehearted and voluntary acceptance of God's will during the Annunciation (Luke 1:38). When the angel Gabriel came to her and announced that she would conceive and bear the Son of God, her humble yet profound response—"Let it be done to me according to your word"—marks the moment of her unique participation in the divine plan. This act of consent, freely given, is viewed by the Church as the beginning of Mary's significant involvement in the work of redemption. It is not a passive acceptance but an active act of faith and self-surrender to God's will, distinguishing Mary as the first and most perfect disciple of Christ.

Given Mary's vital role in the history of salvation, it is prudent to refer directly to what the Church teaches about her. Below is an exposition of the Catholic Church's reflections expressed in various Church documents that address Mary's important role.

Rosarium Virginis Mariae

Rosarium Virginis Mariae is an apostolic letter written by Pope John Paul II and published by the Papacy on October 16, 2002. Through this document, the Catholic Church addresses the rosary, a traditional prayer

that has profoundly influenced the spiritual life of Christian believers. This apostolic letter also serves as a follow-up to the declaration of the Year of the Rosary made by the Pope at the time of its publication. Within it, the Pope reflects on the urgency and relevance of praying the rosary in the modern era.

Inherently, the Catholic Church emphasizes Mary's role in the rosary, through which Christian believers can delve deeper into the story of Jesus Christ's redemption. Along with this emphasis, the narrative of Mary's life as a mother is also highlighted.¹⁹ Mary's qualities as someone close to God are manifested in her daily life, rendering her a person of integrity. By showcasing Mary as the ideal model for every woman, the Catholic Church contributes to the feminist movement, particularly regarding what women should strive to achieve in contemporary society.

The Catholic Church upholds maternal qualities as the primary attribute of a woman. This maternal quality is prominently displayed in Mary's actions as the mother of Jesus. Mary dedicated her entire life to loving Jesus. At the time of Jesus' birth, her maternal qualities are evident when she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger (cf. Luke 2:7). During difficult moments, such as when the child Jesus went missing and was later found in the Temple (cf. Luke 2:48), Mary chose to continue loving Him. Her maternal love is also apparent in the event at Cana (cf. John 2:5), where, despite the challenges, she sought to understand Jesus and His mission.

When Jesus died on the cross, a mother's love compelled Mary to remain faithfully by His side (cf. John 19:25). The final event in Mary's maternal narrative occurs when she receives the beloved disciple, entrusted to her by Jesus, as her own son (cf. John 19:26-29). This series of events demonstrates that the quality of motherhood has fundamentally never left Mary. For Mary herself, this understanding helped her comprehend who she was and what her mission in the world entailed.²⁰

By emphasizing Mary's role, the Catholic Church aims to demonstrate that from the beginning of creation women have been blessed with maternal qualities. Thus, the mission of women is to recognize and optimally develop this maternal quality within themselves for the greater good. The development of maternal qualities is often confused with

being a (biological) mother, which has also been a point of critique from feminists. According to feminists, asserting that a woman must become a mother limits women's choices, thereby eliminating opportunities for them to grow freely and authentically.

Through *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, the Catholic Church focuses more on the maternal qualities inherent in women rather than advocating for motherhood. The topic of advocating for motherhood requires a separate study distinct from this research. In other words, developing maternal qualities is not synonymous with becoming a mother. In relation to interactions with men, the loving maternal quality aids women in reclaiming harmonious relationships with them. This harmonious relationship is characterized by fellowship, which can only occur through love.

Mulieris Dignitatem

Mulieris Dignitatem, issued by Pope John Paul II in 1988, is one of the most profound reflections on the dignity and calling of women in light of divine revelation. The second chapter of this document specifically focuses on Mary's role in salvation history, underscoring the significance of women in this narrative, with Mary at its center. The emphasis on Mary in this chapter not only serves to elevate the dignity of women but also provides an ideal model for understanding how the calling of women is perceived within the framework of the Catholic faith.

Mary participates in salvation history not only through the biological aspect of being the mother who gave birth to Jesus but also through her spiritual fertility. *Mulieris Dignitatem* describes how Mary's womb became a sacred place where the Word of God became flesh; moreover, Mary united her entire life with Christ from that moment onward.²¹ Mary's physical fertility symbolizes how a woman's body is prepared to bear life, while her spiritual fertility reveals how she also makes space for God in her soul, allowing God's grace to work through her.

This spiritual fertility is evident in the way Mary accompanies Jesus throughout His life, from His birth and childhood to His suffering on the cross. Pope John Paul II portrays Mary as someone with a profound understanding of Jesus' salvific mission. Mary is not only a biological mother but also assumes a spiritual role as the "Mother of all the living," as the Church refers to her as the New Eve.²²

Mary is also regarded as a model of spiritual life. She is a woman who fully lives in an intimate relationship with God, directing her life entirely according to God's will. In this document, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that Mary, despite being filled with the extraordinary grace of being the Mother of God, remains an ordinary woman who lives a life marked by silence, hard work, and sacrifice. Therefore, Mary is not a figure distant from the realities of women's lives; rather, she is a true woman who serves as an example for every woman to live a life of deep faith and a willingness to serve God.

In addition to emphasizing Mary's role in the incarnation and salvation history, *Mulieris Dignitatem* also discusses the dignity of women in light of Mary. Pope John Paul II aims to affirm that Mary, through her obedience and her role as the Mother of God, serves as a model for all women in understanding their value and dignity before God. In a world that often neglects or diminishes women, Mary stands as the primary witness to how God elevates the dignity of women to a very high place.

Mary, as the one filled with grace, demonstrates how God views every woman: as a valuable individual called to participate in the plan of salvation. Through this document, Pope John Paul II reminds us that the dignity of women is not based on social or cultural roles, but on their unique calling before God, as exemplified by Mary. Mary shows that the dignity of women is not only related to their biological roles but also to their active participation in spiritual and moral life.

Ultimately, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Mary is portrayed as a model of womanhood who not only plays the role of a "recipient" of the plan of salvation but also as an active participant directly involved. Pope John Paul II emphasizes that Mary symbolizes all women who are called to participate in God's saving plan through their unique ways. Mary's active participation illustrates that salvation is not something to be passively received, but rather something to be lived out through involvement, faith, and profound obedience. As an example of an engaged woman, Mary provides a model for women to recognize their unique calling in their own lives. Through Mary's obedience, Pope John Paul II invites all women to see that they too have a place in God's plan of salvation. Mary, in her distinctive femininity, demonstrates that women's involvement in salvation is something that cannot be overlooked.

Redemptoris Mater

The encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, written by Pope John Paul II on March 25, 1987, is one of the most comprehensive magisterial texts highlighting the role of Mary in the history of salvation. Through this document, the Catholic Church explicitly states the presence and unique participation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the salvific work carried out by Christ, the Redeemer of the world. Mary's role is not limited to her biological function as the Mother of Jesus but encompasses a broader and deeper dimension within God's plan of salvation for humanity.

Mary's involvement in the history of salvation begins not only with the event of the Incarnation but also continues throughout Jesus' life, including His moments of suffering, death, and resurrection. Pope John Paul II explains how Mary faithfully accompanied Jesus throughout His journey, from Bethlehem to Calvary. In particular, Mary's presence at the foot of the cross signifies her solidarity with Jesus' suffering and with His redemptive mission.²³ Mary, known as *Mater Dolorosa*, shares in her Son's passion, and this becomes a part of her mysterious contribution to the salvation of humanity.

Redemptoris Mater emphasizes that Mary not only plays a role in Christ's work of salvation but also has a maternal role in the life of the Church. Pope John Paul II interprets Mary's role in the Church as a continuation of her role as the Mother of Jesus. The Church, symbolized as the Mystical Body of Christ, sees Mary as its spiritual Mother.²⁴ Just as Mary is the physical mother of Jesus, she also becomes the spiritual mother of all members of the Church. This is particularly underscored in the event at Calvary when Jesus, before His death, entrusted Mary to His disciple John, saying, "Behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). The Pope interprets this event as an important symbol that Mary is given to all of humanity as the Mother of the faithful.

As the Mother of the Church, Mary continually prays and mediates God's grace for the Church. The Church, through sacred tradition, has always taught that Mary has a role as a supplicant who gently guides her children toward Christ. This role is also evident in the devotions and prayers of the Catholic faithful directed to Mary as a mediator who brings them closer to Jesus.

Redemptoris Mater also speaks of Mary as the “Mediatrix” involved in conveying the grace of salvation. While Christ is the sole Mediator between God and humanity, Mary has a special participation in Christ’s redemptive work. The Catholic Church does not view this role as competing with or an alternative to Christ’s role, but rather as a means by which Mary, through her closeness to Jesus, becomes a channel of grace for humanity.²⁵ Mary, through her prayers and spiritual mediation, continues to accompany the Church on its journey, serving as a loving intercessor in the lives of the faithful.

Reflections on Judith and Mary

Before offering some reflections of the feminine traces evident in the stories of Judith and Mary, some notes should be considered. *First*, the narrative of salvation that frames both stories occupies different positions. The story of Judith is a romanticized account of the experience of God saving the people of Israel, while the story of Mary is an inseparable part of the mystery of God’s salvation for humanity. *Second*, the point of convergence between the two stories is God’s decision to include them in God’s plan of salvation. Therefore, reflections on these feminine traces should be based on God’s intention in including them. Otherwise, the identified feminine traces may lead to eclecticism and, ultimately, could be misused.²⁶

Elaborating on how Judith and Mary utilize the essence of their femininity to engage in the history of salvation is not only important within the context of salvation history but also offers a new lens for viewing women’s contributions to the divine plan of salvation. The femininity of Judith and Mary cannot be separated from their roles as agents of salvation. Both exemplify how feminine traits—courage, intelligence, perseverance, humility, and motherhood—actively contribute to God’s salvation narrative. The following reflections identify several important dimensions related to the essence of femininity projected by Judith and Mary in the history of salvation.

Courage and Intelligence as Characteristics of Women in Salvation History

Courage and intelligence, as significant characteristics possessed by Judith and Mary, play a crucial role in their participation in the history of salvation. In the biblical tradition, courage is often associated with masculine qualities, with male heroes identified through physical strength, military leadership, and the ability to confront enemies directly. However, in the stories of Judith and Mary, a new dimension of courage is revealed, one that is linked to femininity—courage that is not only physical but also spiritual and emotional. This essence of femininity in courage expresses qualities that transcend patriarchal norms, demonstrating that women also play an important and active role in the dynamics of salvation.²⁷

In her story, Judith displays a deep understanding of the dynamics of power. When Holofernes, an Assyrian general leading a large army, threatens Israel, Judith devises a strategy that is not only clever but also highly risky. She deliberately leverages her identity as a woman and her beauty to approach Holofernes, exploiting his weaknesses as a means to destroy him. Here, Judith subverts stereotypes about women as weak and helpless; she uses what is often perceived as a weakness in a patriarchal perspective, namely beauty and sexuality, as an effective weapon to assert her true strength as a woman.

Judith's courage in confronting Holofernes reveals a deeper understanding of the nature of power. Holofernes, as a representation of brutal masculine power, is faced with Judith, who relies on non-physical strength and intellect. This portrayal not only deconstructs the notion of male strength as the sole means to achieve victory but also opens the space for understanding that the courage and strength of women can be transformative within the context of salvation. Judith becomes an agent of salvation for Israel through active actions stemming from spiritual obedience and personal sacrifice.

In relation to the struggles of women, Judith's actions can be interpreted as a subversion of the patriarchal structures that dominate traditional salvation narratives. Instead of being a victim or a spectator in the drama of salvation, Judith takes control of the narrative. She positions herself as an autonomous subject, using feminine qualities to

defeat the enemy and protect her people. The courage she displays is not conventional courage—typically dominated by physical strength and direct confrontation—but rather a courage that arises from intelligence and spiritual obedience.

Mary, in the context of the New Testament, exhibits a different yet equally significant type of courage in her participation in the history of salvation. The Annunciation narrative in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:26-38) reveals a moment when Mary, a young girl living in a patriarchal Jewish society, is confronted with a task that transcends her traditional gender role. When the Angel Gabriel comes to her and announces that she will become the mother of the Savior, Mary faces not only spiritual challenges but also profound social challenges.

Mary's courage is evident in her response filled with trust and surrender to God's will, "*Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*" (Luke 1:38). In the social context of her time, accepting the task of being the mother of God meant that Mary would face stigma, ostracism, and the risk of punishment for being perceived as having sinned. Her role as a woman at that time, which demanded purity and absolute obedience to social norms, seemed to be jeopardized by accepting an unexpected pregnancy. However, Mary boldly transcended these concerns, and her courage lay not only in passive obedience but in the active choice to cooperate with God's plan of salvation.

Mary's courage is not manifested in physical confrontation but in moral and spiritual bravery. In this narrative, Mary displays an inner strength that is equally significant as Judith's heroic actions. While Judith fought against earthly powers that threatened her physically, Mary contended with social and spiritual forces that threatened her position as a woman in a patriarchal society. She participated in God's plan in a way that transformed the role of women in the history of salvation.²⁸ In Mariological tradition, Mary is understood as the "New Eve," whose actions reverse the sin of the first Eve, which in patriarchal tradition is often perceived as the origin of humanity's fall.

The essence of femininity manifested through the courage of Judith and Mary paves the way for a new interpretation of women's roles in the history of salvation. In a patriarchal context, women are often seen as

passive objects in salvation narratives, functioning merely as instruments for the achievement of divine purposes through domestic or reproductive roles. However, the stories of Judith and Mary overturn this narrative and affirm that women can also be active subjects who play a significant role in the history of salvation.

In the context of the struggles of women, the courage of Judith and Mary is seen as a form of empowerment. They utilize their feminine characteristics to challenge and deconstruct existing patriarchal structures. Their courage, manifested through strategic intelligence, spiritual obedience, and moral strength, demonstrates that women's roles in salvation are not merely complementary but central to the narrative. Judith saves Israel from physical destruction, while Mary saves humanity from slavery to sin through her participation in the Incarnation. Both figures illustrate that the essence of femininity possesses the strength to play an active role in God's plan of salvation.

Humility and Faithfulness as Women's Strength in the History of Salvation

Humility and faithfulness are two characteristics often associated with the essence of femininity in theological tradition, especially in a biblical context. Although on the surface, both seem to place women in subordinate positions, both Judith and Mary demonstrate how humility and faithfulness become the primary strengths that enable them to play significant roles in the history of salvation. In a feminist theological approach, this humility and faithfulness of women are not forms of passive subjugation, but rather active actions that allow them to cooperate with God's plan in bringing forth salvation.

Judith's faithfulness is not only evident in her adherence to religious laws but also in her willingness to act for the collective salvation of her people. When the leaders of her city began to doubt God's protection and considered surrendering to the enemy, Judith remained steadfast in her faith in divine intervention. Judith shows that true faithfulness to God does not mean merely submitting to human authority or surrendering to difficult circumstances. Rather, she understands that true faithfulness to God requires bold and confident actions, even when it entails great personal risk.

What is remarkable about Judith's faithfulness is that she displays this quality in an active and strategic context. Her faithfulness is not passivity resigned to fate, but rather a faithfulness that manifests in heroic action. Through her faithfulness, Judith refuses to surrender her people to the enemy, and instead, she takes radical action by approaching Holofernes, their greatest enemy, and ultimately beheading him. This action reminds us that faithfulness, in the context of salvation history, is not always expressed through passive obedience, but can also take the form of active responses to God's call in critical situations.

Judith's faithfulness to her people also illustrates the social dimension of women's actions in salvation. In the feminist tradition, Judith is often viewed as a symbol of the collective strength of women who act not only for themselves but for the benefit of a broader community. Her heroic actions are not merely for her personal victory, but for the salvation of all Israel. In this regard, Judith transcends individual narratives and becomes a representative of the collective role of women as agents of salvation in society.

While Judith demonstrates faithfulness through her heroic actions, Mary, the mother of Jesus, exhibits profound humility in cooperating with God's plan of salvation. Mary's humility is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a form of spiritual strength. She understands her unique position as the Mother of God, yet she does not use that status for her own benefit. Instead, she fully places herself in service to God and the plan of salvation. In Mariological theology, Mary is often seen as the perfect model of humility—someone who does not seek personal glory but directs all praise and honor to God. The Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55) is an example of how Mary, in all her humility, affirms the greatness of God and God's divine wisdom in saving the humble and oppressed.²⁹

In this context, Mary's humility is a form of spiritual courage. She accepts the role assigned to her without hesitation, and although she is aware of the immense responsibility of being the mother of the Savior of the world, she does not attempt to evade it. Thus, Mary's humility is not a form of self-erasure or helplessness, but rather an active acceptance of God's will with complete confidence that God's plan is good.

What is critical about Mary's humility is how it reveals the spiritual dimension of feminine strength. In the patriarchal society of her time,

women were often seen as having limited domestic roles. However, Mary demonstrates that humility does not have to equate to passivity or a diminished social status. Instead, Mary's humility enables her to become a central figure in the history of salvation, transcending the social boundaries imposed on women. By accepting her role as the Mother of God, Mary claims a unique and irreplaceable position in the overall narrative of human salvation.

In the stories of Judith and Mary, it can be observed that faithfulness and humility are not forms of passive subjugation or signs of helplessness; rather, they are active and meaningful actions within the context of salvation. Both Judith and Mary do not yield to social pressures or their status as women in a patriarchal society. Instead, they harness their faithfulness and humility as strengths to cooperate with God's plan in bringing salvation to humanity.

The faithfulness and humility exhibited by Judith and Mary also open up space for feminist theological interpretations that emphasize the importance of women's roles in salvation. In this approach, both figures are seen as active agents who directly participate in God's plan of salvation. They do not merely function as supporters of men or as mere instruments in the narrative of salvation; instead, they become autonomous subjects who choose to cooperate with God's will through acts of faithfulness and humility.

Mediator of Divine Power in the History of Salvation

Judith and Mary exemplify an extraordinary dimension of their feminine essence within a theological context, particularly in their roles as mediators of divine power. Although both operate within different historical and narrative contexts—Judith as a heroine fighting against worldly enemies in the Book of Judith, and Mary as the mother of Jesus in the Gospel narrative—they both demonstrate how women can be channels of God's power in the salvation of humanity. This role is not merely passive; it illustrates how women, through obedience and cooperation with God's will, actively participate in the fulfillment of divine plans. In this regard, both Judith and Mary reflect feminist traces that transcend the limitations imposed on them by the patriarchal social systems of their time.

Judith positions herself as an instrument of God, and through her intelligence, she successfully enters the enemy ranks and beheads Holofernes, the leader of the Assyrian forces. Although this act may appear to be an individual effort, it is, in essence, a manifestation of God's will and power. Within theological tradition, Judith can be seen as a mediator who brings salvation to God's people through the courage and conviction inspired by her faith. Here, she transcends the stereotypes of passive roles often assigned to women in patriarchal societies. In this narrative, Judith's role illustrates that women can serve as mediators of God's power through actions that are intelligent, strategic, and full of faith.

Catholic theology also positions Mary as a mediatrix or intermediary of grace, where Mary is regarded as a spiritual intercessor for the faithful.³⁰ This position is recognized in the doctrine of the Catholic Church and is understood as Mary's active role in supporting humanity through her intercession to God. As the mother of Jesus, who is both God and man, Mary stands between humanity and salvation, imploring divine grace and mercy for them. This illustrates Mary's mediating role that transcends her biological motherhood and places her in the spiritual realm, where she continues to accompany the Church and the faithful on their faith journey.

In the feminist tradition, Mary can be seen as an example of a female figure who is actively involved in God's plan of salvation, not through physical power, but through spiritual actions and active consent. By accepting God's call and fulfilling her role as the Mother of God, Mary demonstrates that femininity, especially in terms of obedience and humility, can be the primary means through which God chooses to manifest God's power.

The mediating roles of Judith and Mary ultimately challenge patriarchal structures that often place women in subordinate positions. Through their roles in the history of salvation, they overturn gender expectations and show that God's power can work through women in ways that are as equally significant and powerful as through men. In other words, they illustrate that in the narrative of salvation, gender is not a barrier but a new possibility offered by God to express God's power through agents who are deemed weak by society but strong in faith and action.

Epilogue

The stories of Judith and Mary offer a powerful perspective on the role of women in the history of salvation, particularly regarding how they utilize feminine essence in their active involvement in God's plan. These two figures not only reflect the role of women in the historical and religious contexts of their time but also highlight profound elements of femininity as transformative forces within the narrative of salvation.

The narratives of Judith and Mary provide a broader and deeper view of women's roles in the history of salvation. They teach that femininity, in its various forms, whether through heroic actions, humility, fidelity, or spiritual courage is an integral part of how God works in the world. The novelty arising from this exploration includes the reinterpretation of the feminine concept within salvation theology, the strengthening of women's roles as agents of salvation, and their relevance within contemporary theological contexts and liberation struggles. Thus, the feminine footprints exhibited by Judith and Mary enrich our understanding of how God works through women in the fulfillment of the history of human salvation.

Bibliography:

- Bird, Phyllis. "Images of women in the Old Testament." Rosemary Radford Ruether (Ed.). *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974.
- Christiansen, Ellen Juhl. "Judith: Defender of Israel – Preserver of the Temple." Geza G. Xeravitz (Ed.). *A Pious Seductress*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012.
- Coogan, M. D. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Donovan, Josephine. "Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as A Moral Criticism." K. M. Newton (Ed.). *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997.
- Dube, Musa W. "Jumping the Fire with Judith." Silvia Schroer & Sophia Bietenhard (Eds.). *Feminist Interpretation of The Bible and The Hermeneutics of Liberation*. London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.
- Framer-Kensky, Tivka. *Reading The Women of The Bible*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.

- Hodgson-Wright, Stephanie. "Early Feminism." Sarah Gamble (Ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Manelli, F.I., Fr. Stefano. "The Mystery of The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Old Testament." Mark Miravalle, STD (Ed.). *Mariology*. California: Queenship, 2007.
- Manelli, F.I., Fr. Settimio M. "The Virgin Mary in The New Testament." Mark Miravalle, STD (Ed.). *Mariology*. California: Queenship, 2007.
- Nichols, OP., Aidan. *There is No Rose*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.
- Pope John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*. 1998.
- _____. *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Vatican, 1988.
- _____. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*. 2002.
- _____. *Redemptoris Mater*. Vatican, 1987.
- Pope Leo XIII. *Iucunde Semper Expectatione*. Vatican, 1894.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon, 1983.
- Schmitz, Barbara. "The Function of Speeches and Prayers in the Book of Judith." Athalya Brenner (Ed.). *Feminist Companion to Tobit and Judith*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Schotroff, Luise. "Conceptions of the History of Early Christianity in Feminist-Theological Perspective." Luise Schottroff & Marie-Theres Wacker (Eds.). *Feminist Interpretation; The Bible in Women's Perspectives*. Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1996.
- Walter, Margaret. *A Very Short Introduction to Feminism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Wojciechowski, Michael. "Moral Teaching of the Book of Judith." Geza G. Xeravitz (Ed.). *A Pious Seductress*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012.

Endnotes:

- 1 This article was presented by the author in one of the sessions of the international conference *Re-Imagining Identity: The Particular and Beyond*, organised and hosted by the Faculty of Philosophy, Parahyangan Catholic University, on 8-9 March 2024, at "Bumi Silih Asih", 18 Moch. Ramdhan, Bandung, West Java, Indonesia.
- 2 Email: marchelinojoshua@gmail.com.
- 3 Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, "Early Feminism," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2006) 4.
- 4 Josephine Donovan, "Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as A Moral Criticism," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*, ed. K.M. Newton (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997) 211-212.

- 5 Phyllis Bird, "Images of women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of women in the Jewish and Christian traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 41.
- 6 Margaret Walters, *A Very Short Introduction to Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 9.
- 7 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism dan God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) 94.
- 8 *Incunda Semper Expectatione*, art. 2.
- 9 Fr. Stefano Manelli, F.I., "The Mistery of The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Old Testament," in *Mariology*, ed. Mark Miravalle, STD. (California: Queenship, 2007) 31.
- 10 Ellen Juhl Christiansen, "Judith: Defender of Israel – Preserver of the Temple," in *A Pious Seductress*, ed. Geza G. Xeravitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012) 72.
- 11 Musa W. Dube, "Jumping the Fire with Judith: Postcolonial Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation," in *Feminist Interpretation of The Bible and The Hermeneutics of Liberation*, eds. Silvia Schroer & Sophia Bietenhard (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 62.
- 12 Barbara Schmitz, "The Function of Speeches and Prayers in the Book of Judith," in *Feminist Companion to Tobit and Judith*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 237-238.
- 13 M. D. Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 1079.
- 14 Tivka Frammer-Kensky, *Reading The Women of The Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002) 55.
- 15 Cf. Genesis 12:20 and 2Samuel 12:2.
- 16 Christiansen, *art. cit.*, in *A Pious Seductress*, 81.
- 17 Michael Wojciechowski, "Moral Teaching of The Book of Judith," in *A Pious Seductress*, ed. Geza G. Xeravitz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012) 96.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, art. 11.
- 20 *Ibid.*, art. 14.
- 21 *Mulieris Dignitatem*, art. 3.
- 22 *Ibid.*, art. 14.
- 23 *Redemptoris Mater*, art. 40.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, art. 22.
- 26 *Fides et Ratio*, art. 87.
- 27 Luise Schottruff, "Conceptions of the History of Early Christianity in Feminist-Theological Perspective," in *Feminist Interpretation; The Bible in Women's Perspectives*, eds. Luise Schottruff & Marie-Theres Wacker (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1996) 190-191.
- 28 Aidan Nichols OP, *There is No Rose* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) 14.
- 29 Fr. Settimio M. Manelli, F.I., "The Virgin Mary in The New Testament," in *Mariology*, ed. Mark Miravalle, STD. (California: Queenship, 2007) 90.
- 30 Nichols, *op. cit.*, 114.