



The Agency of Children and Animals in the Prevention of Catastrophe: Judith 4:8-15 and Jonah 3:6-10

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<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.319>

Abstract

In recent feminist research, women and children are not seen collectively as one marginalized group, but children and animals have been given their own research focus and categories. Judith 8:1 states an impressive list of forebears of Judith that defines her character and role, but scholars say nothing about the fact that she prefers to terminate this lineage by not having children or offspring, no legacy. In Judith, children are absent in the victory section, their crying out to YHWH during the period of mourning is not recognised and forgotten.

Children and animals form a vulnerable group, especially in biblical narratives. In Judith 4:8-15 and Jonah 3:6-9 at the time of a national disaster, a period of communal mourning is called by the leaders. Children and animals are given the agency to petition YHWH to intervene and not allow the crises to happen. This agency of children and animals contradicts their vulnerability as they are not involved in decision-making concerning their participation in events and overall well-being. In this paper, the agency of children and animals in Judith 4:8-15 and Jonah 3:6-10 is critically assessed to determine if they are given a real agency to petition YHWH or if their vulnerability is exploited for communal purposes and interests. Although Judith's role inspires feminists to focus on her independence and perseverance in saving Israel, as well as to undermine motherhood as an essential woman attribute, what has the story to say about the future and agency of children and animals, the most vulnerable in society?

Keywords: children, animals, mourning, agency, vulnerability.

Introduction

In the Old Testament books of Judith 4:8-15 and Jonah 3:6-9, the leaders of Israel and Nineveh called a period of communal mourning to prevent a national disaster. Everybody was called to participate, and children and animals are specifically named to be included in the mourning. This inclusion gives children and animals the agency to petition YHWH to intervene and not allow the crises to happen. However, this agency of children and animals demonstrates their vulnerability as they are not involved in decision-making concerning their participation in events and overall well-being. The question is whether they are given a real agency to petition YHWH. Or is their vulnerability exploited for communal purposes and interests? Feminists focus on Judith's character and role, her independence, and her perseverance in saving Israel. Judith put her "trust in God to protect both her body and her nation's temple from the impurity, profanation, and disgrace of foreign aggression" (Thiessen, 2018:165). But what has the story to say about the protection, future and agency of children and animals, the most vulnerable in society? When the nations are saved, are they left on their own with no legacy?



The approach to discussing these situational contexts of children and animals is agency. Agency is the ability to make decisions or to act upon a situation. Vulnerability, on the other hand, means being exposed to risks. Agency has often been viewed as conflicting vulnerability. These risks include exploitation, violence, neglect, and abuse (Davids & Davids 2024:10). In the next paragraphs, child and animal agencies are described.

Child Agency

Child and animal¹ agency can be seen as the ability to act on their own and to be able to make their own decisions. Vuolanto (2017:18) says that “to have agency means that an individual has a sense of having the means to influence the course of one’s own life (and thus the world) within the opportunities and constraints provided by history and social circumstances”.

Children live in physical, social, and ideological situations that also include their actions, bodies, and minds (Punt, 2024:61), and therefore have agentic abilities that they share with adults (Malone, 2020:85). Agency is influenced by various factors and circumstances and is not static and uniform to all communities. It should be taken into consideration that agency is only favourable “in environments that are stable, constant and deemed and appropriate” (Ivankovic & Izsak, 2019:139), and where adults are creating conditions for children and animal agency.

Sultan and Andresen, (2019) see children as a vulnerable group because of their dependency on caretakers and authorities. This is due to their inability, lack of experience, and insight to make informed decisions in terms of their future, health, and overall well-being. This results in caretakers and authorities making decisions on behalf of children to which they need to adhere. In many societies, children are not allowed to participate in decision-making processes, and especially things that have to do with their own physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

For this reason, children are considered incomplete and need to grow into adulthood to be able to become “full participants in decision making or as agentic actors within or on their lives” (Malone, 2020:85). Adults are usually making decisions *for* or *about* children (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008:165), and to acknowledge their agency goes against many societies’ views concerning children. To acknowledge children and animals as social agents means to bestow on them holders of rights and allow them to voice their preferences and needs. When agency is bestowed upon children, it gives children the ability to act on their own, or their ability to make their own decisions can be made determinative, such as that “agency is not what children *do* as such, but also what they *choose (not) to do*”, namely resistance (Cojocar, 2017:258). This can also be applied to animals, e.g. Balaam’s donkey in Numbers 22.

Horn (2017:301) sees “childhood itself as liminal, vulnerable, dependent, and, in some ways, as lying on the fringe of human existence”. Therefore, children are more at risk of physical and structural violence than other marginalised groups such as women and slaves (Punt, 2024:61). When children are faced with circumstances that can have a negative impact on their lives and well-being, it is termed situational vulnerability. In this situation, agency can be displayed through their decision-making abilities and processes. This can only happen if adults (caretakers and authorities) are willing to shift the “control-over” or “power-over” children, to “power-with” the children (Warren, 1994:183). Children will then be able to make informed decisions and choices and in the process enable their self-sufficiency.

¹ Animals refer to living things such as mammals, insects, reptiles, and birds. Basically, animals mean all living beings except humans. Non-human can refer to things that humans have developed such as robots or vehicles. It can also be entities that are defined as fictitious characters, mythological figures, deities, legendary characters, and animals with proper names. The preferred term in this study is “animal”.



Vulnerability and agency co-exist in the context of violence. The experience of violence often perpetuates feelings of vulnerability among children (Davids & Davids, 2024:9). Vulnerability means being exposed to risks that include “exploitation, violence, neglect and abuse”. Therefore, children and animals can be seen as vulnerable due to their position in society as dependent on caretakers and authorities. Vulnerability can be harmful as it creates “images of helplessness, weakness, and victimhood” (Davids & Davids, 2024:10).

Situational vulnerability refers to “biographical circumstances, situational difficulties or transgressions – this can include the input of a third party or structural force, and can also involve human agency (often to a contested extent)” (Brown, 2015:28). Universal vulnerability is “where vulnerability is seen as a state shared by all citizens, but which is socially or politically constituted to varying extents” (Brown, 2015:28; see Davids & Davids, 2024:11). The Ninevites in Jonah and Israelites in Judith, including the children and animals are in a position of situational and universal vulnerability.

Vulnerability can be context-specific, as in the case of the mourning of the Israelites and Ninevites. The context can be “personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups” (Davids & Davids, 2024:15). The time frame can be “short-term, intermittent, or enduring” and therefore it can be experienced as “acute or chronic” (Davids & Davids, 2024:16).

Animal Agency

In theological reflection, humans are seen as unique within creation (Horan, 2019:564). Humans are therefore privileged, “not simply the human person *as such*, but a way of knowing or being that is limited to a human-centred outlook to the exclusion of all else and restricts agency to humanity alone” (Horan, 2019:564).

Besides the rights to life, freedom, and the search for meaning, humans also claim agency which can be summarised as the inner ability to make your own decisions and choices. Advocates of fundamentalistic religious belief claim that according to the creation narrative and the *Imago Dei* theory (Horan, 2019), animals do not have such abilities, particularly cognitive abilities, and can therefore not claim agency. Research in the field of natural sciences has proven that “many animals have the intellectual capacity and even self-awareness that are necessary to be agents of their own lives” (McFarl & Hediger, 2009:1).

How do we define animal agency, and what is the relationship between humans and animals? There are also other related terms to the concept of agency, namely “free will, ability, rationality, mind, morality, and subjectivity” (McFarl & Hediger, 2009:2). McFarl and Hediger discuss two ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and animals: “One emphasizes the continuity between us and them and has Darwin as its familiar champion. The other emphasizes the discontinuities between humans and other animals, constructing a binary opposition between us and all other species, and has traditional western monotheistic religion and much of the western philosophical tradition as its strongest supporters” (McFarl & Hediger, 2009:4). To deny the continuity between humans and animals, is to deny life in its essence. Along this line, I support Darwin’s opinion that:

The difference in mind between man (*sic*) and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the sense and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, &c., of which man (*sic*) boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals. (Darwin, 1874 referred by McFarl & Hediger, 2009:4).

It is not the aim of this study to determine exactly what degree or kind of similarities or differences lie between human and animal agency.



The first “mistake” we as humans make is to view animal behaviour from our own intentional motives. The second is that humans’ motives may not be as conscious as we would like them to be and that our motives are more similar to those of animals (McFarl & Hediger, 2009:3-4). We must realise that the Earth hosts many different forms of consciousness. Taylor (2011:360) says that “all organisms are teleological centres of life in the sense that each is a unique individual pursuing its own good in its own way” (Taylor, 2011:360) referred to by McFarl & Hediger, 2009:2).

Horan (2019:566) gives an overview of “three agential characteristics typically reserved for humans that are also found in other creatures” what he calls “cognition, moral reasoning, and emotion”. He refers to Frans de Waal’s book, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* to explain cognition (2016:267). In an attempt to define animal agency, he concludes that “every species has a different cognitive story, rather than a ‘single species that can stand model for all the others,’ e.g. humans for all other animals” (Horan, 2019:566). He further says that studies have proven that the ability of cognitive function is not limited to humans’ closest relatives in the animal world, namely primates, but that various fishes’ cognition, memory, communication, social structure, cooperation, and tool usage, all of which seem dismissible according to an anthropocentric-based human standard”, are found in these species (Horan, 2019:566-567).

To demonstrate moral reasoning in animals, Horan relies on Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce’s (2009) book, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*, who argue convincingly that “animals have a broad repertoire of moral behaviour and that their lives together are shaped by these behaviour patterns. *Ought* and *should* regarding what’s right and what’s wrong play an important role in their social interactions, just as they do in ours” (Bekoff & Pierce, 2009:x); Horan, 2019:567). They also emphasise the importance of ‘species-relative accounts’ of morality². McFarl and Hediger, (2009:7) conclude that “behaviour that conforms to the expectations of a group is ethical behaviour within that group, suggesting that nonhuman animals can be said to have some kind of morality”. If we limit morality to the human, we rather start listening to animals voicing their own experiences. Then we will be able to “understand” the rich and nuanced life of the other inhabitants of the Earth (Horan, 2019:567).

In his book, *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, Mark Bekoff (2007:72-74) explores “the biological and the ethological roots of complex emotional lives shared by diverse creatures”. Bekoff discusses scientific literature that convincingly argues for the presence of primary and secondary emotions in a variety of animals, “ranging in a continuum but recognizable fashion in creatures as diverse as dogs, cats, horses, snakes, elephants, whales, and even leeches” (Bekoff, 2007:72). Many people experiencing the rich emotions displayed by their domestic animals, can confirm scientific studies recorded in Bekoff (2007:72-74). Good examples are coming from many internet footages placed on social media.

Horan (2019) has convincingly argued for the presence of cognition, moral reasoning, and emotions in animals. However, we have to realise that there are limitations to human abilities to explore the extent of the otherness of animals. We also have to be mindful of the anthropocentric privilege of our reasoning and conceptualisation of the inner abilities of animals. He says that “the way we think about the world and the way we talk about it reveals a great deal about how we believe creation is ordered” (2019:565). Looking at and interpreting the world from an anthropocentric view “proscribes and erases the agency and subjectivity of the majority inhabitants of the Earth”. Humans formulated categories such as “language, rationality, capacity for relationship, moral reasoning, and others” to restrict and silence other creatures. We have to admit that animals cannot communicate with humans in the same way

² This means that “these capacities are not possessed by all humans and animals to the same degree” (Cooke & Chan, 2016).



humans communicate with each other, but this doesn't mean that they cannot communicate with each other and with humans. Horan concludes that:

it is not true that nonhuman creatures do not have an experience of meaning-making or exercise modes of expression or negotiate forms of self-representation. It is just that these iterations of agency and subjectivity appear absent on the horizon of anthropocentric valuation (Horan, 2019:565-566).

The various perspectives of the articles on animal agency in McFarl and Hediger (2009), "demonstrate that other animals can be thinking subjects, knowing subjects, self-conscious subjects: subjects with complex and substantial subjectivity that we call 'agency'." We must also acknowledge that animal agency is not simple and problematic. Agency depends on the animal in question, on the circumstances surrounding the animal, and how agency itself is framed (McFarl & Hediger, 2009:16). I am of the opinion that we do not have the ability to understand animals completely, but this is not a reason to deny them agency.

Children and Animals as Religious Agents

Children

Singer (2006:69) mentions that in ancient Israel children were important in the performance of religious rituals and worship. Children were encouraged by their caretakers and leaders to ask questions about their religion and history (Mackey, 2017:181–197).

Genesis 17:10-12 requires that all boys must be circumcised on the 8th day after birth as a sign of their inclusion into the covenant of Israel with YHWH. Boys were instructed in the Torah, first by their father and then by a priest or rabbi. At the age of 13 years, they had their Bar-mitzva (son of the commandments), a traditional Jewish coming-of-age ceremony that marks the transition from childhood to religious adulthood. The boy is then considered personally responsible for fulfilling all the commandments (Tikkanen, 2024). Recently, girls have also become a Bat Mitzvah meaning a "daughter of the commandments".

Together with the family, children also have to uphold the Sabbath. Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-14 specify that none who are considered as part of the family shall do any work:

you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Children participated in all the festivals, e.g. the Passover (Exodus 12); Purim (Esther 9:26-28); and the demand that the first-born of humans and the first-born of the flocks and herds belong to YHWH (Exodus 13:1-2; 34:20). It is not clear whether it was interpreted as to literary "sacrifice" the first-born, or just dedicate it to YHWH. Singer says, "During the known period of Israel's worship the principle of compensation was accepted, either by substituting a lamb for the child, or by regarding the priestly duties of the tribe of Levi as an overall compensation for all Israel", (Exodus 34:20) (Singer, 2006:70). Luke 2:22-24 records that Jesus as the first-born was also presented to the Lord and his parents "offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law".

Girls were trained and educated by their mothers', and instructed to follow house rules and strict purity laws. A girl's virginity was attached to the honour of her family and especially to her father. Losing her virginity before marriage could lead to her being killed (stoned) by the elders from the village or the men in her family (Deuteronomy 22:17-21).



The Law of Holiness in Exodus 20:1-2 forbids child sacrifice or passing through fire. In this context, it is said that any person who lives in Israel and gives their children to “Molech” shall be punished by death.³

Genesis 22:1-12 records the story of Abraham who was ordered by YHWH to sacrifice his son Isaac. When he demonstrated obedience to YHWH, the sacrifice was prevented, and his son was saved. In 2 Kings 16:3, it is said that Ahaz, king of Judah followed foreign practices and sacrificed his son. He was rejected as king and punished. Jeremiah (7:31) condemns Judah for building high places to burn their sons and daughters in fire. Although the practice of child sacrifice was forbidden in Israel, it seems that there were throughout the history of Israel, instances of child sacrifice.

Animals

Animals were in some or another way involved in the religious activities of early humans. It is not possible to determine when and where animal sacrifices originated. Ullucci (2008:362) rejects “all attempts to reduce the practice of sacrifice to a single meaning or source be it the hunter-killer instinct scapegoat practices or gender hierarchy”. It seems that “originally humans only sacrificed spelt (*far*) and pure salt to the gods. Following this, other plant offerings were made but no animals” (Ullucci, 2008:368). However, the early humans were of the view that slaughtering animals and eating meat would please the gods. Therefore, the slaughtering of animals was encouraged and justified (Ullucci, 2008:367). Genesis 4:3-4 records the first offerings in the biblical narrative: Cain, a farmer, offers some of his crops and Abel the fat of his animals. Abel’s offering was accepted and Cain’s not. That indicates a preference for animal offerings. When Noah and his family exit the ark, he builds an altar and offers some of the clean animals and birds.⁴ Leviticus provides extensive instructions and regulations for plant as well as animal offerings to please the Lord of Israel.

But animals also played other religious roles. A good example is Balaam’s donkey in Numbers 22. The donkey acts as a divine agent by preventing Balaam from continuing his journey to Balak the king of Moab and attempting to protect Balaam and Israel from his evil and offensive intentions to curse Israel for monetary gain (Frisch, 2015:111).

In contrast with Balaam, his donkey displays insight and knowledge of the will of God. Three times the angel tried to prevent Balaam from continuing his journey to Balak, but each time it was only the donkey who saw the angel and tried to divert the journey. In his anger, greed, and lack of understanding, Balaam struck the donkey each time forcing the animal back on the road. When the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and she complained about the abuse, it was only then that Balaam saw the angel.⁵ The donkey saw the angel and turned away three times, preventing the angel from killing Balaam (Nortjé-Meyer, 2022:8-9). The function of this story is to ridicule the “prophet” Balaam.

The dove also played an important role in religious symbolism: In Genesis 8 after the flood, Noah sent out a dove to see if the waters had subsided from the Earth. It returned with an olive branch and since then it has been a symbol of peace and purity (Den Heyer & Schelling,

³ It is not clear to whom “Molech” refers, but Singer (2006:70 fn. 14) explains that “The usual views are that Moloch/Molech is: 1) a tendentious misvocalization of the word *Melech*, “king”, the original vowels being replaced by those of the word *bosheth*, “shame,” just as Baal himself was called Bosheth by Israelite writers, and just as Ashtareth was vocalized Ashtoreth in the same way; 2) a name of an Ammonite god (*M-I-ch* or *Milcom*) registered in the Old Testament; 3) a deity of the same name mentioned in texts from a) the Third Dynasty of Ur, b) Mari, and c) Ras Shamra-Ugarit, and 4) a Phoenician word *molk*, meaning “votive offering”.

⁴ “... and when the Lord smelled the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done’” (Genesis 8:20-21 NRSV).

⁵ The angel said to him: “I have come out as an adversary because your way is perverse before me” (Numbers 22:32).



2000:117). Leviticus 1:14-17 describes the specification of the burnt offer, and turtledoves or pigeons should be offered if the person could not afford a lamb. The offer for purification of a woman after childbirth is also two turtledoves or pigeons (Leviticus 12:8). According to Exodus 13:2 the firstborn of everything that “opens the womb” of the mother of a human and an animal, should be dedicated to YHWH. However, the parents could pay a ransom to set the child free from obligations and charges. Luke 2:22-24 refers to this practice when the mother of Jesus completed her purification after the birth and brought Jesus to Jerusalem for the prescribed offerings, namely a few turtledoves and pigeons.

The dove also acts as a divine agent of the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus during his baptism by John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11) (Den Heyer & Schelling, 2000:117-119).

Mourning in the Bible

There are four types of mourning represented in biblical texts. Mourning the dead serves as a model for the other types of mourning (e.g. Genesis 37:34-35; 2 Samuel 3:31-37; Jeremiah 16:5-7), namely the mourning of penitents and other petitioners (Ezra 9-10; Joel 1-2; Jonah 3:6-9; Judith 4:8-15); mourning at the time of a disaster (non-petitionary mourning (2 Samuel 13:19; Esther 6:12) and mourning of a person who is stricken with skin disease (Leviticus 13:45-46) (Olyan, 2004:25-26). The verb ‘to mourn’ (*lba*) is used for ritual behaviour or mourning unrelated to death. There are also other forms of the verb “to mourn”, namely “to lament” and its derivatives (Olyan, 2004:20).

The mourning depicted in Judith and Jonah can be understood as relating to a calamity yet to come, placing both in the category of petitionary mourning (Seidler, 2019:119). The purpose of petitionary mourning is “to focus the deity’s attention on the plea of the petitioner and secure his intervention on the petitioner’s behalf” (Olyan, 2004:62). The statement of the king of Nineveh “Who knows but that God may turn and relent ... so that we do not perish.” (Jonah 3:9), “clearly reflects the belief that the acts of mourning, together with remorse, have the potential to change the divine decree” (Seidler, 2019:119).

Also known as communal mourning, it can be led by the king or priests. Their motivation is to call their people to cry out to YHWH in time of potential or actual personal or corporate loss or disaster (Olyan, 2004:67). Olyan (2004:70) says that the “purpose of the communal petition is to secure YHWH’s guidance and intervention at a time of crises”. The entire population is called upon to gather for the petition (2 Chronicles 20:13; cf. Joel 2:16) to ask YHWH if he might reverse their difficult situation (2 Chronicles 20:9; cf. Joel 1:14; Jonah 3:7) (Olyan, 2004:71). These include mourning in anticipation of disaster (Jeremiah 6:26; Micah 1:8); mourning after the destruction of Jerusalem (Isaiah 66:10; Lamentations 1:4); mourning in order to seek divine revelation (Daniel 10:2-3; cf. 10:12) and mourning unrelated to death (Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 9:1) (Olyan, 2004:20).

The response of the people and the response of the leadership in the face of the coming disaster is similar but not identical. The people of Nineveh fasted immediately and only once, but the king ordered another fast and included additional conditions like abstention from eating and drinking and including sheep and cattle in the mourning (Seidler, 2019:124).

Unlike the call to repentance in Jonah 3:8 (paralleled in Joel 2:12-13), there is no indication of transgressions, repentance or confessions of sins in Judith. In Judith, it is rather mourning in anticipation of a disaster (Jeremiah 6:26; Micah 1:8).

The location in which mourning takes place varies. Mourning for the dead probably occurs mostly in a domestic setting and definitely not in a sanctuary. While communal petitionary mourning occurs in a sanctuary, or as in Judith 4:11, 13-14 in front of the temple, in the temple, and everywhere in Judea. It seems the mourning in Nineveh took place everywhere in the city. Individual mourning can be at home, in a sanctuary, or wherever the person finds themselves (Olyan, 2004:26).



The length of the period of the mourning depends on the type of mourning. It can be part of a day, one day, seven days, thirty days for the dead, or several weeks or until the petitioner's entreaty has been answered (Olyan, 2004:27). The mourning in Nineveh has been proclaimed as a "fast" and the length of fasting is not indicated (Jonah 3:5). However, while it seems that the people of Nineveh fasted once, "the king decrees another fast and expands the subjects of his decree to fast and wear sackcloth to include sheep and cattle" (Seidler, 2019:124). In Judith, it appears that the mourning is taking place over some time as it is said in Judith 4:13 that they fast for a long time and that the priests put on sackcloth⁶ while bringing the daily "burnt-offerings, the votive offerings, and freewill-offerings of the people" (Judith 4:14).

Olyan (2004:3-4) says that "The social and ritual dimensions of mourning are intertwined and inseparable in that rites in general, are a context for the creation and recreation of the social order and for its potential transformation". In Jonah, the king orders a complete transformation from the people, namely, to repent from their sins and violence to prevent total destruction from the deity. The transformation takes place, and the city is saved. In Judith, the social setting of the mourning is rather an affirmation and realization of the social bonds between the Israelites living in Judea (4:1) (Olyan, 2004:4).

Typical petitioners' mourning behaviour is "tearing garments, tossing ashes or dust on the head, weeping, wearing sackcloth, and fasting" (Olyan, 2004:13, 62). It is seen as a self-debasing act, and to humble oneself. They are stripped of honour for a certain time (Olyan, 2004:78, 80). This occurs in Judith and Jonah.

When the people of Nineveh heard the condemning words from Jonah (3:4), they called a fast and put on sackcloth (3:5). However, when the king received the news, "he removed his clothing and covered himself in sackcloth and sat in ashes" (3:6). He further proclaimed that humans and animals (specifying probably domestic animals), herds and flocks shall neither eat nor drink (3:7), and they shall be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily to God (3:8). He also instructed them to turn away from their evil ways and from committing violence (3:8) (Seidler, 2019:128).

In Judith, all people who lived in Jerusalem and Judea were ordered to participate in the mourning: the high priest, the council, priests, men, women, children, cattle, all foreigners, hired workers and slaves (4:10). They fast, wear sackcloth, put ashes on their heads, laying flat on their faces in front of the temple, and crying out to God (4:11-12). They also covered the altar in sackcloth (4:12) which is rather unusual and only appears in Judith.

Allen (1976:186) is of the opinion that "The participation of domestic animals in mourning ceremonies (3:8) is mentioned by Herodotus as a Persian practice". Also, the linking of the king and nobles in the announcement (Jonah 3:7) is rather a Persian than an Assyrian custom. However, Bolin (1997:128) thinks the practice occurred both earlier and later, namely from the Assyrian to the Roman periods.

God's love and concern for creation include the welfare of its animals, not only humans as Jonah 3:7-9 and 4:11 remind us of Genesis 7:14-16, Exodus 20:10, Jeremaih 7:20, Joel 1:20, Job 39, Matthew 10:29-31. It serves as motivation for why God is reluctant to punish the Ninevites (Simundson, 2005:261-262).

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⁶ "Sackcloth was known to be a coarse material often made of woven goat's hair. It was known to be uncomfortable and would often lead to skin itching, irritation and chafing". Accessed: 27 Feb 2024 <https://westsidechristians.org/wearing-sackcloth/#:~:text=Sackcloth%20was%20known%20to%20be,itching%2C%20irritation%2C%20and%20chafing.>



The Assyrian city of Nineveh plays an important role in both these narratives. However, Judith and Jonah are obscure concerning the correctness of historical data. They are replete with glaring historical and geographical inconsistencies (Efthimiadis-Keith, 2014:861-862). Efthimiadis-Keith (2014:862-863) indicates corresponding events in Judith with the Maccabean (163-135 BCE) and Hasmonean periods (168-63 BCE) when the High Priest obtained military and civil powers. Judith is also deeply concerned with the rededication of the temple, its altar, and vessels after they have been defiled by the Assyrians (cf. Judith 4:3, 12; 8:21; 9:8). Moreso, “Judith’s long lifespan – 105 years (16:23a-b) – corresponds precisely with the duration of the Hasmonean era (168-63 B.C.E.)” (Efthimiadis-Keith, 2014:863).⁷

Nothing is known about this Jonah except that a prophet Jonah is mentioned in 2 Ki 14:25 during the reign of king Jeroboam II in the eighth century BCE (Allen, 1976:179). There is no direct reference in the book to the author and it is written anonymously. However, maybe Jonah is a legend, similar to that of Elijah and Elisha, and might not be historically accurate, but it can be related to actual historical persons and events (Simundson, 2005:257).⁸ The references to Persian customs suggest that the book was probably written in the Persian period between the mid-sixth and mid-fourth century BCE. The similarity between Jonah 4:2 and Joel 2:13-14, suggests that Jonah was written not earlier than 350 BCE (Simundson, 2005:260). However, according to Sir 49:10, it was certainly known and accepted by 200 BCE (Allen, 1976:188).⁹

The story is about Israel who has just returned from exile and is beginning to reconstitute themselves in their community and to purify and rededicate the temple to God (Judith 4:3) (Hobyane, 2016:1). This brings to mind the cleansing and rededication of the temple by the Maccabees in 164 BCE after they revolted against the Seleucids (Efthimiadis-Keith, 2004:178).

The Judeans take control of their situation and make all attempts to protect themselves from Holofernes by garrisoning their towns and cities, securing their freshly harvested fields, and calling out an all-inclusive mourning, “the entire community throughout all its strata of consciousness is involved in humbling themselves and crying out before God” (Efthimiadis-Keith, 2004:179). It is significant that the children and cattle are mentioned as part of the “inner circle”, namely the family of the community, while the alien resident, hired labourer, and purchased slave are listed afterward. The crying out to God increased in Judith 6:14-21 and 7:19-29, where women and children are participating, “a fever pitch of desperation” as Efthimiadis-Keith, (2004:156) calls it. The fact that the king of the Ninevites extended the

⁷ Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BCE) ruled the Babylonian Empire from its capital Babilon and not Nineveh as stated in Judith 1:1. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, but it was destroyed already in 612 BCE by the father of Nebuchadnezzar (Bolin, 1997:130). Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar could not rule from Nineveh as stated in Judith 1:1. Arpachshad is named the king of Media in Judith 1:13 but is otherwise completely unknown, he is nowhere else mentioned, only in Judith. Ecbatana was indeed the capital of Media but was not invaded by Nebuchadnezzar (Jud 1:13-15) but by Cyrus in 550 BCE.

⁸ Some scholars think that the “sign of Jonah” Jesus links to his own death (Matthew 12:38–42; Luke 11:29–32), is an indication of the historicity of Jonah (Spangenberg, 2013:4).

⁹ The size of Nineveh (Jonah 3:3) (Simundson, 2005:254). There are different explanations for the size of the city and how the 3-day journey should be explained because according to excavations the city was about 12 km in circumference and 5km at the widest points (Bolin, 1997:131). Explanations differ from the length of the city, or to go around the city or through all the streets, or including the surrounding area (Bolin, 1998:132). Jonah was in the big fish for three days and three nights (1:17, 2:10). There is no proper historical explanation for the big fish that swallowed Jonah. Simundson (2005:270) is of the opinion that it refers to God’s ability to command “other creatures besides humans” to fulfill his purposes. This includes the miraculous plant (4:6-7), the worm to destroy the bush, and the sultry east wind (4:6-8). There is no report of the miraculous repentance of the Ninevites (3:4), other than in Jonah. It resembles the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25, 29) and the Flood (Genesis 8). “The moral charge of ‘violence’ features in Genesis 6:11, 13” (1976:176). Joel 2:13-14 is applied in Jonah 3:9, 4:2 to a “non-Israelite setting and extends God’s characteristic love for Israel to cover pagans” (Allen, 1976:177).



mourning in terms of intensity and duration, indicates also “a fever pitch of desperation”. In Jonah and Judith, the mourning is done in desperation.

It is not clear in Judith why the Assyrians threatened to invade Israel again, especially so soon after the Israelites had returned from exile and restored the temple. Is it again punishment, but for what? In Jonah it is said clearly it is because of their sin and violence (Jonah 3:8). In both narratives, leaders included specifically children and all domestic animals, herds and flocks in the mourning process (Jonah 3:7, Judith 4:10). Other people like immigrants, hired workers and slaves were also commanded to participate (Judith 4:10). All participants, all people, animals and even the altar, had to be clothed with sackcloth (Judith 4:12).

In these narratives, an all-inclusive community is called upon and involved in the mourning.¹⁰ These instructions resemble the commands in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 and Exodus 20:8-10 to consecrate the Sabbath, namely “you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, or any of your livestock (ox or donkey), or the alien resident in your towns”, shall not do any work (NRSV).¹¹

The inclusion and participation of children and animals emphasize their agency, their importance to the community, but also their vulnerability. The people of Israel are afraid that their children will be captured and taken away (Judith 4:12). The Assyrians have also instructed that the babies should be dashed to the ground, and the Israelite daughters should be taken away (Judith 16:4). However, the young men, women and children rebelled against the leaders of Israel and blamed them for the devastated situation (Judith 7:23). According to 1 Samuel 30:1-20 the same happened during the time of King David: the Amalekites took women and children, sons and daughters into captivity. The people wanted to stone David because of that, but he brought all the women and children back. He also captured all the flocks, herds, and cattle (1 Samuel 30:20). This is probably what the Israelites remembered in Judith 4:12 when they prayed that their children and wives should not be captured and taken away by the Assyrians.

The agency given to children and animals emphasizes their vulnerability. In Judith 4-9 the fate of children is mentioned frequently, they are starving of hunger and thirst (Judith 4:14, 22, 27), they are taken away and sold probably as slaves and prostitutes (Judith 4:12, 9:4), and they are violently killed (Judith 16:4). The animals that were instructed to participate in the mourning are slaughtered and eaten (Judith 11:12). A similar contradicting event took place when Noah and his family together with all the animals were rescued from extinction and released safely after the Flood, but then Noah built an altar and “took of every clean animal and of every clean bird” to offer to the Lord (Genesis 8:20).

In Israel, the sacrificing of people, specifically children was forbidden. However, there are examples of children being killed on purpose for a specific reason, e.g. the two women who killed their children to be eaten in 2 Kings 6:28-31 and Lamentations 2:20 & 4:10 (Ngqeza & Nortjé-Meyer, 2022). In Genesis 22:2 the Lord commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering, but was prevented from doing so when the Lord provided a ram as a substitute for the offering (22:12-13). Exodus 1:22 mentions the orders of Pharaoh that every boy that is born to the Hebrews, should be killed (Exodus 1:16, 22). Later in the narrative, the Lord gave the command that all firstborns of the Egyptians would die, supposedly boy and girl children included (Exodus 11). In Esther 3:13, Haman the Persian commander ordered that all Jews, young and old, women and children should be destroyed, killed and annihilated (Seidler, 2019:122).

¹⁰ Joel 2:28-29 also mentions an all-inclusive community of people on whom God will pour out his spirit, namely on all flesh. Sons and daughters will have agency to prophesy, and slaves will also receive the spirit.

¹¹ A child would have known most of the rules that govern their lives on the Sabbath and other festivals (Sivan, 2017:198)



In Matthew 2 it is the baby boys of two years and younger that were killed to give room to the family of Nazareth to flee from the violence of Herod the Great. But more concerning is that the Lord himself gave his only Son for the sins of the world (John 3:16). It is said that the mothers of Cartage threw their firstborn sons down the cliffs as a sacrifice/offering to prevent Cartage from being taken by the enemies (Xella & Quinn, 2014).

Conclusion

It seems that the children and animals are brought into mourning to demonstrate Israel's vulnerability and to "soften" God's heart so that He will "change his mind". But Israel is not exposing their vulnerability, they expose the vulnerability of the children and animals. To give children and animals agency should not expose their helplessness, this is silencing their voices.

In Judith, the children and animals who were included in the mourning are given agency, but they have no choice but to participate. Therefore, the children and animals are experiencing situational vulnerability due to the risk of hunger and thirst. Jonah 3:7 states explicitly that "No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water" (NRSV). Violence is committed against children and animals, and they are used as a shield against violence threatening a nation, in this specific context, Israel (Judith 4:8-10) and the city Nineveh (Jonah 3:7-10; 4:11b).

Efthimiadis-Keith's article (2014) on the genealogy of Judith states the impressive list of forebears she comes from that defines her character and role. Still, Efthimiadis-Keith does not say anything about the fact that Judith prefers to terminate this lineage by not having any children or offspring, no legacy. ¹²In Judith, children are absent in the victory section, their crying out to YHWH is forgotten, not recognised, and they have no legacy. Judith's no-children approach indicates a hopeless future for children. Her role inspires feminists to focus on her independence and perseverance in saving Israel, as well as to undermine motherhood as an essential woman attribute, but what has the story to say about the future and agency of children and animals, the most vulnerable in society?

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¹² A similar scenario is recorded in Luke 2:36-37 about the prophetess Anna who was of high age (84) and stayed a widow after her husband died when she was still young. She dedicated her life to God. It is not stated that she had no children, but it is implied by her dedication to her faith and service to God. In a similar way as Judith, a short lineage is indicated that she was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.



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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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