

Judith: Apocrypha

by Toni Craven



Judith with the Head of Holofernes, by Lucas Cranach the Elder, c. 1530. On display in Gallery 643 of the Met Fifth Avenue. Source: The Met Museum.

In Brief

The apocryphal book of Judith is an imaginative, highly fictionalized romance, portraying an Assyrian invasion of Israel led by a man named Holofernes. He besieges the town of Bethulia, where a widow named Judith dwells. Frustrated by the lack of faith in God shown by Bethulia's leaders, Judith concocts a plan of her own. She takes matters into her own hands, seducing and murdering Holofernes in his tent. The death of Holofernes gives the Israelites faith and they rout the Assyrian forces, securing victory for Israel.

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The Book of Judith (second or early first century BCE) is an imaginative, highly fictionalized romance that entertains as it edifies. From a literary perspective, the book is an artistic masterpiece, constructed in two parts (1:1–7:32, 8:1–16:25), with each internally ordered by a threefold chiasmic pattern. Numerous correspondences between the two halves of the story provide elegant compositional symmetries. The Book of Judith

is a story of balance and counterbalance that makes the point that God's people have all they need to survive if they rely wholeheartedly on the covenant.

The Introduction to Judith

Judith, the character from whom the book takes its name, is not mentioned in the story's first half (1:1–7:32). In the opening chapters, God's divine sovereignty over Israel comes into direct conflict with Nebuchadnezzar's political sovereignty over all the nations of the western world. Holofernes, commander-in-chief of the Assyrian armies of Nebuchadnezzar (which, of course, is impossible historically since Nebuchadnezzar is a Babylonian), leads a massive force in a punitive campaign against his western vassal nations—including Israel—who refused to send auxiliary forces against the Medes. The people of Israel block his retaliatory advancement against all the nations of the west at their little town of Bethulia (related to Hebrew for "virgin"), which strategically guards his route of access to Jerusalem. Despite the warning of Achior the Ammonite that the Jews cannot be conquered unless they sin against their God, Holofernes lays siege to Bethulia, cutting off its water supply. After thirty-four days, the exhausted Bethulians are ready to surrender, even though it will mean worship of Nebuchadnezzar (3:8). Uzziah, their town magistrate, urges a compromise to give God five additional days to deliver them, temporarily postponing what seems inevitable apostasy, slavery, and destruction of the Jerusalem sanctuary

Enter Judith

In Part 2 (8:1–16:25), Judith, a pious widow in Bethulia, comes forward to challenge the five-day compromise that has imposed conditions on God's sovereignty. Once she takes the stage, she surrenders it to no other character, figuring in every scene until the book's end. She sends her maid to summon the town magistrates, Uzziah, Chabris, and Charmis to her house. Upbraiding them for putting themselves in the place of God (8:12), she argues that God is simply testing them, and has the power to help them at any time (8:15). She urges, "Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading" (8:16). Judith proposes that they wait for deliverance and together call upon God who will listen, if so disposed (8:17). She insists that God will not disdain Israel because they know no other god and that capture by the Assyrians will mean the desolation of the temple as well as their way of life. Judith counsels, "Let us set an example for our kindred" (8:24).

Uzziah responds that all she has said is true and that this is not the first time her wisdom has been shown (8:28–29). But, the people were thirsty; the magistrates made an oath; and she can best help by praying for rain. On her account, the Lord will

See Also:

fill the cisterns and the people will no longer faint from thirst (8:31). Thus he saves himself from losing face by rescinding his foolish vow to hand over the town to the Assyrians in five days if God does not act (7:30–31), blaming the people who forced him to this oath, victimizing the victims as Jephthah did his daughter (Judg 11:35).



Encyclopedia: Palmah

Judith's Plan

Giving up the idea that she and the town officials can set an example together, Judith decides to act independently. Explaining that she will do something all the generations will remember, she tells them to meet her at the town gate that evening when she and her maid will go out. Before the five days of their compromise are gone, she pledges “the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand” (Jdt 8:33). She refuses to tell them exactly what she is about to do (8:33–34).

Once the magistrates leave, Judith prostrates herself and cries out to God, begging the strength to be like Simeon, who took vengeance against the Shechemites who violated his virgin sister, Dinah. She implores God to hear her widow's prayer (9:4), crediting God with full knowledge of past, present, and future (9:5–6). Judith asks God to see the pride of the enemy, to send fury on their heads, to give her—a widow—a strong hand, to strike down the enemy “by the deceit” of her lips (9:10), and to “crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman” (9:10). In an androcentric setting, there is no greater dishonor for a male than to die at the hand of a female (see Judg 9:53–54; 2 Sam 11:21).

Judith is the only biblical woman who asks God to make her a good liar. In Jdt 9:10 and again in 9:13, she petitions God for “deceitful words” that will wound those who have planned cruelties against the Jerusalem Temple and their homeland. Judith is part of a larger company of women in the Bible who practice deceptions that have positive national and personal consequences, including Rebekah who tricks her husband, Isaac, for the sake of their son Jacob (Genesis 27); Tamar who steals the next generation by tricking her father-in-law Judah into impregnating her (Genesis 38); the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who lie to the king of Egypt about why they have not killed the Hebrew males at birth (Exod 1:19); Moses's sister who offers to call a nurse for the daughter of Pharaoh, but calls the baby's own mother, (Exod 2:7–8); the daughter of the Pharaoh who adopts and names the child Moses, in direct violation of her father's instruction (Exod 2:10); Rahab, who preserves the lives of Joshua's spies by lying to the king of Jericho (Joshua 2); and Jael, a Kenite, who smashes the skull of the enemy general seeking the hospitality of her tent (Judges 4–5).

When her prayer is finished (Jdt 9:14), Judith dresses beautifully, “to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her” (10:4). Taking ritually pure foods to eat (10:5), she and her

maid go out that night to the camp of the enemy. She meets the Assyrian patrol and tells her first lie when she says, "I am a daughter of the Hebrews, but I am fleeing from them, for they are about to be handed over to you to be devoured. I am on my way to see Holofernes the commander of your army, to give him a true report" (10:12–13). Her words and beauty greatly excite the soldiers who choose one hundred men from their ranks to assist her to the tent of Holofernes (10:14–17).

She prostrates herself before Holofernes, who tells her his first lie, saying he has never hurt anyone who chose to serve Nebuchadnezzar (11:2; conveniently forgetting how he destroyed the shrines and sacred places of seacoast peoples after they had surrendered in 3:1–8). Equal to the encounter, and playful with her use of the address "lord," which Holofernes hears as deference to him, but Judith means as reference to God, Judith promises to tell him nothing false (11:5). She explains she will go out into the valley and pray to God each night and God will tell her when the Bethulians have sinned by eating sacrifices, so that Holofernes can safely attack Bethulia (11:16–19). Well-pleased, Holofernes praises her beauty and wise speech, pledging, "If: you do as you have said, your God shall be my God, and you shall live in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar" (11:23; compare Ruth 1:16).

From the Blog:



Girls in Trouble: Telling women's stories in a 'language' I understand

Four uneventful days pass in the enemy camp before Holofernes sends his personal attendant Bagoas to invite Judith to a banquet in his tent (Jdt 12:10–12). Judith accepts the invitation and dresses in her best finery (12:14–15). Seeing her, Holofernes is ravished, "for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her" (12:16). She drinks and eats what her maid prepares (12:18–19). He drinks "much more than he had ever drunk in any one day since he was born" (12:20).

Evening comes and all withdraw from the tent, save Judith and Holofernes who is stretched out, on his bed, dead drunk (13:2). Judith's maid waits outside, as instructed. Judith prays twice for God's help (13:4–5, 7), then taking Holofernes' own sword, she strikes his neck twice and cuts off his head (13:8). She gives his head to her maid, who puts it in the food bag, and the two women go out of the camp, as was their nightly habit to pray, except this night they return to Bethulia (13:10).

Judith Victorious

The people run to welcome Judith and her maid, and Judith displays the head of Holofernes, telling how God protected her so that no sin was committed to defile or

shame her (13:15–16). The people bless God (13:17), and Uzziah hails her as “blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth” (13:18). Judith then instructs the people to wait until daybreak and then attack the Assyrians (14:1–4). When Achior the Ammonite is brought to verify that the head belongs to Holofernes, he faints (see Add Esth 15:7), blesses Judith, believes firmly in God, and is circumcised (14:6–10).

The Israelites successfully rout the Assyrians and plunder their camp. Joakim, the high priest of Jerusalem, arrives to celebrate the victory. A triumphant procession of the women and the men, with Judith in the lead singing a hymn of praise like that of Miriam and Moses in Exodus 15, makes its way to Jerusalem where all worship God for three months (16:1–20).

In the end, Judith goes back to her estate in Bethulia. “Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh” (16:22). At one hundred five years of age, she frees her faithful maid and distributes her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband (compare Num 27:1–11; 36:1–11; Tob 6:11–13). This dispersal of her estate supports the unexpressed fact that Judith is a childless widow.

Judith is conventional in upholding inheritance and purity rights, in prayer and fasting, in her ideas about God’s providence. She is unconventional in upbraiding the male leaders of her town for what they have said about God, though she does this within the privacy of her own home. No other woman in the Bible has another woman in charge of her estate; no other childless woman refuses to marry. On her account, “No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death” (16:25).

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