

The Book of Judith



Painting by Trophime Bigot depicting Judith and Holofernes | The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore | PD-US

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The Deuterocanonical book of *Judith* is a book that portrays an Assyrian invasion of Israel led by a general named Holofernes. He besieges the town of Bethulia which occupies a strategic place as regards Holofernes invasion of Israel. His plan is to cut off the water supply and have a bloodless siege. Inside the walls of Bethulia there is a widow named Judith. 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. At its core the Book of Judith relates the story of God's deliverance of the Jewish people. This was accomplished "by the hand of a female." The motif "by the hand" is an echo and meant to remind people of the "hand" of God in the Exodus narrative (cf. Ex 15:6).

The work may have been written around 100 B.C., but its historical range is extraordinary - and that is either its brilliance or its Achilles heel. Within the reign of book's King Nebuchadnezzar, it telescopes five centuries of historical and geographical information with imaginary details. There are references to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital destroyed in 612 BC, to Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler not of Assyria but of Babylon (605/604–562), and to the second Temple, built around 515. There are even references to governance by the High Priest which would have been a feature of the postexilic period.

The Achilles heel is that the historical and geographical details are either not correct (perhaps intentionally so), unknown, in the wrong time period, or could not have possibly existed together. For example, the geographical details, such as the narrow defile into Bethulia (an unidentified town which gives access to the heart of the land), are not something that can be located based on its description. While

many of the characters are historical (e.g. Holofernes and Bagoas who were part of the military campaigns of Artaxerxes III Ochus (358–338)) Judith and Arphaxad are unknown. And even with known characters (e.g. Holofernes and Bagoas) given some other information and context, it seems as though they are really referring to Antiochus IV and a Syrian general named Nicanor, both of whom attacked Jerusalem and the Temple

The brilliance of the seemingly skewed presentation is that all of the correct information would have been known to the listener and so the compilation of all the features is meant to have a single story line that addresses 5 centuries of protection by the hand of God. The simple conclusion from these and other details is that the work is historical fiction, written to exalt God as Israel's deliverer from foreign might, not by an army, but by means of a simple widow. Not unlike Deborah of *Judges* (chapters 4-5).

Some other interesting notes about the book:

- Judith's beauty deceives foreigners, with the result that blessings redound to Israel (Gn 12:11–20; Abraham taking advantage of Sarah's beauty to enrich the family).
- Judith's Hebrew name means "Jewish woman." Her exploits captured the imagination of liturgists, artists, and writers through the centuries.
- The book is filled with double entendres and ironic situations, e.g., Judith's conversation with Holofernes in 11:5–8, 19, where "my lord" is ambiguous, and her declaration to Holofernes that she will lead him through Judea to Jerusalem (his head goes on such a journey).

Outline of the *Book of Judith*

The book can be divided into five parts:

The Campaign of Nebuchadnezzar the "Assyrian" vs. Arphaxad the Mede

1. Assyrian Threat (1:1–3:10)
2. Siege of Bethulia (4:1–7:32)

Judith thwarts the enemies of Israel

3. Judith, Instrument of the Lord (8:1–10:10)
4. Judith Goes Out to War (10:11–13:20)
5. Victory and Thanksgiving (14:1–16:25)

Another view identifies a clear chiasmic pattern in both "acts"

Act I (1:1–7:23)

- A. Campaign against disobedient nations; the people surrender (1:1–2:13)
- B. Israel is "greatly terrified" (2:14–3:10)
- C. Joakim prepares for war (4:1–15)
- D. Holofernes talks with Achior (5:1–6.9)
- E. Achior is expelled by Assyrians (6:10–13)
- E'. Achior is received in the village of Bethulia (6:14–15)
- D'. Achior talks with the people (6:16–21)
- C'. Holofernes prepares for war (7:1–3)
- B'. Israel is "greatly terrified" (7:4–5)
- A'. Campaign against Bethulia; the people want to surrender (7:6–32)

Act II (8:1–16:25)

- A. Introduction of Judith (8:1–8)
- B. Judith plans to save Israel (8:9–10:8), including her extended prayer (9:1–14)

- C. Judith and her maid leave Bethulia (10:9–10)
- D. Judith beheads Holofernes (10:11–13:10a)
- C'. Judith and her maid return to Bethulia (13:10b–11)
- B'. Judith plans the destruction of Israel's enemy (13:12–16:20)
- A'. Conclusion about Judith (16.1–25)

Literary genre

The German Reformer, Martin Luther, had this to say about the *Book of Judith*:

“It hardly squares with the historical account of the Holy Scriptures, especially Jeremiah and Ezra. Some people think thi not an account of historical events but rather a beautiful religious fiction...Such an interpretation strikes my fancy, and I think that the poet deliberately and painstakingly inserted the errors of time and mae in order to remind the read that the book should be taken and understood as that kind of sacred, religious composition.”

Most contemporary scholars generally tend to ascribe Judith to one of several contemporaneous Greek or Roman literary genres, reading it as an extended parable in the form of a historical fiction from the days of the Seleucid oppression. But does the genre assignment negate the inspiration of the text? The books of *Jonah* and *Job* are as easily assigned to a genre of historical fiction - and like *Judith*, they both have parallels in secular literature of other cultures.

In any case, scholars note that *Judith* fits within and even incorporates the genre of "salvation traditions" from the Old Testament, particularly the story of Deborah and Jael (Judges 4–5), who seduced and inebriated the Canaanite commander Sisera before hammering a tent-peg into his forehead. There are also thematic connections to the revenge of Simeon and Levi on Shechem after the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34.

But as in the traditional “salvation stories,” ever faithful to his covenant, the Lord does not abandon his children in their trials; He intervenes at the appointed hour to save them from their enemies. This recurring biblical theme is, however, set in motion in an apocalyptic tone that evokes in particular the great visions of Daniel. And, in fact, from the time of the prophets, the people were awaiting the day in which the pagan masses, representing the powers of evil, would mount an assault on the kingdom of God and be overcome in a way that could not be foreseen.

Sources: Lawrence M. Wills, “The Book of Judith” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Old Testament Survey* (Abingdon Press, Nashville | 2005)