

WOMEN OF THE BIBLE - 3

THE BOOK OF JUDITH

Judith – A Remarkable Heroine

The Book of Judith

The Deuterocanonical Books

Old Testament – Holy Bible

Chapter 8-13



Nebuchadnezzar has grown angry with the people of the Levant who resist his rule, and vows to destroy them. He assigns his military commander Holofernes to this task, and a great army sweeps down from Mesopotamia into Syria and Lebanon toward Israel. The nations in its path immediately surrender and beg for peace. The Israelites, however, fast and pray to God for deliverance. The town of Bethulia is particularly desperate, since it stands in the way of the mighty army's path to Jerusalem. (1-4)

Holofernes is amazed that the Israelites have the courage to resist him. Achior, the leader of all the Ammonites, briefs him on Israel's sacred history and declares that Israel will be invincible unless it sins against God. "Who is God except Nebuchadnezzar?"

Holofernes replies. He orders Achior bound and taken to Bethulia, where he can share the Israelites' fate. The

Ammonite leader is treated with hospitality by the citizens of the

city, who welcome him into their assembly.[1] Holofernes arrays his troops for battle, but the Edomites in his coalition convince him to lay siege to the city instead, by taking control of its water supply, which lies outside the city walls. After a little more than a month, the people of Bethulia are ready to surrender, but their mayor, Uzziah, convinces them to hold out for five more days. If God does not deliver them by the fortieth day of the siege, he vows to accede to their wishes and surrender to Holofernes' forces. (5-7)

It is only now that the lovely, pious widow Judith appears on the scene. She prophetically proclaims that to surrender to Holofernes' would be sin. "If we are captured, all Judea will be captured and our sanctuary will be plundered; and he (God) will exact of us the penalty for its desecration," she argues. Judith declares that she herself will become God's agent of deliverance. She prays desperately to God to allow her to use "deceitful words" to defeat the Assyrians. She then attires herself glamorously, receiving the praise of the people of Bethulia as she leaves through the city gate together with her maid. She is immediately arrested by an Assyrian patrol,

but convinces them that she has useful information for Holofernes. She is consequently taken to him, amidst great excitement on account of her unrivaled beauty. (8-10)

Holofernes assures Judith that she will not be harmed if she is willing to serve his master, Nebuchadnezzar. She confirms the report of Achior the Ammonite regarding the Israelites' invincibility. However, she reports that the people of both Bethulia and Jerusalem have been so hard pressed by the siege that they are about to sin egregiously by consuming sacred food items dedicated to God. She explains that this very situation is what prompted her own decision to come over to the Assyrian side, rather than to share in the Israelites' now certain doom. She promises to act as Holofernes' agent to tell him when these sins have been committed, and thus when it is safe for him to attack. Holofernes agrees to the plan and marvels at Judith's wisdom, promising her rich rewards. He offers her a sumptuous meal, but she piously declines to eat the non-kosher food. She has brought her own supplies in a bag, however, and survives on this while she stays in the camp for three days, leaving each night to pray, supposedly for God's revelation as to the propitious time for Assyria to attack. On the fourth day, Holofernes determines that he must have his way sexually with the alluring Judith. She now accepts his offer to eat with him and "become like one of the the daughters of the Assyrians," reclining seductively before him at a lavish dinner. The overjoyed and lustful Holofernes becomes so aroused that he consumes a huge quantity of wine at dinner in anticipation of possessing Judith. (11-12)

When Holofernes' servants leave Holofernes and Judith alone to have some privacy, he immediately falls asleep in a drunken stupor. Seeing her opportunity, Judith takes Holofernes' sword from where it hangs above his bed. She then prays to God for strength and decapitates her enemy. Summoning her maid, they place Holofernes' head in Judith's food bag and make good their escape, a feat made easy by Judith's authorized nightly prayer vigils outside the camp. Returning to Bethulia, Judith produces Holofernes' head for all to see, to the great joy of the Israelites. Achior the Ammonite confirms the identity of the head and is so impressed by God's miraculous work through Judith that he accepts circumcision and becomes a Jew. The Assyrians, meanwhile, have discovered Judith's treachery and are thrown into disarray. Following Judith's advice, the men of Bethulia attack, mustering their fellow Israelites to drive the enemy back even beyond Damascus. Judith receives high honors and adulation; even Jerusalem's high priest Joakim comes to pay his respects. Judith then retires to her home and lives the rest of her life as a widow, despite many offers of marriage. She dies at the age of 105. (13-16)

Commentary

Old Testament.

The Book of Judith is a deuterocanonical book, included in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, but excluded by Jews and Protestants. However, it remains a popular and widely read work among the apocrypha of the

PLOT SUMMARY

The story revolves around Judith, a daring and beautiful widow, who is upset with her Jewish countrymen for not trusting God to deliver them from their foreign conquerors. She goes with her loyal maid to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, with whom she slowly ingratiates herself, promising him information on the Israelites. Gaining his trust, she is allowed access to

his tent one night as he lies in a drunken stupor. She decapitates him, then takes his head back to her fearful countrymen. The Assyrians, having lost their leader, disperse, and Israel is saved. Though she is courted by many, Judith remains unmarried for the rest of her life.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF JUDITH:

1. Judith commands, plans, leads. She enters the book bearing her name when the Assyrians have cut off the water supply of Bethulia, the town at the entrance of the narrow corridor leading to Jerusalem (Judith 7:7, 4:7). The siege, which has lasted 34 days, has made the people fractious, thirsty, and bitter (Judith 7:20, 29). Uzziah and the town's other magistrates succumb the townspeople's demands and say they will surrender to the Assyrians in five days—unless the Lord takes pity (Judith 7:29-30). Upon hearing this, Judith, instead of going to Bethulia's leaders, summons them to her home (Judith 8:10). Chiding them for testing God (Judith 8:11-12), she declares she has a plan to save Bethulia, Jerusalem, the Temple, and the people. Declining to reveal it, she nonetheless proclaims her deed will “go down through all generations of our descendants” (Judith 8:32). Not only do the leaders listen without interruption, they also acclaim her for her wisdom and—like all men in this tale!—do her bidding (Judith 8:28-29). She demands that the gates be opened and that she and her maid be let out of the city (Judith 8:33, 10:9).

2. Judith is verbose. Other women wordsmiths in the Biblical text are Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 8-9), Abigail (1 Samuel 25:23-31), Deborah (Judges 5), and the Beloved in Song of Songs. Judith tops them all with two long statements—first to Uzziah and the other Bethulian magistrates (Judith 8:11-27), and the second to Holofernes and the Assyrian forces crowding around to gaze at her beautiful face (Judith 11:5-19). She prays thrice—once before her adventure starts (Judith 9), then for strength to behead Holofernes (Judith 13:4-7) and finally in a public song at the national celebrations honoring her deed and the slaughter of the Assyrians (Judith 16:1-17).

3. Judith strategizes. Dressing in a way “to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her” (Judith 10:4), Judith and her maid set forth at night down the valley intending to be captured. Stopped by an Assyrian border patrol and escorted by 100 men directly to Holofernes (Judith 10:17), she readily spins a tall tale that contains just enough fact to be believed. Claiming to have direct access to God, she promises to guide Holofernes and his whole army through the hill country to Jerusalem without the loss of life or so much as a dog growling at them (Judith 10:13, 11:19). Her words delight the general and his attendants (Judith 11:20). Calling her beautiful and eloquent (Judith 11:23), he welcomes her to the camp and grants her request to travel through the camp at night to bathe at a spring and pray (Judith 12:5-7). Thus this unprotected and unexpected guest in the Assyrian camp dangles herself alluringly as bait and waits for three days for a chance to strike and save Israel.

4. Judith knows her power over men. Throughout the book, it seems Judith merely smiles and men collapse (Judith 10:7, 14, 19, 23). Wisely appealing to their senses of sight and smell, she mesmerizes them. Her weapons of warfare are sensual and material.

She dresses carefully, knowing the success of her ruse and assassination plan depend upon her ability to entice. For her adventure, she removes her sackcloth and widow's dress, bathes and richly perfumes herself, fixes her hair, selects a festival dress, and dons a tiara as her battle garb's finishing touch (Judith 10:3). She accessorizes her outfit with rings, bracelets, anklets, earrings, other jewelry, and attractive sandals (Judith 10:4). In the intimate seduction banquet scene set in Holofernes' tent, Judith simply reclines on lambskins, nibbles her food brought from Bethulia, and flatters the general by telling him "today is the greatest day of my whole life" (Judith 12:15-20). She presents such a pretty picture that gullible Holofernes, beset with lust, drinks himself into senseless, fatal oblivion (Judith 12:16, 20).

5. Judith acts for the common good. Judith murders Holofernes, the enemy of Israel, a world-class bully who slaughtered his way through Put, Lud, the lands of the Rassisites and the Ishmaelites, the walled towns along Wadi Abron, and Cilicia; he set fire to the tents of the Midianites and the fields of Damascus (Judith 2:23-27). Alone with him late at night in his tent, Judith beheads him with two strokes to the neck from his own famous sword—praying beforehand, of course (Judith 13:4-7)! She rolls his corpse to the floor, yanks down a jeweled canopy from above his bed, walks out of the tent, and hands his head to her waiting maid who puts it in the food sack (Judith 13:9-10). Together the women walk through the Assyrian lines as they have on other nights, allegedly to pray and bathe. This time skipping the prayer-and-bath routine, they head straight up the mountain to Bethulia's gates. There, Judith starts shouting (Judith 13:14)! The gates open and she shares her story. She carefully proclaims in front of all that she has not been defiled by Holofernes because the Lord protected her; her face tricked Holofernes and brought his downfall (Judith 13:16). Displaying his head, and no doubt unraveling the jeweled canopy, her story is believable. Uzziah proclaims Judith is blessed "by the Most High God above all other women on earth" (Judith 13:18). This verse, an echo of Deborah's vindication of Jael's similar, hands-on murder of Sisera (Judges 4:21, 5:24-26), is pivotal in Roman Catholic theology, for it also is spoken of Mary (Luke 1:42, 48).



Janet Thomas
Founder/President/CEO
Bible Stories Theatre
www.biblestories theatre.org
info@biblestories theatre.org