

Piety vs. Extremism: The Book of Judith and Hanukkah

Hannah Elkin, 12/12/20

What is the Book of Judith?

- Apocryphal source not in Tanakh, though preserved in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches and considered Jewish source by the rabbis
- Written roughly 100 BCE during Hasmonean independent rule of Judea
- Blatantly ahistorical, fictional, connected to Book of Maccabees, possible folk-tale origins
- The invading Assyrian army threatens to capture the land of Israel and destroy the Temple, the massive army lays siege to a tiny town called Bethulia
- Nobody knows what to do and wants to give up, but the pious widow Judith decides to take matters into her own hands...

Judith Chapter 8:

1. Now in those days Judith, daughter of Merari, son of Ox, son of Joseph, son of Oziel, son of Eliah, son of Ananias, son of Gideon, son of Raphain, son of Ahitub, son of Elijah, son of Hilkiyah, son of Eliab, son of Nathanael, son of Salamiel, son of Sarasadai, son of Simeon, son of Israel, heard of this. 2. Her husband, Manasseh,* of her own tribe and clan, had died at the time of the barley harvest...4. Judith was living as a widow in her home for three years and four months. 5. She set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house, put sackcloth about her waist, and wore widow's clothing. 6. She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except sabbath eves and sabbaths, new moon eves and new moons, feastsdays and holidays of the house of Israel. 7. She was beautiful in appearance and very lovely to behold.f Her husband, Manasseh, had left her gold and silver, male and female servants, livestock and fields, which she was maintaining. 8. No one had a bad word to say about her, for she feared God greatly.

9. So when Judith heard of the harsh words that the people, discouraged by their lack of water, had spoken against their ruler, and of all that Uzziah had said to them in reply, swearing that he would hand over the city to the Assyrians at the end of five days, 10. she sent her maid who was in charge of all her things to summon Uzziah, Chabris, and Charmis, the elders of her city.

11. When they came, she said to them: "Listen to me, you rulers of the people of Bethulia. What you said to the people today is not right. You pronounced this oath, made between God and yourselves, and promised to hand over the city to our enemies unless within a certain time the Lord comes to our aid.

12. Who are you to put God to the test today, setting yourselves in the place of God in human affairs? 13. And now it is the Lord Almighty you are putting to the test, but you will never understand anything! 14. You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or grasp the workings of the human mind; how then can you fathom God, who has made all these things, or discern his mind, or understand his plan? No, my brothers, do not anger the Lord our God...17. "So while we wait for the salvation that comes from him, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our cry if it pleases him...24. Therefore, my brothers, let us set an example for our kindred. Their lives depend on us, and the defense of the sanctuary, the temple, and the altar rests with us...

32. Then Judith said to them: "Listen to me! I will perform a deed that will go down from generation to generation among our descendants. 33. Stand at the city gate tonight to let me pass through with my maid; and within the days you have specified before you will surrender the city to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand. 34. You must not inquire into the affair, for I will not tell you what I am doing until it has been accomplished."

35. Uzziah and the rulers said to her, "Go in peace, and may the Lord God go before you to take vengeance upon our enemies!" 36. Then they withdrew from the tent and returned to their posts.

Chapter 13:

1. When it grew late, his servants quickly withdrew. Bagoas closed the tent from the outside and dismissed the attendants from their master's presence. They went off to their beds, for they were all tired because the banquet had lasted so long. 2. Judith was left alone in the tent with Holofernes, who lay sprawled on his bed, for he was drunk with wine. 3. Judith had ordered her maidservant to stand outside the bedchamber and to wait, as on the other days, for her to come out; she had said she would be going out for her prayer. She had also said this same thing to Bagoas.

4. When all had departed, and no one, small or great, was left in the bedchamber, Judith stood by Holofernes' bed and prayed silently, "O Lord, God

of all might, in this hour look graciously on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. 5. Now is the time for aiding your heritage and for carrying out my design to shatter the enemies who have risen against us.”

6. She went to the bedpost near the head of Holofernes, and taking his sword from it, 7. she drew close to the bed, grasped the hair of his head, and said, “Strengthen me this day, Lord, God of Israel!”

8. Then with all her might she struck his neck twice and cut off his head. 9. She rolled his body off the bed and took the canopy from its posts. Soon afterward, she came out and handed over the head of Holofernes to her maid, 10. who put it into her food bag. Then the two went out together for prayer as they were accustomed to do.