



Exploring
the deuterocanonical/apocryphal
Book of Judith
with
Pastor Ritva Williams



INTRODUCTION

- The ***Septuagint*** is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and some related texts made in Alexandria, Egypt. The title “Septuagint” means 70 in Latin and was given to this translation because of the tradition that it was produced by 70 (or 72) Jewish scholars at the request of the King Ptolemy Philadelphus who ruled Egypt from 283-246 BCE.
- ***Apocrypha*** is a Greek word that means “hidden” or “obscure.” It is a label attached to writings that are of unknown origin, doubtful authenticity, or contested. Specifically it has come to refer to a specific set of texts that are in the Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Bible. In Luther’s German Bible, published in 1534, these texts were for the first time published in a separate “intertestamental” section.
- ***Deuterocanonical*** derives from Greek words that mean “a second canon/rule/list of authoritative book.” This title was given to the Septuagint texts that are not in the Hebrew Bible by the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563). Catholic and Orthodox Christians regard these texts as having the same authority as the books of the Old and New Testaments.
- The book of Judith is anonymous, written by a Palestinian Jew who writes in Greek with a distinctive Hebrew accent, probably in the late 2nd century BCE or early 1st century BCE.
- The book of Judith is NOT factual history, but should be regarded as “didactic fiction,” i.e. a highly imaginative, fictional story that entertains ***and edifies***. It seeks to convey a message of hope rooted in loyalty and trust in God. It also makes the point that women are powerful and not to be treated as chattel; they are as capable of being God’s instruments (a theme we also find the books of Ruth and Esther).
- The story contains details drawn from at least five centuries of real history, all mixed up together, e.g.
 - Nineveh*** - the magnificent Assyrian capital city destroyed in 612 BCE.
 - Nebuchadnezzar*** (634-562 BCE) - king of the Babylonian Empire responsible for the construction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (587 BCE). He is featured in the biblical book of Daniel and Jeremiah 52.
 - The Temple in Jerusalem*** built by Solomon, circa 950 BCE; destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE; rebuilt in 516 BCE; destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.
 - Holofernes*** and ***Bagoas*** are named in the campaigns of the Persian king Artaxerxes III (425-338 BCE)
 - Requirement for Jews to forsake their God*** ordered by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215-164 BCE)
 - Judea ruled by a high priest with military and religious responsibilities*** (164-63 BCE)
- The book is written in 2 parts. Part One is all about Nebuchadnezzar’s War (1:1-7:32) and sets the stage for Part Two (8:1-16:25). We don’t meet Judith until the beginning of chapter 8.

THE WORLD OF JUDITH

Judith lives in the town of **Bethulia** located north of Jerusalem in the region of Samaria. It is referred to nowhere else in ancient literature. The town's name derives from a Hebrew word meaning “virgin” or “unmarried young woman.”

This map shows the Kingdom of Judah just prior to Nebuchadnezzar's conquest in 587 BCE. After 539 BCE Judah was a province of the Persian Empire. (Notice that the Kingdom of Israel has ceased to exist, wiped out by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.)

The map below shows the boundaries of the Babylonian, Mede and Persian Empires.

Main Characters:

Judith: means “the Jewess”

Holofernes: means “stinking in hell”

Nebuchadnezzar: means “may the god Nebu protect you and your possessions”

Uzziah: means “the Lord is my strength”

Achior: means “brother of light”



FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What are the most interesting moments in the story? Why do these particular moments appeal to me?
- In the story, who speaks and who listens? Who acts? Who gets what they want? If you were in the story, which person would you want to be friends with? Which person would you want to avoid?
- What is God's interaction with the main characters? What does this tell you about the narrator's image of God? Do you agree with this image?
- What is happening on the other side of the story, in the chapters before and after it? Does this help you understand what is happening?
- The narrator/editor has chosen to tell some things and leave other things out. What has been left out of the story that you would like to know?
- Are the different types of people in the story still present in the world? How is the story relevant to modern life, especially your own?

SITES NAMED IN CHAPTER 1

Nineveh (located near Mosul, Iran)

Reconstructed gates to the ancient city



Interior of Palace at Nineveh



Ecbatana (Capital of the Mede empire from the 8th century BCE; became the summer palace for Persian kings; was the site of the murder of General Parmenion by order of Alexander the Great in 330 BCE)

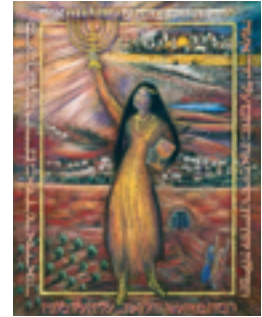


Carving on a mountainside along an old caravan road from Babylon to Ecbatana.





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The story begins in the 12th year of Nebuchadnezzar (ruled from 605-562 BCE, so in 593 BCE). He is described as reigning over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh. In actual fact Nebuchadnezzar was Babylonian, not Assyrian, and ruled from the city of Babylon. Nineveh was sacked in 612 BCE by a coalition of Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Scythians, and Cimmerians. No king named Arphaxad is found in Median records, the king who was contemporary with Nebuchadnezzar was Cyaxares (ruled 625-585 BCE). The Babylonians and Medes were rivals for control of the region. Nebuchadnezzar issues a summons to the inhabitants of Persia, the western countries and those along the Mediterranean coast to join him in making war on Ecbatana. They ignore his summons, and Nebuchadnezzar swears to take revenge.

In the 17th year of his reign (588 BCE) he defeats Arphaxad. The following year he sets about avenging the insult of being ignored by the leaders of the countries that he has summoned to war. He charges his general-in-chief, Holofernes, to assemble an army of 120,000 foot soldiers and 12,000 cavalry and march into the west. He does, destroying towns and cities, butchering anyone who offers resistance, putting all the young men to the sword. Until all the coastal peoples trembled with fear.



READ CHAPTER 3

Discuss:

How does Holofernes treat the populations that surrender without a fight?

READ CHAPTER 4

Historical details/inconsistencies:



Verse 3: “recently returned from exile” refers to the return from Babylon in 539 BCE, after the defeat of the Babylonian empire by Cyrus of Persia. The temple was rebuilt in 515 BCE; it was rededicated in 164 BCE after its

profanation by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.



Verse 6: The high priest, Joakim exercises both military and religious authority like the Maccabean high priests who ruled in the aftermath of Antiochus.

Discuss:

How do Israelites living in Judaea respond to reports about how Holofernes treats the various nations?

READ CHAPTER 5

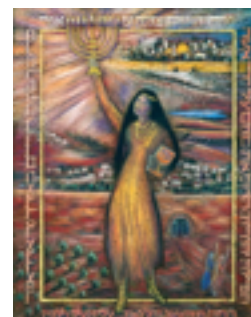
Who is Achior?

Who are the Ammonites (see Genesis 19:37-38)?

What does Achior know about the Israelites? Does he sound like he is for or against the Israelites?



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The people of the coast lands are terrified, and sue for peace. Holofernes accepts their terms, enters their cities as a conqueror and destroys their local shrines and gods. His goal is to make all peoples recognize and worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god. When the Israelites living in Judaea here what is happening in the cities of the coastlands, their high priest presiding over the newly reconstructed temple in Jerusalem determines to defend their holy places and way of worship. He orders the Israelites to occupy and close all the mountain passes into the Judean highlands. In Jerusalem, residents and priests don sackcloth and ashes, with fasting and prayer begged God to keep their women and children, their towns and their Temple safe.

In the meantime, Holofernes and his army are camped at the edge of Esdraelon in the process of re-provisioning their supplies, and gathering intelligence about the Israelites who have closed the mountain passes. Achior, leader of the Ammonites (part of Nebuchadnezzar's coalition), recounts the history of the Israelites. He concludes that Holofernes will only be able to defeat the Israelites if they have committed some sin against their God, otherwise their God will protect and defend them so that they will be invincible.

READ CHAPTER 6

How does Holofernes' respond to the Achior's report? Why?

How is Achior received by the townspeople of Bethulia? Why?

READ CHAPTER 7

What is Holoferne's plan to conquer Bethulia? Who are his informants? Who are the Moabites and the Ammonites (Genesis 19:37-38)? Who are the Edomites (Genesis 36:33)? Does the plan succeed?

What is the Israelite response? Who do they "blame" for their situation? How do they make theological sense of their circumstances? What do they want to happen?

How does Uzziah, the headman of Bethulia, respond to the residents of the town?

READ CHAPTER 8

Who is Judith? What kind of person is she?

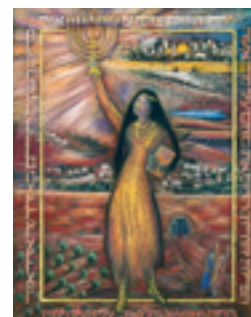
What is her response to what is happening in her town? Based on her speech, how does she understand God and God's purposes?

How does Uzziah respond to Judith?





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When Nebuchadnezzar's summons to the western lands under his influence to make war on Ecbatana is ignored he swears to take revenge. Once he has conquered Ecbatana, Nebuchadnezzar his general-in-chief, Holofernes, to assemble an army of 120,000 foot soldiers and 12,000 cavalry and march into the west. Holofernes does, destroying towns and cities, butchering anyone who offers resistance, putting all the young men to the sword. The people of the coast lands are terrified, and sue for peace. Holofernes accepts their terms, enters their cities as a conqueror and destroys their local shrines and gods. His goal is to make all peoples recognize and worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god. When the Israelites hear what is happening in the cities of the coastlands, they occupy and close all the mountain passes into the Judean highlands. In Jerusalem, residents and priests don sackcloth and ashes, with fasting and prayer begged God to keep their women and children, their towns and their Temple safe.

In the meantime, Holofernes and his army are camped at the edge of Esdraelon in the process of re-provisioning their supplies, and gathering intelligence about the Israelites. Achior, leader of the Ammonites (part of Nebuchadnezzar's coalition), recounts the history of the Israelites, concluding that Holofernes will only be able to defeat the Israelites if they have committed some sin against their God, otherwise their God will protect and defend them. Achior is dismissed from his command, and handed over to the Israelites defending Bethulia. Holofernes moves his armies up to Bethulia, seizing their water sources. A 34 day siege follows. As the water supplies run out in Bethulia the residents, convinced that God is punishing them, urge their leaders to sue for peace. The elders asks them to give God 5 more days before surrendering.



Judith, a beautiful, wise and wealthy widow who has lived in seclusion for 3 years and 4 months in a tent on the roof of her house, summons the elders of Bethulia, castigating them for their "bad" theology on two points. (1) It is not their place to put God to the test. (2) The current state of affairs is not punishment from God, but rather a test of their loyalty and commitment to God like the tests faced by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The elders ask Judith to pray that God will send rain to fill the cisterns in Bethulia. Judith informs them that she is about to do something about the situation, they are to let her and her maid leave by the city gate that night, and not try to find out what she is doing until it is done.

READ CHAPTER 9

1. Read Genesis 34:25-31 to discover what Judith's ancestor Simeon did. Do you think that situation is analogous to the circumstances that Judith finds herself in? Why or why not?
2. What images of God emerge within Judith's prayer? Do you find these images appealing or appalling? Why?



READ CHAPTER 10: 1- 19

1. How does Judith prepare herself for entering the enemy camp? What are her "weapons"? How effective are they?
2. How do you feel about Judith's strategy?

READ CHAPTER 10:20-11:4

1. How would you describe the meeting between Holofernes and Judith?

READ CHAPTER 11:5-23

1. What do you think of Judith's explanation of why she has come to the enemy camp?





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A victorious Nebuchadnezzar, having vanquished the kingdom of the Medes and its capital orders his general-in-chief, Holofernes, to assemble an army of 120,000 foot soldiers and 12,000 cavalry and march into the west. Holofernes does, destroying towns and cities, butchering anyone who offers resistance, putting all the young men to the sword. The people of the coast lands are terrified, and sue for peace. Holofernes accepts their terms, enters their cities as a conqueror and destroys their local shrines and gods. His goal is to make all peoples recognize and worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god. When the Israelites hear what is happening in the cities of the coastlands, they occupy and close all the mountain passes into the Judean highlands, as the residents and priests in Jerusalem don sackcloth and ashes, fast and pray for God's protection.

Holofernes and his army advance across the plains, seizing the water sources below the town of Bethulia. After a 34 day siege, as the water supplies are running out in Bethulia, the residents urge their leaders to sue for peace. The elders asks them to give God 5 more days before surrendering. Judith, a beautiful, wise and wealthy widow who has lived in seclusion for 3 years and 4 months in a tent on the roof of her house, comes forward criticizing the plan of the town elders, and offering to take care of the matter herself.

As the evening incense is being offered in Jerusalem, Judith in sackcloth and ashes prays. She asks God to arm her with a sword like her ancestor Simeon, to give strength to "this widow's hand," and to give her "a beguiling tongue to wound" those who would profane God's holy places in Jerusalem. After her prayers, she washes and anoints herself with perfume, dresses in her finest clothing and jewelry, packs a basket of provisions, and with her maid sets out. The elders let her out the town gates. As they proceed through the valley they are apprehended by a unit of Assyrian soldiers who are bedazzled by her beauty. They provide an escort for her and her maid to the tent of Holofernes who greets her, promising her safety. Judith explains that if Holofernes follows her advice, God will bring his work to a successful conclusion. She affirms Achior's report that the Assyrians will not be able to defeat the Israelites unless they sin against their God, which they are about to do as their food and water is running out and they are on the verge of eating the first-fruits of the grain and the tithes of wine and oil that have been consecrated to God. The day they receive permission from Jerusalem to do so, they will be delivered over to Holofernes for destruction. She will go into the valley each night to ask God when the Israelites have committed this sin. Holofernes accepts her plan.

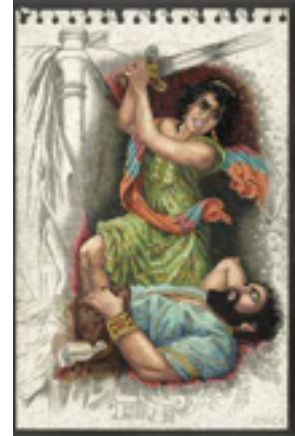
READ CHAPTER 12:1-9

- How does Judith maintain her “purity” during her time in Holofernes’ camp? Why is this important to her?



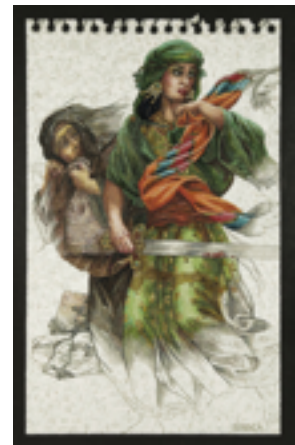
READ CHAPTER 12:10-13:10

- Why does Holofernes throw a banquet on the 4th day? What is he hoping to achieve?
- How does Judith take advantage of the circumstances she finds herself in to defeat Israel’s enemy?



READ CHAPTER 13:11-14:10

- When Judith returns to Bethulia, to whom does she give credit for her victory? What does this show about her understanding of God and how God relates to humans?
- What does Judith advise the elders and townsmen of Bethulia to do in order to clinch their victory?
- What is an unexpected consequence of her bravery in beheading Holofernes?

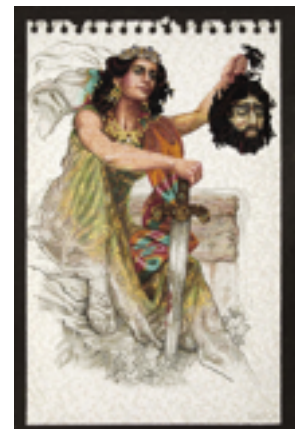


READ CHAPTER 14:11-15:13

- What happens when Judith’s advice is followed?
- How do you feel about the behavior of the Israelites in victory?

READ CHAPTER 16

- What is the main point of the hymn that all the people sing?
- What does Judith do?
- What do you think is the main point that is being made in the story of Judith?



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