

HEROIC WOMEN II

JUDITH

(F. of Judah, = Jewess; echoes Judas Maccabeus)

Last time I asked you to think about the heroism of Ruth & Esther:

1. What common characteristics make the women heroic?
2. What other qualities enable their success?
3. How does Esther's heroism differ from Ruth's?

1. Loyalty
Courage
Strength of Purpose
2. Intelligence
Sexuality
3. Less conventional

So, what makes Judith different?

For one: the stories of Ruth & Esther are CANONICAL, Judith is APOCRYPHAL.

What does APOCRYPHAL mean?

Why is her story excluded from the CANON of Scripture?

What is a CANON?

What are the criteria for inclusion in the TANAKH?

Let's back up: Judith is a HISTORICAL ROMANCE, probably written, like the book of Daniel, around the middle-to-late 2nd century BCE, during (or following) the **persecutions** of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. It is not allegory, but it comments indirectly on current events.

POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO CANONICITY:

1. Texts are all Greek, not Hebrew
2. HISTORICAL: The book has a very shaky grasp on history. As Harris notes: “The book begins with a glaring historical error—that Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BCE) reigned in Nineveh over the Assyrians, when in reality his father, the king of Babylon, had destroyed Nineveh in 612.
3. Theological heterodoxy: emphasizing human heroism rather than (often miraculous) divine agency.
4. Moral ambiguity: Judith's problematic character. According to the editors of the previous (2nd edition) or your New Oxford Annotated Bible, “the book bristles with problems. . . . [M]any readers, past and present, have censured Judith's character and conduct. . . . the discerning reader . . . recognizes that in [her] dealings with Holofernes she showed herself to be a shameless flatterer, a bold-faced liar, and a ruthless assassin.”

POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS:

1. The Greek texts are (probably) based on Hebrew originals.
2. Esther at first seems more plausible as history but almost certainly is not; the historical “mistakes” in Judith are probably intentional, as also the geographical anomalies. Judea is like Britain in Shakespeare’s King Lear, a fairy tale kingdom.
3. Despite some tension, the human heroism associated with Maccabean Judaism seems consonant with the Deuteronomic ideal of submission to God’s will. God helps those who help themselves, to be sure, but faithful behavior (David, Esther) is sanctioned.
4. What do you think of the characterization of Judith as “a shameless flatterer, a bold-faced liar, and a ruthless assassin”?

Here's how she deals with Holofernes:

“Accept the words of your slave, and let your servant speak in your presence. I will say nothing false to my lord this night. If you follow out the words of your servant, **God will accomplish something** through you, and **my lord** will not fail to achieve his purposes. By the life of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole earth, **and by the power of him who has sent you to direct every living being!** . . . For we have heard of your wisdom and skill, and it is reported throughout the whole world that you alone are the best in the whole kingdom, the most informed and the most astounding in military strategy.

“Now as for Achior's speech in your council, we have heard his words, for the people of Bethulia spared him and he told them all he had said to you. Therefore, lord and master, do not disregard what he said, but keep it in your mind, for it is true. Indeed our nation cannot be punished, nor can the sword prevail against them, unless they sin against their God. But now, in order that my lord may not be defeated and his purpose frustrated, death will fall upon them, for **a sin has overtaken them by which they are about to provoke their God to anger** when they do what is wrong. . . .

“So when I, your slave, learned all this, I fled from them. **God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world** wherever people shall hear about

them. **Your servant is indeed God-fearing** and serves the God of heaven night and day. So, my lord, I will remain with you; but every night your servant will go out into the valley and pray to God. He will tell me when they have committed their sins. Then I will come and tell you, so that you may go out with your whole army, and not one of them will be able to withstand you. Then I will lead you through Judea, until you come to Jerusalem; there I will set your throne. You will drive them like sheep that have no shepherd, and no dog will so much as growl at you. For this was told me to give me foreknowledge; it was announced to me, and **I was sent to tell you.**”

Her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants. They marveled at her wisdom and said, “No other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful or speaks so wisely!” Then Holofernes said to her, “God has done well to send you ahead of the people, to strengthen our hands and bring destruction on those who have despised my lord. You are not only beautiful in appearance, but wise in speech. If you do as you have said, **your God shall be my God**, and you shall live in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and be renowned throughout the whole world.”

(11:5-6, 8-11, 16-23)

If the ostensible objections to canonical status are spurious, what might the real objections be?

Who are the admirable characters in the story?

How are the leaders of Bethulia characterized?

The book of Judith is profoundly subversive of traditional masculine, “patriarchal” values. The men (except for the foreigner) are weak, senseless, or worse. Holofernes is a world-class jerk, embodying all of those characteristics that we find least attractive in human males—overweening arrogance, sexual possessiveness (women are objects to be used), cruelty, & vanity. My “nose” tells me that the book was probably written by a woman.