THE BOOK OF JUDITH

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Judith belongs to the list of books that are absent in Jewish and Protestant bibles, and is therefore known as one of the so-called “Deuterocanonical Books” (a.k.a., Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, portions of Esther and Daniel).

Alongside Tobit, the canonical status of Judith was affirmed by the earliest councils of the Church (e.g., Council of Rome A.D. 382, Council of Hippo A.D. 383, Council of Carthage A.D. 397) and the vast majority of the Church fathers (e.g., Clement of Rome, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, et al.).

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1 This handout predominantly represents the research of Joshua Burks, from a class he taught in 2021.
1.2. Brief excursus: The Development of the Canon in the Early Church

a. The earliest records we have of a stabilized list of books regarded as ‘canonical’ are from the waning years of the fourth century. Prior to this, other issues (Gentile inclusion, the nature of salvation, the relationship of Jesus to ‘the Scriptures’ [i.e., what we now call the ‘Old Testament’], and the visible unity of the Church) ranked more highly as matters in greater need of sorting out. Additionally, the prevalence of persecution in the early days of the Church did little to promote the kind of sustained energy and attention canonization entails. Once Christianity was legalized in the early fourth century, and the Scriptures themselves (now both Old and New ‘Testaments’) were being read and studied for the revelation of God they contained, the finalization of the canon became a more central concern.

b. It is important to note that the finalization of the canon (i.e., determining which books were in or out) was not pursued for the purpose of getting bibles into the hands of the lay faithful for personal prayer and devotion. Rather, clarifying the extent and contents of the canon was important principally to answer the liturgical question: what was to be read in the public worship of the Church? Take for example these preserved declarations from two of the earliest councils of the Church:

“No psalms composed by private individuals nor any uncanonical books may be read in the church, but only the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments.” (Canon 59, Council of Laodicea, A.D. 364)

“(…besides the Canonical Scriptures nothing [is to] be read in church under the name of divine Scripture.” (Canon 24, Council of Carthage, A.D. 419, citing Canon 36, Council of Hippo, A.D. 383)

c. In this process of canonization, the Church discerned which books were composed from divine inspiration so as to determine their fitness for the liturgy. In doing so, the Church did not declare, make, or confer the status of inspiration upon a book, but recognized its nature and authority as divinely inspired. As Augustine describes it, the Church “receives” the books of Scripture as inspired. The Church does not make the Scriptures; it rather makes known which Scriptures are inspired.

d. The canonicity of a certain book is not determined by: (1) the personal experience of the believer; (2) the opinions of scholars; (3) the beliefs of [the] Judaism[s]; (4) the explicit quotation of an OT book in the NT; or (5) any abstract principle (e.g., “prophetic character”). It hinges, rather, on the Magisterium (the bishops in union with the bishop of Rome acting within their apostolic authority) to discern the status of a book as ‘canonical’. So we read Jesus’ words to Simon:

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:18-19)

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2 This section is largely adapted from John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament, Vol 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 24-33.
1.3. Title: the book of Judith is named after the heroine of the story, whose name means “Jewish woman” or “Jewess” (Ioudith in LXX; Liber Judith in Vulgate; presumably Yehudith in Hebrew).

1.4. Genre of Judith

a. One challenge in Judith studies is the question of its literary genre. Though it has been regarded as historical narrative throughout most of Church’s history, certain historical and geographical inconsistencies have disinclined recent scholarship from seeing it as such. The identity and setting of King Nebuchadnezzar is one example. Judith describes him as “Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh” (Jdt 1:1). But the account of Nebuchadnezzar found in 2 Kings 24ff has him reigning in Babylon, not Assyria. Additionally, the Nebuchadnezzar of 2 Kings 24-25 is the very king who destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. But this is at odds with the timeline in Judith, which has King Nebuchadnezzar reigning in the post-exilic era of the Second Temple.

b. This leaves the reader with at least three choices for its genre: the book of Judith is either (1) a historical account; (2) historical fiction; or (3) an allegory that presents a significant event of history in a symbolic way.

c. While any of these may be possible, none of the factors at play in the genre debate should hinder us from reading Judith as Scripture. What is important for our understanding of Judith is that it has been discerned to be an inspired text, which means that God has, in his providence and through the Holy Spirit, brought about the inscribing of this account in order to disclose something about himself and his ways with the world.

2. THE SETTING OF JUDITH: IT’S PLACE IN THE STORY OF SCRIPTURE

2.1. The story of Judith follows the events narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah, after the exiles from Babylon have returned to the land. So we read in Judith 4:1-3 (with emphasis added):

> By this time the people of Israel living in Judea heard of everything that Holofer’nes, the general of Nebuchadnez’zar the king of the Assyrians, had done to the nations, and how he had plundered and destroyed all their temples; they were therefore very greatly terrified at his approach, and were alarmed both for Jerusalem and for the temple of the Lord their God. For they had only recently returned from the captivity, and all the people of Judea were newly gathered together, and the sacred vessels and the altar and the temple had been consecrated after their profanation.

2.2. St. Augustine sees Judith as one of a number of books bearing no clear sequence:

> There are other books which seem to follow no regular order, and are such as Job, and Tobias, and Esther, and Judith, and the two books of Maccabees, and the two of Ezra, which last look more like a sequel to the continuous regular history which terminates with the books of Kings and Chronicles.

b. Though the stories in books like Tobit and Judith may not flow obviously within the stream of the connected macro-narrative of Josh–Ezra–Neh, we can observe certain thematic elements that tie them together (e.g., Tobit develops themes from Nehemiah such as marriage and holiness).

c. Judith belongs to a subset of books that display God’s decision to work through select individuals [Tobit, Judith, Esther, even Job] in a way distinct from the prophetic mission developed in Isaiah through Malachi. We might think of these books like episodes in a zoomed-in miniseries which present God’s activity to the side of the main show, in the lives of various individuals whose experiences of God’s providential activity serve the good of the larger community in smaller—though *just as determinative*—ways as the larger, sweeping epic that unites Israel’s history from Exodus–Ezra–Nehemiah.

d. Key in Judith is the development of the virtue of the title character, who follows God faithfully by committing herself to acts of prayer (Jdt 4:8-15; 8:31; 9:1-14; 11:17; 12:6-9; 16:1-17), fasting (4:9, 13; 8:6), and almsgiving (16:24), resembling Tobit in this regard:

“And they began to say, ‘Blessed are you, O God of our fathers, and blessed be your holy and glorious name for ever. Let the heavens and all your creatures bless you...” (Tob 8:5)

“I will sing to my God a new song: O Lord, you are great and glorious, wonderful in strength, invincible. Let all your creatures serve you...” (Jdt 16:13-14)

3. THE SHAPE OF JUDITH: ITS LITERARY STRUCTURE

3.1. Overview of the shape of Judith:


A. Nebuchadnezzar’s Campaign against Media, 1:1-16
B. Nebuchadnezzar’s Campaign against Vassal Nations, 2:1–3:9
C. Israel Prepares for Invasion, 4:1-15
D. Holofernes’ Counsel against Israel, 5:1–6:21
E. Holofernes Lay’s Siege to Bethulia, 7:1-32

II. THE STORY OF JUDITH: JUDITH DECEIVES AND DEFEATS ASSYRIA, 8:1–16:25

A. Introduction of Judith, 8:1-8
B. Judith Plans and Prays for Her Mission, 8:9–10:10
C. Judith in the Assyrian Camp, 10:11–12:20
D. Judith Assaults Holofernes, 13:1-11
E. Judith Returns, and Assyria Is Routed, 13:12–15:7
F. Celebration and Song of Triumph, 15:8–16:17
G. The Legacy of Judith, 16:18-25
“The Book of Judith is a literary work of art. The story is arranged in symmetrical fashion so that its two halves parallel each other, sometimes by setting up sharp contrasts.” The first half of Judith recounts the mission of King Nebuchadnezzar to conquer various peoples and their lands. Judea is one such target, and the small town of Bethulia is compelled to prepare for a battle with the forces of the King’s army, led by the general Holofernes.

The introduction of the heroine Judith in 8:1 marks the hinge of the drama. The story that follows recounts her heroic efforts to save her people and their land by overthrowing the evil general.

3.2. Survey of Judith:


A. Nebuchadnezzar’s Campaign against Media, 1:1-16
B. Nebuchadnezzar’s Campaign against Vassal Nations, 2:1–3:9
C. Israel Prepares for Invasion, 4:1-15
D. Holofernes’ Counsel against Israel, 5:1–6:21
E. Holofernes Lay’s Siege to Bethulia, 7:1-32

Notes

a. The story of Judith begins with a certain King Nebuchadnezzar who calls on all his vassals in the west to join him in his fight against the Medes (King Arphaxad) in the east (1:5-10). All of the vassals ignore or refuse him, which causes the King to become very angry, swearing that “he would surely take revenge” on those who denied him help (1:11-12). The first three chapters proceed to recount the vengeful efforts of the King, led by his general Holofernes, which arrive at a climax at the end of chapter three, where the efforts of Holofernes now come face to face with God’s people in Judea (3:9; see 4:1). Chapter four portrays Israel’s natural response; we see them cry out to God for deliverance (4:1-15).

b. Transitioning to chapter five, we are introduced to the fascinating character Achior, a serviceman of general Holofernes in these campaigns. Achior, a Gentile soldier, offers counsel to the general for the attack on Israel by recounting God’s plan of salvation for his people in the OT. Bergsma and Pitre note:

A certain Achior, leader of the Ammonites, advises Holofernes that the Judeans cannot be defeated unless they sin against their God. In a remarkable overview of salvation history (Jud 5:5-21), the Gentile Achior articulates the theological principle that is at the heart of the book. 5

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5 Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, 479.
c. In chapter 7, we learn of Holofernes’ strategy to overtake Bethulia, a key stage in the Assyrian quest to gain passage to the hill country of neighboring Israelite towns. Instead of risking the loss of men in battle, Holofernes will attempt to subdue the people by cutting off their water supply. Enter, Judith in chapter eight.

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B. Judith Plans and Prays for Her Mission, 8:9–10:10
C. Judith in the Assyrian Camp, 10:11–12:20
D. Judith Assassinates Holofernes, 13:1-11
E. Judith Returns, and Assyria Is Routed, 13:12–15:7
F. Celebration and Song of Triumph, 15:8–16:17
G. The Legacy of Judith, 16:18-25

Notes

a. Chapter eight opens with a detailed introduction of our heroine (vv. 1-8). She rebukes the elders of Bethulia for their lack of faith in the face of the threats of Holofernes (vv. 9-31) and proceeds to divulge a secret plan to overthrow the enemy and save her people (vv. 32-36). Before she acts, however, Judith cries out to the Lord for his help and blessing on her plans. Her words reflect the iconic prayers of other biblical heroes such as Solomon (1 Kings 8), Ezra (Ezra 9), and Daniel (Dan 9).

b. Judith sets her plan in motion by beautifying herself and allowing herself to be caught by Holofernes (10:11–11:4). In a scene laden with irony (see below, 4.1), she proceeds to lead Holofernes to believe that she will assist him in overthrowing the inhabitants of Bethulia and that “God will accomplish something through [him]” (11:6). Holofernes believes Judith and, at the same time, falls for her beauty and seeks to possess her as his own (see 12:10-13). He proceeds to throw her a banquet with the intent of sleeping with Judith in his tent after the festivities, though Holofernes “drank a great quantity of wine, much more than he had ever drunk in one day since he was born” and proceeded to fall asleep. Judith acts swiftly and completes what she sets out to do. With great courage, she cuts off the head of Holofernes (13:1-11) and returns to her people who receive her with joy and blessing (13:12-20). The Gentile, Achior, is able to confirm that it is indeed the general whom Judith beheaded, and consequently he converts to the house of Israel (14:6-10). Upon discovering the headless body of Holofernes, the Assyrian army scatters (15:1-7) causing the people of Israel to shout with joy and thanksgiving to God. The book ends with a song of praise by Judith (16:2-17) and a recording of the heroic legacy she left behind (16:21-25).

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JUDITH: KEY THEMES AND CONTRIBUTIONS
4.1. David deSilva explains the intentional use of irony in the narrative of Judith:

Irony is concentrated in the episodes depicting the encounter between Judith and Holofernes. Judith’s prediction, ‘If you follow out of the words of your servant, God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purposes’ (11:6), teems with ambiguity, since God is indeed about to ‘accomplish with Holofernes things that will astonish the whole world’ (11:16). Moreover, Holofernes understands Judith’s ‘my lord’ to refer to himself, but Judith leaves open the possibility that she means her only Lord, Israel’s God, whose purposes are about to be fulfilled. A close examination of 12:1, 14, 18 reveals further intentional ambiguities and double entendres.6

4.2. The issue of deception in Judith

a. The narrative of Judith presents a moral challenge: is it permissible to lie, as long as it is at the service of accomplishing God’s will (i.e., does the end justify the means in the case of lying)? Clearly, Judith’s plan of saving her people involves the intentional deception of Holofernes. This is not the only time we see deception in Scripture for the sake of accomplishing God’s will. What are we to make of biblical cases of deception?

St. Augustine offers the following helpful clarification:

No lie is just. Accordingly, when examples of lying are proposed to us from the sacred Scriptures, either they are not lies but are thought so for not being understood, or, if they are lies, they are not to be imitated because they cannot be just.7

He goes on to treat the examples of the Hebrew midwives and Rahab, explaining:

As for its being written that God dealt well with the Hebrew midwives and with Rahab the harlot of Jericho, he did not deal well with them because they lied but because they were merciful to the men of God. And so, it was not their deception that was rewarded, but their benevolence; the benignity of their intention, not the iniquity of their invention.8

b. St. Thomas also takes up the issue of biblical deception in his Summa Theologica:

Whether Every Lie is a Sin? (selections)

Obj. 3. Further, the deeds of holy men are related in Sacred Writ that they may be a model of human life. But we read of certain very holy men that they lied. Thus (Gen. 12 and 20) we are told that Abraham said of his wife that she was his sister. Jacob also lied when he said that he was Esau, and yet he received a blessing (Gen. 27:27–29). Again, Judith is commended (Judith 15:10, 11) although she lied to Holofernes. Therefore not every lie is a sin.9

8 Ibid.
9 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II, q. 110, a. 3, obj. 3, in Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English
Reply Obj. 3. ... Some, however, are commended in the Scriptures, not on account of perfect virtue, but for a certain virtuous disposition, seeing that it was owing to some praiseworthy sentiment that they were moved to do certain undue things. It is thus that Judith is praised, not for lying to Holofernes, but for her desire to save the people, to which end she exposed herself to danger. And yet one might also say that her words contain truth in some mystical sense.  

4.3. Theme of faithfulness in Judith  

a. Judith is remembered in Christian tradition as a shining example of heroic faith. She stands among those women utilized mightily by God to deliver his people, and is thus a model for Christian fortitude. Though she was endowed with great beauty (8:7) she used it in service to God and his people. Her faith remains steadfast in the face of danger. When she enters the camp of Holofernes, she insists—like Daniel (1:8)—on bringing and eating her own food in order to avoid being defiled by eating the unclean food of the Gentiles (12:1-4). Judith exemplifies covenant fidelity to God above all else; she was held in great esteem and “she feared God with great devotion” (Jdt 8:8).  

b. Additionally, the faith of Judith is seen as an early type of Christian asceticism. Bergsma and Pitre observe the following:

After her husband, Manasseh, dies unexpectedly, Judith does not seek remarriage but begins to live her widowhood in a life completely consecrated to prayer, fasting, and acts of penance, such as wearing coarse sackcloth for undergarments (Jud 8:4-8). ... Judith goes beyond the minimal requirements of the Old Covenant law to practice what amount to a lifelong asceticism: long fasts, physical mortification, and chaste widowhood, though remarriage was licit for her. She also gave away all of her wealth before her death, thus demonstrating exemplary almsgiving. ... Her chaste asceticism continues to serve as a model for Christian piety, especially for widows who choose not to remarry as well as for those called to religious life.  

5. JUDITH, THE NEW TESTAMENT, AND THE CHURCH  


a. Judith is not explicitly quoted anywhere in the New Testament, though this is not to say it is absent from New Testament theology. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul draws from the vocabulary and theology of Judith:  

Judith 8:14 You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart, nor find out what a man is thinking; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought?

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Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne).  
10 Ibid., a. 3 ad. 3.  
1 Corinthians 2:10  God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. … 16 “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:10-11, 16)

5.2. Judith as a type of The Blessed Mother

a. Judith is “blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth” (Jdt 13:18), just as Elizabeth extols Mary: “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:42).

b. Other Marian typologies in Judith:

i. Judith’s striking the head of the enemy will be remembered through “all generations,” and she will be called “blessed” for it:

Judith said to them, “Listen to me. I am about to do a thing which will go down through all generations of our descendants” (Jdt 8:32).

“O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women of earth” (Jdt 13:18).

Mary—not least by striking the head of the enemy through her fiat—will be known as “blessed” for “all generations”:

“Behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48).

ii. Judith and Mary magnify the Lord. The Vulgate (“the Church’s Bible” according to the Council of Trent) assigns four additional verses onto the end of chapter 13 that are not in the RSV2CE, which read:

[And Achior said to Judith:] “Blessed are you by your God in every tabernacle of Jacob, for in every nation which shall hear your name, the God of Israel shall be magnified on occasion of you.”

Mary, in the humility of her Magnificat, sings: “My soul magnifies the Lord…” (Luke 1:46).

iii. Judith’s widowhood and chastity are shown to be a foundation of her character and blessedness. Chapter 8, the introductory chapter to the character Judith, describes her as “a widow…” who, “belted sackcloth about her loins and wore the garments of her widowhood.” Judith is described as “beautiful in appearance” with a “very lovely face; she was prudent of heart, discerning in judgment, and quite virtuous” (Jdt 8:4-7). Judith prays in chapter 9 to the Lord, “[the] God of my father Simeon” who was known for taking revenge on “the strangers who had loosed the girdle of a virgin to defile her” (Jdt 9:2). After Judith beheads the evil general Holofernes and gives her account before the people, she deliberately adds:
“...and yet he committed no act of sin with me, to defile and shame me” to stress the integrity of her chaste state (Jdt 13:16).

iv. Finally, Judith is a native of the town Bethulia, which is related to the Hebrew word *bethûla*, meaning “virgin.” “Bethulia” may be a geographical adaptation of *bethûla*, meaning “the place of virgin,” similar to the English adaptation “Virginia.” The overarching narrative of Judith is ultimately concerned with Holofernes’ plot to plunder Bethulia, yet due to the heroic intervention of Judith, it is spared. It is as if the author of Judith is uniquely concerned with stressing the importance of unbroken chastity/virginity. Just as Judith was not defiled by Holofernes and remained virtuous in her widowhood, so narratively, Holofernes and his army are kept from entering and defiling Bethulia, the virgin city.

5.3. Judith in the Lectionary

Judith makes a rare Lectionary appearance during Advent, on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The text is from 13:18-19, in which (as we noted above) Uzziah, the king of Judah, extols Judith in a way easily seen to correspond to Mary’s own *magnificat*:

Judith 13:18-19:

*R. (15:9d) You are the highest honor of our race.*

18 Blessed are you, daughter, by the Most High God, above all the women on earth; and blessed be the LORD God, the creator of heaven and earth.

*R. You are the highest honor of our race.*

19 Your deed of hope will never be forgotten by those who tell of the might of God.

*R. You are the highest honor of our race.*

Luke 1:46-55:

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, 52 he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”