

In its introduction to Judith, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* writes: “The book of Judith was written during the period of the Maccabean revolt. Its setting is in an earlier period, but many details reveal the author’s interest in his own time rather than that of the seventh century B.C. In the story, an Israelite town is besieged by Holofernes, commander-in chief of the Assyrian army. The town leaders despair of help from God and declare that if deliverance does not come within five days, they will surrender. A beautiful widow, an observant Jew, upon hearing the decision of the elders, scolds them for their lack of faith. She prays, placing herself in the hands of God. Finally, she prepares her weapon – beauty. Using her beauty, she beheads Holofernes and delivers her people.

“The message of the book is that victory comes not from human might but through the power of God. God can deliver his faithful people at whatever time and in whatever way God wishes. Even though the way of deliverance may look like folly from a human point of view, the story of Judith demonstrates that the real fools are those who place their trust in human power and weapons. The whole army of Holofernes is defenseless against God’s weapon – the beauty of a faithful woman” (p.844).

In its introduction to Judith, *The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition* writes: “The book of Judith is a piece of literature for difficult times. It was hoped that the reader would take to heart the lesson that God was still the master of history who could save Israel from her enemies. There is a parallel with the time of the Exodus: As God had delivered the people by the hand of Moses, so God could deliver them by the hand of the pious widow Judith....

“The story of Judith is full of unexpected turns. The most obvious, especially to those who first heard or read the story, is that a woman – not a man – saved Judah in time of severe distress. Judith is more faithful and resourceful than any of the men of Bethulia. She is more eloquent than the king and more courageous than the leading citizens of the city. While the king, priests, and leaders, show themselves incapable of dealing with the crisis, Judith stands up to the threat posed by Holofernes, and takes decisive action to end that threat” (p.54).

Division of Chapters

PART 1: The Assyrians pose a threat to Israel (Chapters 1-7)

PART 2: Judith saves Israel from Assyrian invasion (Chapters 8-16)

COMMENTARY

PART 1: THE ASSYRIANS POSE A THREAT TO ISRAEL (CHAPTERS 1-7)

CHAPTER 1: The Assyrian king becomes mad with Judea

“But the inhabitants of all that land disregarded the summons of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, and would not go with him to the war. They were not afraid of him but regarded him as a lone individual opposed to them, and turned away his envoys empty-handed, in disgrace. Then Nebuchadnezzar fell into a violent rage against all that land, and swore by his throne and his kingdom that he would avenge himself on all the territories of Cilicia and Damascus and Syria, and also destroy with his sword all the inhabitants of Moab, Ammon, the whole of Judea, and those living anywhere in Egypt as far as the borders of the two seas.” (vv 11-12)

The opening chapter sets the stage for the conflict that is to follow between Nebuchadnezzar and Judea. His big enemy is Arphaxad, King of Medes. Nebuchadnezzar expects most of the known world to come to his aid. When the peoples of the West refuse to join his alliance, he becomes enraged and swears to take revenge on these nations. As verses 13-15 show, Nebuchadnezzar did not need their help because he defeated the King of Medes without them.

CHAPTERS 2-3: Campaign against the West begins

“Thus says the great king, the lord of all the earth: go forth from my presence, take with you men of proven valor, 120,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry and proceed against all the land of the West.” (2:5)

Nebuchadnezzar, like the Pharaoh of Egypt, sees himself as a god. He is the “lord of all the earth.”

Needless to say, he sees himself as more powerful than any other god. His plan is to totally destroy those nations that refuse to join him in an alliance against the king of Medes. Holofernes is the general chosen to execute his plan.

Even though many of the people of the West promise to totally submit to Nebuchadnezzar and worship him (3:8), Holofernes nevertheless devastated their whole territory. As we finish reading chapter 3, we wonder if indeed Nebuchadnezzar is the god of all the earth and no one has a chance of surviving against him.

CHAPTER 4: The people of Israel cry out to the Lord

“All the people of Israel cried out to God with great fervor and did penance....” (v.9)

Holofernes, with an army of 120,000 select troops and 12,000 cavalry, is ready to attack Bethulia, a tiny Israelite village whose main hero is an insignificant childless widow. “The battle is between gods. Each god summons the best in human power in order to defeat the other. Nebuchadnezzar trusts in human force, God in human virtue. Each of the divine figures is represented in the action by a mortal figure. Nebuchadnezzar is represented by his general in chief, Holofernes. God is represented by the holy woman Judith” (Collegeville Commentary p.846).

When the Israelites who live in Judea hear of all that Holofernes has done to the nation, they become extremely fearful. Their fear is not just for themselves, but also for the temple and the holy city, Jerusalem.

The temple is the sign of God’s presence in their midst. Rather than surrender to a mighty army, the Israelites prepare to resist in two ways. Firstly, there are physical or material preparations: the people post guards and store up provisions from the newly gathered harvest. Secondly, they prepare spiritually with prayer and fasting.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the first chapters of the Judith?

CHAPTERS 5-6: Holofernes receives a lesson on Israel and their God

“Who are you, Achior, to prophesy among us as you have done today, and to tell us not to fight against the

Israelites because their God protects them? What god is there beside Nebuchadnezzar? He will send his force and destroy them from the face of the earth. Their god will not save them, but we, the servants of Nebuchadnezzar, will strike them down as one man, for they will be unable to withstand the force of our cavalry.” (6:2-3)

When Holofernes hears that Israel is not ready to surrender to his mighty army, he calls his council and asks these questions: Who are these people? Why are they different? Why has every other nation of the West surrendered and this tiny country refused? Who is their king? What is their power? In answer to these questions, the reader finds the central message of the book.

Who are these people? Achior, leader of the Ammonites, responds with a recital of Israel’s history (6:16).

Who is their king, and what is their power? Achior states that Israel’s king is a God who protects them against all odds if they are faithful to him but allows their enemies to defeat them if they are being unfaithful to him. In short, Israel’s power comes from their God.

“Holofernes fails to appreciate the wisdom in Achior’s response. Neither he nor his attendants can envision a power greater than the material power of arms. His advisers tell him that the Israelites are a powerless people, incapable of a strong defense. ‘Let us therefore attack them; your great army, Lord Holofernes, will swallow them up’ (5:23-24). This misunderstanding of true power will prove to be a fatal error for Holofernes.” (ibid, p.848)

Holofernes ignores the counsel of Achior, and follows the advice of his own counsel. But before he attacks, he acknowledges three things:

- He recognizes that Achior’s function is that of a prophet. He accurately describes the role of a prophet, namely, “to deliver a message on behalf of another.” Achior rightly tells Holofernes that if Israel is faithful to God, he will be unable to defeat them.
- In his arrogance, he believes that Israel has zero chance of victory against Nebuchadnezzar and his powerful army. “*What god is there beside Nebuchadnezzar?*” (6:2).

- He condemns Achior to share the fate of the Israelites. After Achior is handed over to the Israelites, he is hailed as a prophet and hero. When they hear what Achior has said to Holofernes, they realize their only hope is placing their trust in God. If they do that, victory is assured.

Pause: Achior must have known that Holofernes would not be happy with his counsel, yet he had the courage to speak his piece. What gives you the courage to speak up when the circumstances may be a bit intimidating?

CHAPTER 7: Siege of Bethulia

“All the people, therefore, including youths, women, and children, went in a crowd to Uzziah and the rulers of the city. They set up a great clamor and said before the elders: ‘God judge between you and us! You have done us grave injustice in not making peace with the Assyrians. There is no help for us now! Instead, God has sold us into their power by laying us prostrate before them in thirst and utter exhaustion. Therefore, summon them and deliver the whole city as booty to the troops of Holofernes and to all his forces.’” (vv 23-26)

When the Israelites see the size of Holofernes’ army, they cry out to the Lord who they feel has sold them into the power of the Assyrians. They beg Uzziah to surrender to the enemy. He is able to hold them off for five more days. But if God does not act in five days, they are going to surrender to the Assyrians. It is as if they are giving God an ultimatum.

PART 2: JUDITH SAVES ISRAEL

CHAPTER 8: Enter Judith

“Judith was beautifully formed and lovely to behold.... No one had a bad word to say about her, for she was a very God-fearing woman.” (v.8)

After establishing through genealogy that Judith (meaning Jewess) is a true Israelite, the author tells us that she is beautiful within and without.

When Judith hears how the people have lost faith in God, and that Uzziah has given God five days to act, she is very upset. She sends her maid to have Uzziah and the city elders come to visit her. If they think they are coming for afternoon tea, they are in for a big

surprise. Instead, they get a good tongue-lashing from this holy woman.

In her address, Judith deals with two major doubts in her people: their lack of faith in God and in themselves. She concludes her address with an exhortation to action and a statement of the basic theological principle in question. Judith’s call for action has three parts:

- The people of Bethulia must set an example because the fate of the land, the temple, and the people depend on them.
- They must be grateful to God, even in the midst of distress and even on account of their distress, because their affliction is a proof of God’s love for them (see Prov 3:12).
- Finally, they must remember God’s dealing with their ancestors so that they will understand God’s fidelity and the meaning of their own suffering.

“The theological principle has to do with God’s freedom: God may send suffering, not as punishment but as a test.” (ibid, p.851)

Uzziah’s response (vv 28-32). After affirming that Judith is indeed a woman of wisdom, Uzziah goes on to excuse the weakness of the elders for succumbing to the demands of the people. He says that they have sworn an oath that they cannot take back. Concerning this situation, the *Collegeville Commentary* states: “The two different solutions to the dilemma, proposed by Uzziah and Judith, emphasize the contrast between Uzziah’s small hope and Judith’s great courage. Rain is the only solution he can imagine to relieve the immediate distress (8:31). Judith, on the other hand, envisions a total liberation to rank with the Exodus, a liberation that “will go down from generation to generation among the descendants” of Israel (8:32).

“Judith does not tell Uzziah her plans. Both he and the readers are left in suspense, wondering how God will rescue Israel through her. The readers, however, have an advantage over Uzziah: they are told by the narrator that God will deliver Israel (4:13). What they do not know is how” (ibid, p.851).

Pause: In her speech to the elders, Judith shows herself to be a strong woman with tremendous confidence in God’s mysterious ways. Who has modeled for you Judith’s strength and faith?

CHAPTERS 9-10: Judith prepares for war

“Your strength is not in numbers, nor does your power depend upon stalwart men; but you are the God of the lowly, the helper of the oppressed, the supporter of the weak, the protector of the forsaken, the savior of those without hope.” (v.11)

In chapters 9-10, Judith makes a twofold preparation for war. The first is prayer. Judith’s prayer posture is one of radical humility before God—prostration. Her attire is symbolic of penitence—sackcloth and ashes. She begins by reminding God of the mighty deeds performed for her ancestors (9:2-4). Then Judith states that her trust is not in horses and chariots but in the power of God. Therefore, she calls upon God to win the victory for her.

Next, Judith attends to enhancing her physical beauty. After bathing, she uses everything available to make herself look beautiful and captivating. Commenting on this part of Judith’s preparation for war, *The Colledgeville Commentary* states: “Judith understands the goodness of her body. She knows that her physical beauty is good and that it comes from God. She also knows that the power of her beauty comes from within her, from her holiness, from her faithfulness to God. Since both her exterior and interior beauty come from God, her beauty must be devoted to the service of God. God intends to use her beauty as a weapon to liberate the people. She will wield the weapon to the best of her ability.

“The response of others to this second preparation of hers testifies to its effectiveness. The men of her own city are astounded at her beauty (10:7). After she arrives at the enemy camp, the guards of Holofernes gaze at her face in awe because of its wondrous beauty (10:14). The crowd that gathers within the camp at her arrival marvels at her beauty. They say to one another: *‘Who can despise this people that has such women among them? It is not wise to leave one man of them alive, for if any were to be spared they could beguile the whole world (10:19)’*” (p.852).

At the end of the chapter, Judith is led into the presence of Holofernes. All marvel at Judith’s beauty.

Pause: Are you surprised to find in the Bible a woman of faith who is also ready to use her charm and physical beauty to achieve her purposes? Do you know of anyone today who uses her physical beauty to achieve a good end?

CHAPTER 11: Encounter between Judith and Holofernes

“Her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants; they marveled at her wisdom and exclaimed, ‘No other woman from one end of the world to the other looks so beautiful and speaks so wisely!’ Then Holofernes said to her: ‘God has done well in sending you ahead of your people, to bring victory to our arms, and destruction to those who have despised my lord. You are fair to behold, and your words are well spoken.’” (vv 20-23)

The encounter between Judith, servant, of God and Holofernes, servant of Nebuchadnezzar, proceeds with two speeches. Holofernes tells Judith to “take courage” because he assumes she is a servant of Nebuchadnezzar. The truth is Judith has taken courage because she serves the Lord. *The Colledgeville Commentary* states: “Judith’s answer to Holofernes, like her speech in chapter 10, is a cunning mixture of truth and deceit. She weaves her message through three topics: the destiny of Holofernes, the message of Achior and its effect on the Israelites, and the deed that she herself will accomplish. She says to Holofernes that if he follows her advice, God will do the deed perfectly’ with him (11:6). Her Lord will not fail in any undertaking (11:6). Holofernes presumes that this means he will be victorious. Precisely the opposite interpretation – that God will be victorious – is also possible. Judith continues to deceive him when she refers to ‘the power of him who has sent you to set all creatures aright’ (11:7). Holofernes again presumes wrongly that she refers to Nebuchadnezzar... Judith deceives by her report of the truth” (p.853).

Holofernes and his servants marvel at Judith’s wisdom exclaiming: “No other woman from one end of the world to the other looks so beautiful and speaks so wisely” (v.21). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* notes: “Holofernes is now completely mesmerized and ready for the slaughter. No one is so blind as a proud man.” (p.627).

Pause: Judith’s double-talk fools Holofernes. How do you feel about that?

CHAPTERS 12-13: Judith beheads Holofernes

“After bathing, she besought the Lord, the God of Israel, to direct her way, for the triumph of his people.” (12:8)

“When all had departed, and no one, small or great, was left in the bedroom, Judith stood by Holofernes’ bed and said within herself: ‘O Lord, God of all might, in this hour look graciously on my undertaking for the exaltation of Jerusalem; now is the time for aiding your heritage and for carrying out my design to shatter the enemies who have risen against us.’ She went to the bedpost near the head of Holofernes, and taking his sword from it, drew close to the bed, grasped the hair on his head, and said, ‘Strengthen me this day, O God of Israel!’ Then with all her might she struck him twice in the neck, and cut off his head.” (13:4-8)

When Holofernes offers Judith food, she insists on holding fast to her dietary laws, eating only the food she brought with her, insisting that her mission will be completed before her food runs out. Also, each morning, she leaves the camp to beseech the Lord “to direct her way for the triumph of his people” (12:8). This routine of leaving the camp without any interruption from Holofernes’ bodyguard will be crucial to allow her escape after Holofernes’ death (12:7).

As we continue to read, remember that Uzziah is bound by oath to surrender the city in five days. The crucial encounter between Judith and Holofernes does not come until the last day—creating suspense in the story. Trust in God is being pushed to the limit.

On the fourth day, Holofernes invites Judith to a banquet. Her response gives the impression that she is eager to be enticed (12:14). She prepares by putting on her *“festive garments and all her feminine adornments”* (v.15). Judith goes into battle with beauty as her main weapon. The power of her beauty is immediately evident. Holofernes is *“burning with desire for her for he had been biding his time to seduce her from the day he saw her”* (v.16). Holofernes drinks a great quantity of wine. As a result, Holofernes lies drunk on his bed. The stage is set for victory. All other guests depart. Holofernes and Judith are left alone. Judith is armed; Holofernes lies helpless.

Beheading of Holofernes (13:4-10). Commenting on Judith’s murder of Holofernes, John Collins writes: “The great scandal of the story is Judith’s willingness to deceive the Assyrian general, violate his trust, and kill him in a gruesome manner. There is a biblical precedent for her action, in Judges 4-5, where Jael the Kenite, shelters Sisera in her tent and then drives a

tent peg into his skull. There is no apology for the violence of the action. The survival of the people is at stake, and Judith is a heroine. That a woman performs this great deed, accords with the theology of the book of Judges, where God affects his deliverance through improbable means, to show that it is not an achievement of human power” (*Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, p.548).

Victory proclaimed (13:10-20). Before dawn on the fifth day, the day when Uzziah is supposed to surrender the city, Judith returns to Bethulia to announce to the people their liberation. Judith shouts to the guards from a distance: *“Open! Open the gate! God, our God, is with us. Once more he has made manifest his strength in Israel and his power against our enemies; he has done it this very day”* (13:11).

The people are overjoyed to see their heroine who they cannot believe has returned to them safely. Then Judith proclaims again God’s victory over Holofernes and how God used a woman’s beauty to win the day. She says: *“Praise God, praise him! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has shattered our enemies by my hand this very night.”* Then she takes the head out of the pouch, shows it to them, and says: *“Here is the head of Holofernes, general in charge of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy under which he lay in his drunkenness. The Lord struck him down by the hand of a woman. As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the path I have followed, I swear that it was my face that seduced Holofernes to his ruin, and that he did not sin with me, to my defilement or disgrace”* (vv 14-17).

Judith’s proclamation of victory, are responded to by two blessings, one by the people and one by Uzziah.

Pause: What speaks to you most in Chapters 12-13? Can you recall or name a victory you have had in your life against formidable odds?

CHAPTERS 14-15: The Assyrians flee in fear

“On hearing what happened, those still in their tents were amazed and overcome with fear and trembling. No one kept ranks any longer; they scattered in all directions and fled along every road, both through the valley and in the mountains. Those also who were stationed in the mountain district around Bethulia

took to flight. Then all the Israelite warriors overwhelmed them.” (15:1-3)

Chapters 14-15 narrate the response to Holofernes’ death in three scenes: in Bethulia, in the Assyrian camp and throughout Israel.

Bethulia (14:1-10). In Bethulia, Judith acts as general of the army and leader of the people. She has won the victory by assassinating the enemy’s general. Now she sets out to consolidate the victory. After giving orders to hang Holofernes’ head on the city wall, she calls for a fake attack on the Assyrian Camp. This action will rouse the enemy camp and bring about the demoralizing discovery of Holofernes’ death.

Then Judith visits Achior, the non-Israelite prophet who we saw earlier had recognized God as the source of Israel’s power (5:17-21). When Achior sees Holofernes’ head and hears Judith’s account of her visit to the enemy camp, he faints, pays homage to Judith and converts to Judaism.

Panic in the Assyrian camp (15:3). When the Assyrians discover that their leading general has been killed, they are “overcome with fear and trembling” (v.2) and start running in all directions. They are shell-shocked that “a single Hebrew woman has brought disgrace on the house of King Nebuchadnezzar” (v.18).

The good news spreads throughout Israel (15:4-13). Throughout Israel, the good news is spread and the men are summoned to pursue the fleeing Assyrians. When the high priest Joakim sees “the good things the Lord has done for Israel,” they congratulate Judith and break into a song of thanksgiving (vv 8-10). The *Collegeville Commentary* notes: “The message for the people of the author’s time, the second century, is evident. God will win their deliverance from oppression. What they must do, together and individually, is remain faithful. God may choose the weakest hand among them, even that of a woman, to bring about the victory. But even though the whole people is weak, the victory is not impossible for God.” (p.855).

Pause: What speaks to you most in Chapters 14-15? Name one great victory or achievement in your life.

CHAPTER 16: Judith’s hymns of praise

“Strike up the instruments, a song to my God with timbrels, chant to the Lord with cymbals; sing to him a new song, exalt and acclaim his name.” (v.1)

“But the Lord Almighty thwarted them, by a woman’s hand he confounded them. Not by youths was their mighty one struck down, nor did titans bring him low, nor huge giants attack him; but Judith, the daughter of Merari, by the beauty of her countenance disabled him.” (vv 5-6)

Judith’s hymn of praise and thanksgiving is within the victory celebration of the whole people. Before and after the prayer, there is a report of the physical results of victory.

Judith’s great victory is reminiscent of other victory celebrations in Israel, e.g., David’s victory over the mighty Goliath, a victory that seemed impossible. The *Collegeville Commentary* notes: “The model for every deliverance, however, and for every victory celebration, is the Exodus. After Israel marched through the sea, a victory over the pursuing Egyptians in which Israel was powerless, “the prophetess, Miriam took a tambourine in her hand, while all the women went out after her, dancing with tambourines, and she led all Israel in a victory song” (Exod 15:20-21). Judith’s victory over Holofernes is a victory to be compared to that of David over Goliath; the deliverance of her people is comparable to the Israelites’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt.” (p.856).

Structure of Judith’s Prayer. The song opens with a call to praise (16:1) and continues with the reasons for praise (16:2-12). There is a new beginning in verse 13, which is followed by additional reasons for praise (16:13b-16) and a concluding remark on the fate of the wicked (16:17).

After the prayer, the people go to Jerusalem to worship God and to offer holocausts and gifts. All the war booty (treasures from the Assyrian army) Judith received is loaded on carts and sent to Jerusalem. This is not a war for personal gain. It is a war for the liberation of God’s people. The material gains of the victory are all handed back to God.

Verses 21-25—Judith’s renown verses. In reward for her obedience to God in a time of crisis and her fidelity throughout her life, Judith is prosperous, renowned, and lives to a ripe old age.

Concluding Remarks

In its concluding remarks on Judith, the *Collegeville Commentary* states: “The people of the author’s time, who suffered under Seleucid persecution, needed to hear the message of the Book of Judith. The message remains pertinent for us, who face powers of evil beyond our strength. The story of Judith teaches us that the power of God can bring victory even through the most vulnerable. Judith’s example exhorts God’s people to persevere in hope. Uzziah proclaims. ‘Blessed are you, Judith, by the Most High God, above all the women on earth.... Your deed of hope will never be forgotten by those who tell of the might of God.’ And all the people answer ‘Amen! Amen!’” (p.857).

Pause: What are your lasting impressions of Judith?

RESOURCE

As you can see, I relied very heavily on *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* for this article.