

Judith: Headhunting for Virtue

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.¹

The Book of Judith presents us with multiple levels of ambiguity and ambivalence, as Aquinas' response indicates: she does undue things, particularly for a woman, and through them saves her people. Her deceit poses a greater problem for Aquinas than her murder. In his view, killing Holofernes falls within the realm of just war. Aquinas is not alone in his discomfort. Tradition and Scripture equivocate on Judith. No Hebrew version of the text exists, only the Greek, automatically relegating it to a marginal position in Judaism. Although Judith is associated with the festival of Hannukah, the text itself is not part of the *Tanakh*. The story, considered deuterocanonical by the Roman Catholic Church, goes unrecognized by many Protestants, particularly those deriving from Lutheran and Calvinist reformations.

Centering on a threat by one of Israel's three traditional enemies – in this case the kingdom of Assyria, the city of Nineveh and the infamous King Nebuchadnezzar – its first seven chapters abound in specific, yet inaccurate, historical and geographical details. Set just after the return from the Babylonian exile, Israel's fragile community relearns their cultic practice. They fear another profanation of the Temple and resist actions that might result in yet another exile.² Leaders and townspeople find themselves willing to capitulate and collaborate. Judith appears halfway through the narrative, in Chapter 8. As her name means 'Jewish woman', we assume that she is a type for Israel and her city of Bethulia – possibly a corruption of the Hebrew word for virgin (bethula) – a

¹ Thomas Aquinas, OP, *Summa Theologiae, IIa, IIIae, q. 110, a. 3*. CCEL Online[home page online]; Available from <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2005.

² Irene Nowell, OSB, *Jonah, Tobit, Judith*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986, p. 59.

pseudonym for Jerusalem. Judith opposes herself to Holofernes, then, as Israel against Assyria, God against King Nebuchadnezzar, Jerusalem against Nineveh, woman against man, victim against oppressor, life against death, virtue against vice.

Holofernes personifies rash pride, trusting in the power of Nebuchadnezzar, while Judith reflects humility and courage by fasting and praying to God to deliver her people from their mortal enemy. Holofernes embodies cruelty, destroying villages and people merely because they refuse to worship his king. Judith represents justice, restoring the right of her community to worship God and live in peace. Holofernes is lustful – luxurious – his eye on Judith from the moment she enters his camp. His long hair and rich canopied bed attest to his excessive virility. Judith remains chaste, a widow who respects her dead husband, refusing the advances of other men. Holofernes acts foolishly, allowing Judith to flatter him. Given freedom to come and go, she maintains her ritual purity through food (*kashrut*), bathing (*mikveh*) and prayer (*tefilah*). Judith courts wisdom, keeping her plans secret even from her fellow Bethulians with only her maidservant as companion. Without fellow conspirators, she not only eliminates the possibility of ineptitude or betrayal, but also protects her community from complicity in the event of her failure. Judith gains Holofernes' trust through deceit. She is a trickster, playing off his besetting vices of vainglory, lust and gluttony. He epitomizes incontinence and intemperance, drinking himself into a stupor so that he's unable to rape her. Judith demonstrates temperance and prudence, biding her time, attacking him in the dead of night as he sleeps, then leaving the camp with his head in her food bag, according to her previously established and approved patterns of retreat for purification and prayer.

In a reversal of the expected roles, a woman adopts all of the cardinal virtues, conquering evil, incarnated in a man. Subversion can function to reinforce the social structure. Judith certainly returns to a quiet life of prayer and fasting after routing the Assyrian army. But subversion also

retains an inherent destabilizing effect, creating tension and ambivalence within the established power structure. Despite her return to normative behavior, no one messes with Judith – or with Israel – for the many years of her life and even for long after her holy death. The threat of the ‘other’ floats just beneath society’s surface.³

Judith functions as a female David. Medieval Christians, including Aquinas, extend the typology by recognizing Judith as one of the spiritual mothers of Mary. *The Book of Judith* still plays a significant role in Marian devotion, with a special focus on Judith’s hope and obedience to God.⁴ In Dormition Abbey (*Hagia Maria Sion*) on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the dome above the effigy of Mary asleep contains eight mosaic medallions of her ancestors, including Eve, Tamar, Ruth, Esther and Judith, holding the severed and screaming head of Holofernes, that same silent scream captured in the famous painting of that name by Edvard Munch. The very nature of Holofernes’ death – losing his head – bears all of the connotations of subversion of power, loss of control, and destruction of the rational.

Like Mary, Judith exemplifies faith in God’s providence, hope in risking her life, and charity in offering herself as the instrument of salvation for her people. In addition to the acquired moral virtues, Judith owns a full measure of the infused theological virtues. Her community acclaims her as blessed among women, an honor Elizabeth will bestow on Mary in the prototype of the *Ave Maria* found in Luke’s Gospel. We tend to read Judith as allegory, as a type of Mary, because of our discomfort with female courage, intelligence and strength. Perhaps this very discomfort requires that Judith’s virtue be diluted through association with deceit and murder. If a woman attained purity of virtue, she might challenge our attachment of original sin to women. Women who exhibit true creativity and sacrifice might invalidate our association of divinity with the masculine. In a sense

³ Amy-Jill Levine, “Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in The Book of Judith”, in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susannah*, Athalya Brenner, ed. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, pp. 209-210.

⁴ Mark G. Boyer, *Mary’s Day – Saturday*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993, pp. 52-54.

Judith's story counters Gregory of Nyssa's soteriology, where Christ deceives the devil, His humanity the bait. His perfect sacrifice ensures that His resurrection extends eternal life to all humanity. Judith offers her body as bait to Holofernes, an icon of evil incarnate. His death ensures earthly life – a prerequisite for immortality – for all of Israel.

In a sense, Judith does just what she condemns Uzziah for: she claims God will act within five days' time. "Who are you to put God to the test today, and to set yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs?" (Judith 8:12). Instead of demands, she counsels thanksgiving to God, who loves them enough to put them to the test as He did their ancestors, the patriarchs. She recognizes the attitude of the townsfolk as one of despair, without hope. They counter test with test rather than with faith. Uzziah responds to her admonition by acknowledging her reputation for wisdom: her "heart's disposition is right" (Judith 8:29b). Judith responds with a marginally presumptuous claim: "I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants. Stand at the town gate tonight so that I may go out with my maid; and within the days after which you have promised to surrender the town to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand" (Judith 8:32-33). Aquinas contrasts true hope with presumption, using Achior's testimony from *The Book of Judith*.

The hope whereby one relies on one's own power is presumptuous, if one aims at a good beyond one's capacity as if it were possible for one to attain it, after the manner referred to in Judith 6:15: "Thou humblest those that presume of themselves." Such presumption is opposed to the virtue of magnanimity, which holds to the mean in hope of this kind. But hope whereby one relies on the power of God can also be presumptuous through immoderation, if one looks for some good thing as if it were possible through the divine power and mercy, when it is not possible. It would be presumptuous, for example, for a man to hope to obtain pardon without penitence, or glory without merit. Such presumption is indeed a kind of sin against the Holy Spirit, since one who so presumes takes away or despises the aid whereby the Holy Spirit calls him back from sin.⁵

⁵ Aquinas, op. cit., Ia, q. 21, a.1

Judith clearly relies on God's power. She prays to God to deliver her people and attributes her success to God. Because she is willing to act, she escapes the charge of immoderation. In Aquinas' view, precisely because humans are embodied, our virtues derive from action, not thought. Judith could not merely pray and expect deliverance, as that would be immoderation. Further, charity only functions through the other virtues and most particularly in justice, since it alone of the cardinal virtues requires the presence of another. Judith's intervention on behalf of Bethulia restores the community to justice. God is worshipped again in His Holy Temple and no rival king threatens their Covenant relationship.

Ruth, Esther and Judith attain prominence in Judaism by their association with holy days – Ruth with Shavout, a pilgrimage feast of the first fruits; Esther with Purim, a carnival of power subverted; Judith with Hannukah, a celebration of liberation and restoration of the Temple. All three women perform actions that men cannot accomplish. Each also has some disabling characteristic. They are the leaven for the world. Unlike Susannah, no man rescues them. Instead, they rescue the men. Ruth, a Moabite, restores the families of Bethlehem to covenant by holding Boaz to account. Esther, initially hiding her Jewish faith from her husband Ahasuerus, rescues her people from genocide and secures their fortunes in exile. Judith, a childless widow, prevents another enslavement of her people by the Assyrians.⁶ Each woman acts out of a special faith in God's providence as well as a belief that God not only calls women to agency but also calls them in particular to be His instruments. Ruth refuses to accept her mother-in-law Naomi's fatalistic attitude that God has abandoned her because she left the land during a famine. Ruth reaches out to God, asking to be included in His Covenant. Esther, believing herself to be a trophy wife valued only for her beauty and obedience, risks her life by declaring her faith and asking for protection for her people. Judith prays for God to rescue His people and risks her life as His instrument.

⁶ Guy Labouerie, *Judith, esperance d'Israel*. Paris: Centurion, 1991, p. 52.

A widow, Judith falls into the category of the vulnerable in her patriarchal, agrarian society (widows, orphans and resident aliens) and as such is guaranteed preferential treatment in *Torah*. Yet she deliberately cuts off the head of the drunken and sleeping enemy captain, Holofernes. Women, by definition weak, depend on the protection and plans of men. However, when the priests and leaders of Bethulia agree to surrender themselves and, ultimately, the Temple, Judith conceives a plot to save them. Having lived chastely for 40 months after her husband's death (a parallel to the 40 days of Noah's flood and the 40 years of the Exodus), in three days she seduces the enemy with her beauty and charm. Beauty itself in that society indicates virtue. Like health and wealth, it confirms God's blessings on the beneficiary. Deuteronomistic theology implies a specific connection between virtue, life and blessing parallel to that among vice, death and curse. Although Judith's refusal to remarry challenges the patriarchal structure, putting her outside the bounds of control by men, "no one spoke ill of her" (Judith: 8:8a). Her prudence in managing her dead husband's estate paradoxically increases her risk. At best a woman in her circumstances could expect to suffer the scorn and gossip of other women, at worst the active intrigue of men eager for her property or the pleasures of her body.

Scripture provides scant background information about Judith. Her genealogy associates her with the prophetic line. She marries within her tribe, according to convention. After Manasseh's sudden death, Judith sets up a tent on the roof of her house and spends her days in sackcloth, fasting and prayer. The Hebrew word for prayer derives from the root that means 'to judge oneself'. So Judith's reputation for prayer automatically associates her with justice, as well as with faith and hope. She respects the Sabbath and the feast days, likely traveling to Jerusalem for the pilgrimages of *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Succoth*. Although beautiful and quite wealthy – her husband left her with land, livestock, slaves, gold and silver – she chooses to remain alone at home, managing her estate.

Fasting, sackcloth and constant prayer identify her as a holy woman. So when she rebukes the elders, who are about to violate *Torah* by consuming the food consecrated for sacrifice in the Temple, the town takes note and the leaders back down. Judith's faith – that God will rescue His people through their own agency – contrasts with Uzziah's descent into despair. He no longer hopes for a solution and instead agrees to a test of agency. If divine intervention occurs within five days, then the evidence that God exists will justify sacrificing the food set aside in the Temple. Otherwise the town will attempt to save themselves through consumption of that very food. A subtle form of idolatry is at play here, which Judith's wisdom recognizes. In the town's eyes, all agency belongs to God. The end of this line of thinking is worship of whatever appears to benefit us.

All along Judith has had water, while the town thirsts; riches, as her neighbors starve. She uses these resources to restore her beauty, necessary for her plan to succeed. For Judith, wealth has no intrinsic value, but rather instrumental value. Its end is to glorify God, not to provide pleasure for people. By routinely sacrificing in Jerusalem she glorifies God. By fasting and prayer she glorifies God. By restoring her beauty so that she can pretend to seduce the enemy, she glorifies God. Without her prudence in retaining sufficient goods – water, clothing and jewelry, expensive perfumes and ointments – she would never hold Holofernes' attention. So while her bodily mortifications likely appear intemperate to the townspeople – three times the required length of mourning, for example – she reserves a special position for herself. She has the knowledge and experience, in essence the practical wisdom, to act as bait to Holofernes and she also has the material goods to assure realism.

Judith demonstrates her faith in God through her prayer. But she also relies on deceit to demonstrate God's superior power. After routing the enemy camp, Judith leads the women of Bethulia in songs and dances of praise to God. Her booty from the Assyrians army's encampment

ends up on the Temple altar. She desires neither praise nor goods for herself. Instead, she returns to her dead husband's home, to her prayer, sackcloth and fasting. She remains a childless widow, living to the age of 105, as did the patriarchs. Longevity implies virtue in the ancient Near East. The tradition interprets long life as a sign of God's blessing. At the end of her life she frees her servants and gives away her land and wealth, in accordance with the spirit of Sabbath and Jubilee years. In doing so, Judith again acknowledges that her weakness, like the child David's, commends her to God's gracious care.

For Judith, the good life involves accepting our roles as stewards in God's economy. She manages her household well, giving the first (and theoretically the best) fruits to God in sacrifice. She devotes herself to prayer, praising God, as is His due. She stands always at the ready to act as God's instrument in the world, but she never acts alone. Nor does she act except when necessary. Further, she acts not exclusively for her own sake, but on behalf of her entire community. Surely her wealth, beauty and intelligence could have secured her own personal safety with Holofernes and Nebuchadnezzar, but instead she risks her own personal safety to safeguard her community's Covenant with God. Her vision is communal, not individual. She follows ***Torah***, even to the point of freeing her servants and distributing her wealth.

In Judith's view, virtue is its own reward and happiness with one's state is its result. She chooses to return to her normal life of prayer and fasting when the threat to Jerusalem vanishes. She has no desire to alter the life God has given her. While alive, she guarantees security for her people. Even in death, her memory stands as a warning to marauding armies. Because she is a force to be reckoned with, by extension her God is the true God, the omnipotent one. Achior's conversion to Judaism upon hearing her story confirms the foundation of Judith's faith. Although she has not participated in the Covenant by procreation, she adds Achior's lineage to Israel. Her song and dance

of praise to God echoes the imagery of the Psalms, evidence of her constant prayer: Psalm 150 (tambourines and cymbals), Psalm 137 (dash my infants to the ground), Psalm 96 (sing to my God a new song), Psalm 119 (all your creatures serve you), Psalm 104 (you sent forth your spirit and it formed them), Psalm 97 (before your glance the rocks shall melt like wax), and Psalm 85 (to those who fear you you show mercy).

Perhaps the best evidence for Judith's virtue lies in the attraction that her story continues to hold on our attention. Throughout history people have read current events through the lens of Judith's life and actions. She appears in music, literature and art, representing the ideal woman, an exemplar both for men and women. Although interpreted differently by men than by women, deplored by some and acclaimed by others, Judith cannot be ignored. Especially during the Renaissance, artists portrayed her in a variety of modes: in the act of cutting off Holofernes' head, holding the severed head up for display, and carrying it off in her food bag.⁷ Some paintings mimic the physical attributes of public tortures and executions prevalent in those days. Others concentrate on the effect of the murder on Judith herself. Wealthy men commissioned these paintings for their bedrooms, reflecting their ambivalence towards women, power, sex and death. The story continues to fascinate and repel us precisely because Judith's virtues inextricably intertwine with vice.

Judith, portrayed both in the act of decapitating Holofernes and carrying her trophy – with its implicit suggestion of cannibalism, secure in her food bag – fascinated European Christian artists. Scripture enhances the drama of by requiring two strikes of Judith's sword to sever Holofernes' head, enabling artists to depict the full bloody horror of the act. Beheading stood as a dual metaphor, both of castration and tyrannicide. During the Renaissance, church and state acted as a tightly coupled imperial power. Judith, then, represented liberation from both. Elizabeth I of England assumed the type of Judith for her Protestant subjects. Poetry and propaganda alike

⁷ Margarita Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 67-86.

proclaimed Judith's story as justification for female monarchy, which both conflicted with the patriarchal norm and subtly reinforced it. Only virginal, masculinized women survived political and religious intrigues to rule long and wisely. Later, during the French Revolution, Charlotte Corday reenacted Judith's murder, killing Marat in his bath.

Judith functioned as a patron for the city of Florence, whose citizens perceived themselves as political and religious underdogs during the Renaissance. Donatello's statue of Judith in the Medici garden publicly proclaimed the true residence of power. His melding of her body with Holofernes, clearly portraying the woman on top, recalls his earlier David.⁸ It makes explicit the connection between Judith and the kingly lineage of Jesus. Judith appears in Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise, the entry doors to the Duomo in Florence, and on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. In painting, sculpture, stained glass, illuminated manuscript and tapestry – as theme or background⁹ – Judith takes her place in salvation history along with Esther and Ruth.

Of the many Italian renditions of Judith, those by Michelangelo Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi best reveal Judith's ambivalent reception. Caravaggio initiated the concept of models posing for his paintings. His use of light and shadow – *chiaroscuro* – contributes to the viewer's emotional response to his paintings. Artemisia's father Orazio studied with Caravaggio. Orazio taught Artemisia in his own studio since the activities of artists in those days involved exhuming bodies – usually of criminals – to study anatomy. In itself a criminal act, artists and doctors documented their findings in drawings called fugitive sheets. Artemisia knew Caravaggio's portrait of Judith. She painted many Judiths, both in the act of killing and escaping with her trophy.

Caravaggio's Judith – small, young, hesitant and with a fragile beauty – radiates light. Her maidservant, an observer and advisor, is an ancient crone holding the food bag in readiness.

⁸ Adrian W.B. Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 248-253.

⁹ Nira Stone, "Judith and Holofernes: Some Observations on the Development of the Scene in Art", in *No One Spoke Ill of Her*, James C. Vanderkam, ed. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992, pp.73-79.

Caravaggio emphasizes Holofernes' power, even in death. His muscular torso rises off the bed, supported by his splayed hand, eyes wide open, mouth curled away from his teeth in a scream. He, too, is beautiful, although dark and virile. Blood spurts from his throat, in four distinct streams, dirtying the pure white bedding he rests on. Despite the surgical accuracy of Judith's swordplay, she remains an instrument of God, her agency mediated through her maidservant, possibly representing Sophia or the Holy Spirit. Judith acts, but against her will, repulsed by the violence required of her. In this way Caravaggio accentuates her courage.



Michelangelo de Merisi Caravaggio, c. 1598

Artemisia, on the other hand, concentrates on the women's agency. Her scene radiates prudence. Judith's maidservant is young and strong, with a modest peasant beauty. Standing above Holofernes, she holds him down, resisting the arm he thrusts up to her breastbone to push her off.

Judith, an older woman in a low cut dress exposing large breasts, is plump as a wealthy widow should be. She rakes one hand into Holofernes' cheek to grip his hair in a vice, while carving his head off with the other. This Holofernes is big and strong, but older than Caravaggio's and gone to fat.



Artemisia Gentileschi, c. 1612

Artemisia's foreshortening technique minimizes Holofernes and maximizes the women. Their six interlocking arms make it difficult to separate the characters into three distinct individuals. Agency is shared here, in a very active sense. Both Judith and her maidservant appear

intent and calm, without qualms, a team where the older and mature woman takes the lead and the younger student has a supporting role. While Caravaggio emphasizes the opulence of Holofernes' bed, with its luxurious red canopy and white pillows, Artemisia presents us only with blood-spattered white sheets. A fellow artist in her father's school raped her and humiliated her with a public trial. The combination of minimal blood on the white sheets and the pre-meditated violence of the women reflects Artemisia's metaphorical connection of beheading with rape and castration. In one of her Judiths, the women wear blue and red gowns. Significantly, blue is Mary's color in the Western Latin tradition and red is Mary's color for the Eastern Orthodox.



Artemisia Gentileschi, c. 1613

In Artemisia's depictions of the escape, we again see her acknowledgement of Judith's agency. Calmly looking to the right, with only a few locks of hair disheveled, she holds the sword upright against her left shoulder. The servant faces Judith, her back to the viewer, following Judith's gaze that directs them along their escape route. Casually holding the open food basket against her leg, as she might grasp a load of laundry, she assumes almost equal stature with Judith, prefiguring her liberation. Each has her trophy. Holofernes' eyes are shut, his face composed and at peace. Again, only a small amount of blood on the white cloth that lies next to his head reveals the violence of his death. Here the women dress more lavishly, in brocade and velvet. Real flesh and blood women, they need no men to direct or control them. Rather, they have reduced the most powerful of men to an accessory, a symbol of women's work – preparing food or doing the laundry.

Judith's story contains few adjectives. She is beautiful and lovely but not explicitly deemed righteous or pious. Instead, her actions reveal her character. She "fears God with great devotion" (Judith 8:8b). She recalls Covenant history for the failed leaders of Bethulia. She prostrates herself and prays to God for strength and preservation. In her own words, she is a woman and a widow. She names God as the champion of Israel at her weakest, using the metaphors of the *Magnificat* Mary will one day sing: "you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope" (Judith 9:11b). Judith recognizes her virtues as infused and she prays before each step of the way, ensuring a constant relationship with God. She prays and acts alone, but she celebrates in community, giving ivy-wreathed wands and olive wreaths to all of the women, leading them in

song and dance. And always she gives thanks to God in anticipation of blessings. Her faith is her crowning virtue.

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