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Judith Saves Her People

Judith 8:1–13:20 · Bloom · Ages 13–19

Judith is one of three books of the Bible named after a woman, with Ruth and Esther, and its heroine's name means "Jewish woman" or "woman of Judah." She stands for her whole people at their most helpless.

The setting (Jdt 1–7): Holofernes, general of Nebuchadnezzar, is conquering the west and destroying shrines so that the nations will worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god (3:8). He besieges Bethulia, a hill town on the road to Jerusalem, and seizes its springs. After thirty-four days the town's leader, Uzziah, promises to surrender if God does not act within five days.

The story (Jdt 8–13): Judith, a devout and respected widow, rebukes the elders for putting God on a deadline. She prays at the hour of the evening incense in Jerusalem, asking God to use a widow's weakness to break the invaders' pride. Then she dresses in her finest clothes and goes with her maid to the Assyrian camp, where she tells Holofernes she has deserted her people and will guide him to victory. For three days she eats only her own food, prepared according to God's law, and goes out each night to pray. On the fourth night, after a banquet, Holofernes lies drunk on his bed. Judith prays for strength and beheads him with his own sword. Her maid carries the head home in their food bag, and

Judith shows it to the elders as proof, insisting that God protected her and that Holofernes never defiled her (13:16). The Assyrian army flees (Jdt 14–15).

Is it history? The book calls Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians, ruling from Nineveh, though historically he ruled Babylon after Nineveh had fallen, and Bethulia has never been securely located. So many Catholic scholars read Judith as an inspired story that uses a historical setting freely, written to strengthen faith under persecution. The Church has not defined its literary form and reads it with attention to the conventions of its time (CCC 110).

Honest questions:

Did Judith lie, and is that okay? Yes, she deceives Holofernes, and the book records it without comment. The Church teaches that lying is wrong by its very nature, and that a good intention does not make it right (CCC 2485; 1753). St. Thomas Aquinas addressed this very case: Judith is praised not for lying but for her desire to save her people, for which she risked her life (Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3). Biblical heroes are not models in every act.

Was it murder? Holofernes was commanding an army bent on destroying her people. The book tells his death as God's rescue of a besieged people, with God acting through a widow who seemed powerless (Jdt 9:10–11; 13:14–15). The Church reads it in light of its teaching: defending others against an unjust aggressor can be a grave duty for those responsible for them, armed defense of a community belongs to those with legitimate authority (CCC 2265), and every effort must be made to avoid war (CCC 2307–2309). So Judith is not a model for private violence or for settling personal grudges.

Isn't her beauty the weapon? The narrator mentions her beauty, but keeps the focus on her prayer, her fidelity to God's law, and her purity (13:16). Her real strength is her faith.

What the Church sees here: Judith is among the holy women who kept Israel's hope alive and prepared for Mary (CCC 64; 489).

Song of praise • Judith 16:1–25

Judith's song gives God the credit for the victory and closes with a key line of faith: God values a reverent heart that honors him above any offering. Then the people go up to Jerusalem to worship together. (Jdt 16:1–18)

Church teaching note

Church teaching: Judith among the holy women who kept Israel's hope alive and prepared for Mary (CCC 64, 489); lying wrong by its nature, and the end does not justify the means (CCC 2485, 1753); legitimate defense by those responsible for others and by legitimate authority, and avoiding war (CCC 2265, 2307–2309), as the light in which the Church reads the book's account of God's deliverance (Jdt 9:10–11; 13:14–15), not as a general model; literary forms (CCC 110). St. Thomas Aquinas on Judith: Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 110, a. 3, ad 3. The book's history and literary form are a scholarly question, not defined by the Church. The Assyrian flight (Jdt 14–15) is a cross-reference outside the retold passage.

Talk about it

1. Judith told the elders not to give God a deadline. Have you ever been tempted to do that?
2. How would you answer a friend who says Judith proves the Bible approves of lying?
3. Judith prayed before she acted. What difference does prayer make before a hard decision?
4. Catholic connection: read CCC 489. How do women like Judith prepare the way for Mary?

Key verse: Jdt 9:11. Look it up in your Bible.