

Week 61, Lecture 188. ¹ Judith Meets Holofernes, Judith Chapter 11

Outline in NABRE ² [For reference -- no need to include this in the lecture]

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| I. | Assyrian Threat (1:1–3:10) | chapters 1-3 |
| II. | Siege of Bethulia (4:1–7:32) | chapters 4-7 |
| III. | Judith, Instrument of the Lord (8:1–10:10) | chapters 8-9 |
| IV. | Judith Goes Out to War (10:11–13:20) | chapters 10-13 |
| V. | Victory and Thanksgiving (14:1–16:25) | chapters 14-16 |

Context. In chapter 9 we heard Judith's prayer. She recalled God's help in the past. She remembered the "zeal" of her ancestor Simeon, who avenged the rape his sister Dinah. She reminded God what was at stake: not simply her own town, but **his** Temple and **his** city, Jerusalem. She prayed that the God who supports the lowly and the humble would be with her. In chapter 10 we witnessed her beautification, and the effect this had on the city elders who let her go out of the gate. We witnessed the effect that her beauty had on the Assyrian patrol that arrested her. Finally we witnessed the chaos it caused in the Assyrian camp as she waited to meet Holofernes. Chapter 10 ended with her entrance to the tent of Holofernes. She prostrated herself, and his servants lifted her up.

Holofernes Addresses Judith, 11:1-4. 11:1 Then Holofernes said to her, "Take courage, woman, and do not be afraid in your heart, for I have never hurt anyone who chose to serve Nebuchadnezzar, the king of all the earth. ² And even now, if your people who live in the hill country had not slighted me, I would never have lifted my spear against them; but **they have brought all this on themselves.** ³ And now tell me why you have fled from them and have come over to us -- since you have come to safety. ⁴ Have courage; you will live, tonight and from now on. No one will hurt you, but all will treat you well, as they do the servants of my lord King Nebuchadnezzar."

V. 3 They have brought all this on themselves.

There is a certain amount of irony here. Holofernes is outraged at the resistance the Israelites have offered him. Judith, by contrast, thinks that the Israelites are "wimping out," that they are not resisting strongly enough! She is about to speak to Holofernes. One thing we can be sure she will **not** say: "They will surrender in a few days."

11:5-19, Judith Speaks to Holofernes. ⁵ Judith replied to him, "Accept the words of your servant, and let your maidservant speak in your presence, and I will tell **nothing false to my lord** this night. ⁶ And if you follow out the words of your maidservant, **God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purposes.** ⁷ Nebuchadnezzar the king of the whole earth lives, and as his power endures, who had sent you to direct every living soul, not only do men serve him because of you, but also the beasts of the field and the cattle and the birds of the air will live by your power under Nebuchadnezzar and all his house. ⁸ For we have heard of your wisdom and skill, and it is reported throughout the whole world that you are the one good man in the whole kingdom, thoroughly informed and marvelous in military strategy."

V. 5. Judith will say "nothing false to my lord"

In his *NIB* commentary, Lawrence Wills points out the elements of **comedy** in Judith. Much of the humor that makes the story funny to the audience are the double-entendres of Judith. Her words reassure Holofernes -- she will not lie to "her **lord.**" Holofernes thinks that's him!

¹ Lectures numbered consecutively. This is this week's 1st lecture, but its number reflects its place in the **total** sequence.

² NABRE, Introduction to Judith. This introduction has been approved by the USCCB, and ultimately by Rome. It is thus part of the hierarchical magisterium of the Church.

But for Judith, her “Lord” is the God of Heaven! If you are a translator, do you capitalize “lord” in verse 5 or not?

V. 6, NAB vs. RSV

NAB	RSV
God will give you complete success	God will accomplish something through you

The NAB misses the **marvelous ambiguity** of the first part of Judith’s statement.

“God will give you complete success” (NAB) is simply a lie.

The **RSV** is not only more literal -- it is also more hilarious!

“God will accomplish something through you” can be understood in two ways

1) God will give you complete success -- this is what Holofernes **hears**.

2) God will frustrate your plans to achieve his own glory -- this is what Judith **means**.

The NABRE is a great improvement over the NAB: “God will successfully perform a deed through you.”

and my lord will not fail to achieve his purposes

The second part of her statement is equally delightful!

When he hears “my lord,” Holofernes thinks this is a respectful reference to him!

“His purposes” include the subjugation of the entire world, including Israel, to Nebuchadnezzar

Of course when Judith says “my lord” she means the God of heaven!

And **His** purposes include the utter defeat of the Assyrians. If you are a translator, do you capitalize “lord?”

Vv. 7-8, Judith’s Flattery (Lawrence Wills, *NIB*)

Basically she tell him, “The whole world knows you are the king’s best general.”

Her flattery of Holofernes is shameless and almost as much a violation of the truth as is her lying:³

9-10, Judith Comments on Achior. ⁹ "Now as for the things Achior said in your council, we have heard his words, for the men of Bethulia spared him and he told them all he had said to you.

¹⁰ Therefore, my lord and master, do not disregard what he said, but keep it in your mind, **for it is true:** our nation cannot be punished, nor can the sword prevail against them, unless they sin against their God.

Achior’s original statements had provoked the outrage of Holofernes and his generals.

According to his Deuteronomistic theology, Israel can be defeated only when it sins.

Here Judith affirms the same theology -- but there is no outrage!

In fact, at the end of the speech Holofernes and his followers will praise her “wisdom!”

What a difference a pretty face makes!

11-15, Judith spins her tale. ¹¹ "And 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. ¹² Since their food supply is exhausted and their water has almost given out, they have planned to kill their cattle and have determined to use **all that God by his laws has forbidden them to eat**. ¹³ They have decided to consume the first fruits of the grain and the tithes of the wine and oil, which they had consecrated and set aside for the priests who minister in the presence of our God at Jerusalem -- although it is not lawful for any of the people so much as to touch these things with their hands. ¹⁴ They have sent men to Jerusalem, because even the people living there have been doing this, to bring back to them permission from the **senate**. ¹⁵ When the word reaches them and they proceed to do this, on that very day they will be handed over to you to be destroyed.

³ Lawrence M. Wills, [“The Book of Judith.”](#) in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 1154.

The Laws of God about Food.

Judith explains that the reason God is going to reject his people is that they will disobey the food laws. Every rabbi in the world today would make an exception to the food laws when starvation is the alternative. We have seen that the author of Hebrew Esther was **quite lax** on dietary laws. Did Judith belong to an unusually strict sect of Judaism?

Will the reading audience be encouraged to starve rather than to violate dietary laws?

I think it is more likely that this is one more of Judith's lies. The original audience probably thought it was hilarious.

V. 14, Senate / Council of Elders (*Gerousia*)

I was wondering whether to keep the RSV "senate" (also KJV, NAB) or change it to "Council of Elders (NABRE, NJB, NRSV).

The word *gerousia* is related to our word "gerontology," the study of old age.

Most people no longer see the link between "senate" and "senility" -- but I decided to let it stand.

16-19, Judith's Proposal. ¹⁶ "Therefore, when I, your servant, learned all this, I fled from them; and **God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world, as many as shall hear about them.** ¹⁷ For your servant is religious, and serves the God of heaven day and night; therefore, my lord, I will remain with you, and every night your servant will go out into the valley, and I will pray to God and he will tell me when they have committed their sins. ¹⁸ And I will come and tell you, and then you shall go out with your whole army, and not one of them will withstand you. ¹⁹ **Then I will lead you through the middle of Judea, till you come to Jerusalem;** and I will set your throne in the midst of it; and you will lead them like sheep that have no shepherd, and not a dog will so much as open its mouth to growl at you. For this has been told me, by my **foreknowledge**; it was announced to me, and **I was sent** to tell you."

Judith Is Posing as a Prophet. In Israelite thought, prophets are **God's Ambassadors**.

She claims: "**God has sent me**" and "**I was sent**" (i.e., by God). She also claims "foreknowledge."

Remember Isaiah's call: "Here I am, **send** me."

God's words to Jeremiah: "Whatever I command you, you shall speak; to whomever I **send** you, you shall go."

NT aside. When Jesus claimed that he was "**sent**" to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

People did not assume he had been "sent down from heaven."

Rather they assumed God had called him away from his "day job" for a special "mission"

Of all the Gospel portraits, only the **Johannine Jesus** claims to have come down from heaven.

V. 16, Truth in the Midst of Lies

God has indeed sent Judith to **accomplish astonishing things** -- but not the things Holofernes imagines!

He imagines that his easy victory will be astonishing.

He has no clue that his defeat by a woman is what will cause the astonishment.

V. 19, A half-truth: leading Holofernes to Jerusalem.

Judith will not lead Holofernes all the way to Jerusalem. But she **will** take his head on part of that journey!

Judith's Deuteronomistic Theology

Defeated in the Ancient Near East: a common assumption was that their god was too weak to defend them.

Prophetic-Deuteronomistic theology held that Israel's defeat was because their God was punishing them.

Wills (*NIB*) comments:

This theology would be laughable to a real adherent of the Assyrian gods, and in fact Holofernes had rejected it when it was spoken by Achior . . . (5:20–6:4). However, Holofernes readily accepts it from

Judith. Sensing an easy victory over her sexually and over her people as well, he need not quibble over theology.⁴

11:20-23, Holofernes Responds to Judith. ²⁰ Her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants, and they marveled at her wisdom and said, ²¹ "There is not such a woman from one end of the earth to the other, either for beauty of face or wisdom of speech!" ²² And Holofernes said to her, "**God has done well to send you before the people**, to lend strength to our hands and to bring destruction upon those who have slighted my lord. ²³ You are not only **beautiful in appearance**, but **wise in speech**; and if you do as you have said, **your God shall be my God**, and **you shall** live in the house of King Nebuchadnezzar and **be renowned throughout the whole world.**"

Your God shall be my God. These are the same words that Ruth said to Naomi (Ruth 1:16)

Most commentators have trouble imagining that Holofernes will convert to Judaism.

Perhaps this is just effusive oriental rhetoric?

Or perhaps Judith is not the only liar in the room? And this is part of his "line" to seduce her?

If so, Judith is not the only liar in the room. But she is the best liar!

God has done well to send you. Ironically, Holofernes here states the truth.

But the consequences -- the complete destruction of Israel -- he gets completely wrong!

This is part of the comedy that is so delightful to this author's the intended audience.

Beautiful in Appearance / Wise in Speech. A similar speech by Achior had been met with outrage.

Holofernes appears to be thinking with his hormones, not his brain!

You shall . . . be renowned throughout the whole world.

Again, to the delight & amusement of the reader, Holofernes unwittingly gets **half** the truth.

Judith will **not** live in the household of Nebuchadnezzar. She **will** be renowned throughout the whole world!

Week 61, Lecture 189. Judith, Guest of Holofernes, Judith Chapter 12

12:1-9, Judith Stays with Holofernes.

1-4, Judith's Food. Then he commanded them to bring her in where his silver dishes were kept, and ordered them to set a table for her with some of his own food and to serve her with his own wine. ² But Judith said, "I cannot eat it, lest it be an offense; but I will be provided from the things I have brought with me." ³ Holofernes said to her, "If your supply runs out, where can we get more like it for you? For none of your people is here with us." ⁴ Judith replied, "**As your soul lives, my lord, your servant will not use up the things I have with me before the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined to do.**"

Judith is in complete control.

She refuses to eat Holofernes food. His mind is befuddled by her beauty, so he goes along with her religious scruples. Her final words to him at their first meeting are marvelously ironic.

She promises divine action before her food runs out. Holofernes understands this as a promise of his military victory. His total cluelessness is a source of comedy. Wills notes that the book of Judith is:

"the most extended use of comedy in the Bible and combines both the "low" and "high" comedy of burlesque and satire."⁵

⁴ Wills, "Judith," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3, 1154–1155.

5-9, Judith Establishes a Routine. ⁵ Then the servants of Holofernes brought her into the tent, and she slept until midnight. Along toward the morning watch she arose ⁶ and sent to Holofernes and said, "Let my lord now command that your servant be permitted to go out and pray." ⁷ So Holofernes commanded his guards not to hinder her. And she remained in the camp for three days, and went out each night to the valley of Bethulia, and **bathed at the spring** in the camp. ⁸ When she came up from the spring she prayed the Lord God of Israel to direct her way for the raising up of her people. ⁹ So she **returned clean** and stayed in the tent until she ate her food toward evening.

Nightly Prayer

This is important for the story-line. It will enable Judith and her maid to escape without attracting notice.

Bathing. Scholars are not in agreement what this bathing was about.

A ritual bath was part of the piety espoused by the followers of John the Baptist and Jesus.

This bath, however, was **once in a lifetime, not repeated.**

A ritual bath was common at the end of a woman's menstrual cycle. But this would be only **once** a month.

Judith bathes every night.

The best analogy seems to come from the sectarians who dwelt at Qumran.

Their rule prescribed frequent ritual bathing. This type of piety seems to be influencing the actions of Judith.

12:10-20, Holofernes Invites Judith to His Banquet.

10 On the fourth day Holofernes held a banquet for his slaves [NRSV "personal attendants"] only, and **did not invite** any of his officers. **11** And he said to **Bagoas**, the eunuch who had charge of his personal affairs, "Go now and persuade the **Hebrew woman** who is in your care to join us and eat and drink with us. **12** For it will be a disgrace if we let such a woman go **without enjoying her company**, for if we do not **embrace her** she will laugh at us."

V. 10, Officers not invited. Holofernes is thinking this will give him more private time with Judith to seduce her. However, from Judith's point of view, the fewer soldiers present, the greater the chance of success.

Bagoas. Historically there was a Bagoas who served a General Holofernes (about 400 years **after** Assyrian rule) About 350 B.C. the Persian king Artaxerxes III invaded Asia Minor, Egypt, and Palestine. His general was named Holofernes, and Bagoas was one of his important officers. However, the Bagoas in the book of Judith is more of a comic buffoon.⁶

Hebrew Woman. This phrase occurs only 3 times in the entire Bible (checked RSV). Two of them are in Judith.⁷ I am not sure what to make of this, but I think it is worth noting. One of the first steps to understanding a passage is to "note what is peculiar." Sometimes I have thought about something for years -- or decades -- before I get an insight.

Without Enjoying Her Company, *homilēsantes*

Literally, without speaking with her. The Greek word is related to our word "homily." Our English word "intercourse" referred originally to "communications" between individuals or groups. It came to be used as a euphemism for sexual relations.⁸ An analogous process took place in Greek.

⁵ Wills, "Judith," 1155.

⁶ Wills, "Judith," 1101, 1158. Wills names the king Artaxerxes on p. 1101, but incorrectly calls him Antiochus on p. 1158. In the lecture I was uncertain about the pronunciation of the name Bagoas. In Greek the stress is on the middle syllable, **ba-GO-as**.

⁷ Deut 15:12, speaking of the treatment of slaves; Judith 12:11 (this verse) and Judith 14:18)

Embrace her, *epispaomai* is another euphemism.

Holofernes is being “direct” about his desires as he speaks to Bagoas, but he is not being crude.

13-15, Bagoas Invites Judith. ¹³ So Bagoas went out from the presence of Holofernes, and approached her and said, "This beautiful maidservant will please come to my lord and be honored in his presence, and drink wine and be merry with us, and **become today like one of the daughters of the Assyrians** who serve in the house of Nebuchadnezzar." ¹⁴ And Judith said, "**Who am I, to refuse my lord? Surely whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until the day of my death!**" ¹⁵ So she got up and arrayed herself in all her woman's finery, and her maid went and spread on the ground for her before Holofernes the soft fleeces which she had received from Bagoas for her daily use, so that she might recline on them when she ate.

V. 13. Become like an Assyrian Woman

Bagoas is thinks he is honoring her. He does not realize that the idea would be horrifying to Judith.

There is not even any dramatic tension here. Judith never considers deserting her people for a life of ease.

Who am I to refuse my lord? More delightful irony.

Holofernes & Bagoas understand: “Who am I to refuse my lord, General Holofernes?”

Judith means: “Who am I to refuse my Lord, the God of Heaven?”

Whatever pleases him I will do at once

Holofernes & Bagoas: “I will offer no resistance to whatever General Holofernes desires.”

Judith: “If God wants me to kill this sucker, I will do it right away!”

It will be a joy to me.

Holofernes & Bagoas: “I am getting hot just thinking about having sex with this great and powerful general.

Judith: “I am going to enjoy killing this fool.”

16-20, Judith at the Banquet. ¹⁶ Then Judith came in and lay down, and Holofernes' heart was ravished with her and he was moved with great desire to have sex with her; for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her, ever since the day he first saw her. ¹⁷ So Holofernes said to her. "Drink now, and be merry with us!" ¹⁸ Judith said, "**I will drink now, my lord, because my life means more to me today than in all the days since I was born.**" ¹⁹ Then she took and ate and drank before him **what her maid had prepared.** ²⁰ And Holofernes was greatly pleased with her, and drank a great quantity of wine, **much more than he had ever drunk** in any one day since he was born.

V. 17, “My life means more to me today than in all the days since I was born.”

The RSV translation is accurate and literal, but: “**Today is the greatest day of my whole life**” gets the spirit better.

I thought this up before I checked the NRSV and the NABRE, both of which use almost exactly the same words.

Judith eats and drinks “**what her maid had prepared.**”

Again -- unlike Hebrew Esther -- avoiding impure pagan food is a main theme of Judith.

V. 20, Holofernes is falling-down drunk.

The final line of the chapter can be paraphrased: “Holofernes was drunker than he had ever been in his entire life.”

This sets the scene for the next chapter.

⁸ The 2003 edition of *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* gives sexual relations as **meaning # 3** of this word.