

Judith

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

THE CONTEXT

The book of Judith tells the story of how a beautiful and righteous widow saved the nation of Judea from destruction by overwhelming forces. The book is clearly fiction and seems to want its readers to recognize that. It shows its disregard for real historical data by misidentifying characters and making other obvious errors. The most outstanding is that it identifies Nebuchadnezzar as the king of the Assyrians, whose capital was in Nineveh. Everyone who read this book would have known that Nebuchadnezzar was king of the Babylonians. It was his army that sacked Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE. The story of Judith also happens in 587, but in it, the empire's forces are defeated.

Judith was written sometime around 100 BCE, perhaps by an early Pharisee. In some ways, this book describes faithfulness or piety in ways that are coherent with what Pharisees teach. All of our extant copies are in Greek, but its style makes some people think it was originally written in Hebrew. Either way, it was a widely read book, so widely that it influenced the way that a later work (Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 30–31) told the Biblical story of Deborah, a story originally found in Judges 4–5.

SUMMARY

The first half of the book describes the enormous power of the armies of Nebuchadnezzar and their defeat of all who opposes them. Still, Judea refuses to send troops to help his army and so becomes a target of attack. The general sent to subject Judea is Holofernes. But before he gets there, Achior, a leader of one of Judea's neighbors, gives a speech in which he very briefly recounts the history of the Israelites from Abraham to the sixth century BCE. Then he warns Holofernes that he cannot defeat Judea unless the Israelites have sinned against God. The general rejects this advice and promises to kill Achior after his victory; he even sends him to live among the people of Judea as part of his punishment for this prediction. Holofernes then prepares for war and moves on Judea.

The second half of the book is Judea's reaction, mostly Judith's reaction, to the arrival of the army. Overall, the people are afraid and are sure of defeat. But they are convinced to hold out in the face of a siege for five more days to see if the Lord would intervene. Judith now goes to the elders and, after chastising them for putting a time limit on God, promises that God will do something through her. After praying, she puts on her sexiest clothes and goes to visit Holofernes. Still she remains faithful to God, even taking her own food so that she obeys the kosher food regulations. She proceeds to impress the general with her beauty and wisdom. On the fourth day in the enemy's camp, Holofernes decides it is time to seduce her. He has a more elaborate banquet than on the earlier days and Judith gets him to drink heavily. He drinks so much that he passes out. When everyone else leaves the tent, thinking that Holofernes would now seduce her, Judith takes his sword and cuts off his head. She and her servant then sneak out of camp with the head.

When she gets to the gates of her city, Bethulia, she shows the leaders the severed head of Holofernes. She then gives instructions on how the army of the city should arrange itself and when it should attack. When the "Assyrian" army discovers the headless Holofernes, they are disorganized and flee. The army of Bethulia then chases them and kills them, and takes their possessions. The "Assyrian" army then withdraws from Judea.

DIGGING DEEPER

The central point of this tale is that God is the ruler of the whole cosmos. While Nebuchadnezzar claims to be ruler of the world, the defeat of his army shows otherwise. The point is made all the more clearly because the defeat comes at the hand of a woman. In the world of the text, this makes her a person of little power and it was certainly shameful for a warrior to be killed by a woman. But more than that, this woman is a widow, who was in an even more vulnerable state than most women. In addition, the mighty army of the empire is defeated by the forces of a small town in Judea. Clearly, the victory belongs to God. The book also affirms that God blesses and rescues those who are faithful.