

BIBLICAL WOMEN: JUDITH

The Book of Judith tells of a heroine who thwarts the siege of a Jewish city by the Assyrian army. Although the setting is in the 6th Century B.C., the book was likely composed as early as the 1st Century B.C. and not later than the 1st Century A.D. It is replete with historical and geographic anomalies, a clear indication of its fictitious nature. It was meant to teach a lesson about fidelity to God, not to be a factual account.

The first half of the book sets the stage for Judith's actions. The Assyrian commander, Holofernes, was devastating the nations that had refused to join with his king in a war against the Medes. Even those who willingly submitted were destroyed, along with their sacred objects, for only King Nebuchadnezzar was to be worshipped as god. When the Jews resisted, he laid siege to a key city, intending to starve them into submission. After 34 days, they were ready to surrender, sure that this was God's punishment for their sins. The leaders, however, convinced the people to give God five more days to rescue them, and if he failed to, then they would surrender.

Judith – the name means “a Jewish woman” – a God-fearing widow, confronted the leaders for giving God an ultimatum to act. Rather than sit waiting, she asked them to let the Lord act through her to rescue Israel. After imploring God for assistance so that she could show his power and protection for Israel, she and her maid left the city and went to the enemy's camp. She used her beauty to captivate Holofernes, deceiving him by saying that God would deliver the Jewish people into his hands because of their sins. For three days, she followed a routine of prayer, bathing and eating the food she brought with her. On the fourth day, the commander invited her to his banquet, and she proceeded to charm him into a drunken stupor. As he slept, she took his sword, prayed for strength, and beheaded him. Then she and her maid put the head in her food bag and returned to their city. When the Assyrians discovered his headless body the next morning, they panicked and the Jewish warriors attacked and routed them.

Judith was acclaimed by the people as the one through whom God saved Israel. The book ends with Judith leading the community in a lengthy hymn of thanksgiving and praise to God for using his power to rescue his people. After 3 months of celebration, Judith returned home and lived as a pious widow to the age of 105, with no one disturbing Israel during her lifetime and for years afterward.

The Book of Judith clearly proclaims God's unsurpassed power and his continuing care for his people, who are to trust in him without question. It served as a reminder of the need for covenant fidelity, especially when confronted by secular powers. Trust God, don't challenge him. Let faith overcome fear.