

JUDITH

Theme: Judith

Keywords: Judith, Holofernes, Betulia, Old Testament, Christian iconography, Late Middle Ages

Summary: Judith's story begins with the Assyrian army besieging the city of Betulia in Israel. Nebuchadnezzar sent his general, Holofernes, to destroy their enemies instigating them to not take any prisoners. With this in mind, Holofernes cut all the supply routes of the city and posted troops in the springs that provided water to the inhabitants of Betulia. Faced with such adversity, the Jews living in the city began to despair and to consider surrender in order to save their life. When they decided that after five days they would open the doors of Betulia, a woman, Judith, the widow of Manasseh, rebelled against this idea and told her countrymen that God had not abandoned them and that they should give her three days before opening the gates of the city. With the blessing of the elders, Judith removed her widow's clothes and adorned herself with the finest silks and jewels. She called one of her servants and, after preparing a substantial meal and a good wine, both of them left the city and headed for the enemy camp. The two women were arrested by Assyrian soldiers and after a brief interrogation, where Judith informed them that she would betray her people so that the Assyrian army could conquer Betulia, they were taken immediately before the general Holofernes. He was glad at the treachery of Judith and was charmed by her beauty. He assigned a tent to the Jewish woman and her maid and asked Judith at what time would she give the desired information. Judith told him that for three days she would pray at dawn and dusk and when so directed by God she would inform the general. Judith asked the general to not be disturbed by the soldiers when she went to pray and Holofernes granted her request. However, Holofernes was obsessed with the beauty of the woman and invited her to lie with him by her own free will. Judith agreed and, when they were in his tent, she gave him her own food and invited him to drink a substantial amount of wine. Holofernes, drunk, decided to lie on his bed. Then Judith took the general's sword and with two accurate blows she severed his head. After the deed, she called her servant and asked her to put his head in a basket. After the two of them left at dawn as if to pray, the soldiers did not disturb oblivious to the fact that their general was dead. Early in the morning, the Assyrian soldiers gathered to attack the city but they soon learned the grim news: the head of his general was in a stake in front of the gates of Betulia. The army panicked and fled, so that they became easy prey for the Israeli army.

Attributes and types of representation: Judith may appear as an isolated figure or as part of a larger narrative cycle. When she appears as an isolated figure she is represented with a sword in her right hand while holding the head of Holofernes on the left, or by introducing the general's head into the basket of her servant, or with her foot over the head of her victim. Judith appears in some instances accompanied by a dog, which would be the symbol of fidelity to her husband Manasseh.¹ As part of an iconographic cycle Judith may appear in the following scenes²: Judith reproaching Oziah's consent to surrender the city of Betulia to the

¹ Louis Réau (2000), *Iconografía del Arte Cristiano. Iconografía de la Biblia. El Antiguo Testamento*, Barcelona, Ediciones del Serbal, p. 382. Reau mentioned that from the Renaissance in both Italy and Germany, artists began to represent Judith completely naked, although in the narrative it was established that to seduce Holofernes, Judith wore her most beautiful clothes and ornaments and Bible commentators extolled her untamed virtue as an inconsolable widow that did not allow any room for evil gossip.

² Ibid., pp. 383-387. There are three other scenes that are part of the cycle but which rarely shows Judith. The first is when Aquior, an Assyrian soldier, tries to deter Holofernes from attacking the Israelites, and then he is

Assyrians, the prayer of Judith, Judith leaves Betulia with her maid Abra, Judith visits Holofernes at the enemy camp and Judith makes him drunk during the meal, Judith beheads Holofernes, Judith introduces the severed head in the basket of her handmaiden, the return to Betulia, Judith shows the people of Betulia the head of Holofernes that is later hanged on the walls of the city. Amongst all these scenes, the most represented one in the history of art is the episode that reflects the drama of the crime in the tent of Holofernes.

Primary sources: The Book of Judith was probably composed in the second century AD during the Maccabean period. According Réau, it had to be made after the return from the Babylonian captivity because the story of the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem is mentioned. In addition, the rabbinic tradition makes Judith a relative of Judas Maccabee. This and the fact that the story is filled with a fighting spirit and a fierce hatred toward the foreign invader speak in favor of this era. Judith's book was excluded from the Hebrew canon because there are some anachronisms and historical and geographical inconsistencies that questioned the historical authenticity of the book.³ The true identity of the main protagonists is also questioned.⁴ According to Réau, the book of Judith is a patriotic fiction without historical foundation since Flavius Josephus, the writer of *Judaic Antiquities*, did not know this book. If he had known, Josephus would not have been deprived of glorifying this national hero⁵. None of these reasons prevented the Fathers of the Church to include the book of Judith in the Bible, thus making it one of the Christian canonical texts⁶. Despite all these differences of opinion, the book of Judith is one of the most popular stories, if not the most popular one, from the Old Testament.

- *The Book of Judith*⁷. A copy of this book can be accessed online at the following website http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28King_James%29/Judith. (Last accessed on May 3rd, 2011).
- *First Epistle of Clement*, Chapter 55: "The blessed Judith, when her city was besieged, asked of the elders permission to go forth into the camp of the strangers; and, exposing herself to danger, she went out for the love which she bare to her country and people then besieged; and the Lord delivered Holofernes into the hands of a woman". [A copy can be found online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-roberts.html> accessed on May 27th, 2011].
- Ambrose of Milan, *Condemning Widows*⁸, 7:38: "So then, holy Judith strengthened by lengthened mourning and by daily fasting, sought not the enjoyments of the world regardless of danger, and strong in her contempt for death."

tied to a tree and whipped. The second is the discovery of the decapitated body of the general by his soldiers. The third and final scene is the Assyrian army, shocked to see the head of Holofernes in the walls of Betulia, lifting the siege of the city and escaping.

³ Erika Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia en la pintura del Barroco: Imágenes de la ambigüedad*, Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid, p. 42. Scholars do not agree regarding the reason for this exclusion, and they also cite the fact that the work was originally composed in Greek, not Hebrew.

⁴ For a longer discussion on this subject see E.L. Hicks (1885), "Judith and Holofernes", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 6, pp. 261-274.

⁵ Réau (2000), *Iconografía del Arte Cristiano...*, p. 381. According to Réau the name Judith (Jehudith) means the Jewish woman, and she appears to be more the embodiment of her people rather than a real person: she would be the personification of Judaism. The city of Betulia is unknown to geographers. Its Hebrew name, that is Beth Eola, literally means House of God, and it could also be understood as another symbol; and there was never an Assyrian general called Holofernes."

⁶ Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia...*, p. 41, also mentions that Martin Luther also understood the book of Judith as an allegory, not as history, so it was placed among the other apocryphal texts outside the canon of the Old Testament of the Protestant Bible.

⁷ Francisco Cantera Burgos, y Manuel Iglesias González (2000), *Sagrada Biblia: Versión crítica sobre los textos hebreo, arameo y griego*. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid.

- Rabanus Maurus, *Expositionem in Librum Judit*⁹ (9th century). [A copy in Latin can be found online at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5494189s/f297.image> accessed on May 27th, 2011].
- Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*¹⁰, Paradise, Canto XXXII (14th century):

The wound that Mary closed up and anointed,
She at her feet who is so beautiful,
She is the one who opened it and pierced it.

Within that order which the third seats make
Is seated Rachel, lower than the other,
With Beatrice, in manner as thou seest.

Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, and her who was
Ancestress of the Singer, who for dole
Of the misdeed said, 'Miserere mei,'

Canst thou behold from seat to seat descending
Down in gradation, as with each one's name
I through the Rose go down from leaf to leaf.

- Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*¹¹, *The Merchant* (14th century): "Lo Judith, as the story telle can, by good counsel she Godde's people kept, and slew him, Holofernes, while he slept."
- Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The tale of Melibee* (14th century): "Judith, by hire good conseil, delivered the citee of Bethulie, in which she dwelled, out of the handes of Olofernus, that hadde it biseged and wolde have al destroyed it."

Other sources, non-written sources: Little can be said of the non-written sources that may have influenced the creation of this iconographic theme. This episode is not associated to any liturgical program that may have influenced its development. However, in the Jewish tradition, the figure of Judith is associated with the festival of Hanukkah and she is the only character portrayed in art objects intended for religious rituals¹².

Geographical and chronological framework: The oldest depiction of Judith is only known through literary sources. Judith appeared, alongside Esther, in the decoration of the portico of the basilica of St. Felix at Nola (Italy), built in the fifth century¹³. In the eighth century, she appears on the walls of the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, where we find a fresco of the return to Betulia with Judith carrying the Head of Holofernes. In France, Charles the Bald commissioned a Bible (BnF¹⁴, Ms. Lat. 2), circa 870, which collects in the form of a narrative cycle three episodes of the story of Judith. In the tenth century Albigenian manuscript of the

⁸ Ambrosio de Milán (1999). Domingo Ramo-Lissón. ed. *Sobre las vírgenes y sobre las viudas*, Madrid, Editorial Ciudad Nueva.

⁹ Jacques Paul Migne, ed. (1844-1855), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, Vol. 109, Paris, pp. 593-635.

¹⁰ Dante Alighieri (1304-1321; 2009), *The Divine Comedy*, translated into English can be found in http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Divine_Comedy/Paradiso.

¹¹ Geoffrey Chaucer (1380?-; 2004), *Los cuentos de Canterbury*, Jesús L. Serrano Reyes y Antonio R. León Sendra, trad., Madrid, Gredos. An online copy can be found in wikisource at the following address http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Canterbury_Tales

¹² Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia...*, p. 42.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 43-44.

¹⁴ BnF is an abbreviation of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Old Testament (BnF, Ms. Lat. 94) created in Paris shows the story of Judith beheading Holofernes. This same imagery can be found in Catalonia in the Bible of Sant Pere de Rodes (or de Noailles) (BnF, Ms. 77,158) from the eleventh century. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages, the figure of Judith beheading Holofernes is a constant in a large number of Parisian, Flemish, English, German, Spanish and Italian Bibles. Another interesting example is that of a twelfth-century German manuscript entitled *Hortus Deliciarum* (Garden of Delights), whose author and illuminator was none other than the abbess of the convent of Saint Otilia Honenberg, Herrad of Lansberg¹⁵. In the church of La Magdeleine of Vezelay (France), Judith appears in a capital of the nave in this same century. In the thirteenth century, we can see the whole iconographic cycle on the archivolt in the north door of the Cathedral of Chartres. Also we can find an iconographic cycle from this time period in the windows of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Since the establishment in the thirteenth century of the typological manuscripts of the *Biblia Pauperum* and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* in the fourteenth century, the iconography of Judith is further extended throughout the geography of Europe. Considered two of the most popular books of the Middle Ages, both the *Biblia Pauperum* and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* are manuscripts that emphasize the typological parallels between the Old and New Testaments¹⁶. Both manuscripts were used mainly as a teaching tool¹⁷. Therefore we can conclude that the figure of Judith was a popular figure from the fifth century to the present day in almost the entire European continent.

Artistic media and techniques: Judith's story is depicted in a wide range of artistic media such as sculpture, mural painting, miniatures, sumptuary arts, as well as in stained glass windows and tapestries.

Precedents, transformations, and projection: The story of Judith is a Hebrew original story, and it was composed either in Hebrew or Greek, and therefore has no precedent in the Greco-Roman world. Her figure underwent a major transformation throughout the Middle Ages, first in medieval texts and then in the images that reflected the ideas behind those texts. The first commentary on the book of Judith was done by Hrabanus Maurus in the ninth century. In this text Judith is presented as a model of Christian virtue, that is as an allegory of Justice, Humility and Chastity. Around 1000, the book of Judith entered England alongside Beowulf in the Nowell Codex¹⁸. At the same time and at the same place, Aelfric of Eynsham wrote a homily regarding Judith. These two texts show two versions of the figure of Judith: first, she appears as a brave warrior, strong and active in the epic poem, while in the homily Judith is an example of chastity and piety to the nuns. It is from the thirteenth century when Judith starts to be represented either as an allegory of the triumph of the Church or as the prefiguring the Virgin Mary who triumphs over evil. This last interpretation is represented in the so-called Bible of Pamplona, now in the Augsburg University Library. In this Bible the return to Betulia with Judith holding the Head of Holofernes is depicted with a picture of the fall of Satan. This has been interpreted, especially when taking into account the geographical and historical space

¹⁵ Frances G. Godwin (1949): "The Judith Illustration of the Hortus Deliciarum", *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 36, pp. 25-47. The manuscript was created towards 1167 and was not a Bible but an anthology of passages from Scripture, a selection of texts of the Church Fathers and other secular philosophers. The abbess dedicated special attention to the figure of Judith. One of her illuminations show a continuous narrative of Judith cutting off the head of Holofernes accompanied by her maid, the return to Betulia and the head of Holofernes appears suspended from a spear leaning against the outer walls of the city. It is noteworthy that the manuscript was destroyed during the bombardment of Strasbourg in the Second World War and is now known through copies that were created in 1818.

¹⁶ Michelle P. Brown (1994), *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum in association with The British Library, p. 21.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Andy Orchard (2003), *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

where the Bible was executed, as an allegory of the struggle and hope of liberation of Christian Spain from Muslim rule¹⁹. This interpretation imbues Judith with an extra allegorical level. From the fifteenth century onwards, the figure of Judith is going to have a political dimension after she was chosen as an allegory of civic virtue and the symbol of the struggle for freedom and independence of the city of Florence (Italy)²⁰. It is at this moment, after Judith is interpreted as a political symbol, when she begins a metamorphosis in which Judith eventually will become the paradigm of the licentious and sinful woman, that is, one of those *femmes fatales* who with her cunning and beauty brought down a man. So Judith began to be absorbed by the eroticism of the Renaissance and ended up being displayed naked-far removed from those first representations of her as Chastity and Humility or prefiguring the Virgin Mary²¹.

Typology and related themes: Within the typological system Judith killing Holofernes appears as the prefiguration of the Virgin Mary that triumphs over evil. In this system, Judith is also accompanied by Yael who killed Sisera by driving a stake through his head or Queen Tomyris introducing the head of Cyrus in a vase of blood. Judith has also been considered an allegory of the triumph of the Church²². On the other hand, the Oziah receiving a victorious Judith bringing the head of Holofernes to Betulia became the prefiguration of the Visitation of the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth. This is because just the in the same way that Judith appears victorious over the Assyrian general so does Elizabeth receives the Virgin Mary triumphant over Satan. Judith will also be the symbol of *Sanctimonia*, that is of chastity and humility that triumphs over lust and pride, sins embodied by the figure of Holofernes²³.

Images:

- Judith takes Holofernes' head to Betulia. Historiated capital from the nave. Basilica of Mary Magdalene of Vézelay, France. 12th century.
- The Toby and Judith stained-glass window, Sainte-Chapelle, Île-de-France, Paris (France), 13th century.
- Judith and Holofernes. Initial A. Bible. England, probably Gloucester. ca. 1240. Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. G18, fol. 151v.
- Judith. North portal. Cathedral of Nôtre-Dame de Chartres. 13th century.
- Judith and Holofernes. Initial A. Bible. Palermo, Italy. 14th century. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. G. 60, fol. 279r.
- Judith displays the head of Holofernes to his army from the walls of Betulia. Bible. Paris, France. 1400-1425. The Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 395, fol. 9v.
- Judith takes to Betulia Holofernes' head. Typological Tables. Bruges, Belgium. ca. 1400. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, MS. 649, fol. 4r.
- Judith and Holofernes. *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. Bruges, Belgium. 1455. Glasgow, Glasgow University Library, MS. Hunter 60.
- Judith appears before Holofernes. Bible Historiale. Paris, France. 15th century. New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 394, fol. 204v.

¹⁹ Bornay (1998), *Mujeres de la Biblia...*, p. 44.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

²¹ Ibid., p. 46.

²² Ibid., pp. 44-45.

²³ Réau (2000), *Iconografía del Arte Cristiano*, pp. 381-382.

- Judith and Holofernes. Fresco painting in the interior of the Church of Our Lady of Eriskirch, Germany, ca.1410-1420.

Bibliography:

- ALIGHIERI, Dante (1304-1321): *La Divina Comedia*. Conde de Cheste, trad., Madrid, Mestas, 2009.
- AMBROSIO de Milán (1999): *Sobre las vírgenes y sobre las viudas*. Domingo Ramo-Lissón. ed. Madrid, Editorial Ciudad Nueva.
- BORNAY, Erika (1998): *Mujeres de la Biblia en la pintura del Barroco: Imágenes de la ambigüedad*. Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid.
- BROWN, Michelle P. (1994): *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Los Ángeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum in association with The British Library.
- CANTERA BURGOS, Francisco e IGLESIAS GONZÁLEZ, Manuel (2000): *Sagrada Bible: Versión crítica sobre los textos hebreo, arameo y griego*. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid.
- CHAUCER, Geoffrey (1380?-; 2004): *Los cuentos de Canterbury*. Jesús L. Serrano Reyes y Antonio R. León Sendra, trad. Madrid, Gredos.
- HICKS, E.L. (1885): "Judith and Holofernes", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 6, pp. 261-274.
- LOWDEN, John (2000): *The Making of the Bible Moralised: I. The Manuscripts*. The Pennsylvania State University, University Park.
- MIGNE, Jacques Paul, ed. (1844-1855): *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, Vol. 109, Paris.
- ORCHARD, Andy (2003): *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- RÉAU, Louis (2000) (1ª ed. 1957). *Iconografía del arte cristiano. Iconografía de la Biblia. El Antiguo Testamento*. Ediciones del Serbal, Barcelona.
- WILSON, Adrian y LANCASTER, Joyce (1984): *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis 1324-1500*. Berkeley, The University of California Press.

Author and e-mail: Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo, mawalk01@ghis.ucm.es