



# Judith

## Transcript

### Introduction

00:00-00:52

The book of Judith. It's the thrilling story of an Israelite woman's courageous faith in God that topples an evil empire.

The events of Judith's story are set in Israel of the 7th and 6th centuries B.C., when Jerusalem was threatened and attacked by the empires of Assyria and then Babylon.

But the anonymous author who wrote the book lived hundreds of years later, sometime in the 2nd to 1st century B.C. This was when Jews around Jerusalem were under the oppressive empires of Greece and then Syria.

In the author's recent memory is the Syrian king Antiochus who declared that he was a god. He attacked Jews in Jerusalem and then defiled the temple. This resulted in the famous Maccabean revolt, a successful Jewish rebellion against their Syrian oppressors. You can go read the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees for the whole story.

### A Mega-Enemy and a Mega-Heroine

00:53-02:41

The author of Judith wanted to help people understand the meaning of these recent events, and so he wrote a parallel story inspired by ancient biblical events.

This explains a number of unique features about the book. For example, the story opens by introducing the bad guys, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Assyria, and his military general, Holofernes.

But Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon, not Assyria, and Holofernes was a general in the empire of Persia, which came long after Assyria.

But this is not a mistake by the author. Rather, he's intentionally combined three of the most oppressive empires from the biblical story into one mega-enemy. They've become a symbol for any prideful and violent ruler that acts like they're God, just like Antiochus of recent memory.

Nearly every scene and character in the book of Judith has symbolic meaning based on earlier biblical predecessors, even Judith herself.

Her name in Hebrew means "Jewish Woman," and almost all of her words and actions are patterned after courageous figures in the Hebrew Scriptures who also had showdowns with foreign leaders.

Judith is Deborah, Jael, Esther, Moses, David, and Daniel, all combined into one mega-heroine.

Through this showdown of mega-characters, the author of Judith is reflecting on a key theme in the whole biblical story about the surprising ways that God's Kingdom overturns the violent empires of our world.

The book of Judith wasn't considered part of the Hebrew Scriptures in Jewish tradition or in later Protestant tradition, but in the early centuries of the Christian movement, the book's Greek translation was widespread and really popular. And so today, it's part of the Catholic and Orthodox Deuterocanon collections.

## **A Prayer for Mercy**

**02:42-03:43**

Let's dive into the story.

It begins with King Nebuchadnezzar, who is full of himself one day, so he declares war on his eastern neighbor, the Medes. And so he forces the smaller kingdoms around him in the east to help him fight.

But then he also summons the western kingdoms that include the Israelites. They all refuse to join Nebuchadnezzar's alliance, and this makes him really mad. So he declares that when he's done crushing the Medes, he'll destroy these rebellious western nations.

He appoints his second-in-command, Holofernes, as a military general to go defeat and enslave these rebel nations to make them worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god. And most of the nations do surrender, but not the Israelites. When they hear about Holofernes and his armies, they fast and pray, asking God to show mercy, to save their temple, and to keep them from ending up in exile again.

And while we read that God hears their prayer, we're not told how he's going to deliver them. You have to keep on reading.

## A Lesson on God's Power

03:44-04:59

Holofernes and his armies arrive to confront the rebel Israelites. He asked the neighboring kings, "Who are these Israelites and who's their ruler?"

It's Achior, the king of the Ammonites, who speaks up. He retells the biblical story of how Israel's God defeated Egypt and saved them in exodus and how he handed Israel over to defeat and exile in Babylon because of their sins. Achior warns Holofernes that he won't be able to overcome these people unless Israel's God allows it.

Notice the irony. This is a non-Israelite king giving Holofernes a Bible study lesson on God's power.

But Holofernes is not amused. He honors King Nebuchadnezzar as the all-powerful god, and so he banishes Achior to the hills of Israel to be killed in the coming attack.

Holofernes' army assembles at the foot of a mountain pass so they can gain entry into Israel, but there's one thing standing in their way, the Israelite hill town of Bethulia.

When the Israelites living there see this massive army, they freak out. And they test God by saying if they're not saved within five days, they're going to surrender.

And right as things look totally helpless, the author introduces Judith.

## A Widow With Radical Faith

04:59-05:56

She's an Israelite widow in Bethulia who trusts God with radical faith. She hears of this plan to surrender to Holofernes, and she confronts the town leaders saying that Nebuchadnezzar's army is nothing compared to God's power and wisdom.

She recalls how God tested the Israelites' faith in the past. This is one more chance to trust God in the face of evil.

The leaders asked Judith to pray for all of Israel, and so she does.

It's a majestic prayer, combining phrases from poems all over the Hebrew Scriptures about how God helps the weak and how he loves to overturn the power structures of our world.

God exalts the humiliated and humiliates the exalted. Judith asks God to grant her success, and then she announces to her people that she has a secret plan to turn the destructive power of this great empire back onto itself.

And from here on, the story's full of creative ironies and reversals.

## A Crafty Plan

05:57-07:33

Judith dresses up like a queen, and she marches down into the army camp to speak with Holofernes. When the powerful general sees Judith, he's overpowered by his desire, and he's easily taken in by her crafty plan.

Judith tells Holofernes that he can't defeat the Israelites unless their God allows it, and God will allow Holofernes to win as long as he lets Judith leave the camp every night to pray. Then she'll tell him when to attack.

Judith says, with deep sarcasm, "God has sent me to do something with you that will astonish the whole world," and Holofernes has no clue.

But he's thrilled, and he agrees to her plan.

Then he invites Judith to a great feast.

Remember the story of Esther and Haman? The wine is flowing, and Holofernes gets so drunk that this master of armies is unable to master his own passions. He sends everyone out of the tent except Judith in the hopes of getting into bed with her, but then he promptly falls asleep.

Judith sees her chance.

And just like the biblical stories of Jael and Sisera, or David and Goliath, in the darkness of Holofernes' tent, she takes his sword and chops off his head.

The irony is rich.

Instead of Holofernes taking Judith to bed, Judith takes off Holofernes' head. Then Judith sneaks out of the camp with Holofernes' head in a bag, and she goes to Bethulia.

After showing his head to everybody, she orders the Israelite troops to get ready for battle.

In the morning, when the armies discover that Holofernes is dead, they scatter in disarray and are easily defeated by the Israelites.

## A New Moses

07:34-08:11

The book concludes with a victory parade and a long poem celebrating Judith and praising Israel's God for saving them.

The poem portrays Judith as a new Moses who brought about a new exodus from slavery and oppression. In a great reversal, this lone widow brought down an imperial army through her shrewd wisdom and her trust in God.

The poem's final line sticks out as the words of the people around Judith become the words of the book's author, asking God to vindicate his people before all corrupt and violent nations.

And so the story ends.

## **A Pattern of Hope**

08:12-09:01

The book of Judith was written after the Israelites had suffered for centuries under the oppressive rule of ancient empires.

The author was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and he saw within them a pattern of hope.

For him, the biblical Babylon was an image of all arrogant human kingdoms that will one day fall by their own corruption.

And Judith is a symbol of the way God raises up unlikely deliverers like Moses, Deborah, David, or Esther.

The author of Judith read the Hebrew Scriptures as a pointer to future hope, that one day God would send the ultimate unlikely deliverer to rescue God's people and overcome the evil that lurks behind violent human empires.

And that's what the book of Judith is all about.