

A COMPLICATED WOMAN:  
MEANINGS OF PIETY AND  
TRANSGRESSION IN THE BOOK OF  
JUDITH

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the definitions and meanings of piety and transgression in the Book of Judith as an interpretation of the book. Focusing primarily on the second half of Judith, the thesis claims that the meanings of these two concepts shift and change during the course of the narrative. Piety is understood to be what is right and appropriate in regards to religious faith, observance, and social norms and expectations. Transgression is understood to be violations of these religious beliefs, practices, and norms.

There are five chapters in this work: an introduction to the topic, background on the book of Judith, the key concepts and methodology for interpretation, interpretation of selections from Judith 8-16, and a conclusion of the project. The goal of this thesis is to recognize and track the two concepts in this unique Second Temple period Jewish work. The book of Judith presents a narrative with particular features. While many of these features, such as murder, deceit, and a woman leveraging her sexuality, do appear in biblical texts, the combination and extent of these elements in Judith make it a unique book. Instead of moralizing, demonizing, or valorizing the title character and the story itself, this thesis aims to explore these shifting elements in relation to right and wrong in the narrative with curiosity. The contribution of this work is to track the multiple meanings of piety and transgression as opposed to seeking to create one definition for Judith as a whole.

The resources used for this thesis include the book of Judith, a wide range of biblical texts as comparative sources, modern commentaries on the book of Judith, and historical research on biblical and Second Temple history, religious practice, and gender norms. In addition, the thesis also relies on sociological theories for understanding traditional women's religious roles and piety.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>I. Background on the Book of Judith.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>II. Key Concepts and Methodology.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>III. Interpretation of Judith 8-16.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>IV. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>74</b>

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## Introduction

“Who will save us now?” The Book of Judith seems to cry out with this exact sentiment of fictionalized despair. A national and local crisis unfolds, no one knows what to do, and all seems lost. If only a hero would come and save us all.

Enter Judith.

The Book of Judith presents the reader with a frightening world: a threatening army prepares to invade the tiny nation yet again. The wells have dried up and the people are thirsty and hungry, and the community leaders, even the High Priest, have nearly given up hope in divine salvation. The story the audience witnesses is a gripping, fictionalized tale of an unlikely heroine defeating an enemy greater than all the nations of the world. Even outside of the blatantly ahistorical features,<sup>1</sup> the story of Judith reads like good fiction with its dramatic framing and timely rescues. And like some good stories, Judith also includes scenes of graphic violence, vulgar deception, and manipulative sexuality. However, this text is not simply a secular example of good literature. Rather, Judith stands as a Jewish religious source that was preserved, though sometimes ambivalently, by religious communities for hundreds of years and incorporated into Jewish holiday practices. How should we interpret the message and purpose of this work?

The Book of Judith does in fact function as a religious text, demonstrating praiseworthy piety from the widow-heroine and proper faith in God in times of crisis. Indeed, Judith’s piety serves as a key, if not central, element of the narrative. Nearly every character who encounters her in the book and the narrator describe Judith as exceptionally pious. Yet she operates as the heroine in a covert mission that includes manipulating and effectively

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<sup>1</sup> See *Historical Setting*.

seducing a foreign general, and finally cutting off his head with his own sword as he lies incapacitated from wine on his bed. In the interpretation of this story, message, and purpose, the definitions of piety and transgression sit at the core: what is piety? What is transgression? Is there a distinction for transgressive acts done for the sake of piety? Answering these questions might be more difficult than it would appear, given the style and literary features of the work. The meanings of piety and transgression and the boundary between the two is not so neat and clean.

The fictionalized world that the book presents has been turned on its head as communal leaders and institutions of Israel crumble in the face of the approaching Assyrian army. When Judith enters the story at the peak of the crisis, the normative strategies and resources of the traditional military, religious, and political leaders and institutions are no longer effective in this extreme context. Here, national defeat, enslavement, and slaughter appears inevitable, and the powers that would protect the people do not offer much hope or protection. Under these severe circumstances, the line between right and wrong is pushed and perhaps even shattered because the normal rules will result in travesty. The book of Judith offers an exploration of how these boundaries of piety and transgression are impacted by such dire circumstances.

In addition to the narrative context, the style of Judith, with its series of reversals, reveals, irony, double entendres, and endless biblical allusions, creates changing meanings and boundaries of piety and transgression throughout the book. The text complexly layers together so many allusions, echoes, and hints that it speaks four meanings at once, and even these initial meanings end up flipped on their heads as the narrative progresses. Therefore, there are multiple meanings of piety and transgression that reverse and flip along the way. In

the following interpretation, instead of trying to precisely define each concept, I will attempt to identify and track the shifting meanings throughout.

For the purpose of this project, I will focus mainly on the second half of the book: chapters 8-16. Though the richness and artistic beauty of the first seven chapters has been highlighted in recent scholarship,<sup>2</sup> my exploration of the text concentrates on the final nine chapters that pick up the literary foundation laid in the first half: the first part of the book sets the stage of a world turned on its head by national crisis but the flipping back around happens primarily once Judith emerges onto the scene. I will try to identify the significant elements in the first half of Judith to highlight the impact of the ironic reversals and plays on biblical allusions that take place in the second. Indeed, my interpretation of the book relies upon the book's audience knowing the larger context and which traps have or must be laid. While the meanings of piety and transgression are first presented in those first chapters, the implications and continued unfolding of those meanings come to fruition after chapter 7, though most clearly in chapters 11-14.

## **I. Background on the Book of Judith:**

### *Structure:*

The Book of Judith comprises sixteen chapters that follow the plot from the beginning of the national crisis to the neat and joyful conclusion and aftermath. The first seven chapters introduce the serious threat in the plot and the evil characters. The final nine chapters present the heroine and follow her brave, risky, and potentially morally problematic

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<sup>2</sup> See Toni Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983).

actions, which are ultimately successful. At the end, the Jewish people rejoice in their salvation.

Schematic structure:

#### I. Chapters 1-7: The Looming Crisis:

A. Chapter 1: Introduction of framing problem of the narrative: Nebuchadnezzar succeeds in war but wants revenge against the entire region for deserting him.

B. Chapters 2-3: Nebuchadnezzar plots plan of revenge against his former allies, places Holofernes as general of Assyrian army. Holofernes begins vengeance campaign throughout the region, destroys local religious sites, places Nebuchadnezzar as sole deity for worship.

C. Chapter 4: The Israelites in Judea hear of the destruction, leaders prepare. The high priest declares mourning prayers, and the people put on sackcloth and ashes and pray.

D. Chapters 5-6:9: Holofernes wants to learn more about the Israelites, Achior the Ammonite tells their story. Holofernes angry that Achior claims they cannot be defeated.

E. Chapter 6:10-21: Achior is thrown out of the Assyrian camp and taken into Bethulia. Local leaders believe his story shows God will protect them, the elders celebrate alone.

F. Chapter 7: Holofernes breaks camps, besieges Bethulia. Running out of food and water, local leaders declare to wait five days for God to save them before surrender.

#### II. Chapters 8-16: The Heroine's Rescue Mission:

A. Chapter 8:1-8: Introduction of Judith, the heroine, on her pedigree and piety.

B. Chapter 8:9-36: Judith summons the elders to her, scolds them for testing God with a timeframe, declares the people have not sinned and God will save them. Tells leaders she has a plan and to stay out of her way. They agree and leave her house.

C. Chapters 9-10:10: Judith prays to the God of Israel to protect her and act through her hands on her mission to destroy the enemy. Judith dresses up, packs up, and goes with her maid out of town and across the valley.

D. Chapters 10:11-12:9: Judith meets the Assyrian army, who are bamboozled by her beauty and feigned submission. Judith speaks to Holofernes, who is also taken in. Judith sets up in the camp, eating her own food and leaving at night to ritually bathe.

E. Chapters 12:10-13:10: Holofernes invites Judith to a banquet to seduce her, becomes drunk, passes out in his tent. Judith, alone with Holofernes, prays and cuts



off his head. She gives the head to her maid, and they escape into the valley and back to Bethulia.

F. Chapters 13:11-16:20: The Bethulians, empowered by Judith's arrival with the head, attack the Assyrians and defeat them. Judith receives Holofernes's possessions, and the whole nation celebrate Judith's victory in Jerusalem, singing songs of praise.

G. Chapter 16:21-25: Epilogue to narrative: Judith lives happily ever after, unmarried and content, in Bethulia. The nation is peaceful during and after her long lifetime.

The first seven chapters depict the dramatic buildup of the military and national emergency of Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of the neighboring countries of the Ancient Near East and the start of the invasion into the Land of Israel itself. In these opening chapters, the audience understands the existential crisis that the Jews face as each surrounding country falls before Nebuchadnezzar's war machine, led by his general Holofernes. The nations fall, the people of Israel are afraid, Jerusalem prepares for battle but knows they will not be successful. The High Priest orders public repentance and premature mourning as they prepare for Jerusalem to be sacked and the Temple destroyed. Meanwhile, as the Assyrian army approaches Jerusalem, Holofernes and his troops confront Bethulia, a little country town in the hills of Israel and strategic gateway to Jerusalem. The army attempts to break down the town through siege. The townspeople, deprived of water for forty days and fearing complete destruction, prepare to surrender at the end of chapter seven.

Chapter Eight begins with the introduction of the heroine and title character, a pious and much respected widow, and the remaining plot in the book revolves entirely around her. Judith calls the town leaders to say she will not allow them to test God by insisting He saves them on their own timeframe, but to have faith and she will act on her own with the help of God (Jdt. 8:11-27, 32-34). The elders of the town give their blessing and Judith begins her mission, crossing over to the Assyrian camp, winning over Holofernes, tricking him into his

death, and returning to Bethulia and bringing military victory to the Jewish people (Jdt. 15:6-7). The last chapters of the book detail the grand celebrations in Jerusalem, honors for Judith for her faith and courage, and her return to a quiet life as a widow until her death many years later (Jdt. 16:21-24).

One fault that some biblical critiques have found in the structure of Judith is that the narrative takes far too long to introduce the heroine. However, while the titular character does not enter the scene until the eighth chapter, the first half of the book plays just as significant a role as the second half. Indeed, the drama and exhilaration of chapters 8-16 grows out of the foundation of the story that is laid in the first half. In one deep dive into the structure of the Book of Judith, Toni Craven argues persuasively for a triple chiasmic structure to the book.<sup>3</sup> She sees each half of the book, chapters 1-7 and 8-16, to be elegantly divided and structured around parallel themes of vengeance, salvation, surrender, and victory. These themes appear through repetitions, reversals, and echoes that demonstrate the sophisticated structure of the book as opposed to an overextended introduction to the crisis and the main character.

In addition, the structure of the book also sets up the oppositional main characters who play out the question of who ultimately has power in the world. The parallel characters align as Nebuchadnezzar vs. the God of Israel and their surrogates or representatives, Holofernes vs. Judith.<sup>4</sup> The first half depicts the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar and the Assyrian army led by Holofernes, evoking the question of whether God will protect the Jewish people against this existential threat. In the second half, Judith, speaking on behalf of God in the same way that Holofernes speaks for Nebuchadnezzar (Jdt. 6:2-4), declares that

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<sup>3</sup> Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith*.

<sup>4</sup> See Gera, Moore, Zeitlin, etc.

God cannot be tested but will still save the Jewish people and she will be the vessel for His will (Jdt. 9:1-14). The structure of the book lays out and sets up the guiding question and message of the work: who has ultimate power in the world? The God of Israel.

### *Historical Setting:*

The question of historical setting for the book of Judith must deal with two different questions: what is the historical, narrative setting of the story? What is the historical setting of authorship? Because Judith is a fictional story that attempts on some level to pass as historical, both questions should be addressed.

The historical setting of the story itself is thoroughly fictional, as the opening line of the work itself clearly demonstrates: “In the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled the Assyrians from his great city of Nineveh,” (Jdt. 1:1). While Nebuchadnezzar did conquer and rule the Assyrian empire as king of Babylonia, it is unlikely that a historical source would characterize his rule in reference to the Assyrians. This description points to either the ahistorical nature of the text or, at the least, a strange way to refer to a very well-known ruler in Jewish and Ancient Near Eastern history. Furthermore, Nebuchadnezzar first came to power in 605 BCE, several years after the Assyrian capitol Nineveh was destroyed in 612 BCE and ruled his empire from Babylon. Based on the description of Jewish history Achior gives in chapter 5:6-19, the narrative seems to take place in a fictionalized version of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. But the author scrambled together so many historical figures and events that the narrative does not exist in any real timeline. Much more will be discussed on the nature of the narrative and story of Judith in the Genre and Style section, but suffice it to say that the

historical setting of the story looks like a “by-gone era” with exotic Eastern flair<sup>5</sup> dislocated from historical reality.

The historical setting of the composition of Judith, however, we can locate much more readily. Most scholars agree that the author of Judith wrote during the Hasmonean period in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE. The book has clear Hasmonean ideological, nationalistic views and affinity with 1 and 2 Maccabees. These connections indicate Hasmonean influence and possibly rhetoric, making the earliest date of composition of the text roughly 170 BCE.<sup>6</sup> The very latest that the book could have been completed is the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century CE, as Clement of Rome (35-99 CE) knew of and discussed Judith as a sacred text. In arguments for dating the text, some have pointed to a lack of Roman influence or awareness, indicating the text was likely completed before Pompey’s invasion in 63 BCE.<sup>7</sup> This still leaves the dating fairly broad in a hundred year span from 170-63 BCE, during which time there were many changes to the political and religious landscape of Judea. To narrow this range even more, some have suggested that Judith shows not just affinities but influences of 1 and 2 Maccabees, as well as the reigns of Hasmonean and Ptolemaic queens during the period.<sup>8</sup> Considering all of these factors, the final composition of the Book of Judith might stand roughly at 100 BCE, give or take a decade on either side.

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<sup>5</sup> Lawrence M. Wills and Harold W Attridge, *Judith: A Commentary on the Book of Judith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Judith* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Levine Gera, *Judith: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 40-44.

### *Original Language:*

The only surviving ancient versions of the book of Judith exist in several different variants of the Septuagint, and therefore only appear in Greek. The earliest extant version of Judith comes from the Codex Vaticanus of the Septuagint, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. Scholars long thought the original language of the book to be Hebrew with some speculation that the original might have been in Greek. Some now believe more evidence exists to indicate that the original language was Greek, though the evidence is strong enough only to indicate an ambivalence about whether the book was written in Hebrew or Greek, but nothing more conclusive.<sup>9</sup> Scholars will usually point to Hebrew idioms and word play throughout the text in the extant Greek as indicators of translation, arguing that these features are the strongest evidence of Hebrew as the original source language.<sup>10</sup> The setting of the story in particular in and around the town of Bethulia at least hints at Hebrew, as the word could either be a play on *beth-olah*, an allusion to the Temple in Jerusalem, or *betulah*, virgin, symbolizing the vulnerable state of the town that cannot be penetrated by the enemy.

### *Authorship:*

The author of Judith likely seemed to be a religiously fluent 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE Jew living in Judea. Though many scholars have speculated whether the author had connections with any of the Second Temple period sects, in particular the Pharisees or Sadducees, no strong evidence ties the author to either group. Some scholars also disagree about whether the author lived and wrote in the diaspora or Judea. The argument in favor of the diaspora is based on how the character Judith refers to the Israelites when she addresses the town in

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<sup>9</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 17-21.

<sup>10</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 66.

chapter 8.<sup>11</sup> Yet this one piece of evidence cannot support the entire theory. Other scholars argue that the focus on Jerusalem, the Temple cult and associated rituals, and protection of the land of Israel against foreign invaders demonstrates the Judean identity of the author.<sup>12</sup>

The author also possessed a thorough knowledge of Jewish history and biblical texts. When Achior the Ammonite recounts the history of the people of Israel to Holofernes (Jdt. 5:5-21), the author includes a precise description from Abraham's family history through the restoration of the Temple after exile. With the exception of the history of the recent restoration, which needed alterations to fit the story's ahistorical premise of Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian, this historical account is concise and accurate. This speech demonstrates the author's detailed knowledge of the Jewish people. And indeed, the opening of the book begins with an historical wink of someone who knows history so well, using a simple error that points to the historical absurdity of the whole story. The author also possessed a rich understanding of the content and implications of biblical stories and sources with the use of biblical allusions and references throughout Judith. The book is filled with so many connections and echoes from Tanakh that an exhaustive list is scarcely possible. But whatever the identity of the author and wherever the author lived, he or she was an immensely talented writer of fiction with a flair for ironic satire.

#### *Literary Setting:*

The earliest literary setting of Judith in the Jewish tradition is in the Septuagint, where it is located between the books of Tobit and Esther with its later Greek additions. At present, the literary setting of the book of Judith in the Jewish tradition is among the Outside

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<sup>11</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 16-17.

Books generally corresponding to the Apocrypha, as the book was not part of the official canon of Tanakh and was preserved in some versions of the Christian Bible and Protestant Apocrypha collection. In the *Jewish Apocrypha New Revised Standard Version*, Judith is placed next to other late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple period texts, proceeding from the Greek Additions to Esther, to the book of Tobit, to Judith, then 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees. While these texts do not address each other directly, each comes from a similar historical setting and therefore have much to say when placed in conversation with each other.

In the Christian tradition, Judith is considered canonical by the Catholic Church and some Eastern Orthodox churches. In both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, Judith is placed between Tobit and then Esther, possibly because these texts were written as scrolls and likely stored together.<sup>13</sup> Thematically the books of Judith and Esther have many similarities in terms of themes of Jewish minority survival, foreign power, and the main characters of courageous women with extraordinary access to power to save their people. Because the book of Esther is canonical in the Jewish bible, the two books would not appear next to each other in Jewish versions but do in the Christian biblical tradition.

#### *Genre and Style:*

Modern scholars disagree over the exact genre of Judith, though most concur that it is a work of Jewish fiction. Due to the historical problems of the story, that in fact seem to be deliberate literary choices, it appears to be a work of fiction as opposed to a history of the period. This lack of historicity does not diminish the power of the story, which is a well-told tale that is a masterpiece of irony and fast action with a compelling heroine and dastardly

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<sup>13</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 91.

villain.<sup>14</sup> However, the question of the type of fictional genre remains and scholars take many different approaches.

Some view Judith as an adaptation of the rescue-story seen throughout other texts in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>15</sup> Placing a woman as the rescuer acts as a slight change to the classic rubric, but this alteration is not without precedence in the biblical sources. The character of Judith certainly appears as the heroine of a story and a powerful example of a Jewish hero in the Apocrypha.<sup>16</sup> Other scholars see Judith as a trickster story, similar to ancient myths of gods and heroes. In the trickster story, morality often blurs as the protagonist operates from a shadow version of their ethical selves, playing tricks on unsuspecting but often deserving antagonists.<sup>17</sup> This genre fits well in many ways with the book, as Judith plays with moral boundaries to deliberately and strategically deceive Holofernes, the unwitting victim, which the audience watches with some enjoyment. However, the trickster story usually appears in cycles as the trickster-hero encounters new situations and opponents, and Judith is a one-off character.<sup>18</sup> Both the genres of rescue-story and trickster show possible connections of Judith as a folktale and the playfulness connected with that style of fiction.<sup>19</sup> The motifs and moral boundary-crossing of the trickster genre works fairly well as a potential genre of Judith.

Another possibility of genre, though perhaps less likely, is as an apocalyptic. In this literary framework, good versus evil plays out on a cosmic scale, ultimately bringing about the victory of good. Some scholars have pointed to the figures of Nebuchadnezzar and God

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> Benedikt Otzen, *Tobit and Judith* (New York: Sheffield, 2002), 68.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence M. Wills, "Jewish Heroes in the Apocrypha," in *The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha*, ed. Jonathan Klawans and Lawrence M. Wills (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 634.

<sup>17</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 33.



who struggle against each other as the ultimate power of the universe as an example of apocalyptic elements in Judith. However, while there might be some features of apocalyptic literature in the book of Judith, the other more predominant aspects of the narrative substantially counter these apocalyptic elements.<sup>20</sup> And so as the overall genre of the book, apocalyptic falls flat.

Scholars have also connected Judith to the wisdom literature tradition.<sup>21</sup> Judith contains references to wisdom and wise decision-making, the personification of Woman Wisdom represented by the character Judith, and dictums from other texts in the body of wisdom literature. Perhaps the most significant wisdom feature in Judith is the karmic reversal: set something negative in motion for another, and that fate just might befall you instead. This situation appears most directly in Proverbs 26:27, “One who digs a pit will fall into it; one who rolls a stone will have it roll onto him.” The book of Judith contains many ironic reversals of this nature: the Assyrians expect to conquer but are conquered themselves, Holofernes expects to exploit Judith but is exploited himself, and many other examples. However, wisdom literature functions as a somewhat amorphous genre category and does not specifically serve or shape the interpretation or understanding of the book.

In addition to the genre, the style of the book of Judith creates a distinctive character for the work. The book contains a near infinite number of reversals, repetitions, surprises, as well as the use of irony, word play, and biblical allusions. Similar to how the book of Esther is marked by ironic reversals, dramatic repetitions, and word play, the book of Judith takes these literary features to the next level. Indeed, much of the plot and dialogue of the book

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<sup>20</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Greg Schmidt Goering, “Wisdom in the Apocrypha,” in *The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha*, ed. Jonathan Klawans and Lawrence M. Wills (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 603.

functions as the groundwork for an ironic or dramatic reversal, a set-up for the narrative punchline to come in the next verses or chapters. For example, when Judith first speaks to Holofernes when she arrives at the camp, she tells him, “I will say nothing false to my lord tonight. If you follow out the words of your servant, God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purpose,” (Jdt. 11:5-6). Judith tells Holofernes everything she says is the truth, which it technically is, as she forecasts her plot of accomplishing a task through Holofernes. Not only does Holofernes miss her dark implications, he also fails to recognize that Judith’s use of “my lord” refers to the God of Israel, and not himself, to whom she was praying for success in the previous chapters (Jdt. 9:5-6, 9-14). Throughout the book, the author presents an incredible range of foreshadowing wordplay, plot repetitions and reversals, and hints and echoes through biblical parallels,<sup>22</sup> the effect of which creates a complex system of possible meanings.

These literary devices make Judith a darkly humorous story as well. As the story plays out, it is almost comical how easily the Assyrians are duped and Judith becomes victorious.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the story is not all in good fun for all, as Holofernes ends up without a head in the end. Enjoyment of the farce draws a little too close to violation at times.<sup>24</sup> In the end and even though the audience has some understanding that this moment is coming, this pivotal and culminating scene in the Assyrian general’s tent seems a little too dangerous. The direct and graphic violence of the moment, though exciting, necessary, and anticipated, strikes some in the audience as at least a bit shocking. While we cannot know the original audience’s emotional response to this culmination of the narrative, the ambivalent responses

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<sup>22</sup> See *Biblical Allusions*.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Day, “Power, Otherness, and Gender in Biblical Short Stories,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 20, no. 1 (1998): 117.

<sup>24</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 96.

to the book by those canonizing the biblical text points to at least possible discomfort or uncertainty about this source. Tanakh canonized many stories of violence and murder, some with a degree of moral ambiguity and some obviously heroic. The fact this story did not receive canonization in Jewish scripture points to, though of course does not definitively state, ambivalence toward the text. The farce becomes an assassination, and the author accomplishes a dramatic surprise even on the audience themselves.

These series of reversals, wordplay, repetitions, irony, and allusions contribute to the meanings of piety and transgression. Just as the style of the book creates many moments of flips and shifts in power, situations, and dramatic action, so too do the meanings of piety and transgression. Concepts and language are not static in Judith, and so these two opposite categories have different meanings and relate to each other differently as well throughout the story.

### *Message:*

While the message of the Book of Judith has a particular ideological and theological point, the literary style of the book shapes the rhetoric in such a way that it becomes part of the message itself: “Simply put, the story of Judith is one of conflict and reversal, a tale of a crisis and its resolution, and its theological message meshes with the literary means used to tell the tale.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, having examined the genre and style of the work, we can now explore its message.

The religious message and political messages of the book can be difficult to unravel: whoever is the true God has the true power of the outcome and the world. The crisis that

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<sup>25</sup> Gera, *Judith*, 6.

unfolds during the first half of the story is both national and theological, as the God of Israel does not appear to stand up for His people against the fast-approaching invading army. Some scholars point to the structure of the narrative to highlight the role of this overarching theological theme. Otzen divides the structure into three sections driven by theological questions:

1. Chapters 1-3: Nebuchadnezzar seeks to demonstrate that he is God.
2. Chapters 4-7: Who is God?
3. Chapters 8-16: Yahweh is God.<sup>26</sup>

In this structure, Nebuchadnezzar decides to conquer the entire world not only for revenge but to prove he is the most powerful force in the universe. Holofernes, his general and trusted devotee, establishes cult worship of the king wherever he is victorious. As the Assyrians close in on Jerusalem and the Temple, this crisis raises the question of who is in fact God. However, Judith, the loyal devotee to the God of Israel in a similar role as Holofernes to Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>27</sup> reminds the world the God of Israel is the true God through her faith, piety, and actions. Just as the style of Judith presents a series of reversals of power, the theological message of the book utilizes a similar reversal between the characters with the most divine power.

The theological message is present in the heroine's behavior as well. Judith's speeches and prayers throughout the second half of the book, her actions towards the town elder, and her bold plan demonstrate her clear faith in the God of Israel. Judith acts out many other pious religious practices, including the stringency of kashrut (Jdt. 10:5), appropriate times for prayer in connection to the Temple system (Jdt. 9:1), celebration of Shabbat and

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<sup>26</sup> Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 59.

other holidays (Jdt. 8:6), and chaste decorum as a widow (Jdt. 8:4-6, 16:21-22). All of these features appear as basic Second Temple piety and religious behaviors.<sup>28</sup> However, it is unclear exactly how Judith's piety is meant to be interpreted, as she will also lie, seductively corner, and murder, all direct violations of religious morality and practice. Indeed, her religious practice itself is somewhat extreme, as at least her life as a widow goes well beyond what was expected of even the most chaste and pious woman.<sup>29</sup> So while her religious practice may not be didactic and meant for the audience to emulate, her faith in God's power is meant to be learned and replicated. As Judith's words and actions communicate, this God is truly the greatest power in the universe, who cannot be tested and will act when His people are in need and remain faithful (e.g. Jdt. 8:18-27).

The political message of Judith is also part of the book's nationalistic goal. Written during the Hasmonean period, with its focus on ethnic, religious, political identity, the Judith story pushes back on the Hellenistic forces that threatened the tiny kingdom with its new independence.<sup>30</sup> For this small Jewish nation surrounded by empires ready to swallow it back up again, the book of Judith offered a meaningful message of the resilience of an unlikely hero guided by faith and the desire to protect one's people. The name of the title character itself asks the original Jewish audience to identify with the story. The name *Yehudit*, literally the female Jew, which possibly stood as a symbol or metonym of the Jewish people, likely invited Jewish readers to see themselves in this story. The political message of this story teaches that power is sometimes not so obvious, that strategy, creative resources, and faithful dedication can preserve a nation.

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<sup>28</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 60-61.

<sup>29</sup> See *Widows*.

<sup>30</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 6-7.

### *Reception:*

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the reception of the Book of Judith is that the work did not make it into the official canon of Jewish sacred texts. While there is no clear reason offered by contemporary sources or biblical critics for why Judith was not included in Tanakh, many scholars have speculated over the years. The most obvious possibility is that a story about a pious Jewish woman intimately consorting with and then beheading the drunk general of an invading army whose camp she first infiltrated was not considered a source fit for inclusion as a sacred text. Other rationales include that Esther took the only possible slot for a female-protagonist book, Judith contains too much irony, the inclusion of an Ammonite converting to the Jewish people conflicts with earlier legal sources, and that the book was completed too late. We will never know the precise reason, if there indeed was one. However, the book still stands as a fascinating example of late Second Temple literature that was considered unequivocally Jewish, was preserved as a Jewish text, and remained a part of Jewish tradition.

While Judith was not canonized in Tanakh, it was known as a Jewish religious text. Though not deemed to be of the same sacred status as the official canon, important rabbinic figures made allusions or mentions of Judith and a collection of medieval *midrashim* on Judith were written. All of these sources associated Judith with the story and celebration of Hanukkah and this connection established Judith and reading the book as religious practices of the holiday. In his discussion on the *mitzvot* of Hanukkah, Rashi alludes indirectly to the figure of Judith, and later Rashbam explicitly mentions her as the source of the miracle of Hanukkah and the Maccabees victory.<sup>31</sup> In one medieval midrash of Judith, titled “Midrash

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<sup>31</sup> Rashi on BT Shabbat 23a and Tosafot on BT Megillah 4a

for Hanukkah,” the connection with the Maccabees deepens as Judith plays a role in the story of Hanukkah and national struggle alongside Judah Maccabee.<sup>32</sup> Even her name lends itself to this association as the feminine version of Judah, as well as depicting her as a stand in for the Jewish people as a whole.

Besides the book’s reception in Jewish and other religious traditions’ communities, the story has captured the imagination of many over the centuries. The story, with its gripping narrative, compelling characters, drama, unexpected reversals, and shocking scenes of violence and sexuality, has produced innumerable works of art, literature, music, and films. Whether people are inspired by the heroine’s faith, connect with her bravery, or scandalized by her deceit and other brazen actions, Judith caught the eye and curiosity of many audiences.

## **II. Key Concepts and Methodology**

### *Women and Second Temple Judaism:*

In order to explore the meanings and definitions of piety and transgression in Judith, it is important to establish the normative behaviors and expectations for women in the Second Temple period. In particular, women’s roles in society and religious functions will help inform the understanding of piety and transgressions of cultural and religious norms.

### *Widows:*

Looking at the roles of women in the Second Temple period, the expectations for widowed women needs some explanation in the context of Judith, the pious widow. Because

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<sup>32</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 105-107.

one of the most important roles of women was as a wife and mother, widows sat in a liminal position in society. Women were expected to be good wives and daughters, and their wisdom was to know their place in regards to the men around them.<sup>33</sup> Such marriages created social bonds and relationship, a significant feature in Second Temple society that was very class and status conscious.<sup>34</sup> In addition to respecting their fathers' and husband's authority, women were also required to act chastely and protect their chastity, as the prevailing cultural assumption was that only women, but not men, could be seduced.<sup>35</sup> Judith will later both test and play with this assumption of the exclusive seduction of women.

Remarriage was very common and most widows, certainly young and beautiful widows like Judith, would not remain unmarried for long. In the biblical worldview, widows stood in the same category as orphans, people on the margins of society who needed additional support and consideration. Yet in the rabbinic period, divorce and widowhood were how women could acquire legal freedom. And so the issue of the difficulty of widowhood was the loss of economic stability.<sup>36</sup> The character Judith represents an exceptional example of widowhood, remaining unmarried until her death at the end of the book (Jdt. 16:22). Her wealth and position helped enable her choice. The piety that Judith associates with her perpetual widowhood could perhaps be understood less as holy and more as holier-than-thou, as remaining a widow was not in fact viewed as pious or revered.<sup>37</sup> Her chastity and religious observance would have been sources of praise, but not her commitment to never remarry.

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<sup>33</sup> Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 57-61.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 69-70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 122-124.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 148-150.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 149.



With this knowledge of widows in mind, Judith's piety and transgressions could be viewed within a larger context. First, her actions as a perpetual widow are not inherently more pious or more rigorous. And so while her chaste behavior in her life in Bethulia can be viewed as pious and moral, her exceptional widowhood would not be viewed as more pious, but perhaps only as extreme. Second, as a previously married woman, she has gained some degree of legal freedom, and therefore has more control over her home, finances, and body. Judith's widowhood, then, has a strategic function to her character and the story as a whole. As a widow and member of society who appears to have the least amount of power but in fact can comfortably function in the margins of society, Judith is the last person that anyone would suspect of executing such a strategically violent plot. In reality, she is well positioned for an under the radar, covert attack.<sup>38</sup> In a story based on reversals and ultimate power, Judith's extreme widowhood plays into the surprising irony of the story and miraculous reversal, but not necessarily her moral standing or ethical commitments.

#### *Wise Women:*

In terms of religious life in Second Temple Judaism, there were far fewer public roles for women than men. Women focused on domestic, private roles in general within the family system, and so did not serve in many public leadership functions. Certainly, when Judith is first introduced to the audience, the author describes her and her cultivated wisdom and respect in more domestic terms. Despite this initial representation, Judith immediately shifts into more direct leadership, calling the town elders to her to publicly scold them, present her alternative plan, and demand they step aside for her to carry out her vision. Judith's bold

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<sup>38</sup> Linda Day, "Power, Otherness, and Gender in Biblical Short Stories," 116.

actions of leadership, while appearing somewhat out of place in a Second Temple context, connect to the figure in society of the wise woman or female sage.

As Claudia V. Camp argues, the role of the wise woman or female sage appeared to be an informal position as a leader of the community, an amorphous and fluid role with more limitations than official positions of power.<sup>39</sup> In two instances in II Samuel when the epithet “wise woman,” is used in chapters 14 and 20, there are no further identifying details for the figure, indicating that this role was known to at least the original audience. This female sage appears again as a metaphorical depiction of Woman Wisdom or Lady Wisdom in several Wisdom Literature sources, including Proverbs, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon.

Over time, the role of the female sage was minimized, as the informal, family-based authority of wise women had no clear public outlet as society progressed. The informal though concrete role of wise women leaders was eventually swallowed up into the metaphorical character of Woman Wisdom. However, the Jewish religion retained echoes of these real women’s roles through the remaining metaphors: “The memory of the connection of powerful, politicized, and faithful women is not lost entirely, but its transformation into the idealized figure of Woman Wisdom ultimately ensures that it will remain just that- a memory.”<sup>40</sup> As we explore the book of Judith, this memory emerges again in this bold, political, faithful female leader who uses her communal authority to save her people.

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<sup>39</sup> See Claudia V. Camp, “The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue: 185-203 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 203.

*Biblical Allusions, Inspirations, and Precedents to Judith:*

The book of Judith incorporates a tremendous number of biblical allusions and echoes, including particular characters, important motifs, and classic narrative structures. These connections help to enrich the narrative as well as create a dynamic, clever intertextual story: “The author of Judith is particularly fond of making use of the setting, characters or plot of the biblical scene and then deliberately adding a direct allusion to the original biblical passage which underlies his own narrative.”<sup>41</sup> While some scholars might point to Esther or Yael as the clear precedent of Judith, there are too many connections and associations to point to just one source. Indeed, there are so many references that the character and story of Judith is an incredibly complex composite or amalgam of the biblical tradition.<sup>42</sup> This complexity further supports the argument that Judith presents multiple meanings of piety and transgression: there is no one-to-one correlation of character or storyline, but rather rich layers of possible meanings. The list below is by no means exhaustive and only scratches the surface of the possible biblical parallels and connections.

Dinah: Of all the female biblical references, the author draws a clear connection between the story of Judith and the figure of Dinah from Genesis 34. However, the connection in many ways serves more to correct the harm done to Dinah than to draw a simple comparison. Judith is a descendent of Simeon. As she prepares to embark on her bold quest, she beseeches God to remember her like God remembered Simeon, who took vengeance upon a foreign invader and profaner of the sacred community of Israel (Jdt. 9:2-4). This prayer includes a deliberate evocation of the memory of the rape of Dinah and Simeon’s vicious revenge on

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<sup>41</sup> Gera, *Judith*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 51.

Shechem. Judith also appears to embody or evoke both Dinah and Simeon at once: she places herself and her body in harm's way and her actions are also carefully modeled after Simeon's violence.<sup>43</sup> Judith reenacts many of the circumstance of Dinah's rape, yet attempting to remain in control and wreck violence and vengeance on her own.

Tamar: The character Tamar makes her only appearance in Genesis 38, but proves an important point when she takes matters into her own hands. When her father-in-law Judah continually delays remarrying her to his other son as promised, Tamar forces his hand. Dressing up in a veil, Tamar leaves her house and meets Judah, who believes she is a prostitute and pays her for her sexual services. When she becomes pregnant and word gets out about her condition, Judah angrily demands she come to him and pay the punishment for prostituting herself, instead of staying in her father's house as a widow and waiting as Judah had told her to do. Tamar subtly calls out his error in the whole situation, which he concedes and declares publicly that she is in the right (Gen. 38:26). Like Judith, Tamar changes her clothes and dresses up to go out into the world based on a bold plot because she knows what is right and what needs to be done. Tamar is ultimately successful and vindicated for her actions, which was not guaranteed at the outset, just as Judith is at the conclusion of the book.

Miriam: There are two significant similarities between Judith's story and Miriam's story: the female leader and victory song. In the books of Exodus and Numbers, where Miriam's story is preserved, the text depicts Miriam as a bold, female leader, filled with faith in God's

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<sup>43</sup> See Matthew Thiessen, "Protecting the Holy Race and the Holy Space: Judith's Reenactment of the Slaughter of Shechem," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 49 (2018):165-188.

salvation as the Israelites set out from Egypt (Exod. 15:20-21). Miriam appears to be the first woman in the tradition of the Jewish people who leads her community in a public, direct role. Furthermore, the Song of Judith found in chapters 15:14-16:17 depicts a military victory song performed by women in the community in the same tradition as the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15. The connection with the Song in particular places Judith in a line of strong, faithful female leaders who celebrated military victories through women's song and dance.

Devorah and Yael: Judith has many connections and similarities with both of these heroines of the book of Judges. Devorah is a wise military leader whom the male general seeks out for counsel and leadership. Devorah is prepared to lead her people into battle, regardless of the danger it poses her. Her only concern, in fact, is the diminishment of honor that will go to Barak when the victory is viewed as hers instead of his (Jdgs. 4:4-9). While Judith shows no concern for the honor or reputations of the male communal or military leaders of Bethulia, her wisdom and military bravery echoes Devorah's actions. In addition to Devorah, Yael displays strategic tactics that involve lying and violence against Sisera while he sleeps. Sisera believes that he is safe with the wife of an ally who tends to him with womanly, if not potentially sexual, care. Once he is asleep, Yael swiftly executes the general with a tent-peg through the head (Jdgs. 4:17-22). Judith's exploitation and decapitation of the vulnerable Holofernes certainly hints at Yael precedence. Finally, the Song of Devorah (Jdgs. 5), which also includes mention of Yael (Jdgs. 5:6, 24-30), bears a similar connection with the Song of the Sea and the Song of Judith. This example of a women's victory song is another connection between the book of Judith and other biblical allusions.

Ehud and the Book of Judges: Another biblical assassin of the people of Israel, Ehud killed his opponents in a similar way to Judith in Judges 3. Pretending to be right-handed, Ehud assassinated the Moabite king Eglon with his left hand as they greeted each other. Judith's deceptive yet strategic slaying of Holofernes carries echoes from Ehud's actions. In addition, Judith appears to be a model of the heroes of the book of Judges: a vicious savior who protects her people regardless of the means.<sup>44</sup> The closing of the book of Judith echoes the conclusion of each hero cycle in Judges, describing when she died, how she was remembered, and the number of years of peace during and after her victory (Jdt. 16:25).

The moral ambiguity of the book of Judges could be present in Judith as well. There are many connections between the book of Judith and the stories of the heroes of the book of Judges.<sup>45</sup> In Judges, a hero or heroine rises up in moments of communal crisis in between the period of Joshua's conquest of Canaan and the founding of the Davidic monarchy. The hero or heroine succeeds and saves the people, but does not establish a long-term system of sustainable leadership (see Jdgs. 4-5, 6-8, 10:1-5, 11-12:7, etc.). While the moral ambiguity of Judges may not be implied even in the most graphic and gruesome stories presented (see Jdgs. 3:21-23, 11:34-40, 19), the editor of the compilation of the work added an explicit moral caveat at the end of the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes," (Jdgs. 21:25).<sup>46</sup> Even though the actions done in the book of Judges helped establish the people and nation of Israel, biblical editors thought it important to point toward the pitfalls of charismatic, unstable leadership.

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<sup>44</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Author's translation.

While the book of Judith omits this kind of historical critique, the work also leaves out an explicit mention of the *ruach*, or spirit of God, that often descends upon the heroes in Judges when they do what is right in their eyes. This omission in the text might have stemmed from a concern that her actions are too transgressive to be provoked by God.<sup>47</sup> The behaviors of Judith and the heroes of Judges have many similarities, yet the book of Judith lacks both a clear critique and biblically styled support for her divine inspiration. The book of Judges is morally ambiguous because its heroes are both applauded and condemned; perhaps the book of Judith is morally ambiguous because its heroine was not ultimately believable as a divinely inspired actor, even by the author of the work.

Hannah: While Hannah in I Samuel 1 does not act nearly as boldly as Judith, her piety and faithful determination seems to be echoed in the story of Judith. Hannah prays clearly and fervently to God for a son, and her faith is so powerful that Eli the priest does not recognize her prayers. When rebuked by Eli, who believes her to be a drunk, Hannah calmly stands her ground and insists that her expression of piety is acceptable and appropriate (I Sam. 1:12-18). Judith's prayers, though much more violent than Hannah's, reflect a similar piety and represent one of the few examples of full prayer by women in a biblical text.

Huldah: Though she only appears in a brief moment depicted in II Kings 22 and II Chronicles 34, Huldah is an important female religious leader with key connections to Judith. When a sacred scroll is discovered in the Temple and needs to be authenticated, the high priest goes directly to Huldah to validate the scroll. Huldah says the scroll is legitimate and

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<sup>47</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 37.

her word is accepted immediately (II Kings 22:14-20). Though Huldah does not call the leaders to her house herself, Judith acts similarly when she gives directives to the male community leaders and her plan is accepted without second thought. Huldah operates as a “wise woman,” a communal religious leader that stands as a significant precedent for Judith.

Woman Wisdom: Woman Wisdom, or Lady Wisdom, appears as a personification of the quality of wisdom in Proverbs 8, who exhorts young men to pursue her as opposed to evil and foreign women. Similar references are found in Proverbs 3:19 and Psalm 104:24, in which God is described as creating the world through, by, or with wisdom. In this function, Wisdom can be viewed as an apprentice or accomplice to God’s creation. Judith could be considered a personification of wisdom, in particular as an accomplice to God’s work in the world, which she adamantly believes she serves through her actions.

Esther: Besides Deborah and Yael, Esther bears the closest resemblance to Judith, and the two sources were likely written at similar times in history. Both characters are Jewish women surrounded by a threatening majority, foreign power. In order to save their people from an existential crisis, they strategically use their own subversive resources to gain access to the power of the foreign king or general they have drawn close to. In order to access this power, they dress themselves up and lean heavily on their femininity and normative gender roles (Esth. 5:1, Jdt. 10:3-4). And when the moment is at hand to act to save their people, they do so decisively (Esth. 7:3-6, Jdt. 13:6-8). Excessive violence against the enemy and salvation victory follow the brave example they lead (Esth. 9:1-16, Jdt. 15:1-7). Esther and Judith have many more connections, including the motif of drunkenness, ironic reversals, and the mixture



of sexuality and death. Some scholars even argue that Judith is a Hasmonean, ethnic-nationalist corrective to Esther, who in fact marries and has sex with a foreign man.<sup>48</sup> The stories and characters of Esther and Judith have much in common, as well as the literary style of the books. In the end, Judith is more personally violent, as she uses her sexuality to exploit and chop off the head of a drunken man. The echoes from Esther crucially serve to put the story of Judith in context.

### *Piety Versus Transgression:*

The key questions of this project are exploring the definitions and meanings of piety and transgression in Judith, as well as if and when the boundary between the two is crossed in the narrative. The answers to these questions hinge largely upon the character of Judith herself, whose actions and words drive the narrative of the second half of the story, which resolves the plot of the first half of the book. Piety and faithfulness take center stage throughout the book, as the pious heroine acts out her faith through her audacious behavior. But her actions, even though they are on behalf of her piety, cross many lines associated with pious behavior: lying, sexual manipulation, and murder. Yet the two concepts cannot be so neatly separated in her behavior or the message of the book. Indeed, there is no one simple way to view Judith's actions or body, whether as purely good or purely bad. Interpretations of Judith as either as trusting and faithful or deceitful and sensual are both misogynistic readings of the text.<sup>49</sup> So while there is a distinction between the two characteristics or concepts, they do not function solely in opposition to each other. The more complexly we can understand piety and transgression, the more balanced and nuanced we can view Judith.

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<sup>48</sup> Gera, *Judith*, 54.

<sup>49</sup> Wills and Attridge, *Judith*, 69.

Yet the moral questions of the book of Judith are not simply rooted in the title character. Judith's words and behaviors play out the questions about piety and transgression in crisis that the story poses and explores. The moral ambiguities of the story that we will investigate do not point to a clear ethical stance, but rather present a rich, layered dynamic of power and faith when the world has been flipped on its head. Piety in this context means faith in the God of Israel, adherence to the religious and ethical laws of Jewish tradition, and respect for and maintenance of the socially normative behaviors of Jewish men and women: all that is right and stable in the eyes of the community. Transgression, on the other hand, is the flouting and violation of piety. Transgression may not be evil or abhorrent behavior per se, but it does challenge or disrupt the norms of society. The methodological focus on piety and transgression in this project aims to identify and explore how the characters, moments, and themes of the narrative push, reverse, and/or subvert the concepts of these two concepts.

It is important to look at this narrative story and these characters as the fictional features they are: Judith as a character is not meant to be an idealized, one-dimensional depiction. Therefore, we should understand her actions as a dynamic, multi-faceted figure whose character and behavior we can analyze from a literary perspective. Many biblical commentators assume Judith's moral ambiguity but rarely question her religious commitments. As Athalya Brenner notes, despite the success of female protagonists like Judith, "gaps and ambiguities remain...in the more fundamental issue of associating unconventional female sexuality (and murder, in Judith's case) with Jewish piety...The ambiguities, it seems, are at least as indispensable for the tracing of plots and world-views as the overt properties of the narratives."<sup>50</sup> The crossing or blurring of accepted lines is woven

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<sup>50</sup> Athalya Brenner, "Introduction," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1995), 13-14.

into the fabric of the story, and so Judith's pietistic behavior should not be taken for granted. The question then arises as to whether the deceit and violence that she carries out are urgent responses to a dire situation or simply intrinsic to her character that the author cloaks in piety towards God, asking the audience to reevaluate her character throughout the story.<sup>51</sup> Keeping this perspective in mind, it is necessary to notice when in the narrative when piety and transgression are ambiguous, static, contextualized, or reoriented. The meanings of these concepts as enacted in the Judith story and character should not be taken for granted.

Another approach to piety and transgression comes from the work of Lihi Ben Shitrit. Based on sociological research on women's roles in culturally conservative political groups in the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories, Ben Shitrit attempts to create a theoretical framework to understand how women often take such bold leadership in these groups.<sup>52</sup> In a conversation with a woman who is a leader in the national religious community and settler movement in Israel, Ben Shitrit describes how this pious, motherly woman who acts with complete modesty proudly shows Ben Shitrit a video of her screaming at and physically fighting Israeli soldiers attempting to move the protesting settlers. The woman explained her behavior in the brawl:

*This was not, she said, proper behavior for an Orthodox woman concerned with female modesty...And yet she stood by each of her gestures, both physical and verbal, in those moments we had just watched on the screen. She spoke to me of an exceptional situation that warranted her to act in the way she did. She spoke of her land, the Land of Israel, and the future of her children, and of religious Redemption*

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<sup>51</sup> Linda Day, "Faith, Character and Perspective in Judith," *JSOT* 95 (2001): 73.

<sup>52</sup> Lihi Ben Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions: Women's Activism on the Israeli and Palestinian Religious Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

*(ge'ula), and, perhaps more of significance, the role she had to play in securing all three.*<sup>53</sup>

The research in these communities demonstrates that this kind of behavior and rationale were not unique to this one woman. As Ben Shitrit explains, these female settlers utilized national and conservative ideology to construct mental “frames of exception,” that suspend, but do not ultimately challenge, gender norms for the broader, urgent goals. In short: “Exceptional times call for exceptional measures and transformed women’s transgressions from improper to righteous.”<sup>54</sup> This perspective offers another approach to the meanings of piety and transgression that could be applied to the interpretation of Judith.

In this worldview, under normal circumstances there is a clear line between appropriate, pious behavior and unacceptable transgressions for women. However, the times and context of these communities, women, and the threats they faced demand that transgressions for the sake of the righteous, pious goal are acceptable and possibly admirable. Here, instead of viewing piety and transgression as diametrically opposed, the exceptionality of the circumstances that are limited and constrained within time and place blur the line between piety and transgression. And even at certain times, the urgency of the situation reverses what is pious and what is transgressive: acting normatively will not support the cause, violating normative behavior furthers the nationalist, religious goal. These themes and rationales fit well with the narrative, themes, and characters of the book of Judith.

While we cannot ascribe a rationale to Judith, who is a fictional character, the “frames of exception” theoretical framework presents a helpful perspective to consider how piety and

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<sup>53</sup> Ben Shitrit, *Righteous Transgressions*, 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

transgression function together in Judith. The book of Judith tells the story of an urgent military crisis that threatens the sacred land and Temple, containing both religious and nationalistic thematic undercurrents. Leaders and institutions that should have been counted on to protect and defend the people crumble. In order to protect the sacred land and people, someone must act outside the bounds of normative, appropriate actions because those actions would not be enough. In addition to the urgency of the context, this framework from hardline religious groups raises the question of whether piety can act as a cover for transgressive behavior. If transgressions are in the service of the goal of piety, are those actions acceptable? Or perhaps there is something duplicitous and ultimately unacceptable about using religious faith as the rationale for behavior not sanctioned, and at times condemned, by that religious tradition. Is such piety or its results ultimately tainted? The book of Judith walks a narrow line between these two questions, perhaps at times going beyond what even pious faith will allow. And this perspective will serve the deeper exploration of the meanings of piety and transgression in Judith.

### **III. Interpretation of Judith 8-16:**

After exploring the relevant features of the background on the book of Judith, we can now turn to the interpretation of the text. We will look at selections as opposed to the entirety of the source. Before moving into the interpretive section, it is worthwhile to note one unique aspect of previous interpretations of Judith. In biblical scholarship, there are many other sources that scholars have focused on and produced much more interpretive work on than Judith. And in general, scholars often end up grouped together into three or four different camps of interpretive consensus. Yet for Judith, there appears to be little consensus on the

actual interpretation of the text. Each scholar does not come to his or her own wildly different conclusion, but each views Judith in a slightly, or significantly at times, unique light. To me, more than anything, this diversity of scholarly opinion on the book's strengths, purpose, and the character of its main figure, demonstrates the broad multi-vocality of the text. Because of the complex layers of literary features, dramatic plot, and rich and compelling characters, the book of Judith speaks half a dozen different meanings at once. Therefore, as we explore the meanings of piety and transgression, the multi-vocal nature of the text shifts and blurs the lines between and meanings of the two concepts.

*Piety and Transgression in Judith 1-7:*

The Interpretive section focuses on the second half of the book of Judith. However, it is necessary as well to examine briefly elements of the first half that serves as hints and set-ups for the reversals and repetitions in chapters 8-16, including the book's starting point on piety and transgression.

Chapter 1 begins with Nebuchadnezzar's war efforts, demonstrating his prowess in the region and sending messages to his allies to rally behind him. The allies disregard their summons, viewing Nebuchadnezzar as, "only one man," and send his messengers back, "empty-handed and in disgrace," (1:11).<sup>55</sup> Angry and humiliated, Nebuchadnezzar defeats his enemy Arphaxad and returns to Nineveh and feasts in a sign of his power and security in his own power. In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar decides to seek revenge and destroy all of his allies who did not join him and makes "his plan," (2:4). He designates his general Holofernes to carry out the plan and addresses himself as, "the Great King, the lord of the whole earth,"

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<sup>55</sup> All English translations from the New Revised Standard Version.

(2:5). Holofernes marches out and begins his campaign of destruction and slaughter. In these first chapters, Nebuchadnezzar is established as a powerful force who has been disgraced by his allies, and concocts a plan to regain his reputation and authority through his lieutenant Holofernes. Nebuchadnezzar stands in opposition to God as the powerful force on the earth, and Judith will later be cast as God's second-in-command in parallel to Holofernes. Later repetitions include rely on making a "plan" and the use of empty or full hands.

In chapter 3, many of the nations sue for peace with Holofernes, yet he still enters their cities and destroys their religious shrines. He establishes exclusive worship of Nebuchadnezzar in these cities. Before the army reaches Israel and Jerusalem, the exclusive worship of a human being already poses a threat to the Jewish religion and the Temple itself. Though it is only hinted at here, transgression appears to mean shifting allegiance to the Assyrians and their king and piety means remaining faithful to the God of Israel.

Chapter 4 picks up on these themes more explicitly, as the action shifts to Jerusalem. Hearing of Holofernes's approach, they become afraid for the fate of their land, sacred city, and Temple, which had only recently been reconsecrated and sanctified after their exile. The High Priest Joakim and the leaders in Jerusalem order the community to prepare for siege and war, and the border towns, including Bethulia, to secure the mountain passes (4:7). Then the High Priest, ministers, and everyone in Jerusalem began fasting, draping themselves in sackcloth, making offerings and praying fervently to God to save them, which God heard (4:13). While the Jewish people have not lost faith in God, they were also not responding proactively to the threat. These characters demonstrate a more traditional biblical form of piety, praying to God for salvation. However, the book of Judith challenges this type of piety, as it would have resulted in destruction had Judith not acted beyond the norm. So they

maintain piety in their beliefs but not in their actions, which the book of Judith critiques as ultimately transgressive. At the end of the chapter, “they cried out to the Lord with all their might to look with favor on the whole house of Israel,” (4:15). Judith will later echo this cry to look with favor, though it will be to guide and support her actions rather than for salvation out of thin air. In the concepts of piety and transgression in Judith, the Temple cannot be destroyed and those actions that would lead to that destruction appear as transgressions. This traditional, status quo, inactive piety in the first half of the book lays the foundation for Judith’s active piety in the second.

In chapter 5, Holofernes hears that the people of Judea are preparing for his attack in this way and seeks to learn more about who they are. Achior the Ammonite, a soldier conscripted into the army, comes forward and tells a thorough yet succinct biblical account of the history of the Jewish people, completely accurate with the narrative of Tanakh with a few alterations in order to align with the plot of Judith (5:6-19). This historical account also highlights the knowledge of the author, demonstrating that historical inaccuracies, like the opening lines of the work, are literary devices giving a sly wink and not mistakes. Achior also points out that, as long as the Israelites remain faithful to their God they cannot be defeated, forecasting Holofernes’s failure if piety is maintained: before the invasion begins, Holofernes has already dug the pit he will inevitably fall into.

Hearing this account, Holofernes begins chapter 6 by angrily throwing Achior out of the camp for his lack of belief in Nebuchadnezzar’s primacy, insisting, “What god is there except Nebuchadnezzar?” (6:2). For Holofernes, transgression means lacking faith in his king-god, even as Achior speaks what the audience knows to be true piety by recognizing the God of Israel as the true power of the universe. Furthermore, Holofernes asserts the



Assyrian's victory: "we the king's servants will destroy them as one man," (6:3). Later on, in an ironic reversal of this declaration, Judith will destroy the Assyrian army as one woman.

Kicked out of the camp, Achior is captured in the valley between the Assyrians and Bethulia and brought to the town. The town leaders, including Uzziah, Chabris, and Charmis, question him and believe Achior's story demonstrates God's protection and their victory, and they worship God and feast in celebration (6:18-21). Though they have faith in God, the leaders of Bethulia enact a similar status quo faith of the people of Jerusalem: believing God will simply act on His own accord, they do nothing proactive.

Immediately in chapter 7, Holofernes breaks camp and moves against Bethulia. The town leaders' faith without action looks to be a transgression in the end, as they did not act out their faith by engaging in military action or maintaining faith that God supports them. Holofernes besieges the town, which begins to run out of water and food. After days of siege, the Israelites in Bethulia, "cried out to the Lord their God, for their courage failed," (7:19). The simple victory through God's direct salvation did not materialize, and the Bethulians immediately lose faith, a clear example of transgression. Even though they offered prayer, a powerful act throughout Judith and biblical literature, their courage failed immediately. This lack of courage indicates that their faith in God's salvation is a bit feeble and faltering. The people go to the leaders and demand they submit to the Assyrians in order to survive. Uzziah declares to the people that they should wait five more days for God to save them, and if not, then they will surrender. Here again, the leaders of the Israelite community have faith in God but will not act on their own, and it will result in their destruction. This passive faith, in this context, functions as a transgression.

Enter Judith.

*Chapter 8 Interpretation:*<sup>56</sup>

Judith's long introduction clarifies before she says or does anything that she is the hero of this story, as only significant and meaningful figures in Tanakh receive such a long description of both her lineage, personal history, and strong character (see Abraham in Gen. 11:10-26). The especially lengthy lineage in verse 1 connects her to the generations of Israelites that she descended from, all of whom are men. Her associations with her male ancestors reappear in her prayer in chapter 9, when she speaks to God as the descendent of Simeon. Much more can be said about the meaning of each of these figures in the lineage, but here we will simply note that Judith is immediately associated with masculinity and male leadership as opposed to femininity and feminine leadership roles.

Verses 2-6 describe the circumstances of her widowhood: her husband Manasseh died suddenly, young and hardworking, and was buried appropriately. As a woman in antiquity, Judith had to be under the supervision of some man. Here in the narrative, he is introduced, named, and immediately killed off, giving Judith the freedoms and independence reserved for widows if they are wealthy enough to support themselves. But before we learn of her economic state, we are told of her piety and character as a widow, which is beyond reproach. Yet the degree of her widowhood- remaining unmarried, living on her roof instead of the house, dressing in sackcloth, and fasting except for Shabbat and holidays for three years and four months after his death- are not expectations for widows. Indeed, the piety and chastity described seem excessive or zealous.

Though not inappropriate or transgressive, Judith's behavior as a widow was not additionally valued and might in fact have seemed more self-righteous than pious. In

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<sup>56</sup> See Appendix A.

addition, the careful reminder that Judith rejoices and celebrates holidays that religious piety requires to be observed joyfully specifically highlights that her extreme widowhood does not transgress the boundaries of unacceptable asceticism or chastity. Her behavior sits in a carefully constructed framework of exceptional yet no more worthy piety. Is there a difference between piety that is beyond reproach and piety for the sake of being overly meticulous? Yet the text certainly lauds Judith for her behaviors. At this point in the narrative, in contrast to the actions of the previous seven chapters, the correct piety shown here looks more like extremism than traditional piety.

In the final two verses that introduce Judith (Jdt. 8:7-8), we also learn that she is beautiful, rich, and holds a sterling reputation among her community. A pleasing physical appearance was a valued quality in women in antiquity, so, in addition to chastity, Judith checks off another box of expected norms for women. Her beauty will play a significant role in the plan to infiltrate the Assyrian camp later on. Knowing that Judith is wealthy and maintains her late husband's prosperous estate further demonstrates her high degree of independence: she is an unclaimed yet previously married woman who has the means to support herself. Though she does not fit in the normative power structures of ancient society, her status lends her a high degree of support, agency, and freedom. In a story based on ironic reversals and flipped expectations, the character Judith is a walking oxymoron: a young, beautiful, secure widow.

Finally, the last piece of information that we learn about Judith, before she says or does anything in the narrative, is: "No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion," (Jdt. 8:8). Judith had a strong moral reputation in her community because of her pious devotion to God. Yet it could be that the author hints at a different aspect to the

character. The description is not that everyone in the community loved her or praised her, but rather that they did not say anything bad about her or against her. This reputation was certainly beyond reproach and fueled by her religious devotion, and our understanding of her piety as excessive or extreme could support an interpretation that her home community respected her out of fear. Again, the concept of piety seems more like extremism than traditional religious practice.

When Judith hears what the leaders, Uzziah in particular, have said about waiting for God to act in the next five days before submitting, she sends her maid to bring the leaders to her. This action is a strange reversal of status and power: a widow sends her female maid to summon the male leaders of the community. More strangely in the traditional social structure, the leaders come. This moment appears as an echo to Deborah, who summons Barak to her to give him instructions (Jdgs. 4:4-6). Once they arrive, Judith spends sixteen verses scolding the men for the lack of faith and courage. The main features to highlight in Judith's speech in 8:11-27 are her emphasis on not testing God, people needing to correctly understand God and His power, refusal to submit and accept slavery, and acting as an example to generations that follow like their ancestors.

Judith states very clearly that the people and leaders of the town may not test God by setting a human timeframe on His acts. As Judith claims, to place these kinds of constraints or expectations on God means placing human beings in the position of God: the ultimate transgression in the book of Judith. In addition, testing God and seeking to understand God appear to go together conceptually. As the townspeople put God into human terms or context by testing, they are claiming to understand God's will or thought process, and verse 14 echoes the theology of Job 38. Judith presents a theology of human frailty in comparison to

the awesome power of God, a strong critique against both the Bethulians' strained faith in God and Nebuchadnezzar's belief in his own supreme might. Furthermore, Judith states that God is not "to be won over by pleading," (Jdt. 8:16), that is, God is not a fickle king to be won over. Judith insists that the people understand that God is awesome and knows what is right and wrong and will do what is right to protect His people. The correct pious theology is that God will always act for what is right and the Jewish people must simply understand God's power and act according to these two principles.

Judith's speech also focuses on how the Bethulians must not simply give in and become slaves. As she claims, if they give in, God will make slavery even worse. This point clarifies that, if they become slaves, God was not defeated by the Assyrians but made them slaves because they lacked faith: the misery of slavery is God acting against them. There is no chance of the God of Israel actually being defeated; His people's capture is just a reflection of God's anger at their transgression of losing faith and submitting. Judith has no concern over the people being captured or harmed, but the desecration of God's name and power is the true problem here. In this perspective, the crisis that Judith points out and seeks to overcome is a crisis of faith. The people function as a barricade against the profaning of God's sacred name and house by the Gentile army (Jdt. 8:21-22), so piety here means protecting God's sanctity more so than the defense and concern over the Jewish people's safety.

Finally, Judith tells the people to offer thanks that God tests them and that they can "set an example for our kindred," (Jdt. 8:24-25). Judith urges the people to be grateful that they are being tested and can demonstrate their piety to God as an example. Yet Judith seems to be the only person to hold this extreme approach of appreciation for military and

existential crisis. But as her long lineage highlighted earlier in the chapter, Judith seeks to establish her place as a pious leader of her people. Judith's lineage of male leadership in 9:1 points toward her position among public, masculine leaders, which foreshadowed her determination to take bold action when the moment arose. It is not clear at this point if she has a plan in place, as her attempt to rouse the people first does not align with the covert mission she alludes to later. But certainly, this crisis is the chance to put her devout belief on display.

Uzziah's response to Judith recognizes her wisdom and right understanding, stating that all she has said is true and pious. Yet Uzziah then counters her truth of God's power with another undoubtable truth: the people of the town are overcome with thirst and fear (Jdt. 8:30). Uzziah then beseeches Judith to pray with them for rain as a devout woman. But this request plays into the status quo faith of the first half of Judith that is ultimately transgressive, as it is passive and reactive. The town needs rain because of the siege that is causing the great thirst and fear of the townspeople. There is no drought that needs to be resolved, so Uzziah's request seems like he wants to fix the surface problem (no water) without addressing the actual issue (the enemy army besieging the town and threatening Jerusalem). To pray for rain at this moment in the narrative would be a transgression against the active, extreme piety of Judith. Judith's proposed plan will address both the surface and underlying problems.

Judith responds to Uzziah and clearly hints at her future actions and demonstrates she has some sense of what she will do: "I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants...the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand. Only, do not try to find out what I am doing; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to

do,” (Jdt. 8:32-34). Judith forecasts that she will do something historic, something unique and bold, and she will not say what it is. At this moment, the audience does not know her idea but we are tantalized by the possibilities. The speech highlights again Judith’s interest in acting in a way that future generations will know. Judith declares the actions will be “through my hand,” with God acting through her, so she frames whatever comes next from her as a function of God. Yiftah in Judges 12 uses a similar phrasing to demonstrate God’s role in his victory (Jdgs. 12:2-3).

Having failed to rouse the people and leaders into active, faithful action with her, she has determined to take matters into her own hands. Her belief spurs her to take confident and even self-important action, believing and publicly declaring that God will work through her, but keeps hidden what her actions will be. Here active piety looks like bold, possibly reckless, action carried out covertly. While her faith seems to drive her actions, this behavior under normal circumstances would be highly transgressive for a woman. But Judith certainly thinks that she is in the right and that God backs her pious intervention. No wonder Uzziah wishes her luck and sends her on her way.

*Chapters 9-10:10 Interpretation:*<sup>57</sup>

Judith’s prayer begins with good Second Temple petitionary piety: she prostrated herself, she put ashes on her head, and began praying at the same time as the offerings at the Temple in Jerusalem were made.<sup>58</sup> As is characteristic for Judith, her religious practice aligns with normative Second Temple Judaism. In her prayer, the three main elements to be noted

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<sup>57</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>58</sup> See Rodney A. Werline, “Prayer in the Apocrypha,” in *The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha*, ed. Jonathan Klawans and Lawrence M. Wills (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 625-628.

are the continuation of the theology she expressed in her speech in chapter 8, several hints and forecasts of her eventual attack on Holofernes in the Assyrian camp, and an acknowledgement of a plan by God and her for what happens.

Judith begins her prayer by invoking the memory of her ancestor, Simeon, and his attack on the sleeping city of Shechem in retaliation for the rape of his sister Dinah (Jdt. 9:2-4). In the prayer, Dinah herself is not explicitly named, but is alluded to as the virgin who had been defiled and disgraced. Judith prays that God will help her to slaughter the Gentiles who are attempting to pollute the land and Temple, just like what happened to Dinah when she was raped, if Dinah could be understood abstractly or symbolically as the people or land of Israel. The prayer also claims that God punished Shechem so severely because, “you said, ‘It shall not be done’- yet they did it,” (Jdt. 9:2). In this case, God took revenge on people who trespassed on what was allowed to happen to His people, and Judith asks God to back her with a similar conviction for upholding what is right and wrong. Judith identifies herself with Simeon and hints at a surprise attack on someone in a vulnerable situation. Furthermore, she hints at two important features of her attack later on: a blood-stained bed as the site of vengeance and a reversal of the high being made low and the low made high (Jdt. 9:3-4). By putting her actions in the context of rape and a bed, we have a hint already that sex will be at the core of her next move. In addition, as she names herself a widow midway through the prayer, she identifies herself as a lowly, or at least unlikely, person who will take down the princes.

Next, Judith declares that God has done all of this according to God’s designs in advance, and subtly includes her own plans in with God’s: “You have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come,” (Jdt. 9:5). Judith’s gratitude for the opportunity to



be tested is present here again, viewing the crisis as part of an order of events that just need to be played out with faith in God. Judith's request and role here echoes Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 3 and Psalms 104, as she wants to play a role in the design and execution of God's thoughtful plan for the order and structure of the world.

Additionally, the Assyrians' "pride," and "arrogance," are named, and Judith exhorts God to "break their strength," and prove that God is the most awesome power in the universe. Judith asks God to give her, "a widow, the hand to do what I plan," (Jdt. 9:9). Just as Nebuchadnezzar laid out a "his plan" earlier in chapter 2:4 to prove he is the mightiest power in the universe, at this point Judith has her own to make this claim for the God of Israel. Judith also states clearly that she is going to bring the Assyrians down through "the deceit of my lips," (Jdt. 9:10). The plan that Judith lays out, which she believes God has set in motion, now involves sex, violence, and lies. Judith closes the prayer by asking for the final humiliation of their defeat will be the complete reversal of their arrogance: a woman widow will take down the all-male army of the greatest empire on earth. As she claimed before, Judith wants the entire world to "understand," and "know," that the God of Israel is the most powerful force in the universe (Jdt. 9:14), demonstrated by guiding a little widow to destroy an army.

Though these actions will all be taken against the foreign enemy, it is a long list of questionable behavior for a pious, chaste woman. In an exceptional moment when the status quo approach will end in destruction of a people and desecration of God, Judith feels compelled to act well beyond the status quo of norms and expectations. Yet Judith does not view this moment outside the bounds of normal functioning: this is the plan God set in motion and I am simply following through on it. Piety presented in this moment, then, is not

a response to an extreme situation. Rather, it is the logical conclusion that one reaches by playing out the implications of one's faith. While this piety may or may not be condoned in the narrative itself, it would become challenging and highly disruptive if utilized in a society and culture at large.

After her prayer, Judith changes out of her clothes, removing her widow attire, washing and replacing her clothes with "festive attire," to go on her mission. Casting off her widow's garb and changing clothes for an edgy mission, Judith's behavior echoes Tamar's actions in Gen. 38. Judith is fully adorned with clothes, shoes, jewelry, and fragrant oils and ointments (Jdt. 10:3-4). Interestingly, we already learned in her introduction that Judith only changed her clothes for holidays, so it is as if she dresses up to celebrate a sacred festival and worship God on this operation. This scene also hints at the scene in Esther when she dresses up to confront the king (Esth. 5:1), as for both women their beauty and strategic submissiveness helps save the Jewish people. Judith and her maid pack up food and dishes for the few days they will be gone, making sure they will not defile themselves with Gentile food as well as have with them equipment for their mission. When Judith meets the leaders at the gate of the city, who gawk at her beauty, their response could either be viewed as supportive or incredulous as they witness a beautiful woman, all dressed up for a party, walk out of the gates by herself, into a warzone and towards the enemy army's camp. Their final words to her as leaves the safety of Bethulia: "May the God of our ancestors grant you favor and fulfill your plans," (Jdt. 10:8). Whether or not Uzziah and the leaders actually have faith in her plan, they are going to let her try. Appearing as walking, glittering, clanking bait, Judith and her maid cross the physical and gender boundaries by leaving the town and heading across the valley.

*Chapter 10:11-23 Interpretation:*<sup>59</sup>

The mission of Judith and her sidekick, the maid, begins without sneaking or subtlety. The audience knows that she is going out dressed in her finest party ensemble, so we suspect she is not trying to slip into the camp unnoticed. But as they walk directly through the valley, clearly with the intention of being spotted, we begin to understand some of her tactics. In the scenes that follow, Judith intentionally plays up the normative, pious expectations that these men have of good women.

As soon as Judith encounters the Assyrian soldiers, she immediately and eloquently submits herself to them. We might fear what would happen to two women found alone outside an encampment of vicious soldiers, yet they submit so thoroughly that the soldiers are in fact charmed by her overtures: rather than overpowering a beautiful, vulnerable woman, she of her own accord completely bends to them. In a move she will replicate several times in the narrative, Judith circumvents possible violence against her and her maid by presenting herself in such submissive terms. Yet Judith lies to their faces about her intentions, and when she feigns submission, the Assyrians believe they are in command of the situation without knowing they have already been thrown off the power balance. Judith and her maid will now enter the camp under the protection and favor of the Assyrians, who believe the submissive façade without knowing the agency and strength underneath it.

The Assyrian soldiers, viewing themselves as both the conquerors and saviors of this beautiful woman, form an honor guard of a hundred men and escort her into the camp. They marvel at how beautiful she is and remark how the Israelites, a people filled with men and women like her, must be destroyed because just one of them “will be able to beguile the

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<sup>59</sup> See Appendix C.

whole world!” (Jdt. 10:19). The irony in their remarks, of course, is that just one of them has already beguiled an entire army.

The characters are playing off of traditional gender and power norms: Judith awakens their arrogance and pride at their supremacy. In fact, Judith ensnares the enemy with attributes considered pious or chaste. She is meek, submissive, eager to help the men around her, not to mention beautiful and well-spoken. This act, which is different from and more normative than the outspoken faith we know is the character’s true nature, gives Judith the upper hand and power to continue to manipulate the Assyrians.

When Judith is brought to Holofernes, he is reclining on his bed in his tent that is filled with precious decorations. Judith bows down; the general and his slaves immediately raise her up, the slaves struck by her beauty. In their first encounter, Holofernes is lying on his bed when Judith appears, and this moment sets up their final encounter as Holofernes lies on his bed in this tent later on. Judith does what is normative towards the powerful general and prostrates on the ground, yet she is brought up by those surrounding and supporting Holofernes’s power. Again, Judith plays along with the expectations for proper, pious women towards powerful men, and she already has them in the palm of her hand through the façade of normative power structures.

While Judith does not yet explain her rationale to the Assyrians about why she is defecting, she appears to be a scared, beautiful woman submitting to the overwhelming military force. In the next chapter, Judith will argue that her piety showed her the need to come and help the Assyrians, which on the surface seems like an absurd argument: in order to protect her God, she will abandon and help destroy the people whom that God protects and serve Nebuchadnezzar (Jdt. 11:11-16). However, the Assyrians have already bought into her

vulnerability and submission, feigned though it is, and will not question a form of piety that includes this submission. At this point, Judith uses normative gender roles and expectations for good, chaste women as a cover for her strategic plot. In the next chapter, she begins to use a blend of genuine and strategic piety to further her mission. Yet there is perhaps a difference between using submission and using religious piety as strategies for violence.

*Chapter 11:5-23 Interpretation:*<sup>60</sup>

When Judith speaks to Holofernes in this initial encounter, she claims that she will say, “nothing false to my lord this night,” (Jdt. 11:5). While some elements of what she says are correct or could possibly come to be in the near future, certainly not everything she says is true and there are some falsehoods as well. Judith speaks to Holofernes similarly to how she addressed the Assyrian foot soldiers, flattering his arrogance and making herself submissive in a way that protects her and gives her cover to work her plot. Throughout her speech, Judith also hints at and foreshadows what she will actually do to Holofernes later on. As she says, “If you follow the words of your servant, God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purpose,” (Jdt. 11:6). It is unclear whom Judith refers to as “my lord” in this verse, making Holofernes believe she means him while she more likely cites the God of Israel who will not fail to achieve His purpose. This statement also echoes Judith’s prayer in chapter 9:9-14, as she deceives the enemy with her words and seeks to accomplish a great task. In full command of her strategy, Judith feigns submission to the Assyrians while at the same time telling them plainly exactly what will

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<sup>60</sup> See Appendix D.

happen: if they follow her words, the God of Israel will accomplish a great purpose through Holofernes.

In addition to what she had said earlier in the valley, Judith adds another layer of theological submission. Judith claims that it is her piety towards the God of Israel that has led her to help Holofernes, who can defeat the people of Israel only if they sin. Judith repeats her pious belief from her speech to the leaders and people of Bethulia that God will protect them because they have not sinned (Jdt. 8:18). Yet here she repeats this same pious conviction, only she lies and claims that the Bethulians will soon sin by non-kosher animal slaughter, a sin we might surmise would follow in a siege but we have not heard mention of before, and be able to be defeated (Jdt. 11:11-3). The façade the Judith now presents to Holofernes is strategically both genuine and false. She presents herself as a pious woman who does not want her God to be profaned (“Your servant is indeed God-fearing and serves the God of heaven night and day,”), which is accurate to her true piety, but she articulates her piety as the reason she must betray her own people, which is her cover story in the plot. Furthermore, Judith claims she will go out and pray and let Holofernes know when Bethulia is ready for defeat (Jdt. 11:17-18). Her pious religious practice can now be used to give her freedom of movement in and out of the camp. Holofernes believes her story, because her submission to him and his king fits into his view of pietistic behavior and arrogance, both of which are transgression against the true God of Israel in the story.

In this chapter, we see Judith begin to use her piety, her devotion to God and religious practices, as a cover story that plays a crucial role in the duplicity. Earlier in Bethulia, piety righteously functions to push people to act beyond the status quo of normative expectations. Now, the narrative takes it one step further and strategically utilizes piety and pious behavior

itself as part of the plot. Even though this plot serves to protect the God, people, and Temple of Israel, another understanding and function of piety and transgression emerge. Earlier in the narrative, for the people and leaders of Israel to cave under pressure and fear would be a transgression, and Judith acts out of piety to strengthen and empower herself to do something courageous. Yet now, piety is not just a motivating force or determination to do what is needed: piety can deceive as well. And pious behavior as deception towards a pious goal crosses a new line not seen before in the story.

*Chapter 12:1-9 Interpretation:*<sup>61</sup>

After Judith's long speech in which she submits to Holofernes while implicitly foreshadowing his murder, the general eagerly seeks to settle this beautiful and wise woman into his household. Having used feigned submission and piety to gain entry into and trust within the camp, Judith now uses her modesty and piety to separate herself and move freely in and out of the camp. She is able to remove herself from the banquet by stating, truthfully, that she cannot eat the food and will eat her meals separately. When Holofernes shows concern for her continued welfare as a woman under his jurisdiction and asks if she will have enough, Judith again hints at the ultimate outcome of her mission: God will carry out through her "hand" what God has already determined before she runs out of food (Jdt. 12:4). Her piety of maintaining religious dietary laws is both real as Judith would never eat food that was ritually impure based on her characterization in 8:1-8, yet her religious practice also functions as a screen for her bold and violent plot.

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<sup>61</sup> See Appendix E.

In addition, Judith also includes prayer and ritual bathing in the middle of the night as part of her religious practice while she is in the Assyrian camp (Jdt. 12:6-9). She specifically asks Holofernes permission, who tells the guards to stand aside for her to come and go with her maid at night. For the three days that she is there, Judith carefully establishes a routine that will give her cover for her escape later on. And again, that routine is rooted in genuine piety of prayer and ritual bathing, though we do not know if she did so every night while in Bethulia (though it seems unlikely). This moment functions as an echo of when Judith told the leaders of Bethulia to tell the guards at the gate to let her pass through on her mission (Jdt. 8:33). This behavior goes against the cultural norms, and a woman would not be moving in and out of settlements in this manner. Judith's ability to maneuver in and out of cultural boundaries might be an echo of the memory of wise women, whose piety and authority gave them more power and freedom than most women to accomplish the sacred work they were tasked with. Yet Judith moves freely through the camp to both accomplish her task and prepare an escape. In this moment, her piety functions as genuine religious observance, a cover story, and an exit strategy.

*Chapter 12:10-20 Interpretation:*<sup>62</sup>

For the moment that ultimately brings down Holofernes and the Assyrian army, Holofernes sets his own demise in motion. Holofernes sends Bagoas to invite Judith to the banquet with only him and his servants present. Interestingly, it is his fear of judgement by other men that drives him to attempt to seduce Judith, not necessarily his desire or attraction (Jdt. 12:12). Holofernes's ostensible main concern seems to be that he must demonstrate his

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<sup>62</sup> See Appendix F.



manhood to deter the humiliation from other people for not taking advantage of a helpless woman, as a real man should. In the end, he becomes even more of a laughing stock when the isolated, vulnerable woman emasculates him just as he thinks he will prove his manly prowess. Just as Judith played off of normative expectations of women to gain entry into the camp, Holofernes buys into the normative expectations for men as well, and he falls into the same trap he believes he has laid for Judith.

Judith knows this moment is the opportunity she has waited for, and she responds to Bagoas's invitation, saying, "Who am I to refuse my lord?...It will be a joy to me until the day of my death," (Jdt. 12:14). As before in her speech to Holofernes, it is unclear if "my lord" refers to the general or the God of Israel. Hinting at her true piety and mission, Judith certainly cannot refuse this glimmering opportunity God has presented for her to act.

Furthermore, dining with Holofernes will truly be a joy for the rest of her life, as she will accomplish God's designs through that offer. Dressing up in her finest clothes again, which for Judith functions essentially as her battle armor, Judith makes herself appear too beautiful to resist. Holofernes sees her and feels all the more compelled to seduce her (Jdt. 12:16).

Judith remains in control of the situation, using her submissiveness to him once again to protect herself from harm, until he becomes so drunk and incapacitated that the general is no longer a physical threat. Judith hints again at her true mission in verse 18: "I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life." In one sentence, Judith strategically plays off of Holofernes's arrogance and expectations while slyly forecasting her real purpose and goal.

In this moment, Judith knowingly walked into another situation that should make her fearful: she is alone at a banquet with a very drunk and potentially violent foreign man. This

scenario violates every norm of where and what a pious, chaste, Jewish woman should be and do. But Judith also finds herself in the exact situation to save her people and protect God and the Temple. Here, piety appears to mean using all opportunities and options to uphold God's power, yet the actions that allow for that chance push deeper into transgressions. Desperate times perhaps call for desperate measures to serve a higher purpose, but it is strange, if not extreme, to see that end reached through a mixture of sex, lies, and violence.

*Chapter 13:1-10a Interpretation:*<sup>63</sup>

Alone in the tent with a passed-out Holofernes, Judith has her chance to strike. In an echo of the scene when Judith first entered the Assyrian camp, Holofernes rests on his bed in his tent, symbolically bookending the pair's first and final encounter. Bagoas, the helpful servant to Holofernes, leaves his master alone with Judith. This seems like a strange choice, as Holofernes lies dead-drunk and vulnerable on the bed and unable to enact the seduction he planned. Perhaps Bagoas believes Judith's strategic demonstration of meekness, chastity, and piety so much that he does not view her as a threat. But then again, if Judith were such a meek, chaste, pious woman, why would she end up in this potentially compromising situation? If Bagoas had paid attention, these circumstances might have seemed suspicious to him. Yet again in this narrative, as characters play out normative expectations of faith, power, and gender, they inevitably reap the consequences that prove that status quo of piety and norms are transgressions in these instances.

Judith strategically positions her maid outside the bedchamber to look as though the two women will go out of the camp for their ritual bathing and prayers. Before killing

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<sup>63</sup> See Appendix G.

Holofernes, Judith offers one final prayer to God, echoing many earlier sentiments with some alterations. She prays, “O Lord God of all might, look in this hour on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. Now indeed is the time to help your heritage and to carry out my design to destroy the enemies...Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!” (Jdt. 13:5-7). Judith asks God to look at and strengthen her hands for the task, but she does not carry this action out to save Jerusalem, rather for the “exaltation of Jerusalem.” Judith performs this execution, not to save her people, but to prove how glorious God and His Temple are. In this key moment, Judith does not want God to act to rescue but to demonstrate prowess. While protecting a people serves to demonstrate a deity’s power in the ancient world, this moment is an expression purely of power. The book of Judith focuses on power, on who has supreme power in the world, and the most important message sent in the moment of salvation is bold exaltation. Here she follows up on her own request from her prayer in chapter 9 for the world to know and understand the power of the God of Israel (Jdt. 9:13-14). This scene is the ultimate reversal of the narrative: Holofernes tried to prove his manhood and Judith ends up emasculating him; the Assyrians sought to prove the power of their king and god and the God of Israel ended up proving His might instead.

However, Judith also asks God to help carry out “my design,” (Jdt. 13:5). Earlier in the narrative, Judith prayed in chapter 9 for God’s design to be carried out through her hand in a reference to the role of Lady Wisdom in the wisdom tradition (Jdt. 9:9-10, Psalm 104:24). Now, however, it is Judith’s own design that she asks for help with from God. While Judith completes the assassination that is necessary for the situation, that her piety and faith had empowered her to do, perhaps she has taken her piety a step further by claiming ownership over the design of the previous events. Finally, Judith chops off Holofernes’s

head, completing the foreshadowing hint of 9:3, leaving the enemy dead on his bloody bed. She passes the head to her maid, who places it into their food bag. This tool that carried their ritually pure food, a demonstration of genuine piety, is now used to smuggle a human head out of the camp with them, rendered impure by the head. The practices of genuine piety again serve as a cover for the covert operation.

To understand Judith's behavior in this scene, and in the story in general, it is helpful to place her actions in the context of biblical precedents. The two most helpful examples are Esther and Yael. First, Esther also dresses up to become more beautiful and strategically omits information about her ancestry to gain access to the mechanisms of power to save her people (Esth. 5:1-2) and this access does involve intimacy with a foreign man, though she is at least married to him. Esther also acts boldly when she confronts Haman in the precise moment to save her people (Esth. 7:3-7) and Haman does meet a violent end, but Esther is not the one who perpetrates the violence. Esther also believes she might have been placed in this position to save her people, but only because Mordecai tells her so (Esth. 4:14), and she certainly does not explicitly claim her own grand design that God supports. There are many similarities between Esther and Judith in respect to their utilization of secrecy, sex, and violence, but Judith takes each of these elements at least a step further than Esther. Perhaps Judith's faith, religious conviction, and excessive piety counter balance or shield her more transgressive behaviors, and she begins to see herself as the mastermind instead of God. Yet at least in relation to the allusion to Esther, her actions are more extreme.

Second, in comparison to Yael in Judges 4, Judith's behavior matches a bit more closely to hers. In order to overcome the fleeing Sisera and end the war, Yael also uses deliberate lies, implied sexuality, and violence against an incapacitated man (Jdgs. 4:18-21).

In addition, Yael receives praises for her actions in the victory song in Judges 5. However, the biblical account never describes Yael as pious or chaste. Indeed, Yael functions as a traitor of sorts, since her husband appeared to be an ally of Sisera (Jdgs. 4:17). Yael's actions provide an example of the duplicity and violence that occurs when each person does what is right in their own eyes, as opposed to the righteous actions of a national savior in crisis. And so Yael's behavior serves more as a reflection of the lawless system of the book of Judges than a vindication for the deceptive piety of Judith.

While echoes and allusions exist in this famous scene in Judith from other biblical characters, the version in Judith presents a unique mixture of deception, sexual proximity with a foreign man, and murder for the sake of national defense and exaltation. None of these characters or stories utilize religious piety as part of the ploy either. This combination of features may not condemn Judith's behavior as ultimately transgressive; we can view the narrative in relation to other similar literary contexts. Perhaps the strategic use of piety as deception in conjunction with an excessive or extreme amount of lies, sex, and violence for a biblical woman pushes the narrative's conception of piety too far across an acceptable line.

*Chapter 13:10b-17 Interpretation:*<sup>64</sup>

Judith and her maid continue their established routine of leaving the camp at night to bathe and pray, only this time they take the head of Holofernes with them. Hustling quickly back to Bethulia, Judith loudly declares as soon as they reach the gates to open up and that, "God, our God is with us," (Jdt. 13:11). Judith explains that God had worked through her hand: her boldness in the tent of claiming her own design is gone, it was the God of Israel

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<sup>64</sup> See Appendix H.

who acted. She expresses normative piety as she presents herself as simply the vessel for God's power. Judith repeats the same faithful piety she expressed before going on her mission, bringing evidence of God's power and encouraging praise and blessing to God who saved them as He always does.

As soon as they approach the gates, Judith drops the foreshadowing, hinting double-speak she used in the Assyrian camp, speaking directly and shedding light on many of her actions and words. Judith makes sure to declare what happened publicly, and the repetition of phrasing compares her actions back in Bethulia with what happened in Holofernes's bedchamber. The text specifically notes that "both small and great," come running out to hear Judith's initial report as soon as she returned (Jdt. 13:13), and earlier Judith found herself alone with Holofernes, "and no one, either small or great, was left in the bedchamber," (Jdt. 13:4). While in the Assyrian camp, Judith behaved in an elusive way, maneuvering through the shadows and margins. Back in Bethulia, she reverses back to her previous way of engaging with the community: direct, deliberate, authoritative. She even tells them in almost full detail how she gained access to his bedchamber, but makes clear that he did not defile or shame her, her face alone did the seducing (Jdt. 13:16). Given that the great crisis of the narrative is the fear of defilement and shaming by the invading Gentiles, it is important for Judith to clarify that she was not defiled on this mission. Yet Judith is not completely transparent, as she deliberately put herself more at risk for those violations in order to kill Holofernes than she shares.

The people marvel at her return, perhaps hinting that when Uzziah and the leaders sent her out of the gates they did not genuinely have faith in her success and safe return. The people exclaim and immediately praise and bless God, without a word to Judith herself in

thanks or gratitude (Jdt. 13:17). The people now know and understand that God is the most powerful force in the world, and the people of Bethulia reached the correct piety of faith in this God against any opposition. Judith slips back into the role of a pious vessel, not an assassin with strategic agency.

*Chapter 16:18-25 Interpretation:*<sup>65</sup>

After the praise and recognition Judith receives from the people and leaders of Bethulia, the people of Jerusalem, and the high priest through victory songs, the people make the correct offerings and prayers to God in thanksgiving. Judith even offers the canopy from the bed of Holofernes as a part of her sacrifice (Jdt. 16:19), which acknowledges God's role in her mission, demonstrates once again God's prowess over the Assyrians, and destroys the remaining evidence from her escapade. The proper piety for a military victory is concluded and everyone can go back to their normal lives now that the crisis is over and fully resolved. Judith returns back to her normal life of piety and over the top widowhood. During the conclusion of this story, Judith again performs every dignified and chaste act as it should be done: she refuses remarriage, grew famous but not arrogant, lived a long and prosperous life, freed her maid and appropriately distributed her wealth upon her death, and was buried alongside her husband. The final lines echo the conclusion of stories of the heroes at the end of their lives in the book of Judges (Jdt. 16:23-25), with peace throughout the land for many decades because of Judith's actions.

Just as the beginning verses of Judith presents a biblical version of, "once upon a time," the conclusion describes a biblical, "happily ever after." This epilogue ties every event

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<sup>65</sup> See Appendix I.

and concern of the book up into an excessively neat little bow. Given the unique and thrilling events of the story, this thorough and thoroughly pleasant conclusion might function as a closing caveat to the story as well: this was a fictional story; do not replicate. In order to save a country in a national, existential crisis, Judith acted in a way that pushed, reversed, and at times transgressed normative piety and cultural expectations. But then after this mission, the evidence was destroyed, the woman involved never did anything bold again in her life, and it worked so well that nobody had to take on bold measures for roughly one hundred years during Judith's lifetime and the time after. The piety of the book of Judith was a desperate measure for a desperate time. Yet we might recognize the critique of these circumstantial concepts of piety and transgression in how the narrative cleanly boxes up and shelves those definitions and behaviors at the very end.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This interpretive investigation did not seek to find out if Judith was right or wrong, good or bad. Rather, the goal was to explore how piety and transgression functioned in this dynamic and fascinating narrative. How did the definitions or conceptions of piety and transgression present themselves in the story? How did the definitions change or shift throughout? How did the line between the two push or blur? How were piety and transgression juxtaposed and played off of each other?

The book of Judith makes abundantly clear that the people of Israel face a national, religious, existential crisis, and in this moment the only way to combat the unfolding disaster must be well outside the box of normal. As characters seek to address the problem with status quo expressions of piety or acknowledge the vulnerability of the situation, these responses



offer no protection or salvation, and would have resulted in the destruction of the Temple and desecration of God's holy name. Faith on its own is not enough, bold faith and bold actions empowered by faith are required in this moment. Judith serves as the heroine because she can operate outside of the box because of her unique status in the community as well as an excessive faithful piety.

However, in order to save the people and prove the might of the God of Israel for all to know and understand, Judith's piety strengthens her to act in ways that would have been considered transgressions. While some of the transgressions for the sake of piety and faith in God can be acceptable in the circumstance, such as lying and murder, there are other behaviors that seem less excusable even given the circumstances: a vulnerable woman traveling alone, a Jewish woman entering the military camp of non-Jews and coming into intimate contact with them. In addition, Judith uses her piety to empower herself but also to give cover to her transgressive behavior and deceptions. Even though her actions are in the service of God, and therefore piety, Judith uses her religious conviction and practice itself as a weaponized tool. Is this ultimately impious for her to use ritual washing and prayer as a cover story? Perhaps; or it was simply strategic and brilliant. In these moments, the line between piety and transgression blur, leaving open questions and debates but no clear answers.

The biblical precedents and allusions throughout the book also help us think more deeply about piety and transgression in Judith's actions. Yet many similar examples miss crucial elements found in Judith that do not completely absolve or condemn the character. Tamar, for instance, goes out into the world and has sex with Judah, but this case involves a Jewish man and Tamar understands her accountability for her actions and pushes Judah to be

accountable as well (Gen. 38:13-26). Esther uses her beauty strategically to access the power of her foreign husband through lies of omission, demonstrating courage and bold action to save her people (Esth. 5-7). However, Esther never sexually manipulates a man she is not married to and does not use violence herself when the moment comes to act decisively. Finally, Yael strategically deceives and potentially seduces Sisera, killing him with her own hands while he lies incapacitated and vulnerable (Jdgs. 4:21). But Yael never claimed to be pious and she operates in a society where this kind of double-crossing, duplicitous behavior was more expected. And so, while these precedents connect to the story of Judith and offer some context, these stories and characters do not fully support her behaviors either.

Finally, the epilogue of Judith might offer an implicit critique of the actions and behaviors described in the story. Similar to the critique at the end of the book of Judges, the ending of the book of Judith not only ends her career, it also clarifies that she never did anything bold or thrilling again: she dies, is buried, and her property appropriately distributed. There is no possibility of another tale in the trickster-hero cycle; Judith was a one-time actor. While this one-time heroine might have saved the day, she is clearly too dangerous or subversive to act similarly again.

The author of the book of Judith plays with the meanings of piety and transgression throughout the narrative, offering an excellent story and engaging questions about faith and morality. The text does not give us an answer, but it certainly invites us to ask and investigate these fascinating questions. Without a doubt, this book presents us an exciting, dramatic, and complicated heroine and story.

## Appendices

### Appendix A.

#### *Chapter 8 Text:*

<sup>1</sup>Now in those days Judith heard about these things: she was the daughter of Merari son of Ox son of Joseph son of Oziel son of Elkhiah son of Ananias son of Gideon son of Raphain son of Ahitub son of Elijah son of Hilkiah son of Eliab son of Nathanael son of Salamiel son of Sarasadai son of Israel. <sup>2</sup>Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest. <sup>3</sup>For as he stood overseeing those who were binding sheaves in the field, he was overcome by the burning heat, and took to his bed and died in his town Bethulia. So they buried him with his ancestors in the field between Dothan and Balamon. <sup>4</sup>Judith remained as a widow for three years and four months <sup>5</sup>at home where she set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow's clothing. <sup>6</sup>She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>She was beautiful in appearance, and was very lovely to behold. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields; and she maintained this estate. <sup>8</sup>No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion.

<sup>9</sup>When Judith heard the harsh words spoken by the people against the ruler, because they were faint for lack of water, and when she heard all that Uzziah said to them, and how he promised them under oath to surrender the town to the Assyrians after five days, <sup>10</sup>she sent her maid, who was in charge of all she possessed, to summon Uzziah and Chabris and Charmis, the elders of her town. <sup>11</sup>They came to her, and she said to them:

“Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies unless the Lord turns and helps us within so many days. <sup>12</sup>Who are you to put God to the test today, and to set yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs? <sup>13</sup>You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test, but you will never learn anything! <sup>14</sup>You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought? No, my brothers, do not anger the Lord our God. <sup>15</sup>For if he does not choose to help us within these five days, he has power to protect us within any time he pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies. <sup>16</sup>Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him.

<sup>18</sup>“For never in our generation, nor in these present days, has there been any tribe or family or people or town of ours that worships gods made with hands, as was done in days gone by. <sup>19</sup>That was why our ancestors were handed over to the sword and to pillage, and so they suffered a great catastrophe before our enemies. <sup>20</sup>But we know no other god but him, and so we hope that he will not disdain us or any of our nation. <sup>21</sup>For if we are captured, all Judea

will be captured and our sanctuary will be plundered; and he will make us pay for its desecration with our blood. <sup>22</sup> The slaughter of our kindred and the captivity of the land and the desolation of our inheritance—all this he will bring on our heads among the Gentiles, wherever we serve as slaves; and we shall be an offense and a disgrace in the eyes of those who acquire us. <sup>23</sup> For our slavery will not bring us into favor, but the Lord our God will turn it to dishonor.

<sup>24</sup> “Therefore, my brothers, let us set an example for our kindred, for their lives depend upon us, and the sanctuary—both the temple and the altar—rests upon us. <sup>25</sup> In spite of everything let us give thanks to the Lord our God, who is putting us to the test as he did our ancestors. <sup>26</sup> Remember what he did with Abraham, and how he tested Isaac, and what happened to Jacob in Syrian Mesopotamia, while he was tending the sheep of Laban, his mother’s brother. <sup>27</sup> For he has not tried us with fire, as he did them, to search their hearts, nor has he taken vengeance on us; but the Lord scourges those who are close to him in order to admonish them.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Uzziah said to her, “All that you have said was spoken out of a true heart, and there is no one who can deny your words. <sup>29</sup> Today is not the first time your wisdom has been shown, but from the beginning of your life all the people have recognized your understanding, for your heart’s disposition is right. <sup>30</sup> But the people were so thirsty that they compelled us to do for them what we have promised, and made us take an oath that we cannot break. <sup>31</sup> Now since you are a God-fearing woman, pray for us, so that the Lord may send us rain to fill our cisterns. Then we will no longer feel faint from thirst.”

<sup>32</sup> Then Judith said to them, “Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants. <sup>33</sup> Stand at the town gate tonight so that I may go out with my maid; and within the days after which you have promised to surrender the town to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand. <sup>34</sup> Only, do not try to find out what I am doing; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to do.”

<sup>35</sup> Uzziah and the rulers said to her, “Go in peace, and may the Lord God go before you, to take vengeance on our enemies.” <sup>36</sup> So they returned from the tent and went to their posts.

## **Appendix B.**

### *Chapters 9-10:10 Text:*

<sup>1</sup> Then Judith prostrated herself, put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing. At the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said,

<sup>2</sup> “O Lord God of my ancestor Simeon, to whom you gave a sword to take revenge on those strangers who had torn off a virgin’s clothing to defile her, and exposed her thighs to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her; for you said, ‘It shall not be done’—yet they did it; <sup>3</sup> so you gave up their rulers to be killed, and their bed, which was ashamed of the deceit they had practiced, was stained with blood, and you struck down slaves along with princes, and princes on their thrones. <sup>4</sup> You gave up their wives for booty and their daughters

to captivity, and all their booty to be divided among your beloved children who burned with zeal for you and abhorred the pollution of their blood and called on you for help. O God, my God, hear me also, a widow.

<sup>5</sup>“For you have done these things and those that went before and those that followed. You have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. What you had in mind has happened; <sup>6</sup> the things you decided on presented themselves and said, ‘Here we are!’ For all your ways are prepared in advance, and your judgment is with foreknowledge.

<sup>7</sup>“Here now are the Assyrians, a greatly increased force, priding themselves in their horses and riders, boasting in the strength of their foot soldiers, and trusting in shield and spear, in bow and sling. They do not know that you are the Lord who crushes wars; the Lord is your name. <sup>8</sup> Break their strength by your might, and bring down their power in your anger; for they intend to defile your sanctuary, and to pollute the tabernacle where your glorious name resides, and to break off the horns of your altar with the sword. <sup>9</sup> Look at their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads. Give to me, a widow, the strong hand to do what I plan. <sup>10</sup> By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman.

<sup>11</sup>“For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope. <sup>12</sup> Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! <sup>13</sup> Make my deceitful words bring wound and bruise on those who have planned cruel things against your covenant, and against your sacred house, and against Mount Zion, and against the house your children possess. <sup>14</sup> Let your whole nation and every tribe know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!”

<sup>10</sup> <sup>1</sup>When Judith had stopped crying out to the God of Israel, and had ended all these words, <sup>2</sup> she rose from where she lay prostrate. She called her maid and went down into the house where she lived on sabbaths and on her festal days. <sup>3</sup> She removed the sackcloth she had been wearing, took off her widow’s garments, bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment. She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. <sup>4</sup> She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. <sup>5</sup> She gave her maid a skin of wine and a flask of oil, and filled a bag with roasted grain, dried fig cakes, and fine bread; then she wrapped up all her dishes and gave them to her to carry.

<sup>6</sup> Then they went out to the town gate of Bethulia and found Uzziah standing there with the elders of the town, Chabris and Charmis. <sup>7</sup> When they saw her transformed in appearance and dressed differently, they were very greatly astounded at her beauty and said to her, <sup>8</sup>“May the God of our ancestors grant you favor and fulfill your plans, so that the people of Israel may glory and Jerusalem may be exalted.” She bowed down to God.

<sup>9</sup> Then she said to them, “Order the gate of the town to be opened for me so that I may go out and accomplish the things you have just said to me.” So they ordered the young men to open the gate for her, as she requested. <sup>10</sup> When they had done this, Judith went out, accompanied by her maid. The men of the town watched her until she had gone down the mountain and passed through the valley, where they lost sight of her.

## **Appendix C.**

### *Chapter 10:11-23 Text:*

<sup>11</sup> As the women were going straight on through the valley, an Assyrian patrol met her <sup>12</sup> and took her into custody. They asked her, “To what people do you belong, and where are you coming from, and where are you going?” She replied, “I am a daughter of the Hebrews, but I am fleeing from them, for they are about to be handed over to you to be devoured. <sup>13</sup> I am on my way to see Holofernes the commander of your army, to give him a true report; I will show him a way by which he can go and capture all the hill country without losing one of his men, captured or slain.”

<sup>14</sup> When the men heard her words, and observed her face—she was in their eyes marvelously beautiful—they said to her, <sup>15</sup> “You have saved your life by hurrying down to see our lord. Go at once to his tent; some of us will escort you and hand you over to him. <sup>16</sup> When you stand before him, have no fear in your heart, but tell him what you have just said, and he will treat you well.”

<sup>17</sup> They chose from their number a hundred men to accompany her and her maid, and they brought them to the tent of Holofernes. <sup>18</sup> There was great excitement in the whole camp, for her arrival was reported from tent to tent. They came and gathered around her as she stood outside the tent of Holofernes, waiting until they told him about her. <sup>19</sup> They marveled at her beauty and admired the Israelites, judging them by her. They said to one another, “Who can despise these people, who have women like this among them? It is not wise to leave one of their men alive, for if we let them go they will be able to beguile the whole world!”

<sup>20</sup> Then the guards of Holofernes and all his servants came out and led her into the tent. <sup>21</sup> Holofernes was resting on his bed under a canopy that was woven with purple and gold, emeralds and other precious stones. <sup>22</sup> When they told him of her, he came to the front of the tent, with silver lamps carried before him. <sup>23</sup> When Judith came into the presence of Holofernes and his servants, they all marveled at the beauty of her face. She prostrated herself and did obeisance to him, but his slaves raised her up.

## **Appendix D.**

### *Chapter 11:5-23 Text:*

<sup>5</sup> Judith answered him, “Accept the words of your slave, and let your servant speak in your presence. I will say nothing false to my lord this night. <sup>6</sup> If you follow out the words of your servant, God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purposes. <sup>7</sup> By the life of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole earth, and by the power of him who has sent you to direct every living being! Not only do human beings serve him because

of you, but also the animals of the field and the cattle and the birds of the air will live, because of your power, under Nebuchadnezzar and all his house. <sup>8</sup> For we have heard of your wisdom and skill, and it is reported throughout the whole world that you alone are the best in the whole kingdom, the most informed and the most astounding in military strategy.

<sup>9</sup> “Now as for Achior’s speech in your council, we have heard his words, for the people of Bethulia spared him and he told them all he had said to you. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, lord and master, do not disregard what he said, but keep it in your mind, for it is true. Indeed our nation cannot be punished, nor can the sword prevail against them, unless they sin against their God.

<sup>11</sup> “But 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. <sup>12</sup> Since their food supply is exhausted and their water has almost given out, they have planned to kill their livestock and have determined to use all that God by his laws has forbidden them to eat. <sup>13</sup> 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 in Jerusalem—things it is not lawful for any of the people even to touch with their hands. <sup>14</sup> Since even the people in Jerusalem have been doing this, they have sent messengers there in order to bring back permission from the council of the elders. <sup>15</sup> When the response reaches them and they act upon it, on that very day they will be handed over to you to be destroyed.

<sup>16</sup> “So when I, your slave, learned all this, I fled from them. God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world wherever people shall hear about them. <sup>17</sup> Your servant is indeed God-fearing and serves the God of heaven night and day. So, my lord, I will remain with you; but every night your servant will go out into the valley and pray to God. He will tell me when they have committed their sins. <sup>18</sup> Then I will come and tell you, so that you may go out with your whole army, and not one of them will be able to withstand you. <sup>19</sup> Then I will lead you through Judea, until you come to Jerusalem; there I will set your throne. You will drive them like sheep that have no shepherd, and no dog will so much as growl at you. For this was told me to give me foreknowledge; it was announced to me, and I was sent to tell you.”

<sup>20</sup> Her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants. They marveled at her wisdom and said, <sup>21</sup> “No other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful or speaks so wisely!” <sup>22</sup> Then Holofernes said to her, “God has done well to send you ahead of the people, to strengthen our hands and bring destruction on those who have despised my lord. <sup>23</sup> You are not only beautiful in appearance, but wise in speech. If you do as you have said, your God shall be my God, and you shall live in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and be renowned throughout the whole world.”

## **Appendix E.**

### *Chapter 12:1-9 Text:*

<sup>1</sup> Then he commanded them to bring her in where his silver dinnerware was kept, and ordered them to set a table for her with some of his own delicacies, and with some of his own wine to

drink. <sup>2</sup> But Judith said, “I cannot partake of them, or it will be an offense; but I will have enough with the things I brought with me.” <sup>3</sup> Holofernes said to her, “If your supply runs out, where can we get you more of the same? For none of your people are here with us.” <sup>4</sup> Judith replied, “As surely as you live, my lord, your servant will not use up the supplies I have with me before the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined.”

<sup>5</sup> Then the servants of Holofernes brought her into the tent, and she slept until midnight. Toward the morning watch she got up <sup>6</sup> and sent this message to Holofernes: “Let my lord now give orders to allow your servant to go out and pray.” <sup>7</sup> So Holofernes commanded his guards not to hinder her. She remained in the camp three days. She went out each night to the valley of Bethulia, and bathed at the spring in the camp. <sup>8</sup> After bathing, she prayed the Lord God of Israel to direct her way for the triumph of his people. <sup>9</sup> Then she returned purified and stayed in the tent until she ate her food toward evening.

## **Appendix F.**

### *Chapters 12:10-20 Text:*

<sup>10</sup> On the fourth day Holofernes held a banquet for his personal attendants only, and did not invite any of his officers. <sup>11</sup> He said to Bagoas, the eunuch who had charge of his personal affairs, “Go and persuade the Hebrew woman who is in your care to join us and to eat and drink with us. <sup>12</sup> For it would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without having intercourse with her. If we do not seduce her, she will laugh at us.”

<sup>13</sup> So Bagoas left the presence of Holofernes, and approached her and said, “Let this pretty girl not hesitate to come to my lord to be honored in his presence, and to enjoy drinking wine with us, and to become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar.” <sup>14</sup> Judith replied, “Who am I to refuse my lord? Whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until the day of my death.” <sup>15</sup> So she proceeded to dress herself in all her woman’s finery. Her maid went ahead and spread for her on the ground before Holofernes the lambskins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use in reclining.

<sup>16</sup> Then Judith came in and lay down. Holofernes’ heart was ravished with her and his passion was aroused, for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her. <sup>17</sup> So Holofernes said to her, “Have a drink and be merry with us!” <sup>18</sup> Judith said, “I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life.” <sup>19</sup> Then she took what her maid had prepared and ate and drank before him. <sup>20</sup> 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.

## **Appendix G.**

### *Chapter 13:1-10a Text:*

<sup>1</sup>When evening came, his slaves quickly withdrew. Bagoas closed the tent from outside and shut out the attendants from his master’s presence. They went to bed, for they all were weary



because the banquet had lasted so long. <sup>2</sup> But Judith was left alone in the tent, with Holofernes stretched out on his bed, for he was dead drunk.

<sup>3</sup> Now Judith had told her maid to stand outside the bedchamber and to wait for her to come out, as she did on the other days; for she said she would be going out for her prayers. She had said the same thing to Bagoas. <sup>4</sup> So everyone went out, and no one, either small or great, was left in the bedchamber. Then Judith, standing beside his bed, said in her heart, “O Lord God of all might, look in this hour on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> Now indeed is the time to help your heritage and to carry out my design to destroy the enemies who have risen up against us.”

<sup>6</sup> She went up to the bedpost near Holofernes’ head, and took down his sword that hung there. <sup>7</sup> She came close to his bed, took hold of the hair of his head, and said, “Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!” <sup>8</sup> Then she struck his neck twice with all her might, and cut off his head. <sup>9</sup> Next she rolled his body off the bed and pulled down the canopy from the posts. Soon afterward she went out and gave Holofernes’ head to her maid, <sup>10</sup> who placed it in her food bag.

## **Appendix H.**

### *Chapter 13:10b-17 Text:*

Then the two of them went out together, as they were accustomed to do for prayer. They passed through the camp, circled around the valley, and went up the mountain to Bethulia, and came to its gates. <sup>11</sup> From a distance Judith called out to the sentries at the gates, “Open, open the gate! God, our God, is with us, still showing his power in Israel and his strength against our enemies, as he has done today!”

<sup>12</sup> When the people of her town heard her voice, they hurried down to the town gate and summoned the elders of the town. <sup>13</sup> They all ran together, both small and great, for it seemed unbelievable that she had returned. They opened the gate and welcomed them. Then they lit a fire to give light, and gathered around them. <sup>14</sup> Then she said to them with a loud voice, “Praise God, O praise him! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has destroyed our enemies by my hand this very night!”

<sup>15</sup> Then she pulled the head out of the bag and showed it to them, and said, “See here, the head of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy beneath which he lay in his drunken stupor. The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman. <sup>16</sup> As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the way I went, I swear that it was my face that seduced him to his destruction, and that he committed no sin with me, to defile and shame me.” <sup>17</sup> All the people were greatly astonished. They bowed down and worshiped God, and said with one accord, “Blessed are you our God, who have this day humiliated the enemies of your people.”

## **Appendix I.**

### *Chapter 16:18-25 Text:*

<sup>18</sup> When they arrived at Jerusalem, they worshiped God. As soon as the people were purified, they offered their burnt offerings, their freewill offerings, and their gifts. <sup>19</sup> Judith also dedicated to God all the possessions of Holofernes, which the people had given her; and the canopy that she had taken for herself from his bedchamber she gave as a votive offering. <sup>20</sup> For three months the people continued feasting in Jerusalem before the sanctuary, and Judith remained with them.

<sup>21</sup> After this they all returned home to their own inheritances. Judith went to Bethulia, and remained on her estate. For the rest of her life she was honored throughout the whole country. <sup>22</sup> Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people. <sup>23</sup> She became more and more famous, and grew old in her husband's house, reaching the age of one hundred five. She set her maid free. She died in Bethulia, and they buried her in the cave of her husband Manasseh; <sup>24</sup> and the house of Israel mourned her for seven days. Before she died she distributed her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband Manasseh, and to her own nearest kindred. <sup>25</sup> No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death.

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