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**Artemisia Gentileschi depicts Judith as a powerful heroine who slays Holofernes, and her young maidservant as more a co-conspirator than a mere attendant.**

*Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652), JUDITH BEHEADING HOLOFERNES (c. 1619-1620). Oil on canvas. 78 3/8" x 64". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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# Judith's Co-conspirator

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The character of Judith is among the strongest heroines in the biblical tradition. Jewish interpreters see her as a great protector of her people during the period after the Exile; in the Christian tradition she represents various virtues, such as chastity in opposition to lust. Her story is told in the book of Judith, which was probably written in Hebrew (although the earliest known manuscripts are in Greek in the Septuagint) near the end of the second century B.C. in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt. The text is considered canonical in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches; it is in the Apocrypha of Protestant bibles.

According to the story, Holofernes commands a vast Assyrian army laying siege to Bethulia, a Judean town. When the community leaders decide to surrender to him, Judith upbraids them for their lack of faith in God and hatches a daring plan to kill the general.

After praying for her people's deliverance,

[Judith] 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. She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. 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. (*Judith* 10:3-5)

Judith and her maid walk toward the enemy's camp. When they are captured by an Assyrian patrol, Judith captivates the guards and convinces them that she can tell Holofernes how to conquer the hill country without losing one of his men (10:13).

For three days the general enjoys Judith's company. His lust for her grows until, on the fourth day, he plans a banquet for his personal attendants only. When Holofernes urges Judith to "Have a drink and be merry with us!" she gladly accepts because "today is the greatest day of my whole life!" (12:17). The general drinks more than he has ever drunk. That night Judith seizes her opportunity when she is left alone in the tent with Holofernes, who is now unconscious and "stretched out on his bed, for he was dead drunk" (13:2).

Judith prays in her heart, "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 who have risen up against us" (13:4b-5). Taking down a sword that is hanging

from the bedpost, she cries, "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" and strikes Holofernes's neck twice to cut off his head. She rolls the corpse off the bed and gives its head to her maid, who places it in her food bag (13:4-10). After Judith returns to her people with the head of Holofernes, she instructs them to attack the Assyrian army at daybreak. The Israelites proceed to plunder their enemy's camp.

"Judith is conventional in upholding inheritance and purity rights, in prayer and fasting, in her ideas about God's providence," Toni Craven explains. "She is unconventional in upbraiding the male leaders of her own town for what they have said about God, though she does this in the privacy of her own home."<sup>1</sup>

Artemisia painted Judith's famous deed numerous times, but the Uffizi version with the spurting blood makes it one of the most violent depictions of the biblical story ever painted. Over the years many scholars have interpreted the gory depiction as the artist's personal reaction to being raped by a man who was her father's associate. More recent scholars trace its violence to artistic rather than psychological influences: the painting may reflect the tastes of her patrons, probably Duke Cosimo II de' Medici of Florence.<sup>2</sup>

Artemisia borrows certain elements from Caravaggio's depiction of this event, painted ten years earlier: the intense violence pushed to the front of the picture plane and Judith's stiff parallel arms are directly from that source. But, unlike Caravaggio, Artemisia presents Judith as extremely large and powerful. She also adjusts the age, physique and activity of the maidservant: Abra (as she has come to be identified in the secondary literature) appears to be about the same age as Artemisia and is more a co-conspirator than a mere attendant waiting to be given the head. This younger, attractive maidservant holds Holofernes down and he reaches upward toward her, not Judith.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1 Toni Craven, "Judith 2," in Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 106.

2 Keith Christiansen and Judith W. Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 347-348.

3 See Heidi J. Hornik, "Select Female Figures from the Old Testament in Italian Painting (1500-1650)," *The Bible and Women: Reformation and Counter-Reformation in South Europe*, volume in Irmtraud Fischer (German edition), Mercedes Nacarro (Spanish edition), Jorunn Okland (English edition), Adriana Valerio (Italian edition), eds., *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History* (Naples, IT: Fondazione Pasquale Valerio per la storia delle donne, forthcoming 2013).



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