

Dionisio Candido

Manipulating God?

On the Theology of the Book of Judith

The book of Judith immediately captivates its reader, though it is certainly not devoid of harshness. Indeed, one of the most delicate theological questions concerns the fraught relationship between the story's heroine and her God.

Scholars have been attracted by Judith's behaviour, characterised as it is by dubious morality and personal faith: but the role and influence of God himself in the narrative has been explored much less. Going through and beyond the mere theological lexicon it is important to grasp the dynamic of Judith's relationship with God. The Judith of the Greek text is probably much more complex and moving than the Judith of post-biblical tradition and Jerome's Vulgate.

1. Judith's Morality and Religious Life

The question of Judith's moral conduct¹ has been a source of embarrassment: she lies (Jdt 11:5–8), seduces (Jdt 10:3–4), and executes a premeditated murder with lucid cynicism (Jdt 13:6–10). However, from the Church Fathers to modern authors, various solutions to explain or justify the heroine's behaviour have been proposed. Thomas Aquinas' (1225–1274) interpretation of events in the Middle Ages has become standard: "*Judith laudatur, non quia mentita est Holopherni, sed propter affectum quem habuit ad salutem populi, pro qua periculis se exposuit.*"² And reflecting on whether unjust authorities should be obeyed, he quoted Cicero, who had spoken of the legitimacy of disobeying Julius Caesar's usurping assassins: "*Qui ad liberationem patriae tyrannum occidit, laudatur et praemium accipit.*"³ Words like these bring us into dialogue with such to thorny issues as civil disobedience, the assassination of

¹ WOJCIECHOWSKI, "Moral Teaching of the Book of Judith," 85–96.

² THOMAS AQUINATIS, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 110, art. 3 ad 3.

³ THOMAS AQUINATIS, *Commentum super secundum Librum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, dist 44, q. 2 ad 5.

tyrants, legitimate self-defence, and the protection of the weak, all of which remain controversial today. Certainly, the circumstances in which the actions in the book of Judith occur have to be taken into consideration.

In some respects, the theme of Judith's ethics is closely connected to her religious life. In the light of her dubious moral conduct, the reader might well question what type of faith the heroine actually has. The text supplies interesting data about her devotional practices: bodily penitence (Jdt 9:1; cf. 4:14–15), fasting (Jdt 8:6a; cf. 4:13), the keeping of prescribed feasts (Jdt 8:6b), ritual purification (Jdt 11:17; 12:9), and observance of dietary restrictions (Jdt 12:2–4; cf. 11:12–13). However, prayer is certainly the most important⁴. Already the use of *προσευχή* (Jdt 12:6; 13:3,10; cf. the verb *προσεύχομαι* in Jdt 11:7) and *δέησις* (Jdt 9:12; cf. the verb *δέομαι* in Jdt 8:31; 12:8) shows it. The prayers are recited by the inhabitants of Bethulia (Jdt 6:18–19; 7:19,24–28; 13:17–20), by those of Jerusalem (Jdt 15:9–10), but above all by the heroine (cf. Jdt 9:2–14; 13:4b–7; 16:1–17). Going beyond these strict limits, one can add the “reported prayers”, including Jdt 4:9–15; 5:5–21; 6:21; 7:29–31; 10:8; 11:17; 12:8. Even other elements may also be added, such as where blessings are asked for: Jdt 15:9–10,14–17. Finally, the times and places of prayer should be included in this list: Jdt 6:21; 9:1; 11:17; 12:7–8; 13:3.

It is then easy to see that prayer is a leitmotif running through the entire narrative, almost always with Judith as the subject⁵: her prayer is intense and personal, although it is in communion with the official prayer of the Temple in Jerusalem (Jdt 9:1). The final prayer (Jdt 16:1–17) is particularly significant because it bears witness to how the synergy between herself and God has brought about the deliverance of the people of Israel.

2. The Theological Lexicon

So far two contrasting elements are apparent: on the one hand, the question of Judith's dubious morality always comes to the fore, whilst on the other hand, there is also an emphasis on her constant religious practices and, in particular, on her prayer. However, one can still ask what is specific about the theology of the book of Judith: what moving picture of God emerges from the book? One way of answering is to start with a few examples from the theological lexicon, since in the book of Judith there are numerous syntagms and epithets that refer to God.

⁴ Cf. BEENTJES, “Bethulia Crying,” 231; VAN DEN EYNDE, “Crying to God,” 228; XERAVITS, “The Supplication of Judith (Judith 9:1-14),” 161–178.

⁵ Cf. McDOWELL, *Prayers of Jewish Women*, 41–57.

The term *κύριος* is the most frequent one, occurring sixty-seven times throughout the book. Its significance, however, varies considerably according to the character in the narrative who is using it. It is pronounced for the first time by the Ammonite Achior, when he addresses Holofernes directly: “My lord (*ὁ κύριός μου*) would do better to abstain, for fear that their Lord (*ὁ κύριος αὐτῶν*) and God should protect them” (Jdt 5:21). Modern translations have the advantage of quoting Achior’s words explicitly, distinguishing between upper and lower case initials. Scorning Achior’s invitation to be prudent, Holofernes speaks of his king as “the Lord (*ὁ κύριος*) of the whole world” (Jdt 6:4; cf. 2:5). Judith herself makes use of this term in an elusive way, addressing Holofernes as *τῷ κυρίῳ μου*, “my lord” (Jdt 11:5). Immediately afterwards she says: “God will bring your work to a successful conclusion” (Jdt 11:6a). To Holofernes’ ears this means that *ὁ θεός* will be on his side; however, for Judith and the reader it means the exact opposite, that the God of Israel will bring about his deliverance of the people of Israel at the expense of the unsuspecting Holofernes. That is why the final part of the sentence is a masterpiece: “My lord (or Lord) will not fail in his undertakings” (Jdt 11:6b). The expression is deliberately ambiguous. Holofernes is free to believe that it refers to him (lord), while Judith is thinking about her God (Lord). In the light of these facts, one can realise that the fundamental issue of the book concerns the identity of the true God⁶ and the resulting eternal battle between good and evil⁷. Moreover, *κύριος* is found twice in an emblematic expression: “The Lord, the shatterer of war” (Jdt 9:7) and “The Lord is a God who shatters war” (Jdt 16:21)⁸. From the point of view of the narrative and of the theological message of the book of Judith, the God who gives the strength to kill the tyrant is also the God who does not love wars.

The term *θεός* occurs even more frequently than *κύριος*, appearing eighty-seven times and often as part of extremely important theological syntagms⁹. Three seem to be aspects concerning God: the personal, the ethnic and the universal. In at least a couple of instances, Judith speaks to God using a personal pronoun that indicates her special connection to him: “God, my God” (Jdt 9:4; cf. 16:3). Not infrequently the term “God” has a nuance that could be defined as ethnic, when he is being mentioned in connection with the fathers or Patriarchs (Jdt 7:28; 8:26; 9:2.12; 10:8) and with Israel (Jdt 6:21; 9:12,14). Elsewhere there are other epithets with

⁶ Cf. ZENGER, *Das Buch Judit*, 432–433.

⁷ Cf. HAAG, *Studien zum Buche Judith*, 61–78.

⁸ LANG, “The Lord Who Crushes Wars,” 179–187.

⁹ Note also the binomial *κύριος ὁ θεός* (which echoes the Hebrew יהוה אֱלֹהִים) in Jdt 4:2,7,19,29,30; 8:14,16,23,25,35; 9:2; 12:8; 13:18.

universal connotations: “God of heaven” (Jdt 5:8; 6:19; 11:17), “God most high” (Jdt 13:18), and “almighty, all-powerful” (Jdt 9:14). God is given also the unusual and effective epithet of θεὸς μισῶν ἀδικίαν, “God who hates wickedness” (Jdt 5:17). And finally, in a singular expression, he is presented “not like a man to be coerced, nor like a mere man to be cajoled” (Jdt 8:16).

The appellation of δεσπότης, “master”, refers once to God: “Master of heaven and earth” (Jdt 9:12). This expression is unique in the Bible. It is used elsewhere in the book of Judith with a certain adulation when addressing Holofernes (Jdt 5:20,24; 7:9,11; 11:10). Another important appellation is κτίστης¹⁰, “creator.” It is only used in Jdt 9:12: “Creator of the waters.” Here one might venture to hypothesis that the author of the book of Judith is referring both to the creation accounts (cf. Gen 1:6–10) and to the exodus (cf. Exod 14:21–22,26–29), in order to exalt him simultaneously as God of creation and of salvation.

The LXX text of the book of Judith includes other epithets that occur a few times, but that also contribute to building up an understanding of the theology the book of Judith. For example, following the sequential order of the three times in which the noun βοηθός¹¹, “help”, “helper” occurs, a sort of progression emerges. Firstly, in Jdt 7:25 the people complain that there is nobody capable of helping them: “Now there is no one to help us.” Secondly, in Jdt 9:4 Judith calls to mind Jacob’s sons’ supplication: “They called on you for help.” In Judith’s prayers before leaving for her mission, she calls God ἐλαττόνων [εἶ] βοηθός, “[you are] the support of the weak” (Jdt 9:11). In the same verse there are other significant syntagms and epithets: ταπεινῶν θεός, “God of the humble;” ἀντιλήμπτωρ¹² ἀσθενούντων, “protector of the weak;” ἀπεγνωσμένων σκεπαστής¹³, “refuge of the forsaken;” and ἀπηλπισμένων σωτήρ, “saviour of the despairing.” We also

¹⁰ The verb κτίζω appears in Jdt 13:8: “Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth.” Endowed with a similar meaning, one finds in Jdt 8:14 the expression “God who made all things.” Cf. BONS and PASSONI DELL’ACQUA, “A Sample Article: κτίζω – κτίσμα – κτίστης,” 173–187.

¹¹ Cf. BONS, “The Noun βοηθός as a Divine Title,” 53–66.

¹² Among these, ἀντιλήμπτωρ, “protector,” is pronounced by David in 2 Kgdms 23:3 (translating רֹאשׁוֹן, “rock”; cf. Pss 45[46]:6,8,12; 58[59]:17,18; 61[62]:3), as part of his canticle of thanksgiving for the obtained salvation (cf. Ps 17[18]). There are numerous passages in prophetic literature (Isa 49:13; 57:14–21; 66:2; Zeph 2:3; 3:11) and the Psalms (Ps 21[22]:27; 33[34]:3ff; 36[37]:11ff; 68[69]:34; 73[74]:19; 148[149]:4) which refer to “Lord’s lowly ones” (Jdt 16:11). Cf. PASSONI DELL’ACQUA, “La metafora biblica di Dio come roccia,” 424–425; 428; 431–432.

¹³ The substantive adjective σκεπαστής, “defender,” is found twice in the LXX together with βοηθός, “help,” in Exod 15:2 and Sir 51:2. The last occurrence appears in Ps 70:6 LXX: “you have been my defender from my mother’s womb.”

find παντοκράτωρ¹⁴, “omnipotent” (Jdt 4:13; 8:13; 15:10; 16:5,17) used, surely one of the most striking characteristics attributed to God in this book. The term βασιλεύς is also used on one occasion to refer to the Lord, when Judith prays, “You, king of your whole creation...” (Jdt 9:12).

If one puts together all these examples of lexical features, it becomes clear that the book of Judith is extremely rich in theological imagery referring to God. The reader is forced to be aware of a decisive theological presence that pervades the entire narrative.

3. The Silence of Judith’s God

If one shifts attention away from the static analysis of lexical features towards the dynamic narrative development, the most salient feature of the text becomes how God reveals himself and intervenes in history. From this standpoint, the book of Judith is surprising precisely because of the virtual absence of any divine intervention. In other words, anyone who reads it looking for manifest divine actions is destined to be disappointed: in fact, here God is the “book’s absent hero.”¹⁵

Actually, only once in the narrative is he the subject¹⁶ of a verb, just because he only acts directly once. Faced with the dangers posed by the Assyrians, the people of Israel implore God to come to their aid and “the Lord heard (εἰσήκουσεν) them and looked kindly (εἰσεῖδεν) on their distress” (Jdt 4:13). There is quite a clear echo of Exod 2:24–25 according to the LXX: “God heard (εἰσήκουσεν) their groaning and he called to mind his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon (ἐπεῖδεν) the sons of Israel, and he took care” (cf. also Exod 3:7; Num 20:16; Deut 26:7; 27:10). This moment in the Exodus story was the lead up to Moses’ vocation and mission (cf. Exod 3:1–22).

Recalling this episode, the reader is reassured of the God of Israel’s power to intervene in history. However, in the book of Judith it must be noted that God acts only behind the curtain. Consequently, in the face of an omnipotent (cf. παντοκράτωρ, Jdt 4:13) but hidden God, what is the role of a mediator of deliverance? As far as the heroine of the story is concerned, her start is quite difficult: there is no precise command from on

¹⁴ Generally, in the LXX it is used to translate the Hebrew צְבָאוֹת (אֱלֹהֵי) יְהוָה, “the God of armies” (cf. 2 Kgdms 7:8; 3 Kgdms 19:14; Hos 12:6; Amos 3:13; 5:27), but in the book of Job it is related to the couple אֱלֹהִים and יְהוָה or the specific syntagma אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה (among the fifteen occurrences, see Job 8:5; 13:3; 15:25). Cf. BACHMANN, *Allmacht*, 197–198.

¹⁵ Cf. DANCY, “Judith,” 128.

¹⁶ In his own right and elsewhere, God looks like the subject of other actions, but it is always according to what others refer to. One example is in Jdt 14:10: “Achior, seeing all the works that the God of Israel had done...”

high or any special illumination that needs to be fulfilled. In these respects, Judith's position is quite different from and more difficult than Moses', whose character in the Pentateuch in many ways provided a template for this heroine¹⁷. Judith is experienced as a new instrument of freedom by God's chosen people, in a new context of oppression: the Egyptians and their pharaoh are no longer a threat, but they have been replaced by Assyrians, led by Nebuchadnezzar (cf. Jdt 1:1) and Holofernes. There are also close parallels in the text between Jdt 4:13 and Exod 3:9, and between the final prayer in Jdt 16:1–17 and the canticle in Exod 15:1–8¹⁸. However, the book of Exodus contains at least two distinct accounts of Moses' call and mission (cf. Exod 3:1–6; 6:2–13): but none of this applies to Judith. In the book of Judith it is never stated that God directly inspires her or even that he answers her solemn prayers. Paradoxically, Nebuchadnezzar's Assyrian "god" occupies a more prominent role in the story because of his loquacity (cf. Jdt 2:4–13; 6:4b): Holofernes only needs to obey the commands of his *κύριος*. Instead, God's will for Judith and for the leaders and population of Bethulia is much less obvious.

From this viewpoint, Judith also goes above and beyond Esther, who upon hearing Mordecai's appeal (Esth 4:13–16) feels that she has been assigned a mission that she has a duty to carry out. Moreover, while in the Hebrew version of the story Esther limits herself to asking the people to fast with her (Esth 4:16), the Greek version adds her splendid prayer (cf. Esth C:12–30). In the narrative of the book of Judith, however, there is only her will to assume personal responsibility for her actions. In a sense, the courageous and prayerful believer assumes the role of the Lord of history: but, if God does not initiate her mission with a command, doubts persist about the heroine's true motives. The narrator leads the well-meaning reader to believe that Judith's faith and moral rectitude are what motivated her actions: "No one spoke ill of her, for she was a very God-fearing woman" (Jdt 8:8). Her personal qualities appear to render her capable of recognising the right moment in which to act, even in front of God¹⁹: but her actions remain somewhat overshadowed by doubt.

4. Manipulative or Brave?

In this light the book of Judith emerges as paradoxical. On one hand, it is rich in theological elements and divine epithets, contains an extended discussion on the theology of history (Jdt 5:5–21) and abounds in prayers

¹⁷ Cf. VAN HENTEN, "Judith as Female Moses," 33–48.

¹⁸ Cf. SKEHAN, "The Hand of Judith," 96–98.

¹⁹ Cf. CRAVEN, "Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith," 94.

(cf. Jdt 7:19,24–28; 9:2–14; 13:4–20; 15:9–10; 16:1–17). On the other hand, God never intervenes in the story. In particular, no divine communication to Judith is registered: God does not ask her to carry out any special task and he never answers her prayers. Judith's words and actions never receive God's direct approval or disapproval.

Taking all these factors into account, the theological perspective of the whole story changes at least in part. The "God of Israel" takes on the connotations of being the "God of Judith." One may get the impression that she is using God for her own ends and is taking upon herself the responsibility of speaking in his name, despite the fact that God has never invested her with that power. Some episodes of the book would appear to confirm this reading of events: for example, the dialogues with the elders of Bethulia (Jdt 8:9–27) and with Holofernes (Jdt 11:1–23).

After the flattering presentation of her person (Jdt 8:1–8), Judith's first speech is addressed towards the leaders of the community and it is a real turning-point in the narration (Jdt 8:9–27). From the outset, it is clear that she wishes to reproach them: "Your word is not right" (Jdt 8:11), she says, and "you will never understand anything" (Jdt 8:13). However, on closer inspection, her theological reasoning does not differ from Uzziah's, one of the elders of Bethulia: both have faith that God will not abandon his people (Jdt 7:30; 8:17). What Judith accuses the leaders of doing – putting God to the test – is exactly what she is doing in her own way. To the proposal of waiting for five days before the surrender, hoping for divine intervention in the meanwhile (Jdt 7:30–31; cf. 8:15), Judith simply opposes an interventionist strategy (Jdt 8:32). However, God's deafening silence is not restricted to the population and elders of Bethulia: it applies equally to Judith.

Uzziah's answer to Judith (Jdt 8:28–31) is a clear indication that her argument is not entirely convincing. It would also seem that Uzziah has not completely lost his faith in God either. If anything, the reader begins to ask how Judith can be so sure that her point of view corresponds to the will of God. Moreover, she has no divine approval and some of what she says about God and some of her actions turn out to be strategies to further her own ends.

One noteworthy example is in her words to Holofernes: "God has sent me to do things with you at which the whole world will be astonished when it hears" (Jdt 11:16). On an inner-textual level, these words can be interpreted as ironic: Judith is making fun of the naïve Holofernes (Jdt 11:22–23), communicating that God will work wonders thanks to him and not at his expense. A second level of interpretation is the meta-textual and leads the reader to ask: when exactly did God give Judith that task?

Shortly afterwards, there is a gesture which may be read in an analogous way. Judith expresses herself with great assertiveness: "Your servant is a

devout woman; she honours the God of heaven day and night. I therefore propose, my lord, to stay with you. I, your servant, will go out every night into the valley and pray to God to let me know when they have committed their sin” (Jdt 11:17). Again on an inner-textual level, it is clear that the heroine is establishing herself as a pious woman: this should reassure Holofernes that she is trustworthy. So, at the right moment, her plan will be successful. At the same time, Judith not only criticises the people of Bethulia, labelling them as sinners, but she also paints a picture of a God who mercilessly punishes those who flagrantly sin (Jdt 11:9–15)²⁰. If read from an ironical viewpoint, these words ring out as the umpteenth trap for Holofernes. However, from a meta-textual perspective, once again it leaves the reader perturbed: God has never spoken to her and therefore she is perfectly aware that her prayers will probably reveal nothing new to her. Could this be another instance where she is exploiting what she purports to be God’s will to actually carry out her own plans?

Indeed, if the effect produced on the reader is taken into account, it is difficult to avoid being perplexed by Judith’s motives and actions. Moreover, the reader is never reassured by the narrator about the expected protection of God toward his heroine, as was for example true for Joseph, the son of Jacob: “Since the Lord was with him, Joseph got on very well...” (Gen 39:2). In the case of Judith, this silence helps the reader to ask the critical question: is it enough to have beaten one’s enemies to be certain that God’s will has been done?

The figure of Judith in the LXX is a deliberately ambiguous one. In a desperate situation and with God silent, Judith takes it upon herself to act. She is ready to put her life on the line and to be different from the world around her, which consists principally of pseudo-strongmen. Judith decides to act despite God’s silence, and the validity of her free choice – which might appear forced – is not guaranteed by God’s having chosen her, but by her own personal commitment²¹.

So, if it remains true that God never intervenes directly in the story, it is equally true that he does not abandon his plan of salvation “by a woman’s hand” (Jdt 9:10; 13:15; 16:5; cf. 8:33; 9:9; 12:4; 15:10). Judith’s God does not inspire her, but he is willing to collaborate in a miracle of salvation carried out by the righteous who personally accept the risks involved. In other words, although the Greek text gives us an ambiguous and manipulative heroine, this does not prevent God from using her for the good of his people.

²⁰ Cf. GERA, *Judith*, 108.

²¹ “Perhaps within Judith’s religious ambiguity, within her struggle between following divine purpose and her own initiative, is the struggle to find her own way, to act despite an inactive, absent deity” (DAY, “Faith, Character and Perspective in Judith,” 92).

5. Some Changes in the Latin Textual Tradition

The post-biblical tradition can be useful in answering the question of where the common image of Judith as a pious heroine comes from.

Already at the end of the first century CE and for the first time in Christian literature, Clement of Rome calls her ἡ μακάρια, “blessed” (*Letter to the Corinthians*, 55:4)²². However, it is probably the Vulgate of Jerome (347–420 CE) which forms the basis of a whole interpretative tradition that will not consider Judith as an ambivalent and manipulative figure, but rather the epitome of solid, transparent morality and faith. Some short examples can be given which reveal this tendency of the Vulgate²³.

In Jdt 8:31, on behalf of the entire people, Uzziah asks Judith: “Pray for us, because you are pious.” The simple attribute of εὐσεβής, “pious,” “devout,” is already noteworthy for a biblical character²⁴. However, the *Vetus Latina* broadens its translation with a gloss that expresses the hope that God will hear her cry: “Et nunc ora pro nobis, *si forte exaudiet te Dominus Deus noster*, quoniam mulier sancta es tu” (Jdt 8:29 VL). But this was not enough for Jerome, who lengthens his translation further, emphasising that she is a true God-fearing woman: “Nunc ergo ora pro nobis quoniam mulier sancta es *et timens Dominum valde*” (cf. Jdt 8:8 Vg; cf. also 11:17). This is followed by a free translation of Jdt 8:32. This time, the *plus* of the Vulgate intends to ensure the divine origin of both her words and her plan: “Et dixit illis Iudith *sicut quod loqui potui Dei esse cognoscitis ita quod facere disposui probate si ex Deo est et orate ut firmum faciat consilium meum Deus*” (Jdt 8:30 Vg).

Another of Judith’s salient traits that Jerome particularly emphasises, not without an air of misogyny, is her chastity. In Jdt 10:4 it is said: “She made herself very beautiful to slyly attract the gaze of all the men that had seen her.” The Vulgate offers a different perspective and involves God directly in Judith’s powers of seduction: “Et omnibus ornamentis suis ornavit se *cui etiam Dominus contulit splendorem quoniam omnis ista compositio non ex libidine sed ex virtute pendebat et ideo Dominus hanc in illam pulchritudinem ampliavit ut incomparabili decore omnium oculis appareret*” (Jdt 10:3b–4 Vg).

Moreover, in Jdt 16:22 one can read: “She had many suitors, but she never gave herself to another man all the days of her life, from the days her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people”. The Vulgate slightly amends the text to emphasise her chastity: “Erat etiam virtuti

²² Cf. LONA, *Der erste Clemensbrief*, 564–565.

²³ For a more extensive analysis see LANGE, *Die Juditfigur in der Vulgata*.

²⁴ Cf. BONS, “The Language of the Book of Judith,” 402.

castitatis adiuncta ita ut *non cognosceret virum omnibus diebus vitae suae ex quo defunctus est Manasses vir eius*".

In order to emphasise Judith's modesty, the Vulgate contains a revealing gloss. Where LXX says: "She put off the dress of her widowhood to exalt the suffering of Israel" (Jdt 16:7), the Vulgate has: "Exiit enim se vestimenta viduitatis *et induit se vestimenta laetitiae* in exaltatione filiorum Israhel" (Jdt 16:9 Vg). So to avoid concluding with an image of Judith undressed, naked, Jerome specifies that she puts her clothes back on again.

Finally, according to Jdt 15:10, the high priest and elders of Jerusalem go to Judith to praise her for what she did. The Vulgate introduces here both the new themes of Judith's chastity and God's direct intervention: "Quia fecisti viriliter et confortatum est cor tuum eo *quod castitatem amaveris* et post virum tuum alterum non scieris *ideo et manus Domini confortavit te et ideo eris benedicta in aeternum*" (Jdt 15:11 Vg).

6. Conclusion

The LXX text of the book of Judith builds up a profile of a heroine whose moral conduct is not entirely transparent, beginning with her initial and seemingly excessive determination to take action and carrying through until her murder of the Assyrian general. However, the desperate situation which threatens the very survival of the Israelites makes her behaviour understandable, and even praiseworthy. It is her faith in God which appears to enable her to do almost everything she does.

The presence of the biblical God in the book of Judith is notable: the varied theological lexicon woven through the entire book supports this idea, especially in the second part of the tale (Jdt 8–16). This qualitative and quantitative element might lead one to think that God intervenes in the story to exhibit the qualities attributed to him. In reality, this is not the case: God is the direct subject of an action only once (Jdt 4:13), and moreover this should not be considered as an effective intervention in the story. Ultimately, the God of Judith stays offstage.

Indeed, it is Judith's activity in words and deeds that occupies centre stage. However, her religious inspiration, which is chiefly expressed in her prayers, is not accompanied by any divine investiture or confirmation. In reality, the narrative might give the impression that Judith uses God for her own purposes, instead of serving him. In this context, one might define it as self-serving "manipulation of God". The author of the Greek book would therefore seem to leave untouched the thorny question of how to act when God is silent. Should one wait or act? Surrender or fight back? What

emerges with equal clarity is that God's salvation of Israel has been achieved "by a woman", a woman who has risked her own life to save others by opting for a proactive stance.

In a sort of short appendix, a few examples have been given of the attitude of the Latin textual tradition towards this rather elusive character. Mostly bringing the story into line with his own sensibilities Jerome attempts to cope with the heroine's ambiguity by amplifying her personal faith and emphasising her chastity. If God always remains on the sidelines and resolutely silent, Jerome tries to reassure the reader that the God of Israel cannot but be on the side of a woman of such deep faith and blameless morality.

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