

“Use the guile of my words to strike them down” (Jud. 9,10)

Introducing Judith in a liberal Protestant congregation

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1. Teaching and learning love for the Old Testament

Karel Deurloo has taught many students love for the Old Testament. With his characteristic sense of humour and enthusiasm, he revealed them the power and the wit of the Genesis stories, Judges, the Psalms, Jeremiah, Jona and all those other beautiful Old Testament texts. He showed his students the old Israelite world of story, prophecy and song as a living world.

As an *indirect* result, a lot of congregations took a renewed interest in the first part of the christian bible.

The present author, working as a vicar in a small ultra-liberal religious community, is one of those students whose love for the Old Testament was awakened by *Deurloo's* love for the Old Testament.

In this article I would like to discuss, how the world of Old Testament story is appreciated in the type of congregation I work in. As will be demonstrated (section 3), the usual liberal Protestant congregation is not a place where love for the Old Testament is easily understood and appreciated.

On the other hand, as I will argue (section 4), the old Israelite literature is “modern” enough to inspire a church community explicitly desiring to be modern.

I would like to illustrate this with the book of Judith, which I have read on several occasions with either colleagues or parishioners.

2. Judith

Apocryphal Judith, though not part of the canonical Old Testament literature, is a fine specimen of old Israelite story. It contains themes and motifs we also find in some well known Old Testament stories.

Once more, Israel is in distress. A terrible enemy threatens to destroy the land. The enemy king considers himself the mightiest power on earth. Israel's trust in its One God is put to the test. They are hoping that God will save them, but the longer it takes, the more they start doubting. Then a woman steps forward. A single person, not very powerful, appears to be able to cause a favourable turn at the very last moment.

The story of Judith reminds one, for example, of the Exodus tale and the stories about the Judges. Judith herself reminds one of Esther and Deborah. The solitary weak individual capable of standing up against the mighty ones, is the same motif as used in the David and Goliath story or the story of Gideon. Note that Goliath is beheaded with his own sword, just like Holophernes. Judith cuts off the head of the enemy general Holophernes, while he is sleeping, just as Jael kills the violent oppressor Sisera with a tent-peg when he lays fast asleep.

3. Mixed feelings about a beheading

A biblical story in which the heroine cuts off the head of the sleeping general, does not easily find favour with liberal Protestants, as I have experienced. Not only is there a quite

understandable aversion from murder and the shedding of blood – which will presumably be found to the same extent in an orthodox church community. But liberal Protestants have an additional “problem”: their attitude to the bible. The way they live with the bible does differ from the way the bible is read in a more orthodox environment.

Liberal Protestants tend to relativize the authority of the bible quite radically. The bible is certainly a “holy book”, they hold, but also just *a* holy book, one of the many.¹ Although it may contain God’s word in a sense, it does not consist of God’s words. In general, they hesitate to pronounce upon God’s “words”, his “will”, his “deeds”, his “character” and even his existence. They do not believe that it is possible to *know* anything about these, apart from someone’s own experience.² The bible is not a source of reliable information, but an inspiring collection of texts from people expressing *their* beliefs and their experiences.

Therefore, liberal Protestants feel completely free to select and use those parts from the bible that appeal to them.³ Due to their characteristic tendency to rationalism, they will, for example, not choose stories about strange miracles. In general, they do not prefer stories, prophecies, songs, in which violence, hatred, war dominate. They will rather select texts about, e.g., responsibility, respect, love, preferably with a philosophical touch.

Unfortunately, this has as a result that many liberal Protestants prefer Jesus’ ethical teachings (and stories about Jesus), to most of those beautiful Old Testament texts!

The hero of this type of religious attitude is Albert Schweitzer (sometimes, in jest, called “the saint of liberal Protestantism”). Both his philanthropic work in the Lambarene hospital and his personal philosophy, “reverence for life” as all-governing ethical principle, appeal to many liberal Protestants.

As their belief is rather agnostic, as described above, they tend to emphasize the ethical side of christianity: a biblical and philosophical humanism.

The reader can imagine how the introduction of Judith in such a congregation would be met. She should not count a warm-hearted welcome. There is not much “reverence for life” in the book of Judith.

Although once the bloody climax of the story was very popular – many Renaissance and Baroque painters depicted Judith going to sever, severing, or just having severed Holofernes’ head –⁴, this is exactly the scene that makes the book of Judith indigestible to the modern liberal believer.

¹ Cf. Menno Rougoor’s “pleidooi voor universele religie”: his article “De regenboog als religieus symbool”, in W.B. Drees, red., *Een beetje geloven. Actualiteit en achtergronden van het vrijzinnig christendom*, uitg. Balans, Meppel 1999, pp. 29-40.

² Cf. H.J. Adriaanse, “Geloof als bewaren van een geheim”, in W.B. Drees, red., *Een beetje geloven. Actualiteit en achtergronden van het vrijzinnig christendom*, uitg. Balans, Meppel 1999, pp. 85-101.

³ Cf. Th. Marius van Leeuwen, “Hoe heilig is de bijbel? Naar een nieuwe onbevangeheid”, in W.B. Drees, red., *Een beetje geloven. Actualiteit en achtergronden van het vrijzinnig christendom*, uitg. Balans, Meppel 1999 (pp. 17-28), pp. 23f.

⁴ Peter Calvocoressi, *Who is Who in the Bible*, Penguin Books, London 1987, pp. 136f: “There are three Judiths by Tintoretto in one gallery alone (Prado) and he does not hesitate to depict the gruesomeness of the act. Nor does Caravaggio (Rome, Casa Coppi). Botticelli, however, shrank from such enormities. The nearest he got to them was in his picture of Judith emerging from Holofernes’ tent with the head; he also painted a pair of pictures showing Judith hurrying back to Bethulia and the discovery of Holofernes’ dead body the next morning (all these in the Uffizi). On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican Michelangelo shows a decapitated Holofernes sprawled on a bed in the background as the ladies hurry away. By the rococo age Judith gets a whole ceiling to her glorification - Luca Giordano (Naples, S. Martino). Titian made the maid black (Detroit, Art Gallery). Giorgione painted a wonderfully beautiful picture of a serene girl who happens to have her foot on a severed head (Leningrad, Hermitage). Judith was a favourite with Mantegna as the National Galleries in Dublin and Washington can show and Rembrandt’s drawing of her triumphant return (London, British Museum) echoes Mantegna). By C 16 public

However, the aspect which a liberal Protestant finds most difficult to accept, is not the gruesome decapitation itself. Even more disturbing, as I have learned in the groups in which I discussed the book, is Judith's religious inspiration for her act of deception and murder. Judith prays a lot before she goes to Holophernes, deceives him and finally cuts off his head in his sleep. She asks of God: "Use the guile of my words to strike them down" (Jud. 9,10). And at the final moment, she is as near to God as to Holophernes.

"When all had left and not a soul remained, Judith stood beside Holophernes' bed and prayed silently: 'O Lord, God of all power, look favourably now on what I am doing to bring glory to Jerusalem, for this is the moment to come to the aid of your heritage and to prosper my plan for crushing the enemies who have attacked us.' She went to the bed-rail beside Holophernes' head, reached down his sword, and drawing close to the bed she gripped him by the hair. 'Now give me strength, O Lord, God of Israel,' she said, and struck at his neck twice with all her might and cut off his head." (Jud. 13,4-8)

Several participants in my groups pronounced their mixed feelings about this combination of piety and violence.

It may be defensible and even right, or demanded, to kill tyrants, dictators, enemy leaders in extreme circumstances (e.g., World War II). It should however not at all be encouraged to connect such actions, however evil the enemy and how noble motive of the tyrant murderer might be, with divine inspiration.

The participants of my groups understood that Judith is a fictional story, and were aware of Holophernes' role. Holophernes is not just "an" enemy general, but impersonates the enemy of all life, the anti-divine power.⁵ In addition to its extreme cruelty (Jud.3), his military campaign is characterized by its intention "to destroy all the gods of the land, so that Nebuchadnezzar alone should be worshipped by every nation, and he alone be invoked as a god by men of every tongue and tribe" (Jud. 3,8).

However, they maintained that even a *fictional* story in which someone believes that God supports him in his plan to kill someone else, will do more harm than good. It is a dangerous conviction to believe that God takes sides in a military confrontation or any other conflict. Even more dangerous is the belief that God can order you or may want you to kill.

It is probably the typical liberal agnostic attitude that made my parishioners and colleagues alert to this danger, hesitant as they are to define any human actions, decisions or any event as being in accordance with God's will. As we cannot really know exactly what God wants of us, it is better to avoid the risk of "taking the name of the Lord in vain".

An example of this danger is found in Judith's prayer in chapter 9. Preparing herself for her mission, she refers to her ancestor Simeon and his brother Levi. Their cruel revenge on Shechem and his men for Shechem's rape of their sister Dinah (Gen. 34) inspires Judith. She believes that God supported it: "Lord, ... you put a sword in Simeon's hand for him to take vengeance on those foreigners ... you gave up their rulers to be slain, and the bed they had disgraced with their

purpose and heroic patriotism are overshadowed by something else: Cavallino's Judith is pursuing a private vengeance (Stockholm, National Museum) while the younger Allori is simply showing his own mistress holding his own head (Florence, Pitti). But for the most stirring combination of the dignity and indignity of the deed turn from paint to Donatello's bronze (Florence, Palazzo Vecchio)." Calvocoressi does not mention Artemisia Gentileschi's famous Carravaggio-like version of the beheading.

⁵ Cf. Willem Barnard, *Stille Omgang. Notities bij de lezing van de Schriften volgens een vroeg-middeleeuwse traditie*, Boekmakerij Gert-Jan Buitink, Brasschaat 1993 (third impr.), pp. 761f.

treachery to be stained with blood” (Jud. 9,2f).⁶ One must admit the modern liberal reader that in these verses revenge and piety get mixed up in a rather unpleasant way.

4. Modern aspects of the book of Judith

Thus far, I have demonstrated why Judith is not received in a liberal Protestant congregation as a truly positive heroine. In the present section I intend to argue that the book of Judith is modern enough to inspire the liberal Protestant believer as well.

“Modern” is its treatment of the relation between God’s will/God’s deeds and human initiative, even if it is possible to have objections (as discussed above) to some connections between the two that we find in Judith. A central and quite modern theme of the book is: How do we act in accordance with God’s will if we do not know what God wants of us, if God neither tells us what he wants nor acts himself? (How) does God act? It is the modern theme of God’s apparent “absence”.

God saves Bethulia ...

Judith is one of the latest books of the old Israelite literature, which means that the author of the book must have known most of the Old Testament material. He is familiar with the conception that God is his people’s saviour and liberator in difficult circumstances.

He must for instance have known the stories in which God helps removing the enemy leader by raising up a “judge”. Apparently, God approves of Ehud’s murder of Eglon (Judg. 3,12-31)⁷ and Jael’s murder of Sisera after he has been defeated by Deborah and Barak (Judg. 4,17-24)⁸. The latter story may have inspired him in his own tale of a brave woman killing a tyrant.⁹

Of course, the author of Judith knows the Exodus story in which God himself destroys the Egyptian army (cf. Jud. 5,10-14). Probably, he was also familiar with the prophecies against Assyria and Babylon in which God takes vengeance on these aggressive Mesopotamian world powers (e.g. Isa. 13f, Jer. 50f, Nahum). For his own – fictional - story, he combines the worst elements of both nations: he makes frightful Nebuchadnezzar king of infamous and cruel Assyria (Jud. 1,1).

In accordance with all this material, the author of Judith considers God to be the real saviour of Bethulia.

When Judith returns to Bethulia, she calls to the guards: “Open the gate! God, our God, is with us, still showing his strength in Israel and his might against our enemies. Today he has shown it!” (Jud. 13,11).

.... by human initiative

⁶ Actually, the author of Genesis does not recount God’s opinion on Simeon’s and Levi’s murderous revenge. He does however describe the reaction of their father, Jacob. Jacob condemns it (Gen. 34,30) and at the end of his life even curses them instead of blessing them because of this episode (Gen. 49,5-7). The author of the book of Judith clearly disagrees with Jacob!

⁷ Cf. e.g. Karel Deurloo, “Karikatuur van een vreemde koning”, in; Hanna Blok *et. al.*, *Geen koning in die dagen. Over het boek Richteren als profetische geschiedschrijving*, Ten Have, Baarn 1982, 29-36.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Karel Deurloo, “De held holt tussen vrouwen” in; Hanna Blok *et. al.*, *Geen koning in die dagen. Over het boek Richteren als profetische geschiedschrijving*, Ten Have, Baarn 1982, 37-45.

⁹ Cf. above, section 2.

God does not save the city by performing a miracle. Judith certainly is aware of that. Showing on her return Bethulia's inhabitants the severed head of Holofernes, which she and her servant took with them in a bag, she says: "The Lord has struck him down by a woman's hand" (Jud. 13,15). A delegation from Jerusalem agrees. They tell Judith: "With your own hand you have done all this ... and God has shown his approval" (Jud. 15,10).

God had not told either Judith or the besieged city's leaders the right strategy. In fact, God did not act at all.

A check on references in the book of Judith to some action God takes or words he speaks has a remarkable result. There is only *one* verse in the book in which God either does or says something. It is Jud. 4,13, telling God's reaction to the desperate prayer of Bethulia's citizens: "The Lord heard their prayer and took pity on their distress". Subsequently, *nothing* happens. God does not intervene.

The book opposes two different reactions to God's apparent absence.

The strategy of the inhabitants is: "pray and wait". As nothing happens, even when at last Holofernes cut off the Israelites' water supplies and they threaten to die of thirst, they feel compelled to surrender. Ozias, the city's main magistrate, convinces them to wait five more days. If God will not have liberated the city by then, he will surrender (Jud. 7).

At that moment, halfway the book, Judith appears for the first time. Her first action is to reproach Ozias and the city elders. Their decision is wrong. God does not act on command. It is impossible to enforce God's help. "It is not for you to impose conditions on the Lord our God, because God will neither yield to threats nor be bargained with like a mere mortal" (Jud. 8,16). In her opinion, the present awkward situation is a test (Jud. 8,17-27). The elders tend to agree with Judith, but are bound with an oath to their promise to surrender the city after the five days (Jud. 8,28-31).

Thereupon Judith brings in her own strategy: "pray and act". She realizes suddenly that *she* is the one to act: "the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand" (Jud. 8,23). Although God does not act in any way in the rest of the story, he is present as Judith's continuous source of inspiration and strength (Jud. 9; 12,8; 13,4.6).

Judith devises her own plan (Jud. 8,34) and implores God to support her: she asks God to use her plan – deceit and murder – for Israel's liberation (Jud. 9,10.13). God does not answer her explicitly at any moment, but she carries out what she has planned and succeeds.

It is clear that the author of Judith prefers the second strategy, "pray and act", or, "pray and keep thinking for yourself". He also realizes that real life may require taking the risk of soiling one's hands.

The modern reader

However difficult for a modern (and especially a liberal-ethical) reader it is to accept that violence and deceit may have to be used to achieve what God demands or what appears to be necessary, it is near to the modern experience that Judith chooses to act herself instead of waiting for God to act. Judith realizes that God, at least in this case, will not act without human initiative. Liberal Protestant religious experience fully accepts that God is not present in the world as a person taking action on behalf of men. It counts on God's presence in other ways.

Judith can be a source of inspiration for believers who desire to “listen” to God, but believe in human initiative as a necessary factor as well.