Notes on the Book of Judith
St. Jerome Adult Bible Study

The Book of Judith is an “apocryphal” or “deuterocanonical” book. (“Apocryphal” is a Protestant term which means “hidden” or of uncertain authenticity; Deuterocanonical is more Catholic and means “of or relating to a second canon.”) You will recall from our earlier studies that there are 7 books that the Catholic Church includes in its Bible that many Protestants do not: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 Macabees, and 2 Macabees. Also included in the second canon are additional sections of Esther, and Daniel. The Hebrew “bible” contains only books that were originally written in Hebrew but the deuterocanonical books were written in Greek. When the Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) around the third to first centuries BC, the books originally in Greek were also included and at the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563 AD) the books were officially accepted as divine.

When St. Jerome translated the Septuagint into Latin (the “vulgate”) he included these sections but labeled them “apocryphal.” (“Vulgate” = common speech of the people and was, thus, Jerome’s attempt to make scripture available to the people.) Interestingly, most early Protestant versions of the Bible (primarily the King James or “authorized version” in 1611) were translations from Jerome’s vulgate but omitted the apocryphal books. If you are using a “Protestant Bible” like the New International Version (NIV), you will not find Judith in your book.

Judith (the name means “The Jewess”) was written during the Maccabean Revolt in about the second century BC. It was probably written to encourage the Jews who found themselves in the new crisis caused by Greeks who were trying to suppress the religion. In literary form, Judith is a novel whose setting is the 8th century BC. It is not a history nor a geography book since historical and geographical references are inaccurate – for example, Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian not an Assyrian and it is unlikely that he was ever in Nineveh.

It is a marvelous message of hope and inspiration: Oppression requires both reliance on God and human cunning to defeat it. Judith became a role model for those in oppressive circumstances and she is a testament to God’s ability to raise up the least likely heroes in times of difficulty. Here, a beautiful woman in a male-dominated society becomes God’s instrument of deliverance – she has become a sort of icon for artists, poets, and movie-makers.

1. After reading chapters 1 and 2, what is your image of Nebuchadnezzar? Holofernes? (hollow FER neez)
2. After chapter 3 does your image change?
3. Compare the Israelites in Chapter 4 to Nebuchadnezzar.
4. Chapter 5 is a concise history of the Jews. Based on the 3rd paragraph above, did you spot the anachronism?
5. Do you sense a parallel between this story and the exodus from Egypt, especially in chapter 7?
6. 34 days (7:20) plus 5 days (7:30) is 39 days. Are we holding our breath for the 40th day?
7. Oh Judith! What are all her positive qualities? (8:4-8)
8. Summarize the theology in 8:12-17.