

A providential view of judith



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Throughout the Old English poem *Judith*, the poet goes to great lengths to paint a clear and decided picture of providential history. A providential view of history leaves no doubt that God is involved and that He clearly favors one side over the other. In *Judith*, it is exceedingly evident that God has taken an interest in the conflict at hand, and that He is personally invested in Judith's cause: granting her the wisdom to craft a successful plan by lending her the strength to carry it out, and by bestowing His blessing on her people during battle.

The poem, as it exists today, opens praising God as the "renowned Ruler," who has "bestowed an astounding gift" upon Judith who was in dire need of His divine intervention (4, 6). The wicked Holofernes orders that Judith be brought to his tent in the middle of the night. Knowing that Holofernes planned to "ravish" her, "the brilliant lady" anticipated his seduction and planned to capitalize on his weakened state by decapitating him. The poet explains that Judith's actions are not simply sanctioned by the Lord, but he suggests that she is doing the Lord's bidding, acting as "the Savior's handmaiden" and as "Heaven's Defender" (75, 81). By bestowing these seraphic titles upon Judith, the poet surrounds the "bright maiden" with language that depicts her as innocent and justified in her actions (44). Beheading Holofernes is not merely a necessary act during a time of war, but, rather, the divine will of the almighty God being carried out by a willing and able vessel: Judith. Prior to the actual beheading, Judith is filled "with strength and zeal" that she receives directly from God (96). This borrowed vigor allows Judith to "wield control of the wicked" Holofernes, and ultimately to end his life (102). This portion of the poem is thematically

important, not only because it offers an example of God's active engagement in the struggle, but also because it disports language that vividly describes Holofernes and the dichotomy between the characters. As Holofernes is being decapitated, he is described as having a "hateful neck" and as resembling a "heathen hound" (105, 110). Holofernes' wretched appearance serves to distance him from the noble Judith, who is committing what would normally be labeled a brutal act; in fact, the poet goes so far as to dehumanize him, which causes the reader both to relate to Judith and distance themselves from Holofernes.

Even as this adversary's head is rolling on the floor, the poet takes no time to lament, proclaiming that Holofernes will be "torment tied" and "torture bound" in hell for all of eternity (114). God granted Judith "glory at war," while He condemned the soul of Holofernes to writhe in hell. These results differ drastically and leave no room for interpretation; the outcome was decidedly providential and greatly in favor of Judith. God's favor was not limited solely to the endeavors of Judith, but it extended to include those of the Hebrews. Inspired by the actions of Judith, the Hebrew army prepared for war. The army planned to attack as the sun is rising, believing that God is sending "His shining light" from east to west (190). This language insinuates that the sun will act as a beacon to the Hebrew army, urging them forward and leading them to their foes. As the battle unfolds, a clear picture is painted: one side is shown as fearsomely ready to do battle, the Hebrews, while the other, the Assyrian army, is patently unfit and unprepared for the "deadly swordplay" at hand (245). The opposing army is comprised of troops who are "death-fated" (246). This diction is powerful as it illustrates that the

outcome of the battle is predetermined and inevitable. The opposing army has no chance at victory; their destiny is death, and it is a non-negotiable aspect of the tale.

By leaving no doubt regarding the victors of the battle, the poem can focus on the actors rather than the action. The actual battle serves dually to construct a legend of fame and glory for Judith's people and to create one of shame and dishonor for Holofernes and his army. The opposing army shows "no virtue," and succumbs to their fear, thus surrendering all "honor / glory and valor" as the troops retreat from battle (270-272). The retreat of the Assyrians highlights both their cowardice and stupidity. This decision of Holofernes's army to flee allows the Hebrew forces to triumph easily as they slay their enemies from behind. This outcome is a direct result of providential will. God is described as the Hebrews' "almighty Friend" (299). It is exceedingly apparent that the Lord "gave his full support" to Judith and her people, ensuring that they would attain victory over their enemies who were not only evil, but also damned (299). Almost every event in the poem occurs not simply because God allowed it to happen, but, rather, because He intended it to happen: Judith's ability to behead Holofernes with relative ease and the decidedly one-sided battle between the Hebrews and the Assyrians. This version of the Lord as a "supreme Justice" depicts the Almighty as an active and zealous judge presiding over a case, reaching a verdict, and personally delivering His sentence (95).

Providentially determined history can occur only with a proactive God who clearly favors one group over its rivals. The Hebrews and Assyrians, for example, perfectly encapsulate this concept of a providential account of

history. God's continued show of favor toward the Hebrews, coupled with His apparent disapproval of Holofernes and his troops, leaves no doubt that Judith and her people serve as the quill of God, penning history in bloody ink according to His divine will.