

Jewish Culture: The Story of Judith and the Role of Women in Jewish Texts

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Jewish religious texts historically focus on the Patriarchs of the religion. Whether it is the biblical stories of Abraham or Moses, or the widely-known tale of Judah Maccabee and the revolt he headed which led to the preservation of Judaism, men are the primary focus of the Jewish religion. While this is the case, the Matriarchs of Judaism and other prominent women in Jewish culture deserve the same praise as their male counterparts. A woman who stands out in particular is Judith. Her role in the protection of her town, her family, and her religion should not be forgotten. Excluded from Jewish texts-- possibly due to its unorthodox portrayal of women, the story of Judith tells the tale of a widow who lived hundreds of years before Judah Maccabee. Her bravery and strength parallel that of Judah's, yet her victory is held with far less importance in Judaism.

In the town of Bethulia, a General to King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian Empire named Holofernes was sent to conquer the Jews. As time went on, Holofernes and his troops held food, water, and other necessities from the people of Bethulia. The Jews tried to fight back to no avail, but Judith did not want to give up. By tricking Holofernes into thinking that she and her maid had surrendered one night, the two were welcomed into his tent. With her beauty and charm, Judith won over Holofernes and offered him cheese and wine. After some time and plenty of drinks, Judith got Holofernes drunk enough that he fell asleep. As everything went according to her plan, Judith took a sword and decapitated Holofernes. The two headed back to Bethulia with Holofernes' head in a bag, and the Jews found strength in their bravery. This plot, fronted by two women who had the odds stacked against them, led to an attack against the Assyrians

which ended in their defeat and the preservation of Judaism. Judith remained unmarried for the rest of her life and was held in high regard of the women around her until her passing.

While the story of Judith is not completely erased from history, one must question why the bravery of two women that has so many similarities to the story of Judah Maccabee is far less widely known. Between the importance of community, the power of the oppressed against the oppressor, and military feats, the two stories can easily be told alongside each other despite the gap in time between them. The same question can be asked for the Matriarchs and other important women in the Torah-- why are their stories less widely told? And when they are told, why do they come second to the men involved? It is true that the stories of Esther and Miriam and other important Biblical women are well known, but it is safe to say that Jewish Matriarchs deserve more attention than they receive now.

Disclaimer:

The mention of Israel in Biblical tellings does *not* reflect the settler-colonial state that is Israel today. The displacement of Palestinians and violence against them is similar to exactly what Judith herself fought against-- militant force and violence against a group of oppressed people.

[From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.](#)

The Story of Judith

A long time ago, a powerful general named Holofernes declared war against Bethulia with a great army. He besieged the city for many days, making sure no food or drink could enter, so that the people began to starve. The Israelites suffered tremendously during this siege and were in great distress. They were on the verge of surrendering when a young woman named Judith announced that she had a plan.

Judith was a young widow who had been in mourning for three years, since her husband died unexpectedly. A woman of great faith, Judith rebuked the leaders of Bethulia for their intention to surrender and declared that God would act through her. Judith devised a plan to help her people. She removed her mourning attire and dressed in beautiful clothes and jewels, and prepared a bag with wine and kosher cheese. Then she waited until nightfall.

Accompanied only by her maid, Judith left the besieged city under cover of darkness. She walked into the enemy camp, and eventually entered the royal pavilion and came before Holofernes. Since she was exceedingly beautiful, when Holofernes saw her, she found favor in his eyes. He asked, "Who are you? Where do you come from and where do you wish to go?" Judith answered, "I have heard of your wisdom and skill, and since Israel has sinned, I know that you will conquer the city and take possession of it, so I came to save myself and my father's household when you take the city." Judith offered to help Holofernes conquer the city with inside information; the general agreed, and invited her into his tent.

Inside the tent, they feasted. Holofernes drank a great deal of wine, became drunk, and fell asleep. Judith took Holofernes' sword from his bedpost where it hung, and cut off the general's head. Judith then took Holofernes' head and placed it in her bag. She and her maidservant passed unnoticed through the camp until she reached the gates of Bethulia. There she summoned the gatekeepers and told them to place the general's head as high on the city gates as they could, so that the army would see it when they awoke. When the general's men found his body in the morning, and saw his head on the gate, they fled. The war was over, and Judith's people had won.

When the people of Bethulia saw the enemy army retreat, they stormed out to attack. They plundered the abandoned enemy camp for thirty days, returning home with great riches, and gave Judith the tent of Holofernes as well as all his silver dinnerware, his beds, his bowls, and all his furniture.

Many women came to bless Judith. Judith led the women in dance, and the men followed in song, and the city continued to celebrate Judith's victory for three months. Many men desired to marry her, but Judith gave herself to no man all the remaining days of her life. She freed her maid in her old age, and was buried and mourned by many at the age of one hundred and five. No one ever again spread terror among Bethulia during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death.

Jewish Women's Archive. "Core story with discussion questions." (Viewed on December 27, 2021) <<https://jwa.org/node/22770>>.

Guiding Questions

How does time affect the way people look at historical texts? Can you think of a time where you thought one way about a topic, but your opinion changed as you got older or gained a new perspective?

- Opens up the discussion/lesson to importance of context and looking at things through different lenses based on when they were written

Should religion be up for interpretation, or should it be taught the way it always has been? Do new ideas have a role in understanding old texts?

- Can compare old texts to newer texts, religious or otherwise, show how times change perspective

What makes someone brave? Can you think of any brave people in your life? Have you ever been brave?

- Can discuss the story of Judith or other Matriarchs, can also be used in other lessons as it is very broad

Can you think of a time when someone was brave? Did it inspire you to be brave, too? Was there something you witnessed or heard about that made you act differently than you normally would?

- Can use this to discuss stories of women that often go untold and how the messages behind them can be beneficial, shows what could be lost if the stories were not told

The Story of Judith Lesson Plan

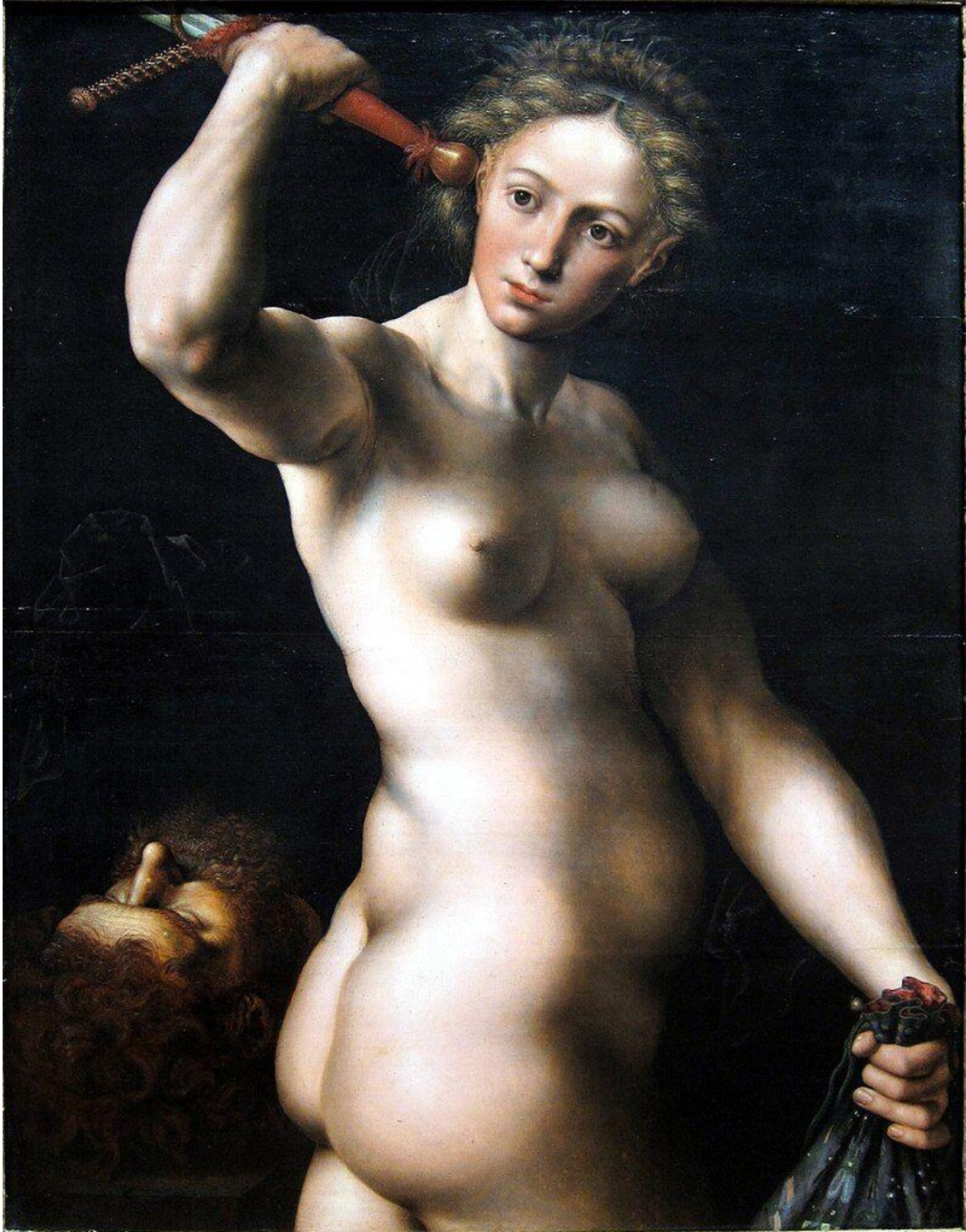
Content/Big Idea	<p>Jewish Matriarchs and prominent women in Jewish Biblical history have long been under taught. The story of Judith is one of strength and bravery in the face of persecution and can serve as an example of what it means to be strong and stand up for what is right. Throughout history, depictions of Judith in art have changed drastically as art styles and movements progressed. This lesson aims to show the importance of highlighting stories of marginalized people as well as how the understanding of stories change throughout time.</p>
Standards/Who is this for?	<p>This is designed for an Art History course</p>
Why Does This Matter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students can explore why women often take the back seat to men when religious stories are depicted through art and talk ● Students can look at art movements and periods and explore different symbols and motifs throughout that change the narrative of religious stories ● Students can take away the bravery Judith displayed and the importance of stepping out of one's comfort zone to stand up for what is right
Compelling Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can you think of a time when someone was brave? Did it inspire you to be brave, too? Was there something you witnessed or heard about that made you act differently than you normally would? ● How does time affect the way people look at historical texts? Can you think of a time where you thought one way about a topic, but your opinion changed as you got older or gained a new perspective?
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Physical copies of <u>The Story of Judith</u> ● Physical copies of <u>Paintings of Judith</u> ● Writing utensils ● Paper/notebooks

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● SMARTboard/projector ● Chromebooks
<p>Sequence of Events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students would come into class and take their seats ● Up on the board would be the question “Can you think of a time when someone was brave? Did it inspire you to be brave, too? Was there something you witnessed or heard about that made you act differently than you normally would?” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students would have a full-class discussion sharing stories of bravery and times they felt they were brave ○ If the discussion ran a little dry, we would look through this website to keep the conversation going and look at the large-scale impact of bravery ● Students would be asked if they had heard the stories of Moses or Judah Macabee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In an Art History course, hopefully Moses would be known as he is depicted in a lot of religious art ○ If students were not interested in responding, I would share the the story of Moses and ask again if students knew anything ● Students would then be asked if they knew the story of Judith <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Her story is much less widely shared, so it is less likely that students would know ● After this, students would receive their copies of The Story of Judith <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students would popcorn read and have the opportunity to ask questions they had regarding the story ○ After finishing, the gallery walk would be introduced ● Students would go around the room looking at paintings depicting Judith’s beheading of Holofernes from different art periods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ On a class JamBoard, students would respond to the

	<p style="text-align: center;">prompts on the slides</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Each painting would have its own slide where students would list symbols, motifs, and stylistic choices in each painting and students would write the feeling the piece evoked ○ When each student responded to each slide, the JamBoard would go up on the projector and we would look over what students had written and discuss disparities, disagreements, and/or agreements ● After the gallery walk discussion, students would return to their seats and answer questions on a discussion board and would be asked to respond to two classmates who had differing ideas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Which painting do you feel best represents the story we read the best? ○ Do you see a difference in the representation of Judith in each period? Her maid? Holofernes? ○ Apart from the subjects, what similarities can you find throughout the paintings? Any stark differences? ○ Focus on one painting. What about this painting shows you it is from the era it came from? List at least two definitive characteristics that tell you this. ● As students finish up the discussion, the DBQ would be introduced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Similar to the gallery walk, students would focus on the paintings throughout history and answer the questions
<p>Assessment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● During class and finished up for homework if necessary, students would answer the questions on the discussion board ● Students will answer DBQ based on the paintings featured in the lesson



Botticelli, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, ca. 1470



Jans Sanders van Hemessen, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, ca. 1540



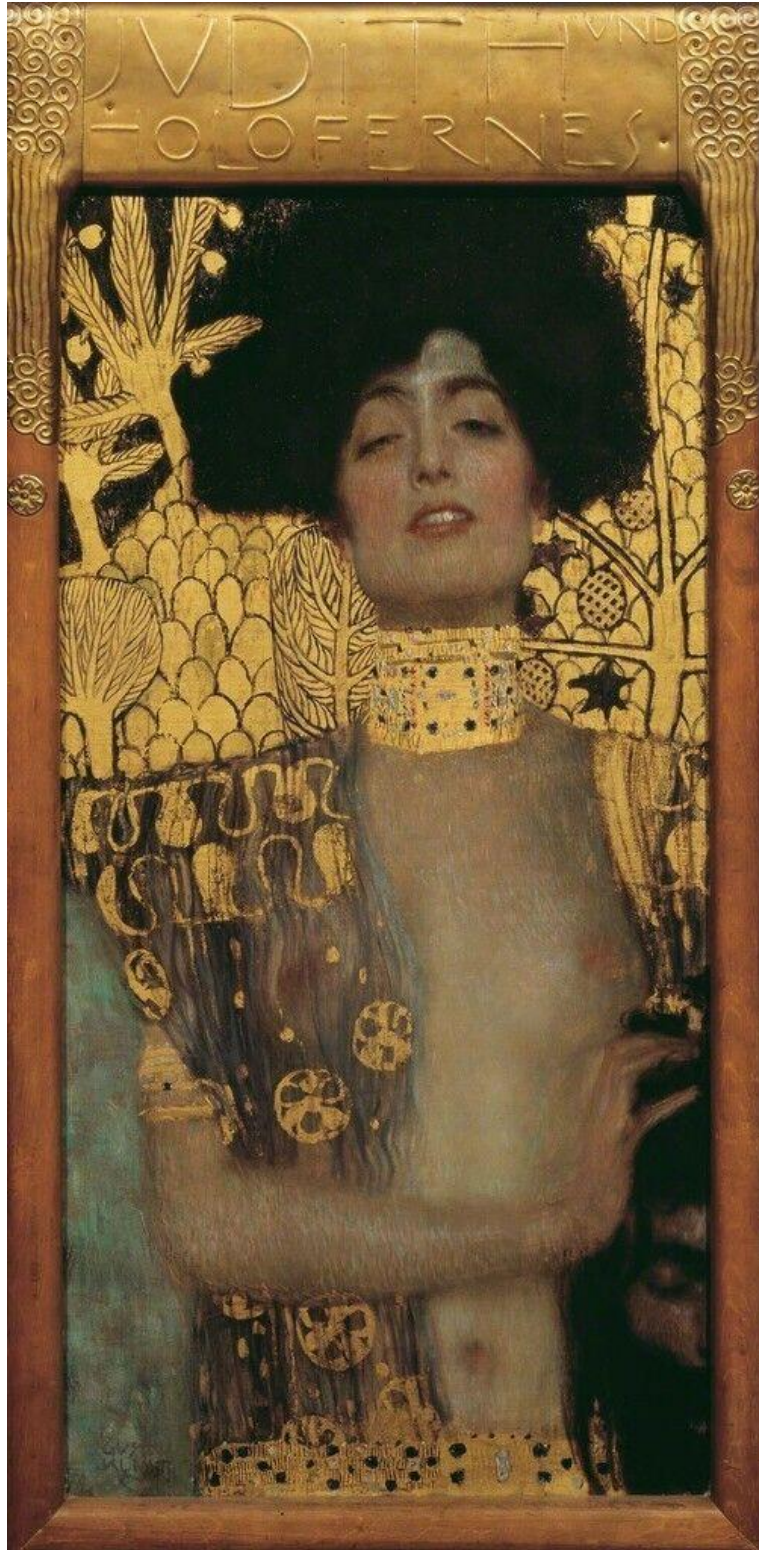
Giorgio Vasari, *Judith and Holofernes*, ca. 1554



Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, ca. 1599



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Holofernes*, ca. 1620



Gustav Klimt, *Judith and the Head of Holofernes*, 1901



Kehinde Wiley, *Judith and Holofernes*, 2012

DBQ:

After looking at the paintings and sculptures from different art movements and periods, do you find understanding of style and characteristics from different eras to be important in shaping your understanding of the piece? Do you feel the artist's style or background has anything to do with it as well? Compare three pieces from different periods to base your claims. Be sure to explain your answer by describing motifs and symbols used throughout eras such as the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Women: General

Women in the Bible:

- <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/women-and-gender-in-the-hebrew-bible>
 - Overview of different women in the Hebrew Bible and their contributions, the tellings of their stories, and primary resources

Judith

Judith Beheading Holofernes, Artemisia Gentileschi (Rome 1593 - Naples 1652/53)

- <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes>
 - Students can even read about the artist of the painting from this website to go even further into the role of Women in Jewish religious texts and history-- Judith perervered and saved her town, Gentileschi worked toward her dreams and succeeded in a male-dominated field

Judith and the Head of Holofernes

- <https://www.gustav-klimt.com/Judith-and-the-Head-of-Holofernes.jsp#prettyPhoto>
 - A 1901 depiction of the Biblical figure. How does this differ from other depictions like that of [Caravaggio](#) and Gentileschi (link above)? Does the gender of the artist have anything to do with it? The art periods/art movements in which they were painted?

Miriam

Numbers 12:4-15

- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Numbers%2012%3A4-15&version=ESV>
 - Shows the importance of Miriam to the Jews, they did not continue on until she was healed, her punishment was also more severe than her brother's. While it is stated that she was more vocal in her disapproval towards her brother Moses' new wife than Aaron was, being struck with leprosy when her brother only faced shame shows the disparity between the treatment of men and women in the Bible

Let My People Go, Miriam and the Passover Story

- <https://www.haggadot.com/clip/let-my-people-go-song>
- <https://jwa.org/blog/miriam-and-the-passover-story>
 - At Passover, Jewish people read the Haggadah and tell the story of Passover. A staple song is Let My People Go which discusses Moses taking the Jews from Egypt, but he would have been lost without his sister Miriam. She raised him after finding him in the river and led dances as the Jews left Egypt

The Miriam Cup

- https://18doors.org/elijahs_cup_and_miriams_cup/
- <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/5027-miriam-cup>

- Traditionally, Jewish people leave out a cup of wine for the prophet Elijah at Passover Seders to represent their hope for his return. In more recent years, people have started leaving out a cup of water for Miriam to represent her saving of Moses from the Nile and the well of water that was to appear in the wilderness on account of Miriam's righteousness in God's eyes. This small addition that many people have introduced to their Seders shows the growing appreciation for women in Jewish history

Esther

The Book of Esther

- <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/megilat-ester-or-1047>
 - Esther's story is shared every year on Purim to tell the story of her saving Persian Jews from death and being crowned Queen of Persia
 - How does the telling of Esther's story differ from that of Judith or Miriam? Esther has her own book in the Bible, and a set day in which it is read, and many of her scrolls are very decorated