

“Judith” by Corrine Carvalho

Reviewed by Steed V. Davidson, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

The book of Judith leaves interpreters with no middle ground. Readers are either repulsed by its violence and overt use of female sexuality or fascinated by the strength of its central female character. Corrine Carvalho advocates for the book to be taken seriously without feeling the need to clear a middle ground for readers. By drawing attention to critical issues raised in the text in its ancient context, she invites participation in the centuries long discussion on the text the interpretive tradition and the issues raised by this tradition. Even though these issues defy the simplistic categories of right/wrong, Carvalho attends to them here not merely to situate them in a gray zone, but to draw out their complexities.

Foregrounding the geography of the book, Carvalho calls attention to the function of Bethulia as mythic space that functions in multiple ways in the story. Bethulia’s association with the Hebrew word for virgin places it on par with Judith who as the pious widow, appears virginal in the narrative. This female pair who saves the nation recalls the Deborah/Jael pairing in many ways not least among which are the ways that gender categories are inverted. That both Bethulia and Judith survive the hyper onslaught of the fictionalized Assyrian imperial threat questions the need for patriarchal disciplinary regimes established to protect women.

The distorted imperial details in the book require attention. This entry emphasizes the otherness of Achior and Judith as the means for encountering the colonial threat. While otherness enables both Achior and Judith access to the seat of power, as in other diasporic tales strategically deploying (hiding and revealing) otherness to undermine the imperial power raises questions of religious and ethnic fidelity. Resolving these concerns will require readers to engage not only theoretical considerations of right/wrong but the embeddedness of the book of Judith in several imperial narratives in the Bible that do not always end as successfully as this does. Playing along with several of the book’s conceits such as making Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian king will push readers into deeper analysis of the response to the imperial threat. Additionally, reading Judith alongside the biblical and Assyrian accounts of the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE can surface easily missed insights.

Viewers of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* will find Judith a suitable companion book. This entry provides strong background details similar to online commentary that accompanies the series that enables readers and viewers to appreciate the book of Judith contemporary discussions. Although violence, sexuality, revenge, and deceit are expected in an HBO series, many viewers engage the thorniness with which these issues are raised by *Game of Thrones*. Engaged living requires ethical discourse even if one holds no faith perspectives. Carvalho points to several works that engage Judith on these issues. *Game of Thrones* shows that representations of the ancient world to modern viewers does not remove the need to struggle with these basic of human issues in ways that Judith asks modern readers to confront them both in the book and in their lived experiences. Through a solid narration of the text in its ancient context and in its interpretative tradition this entry moves readers of Judith several steps forward in engaging the complexities of the text in contemporary discussions.