



Vercruysse, Jean-Marc (éd.), *Le Livre de Judith*
(Graphè 23), Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2014, 264
p. ISBN : 978-2-84832-186-8

Gavin Mcdowell

► To cite this version:

Gavin Mcdowell. Vercruysse, Jean-Marc (éd.), *Le Livre de Judith* (Graphè 23), Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2014, 264 p. ISBN : 978-2-84832-186-8. Apocrypha, 2016, 27, pp.213-215. hal-03930576

HAL Id: hal-03930576

<https://hal.science/hal-03930576>

Submitted on 9 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

VERCRUYSE, Jean-Marc (éd.), *Le Livre de Judith* (Graphè 23), Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2014, 264 p. ISBN : 978-2-84832-186-8

The deuterocanonical books of the Bible are secondary not only with respect to their canonical status but with respect to their cultural influence. The book of Judith is the one exception. This little book about the Jewish heroine who single-handedly saves her people from foreign oppression with a ruse has had a disproportionate influence in the domains of literature, theatre, and – especially – art. It is hardly surprising that the *Collection Graphè*, dedicated to literary studies of biblical themes, should feature Judith as its first deuterocanonical subject. The resulting collection of articles invites comparison to another recent publication, *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies across the Disciplines* (edited by Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann, OPB collection, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2013), which is likewise a compilation of studies on the influence of Judith throughout history.

Even a quick glance at the contents of both volumes reveals that the two collections, while similar in structure, are different in orientation. The English-language volume has a universal scope and includes articles on all periods of the reception history of Judith. The French volume has one article on Judith in Antiquity, one on Judith in the Middle Ages, and ten on Judith from the sixteenth century to the present. Thus, the book under review is overwhelmingly concentrated on the modern period. This ultimately works to the collection's favor; otherwise, it would repeat what has already been done. There is surprisingly little overlap in the subjects covered by the two collections.

The book contains twelve studies in addition to a preface by the editor, Jean-Marc Vercruysse. The preface includes some brief comments on the literary orientation of the collection as well as an overview of each of the articles.

The first study, by Catherine Vialle, serves as a general introduction to the book of Judith itself, including a discussion of its origins, its plot, its genre, and its prominent theological themes. This article is the one that is most likely to touch on the research interests of *Apocrypha*'s readers, although the information is basic.

The second study, by Danielle Delmaire, treats the subject closest to the reviewer's own interests, the Hebrew versions of the story of Judith from the Middle Ages. Consequently, this perfunctory study, the shortest of the twelve, is also the most disappointing. The article depends almost exclusively on the work of André-Marie Dubarle, who included different Hebrew versions of Judith in his *Judith, formes et sens des diverses traditions* (t. I Études, t. II Textes, Analecta Biblica 24, Rome, Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1966). Towards the end, she adds a summary of an article by Pierre-Marie Bogaert ("Le calendrier de Judith et la fête de Hanoukah," *Revue de Théologie de Louvain*, 15, 1984, p. 67-72), arguing that the medieval association between the story of Judith and Hanukkah can be found in the book of Judith itself. As the article contains no original ideas, it is best read as an introduction to the work of A.-M. Dubarle. The corresponding article in *The Sword of Judith* (Deborah Levine Gera, "Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales of Judith," p. 81-95) treats this subject with greater depth.

Passing over 1500 years of the Christian literary tradition, the next two studies focus on Judith in the sixteenth century and the book's literary reception by Protestants and Catholics. John Nassichuk examines the Latin epic *Judith viduae historia* of the Catholic priest-poet Charles Godran, published in 1569 in the wake of the Council of Trent. As a product of the Counter-Reformation, Godran privileges the Vulgate version of Judith, but as a product of the Renaissance, Godran shows awareness of, and sometimes even preference for, the Greek original. His poem, however, is not a slavish reproduction of the biblical book but an adaptation with its own particular focus. For instance, Godran ignores the historical

prologue to Judith but places great emphasis on the speech of Achior and the suffering of the people of Bethulia.

Steeve Taïlamé examines a similar Latin epic on the subject of Judith, Du Bartas' *La Judit*. This version of Judith is doubly surprising – it was not only written by a Protestant, it was commissioned by one, Jeanne d'Albret, the Queen of Navarre, who conceived of this work as a tool of Calvinist propaganda in the Wars of Religion. Du Bartas, as a poet, produced something more subtle, a work that is as much Neoplatonist as Calvinist which, despite the bloody denouement, condemns tyrannicide.

Next, Stéphane Mercier examines how Catholic writers handled a central moral question: Did Judith lie when she presented herself to Holofernes, only to decapitate him during the night? The subject is fascinating, but Mercier leaves no stone unturned in this interminable article, which is more than twice as long as any other contribution. The bibliography is equally ample, including obscure works such as *Judith illustris*, the commentary of the Spanish Jesuit Diego de Celada, which runs to 800 pages!

The remaining seven articles all turn toward the realms of the stage and the canvas. The study of Béatrice Ferrier focuses on the presentation of the most celebrated episode of Judith – the decapitation of Holofernes – in eighteenth century theatre, including, in one case, Charlotte Corday, Marat's assassin, as the "modern Judith." Guy Teissier treats Giraudoux's play *Judith* (1931), a modernized, "Jewish" version of the story which is nevertheless inspired by the biblical plays of Racine. Souad Zaïed Akrouit examines two plays, the *Judith* of Henry Bernstein (1922) and the *Judith* of Peyret-Chappuis (1945), as well as the lurid paintings of Gustav Klimt, reproduced in the book in living color. Frédéric Marteau examines two more recent plays which represent the inevitable development of tying Judith to the Holocaust, Rolf Hochhuth's *Judith* (1984), and the *Judith et Holoferne* of Jean-Jacques Varoujan (2001), where the subtext is not just the Holocaust but the Armenian genocide. Florence Bernard looks at Howard Barker's play *Judith* (1990). Daniel Attala and Isabelle Durand-Le Guern consider two plays, Friedrich Hebbel's *Judith* (1839) and the very recent *Judith* of George Palant (2012), which places the story against the backdrop of Argentina's Dirty War. Finally, Jacques Poirier studies several modern authors divided on the question of whether Holofernes is a victim.

As one can see, the collection focuses heavily on the twentieth century and equally heavily on drama. This leaves the collection with several major lacunae, including both the early and medieval Christian tradition and – curiously – art history. Specialists in drama or twentieth century literature should find much to like here. For specialists of Christian apocrypha, I am not so sure.

Gavin McDOWELL
École pratique des hautes études (Paris)