

THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM IN THE BOOK OF JUDITH

Abstract

The prominence of the patriarch Abraham in the Old Testament cannot be understated, as his name is frequently cited by biblical writers. The narrative of Abraham, known as the “toledot Terah”, occupies a substantial portion of the Book of Genesis (Gn 11:27-25:11). However, this paper seeks to explore a distinct text concerning Abraham, found outside the book of Genesis. It focuses on a passage from the speech of Ahior the Ammonite in the Book of Judith, delving into its exposition and interpretation. The selected words of Ahior shed light on how the people of Israel have diligently preserved and cultivated the memories of their ancestors, particularly Abraham. This passage provides valuable insights into the ongoing significance and reverence the Israelites attached to their historical figures. By examining this excerpt from the Book of Judith, the paper aims to uncover the ways in which the legacy of Abraham transcends the confines of the Book of Genesis and permeates other texts, thus solidifying his enduring and influential role within Israelite tradition.



REV. IOSIF STANCOVICI

Faculty of Letters, History and Theology
West University of Timișoara
iosif.stancovici@e-uvv.ro

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The Book of Judith

The book of Judith is the only one of the deuterocanonical books (*anaginoscomena*) in which a female character plays the main role. The book is divided into three main parts: (1) the reason for the military campaign initiated by King Nebuchadnezzar (Jdt 1:1-3:8); (2) the Israelites' fear of the Assyrians (Jdt 4:1-7:32) and (3) the victory of the godly and beautiful Judith (Jdt 8:1-16:25) (Chirilă 2018, 752-60; Popović 2015, 309-30). Judith, a wealthy Jewess, daughter of Merari of the city of Bethulia (Jdt 8:1) and widow of Manasseh of the tribe of Simeon (Jdt 8:2; 16:22),

rescued her city and Judea from the yoke of Holofernes, leader of the Babylonian/Assyrian army, in the 18th year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (Jdt 2:1), and during the ministry of the high priest Jehoiakim. Around 589 BC, Holofernes, waging war against the Jews, besieged the city of Bethulia. Exhausted, deprived of food and water, the inhabitants of the city lost their courage and their trust in God and prepared to surrender to the enemy.

Judith was a modest, God-fearing, upright and unspeakably beautiful woman. As a widow, she could have remarried, but she decided to give herself completely to the service of God. She used her grace and natural beauty only to save her people and her country. Later, she herself would confess that in her acts she was guided by the hand of God (Jdt 16:5), a fact also confirmed in the praise of Uzziah Simeonite (Jdt 14:17) and of the community (Jdt 15:9-10).

Putting all her hope in the God of her fathers, she dressed herself beautifully and, accompanied by a servant, went to the enemy camp, pretending to be a deserter (Jdt 10:1-23). Thanks to her alluring appearance and cunning, Judith managed to win over Holofernes and at the same time arouse in him a passion for her. Overcome by sinful lust and drunk on wine, he fell asleep in his luxurious tent. In his sleep, Judith beheaded him (Jdt 13:8) and hiding his severed head in a sack, he returned to the strangers and elders of Bethulia (Jdt 13:10-13). The inhabitants of the besieged city besieged and drove away their enemies, confused by the news of the unexpected death of their leader. After this heroic victory, Judith remained a widow in her home, earning the esteem of her countrymen. Her lifespan reaches the lifespan of characters from the time of the patriarchs and is identical to the lifespan of the Maccabean period, which lasted 105 years (Popović 2015, 316). After her death, she was buried in the tomb alongside Manasseh, her husband. The house of Israel mourned for her for seven days (Jdt 16:21-24).

The Book of Judith was probably written in Hebrew during the Hasmonean period, most likely during the reign of John Hyrcanus I (135-104 BC) or during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 BC) (Popović 2015, 321; Otzen 2002, 86). Inspired by the story and song of the prophetess Deborah, as well as the heroism of Jaelah, wife of Heber the Kenite (Jgs 4-5), Judith conveys a message of faith in the deliverance of God's people from political and military oppression (Rakić 2004, 493-4; Nickelsburg 2005, 100).

Who was Ahior?

According to Jdt 5:5, Ahior is “the ruler of all the sons of Ammon” (ὁ ἡγούμενος πάντων υἱῶν Αμμων), who voluntarily gives Holofernes information about the Israelites. Despite being considered a minor character, Ahior plays a significant role in the book (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013, 642-62). His name (Heb. אֲחִיּוֹר) translates as “brother of light” or “my brother is light” (Grintz 1957, 110), which is probably reminiscent of the position of a convert to the Jewish faith. Later, as Judith showed the people the decapitated head of Holofernes, Ahior, a former pagan, recognized the power of Israel’s God: “And when Achior saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly (fully, σφόδρα) in God, and was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day.” (Jdt 14:10 – RSV). Ahior is a character in whom the reader of the book would not expect to discover a hero (Venter 2011, 5).

In the Holy Scriptures, there are mentioned several strangers of the Jewish nation who acknowledge God and affirm His power. These characters can be considered precursors of Ahior: Jethro (Ex 18:1-12), Balaam (Nm 22-24), Rahab (Jo 2:9-11), Nehemiah (2 Kgs 5), Nebuchadnezzar (Dn 2:46-47; 3:28-33) and Darius (Dn 6:26-28). Some of the characters listed heard accounts of God’s works, while others witnessed miraculous events. Ahior stands in contrast to Haman, one of the greatest slanderers and detractors of the Jewish people mentioned in Scripture (cf. Est 3:8). Ahior’s character also contrasts with that of the inhabitants of Bethulia, because, though an Ammonite, he possesses a better understanding of God’s work. It is possible that the author chose this stranger to use his voice to highlight one of the most important theological teachings of the book and to offer a kind of rebuke to compatriots who are slack in the faith.

Biblical interpreters link Ahior to Ahachar in the Book of Tobit (Tb 1:21-22; 2:10; 11:19; 14:10). The Assyrian sage Ahachar or Ahikar was an advisor to the court of Sanherib and Esardon and composed several wise sayings and proverbs. His history remains uncertain. Like Ahior, Ahikar was a pagan nobleman who was persecuted by rulers but eventually regained his lost position. The earliest preserved version of the legend of Ahachar is preserved in Aramaic (Gera 2014, 200-1). The original account is probably of Assyrian origin and likely was popular in the East, not only among the Jews but also among other peoples (Lindenberger 1985, 479-83).

In the Book of Tobit Ahikar becomes Ahiacar (Ἀχιάχαρος) and a close relative (grandson) of Tobit. Ahiacar helps Tobit to return to Nineveh by interceding for him

with King Esardon (Saherdan or Sarchedonus, Tb 1:22). For two years, he cares for Tobit after he loses his sight (Tb 2:10) and shares with him the joy of the narrative's happy ending: the marriage of his son Tobit to the beautiful Sarah (Tb 11:19). There are many similarities between Ahachar in the Book of Tobit (whose author sees him as a devout Jew) and Ahior in the Book of Judith (whose author praises him in his description as an exemplary proselyte): both successfully combine theoretical and practical wisdom. Elder Tobit praises the special virtues, sufferings and ascension of Ahachar (Tb 14:10-11). Ahior's speech also deserves the reader's attention and admiration because his words and actions are a mirror of his high spiritual state (Jdt 14:6-10). Next, we present the first part of the speech on the Israelites' past given before Holofernes.

Ahior's speech

Jdt 5:6-9 is part of a larger literary unit entitled "The Speech of Ahior" (Jdt 5:5-21) (Roitman 2004, 73-87). This speech takes place immediately after the introductory chapters (Jdt 1-4) and is an integral part of the episode of the meeting between Ahior and Holofernes (Jdt 5:1-6:10). We are told that Holofernes (Ὁλοφέρνης), "supreme commander of the army of the Assyrians" (ὁ ἀρχιστράτηγος δυνάμεως Ἀσσοῦρ) was angered by the insolence of the inhabitants of Bethulia, who refused to submit to the Assyrian army. The inhabitants of Bethulia resisted the enemy, unlike the other maritime cities of Canaan who showed no resistance. Calling "all the princes of Moab and the princes of Ammon and all the villagers on the seashore", he demanded an explanation for the unexpected rebellion. The narrator introduces Ahior (Ἀχιώρ), "the ruler of all the sons of Ammon" (ὁ ἡγούμενος πάντων υἱῶν Ἀμμών), who answers Holoferne's question in his speech.

[6] ὁ λαὸς οὗτός εἰσιν ἀπόγονοι Χαλδαίων.

[The] people are the descendants of the Chaldeans.

[7]^(a) καὶ παρώκησαν τὸ πρότερον ἐν τῇ Μεσοποταμίᾳ,
they lived as foreigners first in Mesopotamia,

(b) ὅτι οὐκ ἐβουλήθησαν ἀκολουθῆσαι τοῖς θεοῖς τῶν πατέρων αὐτῶν, οἱ ἐγένοντο
ἐν γῆ Χαλδαίων-

and because they would not serve the gods of their fathers, who were in the land
of the Chaldeans,

^{[8](a)} καὶ ἐξέβησαν ἐξ ὁδοῦ τῶν γονέων αὐτῶν

left the path of their ancestors

^(b) καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, θεῷ ᾧ ἐπέγνωσαν,
and worshipped the God of heaven, the God whom they knew.

^(c) καὶ ἐξέβαλον αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ προσώπου τῶν θεῶν αὐτῶν,
And they drove them from the face of their gods,

^(d) καὶ ἔφυγον εἰς Μεσοποταμίαν
and fled to Mesopotamia

^(e) καὶ παρώκησαν ἐκεῖ ἡμέρας πολλάς.
where they lived as strangers for many days.

^{[9](a)} καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς αὐτῶν

And their God said to them

^(b) ἐξελεῖν ἐκ τῆς παροικίας αὐτῶν καὶ πορευθῆναι εἰς γῆν Χανααν,
to depart from the place where they lived and go to the land of Canaan,

^(c) καὶ κατώκησαν ἐκεῖ

And they sat there

^(d) καὶ ἐπληθύνθησαν χρυσίῳ καὶ ἀργυρίῳ καὶ ἐν κτήνεσιν πολλοῖς σφόδρα.
and they were filled with gold and silver and many, many herds
(our translation).

(Jdt 5:6-9)

There are many features in this presentation that remain unique in biblical literature. Unlike other summaries, the narrator of the book does not mention more familiar biblical knowledge of Abraham's background. For example, there is no mention of the covenant between God and Abraham or the sacrifice of Isaac. The narrator through Ahior's words presents that period of the main character's life, about which the narrator of the Book of Acts, like most historical expositions, says almost nothing.

According to its content, Ahior's speech can be divided into three parts: (1) ethnic origin (v. 6); (2) the new faith and its consequences (vv. 7-8); (3) revelation and migration (v. 9). These three parts contain a wealth of interpretive material: exegetical developments, revisions, omissions and additions to the original biblical account (Roitman 2004, 73-87). Like other post-exilic sources, Jdt 5:6-9 contains midrashic traditions about the early life of the patriarch Abraham. Verses 6 and 9 of this

passage do not contain narrative material taken from the Book of Genesis (although verse 6 includes some exegetical development based on Gn 11:31, while verse 9 seems to provide a revisionist summary of Gn 12:1-13:12). On the other hand, verses 7 and 8 contain extra-biblical traditions.

Finally, the question arises: to what purpose do these corrections, additions and omissions about the early life of the patriarch Abraham serve? It seems that the reason must be sought in the author's desire to glorify the figure of the patriarch. Therefore, according to this "new version", we learn that Abraham in his early years in Ur was already a devout believer, a supporter of monotheism (Kugel 1997, 135-6), who rebelled against his idolatrous fellow citizens, prepared to suffer as a martyr for his beliefs, strictly observing God's law and fighting for God's reward. The author's aim is to make Abraham, from the early period of his life, an example for all generations.

The image of Abraham in the Book of Judith is presented as a role model for both positive characters in the book, Judith and Ahior. As we have shown above, Abraham is portrayed in this short section as a devout believer, willing to suffer for his faith and opposed to the polytheistic Chaldeans. His attitude anticipates that of Judith. Judith, following Abraham's example, is attributed in the book with the qualities of a great believer and patriot, who rejects Nebuchadnezzar's divinity by zealously opposing the polytheists. At the same time, the image of Judith contrasts with that of the inhabitants of Bethulia. While the heroine demonstrates her unwavering faith in God and shows herself willing to suffer for it (Jdt 8:24-27), the inhabitants of Bethulia are distrustful, accepting surrender to the Assyrian army (Jdt 7:23-28). Abraham also serves as a role model for Ahior. Both (1) believe in God (Jdt 5:8 || 14:10); (2) have been cast out because of their beliefs (Jdt 5:8 || 6:11); and (3) have converted to a new faith (Jdt 5:8 || 14:10). According to the Book of Judith, a righteous foreigner who receives the Jewish Law becomes like a native Jew, having Abraham as a model or "father".

Ethnic origin

Compared to other sources from the First and Second Temple periods, this section of Ahior's speech retains early and even unique midrashic elements. The account of how Abraham left Ur and his reasons for opposing idolatry (v. 7) is found nowhere else in early Jewish literature. The account of Abraham's conversion (v. 8) is one of the earliest sources of these traditions (Gera 2014, 204). The reason Abraham was driven out of Ur and forced to leave Mesopotamia (v. 8) knows no parallel

until Josephus Flavius (*Jewish Antiquities* 1,154-157) (Gera 2014, 204).

“These people are the descendants of the Chaldeans” (Jdt 5:6). Ahior’s answer is much completer and more comprehensive than what Holofernes is concerned to know: the Assyrian commander is interested in the military forces and fortifications of the Israelites, not in their origins, past and relationship with their God. Ahior chose to portray the Israelites starting with their ethnic origins: they are descendants of the Chaldeans.

Biblical historical studies usually highlight only religious beginnings (such as creation or the exodus from Egypt), less so ethnic ones. The author mentions the ethnic origins of the Israelites under the influence of Greek and Roman ethnography. According to the Hebrew Bible, Abraham was Aramaic (cf. Dt 26:5), not Chaldean (Wills 1995, 223). Chaldeans have been associated with the Babylonians since the 8th century BC and further back in history, but also in the Old Testament (e.g., Is 47:1; Jer 21:4) (Gera 2014, 205). They were also known as wise and skilful speakers (cf. Dn 2:5,10 etc.). Holofernes rejects Ahior’s position, arguing that the Israelites came from Egypt, considered to be of inferior origin (Jdt 6:5).

The new faith and its consequences

“They would not worship the gods of their fathers” (Jdt 5:7). Ahior states that Abraham and his family left Ur for religious reasons. According to Ac 12:1-5, Abraham was commanded to settle in Canaan. In his discourse, Ahior fills in the textual gaps in the Book of Genesis by presenting the reasons for the migration: the rejection of the ancestral gods and the worship of the Lord God (cf. Jo 24:2-3, where it is revealed that Abraham’s father Terah worshipped other gods). Ahior argues that the ancestors of the Israelites were expelled from their homeland because of their belief in the God of heaven (Wills 1995, 224). While it is obvious that Ahior is referring to Abraham and his family, he is speaking generally about the collective ancestors of the Israelites rejecting the local gods and answering God’s call.

This general reference to Israelite ancestors is consistent with Ahior’s deliberate description of the people of Israel, not their leaders. At the same time, it refutes any possible contradiction between Gn 11:31, where Abraham’s entire family had already left Ur, and Gn 12:1, where only Abraham was asked to leave his “homeland”, presumably Ur (cf. Neh 9:7). Other post-biblical sources (*Jubilees* 11:16-17; 12:1-8, 12-14; *Jewish Antiquities* 1:154-157) also state that Abraham recognized the true God and

had to leave Ur because of his beliefs. In these sources only Abraham recognized God. Biblical sources (Jos 24:2-3) and post-biblical sources (*Jubilese* 12:1-8, 14) emphasize that Abraham's father and his brothers worshipped other deities or idols. Abraham is the one who was specially chosen, and it was God who brought him to Canaan across the Euphrates (Is 51:2; *Jubilees* 12:21-31).

Ahior does not mention the most prominent events in Abraham's life – the covenant with God and the sacrifice of Isaac – but Judith will later allude to these episodes in her discourse on the trials of the three patriarchs (Jdt 8:26). It is interesting that Ahior will somewhat retell the story of Abraham and his family (Roitman 2004, 73). Ahior, like Abraham, will be banished for expressing his beliefs about the God of Israel (Jdt 6:11) (Roitman 2004, 82-5) and will convert to the faith of the children of Israel (Jdt 14:10). As a result, these verses serve a dual purpose: adding previously unstated information about Abraham's early life and anticipating the scene of Ahior's conversion. Ahior's discourse on the origin of Israel indicates that there is a place for the chosen people for the proselytes and that he himself will be among them.

“The God Whom They Knew”: Ahior does not reveal how the fathers of Israel came to know the God of heaven. Some ancient traditions may underlie his words. The verb *ἐπέγνωσαν* (3rd person plural) is aorist ingressive and denotes the acquisition of that knowledge.

The ancestors of the Jewish people were expelled and found refuge in “Mesopotamia”: such expulsion and persecution we will not find in Holy Scripture. According to the texts of Ac 11:31-12:5 and Neh 9:7, Abraham and his family left the land of their own free will when the patriarch was called by God. This is the earliest attestation of the tradition of expulsion (cf. *Jewish Antiquities* 1,157.281).

Revelation and migration

In Jdt 5:9 the following is stated: “And their God said to them to depart from that place where they dwelt and go to the land of Canaan” (*ἐξελθεῖν ἐκ τῆς παροικίας αὐτῶν καὶ πορευθῆναι εἰς γῆν Χανααν*). This verse is an echo of the text in Ac 12:1, where the Lord God commands Abraham, “Come out of your land...” (*Ἐξελθε ἐκ τῆς γῆς σου...*). However, Ahior's version is nuanced, since Abraham and his relatives were commanded to leave their temporary dwelling (*παροικία*), not the native land and parental home mentioned in Ac 12:1. Ahior speaks of the family moving from Haran because the land of Abraham's ancestors is Chaldea, where Ur is located.

“And they were filled (enriched, *ἐπληθύνθησαν*) with gold, and with silver, and with very many herds”. This final section of verse 9 is modelled for inspiration on the description of Abraham’s wealth in Ac 13:2, which lists the same content of the wealth of the Jews’ ancestor: “And Abraham was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold”. Abraham’s wealth came from Egypt because of his wife Sarah’s disownment by Pharaoh (Gn 12:16). However, Ahior avoids reproducing the infamous episode. In the Vulgate, this part of the verse (Jdt 5:9d) is omitted (Gera 2014, 7).

Praise to the Patriarchs of the Chosen People

Later in the narrative, Judith states the following about Patriarch Abraham: “Remember what he did with Abraham, and how he tested Isaac, and what happened to Jacob in Mesopotamia in Syria, while he was keeping the sheep of Laban, his mother’s brother. For he has not tried us with fire, as he did them, to search their hearts, nor has he taken revenge upon us; but the Lord scourges those who draw near to him, in order to admonish them.” (Jdt 8:26-27 – RSV). According to the words of Judith, the patriarch Isaac was tempted like his father, the patriarch Abraham (Mühling 2011, 126). The author of the book probably has in mind the time of Isaac’s binding and preparation for the sacrifice (Gn 22). This case remains unique in early Jewish literature because Isaac’s son is attributed the same deeds and merits as his own father Abraham.

The praise of Judith by Uzziah of the tribe of Simeon bears many similarities to the praise of King Melchizedek to the patriarch Abraham:

“Blessed (*εὐλογημένος*) be Abram by the Most High God (*τῷ Θεῷ τῷ ὑψίστῳ*), Who created heaven and earth (*ὃς ἔκτισε τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν*)! And blessed be the God (*εὐλογητὸς ὁ Θεὸς*) Most High, Who gave your enemies (*ἐχθρούς*) into your hands!”

(Gn 14:19-20)

“O daughter, blessed (*εὐλογητῆ*) art thou by the Most High God (*τῷ Θεῷ τῷ ὑψίστῳ*), more than all the women of the earth; and blessed (*εὐλογημένος*) is the Lord God (*ὁ Θεός*), Who created heaven and earth, Who guided you to cut off the head of the chief of our enemies (*ἐχθρῶν*)!”

(Jdt 13:18)

Conclusions

The reader may be surprised that the author of the book makes Judith almost as deserving as the patriarch Abraham. The comparison between the two characters has the same context:

(1) A victorious protagonist. Abraham defeats the coalition of the four Eastern kings to free his grandson Lor. Judith defeats Holofernes and saves the people of Bethulia; (2) The triumphal blessing is bestowed on the two heroes by one authority: Melchizedek, the shrouded king of Salem, and Uzziah, the ruler of Bethulia (Xeravitis 2019, 39-40).

The book of Judith teaches its readers that the God of Israel cares for his people, especially in difficult circumstances (Jdt 13:17). The Lord God calls all people like the widow Judith and the stranger Ahior to be deliverers and witnesses of the true faith. This shows once again that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25).

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