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The *Book of Judith*: from a symbolic story to a historical mystery

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In the scientific literature devoted to the *Book of Judith*, among the many questions there are often two main problems – History and Historicity. On the one hand the moment of the creation of the work is considered, these are the conditions for its creation, and accordingly the dating and approximate authorship, on the other hand the question of the historical nature of the described events, the problem of their correlation with reality and the possibility of reconstructing the history behind the text are studied.

The story consists of sixteen chapters telling about the Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar, who, intending to take revenge on the rebellious nations, sends his main military commander Holofernes against them. Approaching on his way to the small town of Bethulia – the key to further march on Jerusalem – the army of Holofernes stops, besieging the city. Deprived of the water, the inhabitants suffer from thirst and are about to surrender. Only in the eighth chapter on the scene appears Judith herself. She is a pious widow who leads a very ascetic, solitary and righteous lifestyle after her husband's death. Cursing the elders for wishing to surrender she promises to save the city and its inhabitants with God's help. After uttering a prayer Judith then dresses and decorates herself, provides herself with food, and then, together with her maid goes to the Assyrian camp. There, having the enemy commander at the feast seduced and waiting until he falls asleep drunk, Judith chops off his head with his sword and then returns to Bethulia. There is also a character in the story named Achior the Ammonite. He tells Holofernes the history of the Jews and persuades him not to attack them. In response to this speech the Assyrian commander throws the bound Achior to the gate of Bethulia and wants to capture and destroy the city together with the inhabitants. As a result of all events Achior turns into Judaism. The Assyrians,

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horrified by the death of their military commander, are fleeing, and the Jews are no longer threatened for a long time.

The mentioned problems of historicity and historicism turn out to be closely related to each other in this text. The question of whether the *Book of Judith* is a historical composition, and if so, which period the events described in it belong to, was discussed for a long time. In accordance with this, the works of scholars differed in dating, and in some cases they assumed a historical core, rather ancient, Persian or even Assyrian, which was distorted by later editions and stratifications.

To date, the appearance of the book is dominated by the view that the text was created in the Maccabean (Hasmonean) period, around year 100 BC¹. There are suggestions that as before. Confirming this dating, a number of evidence is provided. Among them there are intentional, well-thought-out hints, and there are random, inevitable signs of time².

The aim of this work is not to specify the dating of the text, but to make a less traditional literary analysis of the work and an attempt to trace what is happening in the text itself and in its perception by readers with a category such as “historicism”.

The work is clearly of a historical nature. Unlike many biblical works, it does not contain a description of the miracle, that is, an active divine intervention in the actions of heroes. All events are very close to realistic. The text is provocatively

¹ In conclusion, a series of factors – literary, linguistic, historical, political, military, and possibly geographical – taken separately and together, all point to a date of circa 100 B.C.E. for the *Book of Judith*, give or take a decade or two on either end. GERA 2014: 44.

² For example, about the signs of time, see DANCY 1972: 67-131. Thus, the frightened Phoenicians meet Holofernes with “garlands and dances and tambourines” (3: 7 “μετὰ στεφάνων καὶ χορῶν καὶ τυμπάνων”). If the last two points could have been encountered before (Judges 11:34), the use of wreaths refers to the Hellenistic period. DANCY 1972: 80. In the same way as the Hellenistic is unconditionally interpreted and the solemn procession in honor of Judith. It is said that “she took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her” (15: 12-13 “καὶ ἔλαβεν θύρσους ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν αὐτῆς καὶ ἔδωκεν ταῖς γυναῖξιν ταῖς μετ’ αὐτῆς καὶ ἐστεφανώσαντο τὴν ἑλαίαν”). Dancy notes that the rod, entwined with ivy, is a thyrsus (See also II Makk 10: 7) - it was mainly used in the cult of Bacchus, and although there can be no hint of this cult here, we still have grounds to extract from here the sign of the era, DANCY 1972: 121. Also the custom of crowning someone with olive branches is Greek. See I Makk 10: 18-21. It is hardly likely that the Maccabees' supporters really "carried the thyrsus" in their hands - especially since Hellenistic supporters at one time tried to force them to do this (see II Makk 6: 7). At the same time Josephus calls Greek "thyrsus" the traditional objects of the Jerusalem cult, the so-called *lulavim* (Ant XIII 372; XIII 13.5). Plutarch also speaks of "thyrsophoria" during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (Quaest. Conv. 671 E). Thus, the use of the word "thyrsus" although not connected in any way with the cult of Bacchus in this context, indicates that the text was written in the Hellenistic period.

The Hellenistic features, as is sometimes believed, are borne by the political organization of the Jews, described in the book of Judith: the people are ruled by the high priest, and also by the council of elders (4: 8).

It recalls the historical events of the period of the Maccabean rebellion and the plot of "Judith" itself. The threat that comes from Holofernes is, in particular, the desecration of the sanctuary, as specifically mentioned in the text (8:21, 9: 8). Prior to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the enemy kings and leaders did not set such a goal: they destroyed and plundered, and desecration was the result of these actions. The very name of the main character is represented by a female parallel to the name of the main rebel leader – Judah Maccabee. Attempt of exact binding of date to certain events see SHMAINA-VELIKANOVA, BRAGINSKAYA 2010; ECKHARDT 2009.

filled with details, indications of places, dates, measurements (of walls, troops, days, etc.³). However, for all the differences in approaches and theories, researchers agree on one thing: the historical situation described in the story is obviously unreal. On the one hand we face the Assyrian threat. The people, whom the Jews are to deal with, are already named in the first lines of the story, and their aggression and large-scale conquest plans are already reported at the beginning of the second chapter⁴. On the other hand, the past fact for the heroes is the return from exile, followed by the restoration of the temple⁵. In fact, Assyria threatened the Jews in the VIII century BC, when in times of King Tiglathpalasar III and Sargon II the Damascus and Israel kingdoms were defeated (732 and 722 BC) and fell under Assyrian domination. King Nebuchadnezzar also has a place in the history of the Jews. However he reigned not in Assyria, as the *Book of Judith* asserts, but in Babylonia from 605 to 562 BC, while the Assyrian power ceased to exist not later than 606 BC. In 587/6 BC he led thousands of Jerusalemites into exile, from which they were able to return in 539 BC, when this time Babylonia was conquered by Persia. Thus, the picture in which the Jews who returned from captivity suffer from the attack of Nebuchadnezzar, the Assyrian king, is a blending of three historical periods: Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian.

In addition to this most vivid discrepancy, there are many other elements in the text that seem to have nothing to do with historical reality. So, among the well-known toponyms, there are also unfamiliar names: the country of the Chelleans (2:23), the brook Abron (2:24), Sur (2:28), Kona, Belmain, Aesora, (4: 4), Cyamon (7: 3), Choba and Kola (15: 4), possibly invented by the author⁶. And of course, paradoxically the fact that the main city where the action takes place, Bethulia, remains a mystery to researchers, and they still offer hypotheses of probable identification.

As in the case of cities, and among real nations, for example, there are also difficult to identify “sons of Cheleoud” (1: 6) and “sons of Rassis” (2:23).

So Nebuchadnezzar could not be the king of Assyria after returning from exile, and thus it becomes necessary to find any explanation for this violent fusion of several periods. According to scientists, this combination should become for the reader a kind of sign, an indication of the fictitiousness, or rather, the allegoricity of the described. Thus, C. Torrey believes that for a modern man, the phrase would sound like this:

³ For example, “(Arphaxad) He built walls around Ecbatana with hewn stones three cubits thick and six cubits long; he made the walls seventy cubits high and fifty cubits wide. At its gates he raised towers one hundred cubits high and sixty cubits wide at the foundations. He made its gates seventy cubits high and forty cubits wide to allow his armies to march out in force and his infantry to form their ranks.” (1: 2–4).

⁴ “It was the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh” (1: 1).

⁵ “...For they had only recently returned from exile, and all the people of Judea had just now gathered together, and the sacred vessels and the altar and the temple had been consecrated after their profanation.” (4: 3).

⁶ “The combination here of known, partially known, and unknown place names is typical of the difficulties raised by the geographical information provided in *Judith*”, GERA 2014: 171.

“It happened at the time when Napoleon Bonaparte was king of England, and Otto von Bismarck was on the throne in Mexico”⁷. R. Dentan characterizes the historicity of Judith in a very similar way, suggesting to compare the beginning of the book with the statement that events occur at the time of “Woodrow Wilson, who was President of the United States of America shortly after the end of World War II”⁸. For the Russian reader, perhaps, the phrase “when Napoleon became the head of the Tatar-Mongol after the victory over Germany” would sound like this.

It is impossible to imagine that the book was written in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. In this case, the indication of the return from the exile would be only fictitious and desirable and would not reflect the fact actually committed in the past; and placing the Babylonian king in Assyria would then become a strange mistake. Late dating seems much more plausible, when the impossible combination of historical facts is simply a literary device. Here it is rather difficult to imagine an unintentional error of the author. He is clearly aware of the historical events, and in the book itself we see how the character Achior the Ammonite represents the military leader of Holofernes a brief history of the Jews, corresponding to the true state of affairs (5: 5-21).

Thus, the deliberate historicity of the book turns out to be detached from reality and serves to create a universal historical background called upon to demonstrate to the reader the universality and timelessness of the truths proclaimed by the author. The author of the book deals with historical events as a designer for creating a new image of a powerful enemy, which, however, is partly familiar to the reader.

Pseudohistorism, a historical work stylization, reveals itself in the story not only by overlaying incompatible episodes of history, but sometimes by exaggerated scales. Thus, on the one hand, a detailed reference to the genealogy of the heroine at her first appearance, as it seems, should give realism to the narrative, but unprecedented for the female character in the *Bible* an expanded list of authoritative ancestors creates an effect if not quite comic, at least similar to the effect of historical discrepancies, namely - pseudo-historicity⁹.

To perceive the text as purely historical means to ignore many of its other meanings. The work is filled with deep symbolic mythopoetic images, which clearly go beyond the pure “encryption” of the confrontation between Antiochus and Judas Maccabee. This is the symbolism of the woman-city, and mother-earth, and the symbol of the struggle of the weak against the strong, the maiden in the tower, etc. From

⁷ TORREY 1945: 89-90.

⁸ DENTAN 1954.

⁹ “Judith, the daughter of Merari son of Ox son of Joseph son of Oziel son of Eliah son of Ananias son of Gideon son of Raphain son of Ahitub son of Elijah son of Hilkiah son of Eliab son of Nathanael son of Salamiel son of Sarasadai son of Israel” (8:1).

the literary point of view the story has a vivid set of artistic techniques. This is a clearly arranged composition, where the heroine does not accidentally appear from the middle of the story; and thought out retardation before the key points of action; and the slowing down of the plot time in the course of approaching the denouement, when starting from periods of several years, the tempo of the story decreases to days, and then to the events of one major night; this is also the use of a mirror scheme for building characters¹⁰; irony and ambiguity in the speech of the heroes.

Thus, when confronted with a confusion of chronology in this work, we are dealing not with the author's mistake, but with a literary device designed only for historical stylization, and in fact a creation of a timeless symbolic story¹¹.

So, despite its symbolic, religious and political orientation, the *Book of Judith* remains a literary work, in which the same processes that operate in texts of later periods up to the present day turn out to be valid. Considering the work from this side we note that for the modern theory of narratology there is no difference between a fictional character and a real one. As V. Schmid writes in his book, "What about historical personalities, such as Napoleon or Kutuzov, if they are figures of the novel? These are only quasi-historical figures. Napoleon of Tolstoy is neither a reflection nor a representation of a real historical personality, but an image, *mimesis* of Napoleon, i.e. the construction of a possible Napoleon. Much of what is narrated in the novel about this Napoleon cannot be documented and is unthinkable in a historiographical text. In the novel "War and Peace" Napoleon and Kutuzov are no less fictitious than Natasha Rostov and Pierre Bezukhov < ... > The fictitious nature of the characters makes fictitious both the situations and the actions which they take part in. The space of the novel is also a fictitious one"¹².

However, the method used here to create a pseudo-historical reality, which nevertheless takes as a basis the reality of the present and reconstructs it in the way required, turns out to be too powerful, and this action does not weaken with the years, but only grows stronger. In combination with the lack of miracles, deliberate historicism and continuing attempts to perceive the book literally lead to the weakening of its symbolic role.

The historical framework, where the fictitious events are inscribed by the author, acts provocatively on readers including scientific researchers. Thus, among

¹⁰ ROITMAN 1992.

¹¹ SHMAINA-VELIKANOVA 2010; Perhaps this feature of the *Book of Judith* was caught by art that appealed to the image of this heroine hundreds of times. In the works of artists, Judith, being one of the most popular heroines of the Old Testament very clearly carries the quality of timelessness, dissolution in history, freedom of binding to a certain period. The appearance of Judith in costumes and interiors of different eras was, for some periods, an artistic tradition, and for some already an accepted technique. Judith in the XX and XXI centuries can appear completely "modernized", wear clothes of the appropriate period and decapitate Holofernes by any means, preserving, however, the key qualities of the image. See the image of modern Judith, for example, in the paintings of John Luke, Oleg Leonov, Kosta Kulundzic.

¹² SHMID 2008: 37-38.

the works devoted to Judith, in particular the topic of reconstructions and search for prototypes is very popular¹³. The abundance of cities indicated in the first half of the story leads to attempts to trace the exact route of Holofernes along the map, and calculations on one of the areas, for example, show that the army was to overcome in three days a distance of about 500 km.

Of course, prototypes for the main characters are also actively searched for: first of all Holofernes, as well as Bagoas, Nebuchadnezzar and Judith herself.

Many attempts have been made to identify Bethulia, the city where the action takes place. The relation to the text as a historical one, the literal perception of historical and geographical indications, the ignoring of inconsistencies and “mistakes” lead to the drawn results, which are against the original intention of the author, who deliberately created only a pseudo-real space with a nonexistent city of Bethulia in the center. For example, some attempts have been made to identify Bethulia with Shechem in Samaria mostly on the basis of geographical indications about the special position of this city¹⁴. However, this approach ignores the fact that the author of the story, who refers to real toponyms for many times in different other situations, used the fictitious city in here, apparently deliberately leaving for abstraction and symbolism. In addition, this interpretation is in contradiction with the hostile statements about the sychemites in the very text of the story, where the heroine, for her further actions, takes as a model the bloody massacre at Shechem, arranged there by the sons of Jacob Simeon and Levi, who avenge the defilement of their sister Dina (34: 1).

Nevertheless “there will always be readers who can easily deceive themselves. Deceive even when the author does not have such an intention”¹⁵.

The historical interpretation of the book brought to the point of absurdity can be found in Dmitriyev's article “Ahiodorus and Holofernes”¹⁶, where in an almost detective manner an attempt is made to reconstruct events and expose the “true” murderer of Holofernes. The author of the article criticizes the version stated in the story for a number of reasons and insists that the heroine “could not even physically carry out the murder in the way indicated in the *Bible*.” M. Dmitriev suggests that the real killer is Achior, who allegedly entered the camp of Holofernes with Judith, disguised as a servant. The author of the note reveals both the motive of the murder, and the methods of camouflage and the convenient opportunities and knowledge that this person possessed.

“In the Bible there are circumstantial evidence indicating the participation of a man in the history of the assassination of the Assyrian commander. In particular, there is an indication that Judith was accompanied by a very big and strong woman

¹³ ZERTAL 2009.

¹⁴ TORREY 1899.

¹⁵ LANN 1930: 47.

¹⁶ DMITRIYEV 2010,

servant (carrying a huge sack with supplies) to the camp of the enemy. Apparently, it was a man disguised as a woman. But who is this man? An analysis of all the circumstances of the Holofernes murder asserts that only one person could have organized and implemented it - Achiodorus!<sic> First, he had a motive for this. Holofernes expelled him from his camp and sent him to the besieged city, thus condemning him to certain death. Isn't that the reason to take revenge on your offender and save your own life? Secondly, only Achiodorus could come up with such a plan, because it takes into account the individual properties of the character of Holofernes, which only a person with whom he knew could know. And finally, being a professional military man, of course, he possessed all kinds of weapons, including a sword. If we accept the version that the organizer of the Assyrian commander's assassination was Achiodorus, then the biblical story of Judith takes on a very reliable form”.

The theme of the relationship between the heroes of the work and reality was considered repeatedly. Out of a number of scholars who talked about this problem, we quote Umberto Eco. As the author repeatedly states, “the text is a lazy mechanism that requires the reader to do part of the work for him. In other words, the text is an adaptation created to provoke as many interpretations as possible¹⁷. The last statement, however, is not so unambiguous. As Eco explains, “the reader must make sure that the text itself not only admits, but compels to interpret it in a certain way”¹⁸.

Despite the obligation to comply with the artistic agreement, only pretending that the events which the author tells us about did take place, attempts to perceive the characters as real ones, that is, correlated with the facts and laws of the familiar reality, were nevertheless undertaken very often: this is the search for Sherlock Holmes' apartment; pharmacies, where Leopold Bloom bought soap; a trace from Julien Sorel's first bullet, etc. However, as might be expected, the literature of a more ancient period, especially at such a level as the biblical, is more protected from such interventions. The author of this kind of literature counted on a certain perception of the reader. “When an ancient or medieval reader read the biblical narration of Jonah, who was swallowed by a fish and who got out of its belly three days later safe and sound, then such a reader did not see in this fact anything contradicting his *encyclopedia* (i.e., various “*Specula Mundi*”, based ultimately on the same Bible)”¹⁹. Nevertheless, as we see, the interpretation from the point of view of “reality” is suddenly comprehended by Judith. The reason for this is, in our opinion, primarily in the above-mentioned deliberate historicism. In addition, the absence of explicit scenes of the miraculous has also its influence. Another explanation, it seems to us, can be found in the fact that in this case the Exemplary reader gives way to the Empirical

¹⁷ ECO 2013: 57.

¹⁸ ECO 2013: 58.

¹⁹ ECO 2007: 381.

Reader, and an infinite number of interpretations are allowed to be offered only to the first, but not to the second one. In this case, we will make the assumption that the author of the note about the true murderer of Holofernes did not stop at the moment of confusion of the chronology for the reason that, unlike the Jew of the second century BC, turned out to be just not familiar with it. Otherwise, as an Exemplary reader, he should have been alerted precisely at this moment, disregarding the unrealistic circumstances of the murder.

And finally we make the assumption that certain detective likeness, tension, predisposition to some guessing of the truth are already laid down in the story itself. Going to the Assyrians, the heroine does not reveal her plan to the elders and inhabitants of the city and does not say exactly how she is going to save them. Likewise, remaining alone and uttering her speech in front of the reader, the heroine does not describe her forthcoming actions at this moment. Only with the time, in the course of the story, we find out what exactly is conceived and how it is performed. And later, almost at the end of the whole book, the inhabitants of Bethulia finally find this out, when Judith, shows them the head. So, this tense expectation of the denouement, this potential question of the reader, “What is she going to do?”, this guess of the inhabitants “What is she doing there?” could have triggered such a detective interpretation, trying to figure out what “really” happened there. And perhaps for this very reason the author of the note about the true murderer focuses on this exposure, missing other unrealistic details.

Summarizing, let us say that the author of the *Book of Judith* created a work of many levels and only one of them can be designated as a figurative description of the struggle of Judah Maccabee with Antiochus Epiphanes. The text clearly contains other meanings, so the reduction of reading the story simply to its historical decipherment will be a violent restriction. The method of overlaying incompatible historical periods, evidently, was understandable to the Jewish reader and was perceived as conceived by the author. Nevertheless, over time, for a number of reasons, this same method began to mislead readers. The symbolic role of the story began to weaken, and this historical coloring of the text began to come to the fore, which however embarrassed the researchers with its mistakes. The curious case of detective reading of the text, attempts to reconstruct the actual course of events, demonstrates the limit which the historical interpretation ignoring the author's initial message, the conditions for creating the text and the religious context of the work can reach.

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Summary

The Book of Judith: from a symbolic story to a historical mystery

The Apocryphal tale of Judith describes the story of the encounter between the Assyrians and the Jews, who managed to overcome the enemy through the faith and strength of Judith. The Book is rich in historical and geographical details but the general historical stage is false or more likely intentionally modified. The reason of this modification may be the creation of a pseudo-historical reality with the purpose to make an impression of a timeless lesson. But with the course of time this symbolic role of this artistic device is slackening so that the process of decoding advances to the forefront.

Key words: *The Book of Judith*, symbolic story, historical mystery