

From Rooftop to Chamber: Prayer in Jerome's Rendering of the Book of Judith

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Judith, Jerome, chamber, tent, translation, Assyrians, privacy, Christian, verse, widow, book, late antiquity, emphasizes, space, chapter, ascetic, text, Greek, Roman culture, case

SPEAKERS

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Natália da Silva Perez 00:21

Hi, my name is Natália da Silva Perez, and you're listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast. In this episode, we will hear Florian Wöller, associate professor of church history at the University of Copenhagen. He will talk about the church father Jerome's interpretation of the book of Judith. This biblical book tells the story of a widow who saved Israel from the Assyrians by killing their leader, the general Holofernes. Florian's talk is entitled From rooftop to chamber - prayer in Jerome's rendering of the book of Judith.

Florian Wöller 00:58

Thank you Mette and everybody at the Center for organizing this. It is obviously a thrill for me to be able to speak to you. I should say before anything else that this is very much work in progress. Actually, it's the first time I dedicated myself to this topic at all, but we'll see how it goes. So initially, this paper was motivated by one single verse in the biblical book, or as some may prefer to say, the deuterocanonical book of Judith. A novellike narration, which is commonly assumed to have been written some time toward the end of the second century BC. Chapter eight verse five, shortly after the protagonist and hero of the book, the widow Judith has been introduced, the text informs us about Judith's way of living. It says, and I quote: "she built a tent for herself on the roof of her house, placed sackcloth about her waist, and wore a widow's dress." End quote. This is the text of the Septuagint that is the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, and presumably the closest we get to the original text simply because all evidence produced by biblical scholarship, suggest that the original language of the book was indeed Greek, and not Hebrew or Aramaic. Yet, it was not the Greek texts that caught my attention, but rather the Latin translation produced by the late antique ascetic, theologian and philologist, Jerome. Jerome dedicated himself to the book of Judith around the year 405 CE, indeed, in the middle of late antiquity, and rendered our verse in the following way: "In the upper parts of her house, she made herself a separate or solitary chamber, in which she resided enclosed with her maids." Then Jerome continues in verse six to describe Judith's outward appearance, complete with sackcloth and widows dress. It therefore seems as if Jerome picks up the original narrative, after having inserted something that as far as we can tell, only he himself knew, or to use a late antique term that oscillates between discovery and forgery, something that he invented. Obviously, for anybody interested in pre-modern concepts of privacy and in the cubiculum in particular, Jerome's rendering of this verse is immediately exciting. For on the face of it, Jerome not only changed the physical space of Judith's dwelling from a tent to a chamber on the rooftop, but much more than that, he qualified the chamber as *secretum* and Judith's life there in as *clausa cum puellis suis*. Essentially, Judith resembles an aristocratic widow, leading a

secluded life together with her personnel, that is her female servants or in this case her slaves. To be sure, it comes to mind that Jerome indeed conversed with aristocratic women, similar to the Judith he portrayed. Some 20 years earlier, in the 380s. He had made the acquaintance of a circle of aristocratic women who, partly as widows partly as voluntary and involuntary virgins, have dedicated themselves to a monastic celibatic life. Jerome, himself an ascetic conversed with them both as a spiritual companion and as a philological and theological teacher. A conduct that soon proved to be both a curse and a blessing, A curse, because allegations of improper relations with some of his female companions forced Jerome to depart them, and a blessing because the Roman women being not only pious but also rich provided Jerome with funding both for his later monastic activities in Bethlehem, and for his scholarly accomplishments with the Latin translation of the Bible. Indeed, it is the relationship with his ascetic friends in Rome, that seems to have guided Jerome in his translation of the book of Judith. In his preface, he exhorts the intended readership to "accept the widow Judith as an example of chastity and make her known with triumphant praise and incessant vortations. For she was given not only to women, but also to men for invitation by the one who as a rewarder for her chastity, has given her such power that she defeated who was undefeated by all men, and conquered the unconquerable." And so, because both dimensions highlighted in this preface, that is the vertical dimension of God's agency in the story, and the horizontal dimension, the monastic dimension connecting Jerome with his ascetic friends in Rome and beyond, because both these dimensions to a very large extent, characterize Jerome's translation, I thought it would be most interesting to discuss how Jerome's rendering of Judith is influenced by the author's contemporary monastic reality and theological thought. But then I had second thoughts. First and foremost, because following Jerome's commendation in the preface and considering the tremendous influence, his translation of the Bible still has today, I became more interested in the way he himself coined and forged the concept of cubiculum and privacy in his translation of Judith, as opposed to how this translation might have been informed by contextual realities. The result of the second thought is the following. I will briefly report the little that as far as I know is to be found in scholarly literature on christian data, the concepts of cubiculum and pray privacy. Then second, I will collect the evidence from the whole book of Judith and eventually, third, returning to the passage introduced above, I will try to formulate some preliminary conclusions. If in the end, you get the impression that all this has some loose ends, I we'll be happy because that will confirm that I have conveyed at least one essential [unintelligible]. What then goes the christian cubiculum in late antiquity? Far from being an exhaustive account, a nonetheless pioneering, study already mentioned by Andrew, the study is by Kristina Sessa, concludes that late anti christianity both specified and transformed the traditional cubiculum. It's specified it, in as much the christian authors continue to see it as the polyvalent space that the cubiculum was in earlier Roman culture. For just as the cubiculum provided and stimulated secrecy in non christian Roman culture, it continued to do so under christian conditions as a "legitimate alternative space of spiritual activity, where christians might practice without direct Episcopal supervision." At the same time, however, Christianity, according to Sessa, also transformed indeed, essentially changed the cubiculum. It became, "synonymous in late antiquity with an intense experience of spiritual intimacy, as a place where one performed and potentially experienced his or her relationship to God." Still a space of intimacy. The intimate partner the concubularius, so to speak, was not any more created being of flesh and blood, but rather the creator and savior himself. For this tremendous redefinition of the cubiculum, Sessa offers conclusive evidence from a large variety of literary genre, and not least from the Bible itself. In this context, Jerome obviously plays a major role. Sessa quotes our passage from Judith, a verse from Isaiah. And last but

not least, the Gospel of Matthew 6.6. In Sessa's, own translation of Jerome's translation, the verse reads: "When you pray, go into your cubiculum and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret (in abscondito) and your Father who sees in secret (in abscondito) will reward you." Whatever may be said about this translation, it must be added that here Jerome largely reproduced some earlier Latin translations of the Bible that is a bunch of renderings that today are being subsumed under the name *Vetus Latina*, the old Latin Bible. But while in the case of Matthew, Jerome and the *Vetus Latina* largely agree. In the book of Judith, in our case, they disagree to an equally large extent. And that not only concerns the passage that I have already introduced, but the majority of the other occurrences of cubiculum in the book of Judith, as well. This is certainly not the place, neither do I have the competency to go deep into the intricacies of the transmission and reception history of the biblical text. So let it suffice to say that in the case of Judith, the *Vetus Latina*, the old Latin text represents an intermediary step between the Greek text and Jerome's translation. The old Latin text is indeed closer to the Greek, which in turn emphasizes, of course the originality of Jerome's translation, and of his concepts of cubiculum and privacy. By dwelling on these concepts now, I hope I can at least put one question mark next to the many exclamation marks behind Sessa's assessment of the Christian cubiculum in late antiquity. In Jerome's rendering of Judith we find two very distinct cubicula. First, the space introduced above. This is where Judith lives before she leaves her hometown, a completely fictitious place called Bethulia, in order to accomplish what she is most famous for, the beheading of Holofernes, the Chief General of the Assyrians, the leader of an army determined to subdue the Israelites and to occupy their land. Judith enters the Assyrian camp with her maid, gains the trust of Holofernes and not least by arousing his sexual desire. And then while Holofernes lies in a drunken stupor after an exuberant party, Judith, beheads him with his own sword. This happens in the other cubiculum. Then she returns to Bethulia, rallies the Israelites in order to defeat the Assyrians, which they of course successfully do and eventually leads them in a victorious procession up to Jerusalem. Turning now to the cubicula in the book of Judith. The first thing to note is that only in Jerome's translation, there are two of them. The Greek equivalent, κοιτών we have come across that word already, only appears in conjunction with a place of Holofernes's beheading, and I quote from Judith 13. That's the Septuagint text. "When evening came, his servants quickly departed Bagoas, that is Holofernes's bodyguard his σωματοφύλαξ. He closed the tent from the outside and dismissed the attendance from his masters presence. They all went to their beds, exhausted because of the excessive drinking. Judith was left alone in the tent with Holofernes, who had fallen on his bed since he was doused in wine. Judith told her maid to stand outside the chamber (κοιτών) and to wait for her to come out, as she did every day since she said she would be going out to her prayers. They all left and no one small or great remained in the chamber (κοιτών)." And so Judith killed Holofernes. According to this, then the κοιτών is situated somewhere within Holofernes's tent. About the chamber's interior features we learn that there is a bed and a bit later that there also is originally an ornamented canopy above the bed, probably against mosquitoes. The activities performed in the chamber closely resemble the classic cubiculum action, sex in this case only potentially, rest and murder. The drinking seems to take place in a space that is at least terminologically distinct from the chamber. Whether or not this is also physically separated from the chamber is not quite clear. Just as it is not entirely clear whether Judith's maid is waiting for her inside or outside the tent. This spatial ambivalence is less strong in the second passage that I would like to draw your attention to. Here, the story has advanced, it is the morning after. The Assyrians realize that the Israelites are preparing an attack and thus rush to Holofernes searching for guidance. Judith 14 - "They came to Holofernes's tent, and said to the one in

charge of all his affairs." (It's the same Bagoas again.) "Wake up our Lord for the slaves have dared to come down to us to make war so that they will be utterly destroyed. Bagoas went in and knocked on the curtain of the tent, since he supposed that Holofernes was sleeping with Judith. Since no one responded, he opened the curtain and went into the chamber (the κοιτῶν again). He found him thrown down on the threshold, a corpse with his head taken away." From verse 14, it appears as if the chamber is separated from the rest of the tent by a curtain, and it exclusively pertains to Bagoas, Holofernes's bodyguard, to enter the chamber somewhat discreetly, where he then finds the latter. Interestingly, those asking Bagoas to wake up the general, not only do not enter the chamber, but they also refrain from entering the tent. The text is very clear about this - παρεγένοντο ἐπὶ τὴν σκηνὴν Ολοφέρνηου, they came to Holofernes's tent - ἐπὶ τὴν σκηνὴν. Notably now the old Latin tradition of the text reproduces the Greek with great precision. Also here the spatial ambivalence in chapter 13. The timidity of the soldiers in front of the tent and Bagoas exclusive access to both the tent and the chamber in chapter 14 pertain. Thus in the old Latin text, the Greek term σκηνή is consistently rendered as tabernaculum and the κοιτῶν equally consistent as cubiculum. This changes tremendously in Jerome's translation. As what regards chapter 13, wherever the Greek text speaks of σκηνή, that is tent, Jerome supplies cubiculum. And in chapter 14 he emphasizes the physical separation of tent and chamber. Indeed, I dare to say he emphasizes the privacy of the chamber. First by saying that the men searching for Holofernes went into the tent, but stopping short of the chamber. Jerome writes, again Judith 14: "The scouts ran together toward the tent, and then those who were inside the tent, came and made a noise at the entrance of the chamber. And in order to wake him, they intentionally engaged in making noise such that Holofernes would wake from the sound makers and not from anybody awakening him, for no one dared to open the chamber of the strength of the Assyrians by knocking or entering." Then the story continues with Bagoas, just as we have read it in the Greek and the old Latin text. However, according to Jerome also Bagoas is even more discreet than in the earlier tradition. "Then, Bagoas, having entered Holofernes's chamber, stood before the curtain clapping his hands, for he assumed that Holofernes would be sleeping with Judith." In other words, Bagoas first does not even touch the curtain of the chamber but tries to wake his master acoustically. And only after Bagoas's "sense of hearing did not perceive any motion of the one sleeping", the bodyguards drew away the curtain. The privacy of Holofernes's chamber that appears as exponentially increased in Jerome's translation as opposed to the earlier tradition. What are the conclusions we can infer from all this? And does anything permit us to apply them to Judith's cubiculum on the roof of her house? But of course, strikes the eye are the spatial parallels between Judith's dwelling in Bethulia on the one hand, and that of Holofernes, in the Assyrian camp on the other. In the old tradition, that is in the Septuagint, and the old Latin, both places are tents. For according to chapter eight, Judith is living in a rooftop σκηνή tabernaculum, just as according to chapter 13, Holofernes is living in a military σκηνή tabernaculum. Jerome now applied great consistency, as we may say, when he changed the spaces into cubacula, maintaining the spatial parallel. For according to him, both Judith and Holofernes reside in a cubiculum. In the case of Holofernes's cubiculum, Jerome emphasize the special character of the chamber as being distinctively off limits by inventing that human alarm clock within the tent but outside the chamber. In the case of Judith, he did the same by qualifying it as secretum, as a separate or solitary chamber, where Judith lives life clausa cum puellis suis, enclosed with her maids. I would like to argue that Jerome did this intentionally and skillfully. It would at any rate, mean to underestimate Jerome's ingenuity, if we simply assumed this construction of the cubiculum to be merely coincidental. But is there anything distinctively late antique and Christian in this cubiculum? I dare to argue that Jerome's cubacula which he designed

as emphatically secluded spaces, characterized by secrecy and privacy, are rather traditional Roman cubicular and not particularly Christian ones, at least not in the way described by Sessa. Activities, rest, sex and murder that we see unfold in them, nicely coincide with a traditional canon established by professor Riggsby. At the same time, however, Judith's dwelling place, the cubiculum on the roof of her house, formerly a tent where she lived visibly for all, may be seen as a supplement, namely as a place of dwelling, to this canon of traditional concepts of the chamber in Roman culture. But even in this case, I would be reluctant to recognize a particularly late antique and Christian chamber in this cubiculum, again, according to Sessa's sense, not least, because Judith also received a delegation of political representatives, the elders of the town of Bethulia in that same space, so it's also a reception room as a matter of fact. Her *vita clausa*, hence is not as much a *clausura* as the one of Jerome's ascetic friends would have been. So maybe both kinds of chambers in Jerome's translation of Judith simply make us aware of what sometimes needs to be emphasized, namely, the process of Christianization of Roman culture was a lengthy one, or at least a longer one than any clear cut distinction between a traditionally Roman and a Christian-Roman era may suggest. One last passage from the book of Judith would require our attention if we had more time today. For after the visit of the Bethulian elders, the visit just mentioned, Jerome adds to the earlier tradition that Judith went into her prayer room: "*ingressa est oratorium suum*". From the context, it is quite clear that this oratorium is the same physical space as the cubiculum. Now, however, with a different function, but note that neither in the Greek nor the old Latin text, any such prayer space is being mentioned, and even in the vulgate oratorium, is a *hapex legomenon*. In this oratorium then, Judith prays to God and thereby readies herself for the heroic venture she is to embark upon. She does that, according to the older tradition, presumably in her tent, exactly at the time when in the Jerusalem temple, the evening incense is being offered, and thus she puts her plan in the national context. We could perhaps say that she performs a distinctively political prayer. In Jerome's translation, this political aspect is absent, which of course turns Judith's prayer in her cubiculum into a personal one, in the oratorium. Perhaps then, the oratorium, the prayer space is the distinctively Christian cubiculum we have been looking for.

Natália da Silva Perez 21:42

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