

Environmental Determinism and Mountain Identities in Judith

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Abstract

This article argues that the book of Judith seeks to define the Jews as a “mountain people.” It suggests that Judith advances this idea through numerous direct statements by prominent characters, particularly Achior during his speech at Jdt 5:5–21, and by redrawing the boundaries of Judea to correspond with the Judean and Samarian hill country. The article further argues, following a consideration of environmental determinism in ancient Greek sources and depictions of mountain peoples in Ancient Near Eastern art, that this definition is used by the author to characterise the Jews as a strong, fierce, and intimidating people as part of its wider discourse on Jewish ethnic identity.

Keywords

Judith – ethnicity – identity – environment – geography

A strong tradition of environmental determinism, the idea that a population’s culture, biology, and patterns of social organization are a product of the region they inhabit, existed within ancient Greek philosophy and ethnography.¹ The

1 Ergin, “Geography-Human Relationships”; Isaac, *Empire and Ideology*, 100–101. Despite the importance of these ideas in Greek thought, there was no ancient Greek term which closely approximated “environmental determinism” (see Kennedy and Jones-Lewis, “Introduction,” 2). With thanks to Benedikt Eckhardt for his support in developing this article.

author of the Hippocratic text *Airs, Waters, Places*, for instance, repeatedly claims that climate and terrain play a decisive role in shaping the physical and psychological characteristics of ethnic groups. The text suggests, for example, that the mild climate of certain regions of Asia has made the population cowardly, lazy, luxurious, and physically large.² Environmental determinism can be seen in the works of other major classical Greek thinkers, including Herodotus and Aristotle, and influenced the worldview of numerous later Greek and Roman writers.³

In this article, I will argue that this tradition of environmental determinism shaped the construction of Jewish ethnic identity in *Judith*, an ancient Jewish text which recounts the invasion of Israel by an Assyrian king named Nebuchadnezzar. The narrative focuses on the Assyrian army's siege of the city of "Bethulia," and the heroic actions of a young Jewish woman, Judith, who infiltrates the invaders' camp and kills their general, Holofernes.

There are live and thorny scholarly debates surrounding the circumstances under which the text of *Judith* was produced. There remains considerable uncertainty about the precise date of its composition: as of 2022, scholarship has settled on the Hasmonean period, mainly because it seems clear that the author had knowledge of Daniel and 2 Maccabees. It is difficult, however, to determine with certainty whether the text is from the early or late Hasmonean period, and dates range from the 160s to the 70s BCE (with most estimating around 100 BCE).⁴ The original language of the text, which survives only in Greek, is also under dispute: while the scholarly consensus traditionally held that the text was composed in Hebrew, in recent years several scholars have argued that it was originally written in Greek.⁵

These complex textual problems notwithstanding, *Judith* has attracted enormous scholarly and public interest for centuries and has been analysed through the lens of various historical, cultural, artistic, theological, and political traditions. The peculiarly unspecific chronological setting of the story has generated stimulating debates about meaning, authorship, and audience.⁶

2 Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* 12.

3 Aristotle, *Pol.* 7.7. For Herodotus, see below. For further examples, including from Roman authors, see Ergin, "Geography-Human Relationships."

4 See summary discussions in Eckhardt, "Reclaiming Tradition," 243–44; Gera, *Judith*, 26–44; Wills, *Judith*, 14–16.

5 An often-quoted statement from Enslin's *The Book of Judith* (39–40) reads: "That the Book of Judith was originally written in Hebrew is recognised by all scholars." Conversely, for proponents of a Greek original, see Joosten, "Original Language"; Corley, "Septuagintalism." For a neutral summary of the arguments see Gera, *Judith*, 79–97.

6 For a rich summary of the book of Judith's reception history, see Wills, *Judith*, 107–54. See also Craven, "Book of Judith."

Judith is also one of a handful of ancient Jewish texts with a female protagonist, and the text's strikingly self-confident, independent, and violent heroine has attracted the attention of numerous gender historians and feminist academics. Discussion has particularly centred around the extent to which Judith broke with dominant ideals of femininity, and the ways the text can inform our understanding of women in Second Temple Palestine.⁷ Scholars have also considered the ways that the book of Judith interacts with Hasmonean state ideology: Benedikt Eckhardt, for instance, argued in 2009 that Judith is responding to official Hasmonean propaganda, and he presents the work as a subversive literary critique of the Hasmoneans' attempts to appropriate biblical literature for their own political purposes.⁸ The text is also an important source for discussions of Jewish ethnicity and identity. Scholars have focused on the unusual frequency of the words "Israel" and "Israelite," as well as the conversion of Achior, an Ammonite, to Judaism and his subsequent acceptance into the Jewish community.⁹

I believe that a hitherto unexplored dimension of Judith's discourse on ethnicity is the development of a Jewish identity which is deeply rooted in the mountains. In the text the Jews are explicitly and repeatedly characterised as a mountain people, particularly during the interaction between Holofernes and his subordinates in chapter 5. In Jdt 5:1–3, Holofernes assembles the leaders of Moab, Ammon, and the coastal plains together, and bluntly asks: "Who is this people who live in the hill country (τῇ ὀρεινῇ)?"¹⁰ Achior, the leader of the Ammonites, begins his reply by saying (5:5): "Listen, Master, to this speech from the mouth of your servant, and I will tell you the truth about the people, who live in this hill country (τὴν ὀρεινὴν ταύτην)." It is striking that both Holofernes and Achior define the Israelites¹¹ with reference to the mountains. Later in his speech, Achior explains how the Israelites came to inhabit this region (5:14–15): "They drove out all those living in the wilderness, they inhabited the land of the Amorites, they destroyed the people of Heshbon in their strength. Then, crossing over the Jordan, they took over the entire hill country (πᾶσαν

7 E.g., Milne, "What Shall We Do"; Sawyer, "Dressing Up"; Efthimiades-Keith, "Judith, Feminist Ethics"; Gera, *Judith*, 98–109; Wills, *Judith*, 50–70. There has been considerable debate about whether Judith is a positive or a negative feminist role model.

8 Eckhardt, "Reclaiming Tradition."

9 E.g., Roitman, "This People"; Eckhardt, "Reclaiming Tradition"; Venter, "Ammonite Achior"; Wills, *Judith*, 1–2.

10 All translations are my own.

11 The term "Israelite" does not seem to specifically refer to the northern tribes of Israel in Judith, but to all the people worshipping Yahweh. For a convincing recent argument for the generality of the terms "Israel" and "Israelite" in the Second Temple period, see Staples, *Idea of Israel*.

τὴν ὄρεινὴν).” He then claims that the Israelites had previously been defeated in battle because they abandoned their god’s commandments and were forced into exile by the victors (presumably a reference to the Babylonian captivity). He adds, however (5:19): “Now, having turned back to their god they have come back from the places they were scattered to and occupied Jerusalem, where their temple is, and have settled the hill country (τῇ ὄρεινῇ), for it was desolate.” The repeated description of the Jews as a people of a hill country in Achior’s speech, which fulfils an important function within the text as a brief ethnography and history of the Jewish people,¹² indicates its importance to the author’s conception of Jewish identity. The idea that the Israelites are a mountain people is also reinforced in Holofernes’ greeting to Judith at 11:2, in which he refers to “your people who inhabit the hill country” (τὴν ὄρεινὴν).

The idea that the Jews are a mountain people is also reflected in the author’s unique redrawing of regional borders. It has often been noted that the author of *Judith* dissolves the boundary which historically bisected the central Palestinian hill country into Samaria in the north and Judea in the south. The Jezreel Valley, which traditionally marked the northern border of Samaria, is instead presented as the northern border of Judea at 4:6–7, where the Jewish high priest Joakin directs the inhabitants of Bethulia and Bethomestham—which is located “opposite the Jezreel Valley facing the plain near Dothan”—to “occupy the mountain ascents (τὰς ἀναβάσεις τῆς ὄρεινῆς) because they were the entrance to Judea.” At 3:9–10, furthermore, the author writes that the Jezreel Valley is “opposite the great ridge of Judea.” The territory defended by the Jews at 4:6 also includes “all the territory of Samaria” which appears, given the placement of Judea’s northern boundary at the Jezreel valley, to be considered a sub-division of Judea.

Scholars have advanced several potential explanations for these unusual border changes. Some see the apparent annexation of Samaria as a simple expression of Jewish triumphalism in the wake of the conquest of the region by the Hasmonean high priest John Hyrcanus.¹³ While this may partly explain Judea’s enlarged borders in *Judith*, it is curious that other territories conquered by John Hyrcanus (in particular coastal and lowland regions) are not included within the expanded Jewish territory. Others argue that these boundaries are intended to suggest that the narrative is taking place before the conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the late eighth century BCE.¹⁴ This would not, however, account for the specific extension of the boundaries of Judea to

12 Roitman, “This People”; Venter, “Ammonite Achior.”

13 Wills, *Judith*, 206; see also Moore, *Judith*, 67–70.

14 Gera, *Judith*, 32.

include Samaria, which was not a feature of pre-Assyrian cultural geography. Joosten, on the other hand, suggests that the unusual boundaries are evidence that the author was not, in fact, based in Palestine, and therefore had a limited understanding of the region's cultural geography.¹⁵ This hypothesis that Judith was produced in the diaspora, however, has not been widely accepted by scholars, who have pointed out that the text appears to directly reflect events in Hasmonean Palestine and has no obvious interest in the priorities of diaspora Jews.¹⁶

There is an alternative explanation which would account for this redefinition: that the author is defining the borders of Judea as coterminous with the Judean and Samaritan hill country, thereby firmly defining the Jews as a "mountain people." Not only does this make the most sense of Judea's unusual geographical boundaries in Judith, but it directly complements the repeated insistence of the text's major characters that the Jews are a "people who inhabit the hill country." This represents a distinct evolution of pre-existing ideas about Jewish territory. On the one hand, the belief that Israel includes a "hill country" or is part of a sequence of "hill countries" is present in numerous earlier Jewish texts. In Joshua, multiple references are made to the "hill country" (which is typically rendered as ὄρεινή, the same word used frequently in LXX Judith).¹⁷ Joshua and other texts also refer to the "hill country of Judea,"¹⁸ the "hill country of Ephraim", i.e., Samaria,¹⁹ and the "hill country of Samaria."²⁰ The Septuagint usually translates these literally, with "hill country" (Hebrew הַר which can also simply mean "mountain") rendered directly as ὄρος. On the other hand, the re-definition of the hill country as being *the* territory of the Jews, instead of an ill-defined region within it, is a striking innovation of this text which is not paralleled in earlier works.

All this begs the question: why did the author of Judith seek to characterise the Jews in this way? I believe that this issue is best addressed by asking another, more fundamental question: what did the idea of a "mountain people" evoke to educated audiences in Hasmonean Judea? In the Greek tradition of environmental determinism described above, the inhabitants of mountainous regions were typically characterised as physically powerful, aggressive, and militaristic. At *Airs, Waters, Places* 24, for example, the author writes:

15 Joosten, "Original Language," 170.

16 Gera, *Judith*, 94–97.

17 Josh 2:16; 9:1; 10:6; 11:2; 15:48, etc.

18 Josh 11:21; 20:7; 21:11; 2 Chr 27:4.

19 Josh 17:15; 20:7, Judg 2:9; 17:1; 18:2; 1 Sam 1:1, and in many other places, particularly in the books of the so-called Deuteronomistic History.

20 Amos 4:1; 6:1.

Those who live in a mountainous, rugged, elevated, and well-watered country, where the changes of the seasons bring about great differences, are likely to have large bodies, and are naturally well adapted for hardship and courage, and possess not a little fierceness and savagery.

The harshness of hill countries, the author claims, produces a strong, brave, and fierce population. A similar attitude can be seen in the final passage of Herodotus' *Histories*, in which the Persians suggest to Cyrus that they should move from the bleak mountains of Persia and into a more comfortable country. He responds that they would become slaves if they did, "for soft people tend to come from soft countries." The Persians are persuaded and decide to remain in Persia, since "they chose to rule in a poor country rather than to be slaves to others sowing flat lands (πεδιάδα)."

Similar ideas appear in texts post-dating Judith. The first-century geographer Strabo, in a discussion of European geography, writes:

The continent is favoured in this respect: it is interspersed with mountains and plains, so that everywhere agricultural, civilised people live alongside the warlike ... Therefore [Europe] is self-sufficient both in war [and peace]. For it has a plentiful warlike population, as well as a population suited to working the land and holding the cities together.²¹

Strabo evidently believes, as is even clearer from the full passage, that mountainous regions are naturally inhabited by warrior races. There are numerous occasions when Strabo identifies specific examples of this tendency, as compiled by Pierre Briant in his 1982 study of pastoralism in the Middle East.²² There is also a moral dimension to the mountains stereotype I have described. In her influential study of the people of the Appenines, Emma Dench explored the tension between depictions of mountain communities as rough and uncivilised on the one hand, and tough and morally upright on the other. Livy's description of the Sabines as "mountain-dwellers and rustics" (*montani atque agrestes*; 11.13), for instance, is clearly meant pejoratively. Yet there are indications in numerous Latin texts that the mountains were imagined to be an ideal theatre for producing masculine, moral men: from Cato's upbringing among

21 Strabo, *Geogr.* 2.5.26. While passages such as this frequently describe territories as a patchwork of mountains and lowlands, it is striking that the author of Judith overwhelmingly emphasises the mountainous character of Judea.

22 Briant, *Etat et pasteurs*, 13. The other Strabo passages Briant identifies are *Geogr.* 11.10.2; 15.3.1; and 16.1.18.

“Sabine rocks” to Horace’s idealised “masculine descendants of rustic soldiers” who farmed with “Sabellian [Sabine] hoes” amid the “mountain shadows.”²³ Dench argues that this ambiguity is comparable to the general Roman ambivalence towards “rustici.”²⁴

There are good reasons to believe that the author of Judith was familiar with Greek historiography. Several scholars have pointed out, for instance, similarities between the presentation of locations and characters in Judith and Herodotus’ *Histories*.²⁵ Jeremy Corley has identified numerous additional resonances of Greek historiography in Judith.²⁶ The author of Judith also deploys some strikingly Hellenic imagery, such as “titans” and “giants” (16:6–10). As such, it is likely that the author of Judith was familiar with the Greek mountain stereotypes outlined above (excluding, of course, those specific to later texts).

The book of Judith also emerged from a broadly Near Eastern, and specifically Jewish, literary tradition. It is possible to detect similar themes in ancient Mesopotamian art and literature, though admittedly there is much less evidence of the kinds of developed environmental determinism which we find in Greco-Roman literature. In particular, mountainous environments are connected to “wild” individuals or peoples. The late-third- or early-second-millennium Sumerian poem *The Marriage of Martu*, for instance, appears to describe a savage community living in the mountains and foothills. The community is portrayed as ignorant of culture, civilization, and proper religious practice, but also highly physical and able to endure their harsh environment.²⁷ In her excellent study of the history of the ancient inhabitants of the Zagros Mountains, Silvia Balatti has assembled numerous Assyrian sources describing mountain peoples, who are characterised as dangerous, threatening, and cruel. In the eighth-century Assyrian text *Letter to the God Ashur*, produced by Sargon II of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, “highlander” is applied to various characters as part of lists of insults designed to illustrate a figure’s impiety, harshness, and cruelty. Balatti also shows that dwelling in the mountains also implies rebelliousness and natural strength in Assyrian literature. King Maniye of Ukku, for instance, is called an “insubmissive mountain dweller” in the early-seventh-century BCE *Sennacherib’s Annals*, while the desert and mountain-dwelling Medes of Dast-e Kavir are regularly described as “dannuti,”

23 Cato *ORF* (4) no. 8, 128; Horace, *Carm.* 3.6.37–44.

24 Dench, *Barbarians*, 126–27.

25 The most widely accepted parallels between Herodotus’ *Histories* and Judith are between Thermopylae and Xerxes in the former and Bethulia and Holofernes in the latter, respectively. See Caponigro, “Holding Tale”; Corley, “Imitation,” 24.

26 Corley, “Imitation.”

27 Mobley, “Wild Man.”

a word which implies fierceness and strength.²⁸ She adds that this stereotype is also reflected in depictions of mountain people in art from a wide range of periods. In various Assyrian reliefs, for instance, mountain peoples are depicted as having long hair and wearing the skins of wild animals, a characteristic of barbarism and savagery. In Neo-Babylonian texts, the mountain people are presented as a horde of savages sent by the gods to wreak havoc on the civilised lowlands.²⁹

The concept of the fierce mountain savage also permeated the Hebrew Bible. Mobley has argued that Elijah is an example of “the wild man as shaman.” In addition to his shaggy hair, a key aspect of this characterisation is that he travels to Mount Horeb (ἔως ὄρους Χωρηβ in the Septuagint) and lives in a cave. Subsequently, Yahweh instructs him to stand out on the mountain where he is compelled to endure extreme winds, earthquakes, and fires. Mobley also considers the figure of Samson at length, arguing that his long hair, aggression, physical strength, and command of animals mark him out as a wild man in the Mesopotamian tradition.³⁰ Most importantly for our purposes, he also points to Samson’s choice to live in a rock crevice as an aspect of his savage characterisation. The author notes that, after slaughtering numerous Philistines, “he went down and lived in a cave in the rock of Etam.”³¹ A later Jewish text which plays upon this trope is 2 Maccabees, describing at 5:27 how Judas Maccabee “retreated into the wilderness and lived like beasts in the mountains” (εἰς τὴν ἔρημον θηρίων τρόπον ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν διέζῃ) to escape the oppression of the harsh Seleucid administration.

The extraordinarily long-lived cross-cultural trope of hardy mountain peoples may partly be a consequence of the substantial impact that mountains had on the dynamics of ancient warfare and imperialism. Mountains are repeatedly described as defensible strategic redoubts and places of refuge for the Jewish people. In Joshua, Israelite spies go “to the mountain [or hill country]” to evade the pursuing soldiers sent by the King of Jericho (Josh 2:22).³² In Judges, the Israelites used “the caves which are in the mountains, and the caverns, and the fortresses” to protect themselves against the Midianites (Judg 6:2). We can

28 Balatti, *Mountain Peoples*, 115–18. On the word “dannuti,” see Lanfranchi, “Assyrian Expansion,” 90–92.

29 Balatti, 328–38.

30 Mobley, “Wild Man,” 227–33. Elijah in the cave: 1 Kgs 19:9–12.

31 Judg 15:8.

32 Joshua is a difficult book to date, as scholars have identified features which might allow it to be placed with both the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History. Over the past fifteen years or so, however, scholars have tended to favour a postexilic date. See Dozeman, “Book of Joshua,” 271–73, for a summary of the scholarship.

see similar examples in 1 Samuel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.³³ This is also reflected throughout Judith, in which the Jews deliberately seize and defend strategic points such as passes and mountaintops (e.g., Jdt 4:3–5, 7:5). The leaders of the Edomites and Moabites present this as the standard defensive strategy of the Jews at 7:10, stating that: “This race descended from the sons of Israel does not trust in their weapons, but in the height of the mountains in which they live, for it is not easy to go up to the peaks of the mountains.” The difficulties which even large empires with vast armies and resources faced when conquering these regions perhaps made them appear unconquerable, and their inhabitants seem exceptionally warlike and strong.

Ultimately, the book of Judith’s insistence that the Jews are a “mountain people” would have had specific and powerful resonances for ancient readers. As the examples I have discussed indicate, there was a certain ambiguity in both Greek and Near Eastern traditions about whether mountain peoples should be viewed as backward, stupid, cruel, and savage, or as resilient, strong, and admirable. The author of Judith, I would suggest, subtly explores both sides of this dichotomy in the text. On the one hand, a primary purpose of the mountain characterization of the Jews in Judith is to emphasise broader themes about the Jews’ ability to show inspirational courage and to militarily triumph over seemingly insurmountable odds. On the other hand, the author of Judith also delicately explores the darker side of the mountain stereotype by characterizing the Jews as having the capacity for extreme brutality and violence in the face of an alien incursion.

This ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that this theme is primarily explored in the speech of Achior, rather than Judith herself. As a sympathetic outsider, Achior is able to present an apparently less polemical history of the Israelites which emphasises their uncompromising piety and martial character. Furthermore, his place as an advisor to Holofernes allows him to analyse the Israelites from the perspective of a would-be conqueror, and reach troubling conclusions about the real possibility of a humiliating defeat for the Israelites. The scoffing dismissal of his concerns by his colleagues, and his ultimate dramatic vindication, serves both to underline Achior’s arguments and emphasise that caution and admiration are the appropriate sentiments which outsiders should have about the Jewish people.

Judith herself, in contrast to the ineffectual community leaders she outshines, perfectly fulfils the complex ideal of the “noble mountain savage.” When she is introduced, she is described as living in a tent on top of her house and dressing only in sackcloth (Jdt 8:5). While this is presented as a consequence

33 1 Sam 13:6; 22:1; 23:14, 29; 24:1–3; Jer 4:29; Ezek 7:16.

of her widowhood, this unusual detail also has the effect of giving Judith the costume and living habits typical of a “savage.” Furthermore, in order to break the siege, she acts with extraordinary courage, cunning, and brutality, sneaking into the enemy camp, seducing the enemy general, and sawing his head off. That she discards her sackcloth and wears the finest clothes and jewellery to accomplish her deception is ironic: even as she wears the seductive clothes of an elite woman, she is capable of decapitating an Assyrian general, thereby preserving and reaffirming her characterisation as brutal and deadly. This irony is made explicit at 16:9: “Her sandal caught his eye, and her beauty captured his mind, and her short sword passed through his neck.”

The fact that Judith is a woman does not undercut this message at all. On the contrary, the fact that even a young Jewish woman, as opposed to a man of fighting age, could accomplish these, underscores the message.

The mighty [Holofernes] did not fall at the hands of the young men, the sons of the Titans did not slay him, nor did tall Giants set upon him, but Judith the daughter of Merari paralysed him in her beauty ... The Persians shuddered at her daring, and the Medes were intimidated by her courage.

Judith's actions serve not only to save the Israelites from conquest, but also to restore them to their true “mountainous” nature: savage, ruthless, and capable of terrorising their enemies. This is foreshadowed in chapter 9, where she recalls the brutality with which the Israelites of old avenged the rape of Dinah by the Shechemites.³⁴ The Israelites of Judith's time enthusiastically re-embody this character in chapter 15. The author claims that when the army of Holofernes heard about Judith's actions “fear and trembling fell upon them” and they “fled through every path of the plain and the hill country.” This prompts the Jewish leader Uzziah to mobilise the Israelites, who pursue the enemy army and slaughter as many as they can catch, before taking thirty days to plunder the Assyrian camp of all its goods (15:11).

In this article, I have argued that the book of Judith consciously presents the Jews as a mountain people. The author develops this theme through numerous explicit statements by prominent characters, and by redefining the boundaries of Judea to be coterminous with the central Palestinian hill country. I have argued that this theme is used by the author to evoke stereotypes about the strength and ferocity of “mountain people” in Near Eastern art and, in particular, the Greek tradition of environmental determinism. Ultimately, I have sought to draw attention to the importance of the mountains in Judith,

34 A reference to Gen 34.

which I believe play an important role in the text's unique discourse on Jewish ethnic identity.

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