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Jewish Female Military Leadership Erased:

The Evolution of Shelamzion Alexandra and Judith's Representations from Antiquity until Today

Abstract

La reine hasmonéenne Shelamzion Alexandra et la figure biblique de Judith incarnent les évolutions du modèle juif du pouvoir féminin à la période hellénistique. À partir de l'époque romaine, les réceptions juives et chrétiennes de ces deux personnages féminins juifs, notamment au sein des milieux rabbiniques et ecclésiastiques, visent à faire disparaître toute trace de leur agentivité militaire afin de les transformer en (contre)-modèles du conservatisme social. Le pouvoir monarchique féminin incarné par Shelamzion est jugé contre-nature et érigé en cause de la perte d'indépendance politique de la Judée, tandis que la cause pour laquelle s'est battue Judith est réduite à la seule défense de sa chasteté. Cet effacement, qui se traduit notamment par l'introduction à leurs côtés de tuteurs masculins, se poursuit dans la littérature médiévale. Ce n'est que dans les années 2000 que le rôle historique de Shelamzion et la véritable portée de l'histoire de Judith ont été réévaluées par les chercheuses. Toutefois, la majorité des réinterprétations de ces deux personnages continuent à privilégier leur rapport aux hommes, y compris à Jésus dans la théologie et la fiction chrétiennes.

When asked about historical female military leaders from European and Mediterranean Ancient History, the names of Cleopatra VII, Boudicca and Septimia Zenobia, who fought against the Romans in 31 BCE, 60/61 CE and 272 CE respectively, will probably come to most people's minds. Those with a classicist background may know of the two Carian Artemisias, Artemisia I who fought with the Achaemenids against the Greek coalition at the battle of Salamis (480 BCE) and Artemisia II who conquered Rhodes after a naval battle (353/351 BCE). Aficionados of Ptolemaic Egypt will undoubtedly be familiar with queens Cleopatra III, who waged war on her son for 15 years (116–101 BCE), and Cleopatra V, who stood against the Armenian king Tigranes the Great in 69 BCE.¹ Romanists may also speak of

Fulvia, the wife of Mark Antony: she went into battle against Octavian – soon to be the emperor Augustus – during the Perusine war (41–40 BCE). In comparison, considerably fewer have heard of Shelamzion Alexandra who ruled Judea during the first half of the 1st century BCE. A look at the 2006 historical encyclopedia of *Women and War* confirms this feeling: Cleopatra VII, Boudicca, Zenobia, Artemisia I and Fulvia all have dedicated entries as “military leaders.”² However, Shelamzion is completely absent, not even featured in the “Jewish Women of Antiquity and War” section which only mentions Biblical characters.³ In a 2015 article for the website *TheTorah.com*, Mika Ahuvia referred to her as a “forgotten queen” while, in 2018, Kenneth Atkinson wrote about “The Salome No One Knows.”⁴ In contrast, Judith (literally “the Jewish woman”), a well-known fictional character whose story was written sometimes between 161 and 63 BCE, does appear in said *Encyclopedia*.⁵ She is famous for cutting off the head of her enemy, a scene often depicted in Western Art.⁶ However, portrayals of Judith’s rarely underline her role as a military leader, despite its prominence in the original eponymous book.

In this paper, I will review all the available information on both Shelamzion Alexandra and Judith’s military role, before pointing out the possible connections between the historical woman and the Biblical female figure. I will then show how, soon after the composition of the *Book of Judith* and the death of Shelamzion Alexandra, their military role was reduced until complete erasure. It remained forgotten by academics until recent historiographical trends renewed interest for women’s participation in war.

1. Shelamzion Alexandra: The Long-Lasting “Warrior Monarch” of Hellenistic Judaea⁷

In the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt that shook off the Seleucid rule, a Jewish monarchy was established in 142/1 BCE in Judea under the Hasmonean dynasty, descended from the victorious Maccabees. The Hasmonean realm endured until the Roman conquest by Pompey in 63 BCE, followed by the Herodian takeover of Judea c. 40 BCE. Shelamzion Alexandra was queen of Judea from 103 until 67 BCE, with her reign made-up of two successive phases. Between 103 and 76, she was the consort of King Alexander Jannaeus. When he died, her husband bequeathed his kingdom to her, and she thereafter reigned in her own right until she died in 67.⁸ A woman inheriting the throne was not a first in the Hasmonean kingdom: in 104 BCE, John Hyrcanus, Jannaeus’ father, had also left his widow in charge. However, she could not hold onto power and was overthrown by their son Aristobulus.⁹ Overall, Shelamzion

Alexandra held monarchic power during 36 of the 79 years of the independent Hasmonean rule. Most of the available information on this period was transmitted by the Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who wrote in Greek between 70 and 100 CE. Josephus used earlier sources, mainly the works of Nicholas of Damascus, a Greek historian from Syria who was part of the Herodian court during the late 1st century BCE. Josephus wrote – or at least published – in Greek; he referred to the “queen” (*basileia* or *basilissa*) by her name in this language, Alexandra. Nevertheless, most ruling Hasmoneans used two names, a Greek one as well as a Semitic one in either Hebrew or Aramaic.¹⁰ Alexandra’s Aramaic name was recorded in contemporary historical chronicles written by the Jewish community settled at Qumran and included in the “Dead Sea scrolls.”¹¹ In those documents, she is called Shelamzion, which means “peace” or “perfection of Zion.” “Shelamzion” should not be confused with the shorter “Salome”, a name later born by several Herodian women, although many scholars still refer to the queen as “Salome Alexandra”, deeming the two Semitic names interchangeable.¹² In addition to textual evidence, a seal impression from a signet ring, first published in 1998,¹³ was recently attributed to the queen. Next to an anchor, a cornucopia and a trident, often-used symbols of Hasmonean power respectively alluding to victories over the Seleucids, prosperity and rule over the sea, the Greek inscription can mean “from Alexandra” (ALEXANDRAS) if read in zigzag – a common way of writing at the time – from top-left to bottom-right.¹⁴

Her predecessors had considerably enlarged their territories; in addition to Judea, Shelamzion’s rule extended over all the areas located around the sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, including Iturea, Gaulanitis, Galilee, Samaria, Idumea, Perea, most Greek cities of the famed Decapolis as well as portions of the Mediterranean coast. Her personal reign coincided with the maximum territorial extension of the Hasmonean realm (Illustration 1).



Illustration 1: Shelamzion’s realm and main military campaigns

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Josephus’s descriptions of Alexandra’s reign give us an insight into her military deeds. According to his *Jewish Antiquities* account, the queen was with her husband in 76 BCE when he died on the battlefield while besieging Ragaba, a fortress held by Gerasa (nowadays Jerash in Jordan). Josephus’s narrative clearly states that it was Shelamzion who conquered the fortress.¹⁵ However, this episode was not included in Josephus’s earlier work entitled *The Jewish War*, where the account of Alexandra’s reign is only a prelude to the main story and thus much shorter. The mention of Alexandra’s conquest in the *Jewish Antiquities* is

embedded in a narrative about the queen and her husband which is also found in Babylonian Talmud and considered fictional by prominent scholars.¹⁶

Nevertheless, after she became the sole ruler, the queen reformed the army, established garrisons, and ordered a military expedition in Iturea:

“She proved, however, to be a wonderful administrator in larger affairs, and, by continual recruiting doubled her army, besides collecting a considerable body of foreign troops; so that she not only strengthened her own nation, but became a formidable foe to foreign potentates [...]. Alexandra sent an army to Damascus, on the pretext of the constant pressure put upon that city by Ptolemy.”¹⁷

Additionally, Shelamzion successfully negotiated with Tigranes II, the Artaxiad king of Armenia (72–69 BCE), who had by this time conquered all neighboring territories. By doing so, the queen prevented the invasion of her realm:

“By means of treaties and presents, she won over Tigranes, king of Armenia, who was seated before Ptolemais [nowadays Akko in Israel].”¹⁸

According to Josephus, Shelamzion Alexandra was a strong and popular monarch, who

“had won the affections (*eunoia*) of the populace [...]. This woman firmly held the reins of government, thanks to her reputation for piety (*eusebeia*). She was, indeed, the very strictest observer of the national traditions and would deprive of office any offenders against the sacred laws.”¹⁹

The connection between Alexandra’s military success and her piety is reminiscent of Judith, to whom we will now turn.

2. *The Book of Judith*: A Hellenistic Take on Biblical Female Warriors

The Book of Judith is a Jewish Apocrypha, probably written during the Hasmonean period; the earliest version known to us is in Greek.²⁰ The narrative is set during the reign of the neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, who lived in the 6th century BCE. However, despite this

historical detail, the story is entirely fictional. It showcases the invasion of the southern Levant by the “Assyrian” army of Nebuchadnezzar, led by the general Holofernes, and the siege of the probably fictional town of Bethulia. Fearing famine, Bethulia’s officials and Elders want to surrender; they are scolded by the pious widow Judith, who takes it upon herself to lift the siege by going to Holofernes’s encampment with her maid. Once there, she waits for Holofernes to be drunk, cuts off his head and brings it back to her town. Judith then directs the victorious military assault on the enemy’s soldiers and leads the following celebrations.

Judith is defined as God’s instrument, a status which gave her the legitimacy to act as a military leader and is presented as the reason for her ultimate success. From her first mention in the narrative, Judith is described as a religious ascetic. She never stopped performing mourning rituals after the death of her husband, continuing to sleep outside and to wear mourning apparel; she is also constantly fasting except on auspicious days of the Jewish festive calendar.²¹ Judith displays a religious zeal going far beyond Biblical prescriptions: although she has not contracted any Biblical impurity, she still purifies herself everyday by immersing in running water, so that she can eat her daily food in a state of ritual purity.²² Such behavior was not unheard of: movements advocating for an extension of the scope of Biblical ritual purity based on oral traditions were prominent in Late Hellenistic and Early Roman Judaism.²³ The *Book*’s obvious regard for such practices prompted scholars to suggest that it may have been written by adherents of said movements, either the Essenes or some Pharisaic group like the *haberim* (literally “fellows”) described in Talmudic literature.²⁴ Judith’s repute as an unfailingly pious woman enabled her to claim authority from the town’s Elders.²⁵ Decided to “accomplish a deed”, she prays to God to grant her people victory “by the hand of a female”²⁶. She also prays while killing Holofernes:

“And approaching the bedpost that was near Holofernes’ head, she took down his scimitar from it, and drawing near to the bed she took hold of the hair of his head and said: ‘Strengthen me, Lord, God of Israel, in this day.’ And she struck at his neck twice with her strength and took his head from him.”²⁷

Judith’s military role does not stop with her bringing back the enemy’s head to Bethulia. Upon her return, she decides on the battle strategy and gives out detailed orders to the Jewish soldiers.

“And Judith said to them: ‘Now hear me, brothers, and take this head, and hang it upon the battlement of your wall. And it shall be, when daybreak dawns and the sun sets forth over the land, you are to take up your battle gear, each one of you, and march forth out of the city, every able man, and you shall set a leader over them, for going down to the plain to the advance guard of the sons of Assour. And you shall not go down. And taking up their armor they will go into their camp and rouse the generals of the army of Assour, and they will run together to the tent of Holofernes and will not find him, and fear will fall upon them, and they will flee from your presence. And taking pursuit you are to lay them low in their path, you and all the inhabitants of the entire territory of Israel.’”²⁸

Following Judith’s orders, the Jews gain victory: not only is the siege lifted, but the defeated Assyrians leave the area altogether. Judith’s status as God’s warrior is then recognized by the priests, the Elders, and the people.²⁹ She is given the most valuable spoils of war, all of Holofernes’s rich furniture.³⁰ The narrative concludes with the description of an elaborate military thanksgiving procession where Judith leads the soldiers wearing their military equipment. The victorious woman then gifts all the spoils of war to the Jerusalem Temple where she dedicates Holofernes’s bejeweled mosquito netting, following the Biblical model of offering the defeated enemy’s possessions as *anathemata*.³¹

Judith was not the first Biblical woman to actively take part in a military victory. In a story from what may be the oldest stratum of the Hebrew Bible – with some material traditionally dated to the 11th or 10th centuries BCE³² – two female characters, Deborah and Yael, were instrumental in the defeat of Sisera the Canaanite. In the fourth chapter of the *Book of Judges*, the prophetess and judge Deborah summons the warrior Barak and reveals to him how, where, and when to defeat Sisera. Barak brings Deborah with him on the campaign and wins the battle by following her orders.³³ When Sisera flees, he runs into another woman, Yael, who pretends she will help him hide but kills him by hammering a peg into his jaw.³⁴

While the *Book of Judges* already credited two women for both the strategic and physical suppression of an enemy host, their military roles were not left unsupervised.³⁵ Deborah’s religious and military authority was derived from her gift of prophecy.³⁶ While obeyed by Barak as God’s spokesperson, she only accompanied the army at the male warrior’s request. Deborah did not commit any actual deed by herself: it was another woman, Yael, who exerted physical violence after she found herself on Sisera’s path. Yael seized the opportunity to suppress him using common tools. At the end of the narrative, three people are credited for

the victory: Deborah, Barak, and Yael. The account of Deborah and Yael's involvement in the victory illustrates the Hebrew Bible definition of the ideal woman: "both active (resourceful) and passive (accepting male authority)."³⁷ The *Book of Judith*, written around 800 years later, displays some significant differences with this Biblical precedent.

3. Judith: A Fictional Double of Shelamzion Alexandra?

Judith's military authority and ultimate success did depend on religious criteria, but, unlike Deborah, God did not explicitly speak to her to specify how it would be achieved. On the contrary, only when tricking Holofernes did Judith pretend to know the word of God.³⁸ Her military strategy was devised out of her personal knowledge and often-noted "intelligence" (*sunesis*).³⁹ Indeed, while prophets and prophetesses were a prominent feature of the Hebrew Bible, they became rarer in Jewish Hellenistic literature and were often associated with more relatable figures who prevailed solely because of their personal skills and piety. This shift is illustrated by the composition history of the *Book of Daniel*, where a chapter about Susanna, a pious woman wrongly accused of fornication and saved by divine intervention, was added to the prophet's story during the Hellenistic period.⁴⁰ The circumstances of the enemy's death also considerably differ between *Judges* and *Judith*. While Yael caught Sisera when he was running toward her tent, Judith purposefully left her town to reach Holofernes. Like Yael, she tricked the enemy general into laying down his guard, but she killed him with his own weapon, a sword of the scimitar-type, following a Biblical prescription on the execution of enemies.⁴¹ Judith's military orders were followed by her townsmen because she had already demonstrated her courage and managed to kill the enemy general, which made her into a divinely sanctioned warrior. At the end of the story, Judith is the only person credited for the victory: the field general who was to lead the Jewish soldiers on the battlefield remains anonymous and his actions unknown.⁴² Judith is also the only one to take charge of the narrative: she alone sings the "Song of praise" which recounts her victory, whereas in the fifth chapter of the *Book of Judges*, Barak sang alongside Deborah.⁴³ These narrative features show how the *Book of Judith* was devised as a Hellenistic update of the Biblical model of female military agency.⁴⁴

The *Book's* focus on the female piety as a source of military power, as well as the portrayal of its heroine as Israel's sole savior, have prompted scholars to suggest that Judith's character may have been created as a fictional counterpart of Shelamzion Alexandra. This hypothesis

was initially put forth by Tal Ilan, who, in 1999, argued that all three Hellenistic Jewish Apocrypha centered on women – namely the Greek version of the *Book of Esther*, the *Book of Judith* and the story of Susanna included in the Greek version of the *Book of Daniel* – were all written as propaganda for Shelamzion Alexandra.⁴⁵ Following her lead, Gabriele Boccaccini has interpreted the *Book of Judith* as a novelization of Tigranes II's initial intent to conquer Judea, with Nebuchadnezzar as a fictional stand-in for the king of Armenia.⁴⁶ The writers would have transformed Shelamzion's peaceful negotiations into a military victory drawing on her otherwise documented military policies to amplify her success. Boccaccini suggested that the *Book* may have been composed for the queen's death, possibly to serve as her funeral eulogy, since it praises her achievements and provides religious legitimization for her military and political leadership. Such a eulogy, which put Judith on equal footing with the great Biblical leaders, would have stood in stark contrast with the Biblical precedent of the usurper queen Athaliah, the only Israelite woman said to have ruled alone before Shelamzion.⁴⁷ While female military agency flourished in both history and literature during the Hellenistic period, from the Roman period onwards, Judith and Alexandra saw their military credentials progressively challenged, be it in Jewish or Christian reception.

4. Judith's Military Leadership Expunged from the Bible, Patristic Literature, and Medieval Storytelling

Since no ancient Hebrew version of the *Book of Judith* has survived, scholars still disagree on its original language.⁴⁸ While it was still widely read by Jews in the 4th century CE, whether in Greek, in Latin or in "Chaldean" – i.e. either in Hebrew, Aramaic or Syriac⁴⁹ – this text was not included in the Jewish canon (in Hebrew, *tanakh*) progressively defined from the 1st century CE onwards.⁵⁰ The Greek *Book of Judith* can be found in most 4th century Christian Biblical *codices* and is consequently canonical for Orthodox churches. Its continued relevance for Jewish communities prompted Jerome to translate it into Latin: it thus became part of the Vulgate, which rendered it canonical for Catholics. As such, the *Book of Judith* belongs to the category of Deuterocanonical books: though written by Jews, they are included in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but not in the Jewish one.

Among the differences between Jerome's Latin version and the Old Greek one, Judith's speech to the soldiers organizing the assault on Holofernes's camp is shortened.⁵¹ Her orders to appoint a battle leader and to attack the enemy vanguard were cut from the Vulgate.

Additionally, while her plans explicitly included “the inhabitants of the entire territory of Israel” in Greek, only her townsmen are mentioned in the Latin version of her speech.⁵² Jerome took those liberties because, as he wrote in 399, he interpreted Judith’s character as an allegory, “a type for the Church which cuts off the head of the devil.”⁵³ Such effacement of Judith’s military authority and deeds is not limited to the Biblical text itself. Already in early Christian literature, other episodes of Judith’s story were altered. In his *Psychomachia*, the Latin poet Prudentius, who, in the early 5th century CE, wrote the first allegorical work of European Literature, gave a rather graphic description of “the severed head of Holofernes soak[ing] his Assyrian chamber with his lustful blood”. However, in his retelling of Judith’s story, when the heroine, “woman as she was, won a famous victory over the foe”, she was not defending her town or Israel against foreign invasion, but only her own chastity from “the lecherous captain’s [...] unclean passion.” To further his point, and in clear contradiction with the Biblical narrative which introduces Judith as a widow, Prudentius transformed her into an allegory of “maidenly chastity” (*virgo pudicitia*) threatened by “Sodomite lust” (*sodomita libido*).⁵⁴

The tendency to modify Judith’s characteristics is not restricted to allegorical works. Christian writers in general sought to make her fit with what they considered proper social norms by having her conform to more traditional Biblical female roles. Already in the late 1st century CE, Clement of Rome, the first Christian author to mention Judith, stated that she asked the Elders for their permission to enter to foreigners’ encampment whereas in the Biblical narrative, she only informed them of her intent.⁵⁵ The *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, an authoritative collection of works attributed to the apostles but written down c. 380 in Syria, included Judith in a list of prophetesses, associating her with the three women who are explicitly given such function in the Hebrew Bible.

“Women also have prophesied: of old, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron; and, after her, Deborah; and, after these, Huldah and Judith; the former under Josiah, the latter under Darius.”⁵⁶

This text specifies that while those women had special abilities, they “were not elated against their husbands (*ouk epêrthêsan kata tôn andrôn autai*) but preserved their own measures”. When trying to justify social conservatism by using Biblical models, the – unknown – writers

of this normative collection did not hesitate to give husbands to both Miriam and Judith even though, according to the Bible, neither of them had one when they acted as leaders.⁵⁷ Outside of the Biblical text itself, there is no Ancient Jewish reception of Judith's story:⁵⁸ she does not appear in any currently known Jewish document until the 10th century at the earliest.⁵⁹ From this time onwards, many versions of her story have been written in Hebrew. Those medieval and early modern narratives (in Hebrew, *midrashim*) fall into two main categories:⁶⁰ a first group, made up of relatively long texts, closely follows Jerome's version; the second group is made up of shorter texts whose contents are much more varied, sometimes significantly departing from the Deuterocanonical book. The origin of the shorter *midrashim* is heavily debated: while it cannot be proved, some scholars consider them to reflect lost ancient Jewish versions of Judith's story.⁶¹ In those versions, as Deborah Levine Gera put it, Judith "is often cast as a more vulnerable and dependent figure, a lesser heroine."⁶² Indeed, like in Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, Judith is sometimes introduced in Hebrew as a *naarah*, "a younger, unmarried woman, rather than a wealthy and independent widow."⁶³ While never given the status of a prophetess, she is often introduced as the daughter of prophets. Her role in the story is thus made dependent on her male relatives:⁶⁴ when tricking Holofernes, she claims that she came to him because her forefathers had prophesied his victory.⁶⁵ Her daily immersions are not ascribed to a zealous custom of eating in a state of ritual purity. On the contrary, all the shorter versions specify, sometimes in explicit terms, that Judith was in fact menstruating and thus impure when she went to the enemy camp; consequently, she was only conforming to Biblical legislation when bathing to restore her purity.⁶⁶ In none of these accounts does Judith scold the town Elders nor is she officially recognized by them as their saviour. Her military role is completely erased; there is no final military procession for her to lead, and she is not given any spoils of war even when those are mentioned.⁶⁷ Rather, her actions are considered suspect by her townsmen, who sometimes object to her leaving by calling her a prostitute and accusing her of sleeping with the enemy.⁶⁸ When she comes back with the severed head of Holofernes, the guardsmen often disbelieve her and refuse to let her in until her tale is confirmed another character, who, even though he used to be an enemy, is deemed more trustworthy because he is a man.⁶⁹ Only in one *midrash* does she receive explicit praise for her actions.⁷⁰ Yet even when "Judith's help is not acknowledged in any way," she is sometimes given special status, but in strict keeping with her canonical counterparts.⁷¹ In the *Scroll of Judith* – so named after the canonical *Scroll of Esther* – she becomes a queen and a judge, which puts her on a similar status with Esther

and Deborah respectively; a liturgical hymn compares her to Yael.⁷² Some rewritings of Judith's story embed her character and actions in the context of the historical Maccabean revolt, triggered by the priest Mattathias and led by his son Judas in the 160's BCE. Those events are recounted in two other Deuterocanonical books, the *First* and *Second Books of Maccabees*. In one of the medieval *midrashim*, Judith is introduced as Mattathias's own daughter, thus putting her actions under male supervision.⁷³

Both Jewish and Christian interpretations of Judith completely erased her military leadership to make her fit with what they deemed to be normative female roles.⁷⁴ While the story of her triumph over Holofernes has constantly been retold, reinterpreted, and appropriated in multiple historical contexts, Judith's military capacity has not often been the focus of attention, except in a handful of French plays from the 18th and early 20th century.⁷⁵ While the motive of Judith protecting herself from rape by killing her assailant has been an inspiration in feminist art, her military leadership has not been a major feature of the feminist interpretation of the *Book*.⁷⁶ Rather, many feminist commentators interpret Judith as a radically misogynistic character, guilty of perpetuating a patriarchal worldview.⁷⁷

5. Shelamzion Alexandra under Male Tutelage in Ancient and Early Medieval Jewish Tradition

Flavius Josephus, who wrote some 150 years after Alexandra's death, gave strangely contradictory appraisals of her reign.⁷⁸ His opinion of her seemingly worsened between his two major works, *The Jewish War*, penned in the 70's CE, and the *Jewish Antiquities*, written about twenty years later. Moreover, inconsistencies occur within each account of her reign, some of which may be attributed to the combination of diverse source material. In the *Jewish War*, his outlook on the queen was mainly positive, calling her "a wonderful administrator in larger affairs." However, according to him, Alexandra did not actually rule alone.

"Beside Alexandra, and growing as she grew, grew up besides into her power, the Pharisees, a body of Jews with the reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observances of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws. To them, being herself intensely religious, she listened with too great deference; while they, gradually taking advantage of an ingenuous woman, became at length the real administrators of the state, at liberty to banish and to recall, to loose and to bind, whom they would. In short, the enjoyments of royal authority were

theirs; its expenses and burthens fell to Alexandra. [...] If she ruled the nation, the Pharisees ruled her.”⁷⁹

By the time he became an historian, Josephus identified as a Pharisee.⁸⁰ Thus, his statement about Alexandra’s relationship with the Pharisees is not a critique of them, but a commentary on the queen; he means to convey that she was only a figurehead, not really making any decisions regarding the realm herself. However, in the *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus contradicted his previous assessment by reporting that Alexandra refused to grant the Pharisees the head of their enemies, the Sadducees, whom she finally trusted with the defense of her fortresses.⁸¹ Josephus framed those events so they would shed negative light on the queen and criticized her indecisiveness, but he could not disguise the fact that in this instance, she was not swayed by the Pharisees and asserted her power regarding such military matters as garrisoning. Nevertheless, in the *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus gives an explicitly negative account of the queen’s reign.

“She was a woman who showed none of the weakness (*asthenês*) of her sex; for being one of those inordinately desirous of the power to rule, she showed by her deeds the ability to carry out her plans, and at the same time she exposed the folly of those men who continually fail to maintain sovereign power. For she valued the present more than the future, and making everything else secondary to absolute rule, she had, on account of this, no consideration for either decency or justice. At least, matters turned out so unfortunately for her house that the sovereign power which it had acquired in the face of the greatest dangers and difficulties was not long afterward taken from it because of her desire for things unbecoming a woman [...] and also because she left the kingdom without anyone who had their interests at heart. And even after her death she caused the palace to be filled with misfortunes and disturbances which arose from the public measures taken during her lifetime.”⁸²

Here, Josephus deems female rule unnatural, especially when a woman has two adult sons:⁸³ he also blames the queen for the fall of the Hasmonean dynasty and for the Roman conquest of Judea, even though those events took place after her death when Pompey the Great conquered all of the eastern Mediterranean (63 BCE).

While the rabbis did not know Josephus' writings, late antique Rabbinic compilations shared some source material with the 1st century CE historian.⁸⁴ In Rabbinic Literature, Shelamzion's reign is remembered as a time of unparalleled and proverbial prosperity.

“It happened in the days of Simeon ben Shetach and in the days of Queen Shelamzion that the rains descended from the nights of Sabbath to the nights of Sabbath until the wheat became like kidneys, and the barley like olive-stones, and the lentils like golden dinars.”⁸⁵

In these standardized descriptions, the queen's name – only her Aramaic one is used – is always associated with a male one. Not her husband's – who is sometimes also mentioned under his Hebrew name Yannai – but another man's, the Pharisee sage Simeon ben Shetach, whom the rabbis claimed as their predecessor. Not only did the rabbis consider that Shelamzion ruled well because she was pious and, as a result, listened to her Pharisee advisors; they invented an imaginary genealogy which made her the sister of Simeon, and thus put her under the tutelage of a specific man.⁸⁶ While some rabbinic stories do command the queen's positive influence over her husband and his actions,⁸⁷ none of them has to do with actual military matters. Rabbinic accounts make Simeon the real protagonist of Shelamzion's prosperous reign, and sometimes even suppressed her name to only credit him.⁸⁸

In the 10th century, the *Yosippon*, a Hebrew reworking of Josephus's works, was composed. Partially influenced by Byzantine chroniclers, it remained extremely influential in many Jewish circles until 19th century. Like Josephus, its anonymous author referred to Shelamzion by her Greek name, Alexandra, which he transcribed in Hebrew. According to him, the Sadducees addressed her as “holy queen” (*malkah ha-qedoshah*), an unprecedented title.⁸⁹ He also highlighted the prosperity of the realm under her rule:

“The queen ruled in peace and quiet, and there was neither adversity nor trouble in her days; and all the kings surrounding her sent offerings of gold and silver annually to the queen, all her days. There was peace and truth in the days of Alexandra.”⁹⁰

However, he intensified Josephus's ambiguity about her reign by altering some of the information and giving new explanations for certain events. He thus claimed that Jannaeus only made his wife regent until their sons reached adulthood, and shifted the blame for the

failed conquest of Damascus from the queen's son, Aristobulus II, to his mother, solely based on her gender:

“The queen, like a woman, did not know what to do [...]. In those days, Damascus rebelled, for Ptolemy, called Minaeus, rebelled there by not paying the tax to the queen as he was supposed to. The queen sent her son Aristobulus with an army of the people who supported the Pharisee masters, for the army of the Sadducees and the Hasidim was not with them; they went forth from Jerusalem and went to Damascus, returning in utter disgrace.”⁹¹

Josephus's assessment of Alexandra's reign also influenced Christian receptions of her reign, and all subsequent historiography until the 21st century.

6. Shelamzion's mistreatment from Late Antiquity until today: from a failure to a proto-Christian

In late antique Christian chronographies, the reign of Shelamzion Alexandra is sometimes altogether omitted: she is absent from Orosius' *History Against the Pagans* (416/7 CE), from John Malalas' *Chronicle* (550 CE) and from the *Chronicon Paschale* (630 CE).⁹² When she does appear, she is invariably blamed as the starting point for the “various misfortunes pressed upon the Judaeans”, as in Jerome's translation of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Chronicles*.⁹³ Even in rather positive accounts of her reign, the blame endures: she is considered responsible for the Roman conquest of Judea. In the 9th century CE, George Synkellus depicts her reign favourably, but begins by stating that from her accession to the throne “the affairs of the Jews were thrown into turmoil.” While he specifies that she was “formidable and intimidating to foreigners,” he never even broaches her military activities.⁹⁴ From the 10th century onwards, Shelamzion was seemingly forgotten for a few centuries. When she reappeared, the discussion focused on an extremely specific aspect of her biography: her argued first marriage to Aristobulus, Jannaeus' older brother. No ancient source mentions that Shelamzion had a husband before marrying Jannaeus, who was a high priest and thus was Biblically forbidden to marry a widow.⁹⁵ The hypothesis of a first marriage stems from the *Jewish Antiquities* where Josephus referred to Aristobulus' wife as Salina Alexandra.⁹⁶ Many Hasmonean women bore the Greek name Alexandra, and Josephus never wrote anything about this Salina marrying Jannaeus.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the idea that

“Salina Alexandra” and “Shelamzion Alexandra” were in fact the same person and that Shelamzion had successively married two brothers was already presented as a self-evident Guillaume Rouillé’s *La premiere partie du promptuaire des medalles des plus renomnees personnes*, published in 1553.⁹⁸ It is also argued in an early 18th century treatise on the queen by the German scholar Johann Müller.⁹⁹ Following this reconstruction, upon her first husband’s death, Alexandra would have appointed her brother-in-law Jannaeus as his successor before she married him. This reconstruction is based on the Biblical law of levirate marriage: when a married man died without children, one of his brothers from the same household was strongly encouraged to marry his widow.¹⁰⁰ Even though the claim of Shelamzion contracting a levirate marriage has been refuted by scholars who pointed out that it is only a hypothesis without any textual support, it remains pervasive in academia.¹⁰¹ Indeed, until the late 1990’s, the few publications that mentioned the queen were still mostly interested in her marital history.¹⁰² A renewal of interest for her reign came with the rise of women’s history and subsequent studies on women’s erasure from the source material, as demonstrated by the evocative title of Tal Ilan’s book: *Silencing the Queen: The literary histories of Shelamzion and other Jewish women*.¹⁰³ In 2001, Ernest Baltrusch devoted an article to Shelamzion and began by stating that such study was lacking because the queen had been mistreated by researchers out of misogyny.¹⁰⁴ However, up until that point, the queen’s military capacities were not emphasized. Indeed, as noted by Pascal Payen, feminist classicists were originally not interested in women’s potential involvement with violence, which “strengthen[ed] the censure on women’s wars.”¹⁰⁵ Only in 2012 did a (male) scholar endeavor to focus on the military aspects of the queen’s reign. In *Queen Salome: Jerusalem's warrior monarch of the first century BCE*, Kenneth Atkinson argues that the queen may have known more military successes that Josephus cared to record:¹⁰⁶

“It is clear that Josephus’ deliberate omission of important events has not only resulted in a rather bewildering historical sequence for Salome Alexandra’s reign, but actually diminishes her accomplishments.”¹⁰⁷

After reconstructing the indeed somewhat lacking diplomatic context of Shelamzion’s expedition against Damascus, Atkinson suggests that she intended to restore the city to the Nabatean king Aretas while threatening Tigranes’s advance on Ptolemais to force him into negotiations, an ultimately successful strategy. In his reassessment of Shelamzion’s military

activities, Atkinson also proposes an original solution to an old historiographical problem. As noted by many historians, the final list of conquests attributed to Jannaeus by Josephus does not fit with his otherwise lengthy and detailed account of the king's campaigns; it also differs from the list preserved by the 9th century chronographer George Synkellus.¹⁰⁸ To resolve this contradiction, Atkinson hypothesizes that Josephus' list combines both Jannaeus and Shelamzion's conquests while only crediting the king, in accordance with the historian's disregard for the queen's rule.¹⁰⁹ Although his overall argument has been met with criticism by fellow historians,¹¹⁰ it does open some new horizons about her reign.

Since 2000, Shelamzion has been the protagonist of one play and two historical novels in English, by female authors Lauri Donahue, Angela Hunt and Lauren Jacobs. The first two writers hail from the USA and the third from South Africa. Donahue's play was staged in 2003: it tells the story of a scorned queen successively married to Aristobulus and Jannaeus. The play ends soon after the conquest of Ragaba, and no further mention of the protagonist's military accomplishments is made.¹¹¹ Hunt and Jacobs, who published their novels in 2018 and 2020 respectively, are explicitly influenced by Atkinson's work and mention him in their bibliographies.¹¹² Both women come from an academic background, having degrees in Theology and Bible studies; they have written several "historical" novels about Biblical women. They also clearly identify as Christians: Hunt is an active member of the *American Christian Fiction Writers* and Jacobs is an ordained minister who used to introduce herself on her website as "a believer in the Christ, and His truth" who "base[d her] life on His precepts", before she changed her biography to only mention "God".¹¹³ In both novels, Shelamzion is mainly defined as a believer, a religious leader, and, above all, a predecessor of Christianity who anxiously waits for the Messiah and announces His coming. Hunt's novel depicts Shelamzion as a learned woman, who followed in the path of Deborah, Esther, and Yael.¹¹⁴ The book focuses on her piety and her righteousness; many pages are devoted to her study of the Torah, mainly with Simeon ben Shetach, while her military decisions are only mentioned in passing.¹¹⁵ Her first going out to the battlefield was not of her own initiative, but was suggested to her by a man, as was her accession to the throne.¹¹⁶ Shelamzion is much more of an actual warrior in Jacob's version. After studying warfare, not only did she reform the army;¹¹⁷ she also fought in armor and on horseback.¹¹⁸ However, her role as a military leader is secondary to her religious concerns. During her coronation, the queen, referred to as the "feminine face of God," promised to "follow God's truth" and led a lengthy public prayer.¹¹⁹ She is also described a prophetess: God told her about the upcoming Savior and sent her

visions of the Messiah.¹²⁰ As illustrated by those two works of fiction, contemporary Christian appropriations of Shelamzion are of a deeply theological nature, only using her military capacity as a tool to facilitate the Coming of Christ.

Since their respective stories were first put down into writing, both the Biblical Judith and the historical Shelamzion have been progressively deprived of their original agency, especially when pertaining to military matters. Judith is mostly invoked as a survivor from sexual assault who was only trying to keep herself safe, rather as a military leader. Although her military prowess was well-known, Shelamzion's military and political independence was deemed unnatural and pointed out as the reason for the later demise of the Hasmonean kingdom. During Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, both women were placed under the tutelage of male family members, who were invented when needed. Perhaps surprisingly, Judith's story has not been embraced by third-wave feminism, which remained somewhat uncomfortable with violence perpetrated by women. The recent renewal of interest for Shelamzion is still very much focused on her marital status and her perceived exoticism as a Jewish woman. Lately, she has been appropriated by Christian women writers who wish to spread to a supersessionist theology. In both cases, the taste for the sensational and the outrageous (as perceived by current moral standards) has prevailed over current academic trends focusing on the normalization of queenship and of women's participation in warfare.¹²¹ A true feminist history of Shelamzion and Judith has yet to be written.

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¹ For further information on other female military leaders during the Hellenistic period, see Pillonel 2008.

² Cook 2006: xliv (“military leaders”), 31 (Artemisia I), 74 (Boudicca), 112 (Fulvia), 123 (Cleopatra VII), and 664 (Zenobia). Cleopatra III, Cleopatra V and Artemisia II apparently suffered from their homonymy their famous relatives and were not included.

³ Cook 2006: 329–330.

⁴ Ahuvia 2016; Atkinson 2018.

⁵ Cook 2006: xxxvi and 330.

⁶ Stone 1992.

⁷ Quote taken from the title of Atkinson 2012.

⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.407: “Now although Alexander had left two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, he had bequeathed the royal power to Alexandra.” (trans. Marcus 1943).

⁹ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.71; *Jewish Antiquities* 13.302. See Liebowitz 2018.

¹⁰ Ilan 1987.

¹¹ Ilan 2001.

¹² Ilan 2006: 53–58 and 261.

¹³ Barkay 1998.

¹⁴ Finkielsztejn 2019.

¹⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.398–399 and 405.

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 22b. See Ilan 1999: 22 and Ilan and Noam 2017 (vol.1): 308–317.

- ¹⁷ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.112 and 115; see parallels in *Jewish Antiquities* 13.409–410 and 417–418.
- ¹⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.116; see parallel in *Jewish Antiquities* 13.419–421.
- ¹⁹ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.108.
- ²⁰ This chronological range is based on literary parallels and historical context. The earliest material evidence of the *Book* is a fragment dated to c. 50 BCE; see Schwartz 1946. The first complete texts are found in two 4th century Christian Biblical *codices* (*Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*).
- ²¹ *Judith* 8:5–6.
- ²² *Judith* 12:7–9; on Biblical causes of impurity, see *Leviticus* 11–17 and *Numbers* 19:11.
- ²³ On Essenes' ritual immersion before eating, see Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.129–130. On ritual purity in the Qumran community, see *Community Rule* 5.13 et 6.13–23. On Pharisees washing their hands, see *Mark* 7:1–5; *Matthew* 15:2; *Luke* 11:38. On the extension of ritual purity in Hellenistic Judaism, see Attali 2019.
- ²⁴ On Judith's composition *milieu*, see Philonenko 1996. On *haverim* and purity, see Oppenheimer 1977 and Attali 2022.
- ²⁵ *Judith* 8:32. All translations from the *Book of Judith* are taken from Pietersma and Wright 2007: 441–455.
- ²⁶ *Judith* 9:10.
- ²⁷ *Judith* 13:6–8.
- ²⁸ *Judith* 14:1–4.
- ²⁹ *Judith* 15:10.
- ³⁰ *Judith* 15:11.
- ³¹ *Judith* 15:13 and 16:19; see Berthelot 2014.
- ³² See Brettler 2002: 62–66.
- ³³ *Judges* 4:6–9.15.
- ³⁴ *Judges* 4:18.21.
- ³⁵ See Ackerman 1998.
- ³⁶ See Brenner 1985: 62–64.
- ³⁷ Klein 2003: 10.
- ³⁸ *Judith* 11:16–18.
- ³⁹ *Judith* 8:29.
- ⁴⁰ Brooke 2012: 120–128.

⁴¹ *Deuteronomy* 13:16.

⁴² *Judith* 14:2.

⁴³ Rakel 1999.

⁴⁴ Crawford 1992.

⁴⁵ Ilan 1999: 127–153.

⁴⁶ Boccaccini 2012.

⁴⁷ *2 Kings* 11:1–3 and 15:16; *2 Chronicles* 22:10–12 and 23:12–15. While analyzing how Judith is set up as an ideal leader, van Henten (1995) argued that her character was intended as criticism against the Hasmonean dynasty, but this claim is unsubstantiated.

⁴⁸ The traditional stance according to which the *Book of Judith* had been first written in Hebrew is still held by some scholars; see Gera 2014: 94–97. However, it is challenged by a series of studies on the text's vocabulary and its construction, which point to a Greek original; see for instance Caponigro 1992 and Schmitz 2010.

⁴⁹ Jerome claimed that he translated it from “Chaldean,” an adjective that can mean any Semitic language; see Gallagher 2015.

⁵⁰ On possible reasons for its exclusion, or, maybe more accurately, its non-inclusion, see Moore 1992.

⁵¹ *Judith* 14:1–5.

⁵² For a discussion of the differences between the original *Book of Judith* and Jerome's version, see Callaghan 1998: 81–85.

⁵³ Jerome, *Letter* 79 to Salvina (trans. in Schaff and Wace 1954: 168).

⁵⁴ Prudentius, *Psychomachia* 60–66, trans. in Thomson 1949: 283.

⁵⁵ Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians* 55:4–5.

⁵⁶ *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 8.2.9 (ed. by Metzger 1987: 138).

⁵⁷ The Bible does not mention a husband for Miriam. Her apparent unmarried status was already deemed problematic in some Jewish circles by Roman times: Josephus wrote that she was married to Hur (*Jewish Antiquities* 3.54; see *Exodus* 17:10–12) while Rabbinic tradition gave her Caleb for a husband (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 12a).

⁵⁸ There may have been some Jewish revisions of the *Book of Judith* in Greek; see Bogaert 2001. Several Old Latin translations of *Judith* are known, and some of them may have been made by Jews; see Bogaert 1968: 7–32 and 181–212.

⁵⁹ Judith features in a Hanukkah homily attributed to 8th century writer but its authenticity is debated; see Wacholder 1963: 257–261.

- ⁶⁰ This categorization was first proposed by Dubarle 1966. More recent attempts at classification, based on a larger corpus, propose sub-groupings of texts; see for instance Gera 2010a.
- ⁶¹ See for example Gaster 1893-1894: 156–163.
- ⁶² Gera 2015.
- ⁶³ Dubarle 1966: 104, 146, and 153; see Gera 2010b.
- ⁶⁴ Dubarle 1966: 105
- ⁶⁵ Dubarle 1966: 111, 115, 123, 129, 135, 147, 155, and 165.
- ⁶⁶ Dubarle 1966: 103, 149, 157, and 173.
- ⁶⁷ Dubarle 1966: 103 and 109.
- ⁶⁸ Dubarle, 1966: 113 and 117.
- ⁶⁹ Dubarle 1966: 109, 125, 129-131, 135-137, and 161.
- ⁷⁰ Dubarle 1966: 161.
- ⁷¹ Gera 2010b.
- ⁷² Dubarle 1966: 169.
- ⁷³ Dubarle 1966: 171.
- ⁷⁴ For an overview of this progressive erasure in Medieval and Renaissance Western literature, see Caviness 2013.
- ⁷⁵ Poirier 2004.
- ⁷⁶ For a positive feminist appraisal of Judith's violence, see Stocker 1998.
- ⁷⁷ Milne 1993.
- ⁷⁸ Liebowitz 2015.
- ⁷⁹ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 1.110–113.
- ⁸⁰ Josephus, *Life* 12.
- ⁸¹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.418.
- ⁸² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.430–423.
- ⁸³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.417.
- ⁸⁴ Ilan and Noam 2017.
- ⁸⁵ *Sifra Behochutai* 1.1. See parallel in *Leviticus Rabbah* 35.10.
- ⁸⁶ Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 48a.
- ⁸⁷ *Scroll of Fasting (Megillat Taanit)*, *scholium* to 2 Shebat (Parma manuscript).
- ⁸⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit* 23a; see Ilan 2006: 36–37.
- ⁸⁹ *Sepher Yosippon* 34 (ed. by Flusser 1978: 138-143)

- ⁹⁰ *Sepher Yosippon* 34 (trans. in Bowman 2022: 133).
- ⁹¹ *Sepher Yosippon* 34 (trans. in Bowman 2022: 134).
- ⁹² See Liebowitz 2011.
- ⁹³ Jerome's Latin translation of Eusebius of Caesarea, *Chronicles* 234F (ed. by Helm and Treu 1984: 152).
- ⁹⁴ George Synkellus, *The Chronography* (trans. in Adler and Tuffin 2002: 355–356).
- ⁹⁵ *Leviticus* 21:13–14.
- ⁹⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.320.
- ⁹⁷ On Alexandra II and Alexandra III, Shelamzion's granddaughters, see Atkinson 2012: 229–234.
- ⁹⁸ Rouillé 1553: 147.
- ⁹⁹ Müller 1711.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Deuteronomy* 25:5–10.
- ¹⁰¹ The lack of textual evidence was first pointed out by Ilan 1993. For the Levirate marriage presented as a historical fact in recent publications, see for instance Lambers-Petry 2003.
- ¹⁰² Zeitlin 1960.
- ¹⁰³ Ilan 2006.
- ¹⁰⁴ Baltrusch 2001.
- ¹⁰⁵ Payen 2015: 218.
- ¹⁰⁶ Atkinson 2012.
- ¹⁰⁷ Atkinson 2011: 21.
- ¹⁰⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.395–397.
- ¹⁰⁹ Atkinson 2012: 149–153.
- ¹¹⁰ See Van Henten 2014.
- ¹¹¹ Donahue 2003.
- ¹¹² Hunt 2018; Jacobs 2020.
- ¹¹³ Jacobs 2019; Jacobs 2023.
- ¹¹⁴ Hunt 2018: 173, 203, 238 and 238.
- ¹¹⁵ Hunt 2018: 224, 321, and 329.
- ¹¹⁶ Hunt 2018: 315.
- ¹¹⁷ Jacobs 2020: 24 and 149.
- ¹¹⁸ Jacobs 2020: 143–144.
- ¹¹⁹ Jacobs 2020: 179 and 161.

¹²⁰ Jacobs 2020: 42 and 202.

¹²¹ On queenship, see for instance Sabloff 2020. On the deconstruction of war as a solely male activity, see Elshtain 1987.

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