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Sharon Packer

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[See table of contents](#)

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Does “Judith” of *The Walking Dead* Reference the Jewish Judith of the Chanukah Story?

Sharon Packer, Bearsville, NY

In November of 2022, *The Walking Dead* (TWD) ended an eleven-year run, leaving a devoted fan base bereft of their favorite show but eagerly awaiting more spinoffs in the coming years. At its conclusion, *The Walking Dead* left an even more important legacy: TWD was one of the most watched TV series of all time, which is no small accomplishment, given the competition it faced from an ever-expanding assortment of streaming shows available online. TWD became paradigmatic of zombie films, carrying on a tradition started by George Romero—yet the word “zombie” is never spoken throughout the series.

In TWD, a world-wide pandemic has infected everyone in America. It is implied that the entire world is impacted. As per the sole surviving CDC scientist (played by Noah Emmerich), the virus was a subject of study in Paris. It is unclear how much progress was made by Parisian scientists, who survived longer than their American counterparts, but it is clear that only a single researcher at CDC headquarters in Atlanta remained. His absent colleagues were either “wiped out” or “opted out.” CDC staff has no success in identifying the source of the virus, but the CDC scientist acknowledged that “everyone is infected,” even if they are not bitten by creatures known as “walkers.” Until that authoritative disclosure, it was assumed that the contagion traveled only through direct contact with infected blood—which usually came by way of bites.

Due to this enigmatic infection, no one dies a natural death. Instead, the afflicted rise after death, with their flesh withered. They walk slowly, with a stilted Parkinsonian-style gait. These unfortunate creatures cannot be put to rest until a knife or bullet enters their brains.

Based on a successful graphic novel by the same name, authored by Robert Kirkman, and initially illustrated by Tony Moore but mostly by Charlie Adlard, *The Walking Dead* TV series did not remain 100% true to its source material. The spectacularly successful TV show took liberties at times, changing names and timelines and even introducing surprisingly popular new characters, such as Daryl Dixon (played by Norman Reedus). Both versions feature a long line of interesting characters who interact with one another, to make the storyline even more complex.

One character in particular is worthy of our attention here: Judith, the daughter of the late Lori Grimes, who died during childbirth in the TV show. Importantly, Judith is the (non-biological) “daughter” of the missing Rick Grimes, who had been a deputy sheriff prior to “the fall.” (In the graphic novel original, Lori survives childbirth, but succumbs to wounds not long after, and collapses onto her infant daughter Judith, involuntarily crushing the baby to death.)

After much deliberation, Judith is named for half-brother Carl’s grade schoolteacher, at Carl’s suggestion. The affectionate appellation first used by Daryl, “little a**kicker,” fades from memory after the baby acquires a name, although Daryl is later addressed as “Uncle Daryl.”

Many of us who are familiar with Biblical lore are struck by the parallels between the sword-waving Judith in *The Walking Dead* and the heroic Jewish Judith from the deuterocanonical Book of Judith, who saved her besieged city by taking sword to the Assyrian general, Holofernes. Judith is central to the Chanukah story, but the Book of Judith does not appear in the official Hebrew Bible. Instead, it is included in the Septuagint, the official Greek Biblical translation of the Hebrew canon, which is revered by Jews in its own right. The Book of Judith is sacred to the Eastern Church and to Catholics, but less so to Protestants, who also relegate the text to the apocrypha.ⁱ

The Book of Judith did not earn a place in the sacred Tanach of the Jews because it included too many contradictory historical statements to merit such status. Just the same, many Jewish women who were born in the 1950s bear the name “Judith” (“Yehudit” in Hebrew) for reasons that remain unclear.ⁱⁱ Importantly, in direct translation from Hebrew, “Judith” means “Jewess” and is a feminized form of “Yehuda.”

That Judith from long ago may not garner as much attention in Jewish lore as Judah or his Maccabee brothers (or even Hannah, mother to the martyred Maccabees), for several reasons, starting with the fact that the Book of Judith was not officially canonized in the Hebrew Bible (Tanach). Yet that Judith, said to be a beautiful, courageous, and cunning widow, lives on in other venues. Her story inspired many illustrious artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Caravaggio, and Gustave Klimt. Paintings of Judith and Holofernes hang in world-class museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Chicago Art Institute. In many artistic renditions, she is depicted decapitating the enemy general, sometimes holding his bloody severed head in her hand. Somewhat like the treacherous Delilah, in the Samson story, this temptress plied her powerful

victim with intoxicants, but Judith subsequently slewed the general herself, using his own sword, and carting off his head, as proof of her victory. In contrast to the treacherous Delilah, who fronted for the Philistines, Judith of the Apocrypha acted on behalf of her Hebrew people when her home town of Bethulia was under siege by the Assyrians.

Why would we hypothesize that TWD's Judith references Judith of the Book of Judith? For several reasons: the given name of these two characters is identical; their swords are strikingly similar; and each female displays a fearlessness in the face of danger. Before elaborating on the Judith of TWD, let us take a quick look at the Judith of the Book of Judith.

Judith of the Book of Judith

The Book of Judith was presumably composed in the second or early first century BCE, but its conflicting historical accounts make it difficult to date with precision. It has been praised as “an artistic masterpiece,” albeit “from a literary perspective,” even though it butchers history and (unforgivably) conflates Assyria with Babylonia. It claims that Holofernes acted as commander-in-chief of the Assyrian armies of nefarious Nebuchadnezzar, which was historically impossible, given that the Nebuchadnezzar was Babylonian. Nebuchadnezzar's name is well-known to Jews, since he makes an appearance in several books of the Hebrew Bible, including an especially dramatic scene in the Book of Daniel, where he metamorphosizes into a werewolf-like lycanthrope.

As per the book of Judith, Holofernes besieged the little town of Bethulia (which means “virgin”). Bethulia was strategically important because it blocked access to the holy city of Jerusalem. With its citizens deprived of water during the lengthy siege, the town magistrates prepared to cede to the general's draconian demands, which would have enslaved the Hebrew people, forced their apostasy, and vanquished the holy sanctuary in Jerusalem. The Hebrews, who were at risk of death, requested five days' reprieve before agreeing to Holofernes' terms. During that time, Judith concocted a scheme to defeat the vengeful general, and took it upon herself to redeem her people, acting without the support of the town elders.

With the aid of her maid, who accompanied her to the enemy camp, and through her own guile and good looks, she convinced the commander's guards that she was fleeing the Hebrews, with the intent to deliver important but previously undisclosed information to Holofernes. She implied that this information would seal Holofernes' success against the beleaguered Hebrews. Rather than

aiding the general, she slays him instead, and frees her people from his yoke. In this way, Judith reminds us of another brave woman from the Hebrew Bible: Jael, a Kenite, who smashes the skull of the enemy general seeking hospitality in her tent (Judges 4–5).

Judith of TWD

In the TV series, Judith grows up—to a degree—and appears to be about age 11 or 12 when the final TWD episode ends. Our last glimpse of Judith occurs one year after the assault that nearly claimed her life. Until then, Judith repeatedly volunteers to fight on behalf of her clan. She brandishes her signature sword, samurai-style, just like her adoptive mother Michonne, the consort to Rick Grimes who went missing herself, in search of Rick Grimes.

Our next-to-last encounter with Judith Grimes is one of the most dramatic scenes in the entire TV series. We see her cradled in the arms of her “Uncle” Daryl, collapsed, vanquished by a single bullet. She is the victim of the ruthless and irresponsible Governor Pamela Milton, who controls the superficially utopian (but ultimately fascistic) Commonwealth community. Confronted by a revolt by her constituents, Milton had grabbed an assault rifle. She fired randomly into the crowd, striking the child, before blaming bystanders for her own wanton act of violence. Daryl, who had assumed responsibility for Judith after her dad Rick Grimes went missing, frantically searches for medical staff in a desperate attempt to save Judith’s life.

We witness Judith receiving a transfusion from Daryl, who notes that he is a “universal donor” who can give blood to anyone, without risk of inducing deadly coagulation from incompatible blood types. We then watch her entourage struggling to find the surgeon who was exiled from the Commonwealth community hospital after Governor Milton coopted all available medical supplies. Milton correctly anticipated an insurrection that would displace her from power. As this episode ends, it is uncertain if Judith will survive her near-lethal wounds—but then we see her again, in full force, in the final episode which is set a year in the future.

Until then, we typically see Judith in warrior mode, her sword ready, even when she is only eight years old. Once she is no longer a toddler, she dons the gigantic sword that she inherited from her missing mother, who herself was once described as a “samurai.” Judith often argues with Uncle Daryl about her ability to fight and insists that she is capable of combat. Although there are times when she steps up and into the action, she is mostly tasked with supervising other children and leading them out of harm’s way. She does facilitate one nearly heroic escape from the zombie-

like “walkers,” for both herself and for the adoptive daughter of Aaron, the recruiter for Alexandria’s community, who had ushered Rick’s crew to safety.

The audience “meets” Judith during her earliest moments of life (and perhaps even earlier, if one counts time spent in the womb, during Lori’s elaborately chronicled pregnancy.) Our very first official glimpse of Judith in the TV series revolves around her difficult birth, when she is removed from her mother’s uterus via a very primitive caesarian section, performed by a less-than-skilled “surgeon” who is substituting for Hershel, a veterinarian who had saved half-brother Carl’s life. Judith’s birth takes place in a make-shift birthing room cobbled together in the prison where the Grimes family and troop took refuge after fleeing their original shelter—on Hershel’s picturesque farm--which became uninhabitable when it was overrun by “walkers.”)

There is no doubt that Judith’s mother was Lori Grimes, who did not survive the birthing process (on TV), both because of immediate blood loss and because her young son Carl (Judith’s biological half-brother) stabbed her in the head, to spare her the ignominy of “turning” into a flesh-eating zombie post-mortem, as routinely happened in this science fiction story about a virus that decimated almost all of the earth’s population. The identity of Judith’s biological father is in doubt, even though she bears the surname “Grimes” and is reared by Rick Grimes, a one-time deputy sheriff and law officer, and the undisputed hero of the story. (Rick subsequently disappears when he blows up a bridge to save his charges from the onslaught of the “walkers.”)

At one point, Rick admits to his lover and common-law wife Michonne (who has taken Lori’s place in Rick’s life) that he is probably not Judith’s biological father. He notes that he has cared for her as if she were his own flesh-and-blood, and that he never informed her of her real lineage. He admits that she was most likely fathered by Shane, Rick’s one-time friend and fellow sheriff who became psychotic and attempted to take Rick’s life. Shane had cavorted with Lori prior to Rick’s return from the hospital, when both Shane and Lori believed that Rick had succumbed to life-threatening gunshot wounds incurred during a roadside shoot-out near Atlanta. That establishing action scene takes place just prior to the apocalypse, as the TV series starts.

The years pass, and Judith grows up, believing that Rick Grimes is indeed her father. She is convinced that she is carrying on her family’s legacy of both law-enforcement and self-appointed vigilantism. She nevertheless believes that Rick Grimes survived the inferno on the bridge when he disappeared. She is convinced that she will locate him, in the far-off future.

Judith is not the only character in TWD with a symbolic name. Ezekiel, better known as “King Ezekiel,” reminds us of the “Valley of Dried Bones,” where the dead rise, as prophesized in the Book of Ezekiel. The crossover between the prophet’s name and the post-mortem fate of the “walkers” could not be more apt. The names of two other Hebrew prophets are evoked: Elisha and Elijah. In Jewish lore, Elijah announces the coming of the Messiah. His presence is welcomed to the Passover table by opening the door to one’s home, even when Jews were endangered by hostile Gentiles, who accused them of baking Christian children into matzos. The prophet Elisha continues the legacy of Elijah and is the name of another important TWD character.

The names of other TWD characters also trace to the Hebrew Bible: Abraham, Aaron, and Gabriel. Aaron is the spokesperson and outreach emissary for the community, in much the same way as the Biblical Aaron acted as spokesperson for his brother Moses, whose speech was impaired by a lisp. Abraham, a military official in TWD, leads his troupe to the “Promised Land,” just as the Biblical Abraham sired a new people. Father Gabriel reminds us of the archangel Gabriel, but also reminds spectators that Gabriel is important to Christian lore. Some names such as Luke, Paul, Sophia, or even Jesus, reference the Christian Scriptures, and nothing but, while other names recollect authors with religious overtones, such as Milton (author of *Paradise Lost*), Virgil, or Dante, who authored *The Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

To be fair, we must admit from the get-go that many of the most important TWD characters (such as Rick Grimes or Glenn Rhee or Carl Grimes or Carol Peletier or Daryl Dixon or Merle Dixon or Maggie Greene) sport “ordinary” names, with no obvious religious or mythical links, and author Robert Kirkman claims that he chose the names of his male characters randomly. Still, we are always free to arrive at our own associations, and, for me, Judith of TWD recollects Judith of the Book of Judith.

ⁱ Craven, Toni. Judith: Apocrypha in The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, reprinted in | Jewish Women's Archive (jwa.org). Accessed April 2, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Information about the name “Judith” was supplied by Judith Fine Dach, Ph.D.