JUDITH

I. THE CAMPAIGN OF HOLOFERNES

Nebuchadnezzar and Arphaxad

1 It was the twelfth year of Nebuchadnezzar who reigned over the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh. Arphaxad was then reigning over the Medes at Ecbatana. He surrounded this city with walls of dressed stones three cubits thick and six cubits long, making the rampart seventy cubits high and fifty cubits wide. At the gates he placed towers one hundred cubits high and, at the foundations, sixty cubits wide, the gates themselves being seventy cubits high and forty wide to allow his forces to march out in a body and his infantry to parade freely.

2 Now at this time King Nebuchadnezzar gave battle to King Arphaxad in the great plain lying in the territory of Ragae. Supporting him were all the peoples from the highlands, all from the Euphrates and Tigris and Hydaspes, and those from the plains who were subject to Arioch, king of the Elymaeans. Thus many nations had mustered to take part in the battle of the sons of Cheleoud.

3 Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians sent a message to all the inhabitants of Persia, to all the inhabitants of the western countries, Cilicia, Damascus, Lebanon, Anti-Lebanon, to all those along the coast, to the peoples of Carmel, Gilead, Upper Galilee, the great plain of Esdraelon, to the men of Samaria and its outlying towns, to those beyond Jordan, as far away as Jerusalem Bethany, Chelous, Kadesh, the river of Egypt, Tahpanhes, Rameses and the whole territory of Goshen, beyond Tanis, too, and Memphis, and to all the inhabitants of Egypt as far as the frontiers of Ethiopia. But the inhabitants of these countries ignored the summons of Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians and did not rally to him to make war. They were not afraid of him, since in their view he appeared isolated. Hence they sent his ambassadors back with nothing achieved and in disgrace. Nebuchadnezzar was furious with all these countries. He swore by his throne and kingdom to take revenge on all the territories of Cilicia, Damascus and Syria, of the Moabites and of the Ammonites, of Judaea and Egypt as far as the limits of the two seas, and to ravage them with the sword.

The campaign against Arphaxad

4 In the seventeenth year he and his forces gave battle to King Arphaxad and in this battle defeated him. He routed Arphaxad's entire army and all his cavalry and chariots; he occupied his towns and advanced on Ecbatana; he seized its towers and plundered its market places, reducing its former magnificence to a mockery. He later captured Arphaxad in the mountains of Ragae and, thrusting him through with his spears, destroyed him once and for all.

1 a. This translation follows the Greek. In places where the verse numbering differs from the Vulgate Latin text, the Vulgate verse numbers are added in italic. b. Nebuchadnezzar stands for "the enemy of God's people, Israel"; historically he was king of Babylon and was never styled "king of Assyria," and Nineveh was not his capital city. c. Probably the Chaldaeans.
He then retired with his troops and all who had joined forces with him: a vast horde of armed men. Then, carefree, he and his army gave themselves up to feasting for a hundred and twenty days.

The campaign in the west

In the eighteenth year, on the twenty-second day of the first month, a rumor ran through the palace that Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians was to have his revenge on the whole world, as he had threatened. Summoning his general staff and senior officers he held a secret conference with them, and with his own lips pronounced utter destruction on all these countries. It was then decreed that everyone should be put to death who had not answered the king's appeal.

When the council was over, Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians sent for Holofernes, general-in-chief of his armies and subordinate only to himself. He said to him, "Thus speaks the Great King, lord of the whole world: Be on your way; take men of proved valor, about a hundred and twenty thousand foot soldiers and a strong contingent of horse with twelve thousand cavalrymen; then advance against the western lands, since these people have disregarded my call. Bid them have earth and water ready, because in my rage I am about to march on them; the feet of my soldiers will cover the whole face of the earth, and I will plunder it. Their wounded will fill the valleys and the torrents and rivers, blocked with their dead, will overflow. I will lead them captive to the ends of the earth. Now go! Begin by conquering this whole region for me. If they surrender to you, hold them for me until the time comes to punish them. But if they resist, look on no one with clemency. Hand them over to slaughter and plunder throughout the territory entrusted to you. For by my life and by the living power of my kingdom, I have spoken. All this I will do indeed. And you, neglect none of your master's commands, act strictly according to my orders without further delay."

Leaving the presence of his sovereign, Holofernes immediately summoned all the marshals, generals and officers of the Assyrian army and detailed the picked troops as his master had ordered, about a hundred and twenty thousand men and a further twelve thousand mounted bowmen. He organized these in the normal battle formation. He then secured vast numbers of camels, donkeys and mules to carry the baggage, and innumerable sheep, oxen and goats for food supplies. Every man received full rations and a generous sum of gold and silver from the king's purse.

He then set out for the campaign with his whole army, in advance of King Nebuchadnezzar, to overwhelm the whole western region with his chariots, his horsemen and his picked body of foot. A composite corps brought up the rear, as numerous as locusts or the grains of sand on the ground; there was no counting their multitude.

The stages of Holofernes' advance

Thus they set out from Nineveh and marched for three days toward the plain of Beclithleth. From Beclithleth they went on to pitch camp near the mountains that lie to the north of Upper Cilicia. From there Holofernes advanced into the highlands with his whole army, infantrymen, horsemen, chariots. He cut his way through Put and Lud, stripped all the sons of Rassas and sons of Ishmael living on the verge of the desert south of Cheleon, marched along the Euphrates, crossed Mesopotamia, razed all the fortified towns controlling the wadi Abron and reached the sea. Next he attacked the territories of Cilicia, butchering all who offered him resistance, advanced on the southern frontiers of Japheth, facing Arabia, completely encircled the Midianites, burned their tents and plundered their sheep runs, made his way down to the Damascus plain in the time of the wheat harvest, set fire to the fields, destroyed the flocks and herds,
sacked the towns, laid the countryside waste and put all the young men to the sword. Fear and trembling seized all the coastal peoples. The populations of Sidon and Tyre, of Sur, Ocina, Jamnia, Azotos, Ascalon, were panic-stricken.

They therefore sent envoys to him to sue for peace and say, "We are servants of the great King Nebuchadnezzar and we lie prone before you. Treat us as you think fit. Our cattle farms, all our land, all our wheat fields, our flocks and herds, all the sheep runs in our encampments are at your disposal. Do with them as you please. Our towns and their inhabitants, too, are at your service; go and advance against them if such is your good pleasure."

These men came to Holofernes and delivered the message as above.

He then made his way down to the coast with his army and stationed garrisons in all the fortified towns, levying outstanding men there as auxiliaries.

The people of these cities and of all the other towns in the neighborhood welcomed him, wearing garlands and dancing to the sound of tambourines. Notwithstanding this, he demolished their shrines and cut down their sacred trees, carrying out his commission to destroy all local gods and to force the nations to worship Nebuchadnezzar alone and to compel men of every language and nationality to hail him as a god.

Thus he reached the edge of Esdraelon, in the neighborhood of Dothan, a village facing the great ridge of Judaea. He pitched camp between Geba and Scythopolis and stayed there a full month to replenish his supplies.

Judaea on the alert

When the Israelites living in Judaea heard how Holofernes, general-in-chief of Nebuchadnezzar king of the Assyrians, had treated the various nations, first plundering their temples and then destroying them, they were thoroughly alarmed at his approach and trembled for Jerusalem and the Temple of the Lord their God. They had returned from captivity only a short time before, and the resettlement of the people in Judaea and the reconsecration of the sacred furnishings, of the altar, and of the Temple, which had been profaned, were of recent date.

They therefore alerted the whole of Samaria, Kona, Beth-horon, Belmain, Jericho, Choba, Aesora and the Salem valley. They occupied the summits of the highest mountains and fortified the villages on them; they laid in supplies for the coming war, as the fields had just been harvested. Joakim the high priest, resident in Jerusalem at the time, wrote to the inhabitants of Bethulia and of Betomestham, two towns facing Esdraelon, toward the plain of Dothan. He ordered them to occupy the mountain passes, the only means of access to Judaea, for there it would be easy for them to halt an attacking force, the narrowness of the approach not allowing men to advance more than two abreast. The Israelites carried out the orders of Joakim the high priest and of the people's Council of Elders in session at Jerusalem.

A nation at prayer

All the men of Israel cried most fervently to God and humbled themselves before him. They, their wives, their children, their cattle, all their resident aliens, hired or slave, wrapped sackcloth around their loins. All the Israelites in Jerusalem, including the women and children, lay prone in front of the Temple, and with ashes on their heads stretched out their hands before the Lord. They draped the very altar in sackcloth and fervently joined together in begging the God of Israel not to let their little ones be massacred, their wives carried off,

2 a. The eighteenth year of his reign was 587, in which he captured Jerusalem. b. The name of an officer under King Artaxerxes III. c. Title of the Persian kings.

3 a. Neither Assyrian nor Babylonian kings claimed divine honors.

4 a. Historically, the return from Exile and the repopulation of Jerusalem were in 539-400. Nebuchadnezzar had died in 562.
the towns of their heritage destroyed, the Temple profaned and desecrated for the heathen to gloat over it. *The Lord heard them and looked kindly on their distress.

The people fasted for many days throughout Judaea as well as in Jerusalem before the sanctuary of the Lord Almighty. *Joakim the high priest and all who stood before the Lord, the Lord’s priests and ministers, wore sackcloth around their loins as they offered the perpetual holocaust and the votive and voluntary offerings of the people. *With ashes on their turbans they earnestly called on the Lord to look kindly on the House of Israel.

A council of war in Holofernes’ camp

Holofernes, general-in-chief of the Assyrian army, received the intelligence that the sons of Israel were preparing for war; that they had closed the mountain passes, fortified the high peaks and laid obstructions in the plains. Holofernes was furious. He summoned all the princes of Moab, all the generals of Ammon and all the satraps of the coastal regions. “Men of Canaan,” he said, “tell me: what people is this that occupies the highlands? What towns does it inhabit? How large is its army? What are the sources of its power and strength?

Who is the king who rules it and commands its army? *Why have these not condescended to wait on me, as all the western peoples have done?”

Achior, leader of all the Ammonites, replied, “My lord my servant please listen to what your servant is going to say. I will give you the facts about these mountain folk whose home lies close to you. You will hear no lie from the mouth of your servant. *These people are descended from the Chaldaeans. They once came to live in Mesopotamia, because they did not want to follow the gods of their ancestors who lived in Chaldea. *They abandoned the way of their ancestors to worship the God of heaven, the God they had learned to acknowledge. Banished from the presence of their own gods, they fled to Mesopotamia where they lived for a long time. *When God told them to leave their home and set out for Canaan, they settled there and accumulated gold and silver and great herds of cattle. *Next, famine having overwhelmed the land of Canaan, they went down to Egypt where they stayed as long as food could be found there. *There they became a great multitude, a race beyond counting.

But the king of Egypt turned against them and exploited them by forcing them to make bricks; he degraded them, reducing them to slavery. *They cried to their God, who struck the entire land of Egypt with incurable plagues, and the Egyptians expelled them. *God dried up the Red Sea before them *and led them forward by way of Sinai and Kadesh-barnea. Having driven off all the inhabitants of the desert, *they settled in the land of the Amorites and, such was their strength, exterminated the inhabitants of Heshbon. Then, having crossed the Jordan, they took possession of all the highlands, *driving out the Canaanites before them and the Perizzites, Jebusites, Shechemites and all the Girgashites, and lived there for many years. *All the while they did not sin before their God, prosperity was theirs, for they have a God who hates wickedness. *But when they turned from the path he had marked out for them, some were exterminated in a succession of battles, others taken captive to a foreign land. The Temple of their God was razed to the ground and their towns were seized by their enemies. *Then having turned once again to their God, they came back from the places to which they had been dispersed and scattered, regained possession of Jerusalem, where they have their Temple, and reoccupied the highlands which had been left deserted. *So now, master and lord, if this people has committed any fault, if they have sinned against their God, let us first make sure that they have offended in this way, and then let us advance and attack them. *But if their nation is guiltless, my lord would do better to abstain, for fear that their Lord and God should protect them; we should then become the laughingstock of the whole world.”
When Achior had ended this speech, all the people crowding around the tent began protesting. Holofernes' own senior officers, as well as all the coastal peoples and the Moabites, threatened to tear him limb from limb. "Why should we be afraid of the Israelites? They are a weak and powerless people, quite unable to stand a stiff attack. 'Forward! Advance! Your army, Holofernes our master, will swallow them in one mouthful!'"

Achior handed over to the Israelites

6 When the uproar of those crowding around the council had subsided, Holofernes, general-in-chief of the Assyrian army, reprimanded Achior in front of the whole crowd of foreigners and Ammonites. "Achior, who do you think you are, you and the Ammonite mercenaries, playing the prophet like this with us today, and trying to dissuade us from making war on the people of Israel? You claim their God will protect them. And who is their God if not Nebuchadnezzar? He himself will display his power and wipe them off the face of the earth, and their God will certainly not save them. But we, his servants, shall destroy them as easily as a single individual. They can never resist the strength of our cavalry. We shall burn them all. Their mountains will be drunk with their blood and their plains filled with their corpses. Far from being able to resist us, every one of them will die; thus says King Nebuchadnezzar, lord of the whole world. For he has spoken, and his words will not prove empty.

As for you, Achior, you Ammonite mercenary, who in a rash moment said these words, you shall not see my face again until the day when I have taken my revenge on this brood of fugitives from Egypt. And then the swords of my soldiers and the spears of my officers will pierce your sides. You will fall among the wounded, the moment I turn on Israel. My servants will now take you into the highlands and leave you near one of the towns in the passes; you will not die, until you share their ruin. No need to look so sad if you cherish the secret hope that they will not be captured! I have spoken; none of my words will prove idle."

Holofernes having commanded his tent orderlies to seize Achior, to take him to Bethulia and to hand him over to the Israelites, the orderlies took him, escorted him out of the camp and across the plain, and then, making for the highlands, reached the springs below Bethulia. As soon as the men of the town sighted them, they snatched up their weapons, left the town and made for the mountain tops, while all the slingers pelted them with stones to prevent them from coming up. However, they managed to take cover at the foot of the slope, where they bound Achior and left him lying at the bottom of the mountain and returned to their master.

The Israelites then came down from their town, stopped by him, unbound him and took him to Bethulia, where they brought him before the chief men of the town, who at that time were Uzziah son of Micah of the tribe of Simeon, Chabris son of Gothoniel and Charmis son of Melchiel. These summoned all the elders of the town. The young men and the women also hurried to the assembly. Achior was made to stand with all the people surrounding him and Uzziah questioned him about what had happened. He answered by telling them what had been said at Holofernes' council, and what he himself had said in the presence of the Assyrian leaders, and how Holofernes had bragged of what he would do to the House of Israel. At this the people fell to the ground and worshipped God. "Lord God of heaven," they cried, "take notice of their arrogance and have pity on the humiliation of our race. Look kindly today on those who are consecrated to you." They then spoke reassuringly to Achior and praised him warmly. After the assembly Uzziah took him home and gave a banquet for the elders; all that night they called on the God of Israel for help.

8 a. Possibly modeled on Ahikar, the virtuous pagan sage mentioned in Tb. 1:21.
The campaign against Israel

The following day Holofernes issued orders to his whole army and to the whole host of auxiliaries who had joined him to break camp and march on Bethulia, to occupy the mountain passes and so open the campaign against the Israelites. 'The troops broke camp that same day. The actual fighting force numbered one hundred and twenty thousand infantry and twelve thousand cavalry, not to mention the baggage train with the vast number of men on foot concerned with that. 'They penetrated the valley in the neighborhood of Bethulia, near the spring, and deployed on a wide front from Dothan to Balbaim and, in depth, from Bethulia to Cyamon, which faces on Esdraelon. 'When the Israelites saw this horde, they were all appalled and said to each other, "Now they will lick the whole country clean. Not even the loftiest peaks, the gorges or the hills will be able to stand the weight of them." 'Each man snatched up his arms; they lit beacons on their towers and spent the whole night on watch.

On the second day Holofernes deployed his entire cavalry in sight of the Israelites in Bethulia. 'He reconnoitered the slopes leading up to the town, located the water points, seized them and posted pickets over them and returned to the main body. 'The chiefs of the sons of Esau, the leaders of the Moabites and the generals of the coastal district then came to him and said, "If our master will please listen to us, his forces will not sustain a single wound. 'The Israelites do not rely so much on their spears as on the height of the mountains where they live. And admittedly it is not at all easy to scale these heights of theirs."

"This being the case, master, do not engage them in a pitched battle, and then you will not lose a single man. 'Stay in camp, keep all your troops there too, while your servants seize the spring which rises at the foot of the mountain, since that is what provides the population of Bethulia with their water supply. 'Thirst will then force them to surrender their town. Meanwhile, we and our men will climb the nearest mountain tops and form advance posts there to prevent anyone from leaving the town. 'Hunger will waste them with their wives and children, and before the sword can reach them they will already be lying in the streets outside their houses. 'And you will make them pay dearly for their defiance and their refusal to meet you peaceably."

Their words pleased Holofernes as well as all his officers and he decided to do as they suggested. 'Accordingly a troop of Moabites moved forward with a further five thousand Assyrians. They penetrated the valley and seized the Israelites' water points and springs. 'Meanwhile the Edomites and Ammonites went and took up positions in the highlands opposite Dothan, sending some of their men to the southeast opposite Egreb, near Chous on the wadi Mochmur. The rest of the Assyrian army took up positions in the plain, covering every inch of the earth; their tents and equipment made an immense encampment, so vast were their numbers.

The Israelites called on the Lord their God, dispirited because the enemy had surrounded them and cut all line of retreat. 'For thirty-four days the Assyrian army, infantry, chariots, cavalrymen, had them surrounded. Every water jar the inhabitants of Bethulia had was empty, 'their wells were drying up; on no day could a man quench his thirst, 'since their water was rationed. 'Their little children pined away, the women and young men grew weak with thirst; they collapsed in the streets and gateways of the town; they had no strength left.

Young men, women, children, the whole people thronged clamoring around Uzziah and the chief men of the town, shouting in the presence of the assembled elders, "May God be judge between you and us! For you have done us great harm, by not suing for peace with the Assyrians. 'And now there is no one to
help us. God has delivered us into their hands to be prostrated before them in thirst and utter helplessness. 'Call them in at once; hand the whole town over to be sacked by Holofernes' men and all his army. 'After all, we should be much better off as their booty than we are now; no doubt we shall be enslaved, but at least we shall be alive and not see our little ones dying before our eyes or our wives and children perishing. 'By heaven and earth and by our God, the Lord of our fathers who is punishing us for our sins and the sins of our ancestors, we implore you to take this course now, today.' 'Bitter lamentations rose from the whole assembly, and they all cried loudly to the Lord God.

Then Uzziah spoke to them, "Take heart, brothers! Let us hold out five days more. By then the Lord our God will take pity on us, for he will not desert us altogether. 'At the end of this time, if there is no help forthcoming, I will do as you have said." 'With that he dismissed the people to their various quarters. The men went to man the walls and towers of the town, sending the women and children home. The town was full of despondency.

III. JUDITH

A portrait of Judith

1 Judith was informed at the time of what had happened. She was the daughter of Merari son of Ox, son of Joseph, son of Oziel, son of Elkiah, son of Ananias, son of Gideon, son of Raphaim, son of Ahitub, son of Elijah, son of Hilkiah, son of Eliab, son of Nathanael, son of Salamiel, son of Sarasadai, son of Israel.

2 Her husband Manasseh, of her own tribe and family, had died at the time of barley harvest. 'He was supervising the men as they bound up the sheaves in the field when he caught sunstroke and had to take to his bed. He died in Bethulia, his home town, and was buried with his ancestors in the field that lies between Dothan and Balamon. 'As a widow, Judith stayed inside her home for three years and four months. 'She had had an upper room built for herself on the roof. She wore sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow's weeds. 'She fasted every day of her widowhood except for the sabbath eve, the sabbath itself, the eve of New Moon, the feast of New Moon and the festival days of the House of Israel. 'Now, she was very beautiful, charming to see. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, menservants and maidservants, cattle and lands; and she lived among all her possessions without anyone finding a word to say against her, so devoutly did she fear God.

Judith and the elders

9 Hearing how the water shortage had demoralized the people and how they had complained bitterly to the headman of the town, and being also told what Uzziah had said to them and how he had given them his oath to surrender the town to the Assyrians in five days' time, Judith immediately sent her woman of affairs who managed her property to summon Chabris and Charmis, two elders of the town. 'When these came in she said:

"Listen to me, leaders of the people of Bethulia. You were wrong to speak to the people as you did today and to bind yourself by oath, in defiance of God, to surrender the town to our enemies if the Lord did not come to your help within a set number of days. 'Who are you, to put God to the test today, you, out of all mankind, to set yourselves above him? 'You of all people to put the Lord Almighty to the test! You do not understand anything, and never will. 'If you cannot sound the depths of the heart of man or unravel the arguments of his mind, how can you fathom the God who made all things, or sound his mind

7 a. "The sons of Esau" are the Edomites; they and the Moabites are traditional enemies of Israel.
8 a. The name means "the Jewess."
or unravel his purposes? No, brothers, do not provoke the anger of the Lord our God. Although it may not be his will to help us within the next five days, he has the power to protect us for as many days as he pleases, just as he has the power to destroy us before our enemies. But you have no right to demand guarantees where the designs of the Lord our God are concerned. For God is not to be coerced as man is, nor is he, like mere man, to be cajoled. Rather, as we wait patiently for him to save, let us plead with him to help us. He will hear our voice if such is his good pleasure.

"And indeed of recent times and still today there has never been one tribe of ours, or family, or village, or town that has worshiped gods made with human hands, as once was done, and that was the reason why our ancestors were delivered over to sword and sack, and perished in misery at the hands of our enemies. We for our part acknowledge no other God than him; and so we may hope he will not look on us disdainfully or desert our nation.

"If indeed they capture us, as you expect, then all Judaea will be captured too, and our holy places plundered, and we shall answer with our blood for their profanation. The slaughter of our brothers, the exile of our country, the unpeopling of our heritage, will recoil on our own heads among the nations whose slaves we will become, and our new masters will look down on us as an outrage and a disgrace; for our surrender will not reinstate us in their favor; no, the Lord our God will make it a thing to be ashamed of. So now, brothers, let us set an example to our brothers, since their lives depend on us and our most sacred possessions—Temple and altar—rest on us.

"All this being so, let us rather give thanks to the Lord our God who, as he tested our ancestors, is now testing us. Remember how he treated Abraham, all the ordeals of Isaac, all that happened to Jacob in Syrian Mesopotamia while he kept the sheep of Laban, his mother's brother. For as these ordeals were intended by him to search their hearts, so now this is not vengeance God exacts against us, but a warning inflicted by the Lord on those who are near his heart."

Uzziah replied, "Everything you have said has been spoken from sincerity of heart and no one will contradict a word of it. Not that today is the first time your wisdom has been displayed: from your earliest years all the people have known how shrewd you are and of how sound a heart. But, parched with thirst, the people forced us to act as we had promised them and to bind ourselves by an inviolable oath. You are a devout woman; pray to the Lord, then, to send us a downpour to fill our cisterns, so that our faintness may pass."

Judith replied, "Listen to me. I intend to do something, the memory of which will be handed down to the children of our race from age to age. Tonight you must be at the gate of the town. I shall make my way out with my attendant. Before the time fixed by you for surrendering the town to our enemies, the Lord will make use of me to rescue Israel. You must not ask what I intend to do; I will not tell you until I have done it." Uzziah and the chief man said, "Go in peace. May the Lord show you a way to take revenge on our enemies." And leaving the upper room they went back to their posts.

Judith's prayer

Judith threw herself face to the ground, scattered ashes on her head, uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing and cried loudly to the Lord. At the same time in Jerusalem the evening incense was being offered in the Temple of God. Judith said:

"Lord, God of my father Simeon, you armed him with a sword to take vengeance on the foreigners who had undone a virgin's girdle to her shame, laid bare her thigh to her confusion, violated her womb to her dishonor,
since though you said, ‘This must not be,’ they did it.  
For this you handed their leaders over to slaughter,  
their bed, defiled by their deceit, to blood.  
You struck the slaves down with the chiefs  
and the chiefs with their servants.  
You left their wives to be carried off,  
their daughters to be taken captive,  
and their spoils to be shared out  
among the sons you loved,  
who had been so zealous for you,  
had loathed the stain put on their blood  
and called on you for help.

“God, my God,  
own hear this widow too;  
for you have made the past,  
and what is happening now, and what will follow.  
What is, what will be, you have planned;  
what has been, you designed.  
Your purposes stood forward;  
‘See, we are here!’ they said.  
For all of your ways are prepared  
your judgments delivered with foreknowledge.

“See the Assyrians, boasting in their army,  
glorying in their horses and their riders,  
exulting in the strength of their infantry.  
Trust as they may in shield and spear,  
in bow and sling,  
in you they have not recognized  
the Lord, the shatterer of war;  
yours alone the title of Lord.

“Break their violence with your might;  
in your anger bring down their strength.  
For they plan to profane your holy places,  
to defile the tabernacle, the resting place of your glorious name,  
and to throw down with iron the horn of your altar.  
Observe their arrogance,  
send your fury on their heads,  
give the needful courage  
to this widow’s hand.  
By guile of my lips  
strike slave down with master,  
and master with his servant.  
Break their pride  
by a woman’s hand.

“Your strength does not lie in numbers,  
nor your might in violent men;  
since you are the God of the humble,  
the help of the oppressed,  
the support of the weak,  
the refuge of the forsaken,  
the savior of the despairing.

Please, please, God of my father,  
God of the heritage of Israel,
Master of heaven and earth,
Creator of the waters,
King of your whole creation,
hear my prayer.

Give me a beguiling tongue
to wound and kill
those who have formed such cruel designs
against your covenant,
against your holy dwelling place,
against Mount Zion,
against the house belonging to your sons.
And demonstrate to every nation, every tribe,
that you are Yahweh, God almighty, all powerful,
and that the race of Israel
has you for sole protector."

IV. JUDITH AND HOLOFERNES

Thus Judith called on the God of Israel. When she had finished praying,
she rose from where she lay, summoned her attendant and went down into
the rooms which she used on sabbath days and feasts. She removed the
sackcloth she was wearing and, taking off her widow’s dress, she washed all over,
anointed herself with costly perfumes, dressed her hair, wrapped a turban
around it and put on the dress she used to wear on joyful occasions when her
husband Manasseh was alive. She put sandals on her feet, put on her necklaces,
bracelets, rings, earrings and all her jewelry, and made herself beautiful enough
to catch the eye of every man who saw her. Then she handed her attendant
a skin of wine and a flask of oil, filled a bag with barley girdle cakes, cakes of
dried fruit and pure loaves, and wrapping all these provisions up gave them
to her as well. They then went out, making for the town gate of Bethulia. There
they found Uzziah waiting with the two elders of the town, Chabris and Charmis.
When they saw Judith, her face so changed and her clothes so different, they were
lost in admiration of her beauty. They said to her:

"May the God of our ancestors keep you in his favor!
May he grant your purposes fulfillment
to the glory of the sons of Israel,
to the greater glory of Jerusalem!"

Judith worshiped God, and then she said, "Have the town gate opened for me
so that I can go out and make all your wishes come true." They did as she asked
and gave orders to the young men to open the gate for her. "This done, Judith
went out accompanied by her maid, while the men of the town watched her all
the way down the mountain and across the valley, until they lost sight of her.
As the women were making straight through the valley, an advance unit of
Assyrians intercepted them, and seizing Judith began questioning her. "Which
side are you on? Where do you come from? Where are you going?" "I am
a daughter of the Hebrews," she replied, "and I am fleeing from them since they
will soon be your prey. I am on my way to see Holofernes, the general of your
army, to give him trustworthy information. I will show him the road to take
if he wants to capture all the highlands without losing one man or one life."
As the men listened to what she was saying, they stared in astonishment at the
sight of such a beautiful woman. "It will prove the saving of you," they said
to her, "coming down to see our master of your own accord. You had better
go to his tent; some of our men will escort you and hand you over to him. Once
you are in his presence do not be afraid. Tell him what you have just told us and you will be well treated. They then detailed a hundred of their men as escort for herself and her attendant; and these led them to the tent of Holofernes.

News of her coming had already spread through the tents, and there was a general stir in the camp. She was still outside the tent of Holofernes waiting to be announced, when a crowd began forming around her. They were immensely impressed by her beauty and impressed with the Israelites because of her. “Who could despise a people having women like this?” they kept saying. “Better not leave one man of them alive; let any go and they would twist the whole world around their fingers!”

Then the bodyguard and adjutants of Holofernes came out and led Judith into the tent. Holofernes was resting on his bed under a canopy of purple and gold studded with emeralds and precious stones. The men announced her and he came out to the open part of the tent, with silver torches carried before him. When Judith confronted the general and his adjutant, the beauty of her face astonished them all. She fell on her face and did homage to him, but his servants raised her from the ground.

The first meeting of Judith with Holofernes

“Courage, woman,” Holofernes said, “do not be afraid. I have never hurt anyone who chose to serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole world. Even now, if your nation of mountain dwellers had not insulted me, I would not have raised a spear against them. This was their fault, not mine. But tell me, why have you fled from them and come to us? . . . Anyhow, this will prove the saving of you. Courage! You will live through this night, and many after.

No one shall hurt you. No, you shall be treated as well as all those who serve my lord King Nebuchadnezzar.”

Judith said, “Please listen favorably to what your slave has to say. Permit your servant to speak in your presence. I will speak no word of a lie in my lord’s presence tonight. You have only to follow your servant’s advice and God will bring your work to a successful conclusion; in what my lord undertakes he shall not fail. Long life to Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole world, who has sent you to set every living soul to rights; may his power endure! Since, thanks to you, he is served not only by men, but through your compulsion the wild animals themselves, the cattle, and the birds of the air are to live in the service of Nebuchadnezzar and his whole House.

“We have indeed heard of your genius and adroitness of mind. It is known everywhere in the world that throughout the empire you have no rival for ability, wealth of experience and brilliance in waging war. We have also heard what Achior said in his speech to your council. The men of Bethulia having spared him, he has told them everything that he said to you. Now, master and lord, do not disregard what he said; keep it in your mind, since it is true; our nation will not be punished, the sword will indeed have no power over them, unless they sin against their God. But as it is, my lord need expect no repulse or setback, since death is about to fall on their heads; for sin has gained a hold over them, provoking the anger of their God each time that they commit it.”

As they are short of food and their water is giving out, they have resolved to fall back on their cattle and decided to make use of all the things that God has, by his laws, forbidden them to eat. Not only have they made up their minds to eat the first fruits of corn and the tithes of wine and oil, though these have been consecrated by them and set apart for the priests who serve in Jerusalem in the presence of our God and may not, lawfully, even be touched by the people, but they have even sent men to Jerusalem—where the inhabitants are doing much the same—to bring them back authorization from the Council of Elders. Now this will be the outcome: when the permission arrives and they act on it, that very day they shall be delivered over to you for destruction.
"When I, your servant, came to know all this, I fled from them. God has sent me to do things with you at which the world will be astonished when it hears.

Your servant is a devout woman; she honors the God of heaven day and night.

I therefore propose, my lord, to stay with you. I, your servant, will go out every night into the valley and pray to God to let me know when they have committed their sin. I will then come and tell you, so that you can march out with your whole army; and none of them will be able to resist you. I will be your guide right across Judaea until you reach Jerusalem; there I will enthrone you in the very middle of the city. Then you shall lead them like sheep and never a dog dare open its mouth to bark at you. Foreknowledge tells me this; this has been foretold to me and I have been set to reveal it to you."

Her words pleased Holofernes and all his adjutants. Full of admiration at her wisdom they exclaimed, "There is no woman like her from one end of the earth to the other, so lovely of face and so wise of speech!" Holofernes said, "God has done well to send you ahead of your people. Strength will be ours, and ruin theirs who have insulted my lord. As for you, you are as beautiful as you are eloquent; if you do as you have promised, your god shall be my god, and you yourself shall make your home in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and be famous throughout the world."

With that he had her brought in to where his silver dinner service was already laid, and had his own food served to her and his own wine poured out for her. But Judith said, "I would rather not eat this, in case I incur some fault. What I have brought will be enough for me." "Suppose your provisions run out," Holofernes asked, "how could we get more of the same sort? We have no one belonging to your race here." "Never fear, my lord," Judith answered, "the Lord will have used me to accomplish his plan, before your servant has finished these provisions." Then the adjutants of Holofernes took her to a tent where she slept till midnight. A little before the morning watch she rose. She had already sent this request to Holofernes, "Let my lord kindly give orders for your servant to be allowed to go out and pray," and Holofernes had ordered his guards not to prevent her. She stayed in the camp for three days; she went out each night to the valley of Bethulia and washed at the spring where the picket had been posted. As she came up again she prayed to the Lord God of Israel to guide her in her plan to relieve the children of her people. Having purified herself, she would return and stay in her tent until her meal was brought her in the evening.

Judith at the banquet of Holofernes

On the fourth day Holofernes gave a banquet, inviting only his own staff and none of the other officers. He said to Bagoas, the eunuch in charge of his personal affairs, "Go and persuade that Hebrew woman you are looking after to come and join us and eat and drink in our company. We shall be disgraced if we let a woman like this go without knowing her better. If we do not seduce her, everyone will laugh at us!" Bagoas then left Holofernes and went to see Judith. "Would this young and lovely woman condescend to come to my lord?" he asked. "She shall occupy the seat of honor opposite him, drink the joyful wine with us and be treated today like one of the Assyrian ladies in waiting in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar." "Who am I," Judith replied, "to resist my lord? I will not hesitate to do whatever he wishes, and doing this will be my joy to my dying day."

At this she rose and put on her dress and all her feminine adornments. Her maid preceded her, and on the floor in front of Holofernes spread the fleece which Bagoas had given Judith for her daily use to lie on as she ate. Judith entered and took her place. The heart of Holofernes was ravished at the sight; his very soul was stirred. He was seized with a violent desire to sleep with her; and indeed since the first day he saw her, he had been waiting for an
It grew late and his staff hurried away. Bagoas closed the tent from the outside, having shown out those who still lingered in his lord's presence.

They went to their beds wearied with all their drinking, and Judith was left alone in the tent with Holofernes who had collapsed wine-sodden on his bed.

Judith then told her maid to stay just outside the bedroom and wait for her to come out, as she did every morning. She had let it be understood she would be going out to her prayers and had also spoken of her intention to Bagoas.

By now everyone had left Holofernes and no one, either important or unimportant, was left in the bedroom. Standing beside the bed, Judith murmured to herself:

"Lord God, to whom all strength belongs, prosper what my hands are now to do for the greater glory of Jerusalem, now is the time to recover your heritage and further my designs to crush the enemies arrayed against us."

With that she went up to the bedpost by Holofernes' head and took down his scimitar; coming closer to the bed she caught him by the hair and said, "Make me strong today, Lord God of Israel!" Twice she struck at the nape of his neck with all her strength and cut off his head. She then rolled his body off the bed and tore the canopy down from the bedposts. Soon after, she went out and gave the head of Holofernes to her attendant who put it in her food bag.

The two then left the camp together, as they always did when they went to pray. Once they were out of the camp, they skirted the ravine, climbed the slope to Bethulia and made for the gates.

Judith brings the head of Holofernes to Bethulia

From a distance, Judith shouted to the guards on the gates, "Open the gate! Open! For the Lord our God is with us still, displaying his strength in Israel and his might against our enemies, as he has today!" Hearing her voice, the townsmen hurried down to the town gate and summoned the elders. Everyone, great and small, came running down, since her arrival was unexpected. They threw the gate open, welcomed the women, lit a fire to see by and crowded around them. Then Judith raised her voice and said, "Praise God! Praise him! Praise the God who has not withdrawn his mercy from the House of Israel, but has shattered our enemies by my hand tonight!" She pulled the head out of the bag and held it for them to see. "This is the head of Holofernes, general-in-chief of the Assyrian army; here is the canopy under which he lay drunk! The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman! Glory to the Lord who has protected me in the course I took! My face seduced him, only to his own undoing; he committed no sin with me to shame me; or disgrace me."

Overcome with emotion, the people all fell on their knees and worshiped God, exclaiming as one man, "Blessings on you, O our God, for confounding your people's enemies today!" Uzziah then said to Judith:

"May you be blessed, my daughter, by God Most High, beyond all women on earth; and may the Lord God be blessed, the Creator of heaven and earth, by whose guidance you cut off the head.
of the leader of our enemies.

The trust you have shown
shall not pass from the memories of men,
but shall ever remind them
of the power of God.

God grant you to be always held in honor,
and rewarded with blessings,
since you did not consider your own life
when our nation was brought to its knees,
but ward off our ruin,
walking undeterred before our God.”

All the people answered, “Amen! Amen!”

V. TRIUMPH

The Jews attack the Assyrian camp

Judith said, “Listen to me, brothers. Take this head and hang it on your battalions. When morning comes and the sun is up, let every man take his arms and every able-bodied man leave the town. Appoint a leader for these, as if you meant to march down to the plain against the Assyrian advance post. But you must not do this. The Assyrians will gather up their equipment, make for their camp and wake up their commanders; they in turn will rush to the tent of Holofernes and not be able to find him. They will then be seized with panic and flee at your advance. All you and the others who live in the territory of Israel will have to do is to give chase and slaughter them as they retreat. “But before you do this, call me Achior the Ammonite for him to see the man who thought so meanly of the House of Israel and recognize this as the man who sent him to us as a man already doomed to die.” (13) So they had Achior brought from the house of Uzziah. No sooner had he arrived and seen the head of Holofernes held by a member of the people’s assembly than he fell down on his face in a faint. They lifted him up. He then threw himself at the feet of Judith, and prostrate before her exclaimed:

“May you be blessed in all the tents of Judah
and in every nation;
at the sound of your name
men will be seized with dread.

Now tell me exactly what you have been doing in these past few days.” And surrounded by all the people Judith told him everything she had done from the day she left Bethulia to the moment when she was speaking. When she came to the end, the people cheered at the tops of their voices until the town echoed.

(A4) Achior, recognizing the mighty works of the God of Israel, believed ardently in him and, accepting circumcision, was incorporated in the House of Israel forever.

At daybreak they hung the head of Holofernes on the ramparts. Every man took his arms and they all went out in groups to the slopes of the mountain.

Seeing this, the Assyrians sent word to their leaders, who in turn reported to the generals, the captains of thousands and all the other officers; and these in their turn reported to the tent of Holofernes. “Rouse our master,” they said to his major-domo, “these slaves have dared to march down on us to attack—and to be wiped out to a man!” Bagoas went inside and clapped his hands in front of the curtain dividing the tent, thinking that Holofernes was sleeping with Judith. But as no one seemed to hear, he drew the curtain and went into the bedroom, to find him thrown down dead on the threshold and the head
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16 gone from his body. He gave a great shout, wept, sobbed, shrieked and rent his clothes. He then went into the tent which Judith had occupied and could not find her either. Then, rushing out to the men, he shouted, "Those slaves have duped us! One Hebrew woman has brought shame on the House of Nebuchadnezzar. Holofernes is lying dead on the ground, with his head cut off!"

When they heard this, the leaders of the Assyrian army tore their tunics in consternation, and the camp rang with their wild cries and their shouting.

15 When the men who were still in their tents heard the news they were appalled. They were so gripped with panic and dread that no two men could keep together: the rout was complete. They fled along every track across the plain or through the mountains. The men who had been bivouacking in the mountains around Bethulia were fleeing too. Then all the Israelite warriors charged down on them. Uzziah sent messengers to Betomastâhím, Bebai, Choba, Kola and through all the highlands of Israel, to inform them of what had happened and to urge them all to hurl themselves on the enemy and annihilate them. As soon as the Israelites heard the news, they fell on them as one man and massacred them all the way to Choba. The men of Jerusalem and the entire mountain country also rallied to them, once they had been informed of the events in the enemy camp. Then the men of Gilead and Galilee attacked them on the flank and struck at them fiercely till they neared Damascus and its territory. The rest, who had stayed in Bethulia, fell upon the Assyrian camp and looted it to their great profit. The Israelites returning from the slaughter seized what was left. The hamlets and villages of the mountain country and the plain also captured a great deal of booty, since there were vast stores of it.

Israel gives thanks

9 Joakim the high priest and the Council of Elders of Israel, who were in Jerusalem, came to gaze on the benefits that the Lord had lavished on Israel and to see Judith and congratulate her. On coming to her house they blessed her with one accord, saying:

"You are the glory of Jerusalem!
You are the great pride of Israel!
You are the highest honor of our race!

9 By doing all this with your own hand
you have deserved well of Israel,
and God has approved what you have done,

"May you be blessed by the Lord Almighty
in all the days to come!"

12 All the people answered, "Amen!"

13.14 The people looted the camp for thirty days. They gave Judith the tent of Holofernes, all his silver plate, his divans, his drinking bowls and all his furniture. She took this, loaded her mule, harnessed her carts and heaped the things into them. All the women of Israel, hurrying to see her, formed choirs of dancers in her honor. Judith distributed branches to the women who accompanied her; she and her companions put on wreaths of olive. Then she took her place at the head of the procession and led the women as they danced. All the men of Israel, armed and garlanded, followed them, singing hymns. With all Israel around her, Judith broke into this song of thanksgiving and the whole people sang this hymn aloud:

"Praise my God with the tambourine,
sing to the Lord with the cymbal,
let psalm and canticle mingle for him,

14 a. This incident is included in ch. 13 in the Latin Vulgate.
extol his name, invoke it!
For the Lord is a God who shatters war;
he has pitched his camp in the middle of his people
to deliver me from the hands of my enemies.

"Assyria came down from the mountains of the north,
came with tens of thousands of his army.
Their multitude blocked the wadis,
their horses covered the hills.
He promised to burn up my country,
destroy my young men with the sword,
dash my sucklings to the ground,
make prey of my little ones,
carry off my maidens;
but the Lord Almighty has thwarted them
by a woman's hand.
For their hero did not fall at the young men's hands,
it was not sons of Titans who struck him down,
no proud giants made that attack,
but Judith, the daughter of Merari,
who disarmed him with the beauty of her face.
She laid aside her widow's dress
to rally those who were oppressed in Israel;
she anointed her face with perfume,
bound her hair under a turban,
put on a linen gown to seduce him.
Her sandal ravished his eye,
hers beauty took his soul prisoner . . .
and the scimitar cut through his neck!

"The Persians trembled at her boldness,
the Medes were daunted by her daring.
These were struck with fear when my lowly ones shouted,
these were seized with terror when my weak ones shouted louder,
and when they shouted loudest, these gave ground.
The children of mere girls ran them through,
pierced them like the offspring of deserters.
They perished in the battle of my Lord!

"I will sing a new song to my God.
Lord, you are great, you are glorious,
 wonderfully strong, unconquerable.
May your whole creation serve you!
For you spoke and things came into being,
you sent your breath and they were put together,
and no one can resist your voice.

"Should mountains topple
to mingle with the waves,
should rocks melt
like wax before your face,
to those who fear you,
you would still be merciful.

"A little thing indeed
is a sweetly smelling sacrifice,
still less the fat
burned for you in holocaust;
but whoever fears the Lord
is great for ever.

"Woe to the nations
who rise against my race!
The Lord Almighty
will punish them on judgment day.
He will send fire and worms in their flesh
and they shall weep with pain for evermore."

When they reached Jerusalem they fell on their faces before God and, once the people were purified, they offered their holocausts and voluntary offerings and gifts. All Holofernes' property given her by the people and the canopy she herself had stripped from his bed, Judith vowed to God as a dedicated offering. For three months the people gave themselves up to rejoicings in Jerusalem before the Temple, where Judith stayed with them.

Judith lives to old age. Her death

When this was over, everyone returned home. Judith went back to Bethulia and lived on her estate; as long as she lived, she enjoyed a great reputation throughout the country. She had many suitors, but all her days, from the time her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people, she never gave herself to another man. Her fame spread more and more the older she grew in her husband's house; she lived to the age of a hundred and five years. She emancipated her maid, then died in Bethulia and was buried in the cave where Manasseh her husband lay. The House of Israel mourned her for seven days. Before her death she had distributed her property among her own relations and those of her husband Manasseh.

Never again during the lifetime of Judith, nor indeed for long after her death, did anyone trouble the sons of Israel.

16 a. And thus qualifies to be ranked with the heroes of the patriarchal age.