The "Judith" Poem
(Medieval Apocrypha)

Judith was first discovered as an appendage to the Nowell Codex. Though it is certain that the poem is a derivative of the Book of Judith, still present in the Roman Catholic Bible, its authorship and year of origin remain a mystery. The poem is incomplete: the version in the manuscript is 348 lines long, divided in three sections marked with the numbers X, XI, and XII. The numbers correspond to the 10th verse of chapter twelve, the 11th verse of chapter thirteen, and the 12th verse of chapter fourteen. Only the last three out of twelve cantos have been preserved. What remains of the poem opens in the middle of a banquet. Had the first nine cantos been preserved, it is often thought that Judith would be considered one of the most laudable Old English works (Cook, pg. lxxvi-lxxvii). What is certain about the origin of the poem is that it stems from the Book of Judith. After the Reformation, the Book of Judith was removed from the Protestant Bible. However, it is still present in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles. Many discrepancies exist between the poem and Book, most notably in regards to the portrayal of Holofernes and the exaggeration of Judith’s righteousness in the poem.

Approximately 850 lines are missing from the beginning of this poem based on the Book of Judith, one of the Apocrypha. Holofernes, general of the Assyrians, has besieged the town of Bethulia. The town’s leaders decide to surrender in five days, unless God saves them with a miracle. Hearing this, a holy widow named Judith chastises them for testing God. She tells them she has a plan and that they should wait for her return. She approaches Holofernes camp, offering to tell him the secrets of the town, so that he might capture it without the loss of men. She explains she is doing this because it is God's will to punish His people and, blinded by her beauty, Holofernes believes her. For four days, Holofernes has wined and dined Judith in his camp. The fragment begins on the last night, the night that Holofernes has decided to send a servant to ask Judith to join him in his bed.

... None doubted the gifts of the Grand Creator
to this great earth, where she had found help from God.

When she had the most need of the Mighty Prince,

then God protected her from greatest danger.
The Guardian of Heaven, granted her request

for she had strong faith in the Holy Father.

I have heard that the mighty Holofernes

eagerly made an invitation to serve

wine, wonderful foods. To that feast, the warrior

called his chief retainers. They came with great haste;

the troop of warriors traveled to that strong prince;

leaders of that folk came forth on the fourth day

since Judith, that shining lady, first sought him,

and the wicked warrior welcomed that wise maid.

Then the soldiers went to sit at that grand feast,

his ‘partners in crime’, those bold chain-mailed warriors,

boastful at beer-drinking. Along the benches,

cups were carried frequently; pitchers kept full

the deep bowls of hall-sitters. They drank their doom,
those brave warriors, though that ruler, wicked man,
did not expect it. Then Holofernes was
happy in hosting; that hearty friend of men
laughed and shouted and clamored the most loudly,
so that sons of men might hear his surge afar
how the resolute one bellowed and roared out,
headstrong and drunk, he exhorted earnestly
that his companions should conduct themselves well,
so that, over the whole day, that wicked man
made his own noblemen drink the sweetest mead;
that treasure-giver made his troops over-drunk,
'til they lay, dizzy, as if struck down by death,
drained of goodness. So that guardian ordered
the diners to attend until dark approached
the sons of men. Then, corrupt with sin, he said
that they should bring the blessed maid to his bed,
hasten to fetch her, heaped high with fair garlands
and adorned most richly with the brightest rings.

Then, the barons did as their bold prince had bid;
the retainers quickly went to the guest room.

The men did find there that fairest of maidens,
wise Judith; then, the warriors began to lead
radiant maid to the tent, where ruler rested,

into the tall pavilion where the prince lie

each night, as was that chief of champions' custom.

There was a fair fly-net, all of gold, which fell

about the chieftain's bed, so the baleful one,

that master of men, might gaze through it upon

any son of heroes who might seek him there;
he could see when his soldiers did approach him,

but not a man could gaze on the general

unless that headstrong one ordered his heroes,

commanded them closer to that chieftain,

nearer to him, champions come for counsel.

Then, the barons quickly brought her to his bed,

that wise maiden. The stouthearted warriors went

to tell their high lord that the holy lady

was brought to his pavilion. The famous prince

became blissful then; he thought of the bright maid,

to defile with impurity and disgrace.

The Almighty Lord God would not allow that,

and so, the Ruler of Heaven restrained him.

Then that fiercest warrior, wanton and fiendish,
left to go to lie where he would lose his life,

with a crowd of men, where he'd meet his cruel end,

an end as he had always striven after,

that dire prince of men, while he dwelled in this world

'neath roof of clouds. There that ruler fell so drunk

onto his mattress, that he might know nothing.

His warriors, sated with sweet wine, went from there,

out of that tall tent, quickly turning away,

the troop of men, who had led the troth-breaker,

that hostile persecutor, that earthly prince,

to his large bed for the last time. The lady,

the strong servant of the Savior, was mindful

of how she most easily might make attempt

to take old age from that most terrible one,

to deprive him, that dark lord, of a long life,
ere that wicked man awoke. Then the wise maid,

with silken hair, sought a sharp sword from its sheath
to hew hard blows, and drew it with her right hand.

Then she called on the Creator of Heaven,

Savior of all Earth-dwellers, and said these words:

"I do pray to you, Lord Prince of Creation,

Holy Son of Heaven and Spirit of Hope,

for mercy, Mighty Majesty, in my need.

Truly, I am greatly troubled with sorrows,

my soul is now inflamed and my mind made sad.

Great Guardian of the Heavens, give to me

triumph and true faith, so I might take this sword

and deal death to this dispenser of murder.

Grant to me my welfare, Great Father of Men,
I never have had more need of your mercy.

Avenge me, Almighty Lord, give me anger

in my heart, heat in my mind." Then the High Judge

filled her completely with courage, as he does

for all who look for his loving help with faith.

Her heart was unbound, trust in Holy God reborn.

Then she grabbed that heathen man hard by his hair,

dragged him toward her with her hands, drew him nearer,

took him shamefully, and placed that sinful man

so she easily had control over him.

Then, she struck her enemy with shining sword,

swung that sharp blade straight down upon his stiff neck,

his trusted weapon falling toward his bare throat,

so that she notched halfway through his naked neck;

he lie there in a swoon, still breathing softly,
drunk and sorely wounded. He was not yet dead, completely lifeless. Then courageous lady earnestly struck that heathen hound one more time so that his head rolled forth to the floor below.

The body stayed behind, as his baleful soul wandered under the wide abyss, wrapped with pain.

The spirit now roamed elsewhere and it survived and there below was bound tight with base torments, surrounded by serpents, sought out for tortures, damned and detained in hell-fire after death.

He need not hope, enveloped in that hot night, that he might go forth from the burning furnace, from that serpents' hall, but he should stay trapped there, always remain, forever and evermore,
in that dreary homestead, with deepest despair.

Then Judith, wise maid, did win worldwide renown
in battle, as granted by Bountiful God,
the Sovereign of Heaven, who gave her success.

That holy widow put the dead warrior's head,
so bloody, into the bag in which her maid,
a lady with light skin, well-mannered servant,

had brought thither some baked bread for them both,
tightly wrapped up the trophy inside the pouch;
then, Judith gave it, so gory, to the girl,

back again to the same young, thoughtful servant
to bear it home. Then both ladies hurried forth,

went directly from that place, bold and daring,

until the triumphant, brave maids traveled

away from the army's camp, so they clearly
could see Bethulia’s brightly shining walls.

Then, radiant, adorned with rings, they hurried and continued forth on the familiar course away from the sleeping Assyrian force until the rampart gate they joyfully gained.

Warriors sat waiting there; wakeful men kept watch in that keep, as she earlier commanded the sorrowful folk of the blessed stronghold, when Judith, wise servant of God, shrewd widow, traveled forth from that tribe of Hebrew people, went on her journey. When Judith, most beloved, returned to her people, then prudent woman ordered one of the men to go out to her, speedily, straight out from the spacious city
and with haste, they let him hurry in again

through the wall's wide gate, and then, with these good words,

to that triumphant folk, he said, "I tell you

a thing deserving thanks; you no longer need

mourn in your hearts. The Maker is merciful,

that King of Splendor, for it shall be well known

through the wide world, that this wonderful future

is bright for you, and honor bestowed on you

for all the evils which you have long endured."

Then the city-dwellers became most cheerful

when they heard how the holy one had spoken

beyond the high wall; the host became eager.

The folk hastened toward the stronghold's heavy gate,

men and women, a multitude and a crowd,

a throng and a troop; many thousands of them
pressed forward and ran toward the Prince's fair maid,
both the old and the young. Every one of them
in the rejoicing city became cheerful
after they learned that the lady had returned
again to her home and then, most happily,
they let her enter with light hearts and good will.

Then the good widow, gold-adorned, commanded
her maid to unwrap Holofernes' bloody head,
her wise handmaiden to hold forth the trophy,
as a gory sign, which God had given her,
to the townsfolk, of how well she triumphed.

To that people, the noble lady proclaimed,
"Here you, heroic leaders of all this host,
may now clearly stare upon this lifeless sign,
the most deeply hated heathen warrior’s head,

Holofernes’, he who harried our city,

more than any man, and made many torments,

grievous sorrows, and who would still prolong them,

but Glorious God did not grant him old age,

that the most hostile man, with hatred toward us,

might be loathsome; I deprived him of long life

with the Lord of Host’s help. Now I have to ask

each of these townsmen, every brave warrior,

that you make ready and then marshal yourselves,

fight Assyrians, as soon as our Father,

Holy Sovereign, shall have sent from the east

bright sunlight. Then, bear your shields bravely forward,

bucklers to your breasts and your burnished helmets,

as you enter the antagonists’ campground.
Slay their war-leaders with your sharp shining swords,
their doomed commanders. Because, condemned to die,

your foes will fall and you will have greatest fame

and honor; the Lord has shown this by my hand."

Then the troop of people did prepare at once,

the men were keen for combat, ready to march.

The courageous nobles went forth; fierce comrades

and bold warriors bearing their war banners high

stepped straight forward to the enemy's campsite,

heroes under helmets, from the holy town,

exactly at sunrise. Their shields resounded,

made a loud noise. Accordingly, the lean wolf

rejoiced in the forest, and the hungry raven,

that bloodthirsty bird. Both beasts of battle knew
that soon the warriors would go to work for them,
fix their fill of food; and flying behind them,
an eagle, dewy-feathered, eager for flesh,
dark-coated, horny-beaked, did call out lowly
a sad war song. There the soldiers did step forth,
heroes at battle hidden behind war shields,
concave planks, those people who previously
endured the reproach of their old enemy,
of the pagans' insult. They repaid all that
severely at the spear-play; they did pay back
the Assyrians after the Hebrews marched
under a battle flag, boldly to their camp.
Then the folk let fly forth showers of arrows,
bright battle-adders shooting from horn-shaped bows,
strong arrows; the grimmest of battle-seekers
shouted loudly, sent their spears soaring aloft,

flying across the sky, from the Hebrew force

into the hardened troops. The native heroes

all overflowed with anger; this hostile folk

stepped forward with stern minds and stouthearted souls,

and bitterly awoke their old enemies;

drunk and weary, the warriors drew with their hands

from dark stained leather sheaths brightly adorned swords

with tried edges. Then the evil-scheming men,

Assyrian champions, struck earnestly.

Not any of those strong soldiers were spared there,

neither the high born nor the mighty heroes

among living men whom they might overcome.

Thus the faithful folk attacked the foreigners
continuously during the cold morning

'til the commanders in that camp understood

the intense sword-brandishing shown to them there

by the Hebrew fighters who fiercely attacked.

Soldiers approached the chief attendant and spoke,

and awoke all of the warriors fearfully,

telling them the news of terrible tidings,

drunk with the morning slaughter, dire swordplay.

And I have heard it said that those doomed heroes

stood and cast off all their sleep, entirely,

turned toward their terrible leader's bright tent,

and then, the heavyhearted host did press on

toward the tall pavilion of that people's prince,

Holofernes'. At once, they hoped to announce

the battle to him, before blows assailed him,
before the Hebrews fell on him with fury.

All thought their leader and the lady still lay
together, under fly-net, in that fair tent,
slept soundly that morning upon the soft bed,
the lovely Judith and the licentious man,
strong and fierce. There was not a soldier standing
who dared to wake up that terrible warrior
or investigate how they had gotten on,
Holofernes with that most holy maiden,
the Creator's servant. The soldiers crept near;
the Hebrew folk continued to fight fiercely
with their hardened battle-weapons. They brought down
their swords upon their long-standing enemy,
repaid old insults. The Assyrians' fame
dwindled with that day’s work; pride depreciated.

Soldiers stood around their sovereign’s pavilion,

grim and angered, sad and gloomy in their minds.

Then, together, they cried out, began to call

and to shout loudly, lacking all courtesy,

desperately gnashing their teeth in despair.

Their glory was at its end, honor and good deeds.

The fighters wanted to wake their friendly lord,

but nothing availed them, no word seemed to help.

Finally and at last, one of the fighters

became bold enough, so that he bravely dared

into that pavilion, as need pushed him forth.

Then he found lying pale on the fair pillows

his gold-giver, the grim remains of a man

deprived of his life. Then at once, he fell down,
mournfully to the ground; he grabbed at his hair
and at his tunic, also, troubled at heart,
and these words he spoke to the many warriors
who were sitting outside the sad soldier's tent.

"Here is demonstrated our own destruction,
an approaching token that the time is near,
with grief gained, when we should become greatly lost,
together at strife, perish. Here, hewed with sword,
lies our dead sovereign." Then they, sorrowful,
quickly departed in flight, with darkened hearts
cast down their swords. Then the mighty company
followed in pursuit, until the greatest part
of that host lay hewed down by the Hebrew folk
on that field of woes, felled by sharpest weapons
as a delight for wolves, and as a dinner
for bloodthirsty ravens. Then the remnant fled;
the troop, carrying shields, traveled in pursuit,
the Hebrew warriors, most worthy of honor,
praised with new found fame. The Almighty Father,
the Highest Judge, justly assisted them there.
Then, with decorated swords, daring soldiers,
stouthearted heroes carved out a straight pathway
through that hostile enemy, hewed their bucklers,
sheared their shield-wall. Brave archers and strong warriors
became enraged by fighting; the Hebrew folk,
mighty retainers, were most ready to meet
desperate spear-play. There fell into the dust
the best part of the biggest number of men
of the Assyrians, that hostile army.
Few from that host came home alive to their kin.

The nobility turned from the native troops,

warriors retreating into the wide wasteland

among the carnage, the reeking of corpses.

Hebrews, unrestricted, from that hostile host,

from lifeless bodies, took much bloody plunder,

bright armor, shining shields, broadswords and chain-mail,

burnished helmets and hoards of precious treasures.

They had gloriously gained a great victory,

overcame their foe on that broad battlefield;

the home guard slew their old enemies with swords.

They trounced upon them and killed them in their tracks,

that host who when alive, was the most hostile

kind of living thing. Then all of the Lord's folk,
this special people, for the space of one month,
proud men with curly locks, carried and bore back
to the brightest city of Bethulia
steel helmets, heavy chain-mail and sharp short swords,
the grim war-shirts of men, gold-decorated,
and treasures of more intricate workmanship
than any of those men who saw it might say;
all of that those fighters had gained by their force,
brave under fair banners on the battlefield
through Judith's keen advice, that courageous maid.
Those men, brave in battle, brought her a reward
from her adventure with cruel Holofernes,
his sword and his helmet, soaked with his own blood,
likewise his ample mail-coat, adorned with gold,
and all that the wicked chief of warriors owned
of princely goods or private inheritance,

necklaces and jewelry, they gave Judith,

ready-witted. The radiant lady said

the glory was God's; the Lord gave her honor,

and renown as reward in this earthly realm,

and glory above; she believed this of God,

of the Dearest Lord. Truly, she had no doubt

of the gift for which she yearned. This was glory,

by the Almighty, who made the wind and air,

the heavens and world, likewise also wide streams

and the joys of heaven, through his own justice.