

JUDITH

INTRODUCTION

Like Tobit, Judith is a story (see pages 12-13). Its hero is an observant woman who manages to do what no nation and no other person could do. She humiliates the most powerful army of the apparently invincible tyrant who rules the world and who is determined to crush the Jewish people. The tyrant is the well known Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the Neo Babylonian Empire who was responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the exile of the last king of Judah and the leading citizens in the early years of the sixth century BC. That the story is not actually about Nebuchadnezzar is made clear by the author, whose fictitious Nebuchadnezzar is said to be ruler of Assyria and to have his capital in Nineveh (see 1:1). The reader is expected to see him as a figure for any nation and ruler who sets out to oppress Judah.

The author features a number of well-known nations. However either his geographical knowledge is faulty or the text as we have it has suffered in transmission (see 2:21-26). In any case we are to look for the meaning of the story, not at the level of historical or geographical fact, but rather in the characterisation, especially, but not only, of the heroine, Judith. Her victory is set in a fictitious town in Samaria. If the Jews can prevail in 'Bethulia' (4:6), they can prevail anywhere. The author is making the point that if a widow can defeat the general of the largest army in the world, Judaism can defeat the nations that are determined to destroy her, so long as the Jews, like Judith, remain faithful to YHWH and to their traditions. Their situation may appear impossible, and their enemies may appear invincible, but only YHWH is invincible, and YHWH is committed to his people. They must never lose faith or abandon their way of life.

The story is divided into two parts. In the first part we witness the apparently unconquerable power of the military machine that has conquered the world and is determined to crush the Jewish nation. The situation for the Jews is desperate and would appear hopeless. In the second part a woman, Judith, kills the general and saves her people. The author presumes his readers can apply the story to their own situation. The fact that the book has survived is witness to the fact that they were well able to do so. The book is, before anything else, a statement about YHWH their liberating God, and Judith is portrayed as an example of what every Jew is called to be, and how every Jew is called to act, if they want to see the survival and ultimate triumph of Judaism.

The most likely situation for the publication of this book is Judah during the Hasmonaean period, after the success of the Maccabean uprising, after the annexing of Samaria by John Hyrcanus, the ruler and high priest of the Jews (135-104) who succeeded his father Simon, brother of the famous Judas Maccabee, and before the sectarianism that divided the Jews during the reign of his son, Alexander Jannaeus (103-78). Like the contemporary Books of the Maccabees it challenges the Jews not to give way to the prevailing Hellenization.

Though the book was composed in Hebrew, no Hebrew text has survived (except later translations into Hebrew from the Latin Vulgate). All we have is a Greek translation. The book never found its way into the Jewish canon of sacred books. This is probably a matter of timing. The canon was pretty well established by the third century BC (and formally recognised at Jamnia towards the end of the first century AD). The only book from the second century to make its way into the canon is the book of Daniel, and this because it contains quite ancient material, and is presented as prophecy.

JUDITH 1-7

¹It was the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians from his capital, Nineveh.

In those days Arphaxad ruled over the Medes from Ecbatana.

²He built walls around Ecbatana with hewn stones a metre and a half thick and three metres long; he made the walls thirty metres high and twenty-three metres wide. ³At its gates he raised towers forty-five metres high and twenty-seven wide at the foundations. ⁴He made its gates thirty metres high and eighteen metres wide to allow his armies to march out in force and his infantry to form their ranks.

⁵In that year King Nebuchadnezzar made war against King Arphaxad in the Great Plain that is on the borders of Rages.

⁶There rallied to him all the people of the hill country and all those who lived along the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Hydaspes, and, on the plain, Arioch, king of the Elymeans. Thus, many nations joined the forces of the Cheleoudites.

From the outset it would have been clear to the reader that the author wanted them to ‘read between the lines’. Every Jew would have heard of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the exile to Babylon of Jehoiachin, the last king of Judah, along with the leading citizens of Judah. They would have known that Nebuchadnezzar (605-562) was the ruler of Babylonia at that time (not Assyria), and that his capital was in Babylon (not Nineveh, which was destroyed in 612, ironically, by the Medes!). When *Judith* was published the danger faced by the Jews did not come from the Assyrians or Babylonians. The danger was that Judaism, like so many cultures of the day, would be swamped by the prevailing Hellenization of their world.

The novel begins in the ‘twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar’; that is, in 593, prior to the exile. We will see, however, that other details presume a post-exilic setting. No matter, the setting is consciously (and obviously) fictitious.

‘Arphaxad’ (verse 1) appears to be a fictitious character. ‘Ecbatana’ (see map opposite) was the capital of Media (see the Book of Tobit 3:7). Its colossal protective walls (also fictitious) serve the purpose of highlighting the invincible power of Nebuchadnezzar, who easily conquered such an important and heavily defended city (see verse 14).

‘Rages’ (verse 5) is just below the Caspian Sea. It features also in Tobit (see Tobit 4:1). The ‘hill country’ (verse 6) would include the Zagros Mountains, between Nineveh and Ecbatana. The Hydaspes River may refer to the Choaspes which flows west from Susa to the Tigris. Elymais was a district of Persia. Arioch appears nowhere in the records. We have no idea who the ‘Cheleoudites’ were, unless it is a corruption of ‘Chaldeans’.

East of Nineveh



⁷Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, also contacted all who lived in Persia and to all who lived in the West: those who lived in Cilicia and Damascus, Lebanon and Antilebanon, and all who lived along the seacoast, ⁸and those among the nations of Carmel and Gilead, and Upper Galilee and the great plain of Esdraelon, ⁹and all who were in Samaria and its towns, and beyond the Jordan as far as Jerusalem, Betane, Chelous, Kadesh and the wadi of Egypt, and Tahpanhes and Rameses and the whole land of Goshen, ¹⁰even beyond Tanis and Memphis, and all who lived in Egypt as far as the borders of Ethiopia.

¹¹But all who lived in the whole region disregarded the summons of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, and refused to join him in the war; for they were not afraid of him, but regarded him as only one man. So they sent back his messengers empty-handed and in disgrace.

¹²Nebuchadnezzar became very angry with this whole region, and swore by his throne and kingdom that he would take revenge on the whole territory of Cilicia and Damascus and Syria, and would put to the sword all the inhabitants of the land of Moab, and the people of Ammon, and all Judea, and every one in Egypt, as far as the coasts of the two seas.

Verses 7-10 mention Persia, and then moves west, starting from Cilicia in the north and ending in Ethiopia in the south.

The Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges (verse 7) are in modern Lebanon, immediately to the north of Israel.

The 'seacoast' (verse 7) is the coast of the Mediterranean from Phoenicia south to Gaza. 'Esdraelon' (verse 8) is the Greek name for the western part of the valley of Jezreel, which runs east-west separating Samaria to the south from Galilee to the north. It includes the Megiddo plain.

Since the author is obviously familiar with the geography of the region, and in light of the naming of the places from north to south, we should assume that 'Betane' and 'Chelous', otherwise unknown, are towns to the south of Jerusalem. 'Kadesh' is Kadesh-barnea, south of Judea, the oasis where Moses and the escaping Hebrews settled during their trek in the wilderness (see Deuteronomy 32:51). The 'wadi of Egypt' (verse 9) separates Palestine and Egypt.

Tahpanhes (see Jeremiah 2:16), Rameses (see Genesis 46:28) and Tanis are in the delta region of the Nile. Memphis (see Jeremiah 2:16) is on the Nile just south of the delta.

The author has the whole region ignoring Nebuchadnezzar's call. They massively under-estimated his power and soon will pay the price.

Moab and Ammon (verse 12) are included among the regions which Nebuchadnezzar is determined to punish.

In context, the 'two seas' appears to refer to the White Nile and the Blue Nile.

West of Nineveh



‘Lord of the whole earth’

¹³In the seventeenth year he led his forces against King Arphaxad and defeated him in battle, overthrowing the whole army of Arphaxad and all his cavalry and all his chariots.

¹⁴He occupied his towns and then turned to Ecbatana, captured its towers, plundered its markets, and turned its glory into disgrace. ¹⁵He captured Arphaxad in the mountains of Rages and riddled him with his javelins, thus making an end of him once and for all. ¹⁶Then he returned to Nineveh, he and all his combined forces, a vast body of troops. There he and his forces rested and feasted for one hundred twenty days.

Nebuchadnezzar’s ‘seventeenth year’ was 588, the year before the siege of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 32:1-2). The reader cannot but feel that the very existence of Jerusalem is threatened.

The Elburz range was just to the north of Rages. ‘Mountains’(verse 15) in Judith have a symbolic power. One thinks of the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel (1Kings 18:17-46). At this stage Nebuchadnezzar appears to be the ‘Lord of the whole earth’(see 2:5). Does this portend his victory in the hills of Samaria and Judea?

There is a subtle irony here, for Nebuchadnezzar is celebrating his victory in Nineveh, a city destroyed years before he began his reign.

The 'eighteenth year' was a year etched into the memory of all Jews, for it was 587, the year of the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the city and temple.

'Orophernēs' was the Persian name of a military general who invaded Asia Minor and Egypt during the reign of the Persian king, Artaxerxes III (358-338). The author has chosen an appropriate name for Nebuchadnezzar's 'commander in chief'.

In claiming to be 'the lord of the whole earth' (verse 5) Nebuchadnezzar is unwittingly setting himself up against YHWH, the God of the Jews, who alone can claim that title.

The offering of 'earth and water' (verse 7) was a Persian ritual whereby a people acknowledged defeat and accepted to be vassals of the Persian king.

Verse 9 had many painful associations for the Jewish people.

The oath sworn by Nebuchadnezzar in verse 12 echoes an oath taken by YHWH (see Deuteronomy 32:39-41). In his overarching pride he is setting himself up for a contest with YHWH. This is the key thrust of the story. The author is writing to bolster the courage of his contemporaries to resist in YHWH's name any power that attempts to destroy their belief in their God.

¹In the eighteenth year, on the twenty-second day of the first month, a decision was made in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, to take revenge on the whole region, just as he had declared.

²He summoned all his ministers and all his nobles and set before them his secret plan and recounted fully, with his own lips, all the wickedness of the region. ³They decided that every one who had not obeyed his command should be destroyed.

⁴When he had completed his plan, Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians, called Holofernes, the commander in chief of his army, second only to himself, and said to him, ⁵"Thus says the Great King, the lord of the whole earth: Leave my presence and take with you experienced soldiers, one hundred twenty thousand foot soldiers and twelve thousand cavalry.

⁶March out against all the land to the west, because they disobeyed my orders. ⁷Tell them to prepare earth and water, for I am coming against them in my anger, and will cover the whole face of the earth with the feet of my troops, to whom I will hand them over to be plundered. ⁸Their wounded will fill their ravines and gullies, and the swelling river will be filled with their dead. ⁹I will lead them away captive to the ends of the whole earth. ¹⁰You will go and seize all their territory for me in advance.

They must yield themselves to you, and you will hold them for me until the day of their punishment. ¹¹But to those who resist show no mercy, but hand them over to slaughter and plunder throughout your whole region. ¹²For as I live, and by the power of my kingdom, what I have spoken I will accomplish by my own hand.

¹³And you – take care not to transgress any of your lord's commands, but carry them out exactly as I have ordered you; do it without delay."

Holofernes's campaign in the west

¹⁴Holofernes left the presence of his lord, and summoned all the commanders, generals, and officers of the Assyrian army.

¹⁵He mustered the picked troops by divisions as his lord had ordered him to do, one hundred twenty thousand of them, together with twelve thousand archers on horseback, ¹⁶and he organized them as a great army is marshalled for a campaign.

¹⁷He took along a vast number of camels and donkeys and mules for transport, and innumerable sheep and oxen and goats for food; ¹⁸also ample rations for everyone, and a huge amount of gold and silver from the royal palace. ¹⁹Then he set out with his whole army, to go ahead of King Nebuchadnezzar and to cover the whole face of the earth to the west with their chariots and cavalry and picked foot soldiers. ²⁰Along with them went a mixed crowd like a swarm of locusts, like the dust of the earth – a multitude that could not be counted.

²¹They marched for three days from Nineveh to the plain of Bectileth, and camped opposite Bectileth near the mountain that is to the north of Upper Cilicia.

²²From there Holofernes took his whole army, the infantry, cavalry, and chariots, and went up into the hill country.

²³He ravaged Put and Lud, and plundered all the Rassisites and the Ishmaelites on the border of the desert, south of the country of the Chelleans. ²⁴Then he followed the Euphrates and passed through Mesopotamia and destroyed all the fortified towns along the Wadi Abron, as far as the sea.

²⁵He also seized the territory of Cilicia, and killed everyone who resisted him.

Then he came to the southern borders of Japheth, facing Arabia.

²⁶He surrounded all the Midianites, and burned their tents and plundered their sheepfolds.

The size of the army is repeated (verse 15; see verse 5).

The destructive power of locusts (verse 20) was well known in Judah (see Deuteronomy 28:38; Joel 1:4).

There is no apparent reason for the author to purposely confuse the geography. No army can march the 500ks from Nineveh to Upper Cilicia in three days. Either 'Upper Cilicia' is a corruption of another place name, or the author knew little of geography beyond the regions already mentioned in 1:7-12. 'Bectileth' (verse 21) is otherwise unknown. Put is a district of Libya. It is nowhere near Lud (=Lydia in west Asia Minor). Who the author thought 'the Rassisites' and 'the Chelleans' (verse 23) were is anyone's guess. Verse 24 also makes no sense, and the Wadi Abron has not been identified. Either the text is hopelessly corrupt, or the author is including any place he has heard of to attest to the overwhelming of the whole region west of Nineveh, as Nebuchadnezzar had vowed (see 1:12; 2:1-13).

The army began its campaign in early spring ('the first month', 2:1). By late spring ('during the wheat harvest', 2:27), it had reached Damascus, which it destroyed.

The cities along the Mediterranean coast realised that they had no hope of resisting Holofernes, so they offered complete and unconditional surrender.

Some suggest that 'Sur' is a textual corruption of Tyre (Greek: Τύρος; Hebrew: טַרְסִישׁ), which, though a repetition, was accidentally included in the text. 'Okina' may be another textual corruption, this time for Acco, just north of Mount Carmel. Jamnia is 14ks north of Azotus (the Hellenistic name for Ashdod) and about 6ks inland from the Mediterranean. Askalon is 16ks south of Azotus. (It is a further 19ks to Gaza).

Holofernes 'demolished all their shrines and cut down their sacred groves' (verse 8). He also demanded that people worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god. This was never a demand of the Babylonian or Persian rulers. Much closer to the time our author is writing, it was the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV, who declared himself to be the epiphany of god ('Theos Epiphanes').

Dothan is 24ks south-east of Scythopolis (the Hellenistic name for Bethshan). 'Geba' may be a corruption of Gilboa. If, as seems likely, Judith was composed after the Hasmonaean king, John Hyrcanus (135-104), had annexed Samaria, our author may consider the mountains of Samaria to be part of Judea.

2:27 Then he went down into the plain of Damascus during the wheat harvest, and burned all their fields and destroyed their flocks and herds and sacked their towns and ravaged their lands and put all their young men to the sword.

28 So fear and dread of him fell upon all the people who lived along the seacoast, at Sidon and Tyre, and those who lived in Sur and Okina and all who lived in Jamnia. Those who lived in Azotus and Askalon feared him greatly.

3:1 They therefore sent messengers to him to sue for peace in these words: **2** "We, the servants of Nebuchadnezzar, the Great King, lie prostrate before you. Do with us whatever you will. **3** See, our buildings and all our land and all our wheat fields and our flocks and herds and all our encampments lie before you; do with them as you please. **4** Our towns and their inhabitants are also your slaves; come and deal with them as you see fit."

5 The men came to Holofernes and told him all this. **6** Then he went down to the seacoast with his army and stationed garrisons in the fortified towns and took picked men from them as auxiliaries. **7** These people and all in the countryside welcomed him with garlands and dances and tambourines. **8** Yet he demolished all their shrines and cut down their sacred groves; for it had been granted to him to destroy all the gods of the land, so that all nations should worship Nebuchadnezzar alone, and that all their dialects and tribes should call upon him as a god.

9 Then he came toward Esdraelon, near Dothan, facing the great ridge of Judea; **10** he camped between Geba and Scythopolis, and remained for a whole month in order to collect all the supplies for his army.

¹When the Israelites living in Judea heard of everything that Holofernes, the general of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Assyrians, had done to the nations, and how he had plundered and destroyed all their temples, ²they were greatly terrified at his approach; they were alarmed both for Jerusalem and for the temple of the Lord their God.

³For they had only recently returned from exile, and all the people of Judea had just now been reunited, and the sacred vessels and the altar and the temple had been consecrated after their profanation.

⁴So they sent word to every district of Samaria, and to Kona, Beth-horon, Belmain, and Jericho, and to Choba and Aesora, and the valley of Salem. ⁵They immediately set to and secured all the high hilltops and fortified the villages on them and stored up food in preparation for war – since their fields had recently been harvested.

⁶The high priest, Joakim, who was in Jerusalem at the time, wrote to the people of Bethulia and Bethomesthaim, which faces Esdraelon opposite the plain near Dothan, ⁷ordering them to seize the mountain passes, since by them Judea could be invaded; and it would be easy to stop any who tried to enter, for the approach was narrow, wide enough for only two at a time to pass.

With so many nations succumbing to the might of Holofernes's army, and with their neighbours offering unconditional surrender, one might expect Judea to follow suit. What hope could they have to resist the onslaught? But not so! They were alarmed, of course, but they could not allow Holofernes to destroy their sanctuary the way he has destroyed the sanctuaries of all the nations that he had conquered. They had to protect 'Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord their God'(verse 2).

The story is not bound to a particular time. The army set out in 587, the year that Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army (see 2:1). Now we hear that the exiles have but recently returned (verse 3), which puts the scene at the close of the sixth century. At the same time the author is recalling the recent rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabaeus (see 1Maccabees 4:36-61). Note that he calls the people "Israelites"(verse 1). The focus is on their religion. They alone are resolved to resist Holofernes.

The only period in post-exilic Judea when the high priest could be imagined as sending instructions to Samaria (see verse 4) was in the latter part of the second century BC when John Hyrcanus I (135-104) had annexed Samaria. The author, writing after that annexation, is encouraging his contemporaries to follow the example of the Jews in the story, by resisting those who would wipe out their religion.

Beth-horon is named in verse 4, for it was the scene of two major victories in the Maccabean resistance against Syrian oppression (see 1Maccabees 3:16 and 7:39). Jericho cannot but recall the first Israelite victory as they entered the Promised Land (see Joshua 6). The other places are unknown (and probably fictitious). This includes Bethulia and Bethomesthaim in verse 6, and the nonexistent pass of verse 7. The readers are expected to supply the name of their own town. Joakim (verse 6) is a name plucked from the past (see Nehemiah 12:26).

The 'Israelites' are determined to resist, not because they have the military power to do so, but because YHWH is their God. Hence the prayer, fasting and cult mentioned in these verses.

The first use of the word 'Council' (Greek: γερουσία) for the supreme governing body of the Jews was in the early years of the second century BC. It was replaced by 'Sanhedrin' (Greek: συνέδριον) during the time of John Hyrcanus II (67BC).

Fasting (verse 9) appears to have been more common in post-exilic Judaism as a ritual to attract divine mercy (see Ezra 8:21; 1 Maccabees 3:44-48; Esther 4:3, 16; Tobit 12:18). For covering cattle with sackcloth (verse 10) see Jonah 3:8-10. Verse 12 is the only time we hear of the altar being covered with it.

The land of Canaan was 'their heritage' (verse 12); an inheritance received, as the Jews believed, from God.

'Almighty' (verse 13) translates the Greek παντοκράτωρ (see also 8:13; 15:10; 16:5, 17).

Twice a day a lamb was sacrificed on the temple altar (see Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:6).

'Turban' (Greek: κίδαρις) is a loan word from Persian.

⁸The Israelites did as they had been ordered by the high priest Joakim and the Council of the whole people of Israel, in session at Jerusalem.

⁹Every man of Israel cried out to God with great fervour, and they humbled themselves with much fasting. ¹⁰They and their wives and their children and their cattle and every resident alien and hired laborer and purchased slave – they all put sackcloth around their waists.

¹¹All the Israelite men, women, and children living at Jerusalem prostrated themselves before the temple and put ashes on their heads and spread out their sackcloth before the Lord. ¹²They even draped the altar with sackcloth and cried out in unison, praying fervently to the God of Israel not to allow their infants to be carried off and their wives to be taken as booty, and the towns of their heritage to be destroyed, and the sanctuary to be profaned and desecrated to the malicious joy of the Gentiles.

¹³The Lord heard their prayers and had regard for their distress.

For many days the people throughout Judea and in Jerusalem continued their fast before the sanctuary of the Lord Almighty.

¹⁴The high priest Joakim and all the priests who stood before the Lord and ministered to the Lord, with sackcloth around their loins, offered the daily burnt offerings, the votive offerings, and freewill offerings of the people. ¹⁵With ashes on their turbans, they cried out to the Lord with all their might to look with favour on the whole house of Israel.

¹It was reported to Holofernes, the general of the Assyrian army, that the people of Israel had prepared for war and had closed the mountain passes and fortified all the high hilltops and set up barricades in the plains. ²In great anger he called together all the princes of Moab and the commanders of Ammon and all the governors of the coastland, ³and said to them, "Tell me, you Canaanites, what people is this that lives in the hill country? What towns do they inhabit? How large is their army, and in what does their power and strength consist? Who rules over them as king and leads their army? ⁴And why have they alone, of all who live in the west, refused to come out and meet me?"

⁵Then Achior, the leader of all the Ammonites, said to him, "May my lord please listen to a report from the mouth of your servant, and I will tell you the truth about this people that lives in the mountain district near you. No falsehood shall come from your servant's mouth.

⁶These people are descended from the Chaldeans. ⁷At one time they lived in Mesopotamia, because they did not wish to follow the gods of their ancestors who were in Chaldea. ⁸Since they had abandoned the ways of their ancestors, and worshipped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know, their ancestors drove them out from the presence of their gods. So they fled to Mesopotamia, and lived there for a long time. ⁹Then their God commanded them to leave the place where they were living and go to the land of Canaan. There they settled, and grew very prosperous in gold and silver and livestock. ¹⁰When a famine spread over the land of Canaan they went down to Egypt and lived there as long as they had food. There they became so great a multitude that their race could not be counted.

The Assyrian general is surprised and angry that the Jews have dared to attempt to defend themselves against him (see 4:7-8). This provides the occasion for him to ask about them, and why they, and 'they alone of all who live in the west'(verse 4) have defied him.

The Moabites and Ammonites fought with Nebuchadnezzar against Judah (see 2Kings 25:2; see also 1Maccabees 5:6).

Through the mouth of Achior (= Ahikar; verses 6-27), the author takes the occasion to remind his contemporaries of their history, a history directed by their God YHWH.

The story starts in Chaldea (see Genesis 11:31; 15:7; Nehemiah 9:7). There the ancestors of the Israelites 'abandoned the ways of their ancestors, and worshipped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know'(verse 8). They left Chaldea and settled in Mesopotamia (in Haran; see Genesis 11:31). Calling YHWH 'the God of heaven' was common during the Persian and Greek periods (see Ezra 1:2; 5:11-12; 2Chronicles 36:23; Daniel 2:37; Tobit 10:11-12; Judith 6:19; 11:17).

It was while they were in Mesopotamia that they were commanded by God to go to the land of Canaan (see Genesis 12:1-5). Because of famine in Canaan Abraham went to Egypt (see Genesis 12:10). Later Jacob went there for the same reason, and there 'the Israelites multiplied and grew exceedingly strong'(Exodus 1:7).

The author reminds his readers of their past when they were slaves in Egypt, and how their God led them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, to the 'land of the Amorites' on the eastern side of the Jordan, and then into Canaan. The only surprise in the list of nations that were driven out of Canaan by the Israelites is the inclusion of the 'Shechemites'. For the others see Deuteronomy 7:1; Joshua 9:1; 11:3; Nehemiah 9:8).

The author's theology in verses 17-18 fits with that of the Deuteronomists: good behaviour leads to prosperity, bad behaviour must be punished.

The razing of the temple was in 587. The return from exile began in 538. The author has Achior telling this as if it were in the past. The author's interest is not in chronology. He is using Achior's speech to remind his contemporaries of their history. His point is that if they remain faithful to YHWH and the Torah, they will certainly overcome their enemies, however powerful they may seem. YHWH will redeem them as he has always done in the past.

What happens in Judea depends on their behaviour. Holofernes will subdue Judea only if their God permits it as a punishment for their infidelity.

¹¹So the king of Egypt became hostile to them; he exploited them and forced them to make bricks. ¹²They cried out to their God, and he afflicted the whole land of Egypt with incurable plagues. So the Egyptians drove them out of their sight. ¹³Then God dried up the Red Sea before them, ¹⁴and he led them by the way of Sinai and Kadesh-barnea. They drove out all the people of the desert, ¹⁵and took up residence in the land of the Amorites, and by their might destroyed all the inhabitants of Heshbon; and crossing over the Jordan they took possession of all the hill country. ¹⁶They drove out before them the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Shechemites, and all the Gergesites, and lived there a long time.

¹⁷"As long as they did not sin against their God they prospered, for theirs is a God who hates wrongdoing. ¹⁸But when they departed from the way he had prescribed for them, they were utterly defeated in many battles and were led away captive to a foreign land. The temple of their God was razed to the ground, and their towns were occupied by their enemies. ¹⁹But now that they have returned to their God, they have come back from the places where they were scattered, and have occupied Jerusalem, where their sanctuary is, and have settled in the hill country, because it was uninhabited.

²⁰"So now, my master and lord, if there is any oversight in this people, if they have sined against their God and we find out their offense, then we can go up and defeat them. ²¹But if this nation is not a guilty, then let my lord pass them by; for their Lord and God will defend them, and we will become the laughing-stock of the whole world."

^{5:22}When Achior had finished saying these things, all the people standing around the tent began to complain. Holofernes' officers and all the inhabitants of the seacoast and Moab insisted that he should be cut to pieces. ²³They said, "We are not afraid of the Israelites; they are a weak people, unable to wage war. ²⁴Therefore let us go ahead, Lord Holofernes. Your vast army will swallow them up."

^{6:1}When the disturbance made by the people outside the council had died down, Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, said to Achior in the presence of all the foreign contingents: ²"Who are you, Achior and you mercenaries of Ephraim, to prophesy among us as you have done today and tell us not to make war against the people of Israel because their God will defend them? What god is there except Nebuchadnezzar? He will send his forces and destroy them from the face of the earth. Their God will not save them. ³We the king's servants will destroy them to a man. They cannot resist the might of our cavalry. ⁴We will overwhelm them; their mountains will be drunk with their blood, and their fields filled with their dead. Not even their footprints will survive our attack; they will utterly perish. So says King Nebuchadnezzar, lord of the whole earth. For he has spoken; none of his words will be in vain.

Not surprisingly, but, as we will see, foolishly, Achior's words are treated with contempt. The army of 'Lord Holofernes' has swallowed up the whole region. The Israelites are stupid to think they can resist it by relying on their God, especially since they are 'a weak people, unable to wage war'(verse 23).

Achior is the leader of the Ammonites (see 5:5). It appears that mercenaries from Ephraim (Samaria) must have backed him up, not wanting their country to suffer the destructive consequences of war (see 6:2).

We will see that Achior's words were to prove prophetic. It is Holofernes who proves to be the fool.

Holofernes's question: 'What God is there except Nebuchadnezzar?'(verse 2) goes to the heart of the whole book. Holofernes will have his answer. It is the answer given by King David:

Who is God, but YHWH?

– 2Samuel 22:32.

And in the Isaiah scroll:

I am YHWH, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.

– Isaiah 45:5

'Their God will not save them'(verse 2). We'll see.

The final words are loaded with irony. His words will, indeed, be proved vain.

Another example of irony. The next time Achior sees Holofernes's face, it will be his decapitated head that he will see (14:6).

Since Achior has such a fine view of the Israelites, Holofernes decides to have him dumped among them to see how foolish his words were when he sees them annihilated, and 'perishes along with them'(verse 8).

'Bethulia'(verses 10-11) was first mentioned in 4:6. It is a fictitious site chosen by the author as the location of Holofernes's defeat and the victory of the Israelites.

⁵“As for you, Achior, you Ammonite mercenary, you have said these in your day of insults; you shall not see my face again from this day until I take revenge on this race that came out of Egypt. ⁶Then at my return the sword of my army and the spear of my servants shall pierce your sides, and you shall fall among their wounded.

⁷Now my slaves are going to take you back into the hill country and put you in one of the towns beside the passes. ⁸You will not die until you perish along with them. ⁹If you really hope in your heart that they will not be taken, then do not look downcast! I have spoken, and none of my words shall fail to come true.”

¹⁰Then Holofernes ordered his slaves, who waited on him in his tent, to seize Achior and take him away to Bethulia and hand him over to the Israelites. ¹¹So the slaves took him and led him out of the camp into the plain, and from the plain they went up into the hill country and came to the springs below Bethulia.

The men of Bethulia

12When the men of the town saw them, they seized their weapons and ran out of the town to the top of the hill, and all the slingers kept them from coming up by throwing stones at them. **13**Having taken shelter below the hill, Holofernes's men bound Achior and left him lying at the foot of the hill, and returned to their master.

14The Israelites came down from their town and found him. They untied him and brought him into Bethulia and placed him before the magistrates of their town, **15**who in those days were Uzziah son of Micah, of the tribe of Simeon, and Chabris son of Gothoniel, and Charmis son of Melchiel. **16**They called together all the elders of the town, and all their young men and women ran to the assembly. They set Achior in the midst of all their people, and Uzziah questioned him about what had happened.

17He answered and told them what had taken place at the council of Holofernes, and all that he had said in the presence of the Assyrian leaders, and all that Holofernes had boasted he would do against the House of Israel. **18**Then the people fell down and worshipped God, and cried out: **19**"O Lord God of heaven, see their arrogance, and have pity on our people in their humiliation, and look kindly today on the faces of those who are consecrated to you."

20Then they reassured Achior, and praised him highly. **21**Uzziah took him from the assembly to his own house and gave a banquet for the elders; and all that night they called on the God of Israel for help.

The movement of the story has, to this point, been with the army of the Assyrian Empire sweeping all before it.

In verse 12 the focus changes. We see the action of this band of Israelites from the otherwise unknown town of Bethulia bravely resisting the approach of Holofernes's men who are forced to take shelter and dump Achior at the foot of the hill on which Bethulia stands.

Hopeless as the situation appears the people of Bethulia have carried out the instructions given them by the high priest (see 4:6-7).

The name of the first magistrate is Uzziah (Hebrew: **עֲזַיָּהוּ** ; YHWH is my strength). In light of the other names chosen by our author, we wonder whether he will live up to his name, or is this another irony? He is portrayed as 'of the tribe of Simeon', going back to the time when this tribe was located in the general vicinity of Shechem in central Palestine (see Genesis 34 and Deuteronomy 27:12-13). The other names are inventions of the author.

Following the example of the Israelites in Jerusalem (see 4:8-12), the people of Bethulia 'called on the God of Israel for help' (verse 21). They are relying on the fact that they are 'consecrated' to YHWH, the 'God of heaven' (verse 19; see 5:8).

With the addition of troops from Israel's neighbours, the invading army has increased by fifty thousand since it first set out from Nineveh (see 2:15). It is, indeed, a formidable force.

Dothan has already featured (see 3:9 and 4:6). The other two towns appear to be fictional.

The Israelites are, of course, terrified, but they continue to follow the instructions of the high priest (see 4:6-7).

The first task of the invading army is to seize control of the water supply.

¹The next day Holofernes ordered his whole army, and all the allies who had joined him, to break camp and move against Bethulia, and to seize the passes up into the hill country and make war on the Israelites.

²So all their warriors marched off that day; their fighting forces numbered one hundred seventy thousand infantry and twelve thousand cavalry, not counting the baggage and the foot soldiers handling it, a very great multitude. ³They encamped in the valley near Bethulia, beside the spring, and they deployed on a wide front from Dothan as far as Balbaim and in depth from Bethulia to Cyamon, which faces Esdraelon.

⁴When the Israelites saw their vast numbers, they were greatly terrified and said to one another, "They will now strip clean the whole land; neither the high mountains nor the valleys nor the hills will bear their weight." ⁵Yet they all seized their weapons, and when they had kindled fires on their towers, they remained on guard all that night.

⁶On the second day Holofernes deployed all his cavalry in full view of the Israelites in Bethulia. ⁷He reconnoitered the approaches to their town, and discovered the springs that supplied their water. These he seized and set guards of soldiers over them, and then returned to his main army.

⁸Then all the chieftains of the Edomites and all the leaders of the Moabites and the commanders of the coastland came to him and said, ⁹“Listen to what we have to say, my lord, and your army will suffer no losses. ¹⁰This people, the Israelites, do not rely on their spears but on the height of the mountains where they live, for it is not easy to reach the tops of their mountains. ¹¹Therefore, my lord, do not fight against them in regular formation, and not a man of your army will fall. ¹²Remain in your camp, and keep all the men in your forces with you; let your servants take possession of the spring of water that flows from the foot of the mountain, ¹³for this is where all the people of Bethulia get their water. In this way thirst will destroy them, and they will surrender their town. Meanwhile, we and our people will go up to the tops of the nearby mountains and camp there to keep watch to see that no one gets out of the town. ¹⁴They and their wives and children will waste away with famine, and before the sword reaches them they will be strewn about in the streets where they live. ¹⁵Thus you will pay them back with evil, because they rebelled and did not receive you peaceably.”

¹⁶These words pleased Holofernes and all his attendants, and he gave orders to do as they had said. ¹⁷So the army of the Ammonites moved forward, together with five thousand Assyrians, and they encamped in the valley and seized the water supply and the springs of the Israelites. ¹⁸Meanwhile the Edomites and Ammonites went up and encamped in the hill country opposite Dothan; and they sent some of their men toward the south and the east, toward Egrebel, which is near Chous beside the Wadi Mochmur. The rest of the Assyrian army encamped in the plain, and covered the whole face of the land. Their tents and supplies formed an immense camp, so vast was their number.

The Moabites have already featured in the story (see 1:12; 5:2, 22). The Edomites are mentioned only here. The author is going back to the time when they inhabited the region just to the south of Moab. That was before they had to migrate west due to pressure from the Arabs. By the time of the author the Idumeans (the post-exilic descendants of the Edomites) had been conquered by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 (see 1 Maccabees 5:1-5).

They offer Holofernes local advice, which he accepts. Victory is never in doubt, but this way his victory will have the extra glory of his not having lost a single warrior.

They appear to know of a hidden spring which the army had missed earlier (see verse 12 and verse 7).

The Ammonites have also been mentioned earlier (see 1:12 and 5:2). Achior was their leader before he was dumped at Bethulia (see 5:5; 6:5).

Egrebel, Chous, and the Wadi Mochmur join the other fictitious sites that help persuade the readers to apply this story to their own situation.

The situation appears hopeless, and the advice given to Holofernes is working. There is no escape for the inhabitants of Bethulia and they are dying of thirst.

The people are used to God punishing them for their sins. It is clear to them that this is what is happening now. God has sold them into the hands of the enemies (see verse 25), punishing them for their sins and the sins of their ancestors (see verse 28). They go to Uzziah in an attempt to get him to see reason and do what he should have done in the first place. They should have done what all their neighbours did and offer unconditional surrender to the invaders. At least that way their lives would have been spared.

¹⁹The Israelites then cried out to the Lord their God, for their courage failed, because all their enemies had surrounded them, and there was no way of escape from them. ²⁰The whole Assyrian army, their infantry, chariots, and cavalry, surrounded them for thirty-four days, until all the water containers of every inhabitant of Bethulia were empty. ²¹The cisterns were drying up, and on no day did they have enough water to drink, for their drinking water was rationed. ²²Their children were listless, and the women and young men fainted from thirst and were collapsing in the streets of the town and in the gateways; they no longer had any strength.

²³Then all the people, the young men, the women, and the children, gathered around Uzziah and the rulers of the town and cried out with a loud voice, and said before all the elders, ²⁴“Let God judge between you and us! You have done us a great injury in not making peace with the Assyrians. ²⁵For now we have no one to help us; God has sold us into their hands, to be strewn before them in thirst and utter helplessness. ²⁶Contact them at once and surrender the whole town as booty to the army of Holofernes and to all his forces. ²⁷For it would be better for us to be captured by them. We shall indeed become slaves, but our lives will be spared, and we shall not witness our little ones dying before our eyes, and our wives and children drawing their last breath. ²⁸We call to witness against you heaven and earth and our God, the Lord of our ancestors, who punishes us for our sins and the sins of our ancestors; do today what we have said!”

Wait five more days

²⁹Then great and general lamentation arose throughout the assembly, and they cried out to the Lord God with a loud voice.

³⁰But Uzziah said to them, "Courage, my brothers and sisters! Let us hold out for five days more; by that time the Lord our God will turn his mercy to us again, for he will not forsake us utterly. ³¹But if these days pass by, and no help comes for us, I will do as you say."

³²Then he dismissed the people to their various posts, and they went up on the walls and towers of their town. The women and children he sent home. In the town they were in great misery.

Uzziah promises to follow their advice, but asks for five more days. Perhaps God might yet have mercy on them and deliver them.

The men return to their posts, defending the town. The women are sent home. Another irony. It is a woman, not a man, who will be God's instrument in saving them, as we are about to see.