

JUDITH 8-16

¹News of what had just happened reached Judith, the daughter of Merari, son of Oz, son of Joseph, son of Oziel, son of Elkiah, son of Hananiah, son of Gideon, son of Raphain, son of Ahitub, son of Elijah, son of Hilkiah, son of Eliab, son of Nathanael, son of Shelumiel, son of Zurishadai, son of Israel.

²Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to the same tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest.

³He was overseeing those who were binding sheaves in the field, when he suffered sunstroke. He took to his bed and died in his town, Bethulia. He was buried with his ancestors in the field between Dothan and Balamon.

⁴Judith had been a widow in her home for three years and four months. ⁵She had set up a shelter for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow's clothing.

⁶She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the House of Israel.

⁷She was beautiful in appearance, and was very lovely to behold. Her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields; and she maintained this estate.

⁸No one spoke ill of her, so devoutly did she fear God.

Judith (Hebrew: **יְהוּדִית**) means 'Jewess'. It is the feminine form of Judas, the name of the famous Judas Maccabaeus. Her name is chosen, it seems, to symbolise the nation.

The author traces her genealogy right back to Israel (that is, Jacob; see Genesis 32:28). The only names otherwise familiar are 'Shelumiel' and his father 'Zurishaddai' (the son of Simeon; see Numbers 1:6). Normally it is the man's genealogy that is given. This is one of the ironies of the book. It is a woman, not a man, whose trust in God has no limit, and who, therefore, is God's chosen instrument in saving his people. Our author is telling his contemporaries to rely, not on their human resources (which cannot hold out against the forces that dominate them), but on their God. A woman can do it, so there is no excuse for anyone to give up.

The author adds 'Balamon' (verse 3) to his other fictitious places.

Judith is a woman – which in that culture gave her little scope for exercising power in the public sphere. She is a 'widow' which puts her in an even more powerless position, except for the key point that YHWH is a God who heeds the cry of the poor, and is the protector of widows (see Psalm 68:5; Sirach 35:15). She represents suffering Israel (see Isaiah 54:4; Lamentations 1:12; 5:3-4).

She is devoted to God, and carries out her devotions, her mourning and fasting, in secret, in the privacy of a shelter which she had constructed on the roof of her house. On festive days she followed the customs of her people.

Then comes the quality that is the key to the plot: 'She was beautiful in appearance and was very lovely to behold' (verse 7). She 'fears God'. We will soon see that she fears no person or situation other than YHWH.

Her reputation in the town for holiness, and as we will see for wisdom, was such that the magistrates responded when her female slave summoned them.

She reprimands them for putting God to the test by setting a time limit on God's response, followed by an oath to surrender if God does not act in the time they have set.

Where is their humility? They must leave God free to act in his own time and according to his own wisdom.

Theirs is not to set a time limit on God, but to 'wait for his deliverance'(verse 17), and to continue to call upon him. 'He will hear our voice, if it pleases him'(verse 17).

⁹When Judith heard the harsh words spoken by the people against the magistrate, because they were faint for lack of water, and when she heard all that Uzziah said to them, and how he promised them under oath to surrender the town to the Assyrians after five days, ¹⁰she sent her maid, who was in charge of her property, to summon Uzziah and Chabris and Charmis, the elders of the town.

¹¹They came to her, and she said to them: "Listen to me, magistrates of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies unless the Lord turns and helps us within so many days. ¹²Who are you to put God to the test today, and to set yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs? ¹³You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test, but you will never learn anything! ¹⁴You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to fathom God, who made all these things, and read his mind or comprehend his thought?

No, my brothers, do not anger the Lord our God. ¹⁵For if he does not choose to help us within these five days, he has power to protect us within any time he pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies. ¹⁶Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. ¹⁷Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him.

18“For never in our generation, nor in these present days, has there been any tribe or family or people or town of ours that worships gods made with hands, as was done in days gone by. 19That is why our ancestors were handed over to the sword and to pillage, and so suffered a great catastrophe before our enemies. 20But we recognise no other god but him, and so we hope that he will not disdain us or any of our nation. 21For if we are captured, all Judea will be exposed and our sanctuary will be plundered; and he will make us pay for its desecration with our blood. 22The slaughter of our kindred and the captivity of the land and the desolation of our heritage – all this he will bring on our heads among the Gentiles, wherever we serve as slaves. We will be an offense and a disgrace in the eyes of our masters. 23For our slavery will not issue in favour, but the Lord our God will turn it to dishonour.

24“Therefore, my brothers, let us set an example for our kindred, for their lives depend upon us, and the sanctuary – both the temple and the altar – rests upon us. 25In spite of everything let us give thanks to the Lord our God, who is putting us to the test as he did to our ancestors. 26Remember what he did with Abraham, and how he tested Isaac, and what happened to Jacob in Syrian Mesopotamia, while he was tending the sheep of Laban, his mother’s brother. 27For he has not tried us with fire, as he did them, to search their hearts, nor has he taken vengeance on us; but the Lord scourges those who are close to him in order to admonish them.”

Judith attempts to raise their hopes. The people and the magistrates have been assuming that the dreadful situation in which they find themselves is a sign that God has abandoned them and is punishing them for their sins and the sins of their ancestors. Judith makes the point that their ancestors were punished for idolatry, which led to ‘a great catastrophe’, the catastrophe of 587, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. They are different from their ancestors in that they have not committed idolatry (verses 18-20).

If they surrender, as they are planning to do after five days, they will be responsible for a repetition of the catastrophe of 587, and, because of their sin, Judea will be exposed and God’s holy sanctuary will be plundered. If they fail to hold out they will have to bear the responsibility for the slaughter, enslavement and desolation of their people.

They must set an example. Instead of contemplating surrender they must continue to put their trust in God, and continue to offer thanks. God is testing them, not abandoning or punishing them. They must not fail the test. So much hangs of their remaining faithful and steadfast.

The author, through Judith, is reminding his contemporaries of the history of the patriarchs, who remained faithful against all the odds.

They are being tested, but not to the extent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is because they are so close to God that he is purifying them in the fire of adversity. They must not fail the test.

Uzziah speaks highly of Judith's wisdom and concedes the logic of her argument.

However he has taken an oath and is not free to go back on it. He asks her to put her piety to good use by praying for rain, which will ease the situation.

Obviously what they hope for can, of itself, only put off the evil day. Judith has other plans. Without giving anything away she tells them what to do, promising that within the five days 'the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand' (verse 34).

Since they have no other plans, they agree to let her go ahead with whatever it is she is planning. As they see it, they have nothing to lose.

²⁸Then Uzziah said to her, "All that you have said was spoken out of a true heart, and there is no one who can take issue with your words. ²⁹Today is not the first time your wisdom has been shown, but from the beginning of your life all the people have recognized your good sense and sound judgment.

³⁰But the people were so thirsty that they compelled us to do for them what we have promised, and made us take an oath that we cannot break. ³¹Now since you are a God-fearing woman, pray for us, so that the Lord may send us rain to fill our cisterns. Then we will no longer feel faint from thirst."

³²Then Judith said to them, "Listen to me. I am about to do something that will go down through all generations of our descendants. ³³Stand at the town gate tonight so that I may go out with my maid; and within the days after which you have promised to surrender the town to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand. ³⁴Only, do not try to find out what I am doing; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to do."

³⁵Uzziah and the rulers said to her, "Go in peace, and may the Lord God go before you, to take vengeance on our enemies."

³⁶So they returned from the tent and went to their posts.

¹Then Judith prostrated herself, put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing. At the very time when the evening incense was being offered in the house of God in Jerusalem, Judith cried out to the Lord with a loud voice, and said, ²“O Lord God of my ancestor Simeon, to whom you gave a sword to take revenge on those strangers who had torn off a virgin’s clothing to defile her, and exposed her thighs to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her; for you said, ‘It shall not be done’ – yet they did it; ³so you gave up their rulers to be killed, and their bed, which was ashamed of the deceit they had practiced, was stained with blood, and you struck down slaves along with princes, and princes on their thrones. ⁴You gave up their wives for rape and their daughters to captivity, and all their booty to be divided among your beloved children who burned with zeal for you and abhorred the pollution of their blood and called on you for help. O God, my God, hear me also, a widow.

⁵“For you have done these things and those that went before and those that followed. You have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. What you had in mind has happened; ⁶the things you decided on presented themselves and said, ‘Here we are!’ For all your ways are prepared in advance, and your judgment is with foreknowledge.

Judith’s prayer is linked with the evening incense ritual in the Temple (verse 1; see Exodus 30:8). Jerusalem and the temple are at the heart of the author’s concern (see 4:2-3; 5:18; 8:21, 24).

Genesis 34:30 and 49:5-7 are critical of Simeon’s taking revenge on the people of Shechem for Hamor’s rape of his sister Dinah. The author has Judith identifying with Simeon in being God’s instrument in punishing those who would ‘rape’ God’s holy land and its temple.

In verses 3-4 we have a clear example of an assumption that we find throughout the Older Testament. Such was their understanding of God that they took it for granted that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God’s blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God’s disapproval and punishment. Through the lips of Achior our author has already stated as much:

As long as they did not sin against their God they prospered, for the God who hates iniquity is with them. But 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.

– Judith 5:17-18

A terrible deed was perpetrated, which Simeon avenged. In the theology espoused by the author, it was God who gave Simeon the sword (verse 2). It was God who ‘struck down slaves along with princes’ (verse 3). It was God who ‘gave up their wives for rape and their daughters to captivity’ (verse 4).

The general principle is clearly expressed in verses 5-6. Behind this view is a way of thinking of power. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the author thinks of God as 'Almighty' (see 4:13; 8:13; and later 15:10; 16:5, 17), declaring his faith that there are no limits to God's power, he has not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that the power God has is the power of love. God is not more powerful than human beings in the way we humans abuse power. God does not will the raping of the women of Shechem to punish Hamor for his rape of Dinah! It is God's love-power that has no limits, not God's exercise of control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews' (1 Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he did not punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control. In Judith's prayer there is a clear assumption that God is the one ultimately deciding whatever happens in our world. The author has not grasped what it means for God to have made us free, and to respect that freedom even when we abuse it.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1 Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation – by loving. God willed creation to be an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is free and not determined. We experience this.

When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Many texts in the Older Testament state this, and state it beautifully (see Judith 9:11), but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God's relationship with the world is quite different from the way we have come to see it through the life and teaching of Jesus.

We do not assume that Jerusalem was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that our author thought this way (see Judith 5:17-18). Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

God's all powerful Love

We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We do not – or at least we should not – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. He was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus saying: 'You look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word'(John 8:37). What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The understanding of our author, expressed by Judith in her prayer, is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: 'Not my will but yours be done'(Mark 14:36).

In the course of history the Older Testament has inspired people from every culture. Its meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them. It is essential for those who want to follow Jesus, that we see him as the one who brought the scriptures to their fulfilment. He helped us get to the heart of God's revealed word and to transcend the human limitations of its authors. We are to pray to read the sacred Scriptures with Jesus' eyes, and to hear him say: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you'(see Matthew 5:21-43). We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the text in the light of the revelation we have received in Jesus.

Verse 7 includes an allusion to the triumphant song of Moses and the Israelites, celebrating God's freeing them from the pursuing Egyptians (see Exodus 15). Verse 3 of that song in the Greek Septuagint Version reads:

He is the Lord who crushes wars;
the Lord is his name.

– Exodus 15:3

Once again the focus is on the temple in Jerusalem (verse 8; see comment on verse 1).

Judith is praying that God will bless 'the guile of my lips'(verse 10; also verse 13). The author is offering the reader advance hints on the development of the plot.

The whole of the first part of the book demonstrated the 'might of powerful men'(verse 11). God's power does not depend on male power (see 2Samuel 17:45-47; Judges 7:2). Hence the stress on 'the hand of a woman'(verse 10).

In verses 11-12 the author offers here a litany containing ten titles of God:

- God of the lowly
- helper of the oppressed
- upholder of the weak
- protector of the forsaken
- saviour of those without hope
- God of my father
- God of the heritage of Israel
- Lord of heaven and earth
- Creator of the waters
- King of all your creation

Do not miss the universal scope of verse 14.

7"Here now are the Assyrians, a greatly increased force, priding themselves in their horses and riders, boasting in the strength of their foot soldiers, and trusting in shield and spear, in bow and sling. They do not know that you are the Lord who crushes wars; the Lord is your name. ⁸Break their strength by your might, and bring down their power in your anger; for they intend to defile your sanctuary, and to pollute the tabernacle where your glorious name resides, and to break off the horns of your altar with the sword. ⁹Look at their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads.

Give to me, a widow, the strong hand I need to do what I plan. ¹⁰By the guile of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman. ¹¹"For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on powerful men. You are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, saviour of those without hope. ¹²Please, please, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! ¹³Grant me a beguiling tongue to wound and bruise those who have terrible designs against your covenant, and against your sacred house, and against Mount Zion, and against the house your children possess. ¹⁴Let your whole nation and every tribe know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!"

¹When Judith had stopped crying out to the God of Israel, and had ended all these words, ²she rose from where she lay prostrate. She called her maid and went down into the house where she lived on sabbaths and festal days. ³She removed the sackcloth she had been wearing, and took off her widow's garments. Then she bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment. She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. ⁴She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to attract the attention of all the men who might see her.

⁵She gave her maid a skin of wine and a flask of oil, and filled a bag with roasted grain, dried fig cakes, and fine bread; then she wrapped up all her dishes and gave them to her to carry.

⁶Then they went out to the town gate of Bethulia and found Uzziah standing there with the elders of the town, Chabris and Charmis. ⁷When they saw her transformed in appearance and dressed differently, they were very greatly astounded at her beauty and said to her, ⁸"May the God of our ancestors grant you favour and fulfill your plans, so that the people of Israel may glory and Jerusalem may be exalted." She bowed ⁹and said to them, "Order the gate of the town to be opened for me so that I may go out and accomplish the things you have just said to me." So they ordered the young men to open the gate for her, as she requested.

She removes her mourning attire and adorns herself in festive garments. This is an essential element of her plan, which is yet to be revealed. It is also an omen, pointing to a successful outcome when the whole nation can cease its mourning and rejoice in God's deliverance.

Isaiah 3:18-23 offers a long list of female adornments (of which he does not approve).

Judith wraps up all her dishes to ensure that the food that she eats is ritually pure according to the laws of her people (compare Daniel 1:8).

Once again her beauty, and so men's attraction to her, is stressed (verse 7; see 8:7). This will be repeated over and over in the following passages (see 10:14, 19, 23).

The men, like the reader, are kept in the dark as to Judith's plan. Earlier she had told them not to try to find out what she had in mind, and they had agreed (see 8:34-35). Nothing has changed.

They can't take their eyes off her. The author wants the reader to keep watching her as she gradually fades into the distance.

Judith is, of course, not a Jew (in spite of the name the author has given her). She belongs to the tribe of Simeon, not Judah. She could have spoken of herself as an Israelite. In the circumstances that may have linked her too closely with the people who have determined to oppose Holofernes (see 5:1, 23; 6:2, 10). Perhaps she is hoping that the word 'Hebrew' would be associated in the mind of the Assyrians, not with the nation that is daring to oppose them, but with the people who were in a submissive situation as slaves in Egypt.

She speaks of their certain victory as devouring those opposing them (verse 12), an expression we have already heard from the advisers of Holofernes (see 5:24). The idea of their being victorious without losing any of their men (see verse 13) repeats the idea given to Holofernes by the Edomites and Moabites (see 7:9).

Now it is the enemies who are smitten with her beauty (verse 14). They can't do enough for her, and proceed to escort her and her maid 'to the tent of Holofernes' (verse 17).

On the surface it appears that Judith is being captured by the Assyrians. Ironically, it is they who are captivated by her.

¹⁰When they had done this, Judith went out, accompanied by her maid. The men of the town kept staring after her until she had gone down the mountain and passed through the valley, where they lost sight of her.

¹¹As the women were going straight on through the valley, an Assyrian patrol came upon her ¹²and took her into custody. They asked her, "To what people do you belong, and where are you coming from, and where are you going?" She replied, "I am a daughter of the Hebrews, but I am fleeing from them, for they are about to be handed over to you to be devoured. ¹³I am on my way to see Holofernes the commander of your army with reliable information I will reveal only to him a way by which he can go and capture all the hill country without losing one of his men, captured or slain."

¹⁴When the men heard her words, and observed her face – she was in their eyes marvellously beautiful – they said to her, ¹⁵"You have saved your life by hurrying down to see our lord. Go at once to his tent; some of us will escort you and hand you over to him. ¹⁶When you stand before him, have no fear in your heart, but tell him what you have just said, and he will treat you well."

¹⁷They chose from their number a hundred men to accompany her and her maid, and they brought them to the tent of Holofernes.

¹⁸There was great excitement throughout the camp, for her arrival was reported from tent to tent. They came and gathered around her as she stood outside the tent of Holofernes, waiting until they told him about her. ¹⁹They marvelled at her beauty and, judging by her, they began to wonder about the Israelites. They said to one another, "Who can despise these people, who have women like this among them? It is not wise to leave one of their men alive, for if we let them go they will be able to beguile the whole world!" ²⁰Then the bodyguard of Holofernes and all his servants came out and led her into the tent. ²¹Holofernes was resting on his bed under a canopy that was woven with purple and gold, emeralds and other precious stones. ²²When they told him of her, he came to the front of the tent, with silver lamps carried before him. ²³When Judith came into the presence of Holofernes and his servants, they all marvelled at the beauty of her face. She prostrated herself and did obeisance to him, but his slaves raised her up.

The word translated here as 'arrival' is the Greek παρουσία, a word used for the arrival of a distinguished visitor such as an emperor or senator.

Here again all the males marvel at her beauty (verses 19 and 23; see 8:7; 10:7, 10).

Judith is already working her magic, as Holofernes begins in a protective tone, reassuring her that she is safe with him. He paints himself in the best colours. He is clearly attracted to her and wants her to be attracted to him.

Judith responds by assuring Holofernes that she will speak only the truth in the presence of her 'lord' (verse 5). Naturally he takes this as a reference to himself. She has YHWH in mind! It is God's purposes that will not fail, not those of Holofernes (verse 6).

She further ingratiates herself with Holofernes by swearing an oath in the name of Nebuchadnezzar, whom Holofernes looks on as a god (see 3:8; 6:2). In her eyes her oath has no value for it is meaningless. In his eyes she is bound by a solemn oath to the one he recognises as the only true god!

Holofernes is so open to flattery that he takes seriously her words, including the rather comical inclusion of the animals and birds (verse 7).

Judith prayed for a beguiling tongue (see 9:10, 13). Her prayer is being answered.

¹Then Holofernes said to her, "Courage, woman. Do not be afraid. I have never hurt anyone who chose to serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of all the earth. ²Even now, if your people who live in the hill country had not slighted me, I would never have lifted my spear against them. They have brought this on themselves. ³But now tell me why you have fled from them and have come over to us. In any event, you have come to safety. Take courage! You will live tonight and ever after. ⁴No one will hurt you. Rather, all will treat you well, as they do the servants of my lord King Nebuchadnezzar."

⁵Judith answered him, "Accept the words of your servant, and let your handmaid speak in your presence. I will say nothing false to my lord this night. ⁶If you follow the advice of your servant, God will accomplish something through you, and my lord will not fail to achieve his purposes. ⁷I swear by Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole earth, and by the power of him who has sent you to direct every living being, that not only do human beings serve him because of you, but also the animals of the field and the cattle and the birds of the air. It is thanks to you that Nebuchadnezzar and all his house will prosper. ⁸For we have heard of your wisdom and skill, and it is reported throughout the whole world that you alone are the best in the whole kingdom, the most informed and the most astounding in military strategy."

⁹“Now as for Achior’s speech in your council, we have heard his words, for the people of Bethulia spared him and he told them all he had said to you. ¹⁰Lord and master, do not disregard what he said, but take it to heart, for it is true. Indeed our nation cannot be punished, nor can the sword prevail against them, unless they sin against their God.

¹¹“But as it has worked out, my lord need not be defeated and his purpose frustrated. Death will fall upon them, for sin has them in its power. They are about to provoke their God to anger by committing a sacrilege.

¹²Since their food supply is exhausted and their water has almost given out, they have planned to kill their livestock and have determined to use all that God by his laws has forbidden them to eat. ¹³They have decided to consume the first fruits of the grain and the tithes of the wine and oil, which they had consecrated and set aside for the priests who minister in the presence of our God in Jerusalem – things it is not lawful for any of the people even to touch with their hands. ¹⁴. They have sent messengers to Jerusalem in order to bring back permission from the council of the elders, since even there the people have been doing the same things. ¹⁵When the response reaches them and they act upon it, on that very day they will be handed over to you to be destroyed.

Having won Holofernes’s trust, Judith begins by asserting the truth of what Achior had said earlier: victory over the Israelites is possible only if their God wants to punish Israel’s sin. Before attacking them, Holofernes would be wise to ascertain that they have angered their God by sinning (see 5:20-21). Like Judith in this scene, Achior began by assuring Holofernes that he would speak only the truth (see 5:5). On that occasion Holofernes laughed at the stupidity of Achior’s advice (see 6:2). The difference here is the feminine charm of Judith, which is working its magic on Holofernes.

She goes on to explain that the Israelites are about to act in a sacrilegious way, which must bring down upon them God’s ire. In light of the obvious desperation of the citizens of Bethulia, her statement is completely plausible.

Her statement about the behaviour of the Israelites in Jerusalem is a straight-out lie. She, and so the author, appears to think that the end justifies the means.

Her reason for coming to Holofernes is also completely plausible. Being a God-fearing person (see verse 17) she does not want to have any part in the sacrilege!

She continues her flattery. Holofernes has a key role to play in God's carrying out his will (verse 16). Her words deceive him in to thinking that he is going to be God's instrument in punishing the Israelites. She has a different meaning.

She also makes it clear that they haven't sinned yet. This puts Holofernes in a position of having to depend on her to let him know when it is safe to attack. It also gives her an excuse to leave the camp each night to 'pray to God', who will reveal to her when the sin has been committed, and so when Holofernes can carry out God's punishment on them (verse 17). At least, that is the apparent meaning of her words. She hints at having possession of a prophetic gift.

Holofernes and his key advisers join the line of males that admire her beauty (verses 21). They also marvel at her wisdom (verses 20, 21). Holofernes can't help himself. He makes a personal assertion of both (see verse 23). He is hoping that they will share more than the same God (verse 23).

16“So when I, your slave, learned all this, I fled from them. God has sent me to accomplish with you things that will astonish the whole world wherever people shall hear about them. **17**Your servant is indeed God-fearing and serves the God of heaven night and day. So, my lord, I will remain with you; but every night your servant will go out into the valley and pray to God. He will tell me when they have committed their sins. **18**Then I will come and tell you, so that you may go out with your whole army, and not one of them will be able to withstand you. **19**Then I will lead you through Judea, until you come to Jerusalem; there I will set your throne. You will drive them like sheep that have no shepherd, and no dog will so much as growl at you. For this was told me to give me foreknowledge; it was announced to me, and I was sent to tell you.”

20Her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants. They marvelled at her wisdom and said, **21**“No other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful or speaks so wisely!”

22Then Holofernes said to her, “God has done well to send you ahead of the people, to strengthen our hands and bring destruction on those who have despised my lord. **23**You are not only beautiful in appearance, but wise in speech. If you do as you have said, your God shall be my God, and you shall live in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and be renowned throughout the whole world.”

Judith is allowed to leave the camp

¹Then he commanded them to bring her in where his silver dinnerware was kept, and ordered them to set a table for her with some of his own delicacies, and with some of his own wine to drink. ²But Judith said, "I cannot partake of them, or it will be an offense. I will have enough with the things I brought with me." ³Holofernes said to her, "If your supply runs out, where can we get you more of the same? For none of your people are here with us." ⁴Judith replied, "As surely as you live, my lord, your servant will not use up the supplies I have with me before the Lord carries out by my hand what he has determined."

⁵Then the servants of Holofernes brought her into the tent, and she slept until midnight. Toward the morning watch she got up ⁶and sent this message to Holofernes: "Let my lord now give orders to allow your servant to go out and pray."

⁷Holofernes commanded his guards not to hinder her. She remained in the camp three days. She went out each night to the valley of Bethulia, and bathed at the spring from her uncleanness. ⁸After bathing, she prayed the Lord God of Israel to direct her way for the triumph of his people. ⁹Then she returned purified and stayed in the tent until she ate her food toward evening.

Holofernes offers Judith the delicacies from his own table. Quite apart from her own commitment to eating only foods allowed by the Torah, it is an essential part of her strategy that she decline the food he offers her. After all, she has made the point to him that God will punish the Israelites for eating food they should not eat (see 11:13). If she is careless in regard to food, surely even Holofernes must have his suspicions that all is not as it seems.

Verse 4, like many of Judith's previous words, carries a double meaning. Holofernes thinks she is saying that it won't be long before he can have a glorious victory. She has other ideas about what God plans to do 'by my hand'.

At their first meeting, Judith had spoken of her intention to go out of the camp to pray, waiting for God to tell her when the people had sinned so that she could report back to Holofernes (see 11:17). Here she carries out her plan with the authority of Holofernes.

She plunges into the water (the Greek verb is βαπτίζειν - from which our word 'baptism'). She is cleansing herself from the defilement of having been in a Gentile camp.

Holofernes can't wait any longer. He sends Bagoas to 'invite' Judith to dine with him in an intimate meal with only his personal attendants present.

Judith, with another of her ambiguous statements, says she cannot refuse her lord (Bagoas thinks Holofernes. Judith means YHWH). Bagoas can report to the general that she is just as keen as he is. Being with Holofernes will give her something to boast about for the rest of her life. This is true, but not for the reason that is apparent to Bagoas!

We are not surprised to hear that Holofernes has been wanting to have intercourse with Judith 'from the day he first saw her' (verse 16).

Once again Holofernes witnesses Judith's fidelity to the dietary rules of her God (verse 19; see verse 2).

Such is the level of Holofernes's hedonism that, just as he thinks he is mastering Judith, he allows himself to be mastered by wine.

¹⁰On the fourth day Holofernes held a banquet for his personal attendants only, and did not invite any of his officers.

¹¹He said to Bagoas, the eunuch who had charge of his personal affairs, "Go and persuade the Hebrew woman who is in your care to join us and to eat and drink with us. ¹²For it would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without having intercourse with her. If we do not seduce her, she will laugh at us."

¹³Bagoas left the presence of Holofernes, and approached her and said, "Let this lovely maid not hesitate to come to my lord to be honoured in his presence, and to enjoy drinking wine with us, and to become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar."

¹⁴Judith replied, "Who am I to refuse my lord? Whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until my dying day." ¹⁵So she proceeded to dress herself in all her woman's finery. Her maid went ahead and spread for her on the ground before Holofernes the lamb-skins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use in reclining. ¹⁶Then Judith came in and lay down. Holofernes' heart was ravished with her and his passion was aroused, for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her. ¹⁷So Holofernes said to her, "Have a drink and be merry with us!"

¹⁸Judith said, "I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life." ¹⁹Then she took what her maid had prepared and ate and drank before him.

²⁰Holofernes was greatly pleased with her, and drank a great quantity of wine, much more than he had ever drunk in any one day since he was born.

¹When evening came, his slaves quickly withdrew. Bagoas closed the tent from outside and shut out the attendants from his master's presence. They went to bed, for they all were weary because the banquet had lasted so long. ²Judith was left alone in the tent, with Holofernes stretched out on his bed, for he was dead drunk. ³Now Judith had told her maid to stand outside the bedchamber and to wait for her to come out, as she did on the other days; for she said she would be going out for her prayers. She had said the same thing to Bagoas. ⁴So everyone went out, and no one, either small or great, was left in the bedchamber. Then Judith, standing beside his bed, said in her heart, "O Lord God of all might, look in this hour on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. ⁵Now indeed is the time to help your heritage and to carry out my design to destroy the enemies who have risen up against us." ⁶She went up to the bedpost near Holofernes' head, and took down his sword that hung there. ⁷She came close to his bed, took hold of the hair of his head, and said, "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" ⁸Then she struck his neck twice with all her might, and cut off his head. ⁹Next she rolled his body off the bed and pulled down the canopy from the posts. Soon afterward she went out and gave Holofernes' head to her maid, ¹⁰who placed it in her food bag. Then the two of them went out together, as they were accustomed to do for prayer. They passed through the camp, circled around the valley, and went up the mountain to Bethulia, and came to its gates.

Holofernes would have organised the withdrawal of his attendant, so that he could be alone with Judith. Her response to Bagoas (see 12:14) would have convinced him that she, too, was looking forward to their being alone. What Holofernes had not planned was that he would be stretched out on the bed, dead drunk and helpless.

Once again, Judith prays. She is God's instrument in what she is about to do.

Judith is, of course, unarmed. It is the final irony that Holofernes is killed by his own sword. Our mind goes to David's victory over Goliath (see 1 Samuel 17).

She pulls his body off the bed onto the floor, and we see him there at her feet, the general who had just conquered the world decapitated by a woman. The canopy (see 10:21), symbol of his position and power, is torn to the ground.

Because of the pattern she has established, she can leave the camp unchallenged.

Judith's call to open the gates corresponds to the same request at the beginning of her mission in 10:9.

As we would expect, Judith gives all the glory to God.

Judith managed to achieve her goal without losing her virtue.

When we consider that Judith may have been only in her late teens (though nowhere are we told how long she was married prior to the death of her husband), Uzziah's calling her 'daughter' (verse 18) need not seem out of place.

No one has any problem with what Judith did. For them, and so for the author and his readers, the end justified the means.

¹¹From a distance Judith called out to the sentries at the gates, "Open, open the gate! God, our God, is with us, still showing his power in Israel and his strength against our enemies, as he has done today!"

¹²When the people of her town heard her voice, they hurried down to the town gate and summoned the elders of the town. ¹³They all ran together, both small and great, for it seemed unbelievable that she had returned. They opened the gate and welcomed them. Then they lit a fire to give light, and gathered around them. ¹⁴Then she said to them with a loud voice, "Praise God, O praise him! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the house of Israel, but has destroyed our enemies by my hand this very night!"

¹⁵Then she pulled the head out of the bag and showed it to them, and said, "See here, the head of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy beneath which he lay in his drunken stupor. The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman. ¹⁶As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the way I went, I swear that it was my face that seduced him to his destruction, and that he committed no sin with me, to defile and shame me." ¹⁷All the people were greatly astonished. They bowed down and worshipped God, and said with one accord, "Blessed are you our God, who have this day humiliated the enemies of your people."

¹⁸Then Uzziah said to her, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies. ¹⁹Your praise will never depart from the hearts of those who remember the power of God. ²⁰May God grant this to be a perpetual honour to you, and may he reward you with blessings, because you risked your own life when our nation was brought low, and you averted our ruin, walking in the straight path before our God." And all the people said, "Amen. Amen."

¹Then Judith said to them, "Listen to me, my friends. Take this head and hang it upon the parapet of your wall. ²As soon as day breaks and the sun rises on the earth, each of you take up your weapons, and let every able-bodied man go out of the town; set a captain over them, as if you were going down to the plain against the Assyrian outpost; only do not go down. ³Then they will seize their arms and go into the camp and rouse the officers of the Assyrian army. They will rush into the tent of Holofernes and will not find him. Then panic will come over them, and they will flee before you. ⁴Then you and all who live within the borders of Israel will pursue them and cut them down in their tracks. ⁵But before you do all this, bring Achior the Ammonite to me so that he may see and recognize the man who despised the house of Israel and sent him to us as if to his death."

⁶So they summoned Achior from the house of Uzziah. When he came and saw the head of Holofernes in the hand of one of the men in the assembly of the people, he fell down on his face in a faint. ⁷When they raised him up he threw himself at Judith's feet, and did obeisance to her, and said, "Blessed are you in every tent of Judah! In every nation those who hear your name will be alarmed. ⁸Now tell me what you have done during these days."

So Judith told him in the presence of the people all that she had done, from the day she left until the moment she began speaking to them. ⁹When she had finished, the people raised a great shout and made a joyful noise in their town. ¹⁰When Achior saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly in God. So he was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, as are his descendants to this day.

There are echoes here of what Judas did with the head of the Syrian general, Nicanor (see 1Maccabees 7:47; also 2Maccabees 15:35). In the account of the victory over Nicanor the author of Maccabees highlights the element of a miraculous divine intervention (see 1Maccabees 7:40-44). Notice that in Judith there is no mention of the miraculous. God is working wholly through human instruments.

Achior is the only person other than Judith and her maid who has seen Holofernes (see 5:5ff). His fainting highlights the courage of Judith.

When other nations hear what happened to Holofernes, they will think twice before daring to attack the Jews!(verse 7).

Deuteronomy 23:3 speaks against welcoming an Ammonite into the assembly of YHWH (though see Ruth 1:16). The fact that the text speaks of the welcoming of Achior appears to have played a part in the non-acceptance of Judith into the canon.

¹¹As soon as it was dawn they hung the head of Holofernes on the wall. Then they all took their weapons, and they went out in companies to the mountain passes.

¹²When the Assyrians saw them they sent word to their commanders, who then went to the generals and the captains and to all their other officers. ¹³They came to Holofernes' tent and said to the steward in charge of all his personal affairs, "Wake up our lord, for the slaves have been so bold as to come down against us to give battle, to their utter destruction."

Holofernes lost his head in more than one sense! His death meant that the Assyrian army had also lost its 'head'.

¹⁴So Bagoas went in and knocked at the entry of the tent, for he supposed that he was sleeping with Judith. ¹⁵But when no one answered, he opened it and went into the bed-chamber and found him sprawled on the floor dead, with his head missing. ¹⁶He cried out with a loud voice and wept and groaned and shouted, and tore his clothes. ¹⁷Then he went to the tent where Judith had stayed, and when he did not find her, he rushed out to the people and shouted, ¹⁸"The slaves have tricked us! One Hebrew woman has brought disgrace on the house of King Nebuchadnezzar. Look, Holofernes is lying on the ground, and his head is missing!"

¹⁹When the leaders of the Assyrian army heard this, they tore their tunics and were greatly dismayed, and their loud cries and shouts rose up throughout the camp.

¹When the men in the tents heard it, they were amazed at what had happened. ²Overcome with fear and trembling, they did not wait for one another, but with one impulse all rushed out and fled by every path across the plain and through the hill country. ³Those who had camped in the hills around Bethulia also took to flight. Then the Israelites, everyone that was a soldier, rushed out upon them.

⁴Uzziah sent men to Betomasthaim and Choba and Kola, and to all the frontiers of Israel, to tell what had taken place and to urge all to rush out upon the enemy to destroy them.

⁵When the Israelites heard it, with one accord they fell upon the enemy, and cut them down as far as Choba. Those in Jerusalem and all the hill country also came, for they were told what had happened in the camp of the enemy. The men in Gilead and in Galilee outflanked them with great slaughter, even beyond Damascus and its borders.

⁶The rest of the people of Bethulia fell upon the Assyrian camp and plundered it, acquiring great riches.

⁷And the Israelites, when they returned from the slaughter, took possession of what remained. Even the villages and towns in the hill country and in the plain got a great amount of booty, since there was a vast quantity of it.

The Assyrian troops panic.

The Idumeans and Ammonites were 'camped in the hills' (verse 3; see 7:18).

The three locations named in verse 4 are otherwise unknown, and probably fictitious (see commentary on 4:4, 6).

The army that had conquered the world is routed by the Israelites. The author continues to encourage his contemporaries to maintain their faith in God, no matter how high the odds against them might seem.

The inhabitants of Bethulia who were not engaged in pursuing the Assyrians looted the camp.

On Joakim and his Council see 4:4-6.

⁸Then the high priest Joakim and the elders of the Israelites who lived in Jerusalem came to see for themselves the good things that the Lord had done for Israel, and to see Judith and to wish her well. ⁹When they met her, they all blessed her with one accord and said to her, "You are the glory of Jerusalem, you are the great boast of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation! ¹⁰You have done all this with your own hand; you have done great good to Israel, and God is well pleased with it. May the Almighty Lord bless you forever!" And all the people said, "Amen."

¹¹The people plundered the camp for thirty days. They gave Judith the tent of Holofernes and all his silver dinnerware, his beds, his bowls, and all his furniture. She took them and loaded her mules and hitched up her carts and piled the things on them.

¹²All the women of Israel gathered to see her, and blessed her, and some of them performed a dance in her honour. She took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her; ¹³and she and those who were with her crowned themselves with olive wreaths. She went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed, bearing their arms and wearing garlands and singing hymns.

¹⁴Judith began this thanksgiving before all Israel, and all the people loudly sang this song of praise.

The dancing reminds us of Miriam and the Israelite women dancing for joy after the crossing of the Red Sea (see Exodus 15:20). One thinks, too, of the dance that welcomed David after he had beheaded Goliath (see 1Samuel 18:6).

The 'ivy-wreathed wands' were a feature of the ritual processions of the devotees of Dionysus (see also 2Maccabees 10:7). This is a further indication that the author is composing his story in the Greek period.

Hymn of Triumph

**¹And Judith sang, Begin a song
to my God with tambourines,
sing to my Lord with cymbals.
Raise to him a new psalm;
extol him, and call upon his name.
²For the Lord is a God who crushes wars;
he sets up his camp among his people;
he delivered me from the hands
of those seeking my life.
³The Assyrian came down
from the mountains of the north;
he came with myriads of his warriors;
their numbers blocked up the wadis,
and their cavalry covered the hills.
⁴He boasted that he would burn up
my territory,
kill my young men with the sword,
dash my infants to the ground,
seize my children as booty,
and carry off my maidens.
⁵The Lord Almighty has foiled them
by the hand of a woman.
⁶For their champion did not fall
by the hands of the young men,
nor did the sons of the Titans
strike him down,
nor did tall giants set upon him;
but Judith daughter of Merari
with the beauty of her face undid him.
⁷For she put away her widow's clothing
to exalt the oppressed in Israel.
She anointed her face with perfume;
⁸she fastened her hair with a tiara
and put on a linen gown to beguile him.
⁹Her sandal ravished his eyes,
her beauty captivated his mind,
and the sword severed his neck!
¹⁰The Persians trembled at her boldness,
the Medes were daunted at her daring.
¹¹Then my oppressed people shouted;
my weak people cried out,
and the enemy trembled;
they screamed out and ran.**

A 'new psalm'(verse 1) celebrating a new victory of YHWH.

'A God who crushes wars'(verse 2; see 9:7; see Exodus 15:3).

The hymn is placed on the lips of Judith. The 'me' in verse 2 is Israel. It is a public psalm of the community. The same is to be said of the 'my' of verse 4.

The reference to the 'Titans'(verse 6) is another indication of Greek influence.

The communal nature of the song is further indicated by the 'she' of verse 6. The Israelite women are dancing and singing in chorus, praising God for the victory.

The quick movement of verse 9 makes brilliant verse.

By highlighting the Persians and the Medes, the author is, once again, removing his story from any particular chronological setting.

To add insult to injury the hardened troops of the Assyrian army were killed by the ‘sons of slave-girls’, as if they were ‘deserters’ children’(verse 12).

Verses 13-17 constitute a separate hymn, made up from other traditional psalms. Note that these verses lack any clear reference to Judith.

For verse 13 compare Psalm 86:10 and 147:5. For verse 14 compare Psalm 33:6,9 and Psalm 104:30 (see also Isaiah 55:11). For verse 15 compare Psalm 97:5 and Micah 1:4.

The point made in verse 16 is enunciated in Psalm 51:16-17 and Isaiah 40:16. There is a place for cult, but it cannot replace obedience to God’s word, born out of a profound respect for the sacred.

Since there is no evidence in the Book of Judith of belief in an after-life, verse 17 should be read in the light of Judges 5:31 and Isaiah 40:16. On ‘fire and worms’ see also Sirach 7:17 (and in the Newer Testament, Mark 9:48).

They needed to be purified (verse 18) because they had been in contact with the dead (see Numbers 19:11-13). For the offerings compare 4:14.

As final proof of her virtue, Judith kept none of the spoils for herself (see 13:9 and 15:11), but consigned them to the temple as votive offerings.

¹²Sons of slave-girls pierced them through and wounded them like deserters’ children; they perished before the army of my Lord.

¹³I will sing to my God a new song; O Lord, you are great and glorious, wonderful in strength, invincible.

¹⁴Let all your creation serve you, for you spoke, and they were made. You sent forth your spirit, and it formed them;

there is none that can resist your voice.

¹⁵For the mountains shall be shaken to their foundations with the waters; before your glance

the rocks will melt like wax.

But to those who fear you you show mercy.

¹⁶For every sacrifice as a fragrant offering is a small thing, and the fat of all whole burnt offerings to you is a very little thing; but whoever fears the Lord is great forever.

¹⁷Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment; he will consign their flesh to fire and worms; they will wail in pain forever.

¹⁸When they arrived at Jerusalem, they worshipped God. As soon as the people were purified, they offered their burnt offerings, their freewill offerings, and their gifts.

¹⁹Judith also dedicated to God all the possessions of Holofernes, which the people had given her; and the canopy that she had taken for herself from his bedchamber she gave as a votive offering.

²⁰For three months the people continued feasting in Jerusalem before the sanctuary, and Judith remained with them.

²¹After this they all returned home to their own inheritances. Judith went to Bethulia, and remained on her estate. For the rest of her life she was honoured throughout the whole country. ²²Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people. ²³She became more and more famous, and grew old in her husband's house, reaching the age of one hundred five. She gave her maid her freedom. She died in Bethulia, and they buried her in the cave of her husband Manasseh; ²⁴and the house of Israel mourned her for seven days. Before she died she distributed her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband Manasseh, and to her own nearest kindred.

²⁵No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death.

Judith never lost her beauty, and so there were always men who wanted her.

The warriors of ancient Israel refrained from sex before and during a battle. Judith remained celibate for the rest of her life. Like Paul of Tarsus later, she chose to give 'unhindered devotion to her Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:35).

When Judith was published, Judea was a small province only recently independent, and surrounded by territories that were caught up in the Hellenizing culture of the second century BC.

The author is calling on his fellow Jews to be like Judith by maintaining their fidelity to their God and to his will expressed in the Torah and in their traditions. They are relatively powerless, but, if they remain faithful they have nothing to fear. Their Lord is Lord of heaven and earth, the Almighty YHWH, who must punish them if they stray, but who will, in his own best time and way, bring victory to his people.