

THE BOOK OF TOBIT - PART I

THE BACKGROUND, THE PLOT, AND THE THEMES

I. The Book of Tobit is like an historical novel, describing what was likely events surrounding a real person in exile but in a very stylized way to make a point. It is thus somewhat like some of the Shakespearean plays (e.g., Macbeth, Julius Caesar, or King Lear) or some of the accounts of Charlemagne (e.g., the Song of Roland.)

A. The book was likely written originally, or at least as a prior version, in Hebrew or possibly Aramaic, but the only existent copies are in Greek. It was likely written significantly after the Jews of the Southern Kingdom returned from exile in 532 B.C., but before the great crises of the persecution of the Jews that started in 175 B.C. under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Hellenistic ruler of the area around Syria and the Holy Land. For the exile seems to be treated in a remote fashion, while there is not indication of a recent persecution or of the Messianic and apocalyptic expectations that were rising in the 2nd century B.C., although Tobit's discourses at the end reflect an expectation of a new and glorious Jerusalem to which all nations would come and worship God. The author is unknown, but certainly emphasizes the importance of the worship in Jerusalem, while presenting two families of the former northern kingdom in a favorable light.

B. At the basic level, the book is about God's care for the families of: (1) a faithful Jew named Tobit of a northern tribe (Naphtali) who is, through no fault of his own, sent off into the Assyrian exile, and then, precisely because of his piety, suffers a brief persecution, followed by blindness; and (2) a young Jewish woman Sarah, living in the kingdom of Media, who is tormented by the demon Azmodeus, who kills off any man who marries her. Both of them turn desperately to God in prayer and God sends the archangel Raphael to guide Tobit's son Tobias, whose efforts overcome both evils, returning home with a wife and the family fortune, bringing greater happiness to both families than they had before.

- The background is the defeat of the northern tribes by Assyria in 721 B.C. and subsequent exile of most of her people. Tobit is apparently forced into exile by the Assyrians a few years later and goes to live in Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. Shortly before the assassination of the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 681 B.C., see 2 Kings 19:37; Isaiah 37:38-39, he is forced into hiding very briefly because of his courage in burying dead Jews in violation of Sennacherib's orders. With the new king Esarhaddon taking power and Tobit's nephew, the legendary Aliqar, rising in government, he is restored to his home, but becomes blind a short time later at about the age of 58 (translations vary.) At this time, he and his wife Anna have one living son,

Tobias, although they may have had other children who died young. Due to Tobit's blindness, the family fortunes decline, but they are not without means. Among other things, he has left a large deposit of money with Gabael, apparently a trustworthy man and likely relative of his who lives far away in Rages, a city of the Median kingdom (largely composing current Iran) for provision in difficult times. Somewhere between two and ten years later (again translations vary), he sends Tobias, who is now apparently in his late teens or 20s, to recover the money. Tobias sets out upon this grace-filled journey, guided by the archangel Raphael in disguise. With Raphael's help he not only succeeds obtaining the money, but more importantly, obtains a cure for Tobit's blindness, marries Sarah and drives away the demon Azmodeus. They all live together happily and apparently comfortably, with Tobit having five or seven sons, and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Shortly before the destruction of Nineveh in 612, the dying Tobit warns Tobias, Sarah and their family about this event. After Tobit and Anna die, Tobias leaves Nineveh, moves with the family back to Sarah's hometown of Ectabana, the capital of Media, where Sarah's parents are still alive and prosperous. He lives happily with his wife to the age of 117 or 127, blessing the Lord for His providence and the destruction of evil.

C. The book thus follows the classic heroic epic: a good, faithful hero is guided by power from above on a journey to slay the forces of evil (a demon, a dragon, etc.), gain a treasure, marry a good woman and restore peace and prosperity (here the family and the family fortune.) Even at this level, it is a refreshing antidote to the cynicism and moral ambiguity or even decadence so common both in modern entertainment and in ancient pagan myths. See, e.g., St. Justin the Martyr, Discourse to the Greeks. There is an optimism that the good triumphs and that all suffering has a meaning. As with the end of the book Job, God rewards the good characters who have suffered; but unlike the situation with Job, in the Book of Tobit, the angel explains the mysteries of God, making His justice and providence, at least to some degree, comprehensible.

D. On a deeper level, the story teaches lessons on the power of fidelity and prayer. Noteworthy, especially for a stylized account, is the lack of any exaggerated talents or abilities for the main characters. The good characters are mostly described by reference to their fidelity and some weaknesses, not by any super-human powers. The human characters are thus imminently human and accessible even today, despite coming from an ancient civilization.

E. The account emphasizes the importance of the family and faith, against a background of political power and an empire rising and falling. The former receives priority; the latter is merely the stage upon which what is truly important, the living out of faith and God's calling to the glory of heaven and the defeat of demons, occurs.

II. The main themes are: (1) the importance of fidelity to the law and the reward for those who carry it out; (2) the centrality of faithfulness to God to any authentic marital love and the importance of family life; (3) the basic principles of righteousness, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as sustaining one through life and the power of prayer accompanied by such faithfulness and generosity; (4) God's providence especially during suffering; and (5) the guidance of angels.

A. The account centers around the faithfulness of Tobit to the law and of his son to the ancient customs and the instructions of the angel.

1. Tobit is faithful to the ancient instructions to worship in Jerusalem, despite the fact that he lives far in the northern kingdom, where almost everyone else worships at the northern shrines. See Tobit 1:4-9; Duet. 12:4-14; 1 Kings 12:26-33. Despite living near one of the main northern shrines, his family journeys alone to Jerusalem and donates thirty percent of their income to worship and to the poor.

2. Tobit is exiled along with his whole tribe in the Assyrian invasion, but remains faithful to the dietary laws and in the duty of burying the dead. See Tobit 1:16-20. At first Tobit is prosperous, but ends up being forced into hiding because of his piety towards the dead. However, the sons of his persecutor Sennacherib assassinate that king, Tobit's nephew Aliqar, already a high official, intercedes for him and the hiding ends. Tobit's fidelity to the law continues on and leads indirectly to his blindness. See Tobit 2:7-10. Nevertheless, he has no regrets, although he can get upset. He is rewarded for his fidelity with a cure for his blindness, with wife for his son who has now proven himself, and with a restoration of the money he deposited with his kinsman.

3. For his part Tobias abides by his father's instructions and those of the angel appearing as a guide. He also loves Sarah and is eager to marry her above all because she is one of his own kin and the law says that she should be his wife. (The law actually said only that they should marry among their fellow countrymen, not necessarily among kin. See Ex. 34:16; Duet 7:3; Ezra 9:1, 11. However, given the infidelity of the time, marrying close kin many have been the only way to insure marrying into a faithful family.) It is his faithfulness, and not any special talent of his own that makes him the hero.

4. Notable by contrast is the infidelity of the anonymous neighbors of Tobit, who ridicule him for burying the dead and who fade away in the background. See Tobit 2:8. Also in the background is the royal household of Assyria, where treacherous plots seem to abound. See Tobit 1:21, 14:10.

B. The book gives both religious advice for marriage and a quintessential account of the struggles of even a good family.

1. Fidelity to the law, which at the time involved trying to marry within the tribe, is crucial to marital success. Tobias, in fact, falls in love with Sarah, primarily because Raphael tells him that she is of his lineage and, therefore, it is the tradition to marry her. Tobit 6:18. He begins his marriage with a prayer, and the prayer begins with a recognition that God is the author of marriage and that he, Tobias, is taking his wife "not for lust but for a noble purpose." Tobit 8:5-7. Because of this love, and the guidance of the angel who led him to her, he courageously takes on the demon Azmodeus and drives him away, with Raphael binding the angel in the desert.

2. Contrasting with this selfless, prayerful love is the selfish vengeful love of the demon who "loves" Sarah and so kills off her husbands and makes her life miserable. See Tobit 6:14-15. Part of the idea is that even romantic love can become demonic if it is selfish and separated from the law of God. By contrast, faithfulness and prayerfulness make marital love so strong that it overcomes all things, as empires rise and fall.

4. Tobit and Anna likewise have a lawful marriage, both being of good families of the same tribe. See 1:9. Although they have only one child (possibly having had others who died young), they seem through out most of their lives to be happy together, and they carry out their roles well. Tobit provides for the family as well as he can, including prudently depositing money far away in case of emergency. Then, when he is blind, Anna provides for them, apparently without complaint. But the marriage is not without problems, as indicated by Tobit's suspicion that his wife stole a goat, her rebuke of him, and their disagreement about whether to send Tobias on the dangerous journey to recover the money Tobit deposited long. See Tobit 1:11-14, 5:18-6:1; 10:1-7. But despite their disagreements, Tobit loves her and begins what he thinks will be his final instructions to Tobias by telling him to love and honor her. See Tobit 4:3-4. Tobias in turn clearly loves his parents, for he abides by their wishes and is anxious because he knows they will worry about him during his journey. See Tobit 6:15, 10:9. When he returns in triumph, he stays happily with his parents and then Sarah's parents and, when the time comes gives each of them magnificent funerals. See Tobit 14:1-2, 12-13.

5. Although there is less commentary on them, Sarah's parents are also faithful to God and each other. They do have their foibles, including a willingness to be less than sincere for the sake of their daughter Sarah's marriage. See Tobit 7:11, 8:9-18. However, they make up for this by their generosity towards their daughter and her new husband. See Tobit 8:19-21. Sarah, in turn, loves her parents and, in fact, decides not to commit suicide to escape the demon mainly because doing so

would harm her parents. See Tobit 3:10.

6. Overall, the restoration of the two families is the main theme of the book and central to God's concern. The rise and fall of the Assyrian empire, the palace intrigue, the life of the legendary court official Aliqar, and even the exile of the northern kingdom, are all treated as background information to the main event. They are important primarily because of how they affect these families. The implications that world events that people consider so important, are in fact secondary to fidelity to God and family, which are what is really of central importance.

C. A continual theme of Tobit is the interaction of a righteous life and of the noble practices of almsgiving and prayer.

1. Tobit is notable by fidelity to the law of God, especially with regard to proper worship and burying the dead, and his generosity in giving three tithes and in being anxious to share a feast with poorer relatives.

2. Tobit's first prayer, given in anguish, still recognizes the justice and glory of God. See Tobit 3:2-5. Even though he does not dare pray for anything except death, the archangel Raphael says later that his prayer is meritorious and heard in heaven. Tobit 12:12-13.

3. Tobit in turn gives his son advice, primarily with regard to righteous living and generosity. He tells his son that generosity is "laying us a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity" even "delivers from death and keeps you from entering darkness." Tobit 4:9-11. He also exhorts to care in choosing a wife from among his kinsman and warns against "pride" in taking a foreign wife; the idea seems to be that taking a wife honored by the world, as many of the Israelite kings did, see, e.g., 1 Kings 11:1-13, 16:31, will lead one astray. Even in his grief, he tells his son to bless the Lord at all times and keep His commands, for doing so will make him prosper. At the end of his life, he again speaks of how living in accord with the law and almsgiving will deliver one from evil. See Tobit 14:9

4. Sarah in turn is a model of innocence and prayer. In her grief at the loss of her former husbands to the demon Azmodeus, she recognizes the holiness of God and argues her innocence. Like Tobit, she does not dare to ask for a cure, but rather only for either death, or at least an end to public reproaches. Tobit 3:11-15. And, as with Tobit's prayer, her prayer is presented by Raphael before the throne of God and God grants a greater favor than she asked for. Tobit 12:12-13. The implication is that we often do not expect enough of God, but that He still accepts the prayers of the faithful and

works with what we offer.

5. After the adventures, but before revealing himself, the archangel Raphael gives a short discourse on the importance of righteousness, lived out in prayer, generosity, and fasting. He begins with the importance of praising God and continuing with the declaration that almsgiving accompanied by righteousness delivers one from death for the fulness of life. Tobit 12:6-10.

6. Tobias carries out the instructions of his father and Raphael regarding faithfulness to the law and respect for family, and God grants his prayer to be delivered from the demon and have a long life with Sarah.

D. The book presents human suffering as sometimes caused by God and sometimes permitted by Him, but always used by God for the good.

1. Tobit is exiled to Assyria despite his innocence and forced into hiding by Sennacherib precisely because of his practice of burying the dead, but God provides for him throughout this time. Tobit then becomes blind because of his fidelity to the law. First, he asks Tobias to find a poorer relative to share the Feast of Weeks with, and then when Tobias discovered a slain kinsman, Tobit buries him. Because of the ritual uncleanness, Tobit bathes and stays outside, giving the opportunity for his blindness. The angel Raphael describes this blindness as a test by God, but one God would also heal, thus indicating that this evil at least is intended by God. Tobit 12:14. In any case, all of his sufferings are an opportunity for righteousness and the display of God's providence in the end.

- Tobit himself, in his first prayer, considers the exile of his people as a righteous punishment imposed by God. It is possible he also sees his blindness in the same light. See Tobit 3:2-5.

- In his joyous canticle at the end, Tobit again sees the exile as a punishment from God, but also as an opportunity for God, not only to show His mercy, but also to make Israel even greater by bringing all nations to worship God. His own life of suffering, but then restoration to a greater state than before is an example of this stern, but generous providence. See Tobit 13.

2. Sarah's plight is at least permitted by God until Tobias shows us with the angel. Part of the idea is that God wants to provide, but also wants the right person to play his role.

3. Even the attack by the fish against Tobias has its purpose in God's plan, i.e. to provide for a cure of Tobit's blindness and the liturgical rite that would drive the demon away. It is an example of God's plan working through a seemingly random event.

E. Except possibly Revelations, the Book of Tobit gives the most extensive presentation on the guidance of angels in life. Angels certainly do appear elsewhere in the Old Testament to some crucial figures. See, e.g., Gen. 18, 31:11, 32:4; Judges 6:12, 22, 13:9-23. But here the angel appears to a seemingly regular person to help them with their own life. Tobit expresses confidence in such guidance, nor realizing how much his confidence is well-placed. See Tobit 5:22.

1. The book does not so much have a theoretical discussion of angels, as practical examples of what an angel does. The angel Raphael appears in a time of need to guide Tobias along a difficult journey. He points out how Tobias can use a threat (here the attacking fish) for the benefit of the family. He gives Tobias guidance about marriage and helps him ward off evil. He confirms and elaborates Tobit's instructions on a faithful life. And he presents the prayers of Tobit and Sarah before God. These examples summarize much of the role of angels: they guide us, both practically and morally, they keep evil at bay, they bring us back to our better instincts, and they assist us in prayers.

2. Perhaps more surprisingly, the angels test us and challenge us. Possibly the most surprising line in the book is Raphael's statement that he, the angel, was sent by God to cause the blindness, for it would both prove Tobit's fidelity, and be the occasion for the defeat of Azmodeus and the marriage of Tobias and Sarah. See Tobit 12:14.

3. The book also presents the angel as a creature of overwhelming holiness whose very presence to human's must be disguised lest they be overwhelmed, and before whom Tobit and Tobias tremble. Tobit 11:16.

4. Raphael does emphasize that angels are spirit and, therefore, can only appear to eat and drink. See Tobit 12:19. By contrast, Jesus would eat with His disciples after the Resurrection, indicating that He is still fully human. See Luke 24:41-43.