

## THE BOOK OF TOBIT - PART II

### THE CHARACTERS AND CONNECTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

I. The cast of characters in the book combine mostly good, but not superhuman, main characters, in the midst of the archangel and the demon, with a less faithful group in the background.

A. Tobit is a faithful Jew with a good family.

1. He faithfully sticks to God's law and the ancient customs with no complaint. Even when he suffers blindness because of his fidelity, he considers God just. He is also very generous, giving thirty percent of his income to worship and charity, and willing to pay more than just wages, up to half of everything Tobias brings home, not only the deposit recovered, but also apparently half of the gift from Raguel.

2. He is very willing to accept sufferings as a punishment or test from God.

3. He also has a strong confidence in the value of a good family, as indicated by his insistence that his son marry a kinswoman and his immediate confidence placed in Raphael when Raphael tells him of his family.

4. His main flaw is a bit of pride. His introduction is a little boastful and, while he is very willing to pay generous wages, he does not wish to be receive the bonus given to his wife. He also can endure much, including blindness, but when his wife rebukes him for a real failing on his part, it is too much.

- At that point, he does not even dare to pray for healing, but only for a peaceful death.

5. He wants his son, not only to recover the money, but likely also to prove himself.

6. Tobit ends by being, not only an exemplary Jew, but also a visionary, foreseeing the fall of Jerusalem, but then her glorious rebuilding. He also foresees the destruction of Nineveh.

B. Anna, Tobit's wife, is very faithful and courageous, but very anxious for family unity.

1. There is no evidence of a complaint when Tobit is exiled and the family loses its wealth (temporarily at least) because of Tobit defiance of Sennacherib in burying the slaughtered Jews.

2. After Tobit's blindness and loss of Aliqar's patronage, she supports the family.

3. The one thing that throws off her calmness is an upsetting of the family. Thus, when Tobit wonders whether she stole a goat, she sharply rebukes him, ignoring all his previous virtue. And, when Tobias is late in returning home, she becomes frantic.

- Desiring to protect her son, she at first opposes Tobit's commissioning of him to recover the money deposited with Gabael.

C. Tobias is the good son, faithful to his parents and in-laws, prayerful, and abiding by the instructions of the angel precisely.

1. He does not have any particularly heroic quality about him. The great rhetoric and prophesy belong to his father. In fact, he is ignorant of the ways in Media and it is his father, not he, who hires the guide.

2. His love for Sarah is pure, based entirely upon the commands of God and adherence to the family traditions. About this love, he is adamant.

D. Sarah is a classic fair, good maiden in distress.

1. She is subject to despair and even tempted to suicide, but concern for her parents keeps her back.

2. She does not dare to pray for an end of the persecution by the demon, but only for either death or at least an end to false allegations. Nevertheless, her prayer is crucial to the cure of all of the ills. She is rewarded by a husband, a family, and prosperous old age.

E. Raguel is a somewhat comical figure.

1. He is a basically good person, deeply concerned about his daughter and his relative Tobit, and is generous with her and

those who help the family. And when God delivers his daughter, he gives great praise.

2. But he is also concerned with popular opinion and willing to be less than honest for the sake of his daughter and his reputations.

3. His wife Edna is something of a background figure, clearly concerned with her daughter's future and maternally loving of Tobit. Unlike Raguel, she has the courage to see firsthand whether Tobit survived the attack of Azmodeus.

F. The archangel Raphael is the powerful angel in disguise. He knows exactly what the plan is and how to achieve it. Nevertheless, he leaves it for Tobias to carry out the mission, only taking upon himself the task of actually going to Rages from Ectabana and recovering the deposit, a relatively minor point once the demon has been driven away.

1. The angel serves mostly as a teacher, guiding Tobias towards his goal and teaching him how to drive away the demon and to cure his father.

2. At the end of the adventure, he gives wisdom advice to Tobit and Tobias, adding the idea that the righteousness behind almsgiving is more important than the amount. He also adds fasting to Tobit's advice for Tobias.

3. When he reveals who he is, Tobit and Tobias fall down in fear, knowing that angels are too glorious for humans to behold.

G. The demon Azmodeus is the personification of selfishness. He is some sense "loves" Sarah, but it is a selfish, destructive love and thus the opposite of Tobias' pure love.

1. In the end, although terrifying, the demon falls to the power of the prayer and fidelity of Tobias and Sarah, indicating the power of God working through even ordinary people.

2. The book presents Raphael, not Azmodeus, in detail, for it is knowledge of the angels, not demons, that people are meant to pursue.

H. Ahiqar is a legendary figure of the ancient far east.

1. He is faithful and generous in the midst of the faithless and power hungry court of Nineveh.

- The book cross-references an account of his generosity with neighbors creating the goodwill that allowed him to escape when the king believed false allegations from Ahiqar's treacherous nephew Nadab. Ahiqar's wisdom eventually led to his vindication. This story is one example of Tobit's general principle that almsgiving saves one from death.

2. He is also very helpful towards his uncle Tobit, but the irony is that he would be now forgotten to the world if it were not for this book about Tobit. Thus, his continuing reputation is another image of the principle that almsgiving saves one from death.

I. In the background, there are the kings of Assyria who rise and fall, and the faithless, nameless neighbors of Tobit who fade into obscurity. Part of the idea is that, without generosity and courageous worship and fidelity to the law, all people and powers fade into history.

J. Finally, on a lighter point, is the faithful dog, who follows Tobias and Raphael and on their journey and returns with them.

II. Although not speaking directly of the Messiah or of an afterlife with rewards for good and punishment for evil, the book sets up these themes, as well as some of the moral teachings of Jesus.

A. Tobit does not speak of a coming Messiah, but does foresee the great and glorious new Jerusalem in which all nations will come to worship God. See Tobit 13:9-118, 14:11. He thus reflects the great prophecies of a glorious, restored Israel. See, e.g., Isaiah 56:1-8, 60:10-21; Micah 4:1-8; Zech. 8:18-23. Tobit describes this new Jerusalem in terms of a great jeweled city. The end of the Book of Revelations takes up both of these aspects, describing the new glorious Jerusalem, in which all nations will gather to glorify God. See Rev. 21:9-27.

B. Although the Book of Tobit does not expressly deal with an afterlife, Tobit tells his son that almsgiving will preserve one from death. See Tobit 4:10. The angel Raphael affirms that teaching in his wisdom discourse near the end. See Tobit 13:9. Tobit takes this advice of his and the angel to mean that almsgiving will bring one more into God's providence, will provide one with friends in case of need, and will preserve one's descendants and reputation. However, as with his assurance to Sarah that an angel will

guide Tobias, see Tobit 6:22, he is more right than he knows. Jesus will take up this theme that generosity to those in need is key to everlasting life. See, e.g., Matt. 6:20, 19:21-24; 25:31-46.

C. The Book of Tobit also anticipates some of the basic moral principles of the New Testament. For example, Tobit tells Tobias, "Do to no one what you yourself dislike," anticipating Jesus' statement "Do to others what you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets." See Tobit 4:15, Matt. 7:12. And, near the end, Raphael summarizes the life of holiness in terms of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and distinguishes between publicly giving glory to God and keeping a king's secret. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus focuses at one point on prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and balances doing them in secret with letting one's good deeds show forth to give glory to God. See Matt. 5:16, 6:6-18.

D. The Book of Tobit also introduces the notion that angels guide all of us, a theme Jesus and the Letter to the Hebrews will take up. See Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14.