

TOBIT

The Book of Tobit, named after its principal hero, is one of the seven books of the Old Testament not found in the Hebrew Canon or Protestant Canon of the Bible.

Although Tobit, Judith and Esther are placed amongst the *historical books* of the Old Testament, (called by some authors “historical novels”) they do not belong there because they are fictional rather than historical. In his book *Reading the Bible*, Timothy Carmody writes that the books of Tobit, Judith and Esther “describe the faith of a particular person who acts in accord with God’s will and brings about the salvation of the nation or the blessings of God on his or her family. All three books introduce a problem or crisis at the beginning of the book that is developed and eventually resolved in the story” (p.99).

Since Tobit and Judith were written around the time of the Maccabees and Esther sometime before them, I am placing these three “historical novels” after the books of Maccabees.

Historical context. Tobit is portrayed as a devout and wealthy Israelite living in Nineveh. He is one of the many deportees taken there after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians in 721BC.

In its introductory remarks on Tobit, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states:

The Book of Tobit was written between 200-180 BC. This period was marked by growing Hellenization. Greek customs were adopted, the Greek language became common, and Greek cities were built with gymnasia and hippodromes.

“Jewish response to Hellenization was mixed. Zealous Jews resisted every trace of Greek influence, while others found ways to adapt Greek philosophy and language to the service of Judaism. The question of whether to adapt to Greek culture became crucial under the Seleucids, who began to force what had been a rather peaceful progress of Hellenization. The author of Tobit wrote for Jews who were concerned about being faithful to God and who were questioning God’s fidelity to them in the midst of this cultural turmoil. (p.832)

Timeless themes. Tobit contains many timeless themes such as prayerfulness, family loyalty, piety towards parents, purity of marriage, reverence for the

dead, charity toward the stranger and the poor, challenge of cultural assimilation, and even the influence of demons and angels.

Division of chapters

PART 1: Predicaments of Tobit and Sarah (Chapters 1-3)

PART 2: Journey of Tobiah and Raphael (Chapters 4-6)

PART 3: Marriage of Tobiah and Sarah and the healing of Sarah (Chapters 7-10)

PART 4: Journey home and healing of Tobit (Chapters 11-12)

PART 5: Tobit’s prayer of thanksgiving and wise advice (Chapters 13-14)

COMMENTARY

PART 1: PREDICAMENTS OF TOBIT AND SARAH

CHAPTER 1: Tobit, a faithful Jew and a charitable man.

I, Tobit, have walked all the days of my life on the paths of fidelity and righteousness. I performed many charitable deeds for my kindred and my people who had been taken captive with me to Nineveh, in the land of the Assyrians (v.3)..... I would give my bread to the hungry and my clothing to the naked. (v.17)

In the opening chapter, three main sequences are set in motion:

- Tobit walks in the way of truth and righteousness.
- Tobit marries Anna, a woman of his own lineage.
- Tobit deposits money in Rages, in Media

These three sequences open the plot and prepare the way for the questions that will finally be answered in the resolution (*Collegeville Commentary*, p.833).

Verses 3-8—Tobit walks in the way of truth and righteousness. As a young man back in his homeland, Tobit faithfully goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which Jeroboam, his king, tries to stop.

He pays tithes to the temple to aid to the widow and orphan. When taken into exile, he shares his bread with the hungry, clothes the naked, buries the dead, and refrains from eating food forbidden by Mosaic Law. On reaching manhood, he marries Anna and they have a son, Tobiah (v.9).

Verses 12-13—Tobit deposits money in Media. Sometime after his deportation to Nineveh, Tobit becomes a purchasing agent for the royal household of Shalmaneser, a job that often requires him to travel to Media. On one of his trips, he deposits a large sum of money with a kinsman, Gabael, who lives in Media. The central plot revolves around Tobiah's journey to Media to regain the money.

Verses 16-22—Tobit gets in trouble for burying the dead. Tobit is a man who *practiced* his faith by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and burying the dead, especially those who have been cast aside. This latter act of piety enrages the king so much that he wants to kill Tobit.

Tobit goes into hiding, leaving his wife and son behind. All of his property is confiscated. In the meantime, his nephew Ahikar acquires a good position in the new king's court and is able to petition for Tobit to return home.

Pause: Despite being surrounded by infidelity, Tobit was able to remain a faithful Jew. What helps you stay on the straight and narrow in a society where there is so much exposure to worldly and anti-Christian values?

CHAPTERS 2:1-3:6: In his affliction, Tobit prays for death

"...I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into dirges. Then I wept..." (2:6-7).

"...It is better for me to die than to live..." (3:6).

Tobit sends out his son to find a poor kinsman to invite to his table of plenty for the Feast of Pentecost. But instead of finding a poor man, Tobiah finds an executed man. Tobit is grieved and rushes to collect the deceased without thinking how much trouble this action had gotten him into before. That night he sleeps on the roof whereupon bird droppings fall on him and he becomes blind. As ill luck would have it, Tobit's righteousness is rewarded with suffering rather than a blessing. On top of this, his deteriorating

health has placed a strain on his relationship with his wife Anna.

With Tobit blind, Anna becomes the main breadwinner for the family. When one day she home a goat as a bonus to her wages, Tobit, instead of rejoicing over the gift, "gets his goat up" thinking that the goat may have been stolen. Anna, sensing her husband's dark side or his not-so-holy side, gets angry and says to him: *"Where your charitable are deeds now...? ...your true character is showing"* (2:14). Tobit must be bothered by his inability to be the breadwinner. It is hard for him to accept help from others.

3:2-6—Tobit's prayer. Commenting on the Prayer of Tobit, Eugene Hensell, O.S.B. writes:

"Prayer is one of the strongest and most pervasive themes in the Book of Tobit. Tobit appears to have been seriously shaken by his previous argument with his wife, Anna – and well he should have been. He had wrongly accused her of stealing a goat. This and his total blindness have put Tobit in a state of despair. He describes himself as grief-stricken in spirit. It is from this perspective that he turns to prayer.

Tobit begins his prayer by acknowledging God as being righteous, merciful, and true. Only God can heal Tobit from his profound sense of despair. Tobit readily admits his own sinfulness. He sees himself as part of a community, and thus he shares fully in the sins of the community. Tobit's prayer leads to his request that God allow him to die. He does not ask for mercy or forgiveness – only death. He sees no real hope for the future. Keep in mind that at this time Judaism did not believe in a resurrection. Everyone ended up in Sheol, which was neither good nor bad. Rewards and punishments had to be given out in the present world."

3:7-17—Sarah's plight

"Sarah had been given in marriage to seven husbands, but the wicked demon Asmodeas kept killing them off...." (v.8)

"Why then should I live any longer?" (v.15).

On the same day that Tobit quarrels with his wife and prays for death, Sarah, taunted by one of her father's maidservants, also prays for death. As the demon keeps killing off Sarah's husbands on their wedding night, she is driven to despair and considers suicide.

Out of love for her father, Sarah reconsiders and turns to God in prayer. Commenting on the prayers of Tobit and Sarah in chapter 3, the *Collegeville Commentary* states: “Both a man and a woman turn to prayer in desperate situations. Their prayers are equally significant for the plot. Both pray with phrases familiar from other biblical prayers. Tobit asks to die. He thinks that death is the only solution to his problems. Sarah puts herself completely in God’s hands. She illustrates the proper way to pray: she spreads out her hands and turns to face Jerusalem” (p.834).

Verses 16-17—A swift response to prayer. At the very moment that Tobit and Sarah are praying alone on earth, their prayer is heard in the heavenly court. God sends Raphael to be both guide and healer to Tobit who is blind and to Tobiah and Sarah who are in need of a spouse.

Pause: Have you had the experience of praying in a time of desperation? If so, what was that experience like for you?

PART 2: JOURNEY OF TOBIAS AND RAPHAEL

CHAPTER 4: A father’s farewell address

“Through all your days, my son, keep the Lord in mind, and suppress every desire to sin or to break his commandments...” (v.5).

“Give alms from your possessions. Do not turn your face away from any of the poor, and God’s face will not be turned away from you” (v.7).

In his farewell address, Tobit asks Tobiah to give him a decent burial, to care for his mother, to practice almsgiving towards the poor, to marry from his own lineage and to stay close to God. Then Tobit tells Tobiah about the great sum of money he had deposited with Gabael in Media.

CHAPTER 5: Enter Raphael

“A good angel will go with him, his journey will be successful, and he will return unharmed. Then she stopped weeping.”

While Tobiah is ready to obey his father’s wishes, he raises two concerns: he has no idea of *how* to get to Media and he does not know Gabael. The answer to the second problem is simple. Tobit informs his son

that when he had deposited the money with Gabael, they exchanged signatures on a document written in duplicate. One copy had been put with the money, implying that Tobit had kept the other copy.

Finding a guide to Media dominates the rest of the chapter. As soon as Tobiah finds Raphael, the narrator tells the audience that he is an angel but neither Tobiah nor his parents know this. Until Raphael reveals his identity, he will be known to Tobiah as Azariah. Once Tobit checks out the potential guide, he is happy. Tobit also helps to calm his wife’s fears about her son going on a long journey. When Tobit says that a good angel will go with Tobiah, he has no idea how really good the guide is. As we come to the end of chapter 5, Tobit is still without his sight, and Tobiah and Sarah are still without a spouse.

CHAPTER 6: The journey

“Raphael said: ‘Do not be afraid, for she was set apart for you before the world existed. You will save her, and she will go with you’” (v.18).

In the journey to Ecbatana (7:1), Raphael gives Tobiah *three instructions* which have nothing to do with the recovery of Tobit’s money. The real purpose of the trip to Media is the healing of Sarah and her marriage to Tobiah.

Verses 3-6—First instruction: How to prepare the fish. The *Collegeville Commentary* states: “The fish represents a common element in romantic quests in folklore. The hero on a romantic quest conquers a dragon or a water monster such as Leviathan. This sea monster then becomes the source of life for the hero and for other characters in the story. Water as a source of both life and death is a common biblical image. The fish in the story of Tobit attempts to swallow Tobiah’s foot (or to swallow Tobiah in the shorter Greek text!), but when Tobiah follows Raphael’s instruction, seizes the fish, and saves its gall, heart, and liver, it becomes a source of healing” (p.837).

Verses 7-9—Second instruction: Healing properties of the fish. The *Collegeville Commentary* adds: *Raphael informs Tobiah that the heart and liver of the fish are useful in removing an evil spirit from a man or a woman, and the gall is useful in curing blindness in a man. The reader, of course, knows that it is a woman who is afflicted by a demon and a man*

who is blind. Tobiah, instructed by Raphael and supplied with the parts of the fish, will be the means of their healing (ibid, p.838).

Verses 10-18—Third instruction: Tobiah’s marriage to Sarah and her healing. Raphael reveals to Tobiah that he is going to meet his future wife, Sarah. But Tobiah knows somehow that Sarah’s previous seven husbands died on their wedding night due to a demon that loved Sarah and did not want her to marry anyone else – to which the *Collegeville Commentary* states: *However, Tobiah also knows from Raphael that burning the heart and liver of the fish can drive off demons. Once the demon is banished, Tobiah is to begin his marriage in the spirit of prayer, and that prayer, joined to his willing obedience to his father and the great love he already feels toward Sarah, will seal the marriage that was determined “before the world existed”* (ibid, p.838).

The whole purpose of these events is to get Tobiah and Sarah together so they can marry one another. Underneath all of this is the theological conviction that God is guiding the course of history, and that all the conflict, consternation, and intrigue are part of the divine plan. It might look haphazard and random, but it is, in fact, the hand of God shaping the lives of humans.

Pause: What might have helped Tobiah deal with his anxiety about marrying a woman whose previous seven husbands died on their wedding night? Can you recall anxieties you may have had prior to a major shift in your life? What helped you in that situation?

PART 3: MARRIAGE OF TOBIAH AND SARAH

CHAPTERS 7-8: Tobiah marries Sarah and the demon is expelled

“Raguel said to Tobiah... ‘Your marriage to her has been decided in heaven! Take your kinswoman; from now on you are her love, and she is your beloved. She is yours today and ever after. And tonight, son, may the Lord of heaven prosper you both. May he grant you mercy and peace’” (v.11).

The climactic moment in Tobit now emerges. Will Tobiah be yet another newlywed killed on his wedding night by the demon Asmodeus? From the beginning, the angel Raphael has already been at work providing Tobiah with the fish organs that will

ward off the demon (6:2-6). Now he directs Tobiah to the home of Raguel, his future father-in-law, to set the stage for a successful marriage.

The episode begins with the usual rituals of hospitality: guests are greeted warmly and made comfortable, and a festive meal is prepared. There is humor and irony in Raguel’s boisterous well-wishing. He acknowledges that all of Sarah’s husbands died on their wedding night, yet he wishes Tobiah good luck. *“But now, son, eat and drink. I am sure the Lord will look after you both”* (v.11).

7:11—Sarah is given in marriage. Raguel assures Tobiah that despite Sarah’s bad luck with previous husbands, this marriage has been made in heaven. Then Raguel calls in his daughter Sarah and gives her off to Tobiah. A marriage contract is drawn up according to the Law of Moses.

8:1-3—Expulsion of the demon. When Tobiah enters the bedroom, he remembers Raphael’s instructions and performs the necessary ritual of burning the fish’s heart and liver. The ritual works and Raphael pursues the demon to make sure he never returns.

After Sarah’s parents leave the prepared bedroom, Tobiah asks his wife to rise from their bed so that they can pray together. The newlyweds praise God and recall the blessings to Adam and Eve as helpmates for one another (Gn 2). Tobiah affirms his holy and wholesome intentions. He is motivated by love and not lust. Together in prayer they go to bed.

Even though Raguel is glad that Sarah found another husband, he cannot help wondering if Tobiah is going to be the eighth victim of the demon. So he asks his servants to dig a grave. When one of the maids tell him that the newlyweds are sound asleep, his heart is full of joy and he gives praise to God.

The next day, Raguel and his wife prepare a feast for the newlyweds and Raguel asks that the celebration, which normally lasts seven days, be extended for fourteen days. We can only imagine the happiness in Raguel’s household.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapters 7 and 8?

CHAPTER 9 tells the story of how Raphael recovers Tobit’s money without any problem. In fact, Gabael returns with Raphael to join in the joyful wedding celebration.

CHAPTER 10: Tobiah's parents anxiously await his return. An emotional farewell.

“Anna said, ‘my son has perished and is no longer among the living’” (v.3).

“My daughter, honor your father-in-law and mother-in-law, because from now on they are as much your parents as the ones who brought you into the world” (v.12).

Meanwhile “back at the ranch,” Tobit and Anna worry if Tobiah is still alive and okay. Even though Raguel very much wants Tobiah to stay longer, he reluctantly allows him to go with Sarah along with a substantial dowry. The goodbye is very emotional. The words spoken by Raguel and Edna show that they recognize that marriage is the joining of two families. Henceforth, Tobiah will be son to Raguel and Edna, and Sarah will honor Tobit and Anna like her own parents.

Pause: Speak to the issue of parents worrying about their children and their desire for them to live close to them.

PART 4: JOURNEY HOME

CHAPTER 11: Tobiah comes home with Sarah and heals his father's blindness

*“Blessed be God,
blessed be his great name,
and blessed be all his holy angels!
May his great name be with us,
and blessed be all the angels
throughout all the ages!
God it was who afflicted me,
and God who has had mercy on me.
Now I see my son Tobiah!”*

Anna sitting at the gate watching for the return of her son, reminds us of the father in the parable of the prodigal son watching for the return of his son.

As the traveling party gets close to Nineveh, Raphael reminds Tobiah that he will be the instrument of healing for his father and instructs him on what to do. After an emotional reunion, Tobiah immediately works to restore his father's eyesight. When Tobit's blindness is healed, he breaks into a prayer of thanksgiving. The *Collegeville Commentary* notes: “Tobit prays in praise of God, whom he sees both as

a source of affliction and as a source of healing. He thus declares one of the major theological principles of the book: God is free, and God's actions are beyond human understanding. Tobit, although he believes that God rewards obedience and punishes wickedness (1:12-13; 4:6, 21), accepts his blindness as coming from God (3:5). Throughout his affliction he never turns away from God and never ceases praying. His prayer as his sight is restored is a striking manifestation of his own extraordinary faith” (p.840).

The joyful scene concludes with the greeting of Sarah, who has just arrived at the gate of Nineveh. Tobit continues to insist that marriage has linked the two families. He refers to Sarah as “daughter” four times in his welcoming speech (11:17).

Pause: What is the key to a successful relationship with one's in-laws?

CHAPTER 12: Raphael reveals his identity

“A king's secret it is prudent to keep, but the works of God are to be declared and made known...” (v.7).

“I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord” (v.15).

Those who like happy endings will love the Book of Tobit. By the time we get to the final chapter, Tobit has been healed of his blindness and Sarah has been delivered from the evil spirit. Chapter 12 basically wraps up the loose ends.

After the issue of Raphael's wages is settled, he offers some words of exhortation to Tobit and his son. God's good works must be proclaimed. Do good and evil will not find you. While prayer and fasting are commendable, almsgiving that benefits the poor is of greater value.

Verse 15— Raphael reveals his identity- Eugene Hensell writes:

“Raphael reveals to Tobit and Tobiah his real identity. Raphael delivers a farewell discourse. He announces his departure and also tells them of his role in directing past events in their lives. After a strong exhortation to be faithful to God's commandments and to one another, Raphael includes a promise that “those who regularly give alms will enjoy a full life.”

Raphael's role throughout this story has demonstrated the providence of God. He has prepared Tobiah for the healings of Tobit and Sarah. He guided Tobiah on their journey, always encouraging a spirit of prayer. And he has always left room for human freedom in response to God's guidance."

Pause: Can you recall an example of when things were not always what they seem?

After Tobit's death, Tobiah shows himself to be a worthy son of his father. He gives his parents an honorable burial to his parents, follows his father's advice and leaves Nineveh. He also cares well for Sarah's parents.

Pause: What parting words might you want to impart to your children or others on your death bed?

PART 5: TOBIT'S PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

CHAPTER 13: Tobit's prayer of thanksgiving

"Blessed be God who lives forever.... Now consider what he has done for you and give thanks with full voice" (vv 1, 6).

Raphael's exhortation in chapter 12 to praise God is followed in this chapter with Tobit's song of praise. The prayer falls into two sections: God's freedom and mercy (vv 1-8) and Jerusalem's distress and glory (vv 9-18). "The prayer of Tobit reflects the story of his own life. In his prayer he makes himself an example for his people. He exhorts them to praise God as he does and to trust God in adversity as well as joy. In the second section he makes the same call to praise and to trust God both in sorrow and in joy. He concludes the prayer with a hymn of joy over Jerusalem's future glory" (ibid, p.842).

CHAPTER 14: Tobit's parting words

"Now, children, I give you this command: serve God faithfully and do what is right before him; you must tell your children to do what is upright and to give alms, to be mindful of God and at all times to bless his name sincerely and with all their strength" (v.19).

Tobit dies peacefully, having been rewarded the blessings bestowed on the righteous: long life, joy, prosperity and many descendants. Calling Tobiah and his seven grandsons to his bedside, he exhorts them to pay attention to the words of the prophets, especially the word of Nahum about the destruction of Nineveh. Then he goes on to talk about the destruction of and restoration of Jerusalem (vv 4-7). Finally, Tobit tells Tobiah and his grandsons to live as he has lived, to serve God in truth, and to give alms.

RESOURCES

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary. As you can see from the text, I relied heavily on Sr. Irene Nowell's commentary.
- The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition
- Weekday Homily Helps – Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.