

TOBIT 1-3

¹This book tells the story of Tobit son of Tobiel son of Hananiel son of Aduel son of Gabael son of Raphael son of Raguel from the clan of Asiel, of the tribe of Naphtali, ²who in the days of King Shalmaneser of the Assyrians was taken into captivity from Thisbe, which is to the south of Kedesh Naphtali in Upper Galilee, northwest of Hazor, and north of Phogor.

The author of this romance has chosen the names of his main characters to fit their character as he intends to portray it. ‘Tobit’ [Greek: Τωβιτ; Hebrew טוביט] derives from the Hebrew word for ‘good’ [טוב], as does the name of his father, Tobiel [טוביאל; ‘God is my good’]. We are told later that Tobit is telling his story in obedience to the command of the angel Raphael (see 12:20). It is significant that the names of all Tobit’s ancestors end with ‘el (‘God’). Two of the names prepare us for two characters in the story: the angel Raphael’ (רפאאל; ‘God has healed’; see 3:16), and Raguel [רעואל; ‘friend of God’], the father of the one who will marry Tobit’s son (see 3:7).

Tobit is from the tribe of Naphtali west of the Sea of Galilee, and just south of Dan. Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (744-727) conquered the area in 732-733 and transported the inhabitants into exile in Assyria (see 2Kings 15:29).

Shalmaneser V (727-722) besieged and captured Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel (2Kings 17:3-5), but he had to withdraw when Sargon II (722-705) instigated a palace coup. Two years later, in 720, Sargon returned to Samaria and transported its inhabitants into exile (see 2Kings 18:9-11).

Thisbe (verse 2) is otherwise unknown. The judge Barak came from Kedesh (verse 2; see Judges 4:6), a Canaanite city earlier conquered by Joshua (see Joshua 12:22; 19:37). It is mentioned also in 1Maccabees 11:63, 73. Hazor (verse 2) was sacked by Joshua (see Joshua 11:1-15; 12:19).

The author has Tobit begin his life story back in Naphtali prior to his being exiled in Nineveh.

Three words are used of Tobit, and they will characterize his person and his behaviour throughout the story: ‘truth’ (Greek: ἀληθεία; alētheia; Hebrew מֵטָמֶה; ’emet); ‘righteousness’ (Greek: δικαιοσύνη; dikaiosunē; Hebrew: יְדִיאוֹתָיִם; ṣēdāqāh); and ‘acts of mercy’ (Greek: ἐλεημοσύνη; eleēmosunē; Hebrew: חֶסֶד; hesed). ἐλεημοσύνη occurs 22 times in the Book of Tobit.

It is clear from verse 4 that the author supports the Jewish claim that there must be one central sanctuary, and that it must be in Jerusalem (compare 1Kings 9:3; 14:21).

2Kings 10:29 recounts the sanctuaries set up in Dan and Bethel by Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom, as part of his break with Judah. Jewish propaganda had it that the people of Israel sacrificed to the calves. The northerners saw the calves as the throne of the invisible YHWH, just like the cherubim in the temple in Jerusalem.

Tobit is portrayed as resisting local pressure by continuing to worship in Jerusalem. Exodus 23:14-17 and Deuteronomy 16:16 prescribe a festival pilgrimage for Passover (in the spring), Pentecost (at the end of the grain harvest, fifty days after Passover) and Tabernacles (in the autumn).

You shall give the priests the first fruits of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the first of the fleece of your sheep.

– Deuteronomy 18:4

Numbers 18:21-32 speaks of the role of the Levites (verse 7) in the temple cult.

³I, Tobit, walked in the ways of truth and righteousness all the days of my life. I performed many acts of charity for my kindred and my fellow Israelites who had gone with me in exile to Nineveh in the land of the Assyrians.

⁴When I was in my own country, in the land of Israel, while I was still a young man, the whole tribe of my ancestor Naphtali deserted the house of David and Jerusalem. Yet it was this city that had been chosen from among all the tribes of Israel, where all the tribes of Israel should offer sacrifice and where the temple, the dwelling of God, had been consecrated and established for all generations forever. ⁵All my kindred and our ancestral house of Naphtali sacrificed to the calf that King Jeroboam of Israel had erected in Dan and on all the mountains of Galilee.

⁶But I alone went often to Jerusalem for the festivals, as it is prescribed for all Israel by an everlasting decree. I would hurry off to Jerusalem with the first fruits of the crops and the firstlings of the flock, the tithes of the cattle, and the first shearings of the sheep.

⁷I would give these to the priests, the sons of Aaron, at the altar; likewise the tithe of the grain, wine, olive oil, pomegranates, figs, and the rest of the fruits to the sons of Levi who ministered in Jerusalem.

Also for six years I would exchange a second tithe for money and go and distribute it in Jerusalem.

⁸A third tithe I would give to the orphans and widows and to the converts who had attached themselves to Israel. I would bring it and give it to them in the third year, and we would eat it according to the ordinance decreed concerning it in the law of Moses and according to the instructions of Deborah, the mother of my father Tobiel, for my father had died and left me an orphan.

⁹When I became an adult I married a woman, a member of our own clan, and by her I became the father of a son whom I named Tobiah.

There were no tithes in the seventh (sabbatical) year:

In the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for YHWH: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound labourers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

– Leviticus 25:4-7

When people lived too far from the temple, they were permitted to convert the tithe into money and bring the money to the temple (verse 7; see Deuteronomy 14:24-27). Deuteronomy also includes the law regulating tithing in the third year (verse 8):

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that YHWH your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

– Deuteronomy 14:28-29

Tobit speaks of the death of his father when he was still a child. The presumption is that his mother, too, had died, as he was left an orphan. The reader cannot but be puzzled by the contrast between Tobit's name (which fits his behaviour) and his 'bad' experiences: losing his parents and being exiled. More sufferings will follow, and they are the result of his living such an exemplary life.

It was his father's mother who instructed him in his faith. Deborah was named after the judge who carried out her ministry in the same tribal area (see Judges 4-5).

For the practice of marrying within one's own clan (verse 5) see Numbers 36:8. Tobit names his son Tobiah [טוביה; 'YHWH is my good'].

There was an immediate connection between blood and life, and, since life was given by God, flesh could be consumed only after the sacred element, the blood, had been removed (see Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 7:26-27). This could not be guaranteed in 'food of Gentiles'. For a variety of reasons, certain foods were forbidden (see Leviticus 11:1-47). Generally this was because something about them associated them in a symbolic way with death.

The requirement that the people of Israel could not just eat whatever was eaten by their non-Israelite neighbours, was a constant reminder to them that they were different. They have been selected, chosen, set apart from other nations, by the Holy One, to be 'holy'. This 'holiness' is to be demonstrated in every aspect of their way of living: in their eating, but, more significantly, in their behaviour.

Tobit was scrupulously careful in this matter (verse 11; compare Judith 12:1-3 and Daniel 1:8, 13, 15). The title 'the Most High' (verse 12) was originally a Canaanite title for 'El, the chief God of their pantheon. In the Torah 'El is identified as YHWH (see Genesis 14:22; Deuteronomy 32:8-9; Numbers 24:16).

We find out later that Gabael lives in Ráges (4:1; in the vicinity of modern Teheran; see map page 11). Gabael's brother (or is he his father; see 4:20?) is Gabri (short for Gabriel, גַּבְרִיאֵל, 'man of God').

Shalmaneser was succeeded by Sargon II, and Sennacherib was the son of Sargon, not Shalmaneser (see verse 15).

Tobit's 'acts of charity' are central to the behaviour expected of the people of Israel:

share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, cover them,
and do not hide yourself from your own kin.

– Isaiah 58:7

Burying the dead features strongly in Tobit (see 2:3-8; 4:3-4; 6:15; 14:10-13).

¹⁰After I was carried away to Assyria and came as a captive to Nineveh, everyone of my relatives and my people ate the food of the Gentiles, ¹¹but I kept myself from eating the food of the Gentiles.

¹²Because I was mindful of God with all my heart, ¹³the Most High gave me favour and good standing with Shalmaneser, and I used to buy everything he needed.

¹⁴Until his death I used to go into Media, and buy for him there.

While in the country of Media I left bags of silver worth ten talents in trust with Gabael, the brother of Gabri.

¹⁵But when Shalmaneser died, and his son Sennacherib reigned in his place, the high-ways into Media became unsafe and I could no longer go there.

¹⁶In the days of Shalmaneser I performed many acts of charity for my compatriots.

¹⁷I would give my food to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw the dead body of any of my people thrown outside the wall of Nineveh, I would bury it.

In Nineveh

¹⁸I also buried any whom King Sennacherib put to death when he came fleeing from Judea in those days of judgment that the king of heaven executed upon him because of his blasphemies. For in his anger he put to death many Israelites; but I would secretly remove the bodies and bury them. So when Sennacherib looked for them he could not find them.

¹⁹Then one of the Ninevites went and told the king about me, that I was burying them; so I hid myself. But when I realized that the king knew about me and that I was being searched for to be put to death, I was afraid and fled.

²⁰Then all my property was confiscated; nothing was left to me that was not taken into the royal treasury except my wife Hannah and my son Tobiah.

²¹But not forty days had elapsed when two of Sennacherib's sons killed him, and then fled to the mountains of Ararat. When his son Esar-haddon succeeded him, he appointed Ahiqar, the son of my brother Hanael, over all the accounts of his kingdom, and he had authority over the entire administration of the treasury.

²²Ahiqar interceded for me, and I returned to Nineveh. (Ahiqar was chief cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts.) Esar-haddon appointed him second only to himself. He was my friend and a close relative.

In reference to the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701, we read:

The angel of the YHWH set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineveh.

– 2Kings 19:35-36

Because of his commitment to acts of charity, Tobit's life is in danger and he is forced to flee.

Tobit's wife is Hannah [חַנָּה; 'grace'). Fortunately she and Tobiah are safe.

Sennacherib was assassinated in 681. According to 2Kings 19:37, the names of Sennacherib's executors were Adrammelek and Sharezer. The ancient area of Urartu (Ararat; see map page 11) is in the northern area of Armenia, centring on Lake Van.

Sennacherib was succeeded by his son, Esar-haddon (681-669).

There was an Ahiqar who was a court official and sage of Esar-haddon. Our author makes him Tobit's nephew to enhance Tobit's prestige, but also to help develop the theme of a disgraced and rehabilitated minister.

'Chief cupbearer' (verse 22) was an office of special trust and influence (Nehemiah held the same position under Darius; see Nehemiah 1:11; 2:1).

Ahiqar was in a position to intercede for his relative, Tobit, who was allowed to return (and was restored to his wife and child, verse 20).

The 'festival of Weeks' was celebrated 50 days after Passover. It was a joyful festival celebrating the seven weeks of the grain harvest. During the Greek period it came to be called 'Pentecost' (see 2Maccabees 12:31-32).

Seeing the abundance of the meal set before him, Tobit's thought go out to those in need. He sends his son to fetch a needy person to share the meal. The laws governing purity required that it be an observant Jew (verse 2).

The news brought to Tobit by his son leads immediately to action. Even if the dead man was a criminal he was entitled to a proper burial (see Deuteronomy 21:23).

It appears that the dead man has been hanged in public view as a warning to others (verse 3). Tobit waits for darkness, probably to avoid detection (see 1:18-20).

The quote is from Amos 8:10.

Tobit's neighbours can't believe he is so stupid. As they see it he still hasn't learned his lesson.

¹So it was that during the reign of Esar-haddon I returned home, and my wife Hannah and my son Tobiah were restored to me. At our festival of Weeks, a good dinner was prepared for me and I reclined to eat.

²When the table was set for me and an abundance of food placed before me, I said to my son Tobiah, "Go, my child, and bring whatever poor person you may find of our people among the exiles in Nineveh, who is wholeheartedly mindful of God, and he shall eat together with me. I will wait for you, until you come back."

³So Tobiah went to look for some poor person of our people, but he came back crying and said to me, "Father!" And I replied, "Here I am, my child." Then he went on to say, "Look, father, one of our countrymen has been murdered and thrown into the market place, and now he lies there exposed!" ⁴I sprang up, left the meal before even tasting it, and retrieved the body from the square and hid it in a safe place until sunset when I could bury it. ⁵On my return, I washed and ate my food in sorrow, ⁶remembering the prophecy of Amos, how he said against Bethel, "Your festivals shall be turned into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation." And I wept.

⁷When the sun had set, I went and dug a grave and buried the body.

⁸My neighbours laughed at me and said, "Is he still not afraid? He has already been hunted down to be put to death for doing this, and he ran away; yet here he is again burying the dead!"

Tobit is challenged by his wife

⁹That same night I washed myself and went into my courtyard and slept by the wall of the courtyard; and my face was uncovered because of the heat. ¹⁰I did not know that there were sparrows on the wall; their fresh droppings fell into my eyes and produced white films. I went to physicians to be healed, but the more they treated me with ointments the more my vision was obscured by the white films, until I became completely blind. For four years I remained unable to see. All my kindred were sorry for me, and Ahiqar took care of me for two years before he went to Elymais.

¹¹At that time, also, my wife Hannah earned money at women's work.

¹²She used to send what she made to the owners and they would pay her.

One day (it was the seventh of Dystrus), when she cut off a piece she had woven and sent it to the owners, they paid her full wages and also gave her a young goat for a meal.

¹³When it came close to me, the goat began to bleat. So I called her and said, "Where did you get this goat? It is surely not stolen, is it? Return it to the owners; for we have no right to eat anything stolen." ¹⁴But she said to me, "It was given to me as a gift in addition to my wages." But I did not believe her, and told her to return it to the owners. I became flushed with anger against her over this. Then she replied to me, "Where are your acts of charity? Where are your righteous deeds? Look where they have got you!"

It is not clear whether this washing was for ritual or hygienic purpose. Perhaps he slept outside because he had been handling a corpse (see Numbers 19:11-22).

In light of Tobit's exemplary life, the reader is meant to be puzzled. His noble deed has exposed him to suffering! Why does God allow this? Should not noble deeds lead to blessing?

Medical treatment doesn't work. Only God has the power to heal!

To make matters worse his nephew and protector leaves Nineveh for Elymais (ancient Elam), a province in Persia bordering the Persian Gulf (see 1Maccabees 6:1).

His wife has to work to support him. This would have been seen as dishonourable by his neighbours (see Sirach 25:22).

'Dystrus' (verse 11) is the Macedonian name for the Hebrew month Adar (March; see also Esther 13:6).

It will be clear later that Tobit genuinely loves his wife (see 4:3-4; 14:10), and is sensitive to her suffering (see 5:17-21; 10:1-7). One of the attractive traits of this romance is the reality of the characters. Tobit, like every other good man, has his faults. Here it appears that his dependent position is getting to him, as he assumes the worst.

Hannah makes a good point. What is the value of Tobit's scrupulously good behaviour if this is the way he treats her? She is as capable as he of lashing out in the heat of the moment.

Hannah's question cuts deep and plunges Tobit into a deeper depression. What has been the point of his living so faithfully according to the Torah? He wants to die and be free of the burden of life.

As commonly happens in the stories of the Older Testament, prayer leads to an expectation of a major turning point in the plot (see Judith 9; Esther 14:1-9). This is because the person praying is consciously turning towards the only one from whom hope can come.

'Lord' translates the Greek κύριος, which is the Greek rendition of the Hebrew 'ādōnāy (YHWH).

Tobit began his account of his life by stating:

I, Tobit, walked in the ways of truth and ...
I performed many acts of charity.

– Tobit 1:3

Here in his prayer (verse 2) he portrays God as displaying these same two qualities. In asking God to 'remember' him (verse 3), he is asking God to attend to him now in his need and to act graciously towards him.

Though Tobit is utterly confused and depressed, he remains true to his faith by not doubting God's justice (verse 5). What is happening to him makes no sense, but he does not deny the justice of God.

Tobit's cry: 'it is better for me to die than to live' (verse 6) echoes the cry of Moses (Numbers 11:15), Elijah (1Kings 19:4), Job (7:15), and Jonah (4:3; compare Sirach 30:17). The 'eternal resting place' (verse 6) is Sheol (Hades; see Tobit 3:10; 13:2). There is no indication in Tobit of belief in an after life. Traditional Israelite thought reacted against the cult of the dead which they associated particularly with Egypt. The idea of a life of communion with God after death emerged as a result of the persecution suffered under Antiochus IV some decades after the writing of Tobit (see Daniel 12:1 and 2Maccabees 12:43-44).

¹Then with much grief and anguish of heart I wept, and with groaning began to pray: ²"You are righteous, O Lord, and all your deeds are just; all your ways are charitable and true; you are the judge of the world.

³Therefore, O Lord, remember me and look favourably upon me. Do not punish me for my sins and for my unwitting offenses and those that my ancestors committed before you. They sinned against you, ⁴and disobeyed your commandments. So you gave us over to plunder, exile, and death, to become the talk, the byword, and an object of reproach among all the nations among whom you have dispersed us.

⁵Your many judgments are true in exacting penalty from me for my sins and those of my ancestors. For we have not kept your commandments and have not walked in accordance with truth before you. ⁶So now deal with me as you will; command my spirit to be taken from me, so that I may be released from the face of the earth and become dust. For it is better for me to die than to live, because I have had to listen to undeserved insults, and great is the sorrow within me. Command, O Lord, that I be released from this distress; release me to the eternal resting place, and do not, O Lord, turn your face away from me. For it is better for me to die than to see so much distress in my life and to have to bear such insults."

⁷On the same day, at Ecbatana in Media, it also happened that Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, was had to listen to insults from one of her father's servant girls. ⁸Sarah had been given in marriage to seven husbands, but the wicked demon Asmodeus had killed each of them before each marriage had been duly consummated. So it was that the servant girl said to her, "You are the one who kills your bridegrooms! Look at you! You have already been given in marriage to seven bridegrooms yet you have not taken the name of a single one of them. ⁹Why do you beat us? Because your husbands are dead? Go and join them! May we never have to look at a son or daughter of yours!"

¹⁰On that day she was grieved in spirit and wept. She went upstairs in her father's house, intending to hang herself. But she thought it over and said, "Never will they reproach my father, saying to him, 'You had only one beloved daughter but she hanged herself because of her distress.' I would be the cause of my father in his old age going down in sorrow to Hades. It is better for me not to hang myself, but to pray the Lord that I may die so as not to have to listen to these reproaches any more."

There is a sudden change of scene. We find ourselves in Ecbatana in the Zagros mountains (see map page 11), some 400ks east of Nineveh as the crow flies. Sarah [שָׂרָה; 'mistress'], the daughter of Raguel [רַעֲוֵאל; 'friend of God'] is desperate. As the story develops the connection between Tobit in Nineveh and Sarah in Ecbatana will be revealed. For the present what they have in common is a shared sense of despair. Their adverse circumstances are brought to a head by 'insults'(see verses 6 and 7) and they both desire for their life to be ended. The link is underlined by the opening words: 'On the same day'(verse 7).

In contrast to the meaning of her name, she is still a virgin (see 6:22), having lost all seven of her suitors. 'Seven' carries with it the sense of completeness: Sarah had no hope of having a successfully consummated marriage.

Demons in the Older Testament appear to be a left over from polytheism. Usually they are nameless (see Deuteronomy 32:17; Psalm 106:37; 2Kings 22:20-23). Some are named: the Akkadian goddess Lilith (see Isaiah 34:14); Resheph, the Canaanite god of plague and pestilence (see Deuteronomy 32:24; Habakkuk 3:5), and Azazel (see Leviticus 16:8). 'Beliar' is a favourite demon in the intertestamental period and into the Newer Testament (see 2Corinthians 6:15).

If 'Asmodeus'(verse 8) is derived from Hebrew it means 'destroyer'(from the root šmd). If it is a Persian word it appears to mean 'the demon of anger'.

Stretching out one's hands is customary in Jewish prayer (see Isaiah 1:15; Exodus 9:29; Ezra 9:5; Psalm 44:20). As with Tobit, so with Sarah, prayer prepares us for a significant shift in the plot.

The maid has accused her of being responsible for the death of her seven bridegrooms (verse 8). Here Sarah declares her innocence of any crime (verses 14-15).

We are soon to discover that she does have a relative (the other seven were also relatives; see 7:10) whom she can marry, but she knows nothing of this (verse 15).

She wants to die, but does not want to hurt her father. She leaves the decision to God, confident that if God listens to what is being said about her he will act.

We are impressed by her love for her father (verses 10 and 15), and her faith in God (verses 12, 13 and 15), which are stronger than her longing for death.

¹¹At that same time, with hands outstretched toward the window, she prayed and said, "Blessed are you, Lord my God! Blessed is your name forever; let all your works praise you forever.

¹²And now, Lord, I turn my face to you, and raise my eyes toward you.

¹³Command that I be released from the earth never again to have to listen to such reproaches.

¹⁴You know, O Master, that I am innocent of any defilement with a man, ¹⁵and that I have not disgraced my name or the name of my father in the land of my exile. I am my father's only child; he has no other child to be his heir; and he has no close relative or other kindred for whom I should keep myself as wife. Already seven husbands of mine have died. Why should I go on living? But if it is not pleasing to you, O Lord, to take my life, listen to the taunting."

Their prayers are heard

¹⁶At that very moment, the prayers of both of them were heard in the glorious presence of God.

¹⁷So Raphael was sent to heal both of them: Tobit, by removing the white films from his eyes, so that he might see God's light with his eyes; and Sarah, daughter of Raguel, by giving her in marriage to Tobiah son of Tobit, and by setting her free from the wicked demon Asmodeus. For Tobiah was entitled to have her before all others who had desired to marry her.

At the same time that Tobit returned from the courtyard into his house, Sarah daughter of Raguel came down from her upper room.

'At that very moment' tightens the link between the two scenes. Both Tobit and Sarah turned to God in their distress, and God, who hears the cry of the poor, does not disappoint them.

If there has been any suspense in the story so far, verse 17 puts an end to it. It is only chapter three and we are assured that everything is going to work out happily. Instead of wondering how things are going to work out, the reader is directed to look carefully at the characters, and learn from them how a faithful and observant Jew is to live.

From the glorious presence of the transcendent God, the angel Raphael' (רַפָּאֵל ; 'God has healed') is sent to restore Tobit's sight and to set Sarah free (a word used in divorce proceedings; compare 6:14 where we are left with the impression that the demon is lusting after Sarah).

The role of Raphael, one of the seven angels closest to the throne of God (the best known of the others are Michael and Gabriel), is greatly expanded in the intertestamental literature, and always in a situation that involves healing.

Her marriage to Tobiah is divinely predestined, and so she is his by right (compare 6:13, 18).

In the final sentence of verse 17 we have another link connected the two scenes.