Tobit:

A Fairly Fishy Travel Tale?

The Book of Tobit is canonical in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions. Most likely written in Aramaic during the second or third centuries BCE, it appears among the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and was handed down in Greek translation by the early Christians. There are two recensions of the text, one shorter (used by the RSV) and one longer (in most later versions.)

Set in Nineveh and Ecbatana during the exile of the Northern people of Israel, *Tobit* tells the story of two descendants of Naphtali, the aging Tobit and his young kinswoman Sarah, and how they endure misfortune and ultimately are vindicated.

The story, a religious novella which may strike modern readers as humorous as well as pious, parallels the experiences of these two characters. Tobit is rewarded for an act of kindness by being blinded, the virtuous Sarah is denied fulfilment in marriage. Their prayers are answered in the form of a high ranking angel, Raphael, who appears incognito under the assumed identity of Azariah, and accompanies Tobit's son, Tobias, on a quest. The readers are let in on the secret, but the human characters have no such privilege until the very end. The appearance of angels and demons in *Tobit* marks a transition between scarce references in the Old Testament/Tanakh and their prominent role in the New Testament.

The book can be outlined as followss: (1) Tobit's misfortune and reproach, (2) Sarah's misfortune and reproach, (3) Their prayers, (4) The arrival of Raphael and the beginning of the quest, (5) The defeat of the demon Asmodeus, (6) Tobit's cure and Raphael's disclosure, (7) Tobit's Song of Praise, (8) Epilogue.

Tobit draws on both biblical and non-biblical literature. Tobias' journey, which while starting out as a debt collection trip becomes a marriage quest, alludes back to similar ventures by Isaac and Jacob in Genesis. Scholars have identified a Deuteronomic ideology in the book: the theme is theodicy, the justice of God (as in *Job*, where Job's wife, like Anna, brings an accusation against her husband). There are references to chastisement for failure to observe the law (cf. Deut. 28-29.) The angel Raphael also appears in *1 Enoch*, and Tobit has intertextual references to several of the later (canonical) prophets. In *Tobit* we also find one of the earliest references to the story of Adam and

Eve (others are found in the DSS and *Ben Sira*.)

In addition several influences from folklore have been detected, the tale of the Grateful Dead, the Dangerous Bride and the pagan hero Ahiqar (who here makes an appearance as Tobit's nephew.) J. R. C. Cousland suggests that *Tobit* has been modelled on the Ahiqar stories: both are set in Nineveh, both characters are involved in public service, both endure disgrace before vindication. It has also been suggested that the writer was familiar with Homer's *Odyssey*.

Tobit provides a rare window on the world of Second Temple Judaism. There is high regard for the Deuteronomic code, and belief in angels, demons and the magical potency of things like fish gall. These later elements contrast strongly with *Judith* and *Esther* where supernatural events are de-emphasised.

Elements in the story indicate the writer had a well developed sense of humour. Tobit is blinded by the fresh droppings of two sparrows who perch above him while he sleeps, and Sarah has been frustrated no less than seven times when, on her wedding nights, the unfortunate grooms have been struck dead by a jealous demon. Tobit is portrayed as a blustering character full of his own righteousness (but not above stretching the truth when it suits as we will see), Tobias is attacked by a fish (whose entrails are used to perform magical deeds – an exorcism and a healing), and Tobias' new in-laws prepare a grave for the young man on his marriage night which they rapidly (and literally) cover up when it becomes clear that he has not met the expected fate. There is even the presence of a faithful pooch who accompanies Tobias on the quest ("And the dog went along behind them." 11:4b), and one is tempted to think of Snowy and Tintin. Was humour the writer's intention? Lester Grabbe thinks not, suggesting that this is a very modern "reader response," while J. R. C. Cousland maintains that any such deliberate humour would undermine the moral of the story. There is, it seems, a delicate balance between the sublime and the ridiculous.

There are historical and geographical problems with the text. The writer confuses the kings of Assyria and seems to be unaware of the topography of Mesopotamia, where much of the tale is set. David McCracken notes the misleading statement by Tobit within the text that he alone of all the tribe of Naphtali attended the Holy Days in Jerusalem, rather than at Jeroboam's shrines.

> **All** my kindred and our ancestral house of Naphtali sacrificed to the calf that King Jeroboam had erected in Dan and on all the mountains of Galilee. But **I alone** went often to Jerusalem for the festivals, as it is prescribed for all Israel by an everlasting decree. (Tob. 1: 5-6, emphasis added.)[1]

Yet later Tobit concedes he was not alone:

> Then Tobit said to him [Raphael/Azariah], "Welcome! God save you, brother... It turns out that you are a kinsman, and of good and noble lineage. For I knew Hananiah and Nathan, the two sons of Shemeliah, and they used to go with me to Jerusalem and worshipped with me there, and were not led astray. (Tob. 5: 14)

Tobit strongly emphasises endogamy (marriage within the tribe) and active resistance to cultural assimilation. For Tobit, commitment to the community *is* the measure of one's commitment to God. It is Tobit's virtuous deeds in burying Jewish corpses that attracts the enmity of the Assyrian king. Kinship ties and duties are prominent: Tobit is able to judge Azariah's character simply by identifying his assumed lineage. Another theme is the virtue of charity (alms-giving) which has an almost salvific function. Women have strong roles: Sarah (who isn't above beating her servants in 3:9), Anna (a "working housewife" in 2:11) and Edna (who also has a speaking part in 10:12b.) Nevertheless, when Raphael reveals his identity it is only to the significant males (Tobit and

1 All quotations from the NRSV Apocrypha.

Tobias). The account of Raphael's ascension uses language similar to that later used by New Testament writers to describe Jesus' ascension, and may have provided a literary model.

> "...See, I am ascending to him who sent me. Write down all these things that have happened to you." And he ascended. Then they stood up, and could see him no more. They kept blessing God and singing his praises... (12: 20-22)

As Tobit's world has been turned upside down by distress, so too with Israel. Cousland identifies three inversions in the text: the role of men and women (Tobit's wife Anna is forced to become the breadwinner, Sarah is unable to become a wife and mother), the dominance of humankind over the animal world (Tobias is attacked by a fish and Tobit is blinded by sparrow droppings), and bad things happen to good people (Tobit and Sarah.) These signify a greater inversion: the subjection of God's people to the Gentile powers and Israel's national humiliation. As justice is finally meted out to the family, thanks to Raphael and his fish cures, so too justice will come to Israel with the destruction of Nineveh and a the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. In this respect *Tobit* looks toward the apocalyptic prophecy of *Daniel*.

Gavin Rumney, May 2007

Further Reading:

Cousland, J. R. C. "Tobit: A Comedy in Error?" (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*; October 2003; 65/4; 535-553.)

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