

Introduction to the Book of Tobit



The Healing of Tobias, Mattias Stomer | Fondazione Roberto Longhi, Florence | PD-US

The Book of Tobit, named after its principal character, combines Jewish piety and morality with folklore in a fascinating story that has enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles. Prayers, psalms, and words of wisdom, as well as the skillfully constructed story itself, provide valuable insights into the faith and the religious milieu of its unknown author. The book was probably written early in the second century B.C.; it is not known where. It is one of the Deuterocanonical books of Scripture.

The inspired author of the book used the literary form of religious novels (as in Esther and Judith) for the purpose of instruction and edification. The seemingly historical data, names of kings, cities, etc., are used as vivid details not only to create interest and charm, but also to illustrate the negative side of the theory of retribution: the wicked are indeed punished.

Although the Book of Tobit is usually listed with the historical books, it more correctly stands midway between them and the wisdom literature. It contains numerous maxims like those found in the wisdom books (cf. [4:3–19](#), [21](#); [12:6–10](#); [14:7](#), [9](#)) as well as standard wisdom themes: fidelity to the law, intercessory function of angels, piety toward parents, purity of marriage, reverence for the dead, and the value of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The book makes Tobit a relative of Ahiqar, a noted hero of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and folklore.

The Story

Tobit, a devout and wealthy Israelite living among the captives deported to Nineveh from the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722/721 B.C., suffers severe reverses and is finally blinded. Because of his misfortunes he begs the Lord to let him die. But recalling the large sum he had formerly deposited in far-off Media, he sends his son Tobiah there to bring back the money. In Media, at this same time, a young

woman, Sarah, also prays for death, because she has lost seven husbands, each killed in turn on his wedding night by the demon Asmodeus. God hears the prayers of Tobit and Sarah and sends the angel Raphael in human form to aid them both.

Raphael makes the trip to Media with Tobiah. When Tobiah is attacked by a large fish as he bathes in the Tigris River, Raphael orders him to seize it and to remove its gall, heart, and liver because they are useful for medicine. Later, at Raphael's urging, Tobiah marries Sarah, and uses the fish's heart and liver to drive Asmodeus from the bridal chamber. Returning to Nineveh with his wife and his father's money, Tobiah rubs the fish's gall into his father's eyes and cures him. Finally, Raphael reveals his true identity and returns to heaven. Tobit then utters his beautiful hymn of praise. Before dying, Tobit tells his son to leave Nineveh because God will destroy that wicked city. After Tobiah buries his father and mother, he and his family depart for Media, where he later learns that the destruction of Nineveh has taken place.

The divisions of the Book of Tobit are:

1. Tobit's Ordeals ([1:3–3:6](#))
2. Sarah's Plight ([3:7–17](#))
3. Preparation for the Journey ([4:1–6:1](#))
4. Tobiah's Journey to Media ([6:2–18](#))
5. Marriage and Healing of Sarah ([7:1–9:6](#))
6. Tobiah's Return Journey to Nineveh and the Healing of Tobit ([10:1–11:18](#))
7. Raphael Reveals His Identity ([12:1–22](#))
8. Tobit's Song of Praise ([13:1–18](#))
9. Epilogue ([14:1–15](#))

Characters

Tobit

- A faithful Jew from the Northern Kingdom of the tribe of Naphtali
- Taken into captivity to Nineveh (modern day Iraq)
- Anna is his wife

Tobias

- Tobit's son and main character of the book
- The one who goes on a journey with Raphael

Sarah

- Lived in Ecbatana in Media (modern day Iran)
- Seven times widowed on her wedding night
- Tobias' future wife
- Raguel is Sarah's father

Raphael / Azarias

- Archangel who is linked to ministry of healing
- One of the seven archangels who stand before the Lord

Gabael

- Relative of Tobit from the tribe of Naphtali

- Lived in Media

Asmodeus

- In some angelic hierarchy – a fallen angel just under Lucifer in power
- One of the princes of hell
- Possibly corresponds to Abaddon in Rev. 9:11
- Possibly means “wrath demon”