

PREFACE

This Introductory Commentary is one fruit of an extended period of research in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, granted to me by the Provincial Council of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) in 2007.

For suggestions as to further reading I cannot do better than recommend a web site which offers extensive and up-to-date references to significant scholarly writings on all books of the Bible. http://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska_bibl.html. will take you to a bibliography prepared by Father Jean Louis Ska SJ, who is currently professor of Old Testament Studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome. The directions are in Italian but are obvious to an English speaker. To find Tobit or Judith go to Section XI (Deuterocanonical Books) and click on 'Tob' for Tobit and 'Jdt' for Judith.

Tobit is a short story, a romance. The author, writing somewhere in the East, and probably in the third century BC, wants his contemporaries to appreciate the blessings of the covenant they have with their God, and the benefits that flow from a life lived in obedience to the Torah. The story has a lot to tell us about living a noble and just life, expressed in acts of kindness.

Judith, too, is a story, composed in Judah in the last decades of the second century BC. The heroine is a woman, Judith, who lives in an imaginary town in Samaria. She is victorious over the general of the most powerful army in the world. The author wants to encourage his contemporaries to persevere in their faith. Their situation may appear impossible, and their enemies invincible, but only God is invincible and God is committed to his people. They must never lose faith or abandon their traditional way of life in obedience to the Torah.

I thank Father Warrick Tonkin for the time and care he put into reading the manuscript and granting it the 'Nihil Obstat', and Monsignor John Woods for permission to publish. My prayer is that this Introductory Commentary will enrich your appreciation of these ancient Jewish writings.

– Feast of Saint Benedict, 2012

TOBIT

INTRODUCTION

A Jewish Romance

The Book of Tobit is perhaps best described as a short Jewish Romance. What it lacks in suspense, it makes up for in the realism of the characters: ordinary people who look to God and care for others. This does not protect them from suffering, but they continue to trust in God, and they do experience God's blessing. Tobit, a righteous and observant Jew living in Nineveh, the ancient capital of the Assyrian Empire (see map pages 10-11), gives an account of his experiences. He is from Thisbe in Naphtali (Galilee), and was exiled along with many of his countrymen during the reign of the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V (727-722BC). His mother (unnamed) and father, Tobiel, died when he was still a child and he was raised by his grandmother, Deborah. He married Hannah, who was also from Naphtali, and they had a son whom they named Tobiah. As we will see when commenting on the text, the names of his characters are chosen to fit the message the author is wanting to convey.

God rewards Tobit by making him purchasing agent to the king. With a change of ruler, his fortunes change under Sennacherib (705-681), but he is again in favour during the reign of King Esar-haddon (681-669), thanks to the fact that his nephew Ahikar is the king's chief financial minister. As a consequence of his persistence in burying the dead, Tobit loses his sight. When his blindness is compounded by having to rely on the support of his wife, who challenges his whole reason for living, he sees no purpose in continuing, and in desperation prays to God to bring his life to an end.

There is a change of scene from Nineveh in Assyria to Ecbatana in Media, some 400ks east of Nineveh through the Zagros mountains. We are taken to the home of Raguel, who is living with his wife Edna, and daughter, Sarah. Sarah, too, is desperate, as she has been betrothed seven times, but each time her husband has died before consummating the marriage. She, too, prays for God to end her life. God answers both their prayers by sending to their aid Raphael, one of the seven who stand before the throne of God (see Tobit 4:16-17; 12:12-15, 19-20). He arrives under the guise of a man called Azariah.

Tobit remembers that he is owed money by Gabael who lives in Ráges, in the Elburz mountains south of the Caspian Sea. He sends his son, Tobiah, on the long journey to collect the debt, telling him to stay with Jews and not to marry anyone outside his tribe. Tobiah is accompanied by Azariah. Eventually Tobiah and Sarah meet and are married. They travel back to Nineveh, Tobit's sight is miraculously restored, and they all live 'happily ever after'.

The text

Fragments of Tobit were discovered among the Qumran scrolls, one in Hebrew and four in Aramaic. Publication of these fragments has convinced most scholars that Tobit was originally written in Hebrew, and that the closest Greek translation is that found in the fourth century Codex Sinaiticus, which is a century older than the other two major Codexes (Vaticanus and Alexandrinus). It is also 1,700 words longer. The English translation offered here is based upon the Codex Sinaiticus.

The Jewish Canon of sacred books

Tobit was not included among the authoritative sacred books accepted by the Palestinian Jews. We can only surmise as to the reasons. The problem was not one of language, as Tobit was composed in Hebrew. Nor was it content. Tobit has as much right to be included as Jonah or Esther. Probably it was because it was judged to be not sufficiently ancient. It was written, it seems, sometime in the third century BC. Though the Book of Daniel, which was included, was composed in the second century BC, it contained quite ancient stories, and purported to be about Daniel, an otherwise unknown prophet of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BC. Apart from the Book of Daniel, the most recent books included in the Palestinian canon are the Books of Chronicles composed about the year 300BC. While Tobit was not included in the official Jewish canon, it was part of the Jewish Greek Version (the Septuagint) and was inherited among the sacred writings by the Christians, though many of the early Christian writers, especially in the East, followed the Palestinian canon, and did not include it among the authorised sacred books.

History, Story and Truth

We are right to expect to find truth when we read the texts of the Sacred Scriptures. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council we read:

Those divinely revealed realities that are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old Testament and the New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church (n.11).

The document goes on to explain that inspiration relates to what the inspired authors *assert*:

Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, *assert* should be regarded as *asserted* by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures ... Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through people in human fashion, it follows that interpreters of sacred scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of the words (n. 11-12).

Truth is found in the judgment. We communicate truthfully when what we *assert* expresses the way things are, as distinct from the ways we think they are, or would like them to be. The hard-earned gains of empirical science have rightly made us take great care that our judgments be based on discerned data. We want to know ‘the facts’ and are loath to trust those who start from abstract principles and deal out what they claim to be ‘truths’ without being able to ground them in tested experience.

However, there are many ways of communicating truth. The writing of history is one way. It involves the careful establishing of the data (what actually happened), as well as a careful attempt to express something of the significance of what happened. Of course, there are limits to history’s capacity to express truth.

West of Nineveh



East of Nineveh



Hellenization

Truth can also be communicated through other forms of art which aim to awaken the imagination – as distinct from appealing to the logic of discursive reasoning – and through the imagination to open the way to insight. A video can tell us something of what was actually going on, but so can a painted portrait or a film. These take us ‘inside’ the facts to what is really going on! A well told story can have the same effect.

Story

Tobit is a story. If we are to find inspiration from reading it we must approach it as one approaches a story. We are familiar with this from the parables of Jesus. Story-telling links immediately with experience, and provides a simple and effective way of sharing experience, and so truth. The author is writing to encourage his fellow exiles not to let themselves be absorbed by the culture in which they find themselves, but to be faithful to their religious heritage. He brings the stories of the patriarchs to life by helping the reader see what it means to be led by God in their ordinary lives. He wants his readers to appreciate the blessing of the covenant and the benefits that flow from living faithfully by the Torah: lives characterised as noble (καλός; kalos), good (ἀγαθός; agathos), righteous (δίκαιος; dikaios) and expressed in acts of mercy (ἐλεημοσύνη; eleēmosunē). The main characters of the story exhibit these qualities, which are also qualities of God.

The author is not a philosopher, nor does he deal in abstractions. Tobit’s good deeds do not protect him against misfortune (see 4:10), but Tobit continues to put his trust in God (see 5:10), and he does experience God’s blessing. The generosity of Ahikah (see 1:22; 2:10; 11:18) does not protect him against being exploited by Nadin (see 14:10-11). We are to be generous because that is what the Torah asks of us, whatever the consequences. Tobiah is set before the reader as an example of willing obedience (see 5:1-2, 16). He is aware of his limitations, and willingly allows himself to be led by a guide (see 6:2-8, 11-17). When confronted with evil he courageously confronts it (see 7:8-12; 8:1-9).

These are some of the truths conveyed by the author of this story. There are others. While there is a place for cult in our religious lives (see 1:3-13; 13:9-18; 14:5-7), living a religious life is essentially a matter of faith and simple generosity (see 1:16-17; 4:3-19; 12:6-14). He is aware of the mystery and transcendence of God, hence the role of the heavenly angelic guide. He is also encouraging simple heartfelt prayer, and the prayers expressed in the story are central to the action.

Robert Alter in his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Allen & Unwin, 1981, page 189) writes:

The Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning [depicting] of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for a hundred generation of readers. But that pleasure of imaginative play is deeply inter-fused with a sense of great spiritual urgency. The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality, because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to, or resists, Him. Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.

In using story to convey truth the author of Tobit is carrying on an ancient tradition. The faith of Israel is a historical faith, essentially related to ways in which God has been experienced in their history, but there are more ways, and often more effective ways, of expressing truth than by accurate statements of historical fact. The authors were real human beings whose aim was to alert their contemporaries to the meaning of their history for their current circumstances. To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will. The biblical writers are interested in forming the consciousness of their contemporaries by keeping before them the stories that remind them of who they are and what they are called to be.

The question to be asked as we read these stories is not: 'Can we be confident that we are reading historically accurate accounts of past events?' It is rather: 'Is God really the way God is presented here?' and 'Are we to respond to God in the way this account states?' The fact that the Jewish scribes in Alexandria judged the Book of Tobit worth including in their Bible should encourage us to trust that (allowing for the necessary imperfections of people and language) the author's inspired insights will guide us well.

The author

The author is an observant Jew, probably living outside Palestine, and writing some time in the third century BC when the pressure to become part of the dominant Hellenistic culture was being experienced, but prior to the time of the Maccabees (see 13:11; 14:6-7). Because he is writing centuries after the time in which he has situated his story, we can excuse his historical and geographical errors. The tribe of Naphtali was taken into exile during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727BC), not Shalmaneser V (see Tobit 1:2). Sargon II succeeded Shalmaneser V, not Sennacherib (see Tobit 1:3-21). The distance from Rages to Ecbatana is over 330ks, too far for a two-day journey (see Tobit 5:6). Tobiah and his companion leave Nineveh and head east. Their first stop is at the Tigris River (see Tobit 6:1-5). Yet Nineveh is east of the Tigris.

Influences

In Tobit there are echoes of the Joseph saga from Genesis. Tobit, like Joseph, was an exile (see Tobit 1:2-3; Genesis 41:42-43). Both rose to a position of eminence in a foreign land (see Tobit 1:13, 22; Genesis 41:42-43). Both suffered unjust opposition (see Tobit 1:19-20; Genesis 37:18-28; 39:7-20). Both experienced God's blessing and finally prospered (see Tobit 1:17; 4:16; Genesis 45:11; 47:12). There are echoes, too, of Isaac's quest for a bride, upon his father's insistence that he marry a person who shared his faith (see Tobit 1:9; 4:12-13; 6:10-12, 15; 7:10-12; 8:7; Genesis 24). We will notice further elements of the Isaac story as we comment upon the text.

Tobit appears also to draw on folktales that abounded in the ancient world. There are stories that tell of a man being rewarded for giving a body an honourable burial. Other stories speak of the hazards of marrying a dangerous bride. Then there is the story of Ahiqar (a name we find in Tobit 14:10), a wise man and counsellor to the Assyrian kings whose life was in danger because of lies told about him to his nephew Nadin (see Tobit 1:21-22; 2:10; 11:18; 14:10).

