

Exegesis Paper – Tobit Chapter 12

Introduction

In the Old Testament Apocrypha, the book of Tobit relates the intersecting stories of two Jewish families during the Assyrian Exile. The book is written in narrative style from the point of view of one family: primarily the father Tobit and his son Tobias. Tobit has become blind through an almost comic incident and, while wishing he was dead, sends Tobias on a journey with a guide to collect some money. Meanwhile, in another family, the daughter Sarah also wishes she were dead, because each of her seven husbands have been killed by a demon on their wedding nights. As the stories merge, Tobias and Sarah marry, the demon is chased away, the money is collected, Tobit's blindness is healed, the guide reveals himself to be the angel Raphael, and they all live happily ever after.

The focus of this essay is Chapter 12, which narrates a discussion between Tobit, Tobias and the guide after Tobias has returned home with his new wife Sarah. This passage is followed by two further chapters in which Tobit expresses a joyful prayer and a denouement about the subsequent lives of the key protagonists.

Text Criticism

There are early copies and fragments of Tobit in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic. In Greek, there are two recensions of the full work, designated G^I and G^{II} (both having manuscripts dated to the 4th century CE) and fragments of a third recension, G^{III}. Fragments comprising about 20% of the book of Tobit were found at Qumran in both Hebrew (4QTob^e) and Aramaic (4QTob^{e-d}), dated between 1st century BCE and 1st century CE. The Latin versions are later derivations from these earlier languages. (Nowell 1999, 976; Fitzmyer 2001, 626; Otzen 2002, 61–62)

As a consequence of these language variations, determining the language of the original work is difficult. Since the Qumran discoveries in 1952 (Perrin 2014, 107) most scholars favour a Semitic language, probably Aramaic (Moore 1996, 33–39; Fitzmyer 2001, 627; Perrin 2014, 113).

G^I is 1,700 words shorter than G^{II} (Moore 1996, 56), and in the passage under discussion – chapter 12 – one of the omissions in G^I is the key phrase about Raphael testing Tobit.

Historical Context

The story is set within the Jewish community in exile “at Nineveh in the land of the Assyrians” (1:3¹) around 700 BCE (Otzen 2002, 2).

Many suggestions have been made about the date and place of composition, but the majority view advocates a date in the late 2nd or early 3rd century BCE (Nowell 1999, 977; Fitzmyer 2001, 627; Dancy 1972, 10; Moore 1996, 42; Perrin 2014, 113).

¹ All quotes from the Book of Tobit are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Canonical Context and Literary Sources

Tobit is part of the OT Apocrypha in Protestant discourse, and one of the deuterocanonical books in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles (deSilva 2002). Although Jewish in origin, the book was not part of the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, it was included in the Septuagint project to translate Hebrew scriptures into Greek (Moore 1996, 49) during the 3rd century BCE.

The plot of Tobit shows affinities² with numerous earlier stories, particularly the folktales *The Grateful Dead*, *The Bride of the Monster*, and the story of Ahiqar (Otzen 2002, 24–26; Nowell 1999, 979). The Biblical stories of Joseph and Job may have also been influences (Nowell 1999, 981–982) and there is a strong inclination among scholars to see a theology in Tobit based on the Deuteronomic model of retribution (Kiel 2011; Perrin 2014, 123–124; Spencer 1999, 160).

Genre

The form of Tobit is a narrative and although many past scholars tried to read Tobit as literally true (Moore 1996, 187), the majority view today is that it is fictional (Miller 2012, 493; Fitzmyer 2001, 627; Metzger 1969, 31). While most of my sources simply assume the book's fictional status, Dancy proposes some internal evidence: the basic ingredients of the plot, stereotypical characters, pathos, indifference to accuracy about times and places, the supernatural element, and the apparent borrowing from other stories (Dancy 1972, 127–130). Others point out historical inaccuracies (Nowell 1999, 978; Otzen 2002, 17) as external evidence of the work being fictional³.

Rather than being merely for entertainment, however, the book is a “didactic novel” (Miller 2012, 495), variously classified as a romance (Moore 1996, 18; Dancy 1972, 127–131) or as a legend based on an earlier fairy-tale (Otzen 2002, 50–52). There is some debate about whether the story is a comedy (McCracken 1995; Cousland 2003). The story also has the flavour of *The Arabian Nights* in both the narrative style and the role ascribed to the supernatural, especially the portrayal of the demon Asmodeus and the magical fish, which perhaps indicates an influence from the surrounding Assyrian culture.

Rhetorical Criticism

Tobit chapter 12 begins after the seven-day celebration of Tobias' and Sarah's marriage (11:19)⁴. The narrative flow can be divided into four sections: a discussion between Tobit and Tobias about how much to pay the guide (12:1-5); some advice from the guide (12:6-10); the guide reveals himself to be an angel (12:11-15); and, after Tobit and Tobias have fallen on their faces, the angel tells them to get up and acknowledge God (12:16-22).

² In fact the sources I read claimed more than affinity, proposing that it is unquestionably the case that the author deliberately borrows from those stories. Such confidence seems to exceed the evidence to me. While it may be “unquestionable” that the author links Tobit to the same Ahiqar who appears in an earlier story (1:21-22), that need not imply that the plot of Tobit is borrowed from the same story.

³ Another option for external evidence would be whether the original or early readers understood the work to be fictitious, but recent scholarship seems to be silent on that question.

⁴ The actual wedding occurred back in chapter 8, with Sarah's family hosting a 14-day feast.

As with most of the book, this chapter is written in the third-person omniscient voice. In terms of narrative structure, the disclosure of Raphael's true identity is a turning point for Tobit and Tobias, although the reader has been aware of this since the angel's first appearance (5:4).

Scene-by-scene Analysis

How much to pay the guide (12:1-5)

Tobit and Tobias discuss how much to pay the guide and agree to the generous amount of "half of all that you brought back" (12:5).

In at least one point of the dialog, it is difficult to ascertain who is speaking. In verse 5, did Tobit call Raphael into the discussion (CEB, Anchor) or did Tobias (NRSV, NEB)? According to footnotes in both Moore (1996, 266) and the NRSV, the Greek (and RSV) simply has "he". Although this example is of minimal consequence, it highlights an important challenge in the process of translation and interpretation.

Advice from the guide (12:6-10)

In response to the payment offer, Raphael expounds a series of moral exhortations to honour and acknowledge God, and to give to the poor.

A view of good and evil based on moral merit is reflected in a neat symmetry within Raphael's advice. The angel implies that one gets what one deserves, whether that be on the positive side – "Do good and evil will not overtake you" (12:7) – or the negative side – "but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies" (12:10). Moore labels this type of consequentialist statement the "Deuteronomic creed" (Moore 1996, 263), but I side with Kiel who considers that label to be inadequate (Kiel 2011, 287). It unfairly reduces all of the theology in Deuteronomy to a single principle, and over-simplifies the more nuanced understanding of moral desert in both texts.

The guide reveals himself to be an angel (12:11-15)

These verses may be the key to understanding the author's intended lesson. The section starts with the phrase "I will now declare the whole truth" (12:11), implying that what has preceded was *not* the whole truth (Kiel 2011, 289). In particular, the immediately preceding consequentialist ethical assumption is called into question.

Two apparent anomalies in this section invite readers to reconsider how they have interpreted the story. First, it is odd that an angel, the paragon of moral goodness, and moreover one of seven privileged angels (12:15), should lie (e.g. 5:12) and deceive (e.g. 12:19). Admittedly, the observant reader has been aware of this since the introduction of Raphael in 5:4, but the revelation of this to Tobit and Tobias brings a new focus to the incongruity. It seems to me that Raphael attempts to justify (or perhaps apologise for) the deceit by repeating the aphorism "It is good to conceal the secret of a king, but to reveal with due honor the works of God" (12:7 and 12:11). The implication may be that he feels some internal tension⁵ because the obligation to maintain the secret of a God-as-king – and hence to lie – morally and temporally preceded the obligation to reveal what God has been doing. It is only now, with the quest complete, that he can be honest.

⁵ An angel suffering cognitive dissonance!!!

Secondly, it is a surprise – to both Tobit and to the reader – to find that Raphael was sent not just to heal Sarah and Tobit but also to “test” Tobit (12:14)⁶. The book neither explicates the nature of that testing, nor pronounces whether Tobit passed or failed.

In the light of these two facts, the reader can review the plot to consider why Raphael lied, how Tobit was being tested, whether Tobit was actually as good a man as he claims, and whether the *denial* of the “Deuteronomic creed” is perhaps the real theological lesson.⁷

“Acknowledge God” (12:16-22)

As is typical in Biblical accounts of angelic appearances (e.g. Judges 6:22-23, Luke 2:9-10), Tobit and Tobias respond to the revelation with fear (12:16) but Raphael reassures them “Do not be afraid” (12:17). Raphael asserts that he was acting on the will of God (12:18) and that the proper response is to “bless God forevermore” (12:17).

The chapter ends with Raphael “ascending” (12:20), leaving Tobit and Tobias praising God. The scene is very similar to Jesus’ departure in Luke 24:51-53 (Nowell 1999, 1057).

Reflections

Tobit 12 emphasises themes of moral goodness: of celebration, praise, generosity and honesty. These virtues are set against a background of a “guardian angel” motif that suggests that God, through the angel, is watching over and protecting the righteous.

Paradoxically, this way of describing God’s involvement in human affairs actually places God at a distance, as though God were inaccessible except through the angel. Although Tobit (3:2-6, 11:14-15, 13:1-18), Sarah (3:11-15), Sarah’s father (8:15-17) and Tobias (8:5-7) all address God directly, God is silent throughout the book. Verse 3:16 implies that God hears such prayers, but even then we learn from 12:12 that it was the angel who brought the prayers to God’s attention. The sense of God’s absence, or at least remoteness, is perhaps an apt reflection of the Jewish experience of Exile.

The same may be true for those who experience a sense of spiritual exile today. Although we continue, with Tobit, to direct our prayers to a God who can still act in the world, and continue to live in faith and virtue, the shadow of abandonment remains. We are left with a sense that although God is watching, in the words of Bette Midler’s song⁸, it is “from a distance”.

Conclusion

The story of Tobit, a didactic romance set in the Jewish exile to Assyria, continues to be both an interesting tale and a perceptive commentary on the life of faith in exile.

In chapter 12, the main quest plot is resolved and the truth of Raphael’s role is revealed. The nature of that revelation, both in terms of Raphael’s true identity and his stated intention to test Tobit, challenges the reader to dig below the surface story and to re-evaluate the theological implications.

⁶ The RSV does not include this element, although the NRSV does. I assume that is because the phrase “I was sent to test you” does not appear in G¹ (Moore 1996, 266).

⁷ How I wish for another 1,000 words to discuss the intriguing proposals about those questions! (Kiel 2011; Miller 2012; Efthimiadis-Keith 2013).

⁸ Written by Julie Gold, herself of Jewish descent (Benarde 2003).

This chapter calls us to acknowledge the hand of God and to sing God’s praises, even though God may seem remote.

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