

TOBIT 4-7

Tobit's advice to his son

¹That same day Tobit remembered the money that he had left in trust with Gabael at Rages in Media, ²and he said to himself, "Now I have asked for death. Why do I not call my son Tobias and explain to him about the money before I die?"

³So he called his son Tobiah, and when he came to him he said, "My son, when I die, give me a proper burial. Honour your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life. Do whatever pleases her, and do not grieve her in anything. ⁴Remember her, my son, because she faced many dangers for you while you were in her womb. And when she dies, bury her beside me in the same grave.

'That same day' links Tobit's remembrance of the money (see 1:14-15) with his prayer (see 3:1-6). As we will see, remembering is the first step in God's response to his prayer. Rages is just south of the Caspian Sea (see map page 11).

Tobit continues to place his trust in God, but he is still expecting to die. He wants to ensure that his wife and son are secure, but before telling his son about the money, he focuses on instructing him how he should conduct his life. His testament is modelled on that of Moses (see Deuteronomy 33), Jacob (see Genesis 49), and Joshua (see Joshua 23-24). Thinking his death is imminent, he speaks of his burial, and exhorts Tobiah to look after his mother (verses 3-4).

There are close links between the advice given here by Tobit and the teaching of Ben Sira who was a contemporary of the author of Tobit. Ben Sira stresses the importance of the instruction given by a father to his son:

He who teaches his son will make his enemies envious, and will glory in him among his friends. When the father dies he will not seem to be dead, for he has left behind him one like himself, whom in his life he looked upon with joy and at death, without grief.

– Sirach 30:3-5

The Book of Proverbs also has a lot to say about this, and stresses the importance of a son heeding his father's instructions.

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.

– Proverbs 3:1-2

Ben Sira, too, stresses the importance of honouring one's mother as well as one's father:

With all your heart honour your father, and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother. Remember that it was of your parents you were born; how can you repay what they have given to you?

– Sirach 7:27-28

The Book of Deuteronomy stresses the importance of parents educating their children (see 6:20-21; 31:12-13; 32:7, 46).

Just after the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 5:6-21), the Deuteronomists write:

Take care that you do not forget
YHWH, who brought you out of the
land of Egypt.

– Deuteronomy 6:12

At the beginning of his account of his life, Tobit declared that he ‘walked in the ways of truth and righteousness all the days of my life’ (Tobit 1:3). He is asking his son to follow his example (verses 5-6).

The irony of verse 6 is that Tobit continues to believe in God and to promise his son that righteousness leads to prosperity, when he himself is despairing, and is anything but prospering. The giving of alms is mentioned 22 times in Tobit. Tobias is to give alms ‘to all those who act righteously.’ This qualification fits well with Sirach 12:1-7. Tobit’s own behaviour, however, seems to be totally inclusive: he meets a need simply because it is there. This is in keeping with the instructions given in Deuteronomy:

Give liberally and be ungrudging
when you do so, for on this account
YHWH your God will bless you in all
your work and in all that you under-
take. Since there will never cease to be
some in need on the earth, I therefore
command you, “Open your hand to
the poor and needy neighbour in your
land.”

– Deuteronomy 15:10-11

Codex Sinaiticus goes straight from verse 6 to verse 19: ‘To all those who act righteously the Lord himself will give good counsel’. Verses 7-18 are supplied from other ancient versions.

There are echoes of the final sentence in Jesus’ words:

The measure you give will be the
measure you get.

– Matthew 7:2

⁵Revere the Lord all your days, my son, and never deliberately sin or to transgress his commandments.

Do what is right all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing;

⁶for those who act in accordance with truth will prosper in all their activities. To all those who act righteously

⁷give alms from your possessions, and do not begrudge the gift when you give it.

Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you.

⁸Give alms, my son, in proportion to what you have. If you have much wealth, give more; if little, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. ⁹You will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of adversity. ¹⁰For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness. ¹¹Indeed, almsgiving, for all who practise it, is an excellent offering in the sight of the Most High.

¹²“Beware, my son, of every kind of fornication. Above all, marry a woman from among the descendants of your ancestors; do not marry a foreign woman, who is not of your father's tribe; for we are the descendants of the prophets. Remember, my son, that Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our ancestors of old, all took wives from among their kindred. They were blessed in their children, and their posterity will inherit the land.

¹³So now, my son, love your kindred, and in your heart do not disdain your kindred, the sons and daughters of your people, by refusing to take a wife for yourself from among them. For in pride there is ruin and great confusion. And in idleness there is loss and dire poverty, because idleness is the mother of famine.

The principle enunciated in verse 8 is picked up by Paul:

If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.

– 2Corinthians 8:4

Verse 9 has echoes in Sirach:

As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin. Those who repay favours give thought to the future; when they fall they will find support.

– Sirach 3:30-31

Verse 10 is ironic when we consider Tobit's situation. It is the measure of his faith, a faith that transcends his experience.

‘Fornication’ (Greek: *πορνεία*; Hebrew *פְּדִיאוֹת*) covers all kinds of sexually irresponsible behaviour.

It is not enough that Tobit marry an Israelite. He is to marry within his own tribe (Naphtali; verse 12; see 1:1).

We read in the Book of Proverbs:

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

– Proverbs 16:18

On idleness see Proverbs 24:30-34

The Torah insists on not delaying the payment of wages to a worker (see Leviticus 219:13; Deuteronomy 24:15).

The first sentence in verse 15 appears to draw on the Ahiqar folktale, where we find:

Do not do to your companion what seems evil to you.

The Nazarites (Numbers 6:3-4) and the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35:5-6) vowed to abstain from wine. The drinking of wine in itself, however, was considered a value:

Wine is very life to human beings if taken in moderation. What is life to one who is without wine? It has been created to make people happy. Wine drunk at the proper time and in moderation is rejoicing of heart and gladness of soul.

– Sirach 31:27-28

Verse 17 may be encouraging generosity to the family of the person who has died. ‘Give none to sinners’ echoes verses 6-7 (see comment there).

On verse 19 compare:

Even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you.

– Wisdom 9:6

Having offered his son advice on how to live, Tobit goes on to speak of the money left with Gabael (see 4:1).

14“Do not keep over until the next day the wages of those who work for you, but pay them at once. If you serve God you will receive payment. Watch yourself, my son, in everything you do, and discipline yourself in all your conduct.

15What you yourself hate, do not do to anyone.

Do not drink wine to excess or let drunkenness go with you on your way.

16Give some of your food to the hungry, and some of your clothing to the naked. Give all your surplus as alms, and do not let your eye begrudge your giving of alms.

17Pour your wine at the grave of the righteous, but give none to sinners.

18Seek advice from every wise person and do not despise any useful counsel.

19At all times bless the Lord God, and ask him that your ways may be made straight and that all your paths and plans may prosper. For none of the nations has understanding, but the Lord himself will give them good counsel; but if he chooses otherwise, he casts down to deepest Hades. So now, my child, remember these commandments, and do not let them be erased from your heart.

20“And now, my son, let me explain to you that I left ten talents of silver in trust with Gabael son of Gabrias, at Rages in Media.

21Do not be afraid, my son, because we have become poor. You have great wealth if you fear God and flee from every sin and do what is good in the sight of the Lord your God.”

Tobiah needs a travelling companion

¹Then Tobiah answered his father Tobit, "I will do everything that you have commanded me, father; ²but how can I obtain the money from him, since he does not know me and I do not know him? What evidence am I to give him so that he will recognize and trust me, and give me the money? Also, I do not know the roads to Media, or how to get there."

³Tobit answered his son Tobiah, "We each signed a bond, and I divided it in two. I kept one half and put the other half with the money. Twenty years have passed since I deposited the money with him. So now, my son, find yourself a trustworthy man to go with you, and we will pay him wages when you return. But get back the money from Gabael."

⁴So Tobiah went out to look for a man to go with him to Media, someone who was acquainted with the way. Once outside he found the angel Raphael standing before him, though he did not perceive that he was an angel of God. ⁵Tobiah said to him, "Where do you come from, young man?" "From your kindred, the Israelites," he replied, "and I have come here to work." Then Tobiah said to him, "Do you know the way to go to Media?" ⁶"Yes," he replied, "I have been there many times, so I am acquainted with it and know all the roads. I have often travelled to Media, and would stay with our kinsman Gabael who lives in Rages of Media. It is a journey of two days from Ecbatana to Rages; for it lies in a mountainous area, while Ecbatana is in the middle of the plain."

⁷Tobiah said, "Wait for me here, young man, while I go in and tell my father; for I do need you to travel with me, and I will pay you." ⁸He replied, "All right, I will wait; but do not take too long."

⁹Tobiah went in and told his father, "I have just found a man who is one of our own Israelite kindred!" Tobit replied, "Call the man in, my son, so that I may learn about his family and to what tribe he belongs, and whether he is trustworthy enough to go with you."

Tobiah is ready and willing to obey his father, who reassures him that he can provide evidence that the money belongs to Tobit. He has a receipt that matches the note left with the money.

Tobiah needs a guide, and meets the angel Raphael whom God has sent in answer to Tobit's prayer (see 3:17). As is customary throughout the Bible the heavenly messenger has taken on human form. He will make the perfect guide for he claims to be an Israelite, and to know Media well. He has even stayed with Gabael in Rages (verse 6; see 4:20).

From Ecbatana to Rages is a ten or twelve day (not 'two day') journey. Furthermore Ecbatana is on a plateau 800 metres above sea level (not 'in the middle of the plain'). The author is not familiar with the geography of the area.

Tobit shares the understanding of his contemporaries that death is the end of life. The grave is a place of eternal darkness (compare Psalm 88:6; Job 10:21-22; 38:17).

The young man's words are more than a pious wish. We know it is God who is speaking through the angel. Tobit's healing is assured.

It is clear that Tobit will not accept a guide who does not belong to his people. The angel has taken on the appearance of Azariah [אַזַּרְיָהוּ 'YHWH has helped'], the son of Hananiah [חַנַּנְיָהוּ 'YHWH has been gracious'], whom Tobit knew back in Naphtali. The other two names are also quite symbolic in the context. 'Nethaniah' [נְתַנְיָהוּ 'YHWH has given'], and Shemaiah [שֵׁמַיָּהוּ 'YHWH has heard'].

The Attic drachma (verse 15) was roughly equivalent to the Roman silver denarius (compare Matthew 20:2).

¹⁰So Tobiah went out and called him, and said, "Young man, my father is calling for you." So he went in to him, and Tobit greeted him first. He replied, "Joyous greetings to you!"

To which Tobit retorted, "What joy is left for me any more? I am a man without eyesight; I cannot see the light of heaven. I lie in darkness like the dead who no longer see the light. Although still alive, I am among the dead. I hear people but I cannot see them."

The young man said, "Take courage; the time is near for God to heal you; take courage."

Tobit said to him, "My son Tobiah wishes to go to Media. Can you accompany him and guide him? I will pay your wages, brother." He answered, "I can go with him and I know all the roads, for I have often gone to Media and have crossed all its plains, and I am familiar with its mountains and all of its roads."

¹¹Then Tobit said to him, "Brother, of what family are you and from what tribe? Tell me, brother."

¹²He replied, "Why do you need to know my tribe?" But Tobit said, "I want to be sure, brother, whose son you are and what your name is."

¹³He replied, "I am Azariah, the son of the great Hananiah, one of your compatriots."

¹⁴Tobit said to him, "Welcome! God save you, brother. Do not be offended, my brother, because I wanted to be sure about your ancestry. As it turns out that you are a kinsman, and of good and noble lineage. For I knew Hananiah and Nethaniah, the two sons of Shemaiah, and they used to go with me to Jerusalem and worshipped with me there, and were not led astray. Your kindred are good people; you come of good stock. Hearty welcome!"

¹⁵He added, "I will pay you a drachma a day as wages, as well as expenses for yourself and my son. So go with my son, ¹⁶and I will add something to your wages." Raphael answered, "I will go with him; so do not fear. We shall leave in good health and return to you in good health, for the way is safe."

Tobit' mother

¹⁷Tobit said to him, "Blessings be upon you, my brother." Then he called his son and said to him, "Son, prepare supplies for the journey and set out with your brother. May God in heaven bring you safely there and return you in good health to me; and may his angel, my son, accompany you both for your safety."

Before he went out to start his journey, Tobiah kissed his father and mother. Tobit then said to him, "Have a safe journey."

¹⁸But his mother began to weep, and said to Tobit, "Why is it that you have sent my child away? Is he not the staff of our hand as he goes in and out before us? ¹⁹It's only money! let it be a ransom for our child. ²⁰For the life that is given to us by the Lord is enough for us."

²¹Tobit said to her, "Do not worry; our child will leave in good health and return to us in good health. Your eyes will see him on the day when he returns to you in good health. Say no more! Do not fear for them, my dear. ²²For a good angel will accompany him; his journey will be successful, and he will come back in good health."

^{6:1}With that she stopped weeping.

Tobit does not know that 'Azariah' is actually the angel Raphael. There is more to his prayer ('May his angel accompany you') than he realises. There are echoes here of Abraham's words to Eliezer concerning Isaac:

YHWH, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and make your way successful. You shall get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house.

– Genesis 24:40

A reader familiar with this episode in Genesis might begin to wonder whether Tobiah's journey is about more than money. Might it include Sarah?

The simple realism of the depiction of Hannah and her relationship with her son and husband is striking. She does not want her son to set out on such a long and perilous journey, and tries to persuade Tobit to change his mind, reminding him how much they need Tobiah. She'd rather have her child than the money.

Tobit reassures his wife. 'My dear' (verse 21) translates 'my sister', a term of affection for one's lover (see Song of Songs 4:9, 10, 12; 5:1,2). Raphael's presence is already bringing healing, even to the strained relationship between Tobit and Hannah (see 2:11-14).

Once again 'a good angel will accompany him' (verse 22; compare verse 17) says more than Tobit realises.

In the Older Testament the dog was an unclean animal (see Deuteronomy 23:18), and was regarded primarily as a scavenger (see 1Kings 14:11; 21:24; 2Kings 9:36; Psalm 59:6). Its presence here is probably due to the influence of the secular folktale used by the author.

Since Nineveh is on the east bank of the Tigris, this appears to be another indication that the author is not familiar with the geography (compare 5:6).

The 'large fish' that emerges from the dark waters is at first a threat to Tobiah. Thanks to the angel, the threat is neutralised and what began as a threat ends as a harbinger of healing. 'Foot' in verse 3 may be a euphemism for the genitals (as commonly in the Bible; see Exodus 4:25; Ruth 3:4-14; Isaiah 6:2). If that is what is intended here, the attack takes on a deeper meaning, by echoing the attack of the demon on Sarah's bridegrooms.

The medicinal value of the heart and liver prepares the reader for the encounter with the demon Asmodeus.

The medicinal value of the gall prepares us for the healing of Tobit's sight.

This sounds like magic, but it may represent aspects of primitive medicine.

¹The young man went out and the angel went with him; ²and the dog followed him out and went along with them. So they both journeyed along, and when the first night overtook them they camped by the Tigris river.

³Then the young man went down to wash his feet in the Tigris river. Suddenly a large fish leaped up from the water and tried to swallow the young man's foot, and he cried out. ⁴But the angel said to the young man, "Catch hold of the fish and hang on to it!" So the young man grasped the fish and drew it up on the land. ⁵Then the angel said to him, "Cut the fish open and take out its gall, heart, and liver. Keep them with you, but throw away the intestines. For its gall, heart, and liver are useful as medicine." ⁶So after cutting open the fish the young man gathered together the gall, heart, and liver; then he roasted and ate some of the fish, and salted and kept the rest.

The two continued on their way together until they were near Media. ⁷Then the young man questioned the angel and said to him, "Brother Azariah, what medicinal value is there in the fish's heart and liver, and in the gall?" ⁸He replied, "As for the fish's heart and liver, you must burn them to make a smoke in the presence of a man or woman afflicted by a demon or evil spirit, and every affliction will flee away and never remain with that person any longer. ⁹And as for the gall, anoint a person's eyes where white films have appeared on them; blow upon them, upon the white films, and the eyes will be healed."

¹⁰He had entered Media and was already approaching Ecbatana,
¹¹when Raphael said to the young man, "Brother Tobiah." "Here I am," he answered. Then Raphael said to him, "We must stay this night in the home of Raguel. He is your relative, and he has a daughter named Sarah. ¹²He has no male heir and no daughter except Sarah only, and you, as next of kin to her, have before all other men a hereditary claim on her. Also it is right for you to inherit her father's possessions. Moreover, the girl is sensible, brave, and very beautiful, and her father loves her."
¹³He continued, "You have every right to take her in marriage. So listen to me, brother; tonight I will speak to her father about the girl, so that we may take her to be your bride. When we return from Rages we will celebrate the marriage. For I know that Raguel can by no means keep her from you or promise her to another man without incurring the penalty of death according to the decree of the book of Moses. Indeed he knows that you, rather than any other man, are entitled to marry his daughter. So now listen to me, my brother, and tonight we will speak concerning the girl and arrange her engagement to you. And when we return from Rages we will take her and bring her back with us to your house."

It is here that the two stories (Tobit's in 1:1 – 3:6 and Sarah's in 3:7-16) begin to intertwine. Raphael is guiding Tobiah to visit Raguel and to take up his right as nearest of kin to marry Sarah.

There is no law in 'the book of Moses' demanding that Raguel give his daughter to the nearest kin under pain of death. Perhaps there was a ruling among the interpreters of the law calling for the death penalty for failure to carry out Numbers 36:5-9 which required a woman who inherits property to marry into her own tribe.

We are surprised to be told that Tobiah already knows about Sarah. We would never have gathered that from the previous verses, or from the story as told to this point.

This is not the first Bible story to speak of angels being attracted to women (see Genesis 6:1-2). The Greek myths are full of gods lusting for women.

Tobit is understandably resistant to the idea of espousing Sarah.

In the Bible the liver is seen as the seat of vitality (see Proverbs 7:23) and the heart (in contrast to the kidneys) is the seat of the higher emotions and decisions of a person's spirit (see Sirach 37:13; Proverbs 4:23). These organs were commonly used in the ancient Near-East in attempting to 'read' fate and predict the future. Here the smoke exorcises the evil spirit.

Raphael assures Tobiah that it is the will of God that he take Sarah as his wife.

The love Tobiah has for Sarah is ἀγάπη (love of commitment), not ἐρως (love of desire) or φιλία (love of friendship), though in Hellenistic Greek agapē and philia are often used interchangeably (see Genesis 37:3-4).

¹⁴Then Tobiah said in answer to Raphael, "Brother Azariah, I have heard that she already has been married to seven husbands and that they died in the bridal chamber. On the night when they went in to her, they would die. I have heard people saying that it was a demon that killed them. ¹⁵It does not harm her, but it kills anyone who desires to approach her. So now, since I am the only son my father has, I am afraid that I may die and bring my father's and mother's life down to their grave, grieving for me – and they have no other son to bury them."

¹⁶But Raphael said to him, "Do you not remember your father's orders when he commanded you to take a wife from your father's house? Now listen to me, my brother, and say no more about this demon. Take her. I know that this very night she will be given to you in marriage.

¹⁷When you enter the bridal chamber, take some of the fish's liver and heart, and put them on the embers of the incense. An odour will be given off; ¹⁸the demon will smell it and flee, and will never be seen near her any more. Now when you are about to go to bed with her, both of you must first stand up and pray, imploring the Lord of heaven that mercy and safety may be granted to you. Do not be afraid, for she was set apart for you before the world was made. You will save her, and she will go with you. I presume that you will have children by her, and they will be as brothers to me. Now say no more!" When Tobiah heard the words of Raphael and learned that she was his kinswoman, related through his father's lineage, he loved her very much, and his heart was drawn to her.

¹As they entered Ecbatana, Tobiah said to him, "Brother Azariah, take me straight to our brother Raguel." So he took him to Raguel's house, where they found him sitting beside the courtyard door. They greeted him first, and he replied, "Joyous greetings, brothers; welcome and good health!"

When he brought them into his house,

²he said to his wife Edna, "How much the young man resembles my kinsman Tobit!"

³So Edna questioned them, saying, "Where are you from, brothers?" They answered, "We belong to the descendants of Naphtali who are exiles in Nineveh." ⁴She said to them, "Do you know our kinsman Tobit?"

And they replied, "Yes, we know him."

Then she asked them, "Is he in good health?"

⁵They replied, "He is alive and in good health." Tobiah added, "He is my father!"

⁶At that, Raguel jumped to his feet and kissed him, and broke into tears. ⁷He spoke to him as follows, "Blessings on you, young man. You are the son of a good and noble father! O most miserable of calamities that such an upright and charitable man should have become blind!" He then embraced his kinsman Tobiah and wept. ⁸His wife Edna also wept for Tobit, as did their daughter Sarah. ⁹Then Raguel slaughtered a ram from the flock and received them very warmly.

When they had bathed and had reclined to dine, Tobiah said to Raphael, "Brother Azariah, ask Raguel to give me my kinswoman Sarah." ¹⁰But Raguel overheard it and said to the lad, "Eat and drink, and be merry tonight. For no one is more entitled that you, my brother, to marry my daughter Sarah. Moreover, I am not at liberty to give her to any other man than yourself, because you are my nearest relative. But let me explain to you the true situation more fully, my child.

For the first time, Raguel's wife is named: 'Edna [עֵדְנָה; 'pleasure', 'delight'; see Genesis 18:12]. Her name comes from the same root as 'Eden', the garden of paradise (see Genesis 2:8).

Verses 3-5 are modelled on Genesis 29:4-6. The betrothal scene also resembles the betrothal scene of Isaac (see Genesis 24).

Raguel's are tears of joy (verse 6) on learning that his relative, Tobit, is still alive. Part of the conversation is assumed, for next we hear that Raguel knows of Tobit's misfortune (verse 7).

Raguel is portrayed as a gracious and convivial host (verses 1 and 9).

He knows he must obey the demands of the Torah and marry his daughter to a relative. At the same time he is mindful of what happened to the seven previous suitors who were relatives.

The reader already knows the story of the seven bridegrooms (see 3:8).

For the reference to the book of Moses see 6:13.

In keeping with the custom in much of the ancient Near East, women did not dine with the men (hence verse 12).

Verse 13 is our earliest mention of a Jewish marriage settlement in writing. Verse 14 is referring to the wedding banquet.

¹¹I have already given her to seven men of our kinsmen, and all died on the night when they went in to her. But now, young man, eat and drink, and may the Lord act on behalf of you both."

But Tobias said, "I will not eat or drink anything until you settle this matter with me." So Raguel said, "I will do it. She is given to you in accordance with the decree in the book of Moses, and it has been decreed from heaven that she be given to you. Take your kinswoman; from now on you are her brother and she is your sister. She is given to you from today and forever. May the Lord of heaven, my child, guide and prosper you both this night and grant you mercy and peace."

¹²Then Raguel summoned his daughter Sarah. When she came to him he took her by the hand and gave her to Tobiah, saying, "Take her to be your wife in accordance with the law and decree written in the book of Moses. Take her and bring her safely to your father. And may the God of heaven prosper your journey with his peace."

¹³Then he called her mother and told her to bring writing material; and he wrote out a copy of a marriage contract, and marked it with his seal, to the effect that he gave her to him as wife according to the decree of the law of Moses. ¹⁴That done they began to eat and drink.

¹⁵Raguel called his wife Edna and said to her, "My dear, get the other room ready, and take her there." ¹⁶So she went and made the bed in the room as he had told her, and brought Sarah there. She wept for her daughter. Then, wiping away the tears, she said to her, "Take heart, my daughter; the Lord of heaven grant you joy in place of your sorrow. Take heart, my daughter." Then Edna left the room.

