



Tobit

(also called the book of Tobias)

This is the story of Tobit who is said to have lived in Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) after the northern tribes of Israel were deported to Assyria following the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. Tobit was a righteous man but the opening of the book tells of the mishaps that befell him and his subsequent misery, a misery that culminated with going blind after bird droppings fell in his eyes. A long way away, in Media, a girl called Sarah is plagued by a demon who carries off each one her husbands on their wedding night. The angel Raphael was sent by God to heal Tobit and free Sarah from the demon. Tobias, Tobit's son, set off to Media to collect some money which Tobit left there. He was accompanied by Raphael and, helped by him, married Sarah, drove off the demon and healed his father's blindness.

Dog lovers will enjoy this story as it is one of the very few stories in the Bible in which a dog is featured as a companion.



How long will it take?

Reading time: About 1 ½ hours
Short of time? Just read 1.1–2.14; 3.7-17; 5.1-9; 12.1-22 (this is a single story and therefore very hard just to read excerpts, so the above will give you a flavour but not the whole story).



Genre

Hard to tie down but often identified as Wisdom literature (i.e. like Job)



Anything tricky?

The story of Tobit clearly comes from a very different world than ours (a demon can kill a woman's husband and healing came by using a fish's heart and liver), but despite the alien details, the story is highly enjoyable and memorable.



Inspiring quotes

Seek advice from every wise person and do not despise any useful counsel. (Tobit 4.18)

Then Tobit said: "Blessed be God who lives forever, because his kingdom lasts throughout all ages. For he afflicts, and he shows mercy; he leads down to Hades in the lowest regions of the earth, and he brings up from the great abyss, and there is nothing that can escape his hand." (Tobit 13.1-2)

A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth; many nations will come to you from far away, the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to your holy name, bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven. (Tobit 13.11a)



About the Author

The author is unknown but the book was probably written in Palestine about 200 BC, in Aramaic. The writer seems to be familiar with Genesis, Deuteronomy, Job and some of the prophets.

Tobit is set in the eighth century BC and authorship ascribed to the hero, Tobit (though he dies towards the end of the book). There are, however, a number of historical errors which suggests to some that it was written much later, the current consensus places it in the second century BC.

What do we know about him?

Nothing at all.



About the times

In terms of the setting of Tobit, this is one of those few texts that is set in an exile but not the one that we normally think of. This is not the exile that took place in the sixth century BC when the Judeans were taken off to Babylon but is one that is only mentioned in the Bible in passing (see 2 Kings 15.29 and 16.9). This is the exile of the people of the Northern Kingdom (sometimes called Israel) to Assyria, as opposed to the exile of the Southern Kingdom (sometimes called Judah) to Babylon. [If you don't know what I mean by Northern and Southern Kingdom click here for a brief explanation.]

What were people feeling?

In other ways the similarity between the two exiles is strong. God's people are away from their homeland and attempting to make sense of what it means to be faithful and righteous in a foreign land.

Other books set around this time

2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, possibly also Jonah.



How is it structured?

1.1–3.6	Tobit's ordeals
3.7–17	Sarah's despair and desire to die
4.1–6.1	Preparation for the journey to Media
6.1–18	The journey to Media with Raphael
7.1–9.6	Marriage and the healing of Sarah
10.1–11.18	Return home to Nineveh and the healing of Tobit
12.1–22	Raphael reveals who he is
13.1–17	Tobit's song of praise
14.1–15	Epilogue



What kind of Book is it?

Tobit is often identified as a narrative wisdom book. It contains all the wisdom of books like Proverbs but in a narrative form, a little like Job.



Look out for...

The main question of Tobit is how to live faithfully in an alien context. Trace this theme through the book and see what you make of it.

Also notice that, like Ezra and Nehemiah, the book of Tobit is opposed to 'mixed marriage' (i.e. marrying outside of the people of God). As you read you might like to reflect on what it is that makes people take this view.

Raphael, the angel sent by God, plays a fascinating role in this book. Keep an eye out for the reason he was sent by God in the first place and how he intervened to help Tobit, Tobias and Sarah.



What could this mean for me?

This is a story focused on how God sends help to people who ask for it. Reflect on your own experience of God's help in your life.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Some people think this is 'just' a nice romantic tale with little about faith in it. Martin Luther was even less flattering: 'I take the book of Tobit to be a comedy concerning women, an example for house government.' What did you think?
- Obviously one of the key strands of Tobit is the importance of angels and what they do. Spend some time talking about what you think about angels.
- Tobit is classed as 'wisdom literature' – did you notice any particular wisdom in the book?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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