



One man and his dog

Literary devices and biblical intents in the book of Tobit



Fleur Dorrell

Fleur Dorrell is Catholic Scripture Engagement Manager for Bible Society.

The image for this article is taken from a painting by Davide Ghirlandaio (1452–1525), 'Tobias and the Angel'; tempera and gold on wood, circa. 1479; Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York. Photo by FLL Fund, 1913.

Introduction

In this article, I would like to explore some of the literary devices and biblical themes in the book of Tobit. Using Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, I will show how Tobit is primarily concerned with divine revelation and holy living.¹

Hidden or revealed?

The word *apocrypha* in Greek means 'hidden, secret or mysterious' and is found in the Septuagint.² The Early Church Fathers used the term to denote that which is spurious or heretical. The Apocrypha became the name of those books or parts of books that were included in the Septuagint and Vulgate translations of the Old Testament but not in the main Jewish Canon of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Protestant Bible. Scripture was classified according to at least two levels of decreasing authority and doctrinal use. Tobit was accepted by the Council of Trent (1545–63) as Jerome had supposedly translated it from Aramaic into the Latin Vulgate in one day. Other books so included in the Roman Catholic Canon are Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and some additions to Daniel and Esther.

Tobit challenges us since its date, place, original language of composition and content are not conclusively agreed. There are manuscripts of Tobit written in nine different languages with at least three Greek rescensions.³ It was probably written in Aramaic during the second or third centuries BC, was handed down in Greek translation by the early Christians, and appears among the Dead Sea

Scrolls. Tobit's significance relating to theodicy, mercy, retribution, prayer, almsgiving, marriage, burial, exile, eschatology and revelation cannot be ignored. The appearance of an angel and a demon in Tobit also marks a transition between their scant references in the Old Testament and their more prominent role in the New Testament. However, many scholars describe Tobit as a Hebraic romance because of the central purpose of quest, its historical and geographical inaccuracies, and literary manipulation of time and character. Yet if this is true of Tobit then it is certainly true of other parts of the Bible, which leads us to consider: Are sacred texts and literary art incompatible?

Alter questions whether we can truly understand a Hebrew writer with twenty-first century analysis.⁴ He recognises the freedom of the storyteller to shape his or her story to suit its message. The writer, author or editor assumes a literary omniscience in order to identify what God speaks through leaders, priests, judges, kings, prophets and angels, while the characters only know their own words and actions.⁵ The reader knows or comes to realise details that remain unknown to the characters. This device, dramatic irony, creates suspense between what is hidden and what is revealed. From the ancient Israelite perspective, revelation is not prior to or external to the text; revelation is in and of the text.

Parallel lives, parallel lines

The message of Tobit is theological – it is a didactic text of two families united by marriage after

several misfortunes, but who through fidelity to God, prove that God is just. Suffering is not a punishment but a test. The believer is called to be merciful and to trust in God. Dialogue is paramount here because unlike pure fiction, biblical dialogue *always* points to God or comes from God. The biblical writers used numerous literary devices to convey their desired truths. These include dialogue; narrative pace; repetitions and parallels; lexical nuances; comedy and tragedy; irony and metaphor. One of the difficulties today lies in our dependence on translations to make sense of any of these literary devices.

Set in Nineveh and Ecbatana during the exile of the Northern Israelites, the book of Tobit tells of two descendants of Naphtali, the ageing Tobit and his young kinswoman Sarah, and how they endure parallel misfortunes but are ultimately vindicated. The story is both deeply humorous and religious. Tobit is made blind despite his kindness while Sarah is denied marital fulfilment. Their prayers are answered by the archangel, Raphael, who appears disguised as Azarias, and guides Tobit's son, Tobias, on a quest to retrieve his father's money in Rages, Media, with the help of a dog. The readers are let in on the disguise, but the human characters remain unaware until the end. The story is told from two different viewpoints, the first part by Tobit and the rest by a third person, an omniscient narrator.⁶ The plot is enriched by holding the characters' actions and divine judgement in creative tension.

Alter observes that repetitive patterns, especially of symmetrical double plots and a recurring use of irony, lend dramatic force and psychological depth.⁷ We see this in chapters 2 to 6, with Tobit as a victim of blindness and poverty and Sarah as a victim of a possessive demon; Tobit falsely accuses his wife while Sarah's maid falsely accuses her; Tobit and Sarah both pray on the same day for death and to be 'released' from suffering; Raphael is concurrently sent to heal them both; the subsequent shift to Tobias alerts us that he and Sarah are without siblings and both are concerned for their parents' welfare should they die first. This culminates in the significance of Tobit's burial of dead Jews and Raguel's (Sarah's father) grave for Tobias.⁸

Alter tells us, 'The intersection of characters through their own words matters before all else in this narrative definition of the human predicament, but such intersection does not take place in a trackless void.'⁹

In the Bible, man and woman must live before God and in relation to others. This relational imperative in the book of Tobit is the crux of the plot; the journey of Tobias, the healing acts and retrieval of money are vehicles for obeying God in a life-long relationship.

Text as unity or patchwork quilt

Hebrew writers sought unity and coherence in their organising of the oral traditions into narratives of theology and faith.¹⁰ These ancient

scholars opened up possibilities through their use of language and literary devices. So we see a delicate balance between the sublime and the ridiculous. There are historical and geographical problems with the text. For example, the writers confuse the Assyrian kings, are hazy about Mesopotamian topography (the main setting) and there is some confusion as to whether Tobit was by himself or had companions when he went to Jerusalem to worship.

As Tobit's world was turned upside down by despair, so also was Israel's fate. We notice three textual inversions: the role of men and women is reversed as Tobit's wife, Anna, becomes the breadwinner (2.11), Sarah cannot become a wife or mother and Deborah was Tobit's grandmother who instructed him as a boy.¹¹ Later, we see the animal kingdom dominating humanity: Tobit is blinded by sparrow droppings and Tobias is attacked by a leaping fish. Bad things happen to good people. These key elements signify a greater inversion: the subjection of God's people to the Gentile powers and Israel's national humiliation.

However, the reader is comforted to know that just as justice is finally given to Tobit's and Raguel's families, thanks to Raphael's fish paste, Israel will be delivered after the destruction of Nineveh and the Jerusalem Temple will be restored. In this respect, Tobit the book and Tobit the character look towards the apocalyptic prophecy of Daniel. Therefore, theological understanding and literary mastery walk hand in hand. As Alter says, 'I would prefer to insist on a complete interfusion of literary art with theological, moral, or historiosophical vision, the fullest perception of the latter dependent on the fullest grasp of the former.'¹²

Symbolism and comedy

Tobit combines symbolic humour and religious erudition with ease. From the outset, the names of the key characters are imbued with symbolism. Tobit, from the Hebrew *Tovih* and the Greek *Tobith*, means 'my good'. The angel Raphael's name means 'God heals' and Azariah means 'God helps'.

The comic narrative device uses suspended faith and literary fusion: a heady cocktail of the sacred and profane. This dimension to Tobit is only fully appreciated by the reader. We cannot be devastated at Tobias' arrival into Sarah's life because, unlike Tobias, we know that Raphael will heal her. The fact that this cure comprises entrails of a fish that had leapt out of a river and bitten Tobias' foot is not the point. What is important for Tobias is that Sarah 'was destined for you from the beginning, and you are the one to save her' (6.18, NJB). While the reader is relieved by this, we cannot but empathise with Raguel's, Edna's, Sarah's and Tobit's tears (7.7–8,16).

The story unites a twofold revelation: to Tobias, that he will marry before his journey's end, and to the future revelation of the mysterious guide,

NOTES

1. R Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
2. The term apocrypha is found in Deuteronomy 27.15; Isaiah 4.6; Psalms 17.12; 27.5; Maccabees 1, 1.23, in Ben Sirah; in Mark 4.22, Luke 8.17 and Colossians 2.3.
3. Arabic, Aramaic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Syriac and Sahedic. JD Thomas, 'The Greek Text of Tobit', *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 91, No. 4 (1972), pp. 463–71.
4. Alter, *Art*, p. 20.
5. Except for the prophets, biblical writers never spoke in their own voice.
6. This narrative device is not unique to Tobit; cf. similar narrative shifts in Hosea, Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel.
7. Alter, *Art*, p. 91.
8. Tobit 2.10—3.17 and 6.12–15.
9. Alter, *Art*, p. 87.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
11. Although Sarah is a major character, 'Amen' is her only word spoken in the presence of another person (Tobit 8.8).
12. Alter, *Art*, p. 19.

13. Cf. Deuteronomy 28–29.

14. Cf. Judith's hymn in Judith 16 with Exodus 15; Judges 5, and Hannah's hymn in 1 Samuel 2 with the Magnificat in Luke 1.46–55.

15. "I am about to return to him who sent me from above. Write down all that has happened." And he rose in the air. When they stood up again, he was no longer visible' (Tobit 12.20–21; NJB).

16. Alter, *Art*, p. 189.

Raphael, who just happens to appear at the right time fooling Tobit and Tobias with his ancestry. Even his impatience with Tobias is comically endearing: 'All right, I will wait, but do not take too long' (5.8, NJB). Angels only wait for God. Thus, the journey symbolises Tobias' journey of faithful duty towards his father through revelation, and the giving to Tobias the thing he wants but does not as yet know he wants – Sarah. Next comes Raguel's gravedigging that is hilariously tragic despite the fact that seven husbands are already buried! He dare not check his daughter but having

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discovered that Tobias is alive then has to fill Tobias' grave before he awakes. This device dissociates the actual event from the expected outcome. Strangely, it is never described how Sarah's husbands died.

Is the fish paste of liver, heart and gall magic or madness? Can odours defeat demons? The fish is not used here to share Jewish cuisine or dietary laws but as a tool for something else. Tobias' inevitable apprehension about his first nuptials with a woman whose track record is death has to be the understatement of the story. However, in these extraordinary adventures, Raphael's advice, after his climactic revelation, is well-measured. Raphael enables Tobit to become a visionary and a prophet. The scale of the story moves from domestic suffering to universal mercy, with Israelite restoration and a new Jerusalem. Raphael's speech is finer than Tobit's, not because of novel artistry but because it is *the* message of God.

This type of writing not only stabilises the words but also centralises their meanings. Sacred texts are rarely the work of one person with one pen at one time. However, that does not detract from their divine inspiration. To gain credibility among readers in proving the sacred nature of the text, intertextuality ensures that one text relates both to other sacred texts and emphasises common aims and ideas.

Tobit and intertextuality

Tobit draws on both biblical and non-biblical literature. Tobit alludes to the testing of Abraham when God asks him to go to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his only son Isaac (Genesis 22), the journey of Abraham's servant and Jacob to Mesopotamia (Genesis 24.1–67), and Jacob's conversation with shepherds (Genesis 29.1–30). There are also allusions to the book of Job. Tobit refers to the biblical characters Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when advising Tobias to choose a wife from his own tribe (Tobit 4.12), thus bridging the Pentateuchal world of the patriarchs with the exilic Hebrews. The unifying dynamic here lies in

the events of each story happening outside of the land of Israel. The reader is alerted to the exile's devastating impact on the Hebrew people and that God's relationship with Israel is not defined by, or confined to, geography. The hope then granted to Tobit and Sarah encourages the reader to believe that a universal hope is near.

There are references to castigations for failing to observe the Law.¹³ Raphael also appears in 1 Enoch 10.4, when God orders him to 'bind Azazel by his hands and feet, and throw him into darkness'. Tobit refers to several of the later (canonical) prophets (Isaiah 54.11–12; 60.1–4; 66.10–14; Micah 4.2; Zechariah 8.22; Jeremiah 3.13–16; 3.22–4.2). There are clear biblical connections between Tobit's hymn in Tobit 13 and the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 rather than seeing Tobit's hymn as part of the original narrative. The eschatological conclusion of Tobit's hymn is also similar to the Second Temple period psalms whereby Israel longed for deliverance, the gathering of its dispersed and the glorification of Jerusalem.¹⁴ Neither is it a coincidence that Revelation 21.18–21, Tobit 13.16–17 and Isaiah 54.11 all illustrate the architectural features of the new Temple. Raphael's ascension uses language similar to that used to describe Jesus' ascension and may have provided a literary model.¹⁵

Journey's end

Literary works are neither true nor false and while the Bible narratives can be both literal and true, their meaning can also be imaginative and poetic. Readers in any age can live by the stories in Scripture because of its polysemous nature. The test of their relevance travels beyond the narrative itself. We are not the interpreters but the interpreted. So the debate should not be are the events in Tobit true or false and, therefore, canonical or apocryphal, but how do readers stand in the face of God's revelation through the narrative? Are readers enriched by an understanding of the ancient world in which Tobit lived purely because of its literary devices, or can the Israelite God speak to the reader today about biblical intents that use the imagination to convey their divine truths?

One of the ways ancient Hebrew writers rejected polytheism was by rejecting the epic narrative in favour of new forms of writing for their monotheistic purposes. The book of Tobit, with its unusual story, literary devices and biblical intents, is a text that, as Alter concludes, can help us to learn 'to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories [and] see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man and the perilously momentous realm of history.'¹⁶