

Tobit

A SHORT GUIDE BY JERRY L. SUMNEY

THE CONTEXT

Tobit is a work of fiction set in the seventh century BCE. It tells the story of a family that had been taken into exile when the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. It draws on folk tale themes to explore the question of theodicy (the question of injustice in the world; particularly, it asks why good people suffer). This book sees that righteous people suffer and looks for the cause and explores how God responds. In places, this suffering is discipline intended to lead to even more complete righteousness, but in other places, demonic forces are at work. But there also seem to be situations where there is no good reason for the suffering. In those situations, God must clearly act to make things right. As a story about a righteous person who suffers, Tobit has much in common with the book of Job. But this book does little to question the Deuteronomistic outlook that declares that God blesses the faithful and allows misfortune to come upon the unfaithful.

This book comes from a time when the writings of the prophets carried some authority, as we can see from Tobit's quotations of them (for example, he cites Amos in 2:6). This means that it was probably not written until after 300. On the other hand, Tobit does not reflect the themes and perspectives that develop during and after the Maccabean Revolt. So it was probably written between 275 and 175 BCE.

SUMMARY

The author of this book draws on well-known folk tales, including an ancient Near Eastern tale called the "Monster in the Bridal Chamber" to tell the story of Tobit and his family in Nineveh, the capital of Assyria." (The Monster in the Bridal Chamber tale has a monster or demon who is in love with a woman—usually a princess—kill all those who try to marry her. Finally, usually with the help of

someone who has died, the hero kills the monster and marries the woman.) Tobit is an extremely pious person who gives alms and buries the indigent or forsaken dead (including the executed)—even when that violates the will of the reigning king. In the course of doing good deeds, he becomes blind. This leads to financial difficulties that remind him that he has a significant deposit in an account in Media, about 250 miles east of Nineveh. He decides to send his son Tobias to retrieve it. Tobias finds a guide, who he does not know is an angel, to help him get to Media. Meanwhile, in a town near where the money is being held, a young Jewish woman named Sarah has been married seven times. But before any of the marriages are consummated, a demon kills the husband. Now everyone is afraid to marry her.

During the trip, Raphael, Tobias' guide, promises Tobias that he will get a wife as well as his father's money while they are in Media. When they arrive in Ecbatana, a city in Media, they go to the house of Sarah's father because he is a relative. Tobias falls in love with Sarah and the wedding is arranged. Raphael has given Tobias the way to chase away the demon (by burning the liver and heart of a fish on top of some incense). The demon leaves, never to return, and Sarah and Tobias are happily married. Tobias then gets his father's money and returns home. Raphael tells him to put the fish liver and heart on his father's eyes and he will be healed. It works and all is well. After Tobias' parents live long and good lives, they die, and he buries them and then returns to Media with Sarah to care for her parents until they die, and then to bury them as well. In this way he also shows great piety.

DIGGING DEEPER

This book is clearly written for Jews who live in the Diaspora (outside Palestine). It shows that God remains with the people even when they are outside the Land. Even though problems arise, their resolution shows that God is just, faithful, and loving. The book also provides an image of piety for Diaspora Jews. They are to keep the Law and especially to do acts of alms and charity. The giving of alms is mentioned more times in this book than any other biblical (or deuterocanonical) book. For all its emphasis on how to live outside the Land, it still looks forward to the time when the nation is restored and the temple rebuilt as the time when God will set things right.