

The Book of Tobit

THE BOOK OF TOBIT is probably the most human document in the Apocrypha. It is what we would call “a good story,” lively and entertaining. If it lacks the spiritual depth of the Book of Wisdom, it more than makes up for the lack in its rich humanity and fairy-tale glamour.

The Book belongs to the Gnostic tradition of the Hellenistic Period and was written, it is thought, somewhere in the third century B.C., certainly before 166 B.C., for it is pre-Maccabean, and probably written originally in Aramaic by a Babylonian Jew.

It has been pointed out that the story of Tobit is strikingly similar to the “Tractate of Khons,” in which a Theban deity casts out a demon from an ensorcelled princess. The use of the fish in the Jewish tale is also reminiscent of Egyptian magical practice. But it is also admitted that Persian influence is even more marked than the Egyptian, for the demon Asmodeus, whom we meet in this story, is the Aeshma Daeva of Persian demonology, and the dog which follows Tobias on his travels is reminiscent of the dog which attends upon the Persian Sraosha, the Spirit of Obedience, which indeed the dog clearly typifies. Inasmuch as the dog was sacred to Zoroastrianism but despised among the Jews, this touch is taken to be unJewish. But human nature is human nature, and it is difficult to believe that a Jewish boy might not, under favorable circumstances, love a dog, as Tobias, the son of Tobit, does in this story, whether or not it was the usual custom among his kinsmen.

There is no reason to suppose, either, that the

Babylonian and Assyrian medical practice differed appreciably from the Persian and Egyptian, and the very matters which seem so characteristically Persian or Egyptian have their counterparts in Babylonian usage. We call to mind that Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation, was a prince in Ur of the Chaldees, and a legend of the Haggada contains the statement that Abraham learned of the Law of God from astrology. This is in keeping with what we know of the Chaldean star worship. The Babylonian Captivity naturally brought this vestigial Chaldean heritage into renewed life among the Hebrews, and they profited by the greater scientific and magical knowledge of the Babylonian priesthoods.

At the time of the Captivity, the Babylonians were in the midst of a great Renaissance, compiling their ancient books of wisdom and writing new ones embodying the later learning of Chaldea. Until this time, the Hebrews had no completely organized Scripture of their own. The Temple Scrolls—master-records from which other copies were made—were burned by the Chaldeans, as Esdras mentions, at the time of the downfall of Jerusalem, and it was the Sages of Ardath who took it upon themselves to restore these lost Scriptures, as it is said “from a supernaturally inspired memory,” and who thus, under the stimulation of the Babylonian Renaissance, gave us our Old Testament in a form not dissimilar to that which we have today. The traditions and doctrines incorporated in these Scriptures, though written and edited from the point of view of the Messianic Order of the Exile, are actually older than

Abraham; they include also the esoteric teachings of Joseph and Moses (Egyptian Initiates), as well as those of the great prophets of the Exile, Ezekiel, the Second Isaiah (of the Exile), and Esdras—Ezekiel being the exponent of the Chaldean Initiation, while Esdras and the Second Isaiah represent the Persian.

The Assyrians, though enemies of the Babylonians, yet owed all their culture and learning to them, and it is a modification of the Babylonian star worship and sorcery which is found in Nineveh, where the story of Tobit opens, supposedly in the times of Esarhaddon, about 680-660 B.C.

The principal characters of the story are Tobit, a Jew of Naphtali taken captive to Nineveh by Sargon, who has lost his eyesight; his son, Tobias; and Raphael the Archangel. (We observe in passing that many of these apocryphal Books are rich in angelology.)

Raphael is that Angel who is called, particularly, the Friend of Man, and he is the angelic patron of the healing arts. In astrology he is usually named as the Archangel representing the planet Mercury, but some Bible students associate him with the Sun, instead of Michael whom they, conversely, name as governing, or representing, Mercury. However, since Mercury rules Virgo, the sign usually associated with the healing arts, it is perhaps more logical to associate Raphael with Mercury, as in the Rosicrucian Philosophy; especially since the Mercurians do, indeed, work with the individual who is preparing for Initiation and therefore stand in a more than usually close relationship with the human being upon the planet Earth.

Tobit has a son, Tobias, whom he purposes to wed to Sara, a young Jewess in Ecbatana in Media, and the daughter of Raguel. This girl has had a strange history. She has been married seven times, and each time her husband has been slain on his wedding night by Asmodeus, a demon lover by whom she is persecuted and who allows no mortal man to approach her. Despite the fact that this girl suffers from possession she is essentially devout and has long prayed to God for release from her condition. Therefore the Archangel Raphael is sent to earth to accomplish a double mission: to heal the



Egg tempera on poplar, Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-1488), National Gallery, London

Tobias and the Angel

The only mention of Raphael in the Bible (including the Apocrypha) is in Tobit. While his divine nature is disguised in the story, the archangel is depicted by Lippi with halo and wings.

eyes of Tobit, whose love for his people shines forth on the inner planes, and to free Sara from the persecution of Asmodeus, the evil spirit.

Raphael was sent to heal them both, that is, to scale away the whiteness of Tobit's eyes, and to give Sara the daughter of Raguel for a wife to Tobias, the son of Tobit; and to bind Asmodeus the evil spirit; because she belonged to Tobias by right of inheritance. (Tobit 3:17)

Raphael, then, descended from heaven and in the likeness of a mortal offered himself as a guide to lead Tobias to Ecbatana and to the house of Raguel, Sara's father. Having satisfied the blind Tobit of his good faith and character, he and Tobias set out on their journey to Ecbatana, after a farewell lecture by Tobit in which he said, among other things, "Do that to no man which thou hatest"; i.e., do nothing to others that you would not want done to yourself—the Golden Rule expressed from the negative point of view.

The ostensible object of Tobias' visit to Ecbatana was the recovery of ten talents of silver which his father had left in charge of a friend there, some years before, during the days of his prosperity. Now poverty and blindness had overtaken him and he had nothing left for his son but these ten talents of silver, and he therefore sent Tobias to Ecbatana to get them. There, also, in Ecbatana, lived Raguel, his cousin, and the girl Sara. "So they went forth both [Tobias and the Archangel Raphael], and the young man's dog with them."

There is perhaps nothing in Bible literature more touchingly homely than this scene: the young man and the Archangel (in disguise), setting out upon their long journey afoot, followed by the dog.

Proceeding on their journey, Tobias and Raphael—and the dog—came to the river Tigris and found lodging on its shores.

And when the young man went down to wash himself, a fish leaped out of the river and would have devoured him. Then the angel said unto him, Take the fish. And the young man laid hold of the fish, and drew it to land. To whom the angel said, Open the fish, and take the heart and the liver and the gall, and put them up safely. (Tobit 6 :14)

Of course Tobias wanted to know what this was all about, so Raphael explained that the smoke of the burnt liver and heart in conjunction with ashes of perfume is efficacious in driving away evil spirits, while the gall is useful in curing certain kinds of blindness.

At last they arrived in Ecbatana and at the house of Raguel, where they were welcomed cordially, and Tobias met Sara and immediately asked for her hand in marriage. To this her father consented, but in all honesty warned the young man of the possible fate awaiting him on his wedding night, but the warning failed to dampen Tobias' ardor, since he was fortified by previous instruction from the Angel. So the wedding preparations went forward.



Die Bibel in Bildern, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1789-1853)

The Prayer of Tobias and Sara

Perhaps one concern that caused Protestant authorities to cut the Book of Tobit from the canon of Old Testament scripture (which is retained in the Catholic Douay version) was burning fish organs to drive off evil spirits, a practice that smacked of magic. Likewise, referring to the assistance of Raphael might erode monotheism and encourage a reversion to the common middle eastern practice of worshipping and appealing to many gods. As Tobias and Sara pray, the Archangel is shown spiriting off the demon.

After the wedding supper a chamber was prepared for the bride and groom. But Tobias remembered the words of the Angel and took with him the ashes of perfume and the liver and heart of the fish, and having entered the bridal chamber he made a smoke of them, "the which smell, when the evil spirit had smelled, he fled, into the utmost parts of Egypt [and who can blame him?] and the Angel bound him."

The next morning the anxious father and mother sent a maid into the bridal chamber, fully expecting her to come forth to report another corpse in their daughter's bed. To their great joy the maid "came forth, and told them that he was alive."

In the meantime, Tobit, back in Nineveh with his wife, waited anxiously for the delayed return of his son, thinking him dead, and sorrowing for him.

But Tobias and Raphael, with the new bride, were on their way home. Then Raphael said to Tobias, "Thou knowest, brother, how thou didst leave thy father: Let us haste before thy wife, and

prepare the house. And take in thine hand the gall of the fish.” “So they went on their way, and the dog went after them,” the text adds. All the way from Nineveh to Ecbatana, and all the way from Ecbatana to Nineveh, the dog had followed them.

Anna, the mother, saw them coming and ran to tell Tobit. Tobit, the blind old man, stumbled eagerly to the door, but Tobias hastened to him and took hold of him and rubbed the gall into his eyes as the Angel had said to do. “And when his eyes began to smart, he rubbed them; and the whiteness pulled away from the corners of his eyes; and when he saw his son he fell upon his

neck.” “Then Tobit went out to meet his daughter-in-law at the gate of Nineveh, rejoicing and praising God and they which saw him go marvelled, because he had received his sight.” (Tobit 11:1-16.)

Now when the earthly mission of the Angel had come to a successful close, Tobit and Tobias called him aside and asked what they could do to reward him for his services, offering him half of the wealth Tobias had brought home Of course the Angel refused it, saying:

“I am Raphael, one of the seven holy Angels, which present the prayers of the saints, and which go in and out before the glory of the Holy One....Fear not, for it shall go well with you; praise God therefore. For not of any favor of mine, but by the will of God I came; therefore praise him forever. All these days I did appear unto you; but I did neither eat nor drink, but ye did see a vision. Now therefore give God thanks: for I go up to him that sent me.” (Tobit 12:15-20.)

After the death of Tobit and Anna at a ripe old age, during which they were prospered by the Lord, Tobias and his wife and their six sons, who have arrived in the interim, returned to Ecbatana to Raguel his father-in-law, “where he became old with honor...and inherited their substance and his father Tobit’s. And he died at Ecbatana in Media, being an hundred and twenty-seven years old. But

before he died he heard of the destruction of Nineveh.”

The really interesting point in this story is the patently common belief that Angels, or gods in the pagan usage, could and did walk the paths of earth indistinguishably from mortal men—a belief which played its part in preparing mankind for the descent of the Christ Archangel in a fleshly body in the End of the Age—although opinions might differ as to the means by which such appearances were achieved. It is significant, too, that the Angel

in this story is not winged, but carefully conforms to all of the seeming laws

which govern human existence on earth—conforms so carefully that Tobias has not once realized that his angelic Companion neither ate nor drank as he himself did. So also the Christ Archangel partook of food and drink, or seemed to do so, yet when it was lacking he showed no hunger or weakness but said,

“I have food that ye know not of”; for the Jesus-body which men saw had

been completely made over on the Mount of Transfiguration and was no longer a matter-body in any sense which the ordinary mortal could understand, but had become instead a light body, indestructible by any earthly agency whatever, and a lamp for the Christ-Sun which burned within it.

It is interesting to read in this Book Tobit’s dream of the future Jerusalem, the city of God having walls of precious stones and battlements of gold.

The Apocrypha were of widespread popularity in the Middle Ages, and much of the colorful mysticism associated with that time comes from these Books, as well as some folk customs. For example, in the Latin Vulgate, and in the earliest of the English Bibles as well, Tobias and Sara dedicate the first three nights after their marriage to religious devotions, postponing their wedlock until the fourth night; and we find that this was taken as a behavior pattern by the Middle Ages. □

—Kent Lorimer

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