



The Books between the Testaments: What Christians Should Know about the Apocrypha

SESSION 2

Why do some Bibles contain extra books? Why are they called different things by different religious groups? How do Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox differ in their understanding of the importance of these books?

Introduction

Several of the Old Testament apocryphal (deuterocanonical) books such as 1 and 2 Maccabees and 1 Esdras provide us with information about the historical events during the Maccabean Revolt and the rebuilding of the Temple. Quite a few are tales similar to Ruth, Esther, and Jonah, which provide us some understanding of cultural and religious practices of the period. One of these is the book of Tobit, which in spite of its differences from books in the Old Testament nevertheless has similarities. But first, what is Tobit about?

Tobit: A Summary

The book begins with setting the story of Tobit's life during the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser (727–722 BCE), although Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727) was actually the king who managed the deportation of the Jews from Naphtali. Even so, the religious themes of the book reflect those of the second century BCE, which is most likely the time period of the author, who lived in either Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Palestine. Tobit is presented as an upright man who faithfully traveled to Jerusalem for the festivals and presented the first fruits of his crops and his flocks and other required offerings before being deported from Galilee to Nineveh. In Nineveh he served as a merchant for Shalmaneser and on his many trips left bags of silver

in Media. During that time he gave food and clothing to the impoverished and provided proper burials to fellow Jews. When he realized that King Sennacherib had discovered his burial activity, which the king had forbidden, he fled, returning home to his wife and his son Tobias only when Esar-haddon replaced Sennacherib. Still faithful, since he could not pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks (see Deut. 16:11–17), he attempted to share the feast with a poor Israelite as an alternative and so sent his son Tobias to make that invitation. When Tobias found a corpse and told his father, again Tobit provided the proper burial.

Domestic difficulties quickly developed after Tobit lost his eyesight. He became upset over his wife supporting them financially through her sewing. Then he remembered the bags of silver that he had left in Media and made plans for his son Tobias to retrieve them for him. The remainder of the tale involves the complications that Tobias and Azariah (the disguise for the angel Raphael) experienced as they retrieved the money



Tobit contains many themes found in other books of the Bible.

Definitions

apocalypse: a literary genre that tells about realities hidden from the normal eye, usually through providing visions with elaborate symbolism that tell about the defeat of God's enemies and the victory of those people devoted to God.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes: Syrian monarch (176–163 BCE) whose persecution of the Jews led to the Maccabean Revolt.

Apocrypha: The word *apocrypha* means "hidden." This term refers to texts and books that have no authority for Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices but can be useful for reading about biblical customs and history. When capitalized, the word refers to the books found between the Old and New Testaments.

canon: the list of books that have authority for a community of faith in their beliefs and religious practices.

Dead Sea Scrolls: manuscripts discovered in 1947 that were written from the third century BCE to ca. 68 CE and provide us the texts used by members of a Jewish apocalyptic community who retreated to the Qumran desert.

deuterocanonical books (deuterocanon): As the word *deutero* ("second") suggests, those books and passages that Roman Catholic Christians accepted as Scripture at a date later than the rest.

Old Testament Apocrypha: same as Apocrypha.

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: about sixty-five documents, written from ca. 300 BCE to ca. 200 CE, that include hymns, apocalypses, and legends about biblical characters such as Enoch, Moses, and Isaiah. Written about the same time as the books of the Old Testament Apocrypha, these books nonetheless were never included in official lists of Scripture.

New Testament Apocrypha: additional books written around the same time as those in the New Testament and shortly afterward but not included in the New Testament canon, often because of doctrinal reasons.

Septuagint: the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures accomplished between the third and first centuries BCE.

Vulgate or Latin Vulgate: translation of the Scriptures into Latin that was begun by Jerome.

from Raguel and brought it home to Tobit. The journey is complicated by Tobias's betrothal in Ecbatana to Raguel and Edna's daughter Sarah, whose previous seven husbands had all died on their wedding night. Using the liver and heart of a fish that he had caught along the way, Tobias followed Azariah's instructions and repelled the demon on his wedding night. Sarah and Tobias continued to celebrate their marriage while Azariah traveled to Media to retrieve the bags of silver. After Azariah returned, he, Sarah, and Tobias journeyed home, where Tobias healed his father's blindness with the fish gall and celebrated his marriage to Sarah with his family.

Religious Practices: Festivals and Proper Burials

The summary has already referred to some of the religious practices that are central to the narrative in this book. In particular, Tobit was determined to faithfully observe the religious festivals. Ordinarily he had to take a portion of his crops and flocks to Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Weeks, but if he could not go to Jerusalem, he could still participate in part of the celebration (Deut. 16:17). He decided to invite a stranger to share the festival with him. He made an attempt to do the alternative since he was in exile, and in the process he was faced

once more with observing another religious practice: providing a proper burial.

Tobit conscientiously provided a proper burial to a Jew despite the negative consequences, for already because he had shown the same respect for the dead, he had had to live apart from his wife and son for a while. This act, except for its threat to his life, seems similar to the proper burial that the valiant men of Jabesh-gilead gave to Saul and his sons whom the Philistines had slain (1 Sam. 31:11–13). David later gave an even more proper burial for Saul and his son Jonathan by reburying their bones in Zela (2 Sam. 21:10–14). In Genesis 23, we read about Abraham’s purchase of the field in Machpelah to give his wife, Sarah, a proper burial.

Almsgiving and Other Religious Practices

But what about the reference in Tobit 12:9 that suggests that salvation results from doing good works: “For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin”? Tobit 4:10–11 makes a similar claim: “For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness. Indeed, almsgiving, for all who practice it, is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High.” The principles in these statements can be found elsewhere. The principles of giving alms willingly, in proportion to one’s income, and to the needy within one’s own community are similar to those in Deuteronomy. For example, Tobit 4:16 speaks of such willingness: “Give 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.” Likewise, Deuteronomy 15:10 commands: “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.” Also, Tobit 4:8 affirms: “If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have.” Likewise, Deuteronomy 16:17 affirms that the amount of the giving is determined according to that person’s means: “All shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.”

It is quite noticeable that in Tobit almsgiving primarily refers to people’s willingness to give to the poor—those



who are hungry, who need clothing, or who need to be buried—through charitable deeds and money. These deeds lead to salvation. But can we say that doing these charitable deeds is the same as attempting to attain salvation by works, a theological belief that the Reformers such as Martin Luther were concerned to remove? The book as a whole in no way affirms that Tobit’s standing before God is determined by his charitable deeds. He still suffers and has to live apart from his family for a while, still becomes blind, and still must lament to God. His blindness in no way results from his failure to do something or to make a monetary gift; his recovery in no way results from performing some righteous deed or providing a monetary gift. In Matthew 25:31–46, acts similar to Tobit’s, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the lonely and imprisoned, welcoming the stranger, and caring for the sick, lead to entry into God’s kingdom; the deeds led to entry because they were done generously. Those who have not fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the lonely and the imprisoned, welcomed the stranger, and cared for the sick cannot enter God’s kingdom. Like this passage, the book of Tobit raises this question: Where does faith turn into action, and where does action stop expressing faith?

Tobit desired to practice his faith, not just in burying the dead but many times in this book. He wanted his son Tobias to do likewise. Before he sent Tobias to retrieve the bags of silver, he reminded him of religious practices that were important to him. He wanted Tobias to give him a proper burial (4:3), to honor his mother (4:3–4), to give alms (4:7), to marry within his own people (4:12–13), to avoid drunkenness and the withholding of wages (4:14–15), and to feed the hungry and clothe the naked (4:16–17). He also wanted Tobias to remember to include prayer to God as an important practice to observe (4:5).

Religious Practices: Prayer and Responses to Angels

Through its numerous prayers to God, the book of Tobit itself emphasizes how essential the practice of prayer is. Of all his kindred, Tobit prays the most and is the most concerned about observing the practice of prayer. When his wife, Anna, attacked his virtue and motivation for his charitable deeds, Tobit was so grief stricken that he prayed that God would allow him to die (3:1–6). Before sending Tobias off to retrieve the silver, Tobit instructed him to pray (4:5). Tobit blessed God when his sight was restored (11:14–15). Others pray too. Tobias's future wife, Sarah, prayed that God would allow her to die (3:11–15). Tobias prayed for God to deliver Sarah and him from the demon that had killed Sarah's previous husbands and threatened his life. Raguel, Sarah's father, praised God that his son-in-law had survived the threat of the demon (8:15–17).

It is essential to recognize that in all these situations Tobit, Tobias, Sarah, and Raguel directed their prayers to God. The angel Raphael (disguised as Azariah), who does not reveal himself until 12:6–22, refused to allow Tobit and Tobias to worship him and instead directed their praise to God: "Bless God forevermore. As for me, when I was with you, I was not acting on my own will, but by the will of God. Bless him each and every day; sing his praises" (12:17–18). The book of Tobit does refer to the angel Raphael as interceding to God on behalf of Tobit, Tobias, and Sarah whenever they prayed (12:12–15), but Tobit, Tobias, and Sarah never themselves prayed in any other way but directly to God. The book of Tobit then does not have to be read as promoting that humans use angels as intermediaries to pray to God.

Furthermore, while it is true that the angel Raphael has a sustained role in the book of Tobit that is quite unlike those of the angels in any other biblical books, these other angels do have similar roles, although sometimes these angels refer to God's presence. For instance, an angel appeared to Hagar to instruct her to return to Sarai and promised her many descendants (Gen. 16:7–12), although later the angel is revealed as God (Gen. 16:13). Genesis 18:22 and 19:1 indicate that two of the men who had spoken to Abraham about the birth of a son are angels who next saved Lot and his family (Gen. 18:1–19:24). Jacob also encountered angels of God (Gen. 32:1). Some of the angels in these verses, therefore, are encounters with God, and

some are intermediaries like Raphael. More such mixed examples can be provided. In Numbers 22:22–35, an angel, not God (Num. 22:31), appeared to Balaam's donkey and then to Balaam. In Judges 13:2–24, the angel who appeared to Manoah's wife and then to her and her husband is God, not an intermediary (Judg. 13:22–23). Zechariah tells about an angel to whom God spoke (Zech. 1:13). In Luke 1:11–20 and Luke 1:26–38, the angel Gabriel announced to Elizabeth and then to Mary that each would give birth to a son. To the shepherds, Jesus' birth is announced by a group of angels (Luke 2:9–15). At Jesus' tomb an angel appeared to the guards and the women (Matt 28:2–7). Two men in white, most likely angels, appeared to the women in Jesus' tomb, according to Luke 24:4–7. These references indicate that the traditions are mixed about whether angels are manifestations of God or separate heavenly beings. Regardless of these mixed traditions, all of the angels who are intermediaries direct praise toward God, not themselves, just as we find in the book of Tobit.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the book of Tobit stands apart from any book in the Old Testament because of the major role that the angel Raphael plays in its narrative. His advice is integral for Tobias's success in catching the fish, finding his wife, dispelling the demon, and returning home with Sarah. Even so, he never rivals God in any way. In fact, he explicitly tells Tobit and Tobias to get up and honor God instead when they fall to the ground upon hearing who he truly is. In Tobit's deathbed speech, the narrative of the book of Tobit returns to the beginning themes of praising God and faithfully serving God through giving alms, that is, doing charitable acts.

Almsgiving, proper burial, prayer, observance of festivals, and hospitality are important religious activities in this book and are displayed through the man Tobit but also through the other characters. This book leads us to reflect on the relations between faith and practice and between prayer and service. Where does one end and the other begin? And to whom do we express what our faith means?

About the Writer

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