

The Book of Tobias is one of the short books of the Old Testament. It sets out as entertaining and touching and elevating a tale as could be imagined. It lifts the curtain on God's ways with us and has most valuable doctrinal lessons. The Book contains the life story of the Tobias family, father and son, and of their wives.

Tobias the elder was of the Tribe of Naphtali which belonged to the upper part of Galilee. Even as a boy he displayed extraordinary maturity of mind, such that the scripture says that he never did anything childish. He fled from the worship of the golden calves which at that time prevailed in Israel. Although not yet a man by the Old Law, he went regularly to the Temple in Jerusalem and fulfilled all the ritual there, while his deeds of charity were such as to be recorded in the Bible.

Reaching maturity, he married Anna of his own Tribe, and the boy, called Tobias after him, was born. Carefully tutored by his parents, this boy reflected their goodness and from his very infancy abstained from sin.

Then came one of the dreadful misfortunes which were permitted to descend upon the Jewish people when they had erred gravely from the law of God. The Assyrians, under King Salmanasar, conquered them and transported either the whole people or a great section of them to Assyria.

The Tobias family was stationed at Ninive, the capital, one of the magnificent cities of antiquity. In those distressing conditions the family followed out all the religious rules, keeping themselves undefiled by the heathen ways or food. The uprightness of Tobias attracted the notice of the King who bestowed favour on him and permitted him to move about as he willed. Tobias used his opportunities to engage in trading and in this way he accumulated a fortune. He put his freedom of movement and his money to most admirable use. He travelled widely to all his fellow-victims of the captivity, helping them in their material wants and successfully encouraging them in the faithful following of their religion. The suggestion here is plain: that he alone was engaged in this apostolate – so necessary because of the inevitability that otherwise the captives would gradually be absorbed in the surrounding paganism.

One of his deeds at that time was destined to have a future immense consequence. In Rages, he met Gabelus, one of the captive Jews who was in great poverty. Having with him the large sum of ten talents of silver, he lent it to him.

One of his universal acts of goodness consisted in the burying of the dead Jews. The former King was dead and had been succeeded by his son, Sennacherib, a cruel monarch and a hater of the Jews. His venom in that direction had been increased by the fact that he had been defeated in Judea and driven out. One of his vengeance was to let anybody who liked slaughter the captive Jews, so that it was a common occurrence to find one of them lying dead in the streets, and unburied; because it was an offence to bury them. The extreme love of Tobias for his people led him to defy this order.

Discovering a corpse, he would wait until he thought he was unobserved and then carry it to his own home. At night he would perform the burial. The legal penalty for this disobedience was death, and his family and friends entreated him not to run the risk. But to their terror he persisted. However, one day he was discovered and the fact reported to the King, who ordered him to be executed. Hearing this in time, Tobias fled with his wife and child. He was concealed by some of the other captives for all loved him. He lay hidden for forty-five days. The King was killed by his own sons and was succeeded by Esarhaddon who permitted Tobias to return. But apparently all his goods had been confiscated, and henceforth life was a struggle for the family.

Apparently the injustices to the Jews and the killing of them persisted, because Tobias resumed his former practice of burying them. His friends vainly pleaded with him, pointing out that he had escaped death once and could not expect a second chance.

One day, exhausted by this work of mercy, he lay down outside the wall of his house and went asleep. Dung fell from a swallow's nest into his eye and blinded him. He was then 56 years of age. This affliction brought his burying to a conclusion and probably saved his life.

His patience in bearing his trials of blindness and poverty was such as to put him on a level with Job. Like the latter, he suffered much from the tongues of his friends. The last straw was when his wife, in a hasty moment, upbraided him: 'where now are your alms and your righteous deeds!'

This exclamation was but a thoughtless one, forced out of her by affection. Let it be remembered that she was supporting the disabled man by the labour of her hands. But her words pierced his heart and hurt him so much that he prayed either to be relieved from his suffering or to be taken to Heaven. That anguished prayer of his was heard and in an extraordinary way. But before I tell it, I have to switch the story over to that city of Rages which I have already mentioned.

At the same moment that Tobias uttered his cry of anguish, a maiden called Sara, the daughter of Reguel, likewise cried out to God in agony. Her prayer was the same: that she be either relieved from her terrible position or permitted to die. The circumstances were that she had been betrothed to seven men in succession and each of these had been killed by the devil Asmodeus just before the consummation of the marriage. Although she was the holiest and most estimable of women, she incurred intolerable suspicion as to being responsible for their deaths. One day a maid, whom she had reprimanded openly accused her of being "murderess who had killed those seven men. That was the cause of her torment and of her prayer. Her petition, like that of Tobias's uttered at the same moment was answered. Before I tell you how, let us return to the Tobias family at Ninive.

Running acutely short of money, Tobias, thought of asking for the repayment that loan which he had made many years ago to Gabelus of Rages, which was not too distant from Ecbatana where Sara was living with her parents. In the meantime Gabelus had become wealthy. So Tobias instructed his son to go upon that errand to the far-off place where the debtor lived. The journey was perilous and especially so for a Jew. So the parents poured out their most fervent prayers that God would protect their beloved child who had in every way borne out his original promise. He had grown up into a young man, of supreme excellence.

It was at that moment that God determined to act. The text describes it as follows (Ch 3,24): "the prayers of both Tobias and Sara were heard in the sight of the glory of the Most High God. And the holy Angel of the Lord, Raphael, was sent to heal them both, whose prayers at the same time were rehearsed in the sight of the Lord".

So young Tobias set out. Waiting outside his house he found Raphael in the appearance of a strong and handsome young man, who gave his name as Azarias. He offered to journey with Tobias, explaining that he knew the way well and that he had often stayed with Gabelus, that is the debtor in question. Overwhelmed by this coincidence, Tobias brought the stranger back to his parents who were reassured beyond all measure and commended their boy to him. He promised that he would bring Tobias back safe to them. Of course none of them had any inkling that Azarias was an angel.

After their departure, the mother had a great revulsion of feeling. Her fear overcame her and she lamented that they had let the boy go at all. She cried out that they should have been contented to struggle along in their poverty rather than run the risk of losing him. But the father declared his faith that the boy was in the keeping of God and would return safe.

The first night the travellers lodged by the river Tigris. Going out in the morning to wash, a monstrous fish jumped from the water and made to devour young Tobias. In terror he cried out to Azarias for help. But the angel answered calmly "seize it by the gill and draw it out upon the land. Then take out the entrails and keep the heart and the gall and the liver, because they will provide important medicines for our future use". These things Tobias did, the monster panting helpless in his hands "

The reference to a fish coming out upon the land to devour a man sounds puzzling. But there is a well-supported tradition which would seem to explain it, namely that the fish in question was really the Egyptian crocodile.

Moreover, one might think that the Archangel was merely staging an impressive miracle and utilising items which presented themselves. Not so, he was revealing a power which those elements of the crocodile apparently possessed, that is to help in ailments like epilepsy and leucoma.

Coming to Rages, Tobias asked the angel where would they lodge and he replied that it would be in the house of Raguel, who proved to be a near kinsman of Tobias. The angel continued that he had a daughter, Sara, whom Tobias must take for a wife. But Tobias had heard the story of the seven husbands and was reluctant to become the eighth one.

He explained this to the angel who reassured him and laid down a procedure by which the devil Asmodeus was to be defeated. Part of the ritual to be observed was the utilisation of the liver of the fish; it was to be burnt on the fire and the smoke would drive the devil away.

Then the angel and Tobias entered into the home of Raguel who received them with unutterable pleasure on learning that one of his visitors was the son of his well-beloved friend, the elder Tobias.

Later, Tobias sought Sara as his wife but her parents did not agree, fearing that he might suffer the same fate as the other seven. Then Azarias won them over by a promise that all would turn out well. The marriage was arranged and took place. The ritual ordered by the angel was fulfilled; the devil had been taken hold of by Raphael and confined to the desert of Upper Egypt.

It forms a somewhat quaint circumstance that Raguel, the father of the bride, was only half convinced by the word of Azarias. For on the evening of the nuptials he had a grave dug, ready to receive the body of Tobias if he became number eight. But all went off happily as the angel had declared, and the grave was filled in without an occupant.

In the meantime, Raphael had taken some servants of Raguel and two camels and had gone off to Gabelus the debtor. The latter was rejoiced to hear that the son of his old friend was about to be married and set out with Azar to attend the ceremony. He gave Raphael the amount of the debt.

The wedding of course delayed Tobias considerably. Those were not the days of expeditious means of communication, so the elder Tobias and his wife were reduced to a pitiful condition suspense and grief. Finally, at the **first** possible moment, young Tobias set out. Sara's parents bestowed upon him half of their substance of all kinds, including servants, flocks and herds and **money** and sent him away with the prayer **that** the holy angel would be with **their** children along every mile of the journey. This prayer was being honoured in a manner more substantial than they dreamt. Azarias and Tobias set out for Ninive.

During her son's absence, Anna had sat on the top of a hill for portion of each day, whence she hoped to see him return. Now indeed that happy day was come. She saw him in the distance and forthwith ran to her husband crying, "Behold thy son cometh".

Before they entered in, Azarias said to Tobias: "Immediately after you have adored God and given thanks to Him for your safety, go to your father and kiss him, then at once anoint his eyes with this gall of the fish which you have carried with you. Be assured that his eyes will be opened. After the indescribable rejoicings of the first moments, Tobias took the gall and anointed his father's eyes. Within half an hour his father recovered his sight. His first thought was to cry: "I bless Thee, O Lord God of Israel, because Thou hast chastised me: and now Thou hast saved me, and behold I see Tobias my son."

In the succeeding days Tobias junior told of his adventures and of all that Azarias had done for him. His father was overwhelmed and they debated between them how they could express their gratitude. So they brought Azarias in and spoke to him their gratitude for such services which could never be repaid. They besought him as a small offering to accept half of all their new possessions. Also they petitioned him to make his abode with them. Then followed the astounding revelation of which they had no previous notion. He disclosed that he was Raphael, one of the seven Angels who stand before the Lord. He told them that God had noted every noble deed which the father had performed. Likewise He had heard the agonised 'pleadings of Sara and her parents over the trial of the seven husbands. So He had commissioned Raphael to go first to Ninive to escort young Tobias to Rages, and then to rectify the sorrows of the other family by relieving them from the devil and bringing about the marriage. Then He, Raphael, by the instruction of God, had returned to heal the blindness of Tobias.

When he had spoken these things, Raphael was taken from their sight and they saw him never more on earth. They lay prostrate for three hours upon, their faces, blessing God.

The rest of the days of the family were spent in unmixed happiness. After the restoration of his sight, Tobias lived 42 years, that is to 102 years of age. He saw the children of his grandchildren, and then he died and was buried honourably in Ninive. After his death his son went to live in Rages. Sometime after that, Ninive was destroyed by the Medes.

The chief lesson of this story is the light it casts upon the ministration of the angles. Among them St. Raphael has always been credited with an important place in the office of healing. His name means He who heals. It is not to be thought that this reputation attaches to him merely by reason of the part he played in the episode of Tobias.

ST. RAPHAEL – HIS NAME MEANS – HE WHO HEALS

From time immemorial that power had been attributed to him. In one of the more ancient Jewish writings, it is narrated that Raphael was commissioned by God to put down the evil spirits which vexed the sons of Noah with the plagues and sicknesses after the Flood. It was Raphael, according to that tradition, who taught man the use of herbs and minerals and other substances for the healing of ailments. It is even alleged that the Apocryphal Book, the Book of Noah, contained the first treatise on medicines, and that all this material was furnished by the Archangel Raphael.

The fact that those early writings have not been received as authentic Scripture need not deprive them of all value. Such books often hand down to us correct history and tradition. In any case they represent the ideas of the people of the time and may thus possess utility. Though not accepted Scripture, they can be read as admirable spiritual reading affording sidelights otherwise not available. In this case for instance, the Book of Noah professes to tell us about that more than interesting time, that of the original great calamity of mankind, the Flood.

The suggestions that the Archangel was used to enlighten the earliest men in regard to availing of the natural things around them for curative purposes is intriguing. For how else did those primitive men at once turn to the natural things around them and put them to medical purposes. They had not our modern aids towards analysis and experiment. So the fact that from the first they seemed to be able in a rather expert manner to attend to the physical evils suggests that a higher power was at work to illuminate their first steps.

Moreover from the earliest times religion and healing were associated.. There was a link between the priests and that science in every one of the ancient religions. We see this carried on into Christianity too. The Monasteries provided the first dispensaries. In each one, several Monks were set aside for that office. They delved into that science and provided medicines. This tendency would fit in with that most ancient idea about St. Raphael being the instructor in that science.

It is one of our terrible mistakes to think that mankind was utterly deprived and benighted in all those respects before the days of our modern science. Much evidence exists to the contrary. May this impressive story of the Tobias', father and son, cause you to think more in terms of the Angels, whom the Legion of Mary calls the Heavenly Legion of Mary. We are told that we are to regard their warfare as paralleling ours, each necessary to the other. They supply the immense power and we supplement them in the capacity of instruments.

Also, for the future give greater thought to St. Raphael.