

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church
Bible Study Tobit
Session 2

The Jewish view of Tobit

The book of Tobit may reference the Tobiad family. From the third century BCE this powerful Jewish family occupied a fortress in Araq el- Amir in the Ammonite region in Transjordan; they worked closely with the ruling powers. There are indications that they were already prominent from preexilic times, as the names Tobiah/Tobiyahu are repeatedly linked with being a servant to a ruler or have some connection with a high priest. (Neh 2: 19, Neh ad: 4-9 and Zech 6: 10-14)

The Tobiahs are among Nehemiah's chief enemies. Nehemiah calls one of these an "Ammonite" but this may be an invented insult as Tobiah's name means "Yahweh is My Good (or my Welfare)"

The "land of Tob/Tobiah is also mentioned in Judges and in the third-century B.C.E. Zenon Papyri in which a Tobiah has business with Ptolemy II of Egypt 309-246 BCE.

Josephus relates that a Tobiah worked as a tax collector for the Ptolemies. Many details in Tobit such as working for a king, devotion to the Temple, emphasis on marrying close relatives points to the possibility that the story was written with the intent to present this controversial family in a good light.

Although heavily edited, the text is based on some real characters but is mostly an instruction on living a righteous life with faith.

Shavuot (Festival of weeks) also known as Pentecost

Today's Jews connect the festival of Shavuot with the giving of the Torah on Sinai, but this idea is not attested until Jub. 6: 17-22. This holiday is linked to the first fruits and the wheat harvest becoming especially important in certain Second temple writings. It was call Shavuot "Weeks" because it took place seven weeks after the waving of the first sheaf – related to the later fixed second day of Passover as in Lev 23: 15-21. The reference in Greek is called Pentecost. The themes of harvest, marriage, progeny and inheritance as in the book of Ruth are now read on the second day of Shavuot and also included is the reading of Tobit.

The Jewish Annotated Apocrypha (p. 155). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Literary Form

One has to ask why do the first chapters of Tobit speak from first person to the third person in 3:7? There are some scholars who view this a translation error, as in having different fragments and not the whole. It was Jerome that when he translated at one point recounted everything in the book in the third person to simplify things, but this is not an accurate account but merely a translator's preference.

If studied through the eyes of the original readers and tellers of the text, one might note that there is a described purpose to the first person third person switch. Not often done in more modern times this is not uncommon for the original time period. The story begins in the first person, when Tobit recounts his own past experience and fragments 2 and 5 of Aramaic 4QTob and fragment 1 *i* of Hebrew 4QTob attest that the first person was part of the original composition.

The shift to the third person is explained easily enough because 3:7 is where the narrative shifts from Tobit's plight to that of Sarah in Ecbatana and Tobit is no longer personally involved.

For M. Rabenau in *Studien zum Buch Tobit* the original narrative of the Tobit story was composed in Samaritan Palestine in the third century B.C. in Semitic language, probably Aramaic. He puts for that three expansions of the narrative took place in Palestine.

The first expansion in 147-141 B.C. which would have dealt with the concern to bury the dead in troubled times.

The second expansion after 140 B.C. which reflects inner Jewish problems

The third and last expansion the second century B.C which stresses Torah piety.

***Tobit: Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature (CEJL)* eds. Stuckenbruck, Loren T., Pieter W van der Horst, Hermann Lichtenberger, Doron Mendels, and James R. Mueller
Feature: **Tobit: Joseph A. Fitzmyer** (2003)