



Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time B September 16, 2018

Old Testament: Part Eleven Three Historical Novels Tobit, Judith and Esther

Although, Tobit, Judith and Esther are placed amongst the historical books of the Bible, they are more fictional than historical. Some scholars call them “historical novels.”

In his book *Reading the Bible*, Timothy Carmoday writes that the books of Tobit, Judith and Esther “describe the faith of a particular person who acts in accord with God’s will and brings about the salvation of the nation or the blessings of God on his or her family. All three books introduce a problem or crisis at the beginning of the book that is developed and eventually resolved in the story” (p.99).

THE BOOK OF TOBIT

The New American Bible—St. Joseph Edition has a very good summary of the story we read about in the Book of Tobit.

The Book of Tobit, named after its principal hero, combines specifically Jewish piety and morality with oriental folklore in a fascinating story that has enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles. Prayers, psalms, and words of wisdom, as well as the skillfully constructed story itself, provide valuable insights into the faith and the religious milieu of its unknown author. The book was probably written early in the second century B.C...

Tobit, a devout and wealthy Israelite living among the captives deported to Nineveh from the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C., suffers severe reverses and is finally blinded. Because of his misfortunes he begs the Lord to let him die. But recalling the large sum of money he had formerly deposited in far-off Media, he sends his son Tobiah there to bring back the money. In Media, at this same time, a young woman, Sarah, also prays for death, because she has lost seven husbands,

each killed in turn on his wedding night by the demon Asmodeus. God hears the prayers of Tobit and Sarah, and sends the angel Raphael in disguise to aid them both.

Raphael makes the trip to Media with Tobit. When Tobiah is attacked by a large fish as he bathes, Raphael orders him to seize it and to remove its gall, heart, and liver because they make “useful medicines.” Later, at Raphael’s urging, Tobiah marries Sarah, and uses the fish’s heart and liver to drive Asmodeus from the bridal chamber. Returning to Nineveh with his wife and his father’s money, Tobiah rubs the fish’s gall into his father’s eyes and cures them. Finally, Raphael reveals his true identity and returns to heaven. Tobit then utters his beautiful hymn of praise. Before dying, Tobit tells his son to leave Nineveh because God will destroy that wicked city. After Tobiah buries his father and mother, he and his family depart for Media, where he later learns that the destruction of Nineveh has taken place.

The inspired author of the book used the literary form of religious novel (as in Jonah and Judith) for the purpose of instruction and edification. There may have been a historical nucleus around which the story was composed, but this possibility has nothing to do with the teaching of the book. The seemingly historical data—names of kings, cities, etc. —are used merely as vivid details to create interest and charm. (pp 469-470)

Timeless themes. Tobit contains many timeless themes such as prayerfulness, family loyalty, piety towards parents, purity of marriage, reverence for the dead, charity toward the stranger and the poor, challenge of cultural assimilation, and even the influence of demons and angels.

Division of chapters

PART 1: Predicaments of Tobit and Sarah (Chapters 1-3)

PART 2: Journey of Tobiah and Raphael (Chapters 4-6)

PART 3: Marriage of Tobiah and Sarah and the healing of Sarah (Chapters 7-10)

PART 4: Journey home and healing of Tobit (Chapters 11-12)

PART 5: Tobit's prayer of thanksgiving and wise advice (Chapters 13-14)

Some verses to note from Tobit:

Do to no one what you yourself dislike. Give to the hungry some of your bread, and to the naked some of your clothing. Seek counsel from every wise man. At all times bless the Lord God, and ask him to make all your paths straight and to grant success to all your endeavors and plans. (4:15, 16, 18, 19)

This book of the Bible is such a beautiful story it is worth reading all 14 chapters. Tobit is one of seven books of the Old Testament not found in Protestant Bibles.

(For more on the Book of Tobit, see my *Commentaries on the Old Testament*, Level 3, Article 40.)

BOOK OF JUDITH

In its introduction to Judith, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* reads:

The book of Judith was written during the period of the Maccabean revolt. Its setting is in an earlier period, but many details reveal the author's interest in his own time rather than that of the seventh century B.C. In the story, an Israelite town is besieged by Holofernes, commander-in chief of the Assyrian army. The town leaders despair of help from God and declare that if deliverance does not come within five days, they will surrender. A beautiful widow, an observant Jew, upon hearing the decision of the elders, scolds them for their lack of faith. She prays, placing herself in the hands of God. Finally, she prepares her weapon – beauty. Because God works through her beauty, she beheads Holofernes and delivers her people.

The message of the book is that victory comes not from human might but through the power of God. God can deliver the faithful people at whatever time and in whatever way God wishes. Even though the way of deliverance may look like folly from a human point of

view, the story of Judith demonstrates that the real fools are those who place their trust in human power and weapons. The whole army of Holofernes is defenseless against God's weapon – the beauty of a faithful woman. (p.844)

Division of chapters

PART 1: The Assyrians pose a threat to Israel (Chapters 1-7)

PART 2: Judith saves Israel from Assyrian invasion (Chapters 8-16)

Concluding Remarks

In its concluding remarks on Judith, the *Collegeville Commentary* states:

The people of the author's time, who suffered under Seleucid persecution, needed to hear the message of the Book of Judith. The message remains pertinent for us, who face powers of evil beyond our strength. The story of Judith teaches us that the power of God can bring victory even through the most vulnerable. Judith's example exhorts God's people to persevere in hope. Uzziah proclaims: 'Blessed are you, Judith, by the Most High God, above all the women on earth.... Your deed of hope will never be forgotten by those who tell of the might of God.' And all the people answer 'Amen! Amen!'" (p.857)

For more on Judith, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Level 3, Article 41.

BOOK OF ESTHER

The Book of Esther, like Tobit and Judith, is regarded by most scholars as a historical fiction about God's providential care for his people, the Israelites, who are living outside their homeland in an increasingly hostile environment.

The story is set in the Persian period of Israel's history (the same period as the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah) during the reign of King Ahasuerus, known in most English translations as Xerxes (486-465 BC). The action takes place in Susa, a city in the Babylonian empire. Amongst other things, the Book of Esther shows that the Jews who did *not* return to Jerusalem following Cyrus' decree were still counted as God's people.

Briefly, this book tells the story of how Esther, a Jewish woman, becomes the Persian Queen with the help of her Uncle Mordecai, and intervenes to stop the evil plans of Haman, a royal official of the king, from killing all the Jews in one day.

In its introduction to Esther, the *Catholic Serendipity Bible* reads:

Mordecai and Esther are examples of the righteous wise who, remaining faithful to their God, are able to reverse the tables on their wicked opponents. Esther is a literary masterpiece that reads like a modern suspense novel, complete with plot twists, irony, intrigue, revenge, and plenty of feasting.

Commentators also point out that the book was written to teach Jews how to live a productive life in Diaspora (outside their homeland).

CHAPTER 2: Esther is made Queen

“Esther was beautifully formed and lovely to behold. On the death of her father and mother, Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter.” (v.7)

In his commentary on Esther, J.G. McConville writes:

The story of Esther is a little like the plots of modern novels or films in which the reader/audience is slowly introduced to the characters, who appear at first to bear no relation to each other, but whose lives are ultimately interwoven in a complex way. The scene having been set in chapter 1, events might have unfolded in any number of ways. Their actual course is now determined by two coincidental circumstances. (ibid p.161)

Two versions of the book. This book has come down to us in two versions: one in Hebrew and another in Greek which has over 100 verses more than the Hebrew. The Greek version is found in Catholic bibles and the Hebrew version in the Jewish and Protestant bibles. A unique and troubling feature of the shorter version is the distinct omission of the mention of God. This fact nearly caused its exclusion from the Canon of Scripture.

Addressing the non-mention of God in the Hebrew and Protestant bibles, Protestant Scripture scholar J.G. McConville writes:

As for the fact that the name of God does not appear in the book, this does not mean that it is not ‘theological,’ or does not teach about God. The silence

about God is quite deliberate, not to make the point that he is inactive in human situations, but on the contrary, that he is hidden behind all events. This is the implication of the numerous coincidental occurrences in the book. The story can become, therefore, a powerful statement about the reality of God in a world from which he appears to be absent. (The Daily Study Bible Series – Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, p.153)

As we shall see, the Greek addition which the Catholic Church uses, has explicit references to God, and adds a religious dimension to a secular story.

The 100+ verses in the Greek and Catholic bibles could add some confusion to our reading of the text. The additional verses are scattered throughout the ten chapters of the book and are designated by the letters A to F. The regular chapter numbers apply to the Hebrew text.

Division of Chapters

PART 1: Prologue: Mordecai’s dream (Chapter A Addition #1)

PART 2: Esther replaces Vashti (Chapters 2-3)

PART 3: Haman’s plot against the Jews; Esther and Mordecai’s response. (Chapters 3, B, 4, C, D)

PART 4: Haman’s downfall (Chapters 5-7)

PART 5: Reversal of Haman’s decree (Chapters 8 and E)

PART 6: Feast of Purim (Chapters 9-10)

(For more on Esther, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Level 3, Article 42.)

Have a blessed week,

