

The Old Testament: Part Twelve

Three Historical Novels – Tobit, Judith and Esther

Although Tobit, Judith and Esther are placed amongst the *historical books* of the Old Testament, they do not belong there because they are markedly fictional (called by some authors “historical novels”) than historical. In his book *Reading the Bible*, Timothy Carmody 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). Since Tobit and Judith were written around the time of the Maccabees, and Ester sometime before them, I am placing these three “historical novels” after the Books of Maccabees.

BOOK OF TOBIT

This is the story of a pious Jew in exile who, after many misfortunes and trying events, finally sees the victory of God’s providence in a happy family reunion and a peaceful end. Apart from the fascination of the tale itself, the book reflects aspects of Jewish piety during the Hellenistic period. The account is presented as history and as having taken place in Nineveh in the eighth century B.C.

The book tells about the tragedies and triumphs in the lives of three people: Tobit, Sarah, and Tobiah. The author, by weaving the stories together in three different but related plots, has a theological purpose: to show that God can manage the circumstances of people’s lives to bring God’s plans to fulfillment. The primary message is simple: God rewards those who are faithful.

Some excerpts

3:2-6—Tobit’s prayer. Commenting on the Prayer of Tobit, Eugene Hensell, O.S.B., writes:

Prayer is one of the strongest and most pervasive themes in the Book of Tobit. Tobit appears to have been seriously shaken by his previous argument with his wife, Anna— and well he should have been. He had wrongly accused her of stealing a goat. This and his total blindness have put Tobit in a state of despair. He describes himself as grief-stricken in spirit. It is from this perspective that he turns to prayer.

Tobit begins his prayer by acknowledging God as being righteous, merciful, and true. Only God can heal Tobit from his profound sense of despair. Tobit readily admits his own sinfulness. He sees himself as part of a community, and thus he shares fully in the sins of the

community. Tobit’s prayer leads to his request that God allow him to die. He does not ask for mercy or forgiveness—only death. He sees no real hope for the future. Keep in mind that at this time Judaism did not believe in a resurrection. Everyone ended up in Sheol, which was neither good nor bad. Rewards and punishments had to be given out in the present world.

3:7-17—Sarah’s plight. “Sarah had been given in marriage to seven husbands, but the wicked demon Asmodeas kept killing them off...” (v.8). “Why then should I live any longer?” (v.15).

On the same day that Tobit quarrels with his wife and prays for death, Sarah is taunted by one of her father’s maidservants and also prays for death. As the demon keeps killing off Sarah’s husbands on their wedding night, she is driven to despair and considers suicide. Out of love for her father, Sarah reconsiders and turns to God in prayer. Commenting on the prayers of Tobit and Sarah in chapter 3, the *Collegeville Commentary* states:

Both a man and a woman turn to prayer in desperate situations. Their prayers are equally significant for the plot. Both pray with phrases familiar from other biblical prayers. Tobit asks to die. He thinks that death is the only solution to his problems. Sarah puts herself completely in God’s hands. She illustrates the proper way to pray: she spreads out her hands and turns to face Jerusalem. (p.834)

In **Chapter 5**, the angel Raphael enters the story, but his identity is concealed as he guides Tobiah on his journey.

Chapters 7-8: Tobiah marries Sarah and the demon is expelled

“Raguel said to Tobiah: ‘Your marriage to her has been decided in heaven! Take your kinswoman; from now on you are her love, and she is your beloved. She is yours today and ever after. And tonight, son, may the Lord of heaven prosper you both. May he grant you mercy and peace.’”

The climactic moment in Tobit now emerges. Will Tobiah be yet another newlywed killed on his wedding night by the demon Asmodeus? From the beginning, the angel Raphael has already been at work providing Tobiah with the fish organs that will ward off the demon (6:2-6). Now he directs Tobiah to the home of Raguel, his future father-in-law, to set the stage for a successful marriage.

7:11—Sarah is given in marriage. Raguel assures Tobiah that despite Sarah’s bad luck with previous husbands, this marriage has been made in heaven. Then Raguel calls in his daughter Sarah and gives her off to Tobiah. A marriage contract is set up according to the Law of Moses.

8:1-3—Expulsion of the demon. When Tobiah enters the bedroom, he remembers Raphael’s instructions and performs the necessary ritual of burning the fish’s heart and liver. The ritual works and Raphael pursues the demon to make sure he never returns.

After Sarah’s parents leave the prepared bedroom, Tobiah asks his wife to rise from their bed so that they can pray together. The newlyweds praise God and recall the blessings to Adam and Eve as helpmates for one another (Gn 2). Tobiah affirms his holy and wholesome intentions. He is motivated by love and not lust. Together in prayer they go to bed.

The next day, Raguel and his wife prepare a feast for the newlyweds and Raguel asks that the celebration, which normally lasts seven days, be extended to fourteen days. We can only imagine the happiness in Raguel’s household.

Chapter 11: Tobit is healed of his blindness

“Blessed be God, blessed be his great name, and blessed be all his holy angels! May his great name be with us, and blessed be all the angels throughout all the ages! God it was who afflicted me, and God who has had mercy on me. Now I see my son Tobiah!”

As the traveling party gets close to Nineveh, Raphael reminds Tobiah that he will be the instrument of healing for his father and instructs him on what to do. After an emotional reunion, Tobiah immediately works to restore his father’s eyesight. When Tobit’s blindness is healed, he breaks into a prayer of thanksgiving. The *Collegeville Commentary* notes:

Tobit prays in praise of God, whom he sees both as a source of affliction and as a source of healing. He thus declares one of the major theological principles of the book: God is free, and God’s actions are beyond human understanding. Tobit, although he believes that God rewards obedience and punishes wickedness (1:12-13; 4:6, 21), accepts his blindness as coming from God (3:5). Throughout his affliction he never turns away from God and never ceases praying. His prayer as his sight is restored is a striking manifestation of his own extraordinary faith. (p.840)

In John 9, Jesus rejects the belief that the blind man was born blind because of sin, the sin of his parents. Christians believe that while our good and loving God

allows bad things to happen to good people (e.g., Jesus himself), he is not a God who sends or causes bad things to happen to us.

12:15—Raphael reveals his real identity to Tobit and Tobiah, and delivers a farewell discourse. He announces his departure and tells them of his role in directing past events in their lives. He strongly exhorts them to be faithful to God’s commandments and to one another, and makes a promise that “those who regularly give alms will enjoy a full life.”

Raphael’s role throughout this story demonstrates the providence of God. He prepares Tobiah for the healings of Tobit and Sarah. He guides Tobiah on their journey, always encouraging a spirit of prayer. And he always leaves room for human freedom in response to God’s guidance.

Catholics believe that God has given each one of us a guardian angel to be our Raphael in the journey of life. Hopefully, all of us have a relationship with our guardian angel—daily seeking his guidance, help and protection.

Chapter 14: Tobit’s parting words

“Now, children, I give you this command: serve God faithfully and do what is right before him; you must tell your children to do what is upright and to give alms, to be mindful of God, and at all times to bless his name sincerely and with all their strength” (v.19).

(For more on Tobit, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, 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. Using 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 his 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)

In its introduction to Judith, the *Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition* states:

The book of Judith is a piece of literature for difficult times. It was hoped that the reader would take to heart the lesson that God was still the master of history who could save Israel from her enemies. There is a parallel with the time of the Exodus: As God had delivered the people by the hand of Moses, so God could deliver them by the hand of the pious widow Judith.

The story of Judith is full of unexpected turns. The most obvious, especially to those who first heard or read the story, is that a woman – not a man – saved Judah in time of severe distress. Judith is more faithful and resourceful than any of the men of Bethulia. She is more eloquent than the king and more courageous than the leading citizens of the city. While the king, priests, and leaders, show themselves incapable of dealing with the crisis, Judith stands up to the threat posed by Holofernes, and takes decisive action to end that threat. (p.54)

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)

Chapter 8: Enter Judith

“Judith was beautifully formed and lovely to behold... No one had a bad word to say about her, for she was a very God-fearing woman.” (v.8)

After establishing through genealogy that Judith (meaning Jewess) is a true Israelite, the author tells us that she is beautiful within and without.

Chapters 9-10: Judith prepares to take down Holofernes

“Your strength is not in numbers, nor does your power depend upon stalwart men; but you are the God of the lowly, the helper of the oppressed, the supporter of the weak, the protector of the forsaken, the savior of those without hope.” (v.11)

Judith makes a twofold preparation for war. The first is prayer. Judith's prayer posture is one of radical humility

before God: prostration. Her attire is symbolic of penitence: sackcloth and ashes. She begins by reminding God of the mighty deeds performed for her ancestors (9:2-4). Then Judith professes that her trust is not in horses and chariots but in the power of God, and so she calls upon God to win the victory for her. Next, Judith attends to enhancing her physical beauty. After bathing, she uses everything available to make herself look beautiful and captivating. Commenting on this part of Judith's preparation for war, *The Colledgeville Commentary* states:

Judith understands the goodness of her body. She knows that her physical beauty is good and that it comes from God. She also knows that the power of her beauty comes from within her, from her holiness, from her faithfulness to God. Since both her exterior and interior beauty come from God, her beauty must be devoted to the service of God. God intends to use her beauty as a weapon to liberate the people. She will wield the weapon to the best of her ability.

The response of others to this second preparation of hers testifies to its effectiveness. The men of her own city are astounded at her beauty (10:7). After she arrives at the enemy camp, the guards of Holofernes gaze at her face in awe because of its wondrous beauty (10:14). The crowd that gathers within the camp at her arrival marvels at her beauty. They say to one another: “Who can despise this people that has such women among them? It is not wise to leave one man of them alive, for if any were to be spared they could beguile the whole world (10:19).” (p.852)

At the end of the chapter, Judith is led into the presence of Holofernes. All marvel at Judith's beauty.

Chapters 12-13: Judith beheads Holofernes

After bathing, she besought the Lord, the God of Israel, to direct her way, for the triumph of his people. (12:8)

When all had departed, and no one, small or great, was left in the bedroom, Judith stood by Holofernes' bed and said within herself: “O Lord, God of all might, in this hour look graciously on my undertaking for the exaltation of Jerusalem; now is the time for aiding your heritage and for carrying out my design to shatter the enemies who have risen against us.” She went to the bedpost near the head of Holofernes, and taking his sword from it, drew close to the bed, grasped the hair on his head, and said, “Strengthen me this day, O God of Israel!” Then with all her might she struck him twice in the neck, and cut off his head. (13:4-8)

Commenting on Judith's murder of Holofernes, John Collins writes:

The great scandal of the story is Judith's willingness to deceive the Assyrian general, violate his trust, and kill him in a gruesome manner. There is a biblical precedent for her action, in Judges 4-5, where Jael the Kenite, shelters Sisera in her tent and then drives a tent peg into his skull. There is no apology for the violence of the action. The survival of the people is at stake, and Judith is a heroine. That a woman performs this great deed, accords with the theology of the book of Judges, where God affects his deliverance through improbable means, to show that it is not an achievement of human power. (Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, p.548)

CHAPTERS 14-15: The Assyrians flee in fear

"On hearing what happened, those still in their tents were amazed and overcome with fear and trembling. No one kept ranks any longer; they scattered in all directions and fled along every road, both through the valley and in the mountains. Those also who were stationed in the mountain district around Bethulia took to flight. Then all the Israelite warriors overwhelmed them." (15:1-3)

Concluding Remarks. In its concluding remarks on Judith, the *Collegetown 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*, 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, 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).

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 edition, 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.