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## **THE BOOK OF TOBIT FAMILY IN *A FOREIGN LAND***

### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

Does the institution of the family have a future? This question was asked by T. Machula in the title of his article<sup>1</sup>. In his opinion, the family has always existed, and for humans it is a necessary and natural way of living together. The family is based on marriage, the lasting union of man and woman, and this base stretches to the future with descendants, to the past with ancestors and “sideways” to neighbours, who form together a present society. The institution of the family is now threatened, mainly by the loss of the society-wide understanding of its importance; and by the demographic and economic crisis, the loss of intergenerational solidarity and a sense of community in society. Demands for the equality of the gay lifestyle and the inevitable myth of *growth* are also dangerous. However, according to the author of the article, despite these threats, the family has a future. The greatest threat to the family lies in our own materialist Euro-American world which has very nearly succumbed to the above-mentioned threats.

More than two thousand years ago, the authors of the deuterocanonical books, the Book of Tobit, the Book of Judith, the Books of the Maccabees, the Book of Sirach and the Additions to the Book of Esther, saw the dangerous threat caused by the assimilation of Jews in the Hellenic world and the consequent loss of identity of the Jewish community. Thus, they offered thoughtfully prepared teaching to show

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. Machula, „*Má inštitúcie rodiny budúcnosť? Otázka (pouze) pro euroamerickú kultúru*“ in *Príloha Katolícký týdeník*, roč. XVIII, č. 50, of 9. – 15. 12. 2008, Perspektivy 50, p. 1.

the Jewish people how to live in the Diaspora. One of them, the author of the Book of Tobit, emphasised the future of the Jewish family institution. The narrative of the Book of Tobit is about an unstable world of exile in which boundaries and monarchs are constantly changing, where the native country is lost, it is impossible to visit the Temple, and the priesthood is lost as well. The only stable unit is the family.

The Book of Tobit, after centuries of moderate scrutiny by theologians, would now find new receivers and obtain a new valuation.<sup>2</sup> G. Ravasi said that the Book may now be a good reading for Christian and Jewish families because of its innocence and its many popular settings. This, according to the work of M. Luther, makes it a “sophisticated and charming comedy, a very beautiful and helpful poem” which offers a series of adventure scenes which culminate in the contraction of marriage.<sup>3</sup>

In the twentieth century we have a dichotomy. On the one hand, the story of the Book of Tobit appeared on the big screen under the title *It's a Wonderful Life* and the popular TV series *Touched by an Angel*, on the other hand, the story was also completely denied. The revolutionary government of Ethiopia was not fond of the Book of Tobit. From the extensive canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church it repudiated the Gospel of Mark and the Book of Tobit; the latter partly because “it is an unreasonable bizarreness” and partly because the tradition argued that Asmodee was put in shackles in Ethiopia, which was considered a national insult. The Book should not only not have been read but it also should have been destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

In form and content, the Book of Tobit belongs to the sapient literary form. The aim of the author was to give a moral and religious message in the way of the Jewish method of interpretation and relecture of the Scripture in the form of a dramatic, artistically processed fictional story written in the second century BC.<sup>5</sup> Interest in the author of the Book was also in topics which resonate in today's modern world, such as the topic of departure from the country of ancestors, assim-

<sup>2</sup> Over the last twenty five years, attention and interest in the Book of Tobit has been growing. For example: Three dissertations were written at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in this time; two of them (I. Nowell, *The Book of Tobit: Narrative Technique and Theology*, and P. J. Griffin, *The Theology and Function of Prayer in the Book of Tobit*) were under the direction of A. A. Di Lella who has been giving a course on the Book of Tobit at The Catholic University of America for more than two decades and is the author of several professional articles on the Book of Tobit. One dissertation (V. T. M. Skemp, *The Vulgate of Tobit Compared with Other Ancient Witnesses*) was written under the direction of J. A. Fitzmyer, the author of „*The Aramaic and Hebrew Fragments of Tobit from Qumran Cave 4*,” as well as the Commentary to the Book of Tobit (2003). In 1981 at the Wilhelms-Universität in Münster the work of P. Deselaers entitled „*Das Buch Tobit: Studien zu seiner Entstehung, Komposition und Theologie*” was defended. M. Rabenau revised his doctoral thesis from 1992 to a comprehensive diachronic study and a source criticism study called „*Studien zum Buch Tobit*” (1994).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. Ravasi, *Biblické postavy* (orig. *I volti della Bibbia*; Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2009) 276.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. L. K. Handy, *Entertaining faith: reading short stories in the Bible* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000) 129.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Heriban, *Úvod ku Knihe Tobiáš in Sväté písmo Starého i Nového zákona* (Rim: SÚSCM, 1995) 839.

ilation, mixed marriages, the role of women, the apparent absence of God and the consideration that the world is a place of chaos.

The Book of Tobit is primarily concerned with several aspects associated with the problems of family consisting of a father, mother and their child.<sup>6</sup> Several current issues appear in the story: Why think of a marriage that could end tragically or will not survive long? What to do about the fear of marriage? How can we live in a marriage with an incurably ill partner? Why not think of the final resolution of personal problems by suicide? How can we cope with life alone, with family in a foreign country or living with our own family in a multi-generational household? Does a normative form of family, marriage exist? More than two thousand years ago, the author of the story offered the answer to these questions expressed by the promise of our God: „Behold, I send an angel before you, to protect you [...] listen to his voice“ (Ex 23:20-21).

### FOREIGN LAND

In this short article we will focus on one motive of the Book of Tobit: a foreign land.

The Book of Tobit portrays four stories of journeys, which have theological connotations as well. The first journey was that of Tobit from Thisbe of Naphtali to Niniveh. The second journey was the journey of Tobiah with Raphael to Rages of Media. The third journey is the way of Tobiah and Raphael back from Ecbatana to Niniveh, and the fourth one is that of Tobiah from Niniveh to Ecbatana. On the journey people experience a foreign land.<sup>7</sup>

Already in the story's prologue, we find the author creating a tension between „homeland“ and „exile“ by contrasting the genealogical and local origins of Tobit with his exile by the Assyrians (Tobit belongs to the tribe of Naphtali, but in the days of Shalmaneser he was taken captive by the Assyrians from his home town of Thisbe in the Upper Galilee). Tobit, a pious Israelite is confronted to cope with the living within in Diaspora as an outsider.<sup>8</sup>

### FOREIGN LAND – EMPHASISED BY THE MOTIVE OF BURIAL

There is a literary aspect to the foreign land in the book of Tobit. It is emphasised by the motive of the burial. Tobit's story would make no sense without the burial motive. It is what starts the plot. Right after introducing himself at the beginning of the book (1:1-14), Tobit's first dramatic conflict is about his burying the executed (1:17-18). All further conflict and development, in other words the whole

<sup>6</sup> Cf. W. Soll, „The Book of Tobit as a Window on the Hellenistic Jewish Family“ in *Passion, Vitality, and Foment. The Dynamics of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. L.M. Luker; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) 242-274.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Zsengellér, „Topography as Theology,“ *JSJS* 98 (2005) 186-187

<sup>8</sup> Cf. B. Ego, „The Book of Tobit and the Diaspora,“ *JSJS* 98 (2005) 41-54.

plot, arises from this. It is the motive of the story. But the story concludes: Tobit and his wife die, according to his wish, Tobiah buries them (14:2.9.12). The burial motive has a unusual role in the irony of the book, in chapter 8, where we read how Tobiah's father-in-law is made ridiculous for being of little faith in having a grave dug for his son-in-law.<sup>9</sup> The dead bodies in the streets suggest an absurdity of exile and foreign land.<sup>10</sup> Tobit frequent contact with corpses shows the chaos of the Diaspora. For those who yearn for a stable society, the situation in Nineveh is literally one of „decomposition“. In a book of just 244 verses, 53 verses, or almost 22 percent, contain at least one word referring to death or burial. The burial of relatives provides us with the opportunity to meet with death. It is far more difficult to bury relatives in the foreign land.

### FOREIGN LAND – EMPHASISED BY THE DEPRIVATION OF THE PROPERTY

Tobit's deprivation of his property – taken from him by the Assyrian king Senacherib (1:20) is another way to be a stranger. Tobit himself provides the paralel when he characterizes Israel's punishment as 'plunder, exile, and death' (3:4). The plundering of faithless Israel's goods by the nations who oppress her is predicted in Deuteronomy's catalogue of evils that God will bring on his people who rebel against him (Deut 28:30-31; cf. 2 Kgs 21:14), but the more fundamental paralel to Tobit's misfortune may be Israel's loss of 'the good land' (as Deuteronomy echoed by Tob 14:4 calls it), the source of all her material sustenance and prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

### FOREIGN LAND – EMPHASISED BY BLIDNESS

Tobit's blindness is equivalent of death. Darkness symbolizes death (cf. Job 38:17).<sup>12</sup> Blidness also occurs among the punishments Deuteronomy predicts for faithless Israel (Deut 28:29.65). But we should also notice that Tobit speaks of his blindness as equivalent to death: „I am a man without eyesight; i cannot see the light of heaven, but I lie in darkness like the dead who no longer see the light. Although still alive, I am among the dead. (Tob 5:10). There one may find scriptual allusions: „We wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along the wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Bolyki, „Burial as an Ethical Task in the Book of Tobit, in the Bible and in the Greek Tragedies,“ *JSJS* 98 (2005) 91-95.

<sup>10</sup> Amy-Jill Levine speaks, that „in exile, dead bodies lie in the streets and those who inter them are punished; demons fall in love with women and kill their husband; even righteousness is no guarantee of stability, as both Tobit and his nephew Ahikar (cf. 14:10) realize.“ A.-J. Levine, „Diaspora as Metaphor: Bodies and Boundaries in the Book of Tobit,“ *SFSHJ* 41 (1992) 105.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. J. Collins, „The Judaism of the Book of Tobit,“ *JSJS* 98 (2005) 27.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Portier-Young, „Eyes to the Blind: A Dialogue Between Tobit and Job,“ *CBQMS* 38 (2005) 14-27.

we were dead. (Isa 59:9-10). The feelings of blind Tobit who lives in an isolation from surrounding world culminate in his prayer for death: „So now, deal with me as you please; command my life breath to be taken from me, that I may depart from the face of the earth and become dust. It is better for me to die than to live, because I have listened to undeserved reproaches, and great is the grief within me. Lord, command that I be released from such anguish; let me go to my everlasting abode; Do not turn your face away from me, Lord. For it is better for me to die than to endure so much misery in life, and to listen to such reproaches!“ (Tob 3:6)

### **FOREIGN LAND – EMPHASISED BY CHILDLESSNESS AND ABANDONMENT**

Sarah is a childless widow with no prospect of marriage or children and suffers insults from her maid. She shares with Tobit same plight and pray for death: „Bid me to depart from the earth never again to listen to such reproaches“ (Tob 3:13). The account of Sarah in Tobit seems especially designed to recall the portrayal of the desolate Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations, which begins: „How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess (in hebrew Sarati) among the provinces has become a vassal. (Lam 1:1). Given that most of the names in Tobit seem carefully chosen for their significance, it is probably not coincidental that Sarah’s name (meaning princess) occurs in this opening verse of Lamentations as an epithet of Jerusalem. Lamentations goes on to describe Jerusalem weeping bitterly in the night (Lam 1:2; cf. Tob 2:10) and the taunts she suffers (Lam 2:14; cf. Tob 3:7-9).<sup>13</sup>

### **FOREIGN LAND – MODELLED ON GENESIS**

The topic of being a foreigner is common in the Book of Genesis. Terah is described as the first traveller who decided to emigrate with his entire family (Gen 11:31-32). His son Abram departed to the foreign land on God’s instructions (Gen 12:1-3). His son experienced the foreign land by his blindness (Gen 27:1) and by the lie of his brother Jacob (Gen 27:19). Jacob was a foreigner because of his lie and the lie of his relative (Gen 29:27). Even among Jacob’s sons, Joseph was sold to the foreign land (Gen 37-50).<sup>14</sup>

The Book of Tobit, especially with regard to the description of characters and the flow of the plot, is modeled on Genesis as a whole, telling the story of two patriarchs who „sojourn“ outside the land of promise. The marriage of their children links the two families and carries forward the hope of a return to the „land of

<sup>13</sup> Cf. R. Bauckham, „Tobit as a Parable for the Exiles of Northern Israel,“ *LSTS* 55 (2006) 149.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. N. Lohfink, „Geh in die Fremde. Der Gott der Patriarchen“ in *Im Schatten deiner Flügel: grosse Bibeltex te neu erschlossen* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder 1999) 49-63.

Abraham“ (Tob 14:7). Tobit story is a parable (mashal, comparison) of Israel’s story from exile to restoration.

## IN CONCLUSION

Modern people – “foreigners in this world” – mainly look for political or economic reasons and ways out of contemporary challenges such as migration problems, financial crisis, globalization and secularization. Little is said about the real reason behind our problems – human greed, excessive individualism and utilitarianism – and about finding a way out of the global crisis outside the political or financial arena.

In his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (29th June 2009), Pope Benedict XVI stressed the need for consideration of the principle of philanthropy as an expression of brotherhood (34) and as a basis for new economic, social and political development. In his opinion, the globalization of humanity should be oriented in the categories of relationships, community and sharing.

The author of the Book of Tobit, which should be taken as a model, wants to protect the values and wealth of Jewish families. In the Book we encounter God’s intervention (providential) in the life of Tobit, Tobias and Sarah living in a foreign land **emphasised by the motive of burial, by the motive of deprivation of the property, by the motive of blindness, by the motive of childlessness and abandonment and modelled on Genesis**. Their religion is based on fidelity to Law, prayers and practising pious and good deeds. Such a religion does not exclude suffering, including the suffering of the righteous. Tobit’s instructions, „Tobit’s Torah“ is the key of spirituality which leads to God’s blessing. And the response to God’s blessing is expressed in songs of praise of the fathers of the families of Raguel and Tobit. Obedience to God’s law, even at the times of trial, is highlighted as a guide to the spirituality of the family which is rewarded with blessing.

## THE BOOK OF TOBIT FAMILY IN A FOREIGN LAND

### Summary

The author of the Book of Tobit, which should be taken as a model, wants to protect the values and wealth of Jewish families. In the Book we encounter God’s intervention in the life of Tobit, Tobias and Sarah living in a foreign land **emphasised by the motive of burial, by the motive of the deprivation of the property, by the motive of blindness, by the motive of childlessness and abandonment and modelled on Genesis**. Their religion is based on fidelity to Law, prayers and practising pious and good deeds. Such a religion does not exclude suffering, including the suffering of the righteous.

**KSIĘGA TOBIASZA. RODZINA NA OBCZYŻNIE**

## Streszczenie

Autor Księgi Tobiasza, rozumianej jako wzór, pragnie chronić wartości i dobrobyt żydowskich rodzin. W księdze spotykamy się z Bożą interwencją w życie Tobita, Tobiasza i Sary, żyjących na obczyźnie, gdzie wyeksponowano motyw pochówku, motyw pozbawienia własności, motyw ślepoty, bezdzietności oraz porzucenia wzorowany na Księdze Rodzaju. Ich religia oparta jest na wierności Prawu, modlitwach oraz praktykowaniu pobożnych i dobrych uczynków. Religia taka nie wyklucza cierpienia, łącznie z cierpieniem prawych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Księga Tobiasza, obczyzna, rodzina, Prawo, pochówek

**Key words:** Book of Tobit, a foreign land, family, Law, burial