


# The Book of Tobit in early Christianity: Greek and Latin interpretations from the 2nd to the 5th century CE

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**Dates:**

Received: 18 May 2020

Accepted: 16 June 2020

Published: 18 Nov. 2020

**How to cite this article:**

De Wet, C.L., 2020, 'The Book of Tobit in early Christianity: Greek and Latin interpretations from the 2nd to the 5th century CE', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a6138. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6138>

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This article examines the early Christian reception of the apocryphal book Tobit, focusing on Greek and Latin Christian interpretations from the 2nd to the 5th century CE. The study asks: how did early Christians read Tobit and for what purposes? The article provides an overview of how and why Tobit ended up in the Christian Bible, whether canonical or apocryphal. It then examines how the figures of Tobit and his son, Tobias, function as a moral exemplum in early Christianity, especially related to almsgiving and financial management, burials and the care of the dead, marriage and parenthood, prayer, the suffering and endurance of Tobit, and the role of Tobit in the Christian understanding of angels. The article demonstrates that Tobit had a rich and diverse reception in early Christian biblical interpretation, especially in the Latin church of the West.

**Contribution:** This article investigates the historical reception of the apocryphal Book of Tobit in early Christian thought. The focus is especially on the varieties of thought regarding Tobit. The article provides an overview of how and why Tobit ended up in the Christian Bible, whether canonical or apocryphal. It then examines how the figures of Tobit and his son, Tobias, function as moral exempla.

**Keywords:** Apocrypha; Biblical Interpretation; Early Christianity; Patristics; Septuagint; Tobit.

## Introduction

With a riveting plot and vividly colourful characters, the Book of Tobit is as entertaining to its readers as it is spiritually and ethically edifying. Part of the book's appeal might be its utilisation of various folktale motifs, such as the grateful dead, the angel in disguise, the magical animal (or the 'big fish'), the dangerous bride and the monster in the bridal chamber. Tobit is an 'on-the-road' adventure story, with an angel and a demon, with tragedy and humour, with sex and modesty and, of course, a dog. On the other hand, Tobit also provides meaningful moral and social instruction regarding burial practices, almsgiving, marriage and sex, eating customs, medicine and healing, and the relationship between parents and children. It contains numerous prayers and wisdom sayings. At its core lies major theological questions, such as theodicy, redemptive justice and the value of wisdom.

The story of Tobit takes place during the 8th century BCE, when Tobit and his wife Anna, along with their son, Tobias, are exiled from their homeland of Galilee to Assyria. Initially, Tobit was a servant of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser but was then removed from that service by Shalmaneser's successor for burying the unattended corpses of his Jewish countryfolk. On one faithful evening, after he buried the corpse of another man who was lying in the marketplace, Tobit fell asleep in his courtyard and became blinded after a bird's dung fell on his eyes. After this, Tobit's life became increasingly difficult, so much so that he prayed for death. At the same time, in Media, Tobit's kinswoman, Sarah, also prayed to die. Sarah was being plagued by a demon, Asmodeus, who had killed seven of her successive husbands on their wedding night. Tobit and Sarah are then brought together by their prayers, and God sends the angel Raphael to their aid. Raphael, disguised as a kinsman called Azariah, takes Tobit's son, Tobias, on a journey in which Tobias exorcises Asmodeus, marries Sarah, receives back money owed to his father and, with the aid of Raphael, miraculously heals his father's blindness.

Although the historical setting of the story of Tobit takes place in the 8th century BCE, the text itself was most likely written in the 3rd or 2nd century BCE, during the Hellenistic period. Littman

**Note:** Special Collection entitled Septuagint SA, sub-edited by Johann Cook (SUN).

(2008:xxviii) notes the consensus being between 225 and 175 BCE. The place of composition and specific details about the authorship remain unclear (Fitzmyer 2003:54; Littman 2008:xxix). It was originally written in Aramaic or Hebrew, and there are currently manuscripts of Tobit in nine languages. Aramaic fragments of Tobit were discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Greek manuscript traditions of Tobit are the most complete, with a long and short version of the story. The long version is represented by Codex Sinaiticus and the short version is represented by Codex Vaticanus. The majority of scholars argue that the short version is a later recension of the long version. In the Latin manuscript tradition, there is a long version in the *Vetus Latina*, whilst Jerome's Vulgate version of Tobit represents the short version (for more details, see Hanhart 1984; Weeks, Gathercole & Stuckenbruck 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Tobit was a popular source for moral as well as theological instruction in early Christianity. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of how and to what ends early Christians read and used Tobit as a religious text (whether canonical or not). The focus of the article will be on the earliest period of Christianity, from the 2nd century up to the 5th century. A critical synthesis of how early Christians used and read Tobit has not yet been undertaken. Gamberoni, in his *Die Auslegung des Buches Tobias. In der griechisch-lateinischen Kirche der Antike und der Christenheit des Westens bis um 1600* (1966), does consider early Christian uses of Tobit, but it covers a wide chronological range and focuses mainly on the West (relevant for this study is his analysis of Jerome). Studies on Christian readings of Tobit, as with Gamberoni, focus mostly on Jerome and Bede. Jerome (347–420 CE) is popular for analysis because he is an important witness for the canonical history of Tobit, whilst Bede (672–735 CE) is important because he provides a lengthy and unique allegorical interpretation of Tobit (although this analysis will exclude Bede's later interpretation). Whilst many scholars have highlighted parallels and possible allusions to Tobit in the New Testament, two studies focus exclusively on the possible links between Tobit and texts in the New Testament. Skemp (2005:43–70) examines, generally, allusions to Tobit, especially in the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:18–21, and the role of Tobit in the cultural intertexture of the New Testament, especially with regard to angels, demons, healings and so on. Docherty (2013:81–94) looks at the reception of Tobit in early Christianity. Her study, however, focuses mainly on Luke–Acts, with a mere one-and-a-half page discussion (Docherty 2013:93–94) of Tobit beyond Luke–Acts in early Christianity. Finally, Downs (2016:103–272) also gives attention to the use of Tobit in early Christianity, but focuses only on its influence on Christian ideas of almsgiving. I will not focus on the possible relationship between the New Testament and Tobit in this article, because much has already been said about the topic, and at best, one can only speak of New Testament allusions to Tobit.

1. For the ease of reading, when referring to verses in Tobit, I will use the verse divisions from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, which is based on the text from Codex Sinaiticus.

In this article, I will examine the early Christian reception of Tobit in more detail. The purpose is not to exhaustively list and discuss every reference to Tobit in early Christian literature, but to show the main interpretive trends in early Christianity with regards to Tobit.<sup>2</sup> In order to limit the material under examination, I will only focus on Greek and Latin Christian interpretations from the 2nd to the 5th century CE. How did early Christians read Tobit and for what purposes? Although there is much material available on the canonisation of Tobit, I will still provide an overview of how and why Tobit ended up in the Christian Bible, whether canonical or apocryphal. I will then focus on how the figure of Tobit and his son, Tobias, functioned as a moral *exemplum* in early Christianity, especially related to almsgiving and financial management, burials and the care of the dead, marriage and parenthood, prayer, the suffering and endurance of Tobit, and the role of Tobit in the Christian understanding of angels.

## The canonicity of Tobit

It is traditionally thought that by the 2nd century CE, Tobit had been rejected from the Jewish canon, whilst many Christian authors continued to affirm its canonical status because of its inclusion in the Septuagint. This is not wholly incorrect, but we should be mindful of the fact that during these early centuries, both Jews and Christians were only beginning to come to grips with the notion of canon. There is also a development, albeit opaque at times, from what was initially considered sacred 'Scripture' to the later formal notion of a delimited 'canon' (Brakke 1994:395–419; Kruger 2012:35–37). Tobit was considered by some as sacred Scripture at an early point of its history, because it is included in the Septuagint. The Tobit fragments amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls also suggest that Tobit had some value as a religious text for those Jewish groups associated with the texts, albeit not canon in the strict sense of the word. On the other hand, because many of the Hebrew or Aramaic originals are lost, it might suggest that some Jewish religious groups were not interested in preserving the text (Littman 2008:xix). However, as Fitzmyer (2003:9–15) has shown, Tobit has a rich medieval rabbinic manuscript tradition (albeit different from ancient Aramaic and Hebrew versions), which suggests that it was never fully discarded in Judaism.

In the Christian context, Tobit is included in the canon lists of Codex Claromontanus (first half of the 4th century), the Mommsen Catalogue (before 365 CE), the *Breviarum Hipponense* (October 393 CE, from the Council of Hippo) and the *Epistula* 6.7 (405 CE) of Pope Innocent I (378–417 CE) (see Gallagher & Meade 2017 for the texts of the various lists and their translations). Tobit is absent from several Syriac canon lists, with the exception of the later Syriac Apostolic canons MS. DS 31 (7th to 8th century CE) and Lagarde MS

2. There is a useful website that provides a list of Patristic commentaries on the Book of Tobit (Patristic Bible Commentary n.d.). The online *Biblia Patristica* (1975–1982) database is also very useful when searching for individual comments on each verse of Tobit. In this article, when directly quoting an early Christian source, I will provide an English translation, along with the original Greek or Latin text (with its edition). When simply referring to early Christian works, without direct quotations, I will only cite the relevant English translation of the work, or where there is no translation, the critical edition of the text, if any.

(8th to 9th century CE) (Gallagher & Meade 2017:140–141, 236), although it is present in the Peshitta, as well as in the Sahidic Coptic, Ge'ez (Ethiopic), and Armenian versions of the Bible. We already know that Tobit appears in Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (in different versions and also orders). It also appears in Codices Alexandrinus (Greek; 5th century CE), Venetus (c. 10th century CE) and Amiatinus (Latin Vulgate; 8th century CE); Tobit (in Greek) is also present in two fragmentary papyri, 990 and 910, of the 3rd and 6th centuries, respectively (Gallagher & Meade 2017:283).

Some of the earliest Christian uses of Tobit as Scripture are found in Polycarp's *Epistula ad Philippenses* 10.2 and 2 Clement 16.4 (early 2nd century), where Tobit 12:8–9 is quoted to support almsgiving. Origen (184–253 CE; *Epistula ad Africanum* 19; eds. Harl & De Lange 1983) writes:

[T]obias (so too Judith), we should take note, the Jews do not use. They are not even found in the Hebrew Apocrypha, as I learned from the Jews themselves ... the Churches use Tobias ... [Ἄλλ' ἐπεὶ χρῶνται τῷ Τωβία αἱ Ἐκκλησίαι]. (pp. 562–563)<sup>3</sup>

In *De oratione* 14.4 (ed. Koetschau 1899:331), Origen lists Tobit as one of the books not in the Jewish Testament or 'encovenanted' (μὴ ἐνδιαθηκῶ) by the Jews (see also Gallagher & Meade 2017:86). Augustine (354–430 CE), in *De doctrina Christiana* 2.27 (ed. Green 1996:68–69), listed Tobit as one of the canonical books of the Old Testament, alongside Job, Esther, Judith, 1–2 Maccabees and Ezra–Nehemiah. Athanasius (296–373 CE), however, stated in his famous *Epistula festalis* 39.20 (Gallagher & Meade 2017:125; ed. Joannou 1963:2:75) that Tobit, along with some other apocryphal works (Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach and Judith, along with Esther, in fact), are not canonical. However, Tobit, along with other early 2nd-century Christian works like the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, have been appointed by the elders of the church to be read by newcomers to the church (see also Brakke 2010:61). Similarly, Hilary of Poitiers (315–368 CE) notes that 'to some it seems good to add Tobit and Judith' (*quibusdam autem uisum est, additis Tobia et Iudith*) to the canon (*Instructio Psalmorum* 15; in Gallagher & Meade 2017:195). Hilary does not make a specific pronouncement on the canonicity of Tobit or Judith. Gregory of Nazianzus's (329–390 CE) canon list, in his *Carmina theologica* 1.1.12 (Gallagher & Meade 2017:142), also omits Tobit, although he does allude to sections of the book in some of his works.

One of the reasons for Tobit's continued popularity in the church was because Jerome included it in his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate. Before this, Tobit was already available in a Latin translation in the *Vetus Latina*. The Vulgate is significant because it was the first Christian translation of the Old Testament that used a Hebrew (and Aramaic) Vorlage (which he called the *Hebraica veritas*,

or 'Hebrew truth'). By doing this, Jerome directly challenged the traditional primacy of the Septuagint in the church. Because of this unpopular move, Jerome had to justify his translations of the books of the Bible in various prefaces. Most importantly, in his preface to Samuel and Kings, known as the *Prologus galeatus* (the 'helmeted preface'), Jerome advocated the Hebrew canon as the preference for the Christian Old Testament canon. At the same time, books like Tobit and others were designated as apocrypha. Jerome writes in *Prologus galeatus* 52–57 (early 390s CE):

This prologue of the Scriptures can function as a helmeted preface for all the books, which we are converting from Hebrew to Latin, so that we are able to know that whatever is outside of these should be removed into the apocrypha. Therefore, Wisdom, which commonly is inscribed 'of Solomon' and the book of Jesus son of Sirach, and Judith, and Tobit, and the Shepherd are not in the canon. I have found the first book of Maccabees in Hebrew, the second is Greek, which can be demonstrated from the style itself. (translation [trans.] in Gallagher & Meade 2017:202)

*Hic prologus scripturarum quasi galeatum principium omnibus libris, quos de hebreo vertimus in latinum, convenire potest, ut scire valeamus, quicquid extra hos est, inter Apocrypha seponendum. Igitur Sapientia, quae vulgo Salomonis inscribitur, et Iesu filii Sirach liber et Iudith et Tobias et Pastor non sunt in canone. Macchabeorum primum librum hebraicum repperi, secundus graecus est, quod et ex ipsa φρασιν [sic] probari potest.*

Jerome therefore explicitly notes that Tobit is not canonical (*non sunt in canone*), although in a different preface he does say that these books are useful for the purpose of edification (but not for the formation of doctrine). This sounds similar to what Athanasius said in his *Epistula festalis* 39.20, and also to what Rufinus (340–410 CE) said in his *Commentarius in symbolum Apostolorum* 36:

It should also be known that there are other books that were called by our predecessors not 'canonical' but 'ecclesiastical'. Thus, there is Wisdom, which is called 'of Solomon', and another Wisdom, which is called 'of the son of Sirach'. This latter is known by the general title 'Ecclesiasticus' amongst Latin-speaking people, the description pointing not to the author of the book but to the character of the writing. The Book of Tobit belongs to the same class, as do Judith and the books of the Maccabees. (trans. in Gallagher & Meade 2017:219)

*Sciendum tamen est quod et alii libri sunt, qui non canonici sed ecclesiastici a maioribus appellati sunt, ut est: Sapientia, quae dicitur Solomonis, et alia Sapientia, quae dicitur filii Sirach: qui liber apud Latinos hoc ipso generali uocabulo Ecclesiasticus appellatur, quo uocabulo non auctor libelli, sed scripturae qualitas cognominata est. Eiusdem ordinis est libellus Tobiae et Iudith, et Machabeorum libri.*

Here, again, we find the view that Tobit should not be considered canonical, but it is still useful for other 'ecclesiastical' purposes and should not be discarded.

<sup>3</sup>Christian authors, at times, use different names for the Book of Tobit and the characters of Tobit and Tobias. Jerome, for instance, calls the father and son 'Tobias' (Littman 2008:54–55). Bede later attributed different allegorical significance to the different names in the book.

So, why did Jerome translate Tobit as part of his Vulgate project? The preface to Tobit reads thus:

Jerome to Chromatius and Heliodorus, bishops, greetings in the Lord. I do not cease to marvel at the urgency of your demand. For you demand that I bring into Latin style a book composed in Chaldean speech, namely, the book of Tobit, which the Hebrews, excising [it] from the catalogue of divine Scriptures, transfer to those that they term *agiografia*. I have satisfied your desire, but not with my own enthusiasm. For Hebrew studies accuse us and charge us with transferring them for Latin ears contrary to their own canon. But considering it better to displease the opinion of Pharisees and to be subject to the commands of bishops, I have done as well as I can, and because the language of the Chaldeans is close to Hebrew speech, finding a speaker expert in both languages, I set aside the labor of a single day and whatever he expressed to me in Hebrew words, these things I related in Latin speech to the scribe that I had summoned. I will consider your prayers the wages for this work, when I will have learned that I have completed in a manner pleasing to you what you saw fit to command. (trans. in Gallagher 2015:374–375)

Gallagher (2015:374) provides three possible reasons for why Jerome translated Tobit (and Judith) for the Vulgate. In the first case, he does view the books as authentic Israelite literature, despite them being written in 'Chaldean' (Aramaic). This means that Jerome felt that Tobit and Judith (surprisingly) convey accurate historical events about ancient Israel. He did not feel the same about 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon or Sirach, which were composed too late (i.e. after the end of 'biblical' history) to have authority, despite professing to have Hebrew copies of 1 Maccabees and Sirach. Second, as seen above, Jerome classified both Tobit and Judith as *agiografia*. By using this word, Jerome might be suggesting that these books have special didactic value. In the *Prologus galeatus*, Jerome lists Tobit under the apocrypha. However, the *Prologus galeatus* was written earlier than the prefaces to Tobit and Judith, perhaps in the early 390s. However, if we follow Gallagher's (2015:370–372) argument, which also relies on the work of Skemp (2000:16–17, 2002:5–35) and Gamberoni (1969:74), on the later dating of the Vulgate Tobit around 405 CE, then the word *agiografia* becomes more significant. On the one hand, *agiografia* is used by Jerome to refer to the Writings (*Ketuvim*) of the Hebrew Bible. However, this use cannot be the case here. Gallagher (2015:371) rather argues, convincingly, that Jerome uses *agiografia* here to illustrate the value of Tobit for

*Cromatio et Heliodoro episcopis Hieronymus in Domino salutem. Mirari non desino exactionis vestrae instantiam. Exigitis enim, ut librum chaldeo sermone conscriptum ad latinum stilum traham, librum utique Tobiae, quem Hebraei de catalogo divinarum Scripturarum secantes, his quae Agiografia memorant manciparunt. Feci satis desiderio vestro, non tamen meo studio. Arguunt enim nos Hebraeorum studia et inputant nobis, contra suum canonem latinis auribus ista transferre. Sed melius esse iudicans Pharisaeorum displicere iudicio et episcoporum iussionibus deservire, institui ut potui, et quia vicina est Chaldeorum lingua sermoni hebraico, utriusque linguae peritissimum loquacem reperiens, unius diei laborem arripui et quicquid ille mihi hebraicis verbis expressit, haec ego accito notario, sermonibus latinis exposui. Orationibus vestris mercedem huius operis compensabo, cum gratum vobis didicero me quod iubere estis dignati complere.*

the edification of the church and perhaps to clarify what he said earlier in the *Prologus galeatus*. He might be shielding Tobit and Judith from negative connotations (such as heretical connotations) related to the term *apocrifa*. Although Jerome was not overly excited about translating Tobit into Latin (he dedicated only one day to translating it, although he has the short version of the text), he still included it in the Vulgate and dedicated it the bishops Chromatius and Heliodorus. Third, Jerome probably felt that Tobit and Judith did share, in some way, in the tradition of the *Hebraica veritas*, and he wanted a translation of these works from a Chaldean Vorlage rather than a Greek Vorlage, as used by the *Vetus Latina*.

Thus, the idea that Tobit, as one of the apocryphal books of the Septuagint, was supposed to be 'hidden' or discouraged to use in early Christianity does not ring true. It was only at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) that the Book of Tobit and its apocryphal companions were considered deuterocanonical books by the Roman Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church also considers Tobit to be canonical. The current Protestant canon lists Tobit as part of the apocrypha. During the nascent centuries of Christianity, we might say that the canonicity of Tobit was disputed, but the majority of church fathers would have agreed that Tobit remained useful for edification and for teaching virtue. We will now turn to the ways in which early Christian writers used Tobit in their teaching.

## The Book of Tobit in early Christianity

It comes as no surprise that Tobit was a popular text in early Christian thought. Some texts in Tobit were quoted quite often by many early Christian writers. For instance, the negative version of the golden rule in Tobit 4:15, 'And what you hate, do not to anyone' (NRSV), was quite popular in early Christian discourse. The text is very similar to *Didache* 1.2 (ed. Ehrman 2003:417): 'And whatever you do not want to happen to you, do not do to another' (πάντα δὲ ὅσα ἐὰν θελήσῃς μὴ γίνεσθαι σοι, καὶ σὺ ἄλλῳ μὴ ποίει). A few centuries later, John Chrysostom (349–407 CE), in *De statu* 13.7, writes:

'Do not to another what you hate'. Ὁ μισεῖς, ἄλλῳ μὴ ποιήσης. By the latter precept, he would induce to a departure from iniquity; by the former, to the exercise of virtue. 'You must not do to another', he says, 'what you hate'. Do you hate to be insulted? Do not insult another. Do you hate to be envied? Envy not another. Do you hate to be deceived? Do not deceive another. And, in a word, in all things, if we hold fast these two precepts, we shall not need any other instruction. (trans. Stephens 1889 [slightly modified])

A simple search in the *Biblia Patristica* shows that numerous other Christian authors, including Pseudo-Clement of Rome,

Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Didymus of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose, Ambrosiaster and Gregory of Nazianzus, refer multiple times to this text in Tobit 4:15. And although this study focuses on Greek and Latin Christian authors from the 2nd to the 5th century, Tobit was also known to Syriac Christian authors of late antiquity, such as Ephrem of Nisibis (306–373 CE) and the 4th-century Syriac *Liber graduum*. The *Liber graduum* (*Memrā* 7.1, 30.26; trans. Kitchen & Parmentier 2004:65, 360) refers to Tobit 4:15 twice, whilst Philoxenus of Mabbug (440–523 CE) refers to it three times in his *Memrē* [discourses] to Syrian monks (see *Memrā* 9.56, 9.68, 12.62; trans. Kitchen 2013:259, 269, 473).

Sometimes, Christians gave attention to aspects of the book that might escape the attention of the modern reader. For instance, we read that a dog accompanied Tobias and Raphael on their journey. The dog does not really feature in the story – it is mentioned when they depart (Tb 6:2) and when they return (Tb 11:4). Jacobs (2014:221–246) thoroughly discusses the significance of the dog for the immediate cultural-historical context of Tobit, whilst Macatangay (2019:128) argues that the dog is a ‘concealed indication of the enduring aliveness of God’s life-giving and providential intentions for his people’. Early Christian authors also saw significance in the figure of the dog. Ambrose (c. 340–397 CE), in his *Hexameron* 6.4.17 (trans. Savage 1961:236–237), saw the dog as a pedagogical device that served to remind Tobias to be grateful to God and his companion. The dog is a positive literary device, an example (*exemplum*) that Tobias should actually emulate.

Early Christian authors quite often used biblical figures as moral *exempla* to demonstrate and teach virtue to their congregations (Leemans & Dupont 2019:419–423). Early Christian writers also noticed the exemplary value of the characters in the Book of Tobit – even the dog, as we have just seen. The anonymous 4th-century Christian writer known as Ambrosiaster writes the following about Tobit (*Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 119.1 [*De Tobia*]):

The Lord God’s providence towards us is so great that, not wanting us to do wrong, he gave us the law and examples of good deeds, in that, following these examples, a person may lead a modest and peaceful life with the fear of God. ... Thus God’s holy servant Tobias was given, after the law, as an example, so that we may know how the things which we have read are done, and so that, if temptations come, we may not withdraw from the fear of God, and that we may not hope for assistance from anything else than from him. ... For examples are praised in their imitators; this can also happen to us, if we live in such a manner that it becomes worth it for us to also have imitators. (*Author’s translation*<sup>4</sup>).

*Tanta providentia est domini dei circa nos, ut errare nos nolens et legem et exempla bonorum operum daret, quibus modesta et tranquilla agi possit uita cum dei timore. ... Dei ergo famulus sanctus Tobias post legem exemplum nobis datus est, ut quae legimus quo modo fiant sciamus et, si temptationes aduenerint, a dei timore non recedamus neque auxilium aliunde quam ab eo speremus. ... in imitatoribus enim exempla laudantur, quod nobis quoque poterit prouenire, si sic uixerimus, ut dignum sit et nos imitatores habere.* (ed. Souter 1908:358–359, 361)

Here, Ambrosiaster admonishes Christians to follow the example of Tobit in their daily behaviour. This is a good example of how Tobit was considered to be a book useful for teaching and edification. However, of what were Tobit and Tobias examples? I will now consider how Tobit and Tobias featured as moral examples specifically related to almsgiving and financial management, burials, marriage, parent–child relationships and prayer, as well as how Tobit was used to make sense of theological issues like suffering and angels.

## Tobit as an *exemplum* for almsgiving and financial management

Tobit was a very important source for early Christian teachings about almsgiving, as Downs (2016:57–82) has shown. Tobit 4:9–11 and 12:8–9 were particularly central in this regard. In Codex Sinaiticus (long version), the verses read (Littman 2008):

Tobit 4:10–11: For you are storing up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity, because almsgiving protects from death and does not allow you to go into darkness. Before the Most High almsgiving is a good gift for all those who give it. (p. 13)

θέαμα ἀγαθὸν θησαυρίζεις σεαυτῷ εἰς ἡμέραν ἀνάγκης· διότι ἐλεημοσύνη ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται καὶ οὐκ ἔῃ εἰς τὸ σκότος ἀπελθεῖν· δῶρον ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶν ἐλεημοσύνη πᾶσι τοῖς ποιούσιν αὐτὴν ἐναντίων τοῦ ὑψίστου. (p. 12)

Tobit 12:8–9 (long version): Prayer with truth and almsgiving with justice is better than wealth with injustice. To give alms is better than to store up a treasure of gold. Almsgiving delivers (one) from death, and it purifies all sin. Those who give alms will be satisfied with life. (p. 35)

ἀγαθὸν προσευχὴ μετὰ ἀληθείας καὶ ἐλεημοσύνη μετὰ δικαιοσύνης μᾶλλον ἢ πλοῦτος· ἐλεημοσύνη ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται, καὶ αὐτὴ ἀποκαθαίρει πᾶσαν ἁμαρτίαν· οἱ ποιῶντες ἐλεημοσύνην χορτασθήσονται ζωῆς. (p. 34)

In the short version, Tobit 12:8–9 reads slightly different (Downs 2016):

Prayer with fasting and merciful action and righteousness is good. A little with righteousness is better than much with unrighteousness. It is better to practice the merciful act of almsgiving than to store up gold. For merciful action delivers from death, and it will cleanse every sin. Those who practice merciful action and righteousness will be filled with life, but those who sin are enemies of their own life. (p. 67)

ἀγαθὸν προσευχὴ μετὰ νηστείας καὶ ἐλεημοσύνης καὶ δικαιοσύνης· ἀγαθὸν τὸ ὀλίγον μετὰ δικαιοσύνης ἢ πολλὸ μετὰ ἀδικίας· καλὸν ποιῆσαι ἐλεημοσύνην ἢ θησαυρίσαι χρυσίον· ἐλεημοσύνη γὰρ ἐκ θανάτου ῥύεται, καὶ αὐτὴ ἀποκαθαρεῖ πᾶσαν ἁμαρτίαν· οἱ ποιῶντες ἐλεημοσύνας καὶ δικαιοσύνας πλησθήσονται ζωῆς. (p. 67)

Littman and Downs use different translations for the word ἐλεημοσύνη. Littman renders the term as ‘almsgiving’ whilst Downs prefers ‘merciful action’. Downs (2016:59–60) is probably more accurate in his translation because he notes that ἐλεημοσύνη, in Tobit, denotes more than just the giving of alms, but refers to merciful deeds more generally. In the short version, ‘prayer with fasting’ [προσευχὴ μετὰ νηστείας] replaces the long version’s ‘prayer with truth’ [προσευχὴ μετὰ ἀληθείας], which is important for the early Christian context.

<sup>4</sup>These *Quaestiones* were traditionally attributed to Pseudo-Augustine, but today it is accepted that they are written by the figure known as Ambrosiaster (see also Patristic Bible Commentary n.d.).

In 2 Clement 16.4, the author writes (ed. Ehrman 2003; see also Tuckett 2012:129–144):

Giving to charity, therefore, is good as a repentance from sin [*Or: is good; so too is repentance from sin*]. Fasting is better than prayer, but giving to charity is better than both (καλὸν οὖν ἐλεημοσύνη ὡς μετάνοια ἁμαρτίας· κρείσσων νηστεία προσευχῆς, ἐλεημοσύνη δὲ ἄμφοτέρων). (pp. 190–191)

In 2 Clement 16.4, the author quotes Tobit 12:8 from the short version, but goes so far as to say that ἐλεημοσύνη is better than both prayer and fasting. This might be because 2 Clement links ἐλεημοσύνη directly with repentance (depending on how one translates the verse from 2 Clement). Similarly, we read in Polycarp's *Epistula ad Philippenses* 10.2: 'When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because giving to charity frees a person from death' (*cum potestis benefacere, nolite differre, quia eleemosyna de morte liberat*) (ed. Ehrman 2003:346–347). As early as 2 Clement and Polycarp's letter, from the 2nd century CE, we already find that Tobit starts being used as a text to promote what is called redemptive or atoning almsgiving, that is, almsgiving as an atonement for sins and as a remedy for greed (Downs 2016:225, 231).

The use of Tobit to support the notion of redemptive almsgiving continued into later centuries. Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258 CE) clarifies the meaning of Tobit 12:9, saying that it cannot refer to physical death, which Christ has conquered, but from the death which results from sin (*Epistula* 55.22; trans. Bernard Donna 2010:147). Cyprian actually refers to this text in Tobit in the context of the dispute about the *lapsi* (these were 'lapsed' Christians who, during the persecution, denounced Christ and sacrificed to the Roman gods). Cyprian was of the opinion that the *lapsi* could be readmitted to the church, but only after undergoing public penance (Dunn 2010:161). For Cyprian, based on Tobit 12:9, almsgiving was an important redemptive action for the *lapsi* to be readmitted into the church. Even up to the 5th century, Tobit was used as an *exemplum* in favour of admitting the *lapsi* into the church. The 5th-century monk Bacharius also refers to the example of Tobit in his *De reparatione lapsi ad Januariam* 11 (ed. Migne 1845:20:1047A), when he petitions an abbot for leniency on behalf of an incontinent monk.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Leo the Great (390–461 CE) (in *Sermones* 10.3; trans. Freeland & Conway 1996:45) uses the example of Tobit to show that almsgiving will result in God treating a person with leniency and mercy. Quite interestingly, Ambrose, in *Epistula* 63.16 (trans. Beyenka 1954:327), develops the reading in Tobit 12:8–9 to say that not only almsgiving but also fasting had redemptive power.

Whilst it is clear that Tobit was used to support the practice of almsgiving, especially emphasising the atoning or redemptive nature of almsgiving, early Christian discourse also moved beyond this point with regard to the examples of Tobit and Tobias. We also see that Tobit, especially, becomes a model for a good financial manager more

generally. This is based on Tobit's (and Tobias's) actions with regard to financial and labour matters more generally. Ambrose's treatise *De Tobia* (ed. Miles Zucker 1933), for instance, focuses on the fact that Tobit lends money to Gabael without interest (see Tb 1:14) and uses Tobit as an example against the practice of usury (see also Ambrose, *Epistula* 19.2; trans. Beyenka 1954:175). This treatise, in fact, says very little about the Book of Tobit itself and focuses mainly on the problem of usury. Both Ambrose and Augustine also comment on the fact that Tobit and Tobias pay Azariah (Raphael) half of their gains as wages (see Allen & Morgan 2009:146; Tb 12.1–5). Ambrose writes:

But not content merely with these limits of virtue, holy Tobias also knew that a reward must be paid to the hired servant. He offered him even a half, and instead of a worthy hired servant he found an angel! And whence do you know that you may not defraud some just man of his hire – this is worse, if he be infirm, for 'woe to him that shall scandalize one of these little ones'. How do you know whether there be an angel in him? For we ought not to doubt that there can be an angel in the hired servant, because Christ can be, who is accustomed to be in the least. Give the hired servant his reward therefore and do not defraud him of the price of his labour, because you too are a hired servant of Christ, and He has sent you to His vineyard, and a heavenly reward is laid up for you. Do not therefore injure the servant working in truth nor the hired servant giving his life, do not despise the needy man who spends his life at his labour and maintains it by his hire. For this is to kill a man, to deny him the succour required for his life. You too are a hired servant on this earth; give his reward to the hired servant, that you too may be able to say to the Lord when you pray: 'Give a reward to them that uphold thee. (ed. Miles Zucker 1933:102–103)

*Sed non his tantum uirtutum finibus contentus Tobias mercenario quoque sciuit soluendam esse mercedem. dimidium usque optulit meritoque pro mercenario inuenit angelum. et tu unde scis, ne forte iustum aliquem mercede defraudes, peius, si infirmum – uae enim illi qui scandalizauerit unum de pusillis istis! – qui scis an in eo angelus sit? neque enim dubitare debemus quod in mercenario possit A esse angelus, cum esse possit Christus, qui in minimo quoque esse consuevit. redde ergo mercenario mercedem suam nec eum laboris sui mercede defrudes, quia et tu mercenarius Christi es et te conduxit ad uineam suam et tibi merces reposita caelestis est. non ergo laedas seruum operantem in ueritate neque mercenarium dantem animam suam, non despicias inopem, qui uitam suam labore exercet suo et mercede sustentat. hoc enim interficere hominem, uitae suae ei debita subsidia denegare. et tu mercenarius es in hac terra: da mercedem mercenario, ut et tu possis domino dicere, cum precaris: da mercedem sustentantibus te. (De Tobia 24.91–92)*

Ambrose warns that a hired servant could be an angel in disguise. This type of rhetoric functions well to promulgate economic justice between labourers and those who hire them. Furthermore, he reminds his audience that all Christians are also labourers of Christ. Tobit is therefore sketched as an exemplary financial manager, because he distributed his wealth justly and with virtue, which led to him making profit.

5. See also Online Patristic Bible Commentary (n.d.).

## Tobit and the care of the dead

The first two chapters of the Book of Tobit focus on the goodwill of Tobit when it comes to burying his dead kin. In Chapter 2, especially, we see that Tobit leaves his meal and rushes to bury a dead countryman who was lying in the market. The care of the dead was a very contentious matter in early Christian religious practice. Rebillard (2009:100–103) argues that Tobit functions as the model par excellence of the duty to bury the dead (generally), although many Christian authors do not actually explicitly tell their audiences to follow Tobit's example. This serves to support Rebillard's overarching argument that the burial of the dead did not become a discernible duty of the church in late antiquity and that Christians did not separate themselves from their non-Christian counterparts when it came to burying the dead.

What do the early Christian sources say about Tobit's 'charitable' grave digging? In the 3rd-century biographer of Cyprian, Pontius the Deacon's *Vita Cypriani* 8 (trans. Wallis 1886), we read that Cyprian actually surpassed Tobit, because he did not only act charitably towards Christians, but to all people – Tobit only buried those of his kin, but Cyprian aided all. Pontius mentions burial specifically, but it is a rather terse reference. He simply compares the acts of Cyprian during the plague with those of Tobit. Ambrosiaster (*Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 119.3–5 [*De Tobia*]; ed. Souter 1908:359–360) similarly refers to Tobit's charitable burial practices, but focuses on the risks he took for those in need, rather than on the act of burial itself. Ambrose (*De Tobia* 1.3–4; ed. Miles Zucker 1933:25) also simply mentions Tobit's devotion in the burial of the dead, but as Rebillard (2009:101) notes, he too does not tell his audience to follow Tobit's example. The issue of burial is rarely discussed in *De Tobia*. In this sense, Tobit's acts of burial are grouped within the greater virtue that is his charity and his devotion to his kin (see also, for instance, Bachiarus, *De reparatione lapsi ad Ianuariam* 11; ed. Migne 1845:20:1047A). It seems that the fact that Tobit abandoned his meal in order to go and help others was more exemplary than simply burying the dead. For instance, Ambrose states:

Tobit also very clearly expressed the form of what is honourable. He would interrupt his dinner to go and bury the dead, and invite the needy to share the food of his own table, though he was poor himself. (ed. Davidson 2001:412–413)

*Tobias quoque formam expressit honestatis evidentius, cum relicto convivio mortuos sepeliret et ad cibos pauperis mensae invitaret inopes. (De officiis 3.16.96)*

Tobit's act of burying the dead seems to be part of what Downs (2016:59–60) calls Tobit's 'merciful action' (ἐλεημοσύνη) (see also Maximus of Turin, *Sermones* 41.2; in Rebillard 2009:101–102).

Although burial was not a requirement for salvation or resurrection, Augustine (*De civitate Dei* 1.13) still used Tobit as an example to show that the burial of the dead should not be neglected:

Nevertheless, that is no reason for treating with contempt and carting away the bodies of the dead, particularly those of just and believing men, which the Holy Spirit has used as instruments and vessels for the performance of all good works. ... we have it by the angel's testimony that Tobias earned God's favour for burying the dead. (trans. Zema & Walsh 1950:40)

*Nec ideo tamen contemnenda et abicienda sunt corpora defunctorum maximeque iustorum atque fidelium, quibus tamquam organis et uasis ad omnia bona opera sancta usus est Spiritus.... Tobis sepeliendo mortuos Deum promeruisse teste angelo commendatur. (eds. Dombart & Kalb 1955:14–15)*

Augustine still believed that providing a burial to the dead remains the duty of a Christian (Rebillard 2009:102). Augustine makes a similar point in his *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 5:

Whence also the funerals of the just men of old were with dutiful piety cared for, and their obsequies celebrated, and sepulture provided: and themselves whilst living did touching burial or even translation of their bodies give charge to their sons. Tobias also, to have by burying of the dead obtained favour with God, is by witness of an Angel commended. (trans. Browne 1887)

*unde et antiquorum iustorum funera officiosa pietate curata sunt et exequiae celebratae et sepultura prouisa, ipsique, cum uiuerent, de sepeliendis uel etiam transferendis suis corporibus filiis mandauerunt. et Tobis sepeliendo mortuos deum promeruisse teste angelo commendatur. (ed. Zycha 1900: 627–628)*

Thus, in the case of burying the dead, Tobit is indeed cited as an example by some to emphasise the duty of burying the dead, but in most cases, it is his acts of burial within his greater character of ἐλεημοσύνη that receive more attention. Tobit is admired for burying the dead, but we do not find that he is used as an example to imitate in his acts of burial.

## Tobit and marriage and parenthood

Marriage, too, was a contentious matter in early Christianity. In the first five centuries of the church, marriage was considered to be inferior to the practice of virginity and sexual abstinence. This, of course, does not mean that early Christians did not have a detailed and complex marital ethic, as Michel Foucault has demonstrated in the posthumously published fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 2018; see also De Wet 2020:1–38; Hunter 2007). Marriage is also an important motif in Tobit, especially the fact that Tobit admonishes Tobias to marry within his own tribe (e.g. Tb 4:12). Cyprian, in *Ad Quirinum* 3.62 (trans. Wallis 1886), uses Tobit 4:12 as a proof-text to admonish Christians to only marry within the faith.

More interesting, perhaps, is a reference in an anonymous incomplete commentary on Matthew from the 5th century on the prayer of Tobias after marrying Sarah and before expelling Asmodeus (Tb 8:1–9). The *Opus imperfectum in Matthaëum* (trans. Oden & Kellerman 2010) is a series of homilies, written originally in Latin, that was wrongly attributed to John Chrysostom. It is 'incomplete' because it

does not cover the entire book of Matthew. Like many other early Christian authors, this anonymous author also believes that marriage is not the ideal state for men and women, and recommends celibacy in the strongest of terms. He writes (trans. Oden & Kellerman 2010):

For if marriage itself pleased God, a glorious crown would never have been promised to those who refrain from it, nor would the celibate be loved by God when they hate marriage. It is not the one who flees from the good who is rewarded but rather the one who flees from evil. But do you wish to know how marriage is permitted ... ? But we have not dared to say this to the incontinent, in whose body their soul does nothing, but their blood and that most foul heat, which arises from that maddened fire, hold total sway over them. Finally, the angel recommends to Tobit at his marriage, when he will come to that human custom, to first rise and pray and say: 'Lord, you know that I did not take a wife for passion's sake but in order to beget children' [Tb 8:7]. If he had prayed in any other way, his prayer would not have pleased God. You see, therefore, how he excuses that most foul work of the flesh for the sake of begetting children. But now that the world has increased, the necessity for procreation has been abolished. Now it is not the multitude of people but the love of the saints that delights him. (p. 25)<sup>6</sup>

The author of this treatise goes so far as to call sexual intercourse, explicitly, sinful, although sex within marriage was a concession of God in order to multiply the human race. The main problem of marriage and sex, to the author of this treatise, is that of lust. This is a common trend in early Christian discourse. The author then specifically quotes Tobit 8:7 and uses Tobias to show that marriage and sexual intercourse without lust was permitted for the sake of procreation. The act of prayer and the absence of lust serve as prerequisites for holy conception. However, in the author's time, Tobias's example too is outdated, because the earth was already populated and procreation was no longer necessary. So here, Tobias serves as an example for the incontinent, not for the ideal celibate believers.

In the same homily, the author of this treatise uses the example of Tobias, furthermore, to admonish Christian husbands and wives to pray before engaging in sexual intercourse (trans. Oden & Kellerman 2010):

Just as prayer ought to precede whenever a husband and wife are about to lie together, as the angel Raphael commanded Tobit [*sic* – Tobias], so that what is about to be conceived might be conceived in holiness, so when the only begotten God was about to enter the virgin, the Holy Spirit preceded, so that Christ could be born in holiness according to the body, as the Divinity entered in place of the seed. (p. 28)

Because sexual intercourse is essentially sinful, prayer is required to make it acceptable as a concession before God. The author places Tobias's prayer and sexual intercourse with Sarah in parallel with the conception of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Just as Tobias prayed

before intercourse with Sarah (with the danger of the demon still lurking) to sanctify their union, so too did the Holy Spirit first visit Mary before God entered her. This was an important aspect of the author's predominantly Arian theological disposition.

Thus, Tobias's cautious and ritualised approach to Sarah's demon-infested nuptial chamber served as a useful exemplary precursor for early Christians who subscribed to a sinful view of sexual intercourse. Ambrose (*Hexameron* 6.4.17; trans. Savage 1961:237) says that the demon is driven out by the gratitude of Tobias towards the angel. By focusing on Tobias's prayer, the absence of lust and his gratitude, it might be that some early Christians avoided the magical apotropaic ritual used to drive out the demon. The 3rd-century treatise *De centesima, sexagesima, tricesima* 45 (ed. Reitzenstein 1914:87), by a certain Pseudo-Cyprian, does refer to the fish in the exorcism, but this author understands the magical fish typologically in reference to Christ.

Finally, Ambrose also saw a useful *exemplum* in the figure of Raguel:

Or think of Raguel in particular. *Raguel praecipue, qui contemplatione honestatis, cum rogaretur ut filiam suam in coniugium daret, vitia quoque filiae non tacebat, ne circumvenire petitorum videretur tacendo. Itaque cum Tobias filius Tobis posceret ut sibi eam daret puellam, respondit lege quidem ipsi eam deberi tamquam propinquo, sed dedisse se eam iam sex viris et omnes eos esse mortuos. Iustus itaque vir plus alienis timebat et malebat innuptam sibi manere filiam quam propter nuptias eius extraneos periclitari.* (*De officiis* 3.16.96)

He had such a determination to do the honourable thing that when he was asked for his daughter's hand in marriage, he would not even keep quiet about her faults, in case such silence should be construed as an attempt to mislead the girl's suitor. So, when Tobias the son of Tobit requested if he could have the girl, Raguel replied that as a blood-relative he was certainly entitled to her according to the letter of the law, but he had given her to six husbands already, and every one of them had died. And so this just man feared more for other people than he did for himself. He would rather see his daughter remain unmarried than have other men's lives put in danger by marrying her. (ed. Davidson 2001:412–413)

In this text, Ambrose puts forth Raguel to show that marital transactions – and in Roman and Christian times, marriages were in fact also transactions – need to be honourable, honest and just. He goes on to state that the 'monetary value' of a marital transaction means much less than the honour of being truthful and just.

Along with issues of marriage and sexual ethics, the Book of Tobit was also useful in delineating the duty of parents to teach their children virtue. Quoting Tobit 4:5–12 and 14:10–12, Cyprian (*De opere et eleemosynis* 20) writes:

6. At the time of writing, there was no critical Latin text of the *Opus imperfectum* published. For more on the manuscript tradition of this work, see Van Banning (1988) and Oden and Kellerman (2010:xvii–xxvii).



Be to your children such a father as was Tobias. Give useful and salutary precepts to your pledges such as he gave to his son; command your children as he too commanded .... (trans. Deferrari et al. 1958:246)

*Esto potius liberis tuis pater talis qualis Tobias extitit. da utilia et salutaria praecepta pignorum qualia ille filio dedit, manda filiis tuis quod et ille mandavit ....* (eds. Simonetti & Moreschini 1976:68)

Augustine speaks of Tobias leading his blind father in the light of this world, whereas Tobit led Tobias, whilst being blind, in God's light to heaven (see *Confessiones* 10.34.52; ed. O'Donnell 1992a:139; see also Augustine, *Sermones de scripturis Novi Testamenti* 88.15–16; trans. Hill 1991:437).

## Tobit and prayer

The Book of Tobit contains numerous prayers and admonitions to pray, which did not go unnoticed in the early church. We have already seen above that Tobit served as the prime example, for the author of the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaem*, to encourage prayer before sexual intercourse. In this same work, in Homily 13, the author further elaborates on the power of prayer (trans. Oden & Kellerman 2010):

Just as well-selected incense delights anyone who smells it, so the prayer of the righteous is sweet before God. Do you wish to know its great honour? As soon as the prayer leaves the mouth, angels take it on their hands and offer it before God, as the archangel says to Tobit: 'I brought a reminder of your prayer before the holy One' [Tb 12:12]. (p. 118)

The author links prayer to the work of the angels, and compares it to incense – this is reminiscent of Revelation 8:4, in which the prayers of the righteous are mixed with incense and offered by an angel to God. Prayer therefore engages the believer with the work of the angels (see similarly Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus super Psalmos* 129.7; ed. Zingerle 1891:652–653). Even earlier, Cyprian (*De dominica oratione* 33) also quotes Tobit 12:12–13 in this regard, saying:

Quickly do those prayers ascend to God, which the merits of our works impose upon God. Thus did the angel Raphael stand before Tobias, as he always prayed and always worked .... (trans. Deferrari et al. 1958:155)

*Cito orationes ad Deum ascendunt quas ad Deum merita nostri operis imponunt. sic et Raphael angelus Tobiae oranti semper et semper operanti adstitit ....* (eds. Simonetti & Moreschini 1976:110)

Origen's treatise, *De oratione*, also uses Tobit and Sarah as *exempla* on the importance and usefulness of prayer. In *De oratione* 14.2 (ed. Koetschau 1899:320–321; trans. Greer 1979:109), Origen discerns between four kinds of prayer (based on 1 Tim 2:1), namely supplication (δέησις), prayer (προσευχή), intercession (ἐντευξις) and thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία). In this section, Origen uses the example of Tobit (in verses 3:1–2) as an instance of προσευχή [prayer], which Origen describes thus: 'prayer is something nobler offered by a person with praise and for greater objects'

(trans. Greer 1979:109) [τὴν δὲ προσευχὴν τὴν μετὰ δοξολογίας περὶ μειζόνων μεγαλοφύεστερον ἀναπεμπομένην ὑπὸ τοῦ] (ed. Koetschau 1899:320). Prayer is a great form of supplication, because the angels also pray alongside believers, according to Origen (*De oratione* 11.1; trans. Greer 1979:101), which is testified by the role of Raphael in the prayers of both Tobit and Sarah. In fact, Origen (*De oratione* 31.5) believes that creates two 'churches', one of human beings and one of angels:

It is likely, then, that when a great number of people are assembled genuinely for the glory of Christ, each one's angel, who is around each of those who fear Him, encamps with that man whom he is believed to guard and order. As a result, when the saints are gathered together, there is a double Church, one of men and the other of angels. And if Raphael says that he offered only the prayer of Tobit for a 'reminder' (Tb 12:12, 3:16–17), and after him that of Sarah, who later became Tobit's daughter-in-law when she married Tobias, what must we say when a great many journey together with the same mind and the same purpose and are made one body in Christ? (trans. Greer 1979:166–167)

εἰκός ἐστι, πλειόνων συνεληλυθότων γνησίως εἰς δόξαν Χριστοῦ, παρεμβαλεῖν τὸν ἐκάστου ἀγγελοῦ τὸν 'κύκλω' ἐκάστου 'τῶν φοβουμένων' μετὰ τούτου τοῦ ἀνδρός, ὃν φρουρεῖν καὶ οἰκονομεῖν πεπίστευται ὥστ' εἶναι ἐπὶ τῶν ἁγίων συναθροισζομένων διπλὴν ἐκκλησίαν, τὴν μὲν ἀνθρώπων τὴν δὲ ἀγγέλων. καὶ εἰ μόνου τοῦ Τωβὴτ ὁ Ραφαὴλ φησιν εἰς 'μνημόσυνον' ἀνενηνοχῆναι τὴν προσευχὴν καὶ μετ' αὐτὸν Σάρρας, τῆς ὑστέρως νόμφης γενομένης αὐτοῦ τοῦ Τωβία, τὸ γεγαμησθαι αὐτὴν τῷ Τωβία, τί λεκτέον, πλειόνων ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ νοῦ καὶ τῇ αὐτῇ γνώμῃ συνοδευόντων καὶ σωματοποιουμένων ἐν Χριστῷ; (ed. Koetschau 1899:398)

Prayer therefore increases the ranks of the church by adding angels to its ranks. Origen uses the prayers of Tobit to demonstrate this point. The story of Tobit was important in highlighting the role of angels in the act of prayer. We will discuss angels in a following section.

The prayer of Tobit, in Chapter 13, was also very influential in Augustine's *Confessiones*. In fact, Augustine opens the *Confessiones* (1.1.1) with a quote from Tobit 13:1: 'Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise' [*Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde*] (ed. O'Donnell 1992a:3). Conybeare (2016:59) notes: 'The entire prayer of Tobit 13 is in fact of immense importance for the themes of the *Confessiones*'. O'Donnell (1992b:6–7) demonstrates that Tobit 13 was important for the *Confessiones* not only because of allusions to its content, but even its structure, which O'Donnell clearly sets out. Tobit 12:7, after all, has Raphael say that it is important to reveal and *confess* the works of God, which is the major impetus of the *Confessiones*. O'Donnell (1992b:6–7) notes several allusions to Tobit 13 in *Confessiones* 1.1.1, 1.2.2, 1.16.26, 2.2.4, 2.3.6, 2.6.14, 2.9.18, 3.3.5, 4.15.24, 7.21.27, 8.5.12, 8.6.14, 10.2.2, 10.6.8, 12.16.23, 13.38.53 and so on. This latter point was also noted by Augustine's biographer Possidius (370–437 CE; in his *Vita Augustini* Preface; trans. Hoare 1995:33–34), who also quotes Tobit 12:7 with reference to Augustine's work.

Finally, Prosper of Aquitaine (390–455 CE), the late antique author who significantly promulgated Augustine's doctrine of grace, emphasises the power of prayer within the context of divine election and predestination, with reference to Tobit 6:16–18. In this text, Raphael assures Tobit that he will not die should he enter Sarah's bridal chamber, because Sarah was destined for him before the world was made (Tb 6:18). However, Raphael still tells Tobit to pray before lying with Sarah. Prosper (*De vocatione omnium gentium* 2.36) refers to these texts to illustrate that even though God has predestined certain events to take place, and nothing can change this, 'the design of divine election does not do away with attention to prayer' (trans. De Letter 1952:151) [*Orationum vero sollicitudinem divinae electionis proposito non resolvi*] (ed. Migne 1846:51:720). After quoting these verses from Tobit, he continues to say:

Therefore, although it is impossible that God's decree would not come true, yet it does not do away with the practice of prayer, nor does the design of the election diminish the effort of man's free will. (trans. De Letter 1952:152)

Here, we see that Prosper uses Tobit to demonstrate an important theological principle about divine foreknowledge and election, and not simply to make a moral point about prayer.

### The suffering and endurance of Tobit

Tobit also functioned as an *exemplum* of someone who had to endure hardship and temptation with patience. It is no surprise that the figures of Tobit and Job intersect so closely in this regard (Portier-Young 2005:14–27). The Book of Tobit also follows Job in some canon lists, such as in Codex Claromontanus, the Mommsen Catalogue and in the canon lists of Innocent I and Augustine. The author of the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaum*, in Homily 3, also states: 'People are tested either in their weaknesses or in the losses of their goods or in the death of loved ones, as Job and Tobit were' (trans. Oden & Kellerman 2010:52). Patience, or endurance (ὕπομονή; *patientia*), was an important virtue in early Christian thought, and one that became a symbol of courage and masculinity (Shaw 1996:269–312). In this regard, Tobit, like Job, was quite exemplary. During the time of Cyprian, the Mediterranean world was ravaged by a terrible plague from 249 to 262 CE (sometimes also known as the Plague of Cyprian, because of Cyprian's detailed testimony of the plague). During this time, in 252, he wrote *De mortalitate*, in which he provides scriptural *paraenesis* in light of the devastation of the plague (Brent 2010:106). After referring to the suffering of Job, Cyprian (*De mortalitate* 10) also refers to Tobit:

And Tobias, after his splendid works, after the many glorious commendations of his mercy, having suffered blindness of the eyes, fearing and blessing God in his adversity, by that very affliction of his body increased in praise. And him also his wife tried to corrupt, saying: 'Where are your acts of clemency? Behold what you are suffering!' [Tb 2:14]. But he steadfast and firm in his fear of God and armed for all endurance of suffering by the faith of his religion did not yield in his affliction to the temptations of his weak wife, but deserved more of God through his greater patience. (trans. Deferrari et al. 1958:206–207)

As Job's friends ridiculed him, Cyprian says, so too did Tobit's wife. However, like Job, Tobit remained steadfast. Tobit is sketched not only as a brave and masculine believer, but he is almost viewed as a type of martyr-soldier in this regard. Murphy (2019:87) rightly notes that by using the example of Tobit in this way, Cyprian teaches Christians that '[t]he key is to recast such sufferings from stumbling blocks to battles, so that faith is not broken, but proved'. Through his suffering, Tobit becomes an example of masculinity and almost militant faith – in this case, Tobit is an example that must be imitated, especially because Christians not only suffer from the dangers of plague but also need to battle the devil.

Ambrosiaster (*Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 119.4, 6 [*De Tobia*]) also focuses on the endurance of Tobit during his days of suffering. He writes:

So, let us be informed by the Scripture of how praiseworthy holy Tobit is, whose devotion captivity did not diminish, whom the loss of his eyes did not stop from blessing God, whom the exhaustion of his resources did not divert from the way of justice and truth. Indeed, need tests a just man and proves him to be just, and keeping fairness when in poverty is the true and perfect justice. From things that diminish the devotion of some, praiseworthy Tobit gained an increase of it. For want, he says, humiliates a man, and he who is humiliated cannot keep justice. But holy Tobit's spirit, intent on God, was neither broken by captivity nor humiliated by want, because he buried the bodies of the slain in spite of the prohibition, and, certain of God's generosity, he was compassionate even with the small means that he had,

*et Tobias post opera magnifica, post misericordiae suae multa et gloriosa praeconia caecitatem luminum passus timens et benedicens in adversis Deum per ipsam corporis sui cladem crevit ad laudem, quem et ipsum uxor sua deprauare temptauit dicens: ubi sunt iustitiae tuae? ecce quae pateris. at ille circa timorem Dei stabilis et firmus et ad omnem tolerantiam passionis fide religionis armatus temptationi uxoris inualidae in dolore non cessit, sed magis Deum patientia maiore promeruit.* (eds. Simonetti & Moreschini 1976:22)

knowing that God prefers the compassion that is done from small means, as did the widow whom the Lord praised in the Gospel (Lk 21:2–4) ... Therefore just Tobit was so pleasing to God that he obtained for his merits a twofold reward: for the present he recovered, through the angel's agency, the sight that he had lost, and was also enriched with the resources that are useful in this life; and for the future he was made an heir of the kingdom of heaven: so that we might be taught through this that when someone obeys God's law with all their heart and does not doubt his promises, God often augments their resources in this world, and grants them eternal life in the next. (trans. Patristic Bible Commentary n.d.)

Ambrosiaster uses the example of Tobit to show that by losing that which has earthly value, one has the ability to increase one's spiritual treasure. It therefore becomes a question of character formation. As with Job, Ambrosiaster again notes that God not only restored, indeed increased, Tobit's earthly blessings, but he also gained a heavenly reward. By linking Tobit with the figure of Job, early Christian authors created a line of *exempla* that had to demonstrate that God remains just, despite allowing human beings to suffer. This reaches to the core of the problem of theodicy. Early Christian authors would respond to this problem by stating that suffering earthly loss and temptations always serves to increase one's spiritual riches. Suffering acts like a medicine or therapy for the soul, as many would say (Mayer 2015:337–351). In this way, Tobit functions not only as a type of martyr, as Cyprian seems to hint, but he even becomes a type of ascetic figure, because his soul and spirit are strengthened by the destruction of his body (his blindness and old age) and loss of his earthly possessions (see also De Wet 2016:491–521; Murphy 2019:79–88).

## Tobit and angels

Finally, and as we have already repeatedly noted in this study, the Book of Tobit was also important for early Christian understandings of angels, because Raphael plays such a central role in the story. We have already seen that Tobit was used to link the act of prayer with the activity of angels. The author of the *Opus imperfectum in Mattheum* (Homily 5) again notes, with reference to Tobit, that God uses angels for healing as well as for dispelling demons (trans. Oden & Kellerman 2010:73; see also Hippolytus, *In Daniele* 1.28.6; eds. Bardy & Lefèvre 1947:120). Jerome (*Commentaria in Daniele* 8.16–17; trans. Archer 1958:88) also refers to the meaning of Raphael's name, which means 'the healing or the medicine of God'.

Origen relied on the story of Tobias and Raphael to demonstrate his teaching that all human beings have an accompanying or 'guardian' angel:

*conlaudavit ... Itaque in tantum deo placuit iustus Tobias, ut duplici genere meritorum suorum consequeretur mercedem. et in praesente enim quae amiserat ministro angelo recuperavit lumina, ditatus etiam copiis, quae ad praesentem pertinent uitam, et in futuro heres regni caelorum est factus, ut in hoc doceremur quia, qui toto corde dei legi obtemperat nec de promissis dubitat; et in saeculo curam eius agit deus et in futuro donat illum uita aeterna.* (ed. Souter 1908: 359–361)

That some thoughts are suggested to human hearts either by good or evil angels is shown both by the angel that accompanied Tobias [Tb 5:5ff] and by the word of the prophet, saying, *And the angel who was speaking in me answered* [Zch 1:14]; and the book of *The Shepherd* asserts the same thing, teaching that two angels accompany each human being. (ed. Behr 2017:390–391)

*Quod uero etiam per angelos uel bonos uel malos aliqua humanis cordibus suggerantur, designat uel Tobiam angelus comitatus uel prophetae sermo dicentis: Et respondit angelus, qui loquebatur in me; sed et Pastoris liber haec eadem declarant docens bini angeli singulos quosque hominum comitentur.* (*De principiis* 3.2.4)

The Book of Tobit is used in a significant moral-theological way by Origen in this case. He uses the text to show that angels, both good and evil, have the ability to affect an individual's behaviour. Raphael is then not simply Tobias' companion, but he functions, theologically, as Tobias's guardian angel and the one who shapes Tobias's thoughts and behaviour.

## Conclusion

The importance of the Book of Tobit in early Christian Greek and Latin writers should not be understated. Whether Tobit was part of the canon or not, we see a wide range of uses of the book in early Christian literature. Although some authors state that Tobit was useful, not as canon, but for simple teaching purposes, it does not seem as if Tobit was used in any way different from other figures in canonical literature. In fact, it is only Origen and Jerome who tend to refer to Tobit with a disclaimer that some, especially the Jews, did not consider it canonical. Some verses in Tobit, like 4:15 (negative golden mean) and 12:8–9 (almsgiving delivers from death), were part of the 'staple' of proof-texts used by early Christian authors. Tobit seems to have been especially popular amongst Latin Christian writers of the West, especially Cyprian, Ambrosiaster, Ambrose and, notably, Augustine. Its absence in many Greek 4th-century authors from the East shows that it might have been less popular in the East than in the West.

However, most importantly, Tobit was used as a typical *exemplum* for various moral issues in early Christian thought. He is described as the ideal charitable giver and financial manager. In this guise, Tobit acts as an example for all Christians to emulate. In other cases, Tobit is an example that is commendable, but not necessarily one to imitate, such as his charitable grave-digging. In terms of marriage and Christian sexual ethics, for some, Tobias, the son of Tobit, stood as an example of the importance to choose a Christian wife, and to pray before sexual intercourse. In this regard, for some, Tobit was an outdated example, because it was better not to marry and procreate. Furthermore, Tobit was a very important source for early Christian formulations of prayer and teachings pertaining to angels. Tobit was also a fitting companion to the canonical figure of Job, who endured suffering with patience and faithfulness. It comes as no surprise that when Bede composed his detailed allegorical interpretation of Tobit, the Book of Tobit already

had a legacy of interpretation in the early church – so much so that Tobit's prayer in Chapter 13 was a structuring tool for Augustine's *Confessiones*. What this study further shows us is that the concepts of 'canon' and 'apocrypha' were still quite fluid and opaque in the first four centuries of early Christianity, and that the study of the so-called Old Testament apocrypha, and the Septuagint more generally, remains crucial to gaining a fuller understanding of early Christian notions of biblical interpretation, scriptural pedagogy and canonical authority.

## Acknowledgements

The author thanks Prof. Johann Cook for inviting him to contribute to this special collection.

## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this research article.

## Author's contribution

C.L.D.W. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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