

The Book of Tobit



Fathers! When you are a child, they are the centre of your world, and nothing that they do can be wrong in your eyes. As you grow older you watch them carefully and note their faults. They fall from the pedestals on which you have set them, because you no longer perceive them as perfect. As you get older still you realise that your children have knocked you off their pedestal, and then your view of your father becomes the realistic one. He was human and fallible, and just did the best he could.

My father was not quite like that though. He was single minded; single minded in his devotion to Yahweh. My father is Tobit, son of Tobiel, the son of Ananiel, son of Asael of the tribe of Naphtali. Can I be fair to my forefathers and to my tribe? Probably not. So, I will tell you, in defiance of all of our laws and our God Yahweh, they sacrificed to the god Baal. Alone of the tribe my father would travel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to Yahweh, and to keep his commandments. The rest were warned of the consequences. It was no surprise then when the Assyrians came calling, defeated us in battle and carried everyone off to exile in Nineveh.

Exile did not stop my father from doing his duty to Yahweh, even if he could no longer get to Jerusalem. He also instilled a love of Yahweh into me, his son Tobias. Sometimes my mother Anna would despair when father would give food and alms to anyone who came to our door. The most charitable thing that he would do, was to bury the dead. Kings come and kings go. In their whimsy they would kill members of our community and leave the bodies for the birds of the air. My father could not bear to see the unburied bodies, so he would go out and bury them and commend them to Yahweh.

When king Sennacherib sent for the bodies to gloat over and put on display, they were nowhere to be found. Someone told the king what my father had done. He was absolutely furious and took all our property, leaving us destitute. Father fled. The king didn't last much longer. His sons killed him and another son Sarchedonus ruled in his stead. He appointed my cousin Achiacharus as his Steward. He pleaded for father to be able to return, and we were reunited.

You might have thought that this experience would have put father off annoying kings by burying their enemies. But it did not. One day, father heard of a man who had been strangled and left in the market place. He was so distressed that he went out and buried him. Because he returned late at night and he was polluted by handling the body, he slept outside in the lee of a wall in the courtyard. While he slept birds on the wall dropped their dung onto his eyes, and when he awoke in the morning, a milky film covered his eyes, which no one could remove. Father was blind.

As you might expect, father took his blindness in his stride. So with a sigh did mother. She went out to work, to bring in money for food, and we managed well. Except that there was one day, when the people mother worked for, gave her a kid, over and above her wages. Father heard the kid in the courtyard and demanded to know where mother had got it from. There was an almighty row when father accused her of stealing it, and she raged that it had been given to her because he himself had helped so many people in his time. She stormed out and father was left to silently contemplate what he had said to mother, and how much he was respected in the community, but that he obviously didn't trust her.

Now I come into my own in this story. When my father wept before Yahweh, Yahweh forgave him. I am not sure my mother forgave him quite so quickly. But Yahweh asked one thing of him, and that was that he should marry me off to a godly young woman of our own tribe. Father was very happy with this idea, as I had begun looking at the women around me. Unfortunately none of them matched up to father's ideals for a wife for me. It was then that father remembered a large loan he had made to Gabael in the city of Ecbatane. I was to be sent to collect this money, which would restore the family fortunes. Unbeknown to me on this trip I was also destined to kill a devil, find myself a wife and cure my father of blindness. It was a multi-purpose trip with a very happy ending.

Mother was not at all happy about me going off. She would rather have kept me by her side than have the money. After a lot of debating, father asked me to go down to the market and find a man who would travel with me and help to keep me safe. I found there Raphael, who claimed kinship with a good man father knew. I say claimed kinship, because it turned out he was my Guardian Angel, although I didn't know that until right at the end of the journey! Father sent me off with all sorts of instructions about how I should behave. None of them were new to me!

At the end of our first day we camped by the river Tigris. I went down to the river to wash. As I was washing, a great fish leapt out of the water and would have killed me if Raphael had not helped me. Together we dragged it to the shore. Raphael instructed me to gut the fish and keep the heart, liver and gall. We roasted the rest of the flesh and ate our fill. When we set off the next day Raphael insisted that I pack up the entrails and carry them with me. When I asked him why, he said that burning the heart and liver would ward off evil spirits and the gall would clear the milky film off a man's eyes. That bit I understood the need for, and was very happy about. I was not so sure about the evil spirits.

Soon after that we arrived in the town of Rages. Raphael said that we would lodge with my cousin Raguel and his family. The first time I saw her, I was smitten. Sara was the loveliest woman I had ever seen, and she knew how to make an entrance. Raguel introduced me to his daughter and I knew then I wanted to make her my wife. Sara seemed to like me as well. Within days arrangements had been made for our wedding. I thought that Sara would have been excited, but she seemed really depressed. When I asked her why, she told me that she had been married seven times before, and each time on her wedding night, an evil spirit had come and killed her bridegroom. That is not something a man wants to hear on the eve of his wedding, but I was a man in love, so I went to Raphael to tell him the story and ask him what I should do.

He reminded me to the fish heart and liver, and said that I should put them on the embers of the fire in the marriage chamber, and the smell of the smoke would so repel the evil spirit that he would flee and never come near Sara again. He also told me to pray to Yahweh as my father had taught me, for Sara had been destined to be my wife and everything would work out for us both. So I did as Raphael said. The stench of the fish was unbearable, but we got used to it after a while, and we prayed together and then slept, waking whole and hearty in the morning. Raguel and his wife Edna on the other hand had not slept at all. They knew that I was the only son of my parents, and I like to think that they had got to like me. But they were prepared to give in to my wishes to marry Sara, but had also, with great sorrow, made preparations for my burial.

They were over the moon when we both came out of the marriage chamber in the morning. Raguel sent his servants to fill in the grave, and then set about preparing a marriage feast, the like of which I had never seen before. Raguel insisted that I stay for a full fourteen days of feasting. I did not want to delay my return to my mother and father more than I need, so I asked Raphael to go on to Ecbatane and collect the money, which had been the purpose of our journey. By the time he returned to Rages the feasting was nearly done, and so we were soon able to load up our beasts with the money Raphael had collected and the half of the property owned by Raguel, which was a wedding present to his daughter, my wife Sara. We set off home surrounded by servants and animals.

Just before we reached the gates of Nineveh, Raphael took me aside. Remember how you left your father, how he had the white layer over his eyes. Let us go on ahead of your wife, and all the goods and servants and help your father. Take the gall of the fish with you. When your father hears you are coming, he will run out to greet you. Take the liquid from the gall and drop it in his eyes. He will rub his eyes, because they will sting. As he rubs his eyes, the white film will fall off. So Raphael and I went on ahead, and just as Raphael said that it would, my fathers' blindness was cured. I had to cut across the rejoicing that I had returned and that his blindness was cured, to tell father and mother that I had also married. Everyone made haste to the gates of Nineveh to welcome Sara my wife to her new home. Great was the rejoicing that evening. Father and mother were so delighted that they summoned everyone to a wedding fest, and we had another seven days of celebration. We were honoured that Achiacharus and his brother's son Nasbas came to the celebrations.

There was just one more piece of business to sort out after the wedding, and that was the payment of Raphael. Father and I conferred, and he was happy when I offered Raphael half of the goods I had brought back with me, because he had kept me safe, found me a wife and healed my father. Then we had the greatest shock of our lives, for Raphael refused the money and goods and revealed himself to be an angel of the Lord. He said that Yahweh had seen the deeds of my father, and had heard his prayers and had been determined to reward such devotion. My father and I were deeply troubled by Raphael's words and fell on our knees before him. All he asked us to do was to give thanks to Yahweh for all that we had been given. When we raised ourselves off the floor, he was gone. Father wrote a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to Yahweh, and wrote it down for the family to use and remember. It is written in the book of the deeds of Tobit.

Towards the end of his life, when Sara and I had six sons of our own, father called me to him and urged me to take Sara and the children and return to her home town of Rages. He had heard the prophet Jonah speaking, and he believed that his prophecies would come true and that Nineveh would be destroyed. Father died soon afterwards, and mother soon after that. I buried them both with honour, as they had wished and they deserved. As father had wanted, I returned with Sara to Rages and her father Raguel. When he and Edna died, we buried them with honour as well, as they too deserved.

I too am now coming to the end of my life. Today I have heard of the destruction of Nineveh, as the Prophet Jonah promised and I rejoice that Yahweh's words have been kept and fulfilled. I have written down all these deeds that my children and my children's children will know of the greatness of their forefather Tobit. I hope that they will learn from his deeds about the faithfulness of Yahweh, and that worship of him only is right and just. I hope that it will remind them not to sacrifice to any other gods and at all times keep faith with Yahweh, for he is the only true God. Praise be to Yahweh.