The Book of Tobit, named after its principal hero, combines specifically Jewish piety and morality with oriental folklore in a fascinating story that has enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles. Prayers, psalms, and words of wisdom, as well as the skillfully constructed story itself, provide valuable insights into the faith and the religious milieu of its unknown author. The book was probably written early in the second century B.C.; it is not known where.

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

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

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

Although the Book of Tobit is usually listed with the historical books, it more correctly stands midway between them and the wisdom literature. It contains numerous maxims like those found in the wisdom books (cf Tobit 4:3-19, 21; 12:6-10; 14:7, 9) as well as the customary sapiential themes: fidelity to the law, the intercessory function of angels, piety toward parents, the purity of marriage, reverence for the dead, and the value of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The book makes Tobit a relative of Ahiqar, a hero of ancient Near Eastern folklore.

Written in Aramaic, the original of the book was lost for centuries. The Greek translation, existing in three different recensions, is our primary source. In 1955, fragments of the book in Aramaic and in Hebrew were recovered from Cave IV at Qumran. These texts are in substantial agreement with the Greek recension that has served as the basis for the present translation.
Issues

Written between 200-180 BC (most likely) – the same time as Sirach. Tobit addresses similar issues as Sirach particularly that of almsgiving which is given a high priority and special rewards in both books.

There is no belief in an afterlife. Long life, health and wealth in this life are given to the wise and virtuous person – or are they?

It also is before the persecutions of Antiochus IV. Suffering is neither punishment nor persecution, but testing (“Where are your charitable deeds now? Where are your virtuous acts?” 2:14b)

Well known folk tales “The Grateful Dead” and “The Monster in the Bridal Chamber” provide the structure of the plot. Also the dog is a nice touch (6:2)

Tobit once lived in the northern kingdom but still made the pilgrimages to Jerusalem in the south.

Tobit’s charitable works are essentially the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, burying the dead.

The narrator shifts from the first person to the third person in chapter 3:7.

The reader knows that Raphael is an angel but the characters in the story don’t.

The ritual for the deliverance of Sarah resembles an exorcism with prayer while the application of the fish gall to Tobit’s eyes appears to be a medicinal treatment.

Tobias risks his life to marry Sarah who he has fallen in love with before he even sees her. They marry based on family relationships and obedience to parents. But Sarah’s father, Raguel, digs a grave for Tobias just in case.

This book celebrates marriage as a joyful part of God’s design.

Every major turning point in the story is marked by prayer.

Angelology develops in these late OT texts and into the NT. (Raphael here, Michael and Gabriel in the apocalyptic section of Daniel, Uriel in I Enoch).

The story of Tobit is a model for what is happening with Israel and Judaism. Fidelity to the Torah will lead eventually to restoration and blessing and victory over one’s enemies (14:15).