

Suspense, Simultaneity, and Divine Providence in the Book of Tobit

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“Look at all the works of the Most High,” Ben Sira urges his readers, “they are two by two, one corresponding to the other” (δύο δύο ἐν κατέναντι τοῦ ἑνός [33:15]). This is a sentiment with which the author of the book of Tobit would have been in certain agreement: In Tobit’s carefully ordered narrative world, each problem has its corresponding solution, each need its corresponding fulfillment. Thus the story ends in perfect equilibrium; there are no loose ends.

The orderliness of this narrative itself corresponds, I will argue, to one of Tobit’s most salient theological emphases—namely, divine providence. According to George Nickelsburg, the book of Tobit “creates a portrait of a God who carefully orchestrates . . . the dark events of human life and history, working them toward gracious ends.”¹ And our hero certainly shows no ambivalence about the reality of divine providence: “There is nothing that can escape his hand” (13:2), he proclaims in his joyful hymn of praise upon the story’s successful dénouement.²

[314] My purpose in this essay is twofold: First, I want to explore the narrative techniques by which the author creates this tale’s reassuring sense of tidiness. In particular, I will suggest that the story’s management of suspense and artful use of simultaneity posit a world in which God is firmly in control. Second, I hope to illuminate the interaction between this author’s fiction and his reality: Tobit’s carefully supervised narrative world is, I will argue, a fitting response to the anxiety and seeming chaos of life in Diaspora—chaos which is itself represented but rendered impotent in the narrative.

First, however, I will risk two brief comments concerning this book’s genre: Emil Schürer, noting Tobit’s salient emphasis on almsgiving, burial, and endogamy, categorized this book among Jewish “didactic and paraenetical stories”—a characterization that continues to exert considerable influence.³ I would not deny that this story presents its readers with moral exempla: the elderly Tobit’s assiduous devotion to Jewish piety certainly does provide a model for life in Diaspora, and the author’s concern for righteousness is evident in the ethical omnibuses provided by both Tobit and the angel Raphael (4:3–19; 12:6–10). However, such moralizing is but a corollary of the book’s primary thesis; for this narrative does its work on a more fundamental level—it constructs a world in which traditional mores make sense.

¹ George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 32. Cf. Paul Deselaers, *Das Buch Tobit: Studien zu seiner Entstehung, Komposition und Theologie* (OBO 43; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1982), 364–73; Athanasius Miller, “Das Buch Tobias,” in *Die Bücher Tobias, Judith und Esther* (eds. Athanasius Miller, and Johann Schildenberger; 3 vols. in 1; HSAT 4.3; Bonn: Hanstein, 1940), 3:27.

² All English translations are from the NRSV. I have used the longer Greek recension (B^{II}), attested chiefly by Sinaiticus, throughout this study (Robert Hanhart, ed., *Tobit* [vol. 8.5 of *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983]). On Tobit’s diverse textual traditions, see esp. Michaela Hallermayer, *Text und Überlieferung des Buches Tobit* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 3; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

³ Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (eds. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman; New English ed.; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 3:222–32. Cf. Amy-Jill Levine, “Tobit: Teaching Jews How to Live in the Diaspora,” *BRev* 8, no. 4 (August 1992): 42–51, 64; Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 92. The prominence of this perspective is evident from the list of “purpose statements” gathered by Carey Moore (*Tobit: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 40A; New York: Doubleday, 1996], 23–24). Cf. Richard A. Spencer, “The Book of Tobit in Recent Research,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 7 (1999): 153–54.

Second, the sobriety of Tobit's alleged paranetic purpose has been challenged recently by those who see this as a much more light-hearted book. David McCracken considers Tobit "essentially a comic narrative" that encourages us to laugh at a character who is "obsessed with tribe and family" and "comically overzealous about his own virtues."⁴ But Tobit is hardly the only biblical character who claims to have "walked in the ways of truth and righteousness all the days of [his] life" (1:3),⁵ and we don't accuse David (see Psalm 26) or Hezekiah (see 2 Kgs [315] 20:3; Isa 38:3) of risible egotism. Moreover, Tobit's concern for proper burial and endogamous marriage is no more laughable than, for example, the book of *Jubilees*' calendrical preoccupation—though indeed it may be difficult for secularized readers like us to take such religious scruples seriously.⁶

So, although this novel undeniably contains the occasional humorous touch, and although we may find it amusingly superstitious, there is simply no compelling reason to imagine that it was intended as a comedy.⁷ On the contrary, it is deeply concerned with the wholly serious theme of God's providence. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, the very structure of this narrative emphasizes that God's ordered universe has not—despite the vagaries of exile—succumbed to chaos.⁸ Through conscientious management of suspense and artful use of simultaneity, Tobit posits a world in which God is firmly in control.

I. SUSPENSE

In his influential study of the "poetics of biblical narrative," Meir Sternberg highlights the dilemma that arises from the biblical narrators' competing impulses with regard to the use of

⁴ McCracken, "Narration and Comedy in the Book of Tobit," *JBL* 114 (1995): 403, 413, 409. Cf. Anthea Portier-Young, "Alleviation of Suffering in the Book of Tobit: Comedy, Community, and Happy Endings," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 35–54; Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 81–82. For a careful rebuttal to McCracken, see J. R. C. Cousland, "Tobit: A Comedy in Error?" *CBQ* 65 (2003): 535–53.

⁵ Notably, Tobit's allegedly comic first-person characterization in 1:3 is corroborated by reliable characters throughout the narrative (7:7; 9:6; 14:2). Further, as Sabine Van Den Eynde has shown, by conforming to a biblical pattern of righteous pray-ers, Tobit's prayer reinforces his pious characterization ("Prayer as Part of Characterisation and Plot: An Analysis of its Narrative Function in Tobit 3," in *Analyse narrative et Bible: Deuxième colloque international du RRENAB, Louvain-la-Neuve, avril 2004* [eds. Camille Focant, and André Wénin; BETL 191; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005], 529–30).

⁶ On the importance of kinship in Tobit, see esp. Gabriele Fassbeck, "Tobit's Religious Universe between Kinship Loyalty and the Law of Moses," *JSJ* 36 [2005]: 192–95. On the background and function of burial concerns, see János Bolyki, "Burial as an Ethical Task in the Book of Tobit, in the Bible and in the Greek Tragedies," in *The Book of Tobit: Text, Tradition, Theology* (eds. Géza G. Xeravits, and József Zsengellér; JSJSup 98; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 89–102. On endogamy, see Thomas Hieke, "Endogamy in the Book of Tobit, Genesis, and Ezra-Nehemiah," in *The Book of Tobit: Text, Tradition, Theology* (eds. Géza G. Xeravits, and József Zsengellér; JSJSup 98; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 103–20; Vincent Skemp, "ἈΔΕΛΦΟΣ and the Theme of Kinship in Tobit," *ETL* 75 (1999): 92–103.

⁷ Recent interpretation has fruitfully emphasized Tobit's affinity with the ancient novel. See Jacques Schwartz, "Éléments romanesques dans le livre de Tobit," in *Le monde du roman grec: Actes du colloque international tenu à l'École normale supérieure (Paris 17–19 décembre 1987)* (eds. Marie-Françoise Baslez, Philippe Hoffmann, and Trédé Monique; Études de littérature ancienne 4; Paris: Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1992), 245–48; Wills, *The Jewish Novel*, 68–92. For a thorough history of approaches to Tobit's genre, see Deselaers, *Tobit*, 261–79.

⁸ So Cousland, "A Comedy in Error?" 552: "The novella does . . . have affinities with comedy because both describe a *kosmos* that is far from orderly. The hierarchical inversions described in Tobit, though, are not designed to be humorous but to give expression to the dilemma of the Diaspora. The restoration of order in the story portends the larger restoration of Israel."

suspense.⁹ On the one hand, suspense provides a convenient [316] narrative correlate to a moral principle that underlies the biblical worldview—namely, human freedom. As Sternberg asks, “What gives a sharper sense of the agents’ freedom of choice than the uncertainty of their ultimate fate?”¹⁰ But, on the other hand, Sternberg notes “a powerful coalition of anti-suspense factors,”¹¹ chief among which is the biblical narrators’ insistence on divine supervision and providence. For, as Sternberg explains, “the generation of suspense throughout the tale would militate against our sense of the divine control of history.”¹² Thus biblical narrative is characterized by an ongoing dialectic between these two contradictory impulses, a constant attempt both to retain and to dissolve suspense. In short, it tries to have its cake and, well, to leave open the suspenseful possibility of eating it.

The book of Tobit is a case in point. Even before Tobias sets out on his divinely ordained journey, our omniscient narrator gives us a glimpse of what takes place in “the glorious presence of God”¹³—namely, God hears (3:16), and God provides for our heroes’ redemption. Thus, immediately after describing the misfortunes that generate suspense for the reader, our narrator anticipates their resolution:

So Raphael was sent to heal both of them: Tobit, by removing the white films from his eyes, so that he might see God’s light with his eyes; and Sarah, daughter of Raguel, by giving her in marriage to Tobias son of Tobit, and by setting her free from the wicked demon Asmodeus. For Tobias was entitled to have her before all others who had desired to marry her. (3:17)

This proleptic plot summary dissolves the story’s suspense the moment that suspense is evoked.¹⁴

As Sabine Van Den Eynde has noted, this knowledge of the story’s eventual outcome refocuses the reader’s interest from the question of *what* will happen to the question of *how* it will happen.¹⁵ It is one thing to know that Tobit will be healed and Sarah married, quite another to anticipate the narrative movements that weave together these distant but parallel petitioners. Yet even this problem is quickly resolved: “That same day” (4:1) Tobit remembers that he has left money in trust with a distant relative. Our narrator now has a pretext for the journey that will bring [317] Tobias into Sarah’s home and provide opportunity for the realization of the divine plan.¹⁶ And a mere three verses into Tobias’ journey with Raphael, the young man encounters a

⁹ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Literary Biblical Studies; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 264–68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Deselaers suggests that the reference to God’s glory here helps assure us that everything will be set aright: “In dieser Kennzeichnung wird die Macht und Souveränität Jahwes angesprochen, so daß das ‘Hören’ Konsequenzen nach sich ziehen wird” (*Tobit*, 97).

¹⁴ Cf. Irene Nowell, “The Narrator in the Book of Tobit,” in *SBL Seminar Papers, 1988* (SBLSP 27; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 32. For Joseph Fitzmyer, this anticipation of the resolution results in a story with “no suspense and no buildup to a climax” (*Tobit* [CEJL; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003], 34)—an evaluation that I hope my analysis will call into question.

¹⁵ Van Den Eynde, “One Journey and One Journey Makes Three: The Impact of the Reader’s Knowledge in the Book of Tobit,” *ZAW* 117 (2005): 274 n. 6.

¹⁶ Jacques Schwartz, “Remarques littéraires sur la roman de Tobit,” *RHPR* 67 (1987): 294; cf. Van Den Eynde, “One Journey,” 279.

fish the gall, heart, and liver of which he is told have medicinal value (4:3–6); indeed, he even learns that the fish’s heart and liver can be burned to ward off evil spirits and that its gall can be applied to eyes “where white films have appeared on them” (4:8–9). Despite Tobias’ apparent inability to “put two and two together,”¹⁷ the reader cannot help but recognize this fish as a solution corresponding to the problems that occasioned Tobit’s and Sarah’s prayers.

But knowing this story’s resolution does not, as any sympathetic reader will attest, rob it of its interest. No, reading Tobit is a curious combination of knowing what will finally happen and waiting to see what will happen next. In his study of suspense in ancient epic, George Duckworth noted the predominance of this “suspense of anticipation,” which he differentiated from “suspense of uncertainty”—that is, suspense in which the reader does not know what resolution to expect. According to Duckworth, “The reader of ancient epic . . . usually feels no uncertainty about the events that have been foretold; his interest in the story, however, is by no means at an end; he remains in a state of emotional tension and is on the lookout for something which he either wishes or dreads to see happen.”¹⁸

This “state of emotional tension” will be familiar, for example, to viewers of Hollywood romantic comedy.¹⁹ We know from the outset that, in accordance with the rules of the genre, the hero and the heroine will end up safely in each others’ arms. But still we agonize through a series of misunderstandings, threateningly attractive rivals, and circumstantial obstacles: missed flights, missed phone calls, and so forth. Similarly, despite dissolving the story’s “suspense of uncertainty,” Tobit’s narrator uses anticipatory suspense to engage his audience. Although the reader has been assured of the eventual outcome, the momentum of the narrative toward this end is repeatedly retarded by incipient narrative possibilities that highlight the contingent nature of the desired resolution.²⁰

Although it also functions as the means of plot resolution, Tobias’ long journey is itself one such retarding factor. As Tobias’ mother’s weepy farewell emphasizes (5:18–20), this well-worn journey motif—in Tobit as in other ancient [318] novels—immediately adds an element of uncertainty for readers familiar with the worrying vicissitudes of ancient travel (cf. 1:15).²¹ But this renewed suspense is short lived, for the reader, cognizant of Raphael’s identity, knows that Tobit speaks more truthfully than he realizes when he promises Anna that “a good angel will accompany [Tobias]” (5:22).²² The possibility of a disastrous outcome is all but eliminated.²³

¹⁷ Van Den Eynde, “One Journey,” 277; Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 34.

¹⁸ George Duckworth, *Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius, and Vergil* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1933], 37. Cf. Dennis R. MacDonald, “Tobit and the *Odyssey*,” in *Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity* (ed. Dennis R. MacDonald; SAC; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 2001), 18.

¹⁹ Thanks to Colleen Shantz for this comparison.

²⁰ On retardatory suspense in biblical narrative, see Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 139–40, 278.

²¹ See Loveday Alexander, “‘In Journeyings Often’: Voyaging in the Acts of the Apostles and in Greek Romance,” in *Luke’s Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; JSNTSup 116; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 17. On the dangers of ancient travel see Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), 72–76, 160–62.

²² On the use of dramatic irony here, see Irene Nowell, “Irony in the Book of Tobit,” *TBT* 33 (1995): 81–82; Van Den Eynde, “One Journey,” 276; Frank Zimmermann, *The Book of Tobit* (JAL; New York: Harper, 1958), 74–75, 78; Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 31.

²³ But divine alleviation of travel danger in this story hardly means that, as Jane Webster would have it, the book of Tobit sets out to “promote travel” as a safe and desirable activity (“A Journey through the Book of Tobit: Travel is to Prosper” [paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, Ottawa, Ont., 25 May 2009]). As in the Greek novels, travel is a compelling plot device here precisely because it evokes uncertainty and danger.

Anna's fear at the outset of Tobias' journey inaugurates a consistent pattern in which a character's fear is used to provoke retardatory suspense which is then quickly undermined by the narrator's "abundant assurance of a happy outcome"²⁴—assurance often placed on the lips of the eminently reliable Raphael. Thus when Raphael urges Tobias to marry Sarah (6:10–13), Tobias recalls the frightening story of the seven deaths in Sarah's bridal chamber (6:14–15; cf. 3:8, 15), thus raising the daunting spectre of an eighth dead bridegroom. And Tobias heightens the potential pathos by reminding Raphael that his death would mean the tragic end of the family line (6:15).²⁵ But again the reader's anxiety is quickly ameliorated as Raphael explains to Tobias that burning the magic fish's liver and heart will cause the demon to flee (6:16–18).

Still our narrator does not let sleeping dogs lie. During Tobias' conversation with his future father-in-law Raguel, we are treated for the third time to the story of Sarah's husbands' ill fortune (7:11). Such repetition reinforces the same point that was made initially by the seven-fold iteration of the tragedy: Sarah's problem has long proven intractable. This potent combination of iterative and repetitive reference to Sarah's dilemma raises the stakes by imbuing her story with a troubling inertia: Can this pattern of tragedy really be overcome? As in a good detective story, [319] where repetition is used to overdetermine "false clues,"²⁶ the repetition of the fate of Sarah's husbands encourages the reader to entertain a narrative possibility that will ultimately go unrealized. Thus, for fleeting moments throughout the story, two foreshadowed futures compete for our allegiance: one too good to be true, the other almost too awful to contemplate. When the happy resolution is finally realized, both it and the providence that accomplished it are all the more celebrated for having been threatened.

As Sternberg emphasizes, such narrative representation of God's providence makes a compelling theological point:

God, omniscient and omnipotent by doctrinal fiat, will prove so in dramatic terms as the action translates his implicit will and pledge into the stuff of history: the premise lays the ground for the demonstration and the demonstration vindicates and inculcates the premise—which sounds poor logic but makes excellent rhetoric in the telling.²⁷

But there is another mode of suspense in this story as well, for even after the demon's flight and bondage are narrated (8:3), Raguel's late-night grave digging (8:9–11) reminds the reader of the already averted tragedy. Here the reader can hardly be expected to entertain Tobias' death as a real possibility; instead, the narrator plays the reader's knowledge off against the inferior knowledge possessed by the story's characters to create dramatic irony.²⁸ Raguel does not know what the reader knows, namely that Raphael is God's agent and has already accomplished the defeat of the demon. Thus although there is no suspense here for the reader, he or she is

²⁴ McCracken, "Narration and Comedy," 402.

²⁵ This only-child motif is also used by the narrator in 3:10, where it raises the stakes for Sarah's family: "Never shall they reproach my father, saying to him, 'You had only one beloved daughter but she hanged herself because of her distress.'" Again we see the centrality of kinship in Tobit's narrative world.

²⁶ See Christine Brooke-Rose, "The Readerhood of Man," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (eds. Susan R. Suleiman, and Inge Crosman; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 134–35.

²⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 135.

²⁸ See Nowell, "Irony," 80; Van Den Eynde, "One Journey," 274. Cf. Duckworth's comments on this phenomenon in ancient epic (*Foreshadowing and Suspense*, 70–71).

reminded that, from the perspective of Raguel—who has endured seven other such wedding nights—Tobias’ death seems inevitable.

Gratuitous details pile up here, while the reader awaits with impatience the moment when Raguel’s fears are dispelled (8:11–14). Raguel sends his wife to the wedding chamber; she in turn sends a maid. The pace of narration slows to a crawl while she lights a lamp and opens the door and enters the room. The moment of truth: she finds them (εὗρεν αὐτούς) lying there (καθεύδοντας) and, yes, peacefully sleeping together (ὕπνοῦντας κοινῶς [v. 13]). Finally she goes out to the anxious parents and informs them that the couple is alive and that all is well, and the episode’s pent-up tension erupts into a song of praise: “It has not turned out as I expected,” says Raguel with relief (v. 16). The reader knew the good news all along, of course, but nevertheless cannot help but identify with Raguel’s fear and then his relief.

[320] Similarly, readers are already cognizant of the story’s happy outcome while they watch Anna and Tobit fret, awaiting the delayed return of their son (10:1–7). Cutting away from the joyous revelry of the wedding celebration, our narrator drops us back in Nineveh, where Tobit is counting the days (ἐκάστην δὲ ἡμέραν ἐξ ἡμέρας ἐλογίζετο Τωβιθ τὰς ἡμέρας ἐν πόσῃς πορεύεται καὶ ἐν πόσῃς ἐπιστρέψει [10:1]). Finally his daily re-tabulation can no longer explain the delay of Tobias’ return. Anna gives vent to the worst of her fears—“my child has perished” (10:4)—and Tobit once more finds himself attempting to comfort his distraught wife (10:6). But this time Anna is inconsolable. As with Tobit’s reckoning of the days, the ongoing agony of Anna’s new daily routine is augmented by its expression in the imperfect tense: “She would rush out every day and watch (περιεβλέπετο) the road her son had taken, and would heed (ἐπέιθετο) no one. When the sun had set she would go in and mourn (ἐθρήνει) and weep (ἐκλαιεν) all night long, getting (εἶχεν) no sleep at all” (10:7). Of dramatic tension there is plenty, though the resolution is already certain.

Importantly, because the potential for the failure of God’s purposes here obtains only from the internal perspective of the characters, the reader can remain confident that God is ultimately in control, even while enjoying at least some of the aesthetic payoff that a good, suspenseful story provides. Indeed, this narrative allows readers to simultaneously identify with both the calmly omniscient perspective of the narrator and the characters’ ultimately unfounded anxiety. This dual identification surely serves a cathartic function:²⁹ readers are enabled to unleash their fears and then to experience the relief of fears unrealized.

Further, it is worth reflecting on the correspondence between this quasi-suspenseful narrative situation and Tobit’s theological interpretation of Israel’s historical reality. Readers of the narrative know that all is well, yet still the character’s spend sleepless nights; likewise, Tobit asserts, is Israel’s extratextual reality: In his prophetic words at the close of the story, Tobit insists that, although Israel experiences the anxiety of exilic life, its ultimate fate has already been determined by the providence of God (cf. 14:4–7).³⁰ Thus the extratextual uncertainty of life in Diaspora is represented in this narrative, but it is defused by juxtaposition with God’s superintendence of the story.

²⁹ Again, Duckworth sees a similar dynamic at work in ancient epic: the reader simultaneously views the story from the omniscient perspective of the narrator and “shares the emotions of the sympathetic character” (*Foreshadowing and Suspense*, 70–71). Cf. Suzanne Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” *Narrative* 14 (2006): 213–20.

³⁰ See Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 32–33.

II. SIMULTANEITY

Surely the most striking aspect of Tobit's narrative structure is the extensive parallel between the account of Tobit's misfortune in 1:3–3:6 and of Sarah's in [321] 3:7–15.³¹ Tobit goes blind; Sarah loses her seventh husband (2:10; 3:8). Both lament having to endure undeserved reproach (3:6; 3:7, 10).³² Both Tobit and Sarah cry out to God in prayer (3:1–6; 3:11–15). Both conclude that death is better than disgrace and ask God to release (ἀπολύω) them from the earth (3:6; 3:13). Finally, “at that very moment,” both of their prayers are, we are assured, “heard in the glorious presence of God” (3:16).

God's simultaneous hearing of these parallel prayers leads, of course, to the redemptive interweaving of Tobit's and Sarah's lives. This elegant narrative move has deservedly occasioned an outpouring of scholarly eloquence:

Comme le texte lui même le souligne à plusieurs reprises, [la prière de Tobit] présente un effet un parallélisme parfait avec celle de Sara, de future épouse du jeune Tobias. Les deux prières sont prononcées le même jour et au même moment; elles sont inspirées par le même sentiment, la lassitude du juste en butte à la persécution, et elles ont le même dessein, demander la mort puisque le suicide est exclu; elles sont simultanément présentées à Dieu par Raphaël et symétriquement exaucées.³³

Their lives [are] no longer parallel but distant tales of woe. Divine providence will fuse them together and so transform sorrow into joy.³⁴

Deux misères, la nuit du vieil aveugle Tobit et les deuils de la jeune veuve Sarah, vont devenir une seule joie par la correspondance de leurs deux prières unies devant Dieu.³⁵

Each problem contains the germ of a solution for the other. The combination of these plots for the common alleviation of everyone's suffering is not simply evidence of the author's literary genius. . . . Our author presents a hypothetical [322] case that serves as a window into the workings of divine sovereignty that operates in spite of suffering and the presence of demonic evil.³⁶

³¹ See esp. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 30; McCracken, “Narration and Comedy,” 411–12.

³² Tobit's squabble with his wife has generated an ongoing discussion that centres on whether or not Tobit, who narrates 1:3–3:6 in the first person, should be considered a reliable narrator. David McCracken sees Tobit as an unreliable narrator, noting that although Tobit laments suffering the unjust reproach of his wife, it is he who has made unjust accusations (“Narration and Comedy,” 406). Cousland counters that Tobit's perspective accords with the third-person narrator of the rest of the book and defends Tobit by reading the incident in the light of the shame incurred by Tobit's dependence on his wife's work (cf. Sir 25:22) and her master's charity (“Comedy in Error?” 544; cf. Nowell, “Narrator,” 29; Levine, “Teaching Jews,” 51). Noting that the narrator provides a specific date for the event—the seventh of Dystrus (2:12)—Daniel Bertrand argues that the issue here is the suspect provenance of a Passover victim (“Le chevreau d'Anna: La signification de l'anecdotique dans le livre de *Tobit*,” *RHPR* 68 [1988]: 271). Whether Bertrand is right or whether Tobit simply is ashamed to accept charity, Fitzmyer's interpretation of Anna's rather cryptic response admirably suits the context: “[Anna's] reaction is somewhat like that of Job's wife: ‘Do you still hold on to your integrity? Curse God, and die!’ [Job 2:9]” (*Tobit*, 141).

³³ Bertrand, “Le chevreau d'Anna,” 271.

³⁴ Portier-Young, “Alleviation of Suffering,” 47.

³⁵ Jacques Goettmann, *Tobie: Livre des fiancés et des pèlerins* (Paris: Desclée, 1966), 11.

³⁶ Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 32.

As each of these scholars intuit, there is a synergistic relationship in our text between narrative structure and theological assertion: God's sovereignty finds a particularly apt narrative correlate in the movement from two parallel crises to one resolution. But what makes this narrative move so theologically evocative?

One clue arises from the narrator's repeated emphasis on the simultaneity of these two prayers. Following Tobit's prayer for death, the scene suddenly shifts: "On that same day . . . it also happened . . ." (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ταύτῃ συνέβη . . . καί [3:7]). Sarah's parallel misfortune is narrated, and her parallel prayer is introduced with another, rather pleonastic, reference to this simultaneity: "At that same time . . ." (ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ καιρῷ [3:11]). This exact phrase recurs immediately following Sarah's prayer (3:16). And, after the brief scene in heaven wherein Raphael is dispatched, we are told, "At the same time (ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ) that Tobit returned from the courtyard into his house, Sarah daughter of Raguel came down from her upper room" (3:17). Finally, the next scene begins with a reference to what Tobit did on "that same day" (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ [4:1]). Thus, the entire account of Sarah's misfortune and prayer is punctuated at its beginning and its end and at every internal scene transition by a notice of simultaneity.³⁷

Moreover, the presentation of Sarah's story here, intercalated into the ongoing story of Tobit—which could easily have continued uninterrupted from 3:6 to 4:1³⁸—is a departure from the ordinary procedure of classical biblical narrative. The typical strategy would rather involve the presentation of Sarah's misfortune only after Tobias has arrived in Ecbatana—probably during the dialogue with her father that even now contains an abbreviated summary of her story (7:11). As Robert Alter notes, biblical narrative generally follows the main character through to the resolution of his or her crisis, and background information regarding the supporting cast is typically given in retrospective dialogue only as it becomes immediately relevant.³⁹

[323] Although alternating presentation of parallel story lines is characteristic of Greek romances, wherein the two lovers are often separated for the bulk of the narrative and thus their stories must be told separately,⁴⁰ Thomas Hägg notes that the potential of this narrative structure to facilitate comparisons or connections between the two story lines is seldom exploited.⁴¹ Moreover, simultaneous action in the two stories is rare; rather, the absence of explicit time indicators gives the impression of successively occurring events,⁴² and "it is taken for granted that nothing important has happened to one of the characters when the narration has been concentrated on the other."⁴³ The unusual intercalation of Sarah's story into Tobit's is thus

³⁷ Tobit's usage is clearly much more explicit—and therefore more emphatic—than the pattern of resumptive repetition that Shemeryahu Talmon identified as the primary means of indicating simultaneity in biblical narrative ("The Presentation of Synchronicity and Simultaneity in Biblical Narrative," *ScrHier* 27 [1978]: 9–26).

³⁸ Cf. Van Den Eynde, "One Journey," 275.

³⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 66, 91. Our introduction to Rebekah, of whom we hear nothing before Abraham's servant sees her drawing water, is a convenient example (Gen 24:1–27). As William Soll notes, the same is true of the fairy tales to which he compares the book of Tobit ("Tobit and Folklore Studies, with Emphasis on Propp's Morphology," in *SBL Seminar Papers, 1988* [SBLSP 27; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], 226; cf. Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 76 n. 19).

⁴⁰ See esp. Tomas Hägg, *Narrative Technique in Ancient Greek Romances: Studies of Chariton, Xenophon Ephesius, and Achilles Tatius* (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska Institutet i Athen 8.8; Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 1971), 138–88, 311–14.

⁴¹ Hägg, *Narrative Technique*, 314.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 312.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 187.

emphatic, highlighting both the parallel between these two characters and the simultaneity of their prayers.

The narrative function of simultaneity has not been carefully articulated,⁴⁴ but it is clear that to ancient readers simultaneity suggested providential interweaving of fates. Herodotus assures us that the battles of Plataea and Mycale occurred on the very same day (τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρης συμπιπτούσης [9.100]; τῆς αὐτῆς ἡμέρης συνέβαινε [9.101]), and deduces “divine ordering of things” (9.100; Godley [LCL]) from this (historically dubious) coincidence.⁴⁵ Such use of simultaneity to assert the intervention of providence became a common historiographical *topos*. It is heavily exploited by Polybius, for whom the providential ordering of history is a major theme. As Frank Walbank explains, “[Polybius] is at pains to underline the clues which *Tyche* distributed in the form of synchronisms, by which at certain dates universal movement is signalled by dynastic or other changes occurring [324] simultaneously in several realms.”⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Plutarch reports that the birth of Alexander was concurrent with favorable portents:

To Philip . . . there came three messages at the same time: the first that Parmenio had conquered the Illyrians in a great battle, the second that his race-horse had won a victory at the Olympic games, while a third announced the birth of Alexander. These things delighted him, of course, and the seers raised his hopes still higher by declaring that the son whose birth coincided with three victories would be always victorious. (*Alex.* 3.8–9; Perrin [LCL])

In the NT, Luke too capitalizes on the assumption that simultaneity signals divine providence. In Acts 10, the conclusion of Peter’s vision authorizing him to eat profane food is simultaneous with the arrival of Cornelius’ delegation (vv. 9, 17, 19)—a coincidence that reinforces Luke’s contention that the reception of Gentiles into the community has divine backing.⁴⁷ This synchronism thus serves an important function in Luke’s narrative rhetoric by highlighting God’s providential intervention (cf. 10:30; 11:11).

Similarly, Tobit posits a world in which—to quote an heir to this belief—“all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). The lives of God’s people coincide because thus God has preordained. Simultaneity, then, is an assertion of order, of stability, of divine plan. The temporal

⁴⁴ See Meir Sternberg, “Telling in Time (I): Chronology and Narrative Theory,” *Poetics Today* 11 (1990): 941. In 1994, Ayhan Aksu-Koç and Christiane von Stutterheim found not a single study devoted to the topic (“Temporal Relations in Narrative: Simultaneity,” in *Relating Events in Narrative: A Crosslinguistic Developmental Study* [eds. Ruth Aronson Berman, and Dan Isaac Slobin; Hillsdale, N. J.: Erlbaum, 1994], 394–95). But note Bianca Theisen’s description of a recurring pattern in the novels of Heinrich von Kleist, wherein “two completely contingent events . . . are given simultaneously, meeting in one instant, and from that instant seem to be contingent on one another, necessitating interpretations . . . that construct casual or teleological relationships for these events” (“Simultaneity: A Narrative Figure in Kleist,” *Modern Language Notes* 121 [2006]: 515).

⁴⁵ See Thomas Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 32–33. On the unlikelihood of this account being historically accurate, see W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus: With Introduction and Appendixes* (2 vols.; repr. ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 2:331.

⁴⁶ F. W. Walbank, “Polybius and the Past,” in *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World: Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 182. See also the synchronisms in Herodotus, *Hist.* 7.166; Diodorus Siculus, 11.24; 11.34.

⁴⁷ Daniel Marguerat, *Les Actes des apôtres (1–12)* (CNT 5a; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007), 381: “Le narrateur marquait la simultanéité entre l’approche des envoyés du centurion et la montée de Pierre sur la terrasse pour prier. Cet emboîtement des événements induit l’idée d’une main invisible à l’action providentielle.”

coincidence of Sarah and Tobit's prayers is not happenstance but rather a testament to and actualization of the fact that God set Sarah apart to be Tobias' wife "before the world was made" (6:18). Thus Tobit's explicit assertion that nothing can escape God's hand (13:2) is reinforced implicitly by the narrative's structure—the parallel presentation of Sarah's and Tobit's simultaneous pleas.

III. ASSERTING GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN EXILE

Though a few have suggested Palestinian provenance, most scholars see Tobit as a product of the Diaspora.⁴⁸ Perhaps the most convincing evidence here is [325] the pervasive sense of dislocation that inheres in its exilic setting (cf. 1:10), an aspect of this narrative that has been emphasized by William Soll.⁴⁹ For Soll, exile is the "root misfortune" of which the concrete troubles experienced by Tobit and Sarah are "acute manifestations".⁵⁰ Tobit's poverty is caused by Sennacherib's oppressive rule (1:15, 20), and it is the late-night labour of burying his brutally murdered kinsmen that eventually leads to his sleeping outdoors and thus his sparrow-dropping induced blindness;⁵¹ Sarah's vulnerability to Asmodeus is made possible by her residence in the land over which he has domain (cf. *T.Sol.* 5:10). In short, the crises that arise in Tobit's initial chapters evoke "the chronic condition of exile."⁵²

Although not every aspect of Soll's argument is persuasive—I, for one, am not convinced that the narrative presents Tobit's blindness as deriving in any direct way from his exile—nevertheless, his more general observation is compelling. Moreover, it is easy to see why such a setting would appeal to an author living in the Diaspora. Just as the writer of 4 Ezra, wrestling with the theological implications of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, set his story against the historically analogous situation of the Babylonian destruction, so Tobit's author reflects on Diaspora life in the second century—or thereabouts⁵³—using the historical analogy of eighth-century Israelite exile.

The relevance of Diaspora anxiety for understanding the narrative rhetoric of the book of Tobit has been lucidly emphasized by Amy-Jill Levine. Levine argues that Tobit's preoccupation with kinship and endogamous marriage is best understood as reflecting an attempt to reestablish Jewish identity in the Diaspora by means of "a shift from a geographical to a genealogical definition."⁵⁴ Of course, in order to accomplish this redefinition and relieve male anxiety, Jewish

⁴⁸ According to Zimmerman, "There is scarcely any other extracanonical book that conveys so unmistakable an impression of being written in the Dispersion" (*Tobit*, 18). See also Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 34; Richard Bauckham, "Tobit as a Parable for the Exiles of Northern Israel," in *Studies in the Book of Tobit: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (ed. Mark Bredin; Library of Second Temple Studies 55; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 151–64. Palestinian origin is favored by Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 52–54; Merten Rabenau, *Studien zum Buch Tobit* (BZAW 220; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 175–90; cf. J. T. Milik, "La patrie de Tobie," *RB* 73 (1966): 522–30. Others remain agnostic—so Moore, *Tobit*, 42–43.

⁴⁹ Soll, "Misfortune and Exile in Tobit: The Juncture of a Fairy Tale Source and Deuteronomistic Theology," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 209–31. See also idem, "Tobit and Folklore Studies," 50–52; Bauckham, "Tobit as a Parable"; Fassbeck, "Tobit's Religious Universe," 187–88.

⁵⁰ Soll, "Misfortune and Exile," 222–25.

⁵¹ So Soll, "Misfortune and Exile," 223–24. Another interpretation sees the sparrows as demonic instruments (cf. *Jub.* 11:9–24; Mark 4:4, 15). See Moore, *Tobit*, 131.

⁵² Soll, "Misfortune and Exile," 222. Cf. Amy-Jill Levine, "Diaspora as Metaphor: Bodies and Boundaries in the Book of Tobit," in *Diaspora Jews and Judaism* (eds. J. A. Overman, and R. S. MacLennan; South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 41; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 105–6.

⁵³ See Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 35.

⁵⁴ Levine, "Diaspora as Metaphor," 107.

women must be “properly domiciled” [326] into procreative roles.⁵⁵ Thus Levine summarizes the work of the narrative: “Emphasizing the acute threat to identity posed by the exilic collapse of boundaries and then diffusing that threat by reinscribing distinctions, the Book of Tobit brings stability to the unstable world.”⁵⁶

If this is the meaning of endogamy in Tobit, it is not surprising to see echoes of the patriarchal marriages in the account of Tobias’s journey. As Tobit reminds his son, “Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our ancestors of old, all took wives from among their kindred” (4:12).⁵⁷ What is somewhat surprising is that the reference in Tobias’s wedding night prayer (8:5–7) is to Adam and Eve rather than, say, Jacob and Rachel. As Gabriele Fassbeck has noted, this “would have been a perfect opportunity for the narrator to make the many underlying parallels with the patriarchal stories explicit.”⁵⁸ Instead, Tobias reiterates the creation account:

You made Adam, and for him you made his wife Eve as a helper and support. From the two of them the human race has sprung. You said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; let us make a helper for him like himself.” (8:6)

This association of Sarah and Tobias with Adam and Eve here confirms Levine’s suggestion that something more fundamental than endogamy is at stake here—that is, that endogamy is one expression of this story’s broader concern for reasserting order. Like God’s provision of a helper for Adam, God’s providential uniting of Sarah and Tobias is an assertion of the fundamental orderedness of creation.⁵⁹ Dispersion, then, is not a return to primordial chaos, for God continues to order creation into its corresponding elements.⁶⁰

This, then, is what is at stake in Tobit’s assertion of divine providence. Tobit posits a world carefully ordered, a world in which every lack has its corresponding fulfillment and every exigency “contains the germ”⁶¹ of another’s resolution. Tobit’s narrative world has no loose ends; each element is integrated into God’s comprehensive [327] plan. The story’s two families are joined not only by the bonds of kinship but also by the preordaining purposes of God—better, it is precisely the *correspondence* of kinship and divine arrangement that fascinates the teller of this story and reassures its reader. The simultaneity of Tobit’s and Sarah’s prayers thus serves as a narrative assertion of God’s supervisory control. And, as the preordained plot unfolds, carefully managed suspense gives expression to the anxiety of Diaspora life but finally robs it of its power; for, despite Dispersion, the world is still providentially aligned.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 105, 117.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁷ See Van Den Eynde, “One Journey,” 278–79; Weitzman, “Allusion, Artifice, and Exile in the Hymn of Tobit,” *JBL* 115 (1996): 60; Fassbeck, “Tobit’s Religious Universe,” 180.

⁵⁸ Fassbeck, “Tobit’s Religious Universe,” 189–90.

⁵⁹ Jon Levenson aptly describes the biblical idea of creation as “the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order” (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988], 12).

⁶⁰ Note that the account of Eve’s creation in Genesis 2 evokes precisely the notion of correspondence that informs Tobit’s narrative structure. God makes for Adam “a helper as his partner,” as the NRSV translates the construction (עֹזֵר כַּגִּידָוּ [2:18, 20]); “corresponding to him” would be a more literal translation of כַּגִּידָוּ (see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* [trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984], 227)—as is suggested by the Septuagint’s rendering (κατ’ αὐτόν).

⁶¹ Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 32.