

THE HEALING OF BLINDNESS IN APOCRYPHAL BOOKS AND THE FINE ARTS

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Abstract. *The image of Tobit and Tobias in apocryphal books and the fine arts gives the possibility to break a code of the attitude of society to the person having the sight disabilities in contemporary society. We can assume that the image of Tobias which has lots of positive moral features in the development of history could have the influence to the formation of a positive attitude of the society to sightless people. The history of Tobias's life and especially its happy ending had a great influence on the formation of the image of the guardian angel and the spread in Italian Renaissance pictorial art as well as in the art of other countries starting from the fifteenth century.*

Keywords: *apocryphal books, blindness, the fine arts, image of Tobit and Tobias.*

Introduction

Apocrypha (Gr. *apokryphos* – “hidden”) are the writings retelling in another way or supplementing the Old and the New Testaments; however, they are non-canonised by the Church. Moreover, they tell stories about the childhood of Jesus, the life of his mother Mary and her parents St Ann and St Joakim. Apocryphal books are literary texts of Jews and early Christians, which do not coincide with the official religious teaching and are not included into the canonical Bible. In some countries, these books are considered to be insufficiently sacred to place next to the Old Testament and the New Testament. Over ten such books are known, to name a few: two “Books of the Maccabees”, “Susanna and Daniel”, “Wisdom of Solomon”, “The Book of Judith” etc. “The Book of Tobit” is also among them.

The image of Tobias in apocryphal books

The myth tells about a man named Tobit, who lived in Tishbe, Upper Galilee, in Nepal's family. This man remained faithful to God even in the times when all other people worshiped golden calves made by the King of Israel, and when he was imprisoned and brought by the Assyrian King to Nineveh by the river Tiger. Living with his wife Anna and his son Tobias among pagan people, he did not give up his belief, gave alms, buried the imprisoned who were sentenced to death by the king's orders. After one of such burials he became

blind. Tobit lived in poverty; however held no anger for God for making him blind; he remained devout and honest. When once his wife Anna brought a goat, Tobit warned her: “Beware that it was not stolen. If it was, give it away to the owner because we should not eat what had been stolen, we even ought to not touch it.” Anna was working hard, she sustained the family by spinning. Tobit asked the heavens for some help. Meanwhile his niece Sarah, residing in Media in Ecbatana city, addressed the heavens too; the evil spirit Asmodeus fell in love with her. This demon killed seven bridegrooms of Sarah before reaching the bed of the newlyweds. The heavens sent the archangel Raphael to help them. The old man who asked the heavens for death remembered his silver lent once in Media. He sent his son Tobias escorted by a young man Azaleas, who actually was Raphael repelling evil spirits and patronising travellers. On the first night of their journey, they stopped at the river Tiger. The young Tobias went to wash his feet. An enormous fish jumped out of water and tried to swallow him. Raphael told him to catch the fish with no fear and take its heart, gall and liver. According to the archangel, the heart and liver help repel evil spirits and gall heals blindness. After that event they successfully reached Media. Tobias took his father’s loans and decided to visit a familiar Christian man whose daughter, Sarah, he foresaw as his wife, as advised by the archangel.

Raphael indicated a way to get rid of the demon Asmodeus. Tobias repelled the evil spirit by frankincense made of liver and heart of the caught fish. At night in secret, Sarah’s father dug a pit intended for burying the eighth bridegroom. However, he did not predict that at that night he would have to back-fill the empty pit because Asmodeus would be defeated. The wedding of Tobias and Sarah was celebrated. The father of Sarah gave half of his property to his son-in-law and promised the second half in his will. Happy newlyweds went to the blind Tobit. Anna recognised her son from afar and rushed to announce the news to her husband. Raphael taught the young Tobias: “When you enter the house, pray, call for God and, thanking God, approach your father, kiss him and spread fish’s gall all over his eyes; and then your father will see the light of the sky and will be extremely happy.” Tobias greased his father’s eyes. He suffered for a half an hour and peeled the ointment off as if an egg’s skin. The father and the son did not know how to thank Raphael; they offered Raphael half of the property they brought. Then Raphael told the old Tobit: “As God loved you, he tested, tempered you. I was sent by God to heal you and repel the evil spirit that approached Sarah, your son’s wife. I am Raphael, one of seven saint archangels, who stand in front of the Lord.” Hearing this, all trembling, they kneeled facing the ground. The archangel told them: “Calm and don’t be afraid! Thank God and spread his miracles!” Having said this, the archangel disappeared (Šventasis Raštas, 1999).

In this story Tobit is depicted as a believer and a man of high morality; in his earthly life God awards him. “The Book of Tobit”, entitled by a name of the main character, links the Jewish way of living and morality to eastern folklore by attractive narration favoured both by Jews and Christians. Prayers, psalms and words of wisdom wrapped up in a skilfully narrated story help understand the belief and religious milieu of an unknown author. “The Book of Tobit” was perhaps written in the early II century BC. The place of writing is unknown. The inspired author created a story consisting of three widely spread folk stories of that time:

- 1) a story “The Grateful Dead” (a story about a man who became poor, but was awarded for the burying a desecrated corpse);
- 2) a story “The Monster of the Bride’s Bedchamber” (a story about a demon who would kill bridegrooms on the wedding days);
- 3) “The Story of Achicar” (a story about a wise courtier who was betrayed by an adopted son for no reason and later justified).

The specificity of a structure, images and origin of the book come from the Bible. Even though only Ammon and Nahum are mentioned by names, the story was determined by other books of the Holy Script, especially “Genesis”, “Job” and “Isaiah”. A law of repeated remorse in “The Book of Law”, i.e. the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished, is theology of “The Book of Tobit”. Even though “The Book of Tobit” is included into a list of historical books, its content is specific. It is attributed to a group of historical books and books of wisdom. The book includes many wise sayings similar to sayings of other wisdom books (Tobit 4,3-19.21; 12,6-10; 14,7.9) as well as familiar themes of writings of wisdom: loyalty to the Law of Moses, the patronage of angels, the duty to take care of parents, wedlock fidelity, respect for the dead and importance of alms, prayer and fast (Šventasis Raštas, 1999). In fine art this myth was depicted by Italian, Dutch and other artists (Мифы народов мира, 1982).

The image of Tobias and Tobit in fine art

Christian fine art turned ideas of apocryphs into independent themes of paintings (Universalus meno žodynas, 1998). The image of Tobias and Tobit in the fine arts can be divided into several sub-themes:

1. Tobit buries killed Christian people.
2. The blinding of Tobit.
3. Tobit and his wife Anna.
4. Tobias and the archangel Raphael.
5. Departure of Tobias.
6. Tobias catches a fish in the river Tiger.

7. Tobias and Sarah.
8. Tobias heals eyes of his father Tobit.
9. Archangel Raphael leaves the family of Tobit.

The article presents only several most characteristic examples of the theme of Tobit and Tobias of our collection comprising 204 reproductions of artworks. An Italian painter Andrea Verrocchio (1435–1488) is one of the first authors on the theme of Tobit and Tobias familiar to us. He was a goldsmith, sculptor and painter of Italian Renaissance, who turned his workshop into a centre of the sunset of Florentine early Renaissance, where a number of artists who later became famous obtained their education (Universalus meno žodynas, 1998). In A. Verrocchio's canvas the major figure is of an angel. The painter decorated angel's clothes with elaborate embroidery and falling folds. Tobias is recognised from a fish that he carries; he is led by the archangel Raphael holding a box full of fish's gall which will cure Tobias's father's unseeing eyes. This piece of art is not only by A. Verrocchio, but also by other members of the Florentine studio. Perhaps, a puppy was painted by Leonardo da Vinci (Lodwick, 2003). The travellers walk along a slope, a perfectly painted landscape including mountains, a snaking river and a bridge is behind them. The painting is exhibited at the National Gallery in London. The composition of this painting was copied in detail by A. Verrocchio's contemporary, fellow citizen Piero del Pollaiola (1443–1496) who painted a picture "Tobias and Angel". The main part of the canvas is covered by the archangel Gabriel having a handsome young man's face. The young Tobias who is smaller and younger, holds archangel's arm, walking behind. It can be assumed that the travellers are coming back home because Tobias carries the fish. Like his predecessor, the painter neglects the context of the apocryphal book in which the enormous fish almost swallowed Tobias; later on the angel told Tobias to catch it and use its heart, gall and liver to combat the evil spirit Asmodeus and cure blind father's eyes. In the painting Tobias easily carries the "small fish" by one hand, comfortably tied with a rope. The picture is exhibited in Turin (Italy), Sabauda Gallery (Мифы народов мира, 1982).

An Italian artist of early Renaissance, Pietro Perugino (1448–1523), who together with other famous masters painted frescos on the walls of the outstanding Sistine Chapel, also dealt with the theme on Tobias. He left a painting "Archangel Michael and Archangel Raphael with Tobias". P. Perugino freely interprets the story of Tobias. In his painting he depicts the archangel Michael who was not mentioned in the story of Tobias. We can draw an assumption that P. Perugino painted the archangel Michael because that was a creature most trusted by God and heading the heavenly soldiery. Michael was a brave warrior, reliable guardian, protecting from evil, the superior over all angels. Michael was the mightiest archangel. In the Old Testament, Daniel calls

Michael a powerful grandee and a guardian of the Israeli nation. The name Michael means “who is like God”; the name suits the angel holding much power. Michael is a fighter for order and justice in each step, fights with evil, takes care of ill people (Lewellyn, 2003). Perhaps because of all these Michael’s strengths P. Perugino depicted him beside the archangel Raphael in his picture. Another moment of free interpretation in the painting under analysis focuses on Tobias who is depicted not as a young man but a boy led by Raphael holding his hand. P. Perugino’s pieces of art are characteristic of slim figures, simple composition of a painting, deliberate perspective, idealised mood of characters. This piece of art in oil on wood is exhibited at the National Gallery in London.

In the Louvre Museum, there is a famous painting by a Dutch artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), “Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness”. This painting depicting several figures bears an exceptional feature: in no other painting on healing Tobias familiar to us we can find his blind father with his head covered with a cloth which slightly contrasts old man’s bare feet. The painting is also outstanding among other authors’ works for its dynamism. The painter who favoured expressiveness and decorativeness not only depicted his characters at the background of rich architecture, but also placed one decorated column at the right-hand front plan. No information was found on whether the Dutch grand master or his disciples A. van Dyck, J. Jordaens, F. Snyders and other attempted to transpose this painting onto canvas.

An Italian painter Bernardo Strozzi’s (1581–1644) cultural legacy includes “The Healing of Tobit by Tobias” (1625). The plot of the painting includes major characters only. At the centre there is the blind Tobit wearing ornate silk clothes; other characters are also finely dressed: Anna, the son healing his father and the angel behind them with spread wings. Beside them lie a huge fish and a dog watching the procedure of healing. At a greenish background there is a fragment of a fireplace and a dark curtain. The son’s face is depicted without any outstanding features. The painting may be characterised as unfinished, created in a hurry. This canvas is exhibited at the Cleveland Museum of Art (USA). Perhaps, a notice on B. Strozzi’s painting “The Healing of Tobit by Tobias” (painted in 1625) is correct because ten years later the artist returned to this theme and brilliantly completed the artwork. This canvas of rich colouring was painted in 1635 and is exhibited at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. It should be admitted that B. Strozzi did not follow the context of “The Book of Tobias” in which blinded Tobit suffered and lived in poverty. Regardless, in both variants of the paintings (created in 1625 and 1635) the painter depicts Tobit wearing fine clothes. A wish to demonstrate the ability to render the characteristics of fabric, gloss of silk and satin overshadowed the mythological context. The title of the painting already indicates its content. At the front there is the young Tobias kneeling on one knee, suggesting a handful

of treasures taken out of a vessel to the angel as a reward for provided help during the journey and the healing of the father. The youth is persuading the angel and even touches an edge of angel's clothing. Having regained the eyesight and treasures, Tobias's father also tries to persuade the angel to accept gifts. He is ready to give the second part of the restored property. At the second plan of the painting three women are talking to each other, two of them probably are Anna and Sarah. This masterpiece had a long journey being possessed by rich Italians, until it has been bought by the Grand Duke of Lotharingia in 1832. Presently, the painting is exhibited at the Palatine Pitti Gallery (Italy).

An Italian painter Domenico Fetti (1589–1624) presents his interpretation of an episode of this story in the picture "The Healing of Tobit". Here not the son, but the angel spreads fish's gall over Tobit's eyes. Here Raphael is depicted wearing red clothes and blue wings. In his left hand the angel holds the curing ointment, with his right hand the angel strokes over the eyes of the blind man. Beside the sitting old Tobit there is Sarah standing and Anna watching the healing. Faces of all the characters are focused; it seems that a dog beside them is also calm. The painter does not follow the subtleties of the story and depicts Tobit sitting not in his shabby dwelling but rather neat stairs of a wealthy building with columns. Between the columns there are seen several figures of dressy people. On the left hand side, there is a landscape depicting green trees and clouds against the blue sky. This is a pleasant example of classical Italian painting. This small oil painting on canvas (created in 1620–1623) is exhibited at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.

A French painter Jacques Blanchard (1600–1638), who especially favoured mythological and religious themes, depicts major characters of this story in his painting "Tobias Healing the Blindness of His Father". The old Tobit, being touched, raises his arms, stretching his long, old fingers. His son, holding a vessel with the cure in his left hand, spreads the ointment with his right hand on his father's eyes. The leaning and excited Anna is being calmed by the archangel, pointing his finger to the sky and saying that everything is in God's will and we should trust God. A young pretty Jewish girl, perhaps Tobit's niece Sarah, is standing behind Tobias. The artist dressed the son and the father in luxurious clothes. The piece of art has been created under the influence of the Italian school. J. Blanchard got the creative impulses from painters of the Venetian school, P. Veronese and Titian. The canvas displays subtle colouring, earning him the title "French Titian" (Universals meno žodynas, 1998). This middle-size piece of art in oil on canvas is exhibited at Bordeaux Museum of Fine Arts (France).

The mythological theme was especially favoured by a Dutch painter Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–1669). Well-known masterpieces on the mythological theme: "Danae", "The Return of the Prodigal Son", "The Wedding

of Samson”, “The Blinding of Samson” etc.; however, the dearest story on the theme is the story about Tobit and Tobias. This is an extensive gallery of drawings, engravings and paintings: “Tobit and Anna with the Goat”, “Sleeping Tobit”, “Blind Tobit”, “Tobias Healing His Father’s Blindness”, “Archangel Raphael Leaves the Family of Tobit”, “Tobit and Anna” etc.

As far as we know, it was in 1651 when the great master returned to the theme for the last time; he created an engraving “Blind Tobit”. The picture depicts Tobit hurrying to open the door. Possibly, the painter depicted a moment when the father heard the steps of his returning son. Anxiety and longing reflected on father’s face prove this version. In the engraving, the painter emphasises Tobit’s blindness: the blind man is about to touch a wall while searching for the door with his right hand. The etching perfectly renders the dynamism of a movement. Tobit is in a hurry, a dog is wagging between legs. The old man’s dwelling is suggestively depicted: a spinning wheel lying on the floor overturned by the man in a hurry, a shabby armchair by the fireplace. This etching belongs to a private collection; nevertheless, it is often on display at Amsterdam Art Museum.

The grand Dutch master of painting depicting the story of Tobias thoroughly followed the narration of “The Book Tobit”. His creative legacy is versatile: group portraits, biblical scenes, landscapes, thus avoiding specialisation in one genre, contrary to the convenient tradition in painting. He experienced many contrasts. Since 1631 the apogee of his career began: he became one of the most popular painters, obtained a big studio, stocked a collection of fine art, had a representational house. In 1656 he had financial problems, his house and property were put up for sale (*Universalus meno žodynas*, 1998). We may draw an assumption that such rich and diverse life experience enabled him extensively reflect various social strata. Perhaps, not accidentally there are several beggars and disabled people depicted in the total of 300 etchings and 1600 drawings. The grand realist adequately reflected the milieu of that period, without decoration and refinement.

A Dutch painter of the seventeenth century, Rutgers van Nieval, dedicated one of his pieces to the theme of Tobias. His painting “Tobias Heals His Father’s Eyes” is interesting not only by its artistic value, but also by the story of a tragic death of the last owner of the painting. This canvas belongs to the collection of artworks of the deceased Lithuanian priest Ričardas Mikutavičius. The entire painting is wonderfully lighted by a candle. The plot is traditional: the son using a feather spreads the fish gall over father’s unseeing eyes, whereas the wife Anna and the angel, who assisted in obtaining the miraculous cure, are watching this exciting procedure. An exceptional feature of this canvas is that the painter depicted the angel Raphael having the face of a boy, similar to traditionally depicted angels cupids. Whereas in the myth Raphael is a young

man who helped Tobias cope with many difficulties throughout the journey. There are several horizontal dark strokes across the painting. The painting was created on wood; therefore, stripes could appear over several hundreds of years in the places of joint wooden planks.

If Gustave Dore, Julius Schnorr von Carosfeld became famous for creating engravings depicting biblical scenes, an Italian sculptor Domenico Mastroianni earned his fame by created relieves based on major events of the Old Testament and major characters of this source. Moreover, this author depicted characters of apocryphal books. Extremely expressive is a relief by D. Mastroianni, “Blind Tobit”. At the centre of the relief, Tobit sits in his room. The painter renders blindness of the character by the details of closed eyes and reclined head. Tobit strokes the dog with its front legs on Tobit’s legs. Among utensils, we notice a shovel used by Tobit to dig several pits intended for burying Christian prisoners sentenced to death by the order of the Assyrian King. The in-depth image is depicted masterfully. At the third plane there are two hardly visible human figures. Perhaps these are the son and wife of Tobit. The relief finely renders Tobit’s disability and suffering.

A twentieth-century African painter Heribert Reul (b. 1911) has created stained glass for one of churches in Togo, “The Healing of Tobit”. Three characters are present in the healing procedure: the old Tobit, his son and the angel. If European painters depict the blind man, Tobit, sitting, H. Reul portrayed him standing. Blindness is clearly rendered: the old man’s eyes are closed, he holds a stick. His blobber-lipped son is spreading the ointment on father’s eyes. The angel stands behind, holding a green fish in his hand. The angel is depicted without wings. Like in majority of art works depicting the story of Tobit, the procedure of healing is observed by a puppy. The father is depicted wearing a head covering, quite too big to be a Jewish kippah; the son wears a head covering resembling a turban. An outstanding feature of the painting under analysis is that all characters of the episode from Tobit’s life, i.e. father, son and angel, are black men.

The analysis of artistic reproduction of 204 paintings of the fifteenth–twentieth centuries shows that the theme of Tobit and Tobias was the most popular in the seventeenth century. 116 pieces of art (56.8 per cent) of our collection are attributed to this period. Mostly the theme of Tobit and Tobias was favoured by Dutch and Italian painters. We can single out a group of painters who especially addressed this theme and created not one but several pieces. Some of the depicted the entire life story of Tobit and Tobias: P. Rubens, B. Strozzi, N. Cornelis, A. Vaccari, B. Covalino. Rembrandt rendered the life story of Tobit and Tobias through 26 drawings, engravings and paintings familiar to us.

Discussion

The exploration of the theme revealed some issues to be discussed. First of all, the problem of usage of the names occurred. One of the apocryphs / apocryphal books was entitled “The Book of Tobit”; it was about the life story of a devoted and good-hearted Jew who was taken to Nineveh as a prisoner when Assyrian people took Jerusalem in the VIII century BC. The father had a son Tobias; however, in some literature sources they father is called Tovit and the son is called Tobias. Painters entitling their paintings usually gave the name Tobias to both father and son. We may draw an assumption that these differences between names have occurred due to mistakes in translation because sources were translated from Hebrew into several languages, thus the names and place names were altered. Moreover, the same names in different languages are different. For instance, Tobias in Lithuanian is Tobijas, in English Thobias / Tobias, in French Tobie, in German Tobias, in Jewish Tobi.

Another characteristic incorrectness in titles of the paintings: the archangel Raphael is entitled as angel. Angels are treated as God’s messengers. These creatures are sent to provide help to people, to warn them or send an important message. Archangels are powerful creatures, especially close to God, i.e. angels of a higher rank.

The Bible lists three archangels: Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. Other two groups of angels are cherubs and seraphs. There is one important difference between archangels and cherubs: archangels communicate with people on the Earth, whereas cherubs and seraphs do not (Lewelly, 2003). In “The Book of Tobit”, the young Tobias was escorted by the archangel Raphael because he fosters the blind, doctors, sisters of mercy and travellers. In literature in Lithuanian, Raphael (Lith. Rafaelis) (Hebr. Raphael – “God healed”), the archangel acknowledged not only by Christians but also by Muslims, who tames evil spirits, illnesses, is tried to be named Rapolas. This name was Lithuanianised by D. Ramonienė, the compiler of “The Dictionary of Christian Iconography” (Krikščioniškosios ikonografijos žodynas, 1997), and A. Karsokienė who translated from English C. Llewellyn’s book “Saints and Angels”; after Lithuanianisation Rafailas turns into Rapolas. We maintain that Rapolas and Rafaelis are two different names: Such Lithuanianisation of the names is unreasoned and useless.

The story of the life of Tobit facilitated the popularisation of the concept of a guardian angel. Many Christian people believe that we have guardian angels protecting and helping us. It is considered that at birth each person gets a guardian angel who escorts throughout life. This comforting idea exists for thousands of years now; it is mentioned in the Bible (Lewellyn, 2003). The concept of the guardian angel was formed in Judaic apocryphal writings

(Ramonienė, 1997). As D. Ramonienė holds it, the plot of Tobias made much impact on the formation of the image of a guardian angel and the spread of this image in Italian Renaissance paintings and pieces of art in other countries in the seventeenth century. However, as it was mentioned earlier, an Italian painter Andrea Verrocchio was one of the first painters to use this theme; in 1470–1480 he painted “Landscape with Tobias and the Angel”. His fellow citizen Filippino Lippi painted “Tobias and the Angel” in 1480. Painters even in titles of paintings used the concept of a guardian angel and portrayed an image of a guardian angel. Thus, an image of a guardian angel began formation in Christian fine art in the fifteenth century.

Paintings on the theme of Tobias made an impact on people’s consciousness greater than just objects of aesthetical appreciation. It was believed that images of Tobias and a guardian angel protected during journeys; therefore, paintings would be commissioned if someone planned to travel. Other people willing to regain vision would purchase paintings depicting plots of Tobias’s life story (Lodwick, 2003).

The story of the life of Tobias is an excellent material for moral education of pupils. Examples based on this theme can be used in fine art as visual material. Apocryphal books could be more extensively analysed during lessons on religion.

A blind man Tobit both in his life story and paintings, sculptures, is depicted as a man of high morality, who patiently embraced his disability, even in hardest moments did not lose faith which actually saved him. An image of the Old Tobit became a standard of morality. A pro-image of this theme is found in a story about a miraculous healing of a blind man in the Gospel according to John (John 9, 1–1).

Conclusions

1. Realistic pieces of art adequately reflected everyday life of people, expectations of the disabled of a particular period of time.
2. Some artists painting on the theme of Tobit and Tobias did not follow the texts of “The Book of Tobit”.
3. Stories on miraculous healing of eyes provided much hopes and strength to people, especially those who were highly religious.
4. The positive image of Tobit made an impact on positive societal attitudes towards blind people throughout history.
5. The story of the life of Tobit is suitable for moral education. Fine art examples on this theme could be used as visual material. Apocryphal books could be broader analysed in lessons on religion.

6. The story of the life of Tobit and especially its happy-end could have made an impact on formation of a positive image of a guardian angel, starting from the fifteenth century and spreading not only in Italian fine art but also in other countries.
7. The theme of Tobit and Tobias was the most popular with Dutch and Italian artists of the seventeenth century.

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