

The Book of Tobit

It would not be easy to determine in what way a story or legend becomes part of a people's accepted religious tradition. The myth-creating genius of ancient peoples doubtless threw up an endless variety of tales of Gods and men, some the product of purely spiritual Imagination, others founded on such physical events as were reflections of spiritual deeds. Only a certain number of them would pass the test of time. Perhaps the general sense would reject one and choose another, as it chooses or rejects a word in a nation's speech; or perhaps some great Initiate would bring form into an incoherent mass of legends, as the Greeks said that Homer was the author of the canon of the Gods.

The book of Tobit, accepted by a simpler age from among the authentic inspired biblical books, was rejected by a more Protestant theology no doubt for a variety of reasons. The story of the recovery of prosperity to Tobit's house by the magical properties of a fish and the intervention of an Archangel could hardly be acceptable to an age which had rejected magic and was inclined to reject Archangels. There is no direct prophecy in the book of the central event of Christianity, nor is it in the historical line of Old Testament history. Indeed it could hardly be accepted as a religious book by an age which had learned to scrutinise historical detail with minute accuracy but had lost the power to interpret the whole picture contained in such stories as the Book of Tobit. When religious feeling expressed itself naturally in creative art, when every church was a bible in pictures, then the scenes of the story of Tobit – the old man waiting, blinded, by the fire, or Tobias his son led by the Angel Raphael with fish in hand and little dog at his side, or the evil spirit Asmodeus fleeing from Sarah 'to the uppermost parts of Egypt' – such scenes were among the most favoured themes for painting, sculpture, or glass. But what could a

Deist do with the liver of a fish? Or a Broad Churchman with a woman who slew seven husbands by witchcraft?

That stories such as Tobit should be revived and presented in different ways to the public to-day is only one among many signs that people are seeking again for a more pictorial consciousness. As a rule, however, all that is understood of these old religious and mythical stories is their dramatic and human element – the moral of the piece is nothing higher than virtue rewarded, and the story as a whole presents no image of spiritual truth.

Yet there are quite plain indications that the writer of the story, in the form in which we have it, does not intend it to be taken *only* as a human story. The book has a close relation to the book of the prophet Jonah, whose prophecies, we are told Tobit accepted and so was able to warn his son Tobias in time for him to flee from Nineveh before it was destroyed. The fish which came out of the river to Tobias was no ordinary fish; we are told it 'would have swallowed the young man up' – even as the fish swallowed up Jonah. And in the thanksgiving of Tobit for the recovery of his son and of his sight there are the words: 'He leadeth down to the grave and bringeth up again.' Such things indicate that the book stands very near to the 'sign of the prophet Jonah' and to begin to comprehend the book we must understand a little of the meaning of that sign, as Rudolf Steiner has portrayed it in many of his lectures.

The going down into Hades, or the going down into the Fish, is the symbol of the way in which the Mystery of Initiation was fulfilled in the times before Christ. The man who was to receive pure spiritual experience came into a trance-like condition resembling death in which he lay for three days. The three days' death of the Christ is the fulfilment in physical fact of the ancient Mysteries of Initiation, and for the early Christians the fish became the symbol of the Redeemer. When, therefore, the young man Tobias takes hold of the fish which rises from the river as he goes down into it, he takes hold of the power of the new conscious

Initiation by which he receives into himself the healing forces of the Christ.

But much more is necessary to understand the Mystery picture presented by the book of Tobit. A double healing takes place. The old man who has been so faithful a keeper of the law, even in the time of his captivity in Nineveh, is blinded by the dung of a sparrow as he lies in his courtyard after burying one of his kinsmen, slain in the streets, and in distant Ecbarana, Sarah, the daughter of Raguel of his own tribe, is possessed by an evil spirit who has slain the seven husbands to whom she has been given, each on the night of his marriage. The Archangel Raphael comes, as mediator and healer, between the afflictions of Tobit and Sarah.

For Raphael, pre-eminent among the Archangels, is the bearer of healing powers, and especially at one season of the year he appears to spiritual sight as the overcomer of the sickness of man. In his description of the spiritual course of the seasons Rudolf Steiner has shown the form in which he appears at the time of Easter as the Archangel who is the ruler of that season of the year. The powers of health are those powers which help man to maintain a balance between two opposing temptations. Man may enter too deeply into earth processes, in which case he will be liable to hardening, ossifying processes in his body, and his thinking will also become 'hardened' and mechanical – this is the Ahrimanic temptation: or he may be tempted to flee away from the earth, when the fluidic processes of his body will become too strong, or his mind will be taken away from the earth and become full of 'vain imaginings' – this is the Luciferic temptation.

At the time of Easter especially, mankind is liable to these two temptations. For with the rising of the carbonic acid from the limestone into the plants at this time, there comes about a kind of ensoulment of the limestone masses of the earth; and by the ensoulment Ahriman has always the hope that he will be able to take possession of the earth and, through the earth, of man himself. But at the same time the Luciferic beings in

the atmosphere above the earth endeavour to take possession of the carbonic acid rising in a fine way from the earth, and by means of embodying themselves, as it were, in this fine element, they hope to be able to obtain the mastery over the finer or etheric body of man himself.*

These are the two temptations, the two dangers to which the soul of man has been exposed during the course of the history of the earth, these are the two dangers which appear in the spiritual aspect of the earth in the time of spring. But just as the soul of man was saved or healed from these two sicknesses by the entering of the Christ into the destiny of the earth, so in spring time the Easter Mystery is for ever renewed, the healing forces of the Christ stream upon the earth, and Raphael, the Archangel who bears these forces, stands revealed to spiritual sight between the powers of Lucifer and Ahriman. For Raphael is the Christian Mercury and bears the staff of healing for the sicknesses of mankind.

Easter then, the season of the Archangel Raphael, is essentially the festival of healing when man should learn to recognise the healing qualities in the two polaric elements, the mineralising salt-deposits, and the volatile substances of the earth. Thus it is that in the story of Tobit, too, there is a twofold healing, a healing of the soul which strives to escape too far from the earth region and a healing of the soul which strives to enter too far into it. For Sarah, whose evil spirit brings death to her seven husbands, is the type of the soul which in its sevenfold aspect would flee from the earth; and the old man Tobit, whose self-righteousness will not even allow him to believe that his wife has come by a present in the way of honesty, is dragged by the Ahrimanic temptation into the earth darkness. The dung of the sparrow which falls into his eyes and so causes his blindness is a picture of the 'astral rain' by which, as Dr. Steiner describes it, Ahriman hopes each spring time to ensoul the living limestone masses of the

* For a full description of the spiritual condition of the earth in springtime, see Rudolf Steiner *The Four Seasons and the Archangels*, Lecture 3. (Dornach, 7 October 1923), Rudolf Steiner Press, London 1968.

earth. Raphael brings the healing forces to both these sicknesses. For the old man, recollecting certain monies which he has deposited with a friend in Media, commands his son to find a guide who can conduct him there, that he may show the writing and recover the money. Tobias finds Raphael, disguised as a kinsman of Tobit's, and as they set out the old man says, with happy irony: 'The Angel of God go with you.' On their journey they come to the river Tigris and the young man goes down to the water to wash. It is then that the fish 'leaped out of the river and would have swallowed up the young man. But the angel said unto him, Take hold of the fish. And the young man caught hold of the fish and cast it up on the land.' The angel then commands Tobias to take the heart, liver and gall out of the fish: the rest they roast and eat. So it comes about that Raphael is able to bestow on Tobit the healing forces of the Christ, in the form of the fish, and with the fish he is enabled to heal the woman of her evil spirit, and the old man of his blindness. Students of Rudolf Steiner's spiritual physiology will recognise also the perfection of the details in the picture of the healing. For the woman is healed by the forces of the *heart* and *liver* of the fish – and it is in the liver, of all the inner organs that, in a certain way, the forces of the Ego work with the greatest strength; whereas the old man is healed by virtue of the *gall*, and the gall has the function of paralysing and overcoming a destructive hardening process set up through the combining of carbon with nitrogen in the metabolic system of man. It is the overcoming of the hardening and loosening forces, and the bringing about of a right relation between them, Raphael healing the diseases of Ahriman and Lucifer.

A curious detail in the story has been much commented on. We are told that when Tobias and Raphael set out, 'the young man's dog went with them'. Again on their return, when Tobias has married Sarah and is arriving home with his wife and his father's monies in safety, the Archangel suggests that he and the young man shall run ahead, and 'the dog went after them'. Now in Jewish literature, as in almost all ancient

writings, the dog is not looked upon as the friend of man but is the type of everything that is shameless and contemptible. The Homeric heroes call each other 'you dog' where a modern man would be more inclined to employ another animal, and to give your enemy's body to the dogs is the supreme revenge among the Patriarchs. The insistence on the dog in the story of Tobit has led some commentators to refer the whole story to a definitely non-Jewish source; others have been content to remark that the book of Tobit contains perhaps the first mention in history of a dog purely as the friend and companion of man. Yet the dog is not altogether irrelevant to the picture of the whole story. For this change in the attitude of man to the dog is only one among the many minor transformations which have been wrought on the earth by the coming of the Ego to man. Man, by virtue of his bearing the spiritual Ego, has the great task of redemption to perform for the animals from whom he has exacted such great sacrifices and to whom he owes his capacity for so many spiritual qualities. That the shameless dog should become the image of devotion, that Cerberus, guardian of the lower world should be transformed into the Hound of Heaven, provides a type of the work which man has to do in healing the animal world of their premature penetration into the world of matter. It is not for nothing, therefore, that Tobit, who receives the forces of the Christ Ego, should be accompanied by his dog, and that the artists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when they painted the healing countenance and gorgeous wings of the Archangel, and the shining fish, and the boy's face full of trustful devotion, do not forget to include the little animal gallantly prancing by his master's side.

'Write in a book all the things which have been done,' says the Archangel to Tobit at the moment when he reveals himself in his real being to father and son. 'Read in the book *all* the things which have been written,' he might say to the modern revivers of these ancient Mystery stories. For it is one of the penalties of advancing consciousness that the picture

by itself can no longer work with its old intensity on the human soul. It must be penetrated by a conscious understanding, but by one which can yet develop into a capacity to think pictorially. Stories such as that of Tobit are not to be rationalised, or all the virtue is gone out of them. They should lead to that truly pictorial thinking which stands at the threshold of spiritual experience, that is, into the world of Imagination, where pictures become the objective expression of spiritual realities. In that world Raphael at the festival of Easter stands between the powers of Ahriman and Lucifer, and the healing act of the Christ is for ever renewed.