

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR BIBLE?

To encourage us all to read the Bible more and to engage with it, Bill Church and Jim Thornton are writing a series of guides for this magazine. You will find the next of these, written by Bill, below. Please let them know if you find them helpful. If you would like to read previous articles in the series please email Richard Taylor at RTaylor@home.3b.co.uk To join one of St Andrew's home groups to further your knowledge of the Bible please let Alan or Bill know and they will put you in touch with one or ring the contact person named below for the group that would most suit you.

ST ANDREW'S Home Groups

HOME GROUP	MEETING TIME	CONTACT PERSON
Connect Bible Study Group	Tuesday mornings	Viv Thornton - 584004
Overton Group	1 st , 3 rd & 5 th Tuesday evenings of the month	Rhoda Giddings - 551455
Wives and Co – evenings	2 nd & 4 th Wednesday evenings of the month	Debbie Ledsam - 584426
Goodmans' Evening Group	1 st and 3 rd Mondays of the month	Andrew & Claire Goodman - 421769
Men in the morning	Tuesdays or Wednesdays, once a fortnight	Harold Chaplin - 304606
Delta Dames	Evenings once a month – days vary	Jane Chaplin - 304606

Flying with the Angels – The Book of Tobit.

The Apocrypha

Tobit is from a collection of works usually called the Apocrypha (“hidden”), or Deuterocanonical (“second rank in authority”) or Inter-testamental (“written between the Old Testament and the New”). Many bibles, particularly in the Protestant world, do not have these books at all. If they are there, they are printed after Malachi and before Matthew. The attitude of the Church of England to the books of the Apocrypha is found in Article 6 of the 39 Articles “the Church doth read (them) for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine”. This agrees with St Jerome, the translator who in about 400AD produced the Vulgate, the standard Latin version of the Bible.

The Apocrypha contains a variety of types of work – additions to existing Old Testament books like Esther and Daniel; wisdom books like Ecclesiasticus (or “The wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach” not to be confused with Ecclesiastes in the OT!); the first detective story, Bel and the Dragon; propagandist history like Maccabees; devotional works like

the Prayer of Manasses; and moral romantic tales among which is Tobit.

The story

Tobit has been exiled by the Assyrians from his home in Galilee to Nineveh. He is a model of piety and good works. Before exile, he made regular pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem; in exile he follows the food laws and is generous to other exiled Jews. He had become prosperous but lost it all when he was reported for giving proper burial to Jews killed in a pogrom and later was blinded by bird droppings. Then he remembers he has left ten talents of silver on deposit with a trader at Rages, faraway in Media. He sends his only child Tobias to fetch it. They recruit “Azarias” as a guide and bodyguard. “Azarias” is the angel Raphael in disguise.

Raphael, Tobias and his dog set off. As they are camping by the River Tigris, Tobias is attacked by a large fish – which he kills and eats, but keeping the heart, liver and gall on Raphael's advice. They reach Ecbatana, just within the borders of Media, and meet Raguel, a kinsman, and his wife Edna (yes!) whose only child, their daughter Sarah has

been cursed. Seven times she has been married and each time a demon has killed the bridegroom before the wedding night. By the law of Moses, Tobias is now obliged to marry her. Although Sarah is rich, pious and beautiful, Tobias is understandably reluctant but Raphael tells him to do his duty and to burn the heart and liver of the fish in the bedchamber. Tobias does this and the demon flees, to general rejoicing.

Tobias collects the ten talents and returns to Nineveh to his worried parents. Again on Raphael's advice, he squeezes the gall of the fish into Tobit's eyes and his sight is restored. Raphael reveals himself and says he was sent by God in answer to the prayers of Tobit and Sarah. On his deathbed, Tobit advises Tobias to move to Ecbatana, which Tobias does just before Nineveh is destroyed by the Medes. And they all lived happily ever after.

So what?

It does all sound a bit like a pantomime, and indeed several plays have been written on the subject, the best known by James Bridie (1930) and an opera in 1999, and there is a pastiche Handel oratorio on the subject. There is also in the National Gallery an Italian Renaissance painting of Tobias and the Angel by (?) Verrochio.

The book is fun to read. And why not? but that is not the reason it is in the Apocrypha. It was written during, or more likely, after the Babylonian exile and it has themes important to the exiles and those who returned from exile. Maybe it also chimes with Christians who feel they are "in exile" in a totally secular world.

Tobit and Raguel have followed the advice of Jeremiah 29.4-8 to prosper in the cities of exile, to plant gardens and to raise families but they have also preserved their separateness by following the food laws and customs of marriage and burial.

God is shown as hearing the cry of his people in distress –Tobit in his blindness and Sarah in desperation at the death of her bridegrooms. And God is shown as acting in response to those prayers and also guiding Tobias through dangerous times.

Tobit is, by the end of the story, rewarded for his pious and charitable acts.

In chapter 13 there is a song of praise (part of which is in Common Worship Daily Prayer as a canticle) giving thanks to God and looking forward to the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem.

Tobit is not quoted in the New Testament but themes of charity, prayer and reward are common to both. Many of the Church Fathers knew and used Tobit. But mainly, just enjoy it!

The very first Valentine card - a legend

The Roman Emperor Claudius II needed soldiers. He suspected that marriage made men want to stay at home instead of fighting wars, so he outlawed marriage.

A kind-hearted young priest named Valentine felt sorry for all the couples who wanted to marry, but couldn't. So, secretly, he married as many couples as he could until the Emperor found out and condemned him to death. While he was in prison awaiting execution, Valentine showed love and compassion to everyone around him, including his jailer. The jailer had a young daughter who was blind, but through Valentine's prayers, she was healed. Just before his death in Rome on 14 February, he wrote her a farewell message signed 'From your Valentine.'

So the very first Valentine card was not between lovers, but between a priest about to die, and a little girl, healed through his prayers.