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TOBIT'S BLINDNESS

The ancient world often saw disease as a punishment from God or the gods. Although Hippocrates tried to bring rationality to ancient medicine, popular belief saw God's hand. That is even the case today. Whether it is the plague sent by Apollo against the Greeks in the *Iliad*, or God routing the forces of Sennacherib when they besieged Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah in *II Kings*, a supernatural relationship existed between both the causes of disease and the cure. While Greek medicine promised a rational explanation, prayers were still said and incubation in the Temple of Asclepius was common.

The apocryphal *Book of Tobit*, written in Aramaic, survives in Greek. It is a paradigm for the merging of both the natural and supernatural, and the rescue from suffering of the good by God. Having just performed righteous deeds by interring an unburied corpse of an Israelite, Tobit becomes blind when droppings of sparrows fall on his eyes. The *Book of Tobit* deals with the suffering of a righteous man. The angel Raphael is dispatched to heal Tobit and also to rescue Sarah, a kinswoman of Tobit, plagued by the demon Asmodeus, who had killed seven of her bridegrooms on their wedding nights. Tobias, the son of Tobit, destined to marry Sarah, accompanied by Raphael, goes to claim his bride. On the journey Tobias catches a fish. Raphael instructs Tobias to take the heart and liver of the fish and burn it in front of Asmodeus to drive him away from Sarah. He instructs him that if he anoints the white film over his father's eyes with the gall, the eyes will become well. Tobias follows the instructions of Raphael and drives Asmodeus away, and later cures his father's blindness with the gall.

A supernatural hand guides the dispatching of a demon. Both the blindness and the cure have a natural explanation, but are caused by the supernatural. Blindness can be caused from bird droppings in the eye and a resulting chlamydia infection. There is a recent case in Hawaii of this. Gall or liver to treat eye diseases was known in antiquity, where the blindness was caused by a vitamin A deficiency. Galen and Pliny both refer to the use of fish gall as an eye treatment, as do some Akkadian sources. It would be unlikely that the vitamin A cure would work on chlamydia. However, the look of blindness caused by chlamydia and that of vitamin A deficiency would be similar. The readership of *Tobit* would not know the difference, but only that such a medicinal cure existed. These medicinal cures derived from the divine, are so potent that they can act as a natural cure of a righteous man, and a supernatural cure to drive away a demon from an innocent woman.