

## TOBIT TRANSFORMED: RE-READING TOBIT THROUGH THE LENS OF GRIEF AND LOSS

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### ABSTRACT

Re-reading Tobit through the lens of grief and loss theory yields a very different interpretation of this character to the negative one that I previously put forward (Efthimiadis–Keith 2013). For example, it is seen that Tobit suffers from all six of the principal loss types identified by Mitchell and Anderson (1983). After a brief introduction to grief, loss and transformation, I trace Tobit’s grief and transformation through the various stages of his life. I conclude that his transformation is due to five interlinking factors: the joy brought back by his supposed kinship connection to Azariah, his slow but steady recognition of his family and his emotions, his family’s care, and God’s seemingly late but timely intervention.

### INTRODUCTION

My first reading of Tobit (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:565–567) was a highly negative one that ran against the grain of his positive representation in the text. For me, Tobit was not a wonderfully faithful man, but an alms-obsessed, self-absorbed man suffering from myosis with regard to his immediate family. In brief, my reasons were as follows:<sup>1</sup>

1. “Tobit seems completely obsessed with *his* doing good” (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:565). Up to the end of his prayer in 3:6,<sup>2</sup> the story is written wholly *about*

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<sup>1</sup> These points are adopted and adapted from my 2013 article (Efthimiadis–Keith 2013:565–567).

<sup>2</sup> I will use Di Lella’s (2007) verse numbering and translation of the GII manuscript throughout unless otherwise indicated. However, I will retain the more conventional rendition of character names, except when quoting directly from Di Lella’s text. I have chosen the GII manuscript simply because it is the most accessible to me. For a succinct discussion of the various manuscripts and versions of Tobit, see Otzen (2002:60–66). Such a discussion is beyond the bounds of this paper.

him and from *his* point of view. It is as though he alone were exiled, did good works, and suffered. Apart from reporting on his marriage, the birth of his son (1:9) and his altercation with Anna (2:11–14), Tobit effectively ignores his immediate family, focusing instead on meeting religious obligations and the needs of his poor compatriots.

2. He buries the dead against the wishes of the Assyrian authorities, without any thought of what his possible punishment (death) might mean for his family, neither does he cease doing so after being threatened with death and losing all his worldly possessions (1:18–20, 2:1–8).
3. He seems so focused on his “isolated righteousness” (Weeks 2011:393) that he falsely accuses Anna of stealing a goat. He then insists angrily that she return it despite her truthful explanation (2:11–14).
4. When responding to Azariah’s joyful greeting, Tobit can only lament his blindness, stating pitifully that he can hear but not see and that he is effectively dead as a result of it (5:10). He seems to appreciate neither the fact that he can hear nor the care that his wife and son bestow on him (2:11–12; 4:3; 5:1, 4).<sup>3</sup>
5. In the same scene, Tobit presses Azariah for an answer regarding his family and tribe (5:11–12). However, he neglects to question him about his knowledge of the road on which he and Tobias (his only child) would travel – a road that he knows is fraught with danger (2:15). He is “so overjoyed at meeting a cousin that he forgets about his more immediate relations” (Miller 2012:506).
6. He seems more concerned about money than his son’s welfare.<sup>4</sup> He mentions money four times over the span of five verses (4:20–5:3), whereas “he mentions only once that his son should find a trustworthy ... guide (5:3)” (Miller 2012:505).
7. “Prior to his negotiations for Sarah’s hand, Tobias comes across as a little too immature for a young man of marriageable age” (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:567).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See also 9:1–4; 10:7–8; 11:10–13 and 14:11, 13 where Tobias clearly expresses his care for Tobit.

<sup>4</sup> Anna all but directly accuses him of this in 5:18–20.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Tobias does not relate the angel’s medicinal advice (6:8–9) to either his father’s or Sarah’s predicament, despite knowing about both (6:14–15). Similarly, a little later, he objects to Azariah’s match-making attempt, citing Sarah’s demonic problem

Tobias' immaturity is confirmed by a change in his appellation from *paidion* to *paidarion*,<sup>6</sup> suggesting that Tobit had not spent sufficient time with him to contribute positively to his formation as a man.

Having reflected on these points, I became convinced that Sarah was a better person and that she coped better with grief than Tobit did, so I began to study grief theory to prove it. However, as I studied the book against the background of available literature on grief and loss, I began to see Tobit's brokenness as a product of the cumulative losses he had endured. For the first time, I noted that family and a reminder of family connections was the key to his transformation. Slowly, my focus turned from Sarah-as-better-than-Tobit, to Tobit's transformation.

In this article, I examine Tobit's transformation by means of a close reading of the text and available literature on grief and loss.<sup>7</sup> I begin with a brief, general introduction to grief and loss. I then examine Tobit's transformation in the way I have proposed and offer my conclusions.

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(6:10–15), and seemingly forgets that he already has the cure for it (6:8; Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:567).

<sup>6</sup> Tobias is referred to as *paidion* in 6:2, 3 and 4 and preceding chapters, whereas 6:3, 4, 6 and 7 refer to him as *paidarion*, thus “accentuating his youth and naiveté” (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:567). *Paidion* essentially refers to a young child, not older than 7. However, it can be used for children of any age, as it is in *Tobit*. The diminutive, *paidarion*, refers to a young child, not a young man as per Di Lella's (2007) translation. The Greek word for young man is *neaniskos* and is used of the angel in 5:5 and 7, where Di Lella (2007) correctly translates these instances as “young man” (adopted and adapted from Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:567).

<sup>7</sup> Naturally, I am aware that I cannot simply apply modern grief theory to an ancient text for a number of reasons, including the chronological, cultural and ideological distance between myself and the text. However, I am also aware that I cannot approach the text from any perspective other than that of my own understanding. Furthermore, as Egger-Wentzel (2015:193-194) states, “The expression of emotions is dependent on one's present culture and, therefore, subject to change. The feelings themselves, however, are constant throughout the millennia and within various cultures. They are, for example, similar in the cases of great misfortune or outstanding happiness”. I therefore feel justified in applying modern grief theory to Tobit.

## GRIEF, LOSS AND TRANSFORMATION IN MODERN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

There is a vast amount of literature on loss/bereavement,<sup>8</sup> grief, and mourning, which is not surprising as loss, whether through adversity or death, is a ubiquitous universal experience that deeply affects the one bereaved. Indeed, Mitchell and Anderson (1983:36–46) have identified six principal loss types which can occur alone or in various combinations with each instance of loss:

1. Material loss – the loss of “a physical object or of familiar surroundings to which one has an important attachment” (Mitchell and Anderson 1983:36), e.g., a watch or a house.
2. Relationship loss – the loss of a relationship with one or more people, e.g., through death or divorce.
3. Intrapsychic loss – “the loss within one’s own psyche of a way of thinking about oneself, the world or the future, such as the giving up of a dream or a blow to one’s self-image” (Kelley 2009:103). “Although often related to external experiences, it is itself an entirely inward experience” (Mitchell and Anderson 1983:40).
4. Functional loss – the loss of use or functioning of a body part, e.g., blindness or hearing loss, which “often carries with it a loss of autonomy” (Mitchell and Anderson 1983:41).
5. Role loss – “the loss of a specific social role or of one’s accustomed place in a social network” (Mitchell and Anderson 1983:42), e.g., being a breadwinner or parent. The extent of the loss here correlates with the extent to which the person’s identity is linked to the role that has been lost.
6. Systemic loss – the loss experienced by an entire system or group, e.g., a group of people is exiled or displaced, or when a young adult leaves home.

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<sup>8</sup> “Within the field of thanatology, bereavement tends to be used to refer to the basic fact or objective reality of loss, while grief refers to the person’s response and reactions to the loss” (Martin and Doka 2000:14). Similarly, Servaty-Seib (2004:126) following Rando: “Bereavement is the state of having experienced a loss”.

Whatever one's loss, one is likely to experience a greater or lesser measure of grief in response to it. This "generally passive and involuntary reaction" (Servaty-Seib 2004:126) may entail sorrow, emotional and social withdrawal, a feeling of loss of control, anger, depression, suicidal ideation, dysfunction at home and at work, as well as a host of other functional and emotional impairments (Giddens and Giddens 2000:6; Rubin, Malkinson and Witztum 2012:36-37). Grief, then, may be cast as the "pattern of behavioral, affective, and cognitive changes" resulting from loss (Romanoff, Israel, Tremblay, O'Neill, and Roderick 1999:293). It is "an emotion arising from an awareness of a discrepancy between what is and what the individual believes 'should be'" (Romanoff et al. 1999:294). This discrepancy challenges one's beliefs about oneself, life, God, and the world, as it impacts upon the totality of one's existence.<sup>9</sup> Bereavement thus forces one to rethink and re-imagine one's life in order to find meaning again (Matthews and Marwit 2006:89–91). The life-long or, at least, long-term process by which one adjusts to the loss and re-orient oneself to one's internal and external world (and the deceased if loss entails death) is known as mourning (Martin and Doka 2000:23; Versalle and McDowell 2004/5:54).

There have been a number of important developments in thanatological literature since Kubler-Ross (1970)<sup>10</sup> published her famous five stages of grief.<sup>11</sup> Even though stage theorists insist on the fluidity of the stages they propose, it is now recognised that grief reactions are highly idiosyncratic and affected by a variety of factors

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<sup>9</sup> In existential terms, bereavement affects one's *Dasein* – "a gestalt total consisting of three differentiated aspects or 'worlds'" (Rychlak 1981:363): one's *Eigenwelt* or internal feelings and experiences, one's *Umwelt* or the world around us, including "the animate and inanimate features of existence" and one's *Mitwelt* or social, interpersonal environment. To these categories of Binswanger (Binswanger in Rychlak 1981:363), one may add Deurzen-Smith's concept of the *Überwelt*, i.e., one's "personal view and ideal" according to which one organises one's "overall views of the world, physical, social and personal" and generates or is inserted into "an overall philosophy of life" (Psychology Glossary 2016). The *Überwelt* may or may not be influenced by religion or limited to what is socio-culturally acceptable (Psychology Glossary 2016).

<sup>10</sup> The fortieth anniversary edition of this book was published by Routledge in 2009. Kubler—Ross identified five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

<sup>11</sup> Some have augmented the now frowned-upon stage interpretation (Servaty-Seib 2004:125, 126) while others have moved beyond stages to tasks that need to be completed during grieving (Servaty-Seib 2004:128–129).

including “personality traits, cultural background ... developmental level of the bereaved ... the nature of the relationship with the deceased, mode of death, availability of social support, and previous and concurrent stressors” (Servaty-Seib 2004:127). As such, a person-centred approach to therapy has often been adopted as it focuses on the individual and increases her/his “insight and awareness into [her/his] grief and mourning experience” (Servaty-Seib 2004:129). Other theories have focused on meaning reconstruction as the central grief process (e.g., Neimeyer 2001), and proposed a narrative or existential approach to grief resolution (Servaty-Seib 2004:134–136). Still others have approached grief from the perspective of attachment theory. Attachment “has long been a preferred framework for considering loss” (Kelley 2009:88) given (a) the centrality of relationships – particularly the parent-child relationship (especially with the mother as primary caregiver) – in an individual’s personal and social development<sup>12</sup> and b) the recognition that an ongoing, transformed relationship to the deceased is necessary for successful adaptation to grief (Rubin et al. 2012:37–38; Servaty-Seib 2004:137). As such, the bereaved individual’s attachment style to her/his parents and significant others, particularly the deceased, has been addressed through psychodynamic therapy (Kelley 2009:88) and the interpersonal process approach (Servaty-Seib 2004:138-140) among others.

An interesting development is the investigation into the role that religion and attachment to God play in psychological well-being, spirituality and dealing with loss.<sup>13</sup> As with any attachment, attachment to God as primary figure shows particular styles: “secure, avoidant, resistant/ambivalent, and disorganized” (Yeo 2011:3–4). Empirical evidence shows that anxious and avoidant God-attachment is negatively correlated to spiritual well-being, satisfaction with God, effect, neuroticism and attempts at coping with loss (Yeo 2011:4, 14–15, 24; Kelley 2009:89). By contrast,

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<sup>12</sup> Childhood attachment styles are usually internalised and become “mental representations, called internal working models. People tend to use the same or similar internal working models in other close relationships, such as romantic relationships, throughout their lifetime” (Yeo 2011:3).

<sup>13</sup> See Matthews and Marwit (2006:91–94); Yeo (2011:24–27) and Kelley (2009:92–95) for a general discussion of this matter.

viewing God as a “secure base” correlates positively with these factors (Kelley 2009:91–95).<sup>14</sup>

In relation to the above, religion and spirituality can play either a helpful or maladaptive role in people’s lives (Matthews and Marwit 2006:94). Some religious practices and beliefs can be helpful, while others can be harmful (Yeo 2011:5). For religious persons, “Religious coping methods *mediate* the relationship between an individual’s general religious orientation and the outcomes of major life events” (Matthews and Marwit 2006:94, italics original to source). As such, they form the bridge between the loss and the bereaved person’s journey towards meaning and world-view reconstruction. Psychologists have identified positive and negative religious coping strategies that are related to one’s view of and relationship with (i.e., attachment to) God, belief about the meaningfulness of life, a positive or negative view of the world, the situation and its purpose, and spiritual connectedness (Matthews and Marwit 2006:94; Yeo 2011:5–6). For example, seeing suffering as divine punishment increases dysfunctional mood during bereavement and thus leads to higher levels of grief and grief intensity (Lee, Roberts and Gibbons 2013:293; Matthews and Marwit 2006:96; Yeo 2011:5–6, 39). By contrast, a benevolent view of God and God’s involvement in one’s suffering correlates with less depressive symptoms and less anxiety as well as a higher degree of self-esteem (Yeo 2011:39). Similarly, it has been well established that the positive and compassionate support of one’s family and social network play a crucial role in the positive resolution of grief and in fostering resilience during situations of multiple death and loss (see Neimeyer

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<sup>14</sup> The negative and positive correlations referred to here are known as the correspondence hypothesis. However, psychologists have also observed another phenomenon termed compensation. With compensation, “God may function as a substitute attachment figure” (Kelley 2009:94) in three situations: a) when human attachment figures cannot protect one in times of great stress and danger, b) when one’s attachment figure is not “situationally present”, and in particular when one is permanently separated from this figure or s/he is lost to one, e.g., through death (Kelley 2009:94–95), and (c) when one has “a history of insecure childhood attachments” (Kelley 2009:95). Empirical evidence supports both compensation and correspondence, “although statistically, correspondence appears to be the most common pattern” (Kelley 2009:95).

2001;<sup>15</sup> Leaver, Perreault and Demetrakopoulos 2008:37–38). Regrettably the opposite is also true.

Finally, loss and grief inevitably foster transformation, be it positive or negative (Neimeyer 2001). I have already referred to the necessity of meaning reconstruction in grief, a process that in itself engenders transformation. A grief well negotiated can lead to post-traumatic growth, despite the initial post-traumatic stress of bereavement, “establishing whole new core sets of values and organizing principles for living” (Neimeyer 2001).

Having briefly discussed grief, loss, mourning and their transformative potential, I now turn to *Tobit*.

## **TOBIT’S GRIEF AND TRANSFORMATION**

### **Tobit’s losses and grief experiences**

As I indicated in the Introduction, my first reading of *Tobit* (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:565–567 and 2015:11–14) was highly negative. However, reading *Tobit* again through the lens of grief and loss literature has enabled me to see light in the darkness of which I had accused *Tobit*. For example, I now see that *Tobit* had been exposed to and suffered from all six of the principal types of loss identified by Mitchell and Anderson (1983): material loss, a loss of role, relationship and function, as well as systemic and intrapsychic loss. I intend to discuss these losses in terms of real time,<sup>16</sup> beginning with the loss of his parents and ending with his grief resolution/transformation.

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<sup>15</sup> Regrettably I was unable to secure a physical copy of Neimeyer’s article and have to rely on the version found on [questia.com](http://questia.com) that does not have page numbers.

<sup>16</sup> The narrative does not follow a strict chronological progression. It begins with the exile (1:1–2), goes back to pre-exilic days (1:3–8), refers almost casually to the death of *Tobit*’s parents, and his marriage (1:8–9), and then reverts to the exile. In order to get a clear picture of *Tobit*’s grief experiences, I begin with his childhood and trace his grief and transformation chronologically.



### **The loss of his parents and grandmother: relationship, role and intrapsychic losses**

Early on in his life, Tobit lost his primary attachment figure – his mother – and thereafter his father (1:8). The incredible disorientation that this must have caused was compounded by the subsequent loss of his grandmother (implied) and his role loss first as son and then as grandson. The loss of such key relationships can leave a child emotionally stunted, angry, withdrawn and afraid of forming future close relationships with significant others.<sup>17</sup> These losses could well have triggered Tobit’s focus on his wider family, his compatriots and the poor, and his seeming neglect of his own family members. Similarly, his obsession with doing good may have functioned as a means of continuing the bond between himself and his deceased grandmother. Her nurturing role<sup>18</sup> made her the last attachment figure in his young life, meaning that he could, conceivably, have transferred his attachment needs to her. Moreover, she is the one who taught him about the importance of almsgiving.<sup>19</sup> Continuing the bond with her (and perhaps with his parents through her) through almsgiving could also have functioned as a form of active grieving – a typically (but not exclusively) masculine way of processing grief (Massey 2000:470).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Willis (2002) and Black (2005) for a discussion of grief responses in (modern) children.

<sup>18</sup> Tobit states that she looked after him when his mother and father had died (1:8).

<sup>19</sup> Her importance to him is also underscored by the fact that he effectively puts her on a par with Moses through the parallel structure of the last part of 1:8 (illustrated below):

- “I brought and gave these things to them in the third year, and we would eat them
  - according to the decree that had been decreed concerning them in the law of Moyse
  - and according to the commands which Debbora, the mother of Hananiel our father Shad commanded,
- for my father had left me an orphan and died.”

<sup>20</sup> A number of studies have found that there are differences between feminine and masculine grievers: feminine/intuitive grievers deal with grief in emotionally intense ways, seeking support and sharing emotions with others, while masculine grievers tend to handle their grief more cognitively and actively, through problem-solving and largely in isolation (Martin and Doka 2000:2; Versalle and McDowell 2004/5:55; Massey 2007:470). (The words feminine and masculine are used “because the pattern is gender related but not gender specific” [Massey 2007:470]). However, it is important to note that these are mere tendencies and that grief responses occur along a continuum of instrumental and intuitive grief for either sex (Versalle and McDowell 2004/5:55). Active grieving denotes any action

**The breakaway of the northern kingdom: systemic, relationship and intrapsychic loss**

The northern kingdom's breakaway from the southern kingdom must have caused the young Tobit much grief: he mentions the breakaway twice in the space of two verses (1:4–5) and believes that it happened in contravention of divine decree (1:4, see also 1:8). Moreover, he clearly identifies with both Naphtali and David as ancestors (1:4) – it is almost as if he were a child caught in the middle of a nasty divorce. In this situation of systemic loss (the breakaway), he chooses to maintain his commitment to Jerusalem. For me, his choice speaks of alienation, self-alienation and loss: Tobit relinquishes his connection (relationship) with his tribe in favour of his relationship with Jerusalem. Stating that he alone went up to Jerusalem (1:6) is indicative of his alienation and descriptive of at least two losses: relationship loss – he deliberately broke ties with the north and could easily have been seen as a traitor – and intrapsychic loss, because he regards the breakaway as inherently and theologically incorrect. Despite these losses, framed within the broader systemic loss, Tobit's attachment to Jerusalem is very strong and so he continues taking his firstfruit and doing his charitable works there (1:6–8). His choice of Jerusalem over Dan also signals the textual beginning of his distantiation from close family relationships. No matter how faithful he thinks he is being to God's decrees, he alienates himself from those near him (Naphtali) and focuses on those who are not in his immediate circle of influence – the widows, orphans and strangers of Jerusalem (1:8). His grief is active but isolated.<sup>21</sup>

**The exile of the northern kingdom: systemic, material, relationship, role and intrapsychic loss**

Having briefly reported on his marriage and the birth and naming of his son (1:9), Tobit returns to the theme of the exile (1:10) with which his narration began (1:3). The

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undertaken to deal with loss, e.g., opening up a scholarship fund in the name of the deceased, taking an active part in the funeral, or giving to the deceased's favorite charity (Martin and Doka 2000:6).

<sup>21</sup> Tobit's self-alienation from his family could be construed as a form of isolated grieving, another typically (but not exclusively) masculine form of grieving (see Massey 2000:470).

exile was a huge systemic loss: a significant portion of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel was taken away captive. In such a situation the deportees, including Tobit, would have experienced material loss and at least some relationship and role loss: they would have left most of their possessions behind and lost relationship ties with relatives, friends and acquaintances that had not been deported, those who had been deported to different locations or those who had died in battle. They would also have experienced various role losses as inhabitants of the north, as well as anticipatory loss about their lives in a foreign land. Moreover, the men would have lost the role of being family providers. Above these losses, Tobit may well have experienced additional role-, intrapsychic- and anticipatory loss as he could no longer be a pilgrim to Jerusalem. This is a heady combination of five of the six principal loss types!<sup>22</sup>

### **In exile: all the losses combined**

#### **Tobit flees in fear**

Within the context of systemic loss, national alienation and disorientation, Tobit once again chooses alienation from his fellow exiles: he alone deliberately keeps ritual food laws (1:10–11). However, there is good news. He experiences (temporary) re-orientation in his role as chief buyer for king Enemessaros (1:12–14). His role as family provider is restored and he recovers material loss to the point that he is able to save and deposit money elsewhere (1:14). He also recovers his role as a righteous man and almsgiver by performing many acts of kindness to the exiles of his race (1:3, 16–17). Moreover, he engages in the ultimate act of kindness, namely burying the dead<sup>23</sup> –

<sup>22</sup> The only remaining loss is functional loss, which Tobit experiences later, when he is blinded.

<sup>23</sup> “According to the Old Testament mindscape, a burial establishes the integration of the dead into their people’s ensemble: by a worthy burial the dead reach the Sheol where the downright proverbial gathering to the father’s kin’... takes place” (Ego 2009:90). Not to be buried was therefore an extreme dishonour, all the more so if one’s corpse was thrown behind the city wall (1:17) or left visibly uninterred (1:18), for example in the marketplace (2:3-4), where it could be eaten by dogs or wild animals (Bolyki 2005:89–91, 98. See 1 Kings 14:11; 21:19, 23–24; 22:38 and 2 Kings 9:10). Similarly, not being able to bury one’s dead was dishonouring to the living (see Ego 2009:97, who believes that burial’s primary task was “to dispose of the corpse in order to preserve the dignity of the surviving dependents”). By burying the dead, particularly within the context Tobit sketches, one was

and that in contravention of Assyrian law (1:17–18).<sup>24</sup> In other words, he does all he can to continue fulfilling the law in the absence of being able to worship in Jerusalem, thus boosting his intrapsychic health.<sup>25</sup>

However, Tobit's re-orientation is short-lived. Any anticipatory grief that he may have had for his own demise (as a result of illegally burying the Israelite dead) is foregrounded as a Ninevite betrays him to the Assyrian authorities (1:19). Initially, he hides himself, but when he hears that the king has put a price on his head, he flees in fear (1:19). He experiences great material loss as he is stripped of all that he has, except his wife and son (1:20). Even though his immediate family is not taken away, Tobit experiences a temporary relationship loss as he has fled, presumably, without them. He also experiences multiple role loss: he is no longer the provider for his family, no longer the king's chief buyer, no longer the performer of good deeds.

Despite this negative turn of events, something positive is happening. Two firsts are hidden in and among the rubble of the tragedy: Tobit mentions his emotions, namely fear, for the first time in the narrative, and refers to his family for the first time since his casual mention of them in 1:9.<sup>26</sup> The fear seems to have shaken his deed-obsession, his external focus, and forced him to begin acknowledging his emotions or internal life. Similarly, it seems that his flight from the law and material loss have started opening his eyes to his immediate family. His isolated grief is beginning to change.

The importance of family in Tobit's ultimate recovery is underscored in the next two verses (1:21–22). A new king ascends the Assyrian throne and appoints Tobit's

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demonstrating kindness that could not be repaid, making this activity the “kindness of truth” (Rashi in Abrahams 1893:349) or ultimate act of kindness.

<sup>24</sup> Given the importance of burial (see preceding footnote) the Assyrian authorities were dishonouring both the individual Jew and his nation. It was an act of power-play that was probably meant to act as a deterrent against rebellion/retaliation of the subjugated Jews (see Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:556–557 and Bolyki 2005:92).

<sup>25</sup> In the Second Temple period, “the giving of alms became a suitable substitution for animal sacrifice. Rabbinic Judaism went even further: the giving of alms was equated with fulfilling all the commandments in the Torah” (Anderson 2011:495).

<sup>26</sup> The narrative absence of his wife and son up to this point signifies that his alienation from his immediate family continued. Such alienation, whether conscious or unconscious, brings with it its own grief.

nephew, Achikar, “over all the accounts of his kingdom”, giving him “authority over all the administration” (1:21). Achikar intercedes with the new king and Tobit is permitted to return to Nineveh (1:22). Tobit’s losses are mitigated and he is once again able to re-orient himself in the strange land.

### **Tobit is blinded**

Things go well with Tobit, at least for a while. He celebrates the joyful feast of Shavuot, sitting down to a sumptuous meal (2:1–2). As he sits, he is mindful of other exiles who are not as fortunate as he is, and sends his son, Tobias, to go and bring a faithful one to join him. He will not eat, he states, until Tobias has returned (2:2). The meal and the feast, as well as his first reported communication with his son, signify (a) Tobit’s continued emergence from his state of isolated grief, and (b) that he is slowly and practically turning his sights towards his family.

Instead of returning with a living exile, Tobias returns with a report that one of the exiles had been strangled and left uninterred in the marketplace (2:3). Tobit rushes out to prepare the man’s body (2:4) and returns to eat “the bread with mourning” (2:5). Remembering the following scripture from Amos, he weeps (2:6): “Your feasts shall be turned into mourning, and all your ways into lamentation.” For the first time in the narrative Tobit mourns and weeps. It is as though his previously silent, internalized grief is finally finding external expression. Healing is slowly taking place.

When the sun sets, Tobit goes out and buries the man to the ridicule of his neighbours (2:7–8). He records no emotion this time, but washes himself and lies down to sleep against his courtyard wall (2:9). Even though his emotions may have been severely strained or numbed as a result of his previous emotional outpouring, one senses a deep grief within him, accentuated perhaps by the taunts of his neighbours and his loss of relationship with them. This is when disaster strikes on a far more personal level than before – the excrement of two sparrows falls into his unsheltered eyes and he goes progressively and totally blind, his continual attempts to find medicinal healing completely thwarted (2:9–10). On top of the other losses that he has had to contend with, Tobit suffers the sixth and final principal loss type, namely loss

of function. Strangely, he records no tears for himself. Only his relatives grieve for him (2:10). It seems that he may be in denial and/or completely emotionally spent. His report that he was powerless in his eyes for four years (2:10) is a telling statement of his psychological state: he is powerless, poor (material loss; see 1:10, 4:21) and blind. Divested of his role as family provider and almsgiver, he experiences intrapsychic loss once again. The only glimmer of hope at this point is Tobit's nephew, Achikar, who provides for him. However, this hope fades with Achikar as he leaves for Elymais, seemingly sealing Tobit's fate (2:10). Even so, the mention of his family's grief and Achikar's provision continue to underscore the importance of family in Tobit's coming transformation.

### **Tobit's altercation with Anna and his suicidal prayer**

Tobit's emotional isolation changes radically in the next two scenes. In the first (2:12–14), he lashes out at Anna unfairly, falsely accusing her of stealing a kid. He angrily insists that she return it despite her truthful explanation. Perhaps it is his “isolated righteousness”, as Weeks (2011:393) calls it, that elicits his emotional outburst, but anger is also part of the grief response. As a patriarchal man he is completely humiliated; his loss of role, function and face is total: his wife has to provide for him. Tobit's reaction towards Anna may not be justifiable, but it is comprehensible within the totality of grief that he has suffered. It also signifies the increasing externalization of his grief – an important part of the healing process. Despite the negativity of the altercation, this scene also denotes the role that family is playing in his recovery. After all, conflict can lead to new understandings of oneself and so to change.

While the meaning of Anna's enigmatic response (2:14) to Tobit's accusations is unclear, the effect of her words is not. Her words bring the effect of all of Tobit's reproaches to a head and he cries out to God in an emotion-laden prayer: “Then being grief-stricken in spirit and groaning, I wept, and I began to pray with sighs” (3:1). This is the most emotion that Tobit has shown throughout this narrative and signifies the proverbial breaking of the dam wall. No longer able to contain his grief, he groans, weeps and prays with sighs. It is as though the grief of all the years, from his

childhood until now, becomes fully externalised for the first time. Typical to masculine grieving, and Middle-Eastern culture, Tobit breaks out in another form of active grieving, namely lament.<sup>27</sup>

While his emotional outpouring is a step in the right direction, healing does not take place immediately. To the contrary, Tobit, the man who carefully acted righteously all the days of his life (1:2), is plunged into intra-psychic loss as he concludes that God must be punishing him for his and his nation's sinfulness (3:3–5). This punitive view of God and negative religious coping taxes his psyche all the more, prolonging his grief and intensifying the symptoms.<sup>28</sup> Tobit is plunged back into the pit of despair and begs God to take his life so that he may no longer hear false reproaches (2 times in 3:6) or “see great distress” in his life (3:6). With that, Tobit enters his house (3:17) and, on a narrative level, does not emerge from it until Tobias returns from his quest (11:10). Tobit has, in other words, reached a stage of grief regression while it seemed that he was on his way to grief resolution.

<sup>27</sup> As indicated previously, active grieving is a typically (but not exclusively) masculine form of processing grief (Massey 2000:470). As Massey (2000:480–481) indicates, lament is one of the active forms of grieving. While lament is typically associated with women in the ancient Near East, particularly in terms of the “wailing women”, it is not an exclusively female activity. Two notable biblical examples of male lament, outside of Tobit, are found in 2 Samuel 1:11–27 and 2 Samuel 18:33–19:6. In the first instance, David laments the deaths of Jonathan and Saul in word and in elaborate song (1:19–27). In the second, he laments the death of his son, Absalom. There is no indication in either text that David's laments were regarded as strange, or un-masculine in any way. Moreover, the Psalter contains many lament psalms that were conceivably written by men in at least some instances, and the entire book of Lamentations is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah. It would seem, then, that lament was a non-gendered, active form of grieving in ancient Israel, i.e., that it was also a male form of grief, despite the existence of “wailing women”. (In my own experience, modern Middle Eastern patriarchs can just as easily engage in lament as women.)

<sup>28</sup> The intensification of his grief is reflected in the accumulation of distress-laden terms and phrases in his prayer, which picks up on the expressions of grief, groaning and weeping found in its introduction (3:1): “being *grief-stricken in spirit* and *groaning*, I *wept*, and I began to *pray with sighs*” (3:1), “do not *punish me*” (3:3), “you gave us over to *plunder and exile and death* and for an *illustration and byword and reproach*” (3:4), “*doing with me according to my sins*” (3:5), “*command my spirit to be taken up from me*, that I may be set free ... For *it is better for me to die than to live*, because I have *heard false reproaches*, and *great is the grief with me*. O Lord, command that I be set free from this *distress* ... For *it is better for me to die* than to see *great distress* in my life, and better not to hear *reproaches*” (3:6) – my italics in all cases.

**The angel's visit and Tobias' quest: anticipatory grief**

At this point, it seems that Tobit will go down to his grave in sorrow, dead and dejected like the uninterred corpses that he buried. However, he suddenly remembers the money he had left in trust with Gabael and calls Tobias to tell him about it (4:1–3). Believing that he will die soon – he had, after all asked for death – his first words to his son concern his burial (4:3): “Bury me properly”.<sup>29</sup> If Tobit had lost face during his lifetime, he did not want to lose face at his death. Immediately thereafter, he admonishes Tobias concerning his mother (4:3–4):

And honour your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life.  
And do what is pleasing before her, and do not grieve her spirit in anything. Remember her, my child, because she experienced many dangers for you in her womb. And when she dies, bury her beside me in one grave.

The first section of Tobit's speech to Tobias (4:3–4) begins and ends with death and burial, showing the extent of his depression and his anticipatory grief (for himself). Nevertheless, 4:3–4 brings a further glimmer of hope for Tobit's transformation: turning away from his own dishonour, Tobit shows tender concern for the honour and welfare of his wife, even wanting her to share his grave when she dies.<sup>30</sup> While the first part of his speech begins with his burial and ends with Anna's, most of it is about Anna. It is as though the altercation between them has brought Anna into sharp focus in Tobit's mind. Perhaps, because he had dishonoured her before, he now wishes his son to honour her in life and death,

Next, Tobit admonishes his son on obeying God and giving alms so that his life will be successful (4:5–6, 21). His admonitions fly in the face of his own experience and show that his relationship with God is still on shaky ground – an ambivalent attachment at best. Perhaps Tobit is grasping at old straws – what he knew from the

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<sup>29</sup> “The honourable burial of parents was an obligation of the sons, and meant putting the first part of the fifth commandment in practice” (Bolyki 2005:92).

<sup>30</sup> “Burying couples at each other's side was regarded a fine gesture of honour to the dead” (Bolyki 2005:92)



past despite the losses he has suffered through his righteousness and almsgiving.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps he thought that Tobias might have better success at applying his teachings than he had had. Be that as it may, Tobit ends his speech by instructing Tobias about the money and encouraging him not to be afraid because they had become poor, promising him “many good things” if he lives righteously before God (4:20–21).

While it is true that Chapter 4 begins and ends with money, a theme that is carried over strongly to the next part of this scene (5:2–3), it would seem that Tobit’s concern is to assuage the fears of young Tobit and ensure his wife’s welfare when he dies (4:3–4, 21). Moreover, Tobit’s focus is on family relationships, as he emphasizes the mother-son relationship (4:3–4) and Tobias’ sonship.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, at the time of his pending death, Tobit begins to reconnect with his family in some way, thus heralding his upcoming transformation and the means through which it will take place. Even so, he seems unconcerned about the grief that his family would endure were he to die: he cannot see his family properly yet, perhaps because he is depressed and feels a burden to them, perhaps because he is overcome by a sense of failure as provider, consequently losing face as a Middle-Eastern patriarch.

### **Tobit’s healing and transformation**

In my 2013 reading, I criticised Tobit severely regarding his conversation with the angel. I took issue with his lament upon Azariah’s joyful greeting (5:10) and the fact that he does not acknowledge the care that his immediate family have bestowed on him. Instead of caring for his son’s welfare, I averred, he rejoices over his and Azariah’s supposed kinship (5:14) but neglects to establish Azariah’s credentials as travel guide for his only son (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:566; so too Miller 2012:504).<sup>33</sup> I

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Anderson (2011:499): “In their original setting the words [4:10] were quite ironical, for Tobit made this gnomic assertion against the background of his own personal despair. In the context of his life up to that point, it would have been more accurate to say that almsgiving had been the cause of death!”

<sup>32</sup> The phrases “my son” and “my child” occur seven times in seven verses, i.e. four times in 4:2-5 and three times in 4:19-21, versus five times in 1:1-4:1, i.e. once in 1:20, three times in 2:2 and once in 2:3.

<sup>33</sup> So too Miller (2012:506), Tobit is “so overjoyed at meeting a cousin that he forgets about his more immediate relations”.

now see that Tobit's behaviour may be a reaction of extreme grief. His emotional energy is completely spent, his resilience ground to zero. All he can see is his blindness. He states that he is like the dead and, indicatively, that he *is* dead (5:10). The cumulative adversity of his lifetime has taken its toll.<sup>34</sup>

I also see that, in the midst of all his suffering, his excitement over the fictitious kinship (5:14) may be read as the beginning of a resurrection, an infusion of hope based on good times in the past when he was more in control of his life, when he worshipped at the Jerusalem temple along with Hannanias and Nathan, the sons of Semeilas, his and Azariah's "common kinsman". His return to life is heralded by this moment of kinship recognition and reflected in his subsequent joyful welcoming of Azariah (5:14).<sup>35</sup> It is also reflected in his ensuing, improved relationship with his wife and his expressed concern over his son. Tobit tenderly comforts his weeping wife immediately after Tobias and the angel leave. "Do not worry," he counsels the distraught Anna, "our child will go in good health and come back to us in good health. And your eyes will see him on the day when he comes back to you in good health. Do not worry! Do not fear for them, my sister. For a good angel will accompany him, and his journey will be successful, and he will come back in good health" (5:20–21). Having being comforted (and possibly being surprised at Tobit's change of attitude) Anna ceases to weep (6:1).

Later, when Tobias return is delayed (10:1), Tobit tries to rationalise his delay (10:2) but then begins to grieve for him (10:3). At this point Anna loses hope.

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<sup>34</sup> Seery, Holman and Silver (2010:1025) define resilience as "successful adaptation or the absence of a pathological outcome following exposure to stressful or potentially traumatic life events or life circumstances". This involves (a) "the capacity to maintain a healthy outcome" after exposure to adverse life events, and (b) "the capacity to rebound" after such events (Seery et al. 2010:1025). These researchers have shown empirically that moderate (two to four incidents) but not zero lifetime adversity prepares one better for recent lifetime stresses. By contrast, higher levels of adversity "are more likely to overwhelm individuals' ability to manage stress, thereby disrupting toughness and mastery" (Seery et al. 2010:1026). As such, "more lifetime adversity was associated with higher global distress, functional impairment, and PTS symptoms, as well as lower life satisfaction" (Seery et al. 2010:1035).

<sup>35</sup> This is underscored by Azariah's earlier promise (5:10): "Take courage; the time is near for God to heal you; take courage."

Weeping and mourning for her son, she berates herself for having let him go (10:3–5). Once again Tobit tries to comfort her, despite his own anticipated grief for Tobias (10:1–3), this time to no avail (10:7). Furthermore, once his eyesight is restored, his first act is to “embrace Tobias and bless God because he sees his son again” (Miller 2012:506; 11:13–14). Lament, self-pity and woe are gone, replaced by exuberant praise.

Five things have enabled this: the joy brought back by his supposed kinship connection to Azariah, his slow but steady recognition of his family and his emotions, his family’s care and God’s seemingly late but timely intervention. There is no coincidence in the fictitious kinship connection, despite the fact that Azariah grudgingly provides it (5:11–13). In sending Raphael, God had acted as family, comforting Tobit and providing for him as Anna, Achikar and Tobias had done.

Tobit’s concern with money, extended kinship and burying the dead is replaced by a genuine concern for his family. When he rejoices over seeing his son again, it is precisely because he sees his son again, not because of his new-found wealth (see 8:9, 10:10 and 11:12–15). Even when Tobias speaks of money (11:15), Tobit shows no interest. Rather, he rushes out to meet Sarah and welcome her as family (11:16). Similarly, after the wedding, Tobit eagerly accepts Tobias’ proposal to give Azariah half of the possessions he brought back with him (12:1-4), and is no longer pre-occupied with extended family.

There is also no more talk of almsgiving apart from the angel’s exhortation (12:6–10) and Tobit’s dying speech to Tobias and Sarah (14:8–9). “Significantly, there is not a dead body in sight until Tobit dies ‘in peace at one hundred and twelve years’ ... and is ‘buried with honour’ in Nineveh (14:2)” (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:568).<sup>36</sup>

Tobit has clearly been transformed; his grief and blindness healed as he “focuses all his energy, attention, and affection on those dearest to him” (Miller 2012:507). His

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<sup>36</sup> While I also made these points in my 2013 reading, I did not link the turn-around in Tobit’s attitude to family, kinship recognition, and grief resolution. I had merely stated that his “encounter with the angel somehow changed Tobit” (Efthimiadis-Keith 2013:568) and listed the differences that I discuss here, namely comforting his wife, embracing Tobias and Sarah, and letting go of his preoccupation with money, alms and the dead.

orientation towards death is replaced by an orientation towards life and family – both human and divine.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have reviewed my first reading of Tobit according to theories of grief and loss. While many of my criticisms still stand, for example Tobit's obsession with doing good – in particular burying the dead, his neglect of his family, his self-absorption and self-pity, I now see that Tobit's behaviour may be accounted for, though not excused, by the cumulative effect of the high levels of adversity and loss that he had suffered throughout his life. As I have shown, Tobit experienced all six of the principal loss types such that his resilience had been completely spent by the time he encountered the angel in disguise, thus mitigating my harshest criticism of him. While I had noticed that Tobit had somehow been positively transformed after his encounter with the angel, I had not seen that it was his recognition of fictitious kinship that had acted as the catalyst for this transformation. I had also noticed neither his increasing recognition of his family and of his emotions, nor the fact that God had acted as family in sending Raphael to look after him as Anna, Tobias and Achikar had done.<sup>37</sup> Re-reading Tobit through the lens of grief and loss has thus transformed my understanding of Tobit, yielding a far more compassionate reading of this character.

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<sup>37</sup> The same may be said of my 2015 essay, in which I had also read Tobit more compassionately than before (2013), that time through the lens of my binge-eating disorder.

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