



**Comical moments and comical characterisations in Tobit:  
the undermining of self-righteous piety, simplistic  
retribution, and limited Yahwism.**

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### Comical moments and comical characterisations in Tobit: the undermining of self-righteous piety, simplistic retribution, and limited Yahwism.

Abstract: This article argues that comic moments and comic characterisation **are** used in Tobit as a means of satirically exposing a type of Yahwism characterised by inward-looking piety, religious and ethnic endogamy, and simplistic notions of retribution. Comic moments and comic characterisation, therefore, in Tobit is an important ethical device used to expose the problematic nature of an obsessive emphasis on religious boundary maintenance as demonstrated by the extreme version of endogamy that Tobit endorses. The article argues that the theme of “insults” in Tobit and the distinction between public and private behaviour serves to destabilise the main character’s hyper-religiosity. The article suggests that Tobit’s restrictive form of Yahwism and his overzealous Yahwistic piety are exposed and undermined in Tobit in order to illustrate to audiences that the deity Yhwh does not operate within a mechanistic moral calculus. The article pays close attention to the significance of the language and translations of Tobit when making this case.

Keywords: Tobit; diaspora; endogamy; comedy.

Many people describe the character Tobit as a ‘moral ... exemplar’ (Cousland 2003: 525. Schellenberg 2011: 314. Cf. Kollmann 1994: 289 - 299; Sir 38:2). Connections are made between his ‘exemplary’ style of ‘observance of Torah’ and his emphasis on endogamy which ‘forms the hard core of the Jewish survival strategy’ during the diaspora (Oeming 2011: 550, 556). However, it is also possible that certain aspects of the way Tobit is characterised betrays a slightly less positive, possibly even comical, depiction of Tobit’s piety. This article will suggest that some of the negative aspects of Tobit’s characterisation, and other moments in the text, are deliberately comical for a defined purpose. That is *not* to say that we should simplistically, anachronistically, and without consideration of cultural distance, “laugh at” Tobit. Rather, we suggest that the comical areas of Tobit’s characterisation and the comical moments in Tobit more generally are devices through which an internal critique of a certain type of Yahwism emerges. This critique is didactic and acts as a means of exposing a form of Yahwism characterised by inward-looking piety, endogamy, and simplistic notions of retribution. Comedy, therefore, in Tobit is an important ethical and didactic device through which to persuade readers to avoid slipping into a religiously narrow, self-congratulating, and one-dimensional type of Yahwism.

### Approaches to Comedy.

Comedy is a rather loose term and a risky one when considering characterisation in an ancient text. Three theories of comedy are regularly cited: the incongruence theory, the relief theory, and the superiority theory. Incongruence, or laughter in response to the unexpected, is widely thought to contribute to comedy. This is a theory that goes back at least as far as Aristophanes and it is sometimes detected by scholars in Biblical material (Lazarus 2014; Jarick 2014).<sup>1</sup> The Relief Theory approaches laughter physiologically suggesting that nervous energy builds up which is subsequently relieved by laughter. In contrast, the superiority theory, which goes back to Plato and Aristotle, understands comedy as emerging when an audience feel superior, for example when confronted with a character who is unaware of a *faux pas* that is recognised by the audience.<sup>2</sup> However, these popular theories of comedy are not without critique: can we really agree that comedy is motivated by a malign urge to do others down (superiority theory)? What does incongruity achieve save for a description of what we laugh at (something that defies expectations), rather than *why* we laugh? (Eagleton 2019: 39, 62). Further complicating the problem is the observation made amongst anthropologists that while all human beings laugh, the reasons we find things amusing varies, which raises particular difficulties when it comes to language (Sciama 2016; Apte 1985). Therefore, the classic theories of comedy, although helpful, cannot account for all comedy.

However, Jackson, amongst others, has recently demonstrated successfully that it is possible to identify “characteristics, styles, motifs, devices, approaches” that are regularly understood to ‘contribute to comedy’ in the Hebrew Bible (Jackson 2012: 16; cf. Whedbee 1998). Jackson’s work is particularly helpful here in identifying a framework for comedy.

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<sup>1</sup> For a lengthy discussion of comedy refer to Frye’s classic essays, (Frye 2000).

<sup>2</sup> These theories are outlined fully by Morreall (1983).

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3 Several literary devices are identified by Jackson as contributors. These include  
4  
5 characterisation: comic characters are ‘largely stock ones, underdeveloped or undeveloped,  
6  
7 frequently identifiable through a single trait, a trait that sometimes even doubles as the  
8  
9 character’s name’ (Jackson 2012: 17).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the comic character might be cast as a  
10  
11 buffoon, or lack character development. Similarly plot movement is an important trait, wherein  
12  
13 a comic plot is U-shaped, as Jackson argues,  
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17 [c]omedy's opening scenario is a harmonious one; society is in a state of integration.  
18 Enter into this situation some challenge or test that jeopardizes the harmony, and the  
19 plot begins a downward movement. Then, as the plot is descending to its lowest point,  
20 something or someone acts on it, changes its direction and causes it to swing upwards.  
21 At comedy's ending, a new situation of harmony and integration is established (Jackson  
22 2012: 17-18).  
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25 Thus, while the comic plot may be complex, an overarching U-shaped scenario must be  
26  
27 detectable. In addition, Jackson identifies various linguistic devices as contributors to comedy,  
28  
29 including hyperbole, puns, double-entendre, sound-play. Furthermore, Jackson outlines the  
30  
31 importance of irony and reversals as contributing towards comedy. This ‘may be as simple and  
32  
33 obvious as a character’s saying one thing, but clearly meaning another’ but can also be more  
34  
35 complex, as in the case of dramatic irony and misdirection (Jackson 2012: 19). Repetition is  
36  
37 also identified as comic by Jackson, especially when it is overdone and ‘not going anywhere’  
38  
39 (Jackson 2012: 19). Three key modes of comedy are identified by Jackson: parody (mocking,  
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41 particularly through exaggeration), farce (two-dimensional characters cast into impossible  
42  
43 situations), and satire (comedy as a weapon). Of course, this brief overview of factors  
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45 contributing to comedy is not exhaustive or perfect, but it provides us with a set of reference  
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47 points against which to check the persuasiveness of our arguments.  
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57 <sup>3</sup> The idea of a single trait doubling as a name is presented ironically in Tobit. Nowell notes  
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59 that even Tobit’s name “‘Yhwh is my good’” seems ironic’ (Nowell 1983: 196).  
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3 The next logical question, then, is what does comedy achieve? There are various  
4 sociological approaches to this. A functionalist approach to comedy, for example, interprets it  
5 through the social functions it accomplishes in a society. For example, Douglas suggested that  
6 the function of jokes illustrates their importance beyond the joke itself as subverting the social  
7 order (Douglas 1968; cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1940). In contrast, a symbolic-interactionist  
8 approach emphasises the importance of ambiguity in dialogue and the way in which it is  
9 negotiated to construct meaning. A phenomenological approach to comedy ‘conceptualizes  
10 humour as a specific ... “mode” of perceiving and constructing the social world’ (Kuipers  
11 2008: 373-378). It is also worth noting the conflict approach, which understands comedy, or  
12 humour, as a political weapon that is concerned with power relationships. These approaches  
13 are helpful in developing our thinking about what role comic characterisation plays in Tobit,  
14 since they demonstrate the wide variety of ways of conceptualising the social roles that comedy  
15 plays. This article will suggest that the comic characterisation of Tobit may be addressed using  
16 a conflict approach to comedy. Comedy in Tobit acts as a type of social protest against a type  
17 of over-zealous Yahwism and a mechanism to encourage audiences to think carefully about  
18 their own way of practising Yahwism.<sup>4</sup> However, the approach must be taken on a much  
19 smaller scale as a negotiation of values *within* a group (perhaps involving power relations  
20 between varying sets of Yahwists). Therefore, this article will take a mildly conflict approach  
21 to comedy’s purpose. We will demonstrate the ways in which comedy acts as a didactic force  
22 for the audience at parts in the narrative, to expose the main character’s rather conservative  
23 attempts to be a “good” Yahwist, as if Yhwh acted in a rigid and mechanistic way on the basis  
24 of a strict and fool-proof moral calculus (Brenner 1990: 43). This exposure of the character  
25 Tobit’s religiosity aligns with the (mildly) conflict approach because it seeks to modify and

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59 <sup>4</sup> For an extensive overview of comedy and conflict, refer to Hart and Bos 2007.  
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3 relax social values such as strict endogamy and religious conservatism. Essentially, in seeking  
4 to modify these values, there is a heavily didactic element within this mildly conflict or social  
5 protest approach to comedy, which aligns well with early Greek examples of comedy. Indeed,  
6 many of Aristophanes' function in this way. For example, *The Clouds* questions (thus conflict  
7 approach) Socrates' parody of antisocial behaviour just as Tobit's antisocial behaviour is  
8 parodied in Tobit.  
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17 One final note of approach is in order. There is not scope for an exhaustive analysis of  
18 every verse of Tobit here. Rather, key themes in the narrative are addressed and critically  
19 examined using the framework set out above. These themes as they appear in the narrative may  
20 contribute towards pushing the characterisation of Tobit towards comedy. This is *not* to assert,  
21 simplistically, that "Tobit is comedy."<sup>5</sup> However, it is possible that aspects of Tobit's  
22 characterisation are, indeed, intended to be comedic and there are moments in the text that may  
23 be interpreted and intended as humorous.  
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35 <sup>5</sup> However, perhaps we should not rule out, altogether, the possibility of the genre of Tobit  
36 being comedic, especially in consideration of its comedic U-shaped plot structure. We should  
37 also note the diversity of genres and the changes in person within the narration throughout  
38 Tobit, making the overall question of its genre incredibly complex. After all, our own genre  
39 categories are anachronistic ways of categorising what we think might have been in the mind  
40 of ancient authors. Furthermore, as is regularly noted, genre is not a static phenomenon but  
41 that continually evolves. As Zahn suggests texts participate in genres 'dipping into them,  
42 employing their elements in modified fashion, combining them.... texts can participate in  
43 multiple genres simultaneously' (Zahn 2012: 277). Similarly, Newsom argues '[t]exts do not  
44 'belong' to genres, so much as participate in them, invoke them, gesture to them ... and in  
45 doing so continually change them' (Newsom 2003: 12).  
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4 **Exaggerated endogamy, the farcical situations it creates, and the characterisation of**  
5  
6 **Tobit and Tobias.**  
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9 This article is not the first to argue for the significance of recognising comedic moments in  
10 Tobit. Other scholars have made similar observations (McCracken 1995: 401-418; Portier-  
11 Young 2001: 35-54; Lazarus 2014; Gruen 2002: 135-181). In contrast, the focus of this article  
12  
13 is on how comedy operates to expose a level of obsessive religious boundary-maintenance and  
14  
15 hyper-religiosity as a flawed diaspora survival strategy. We will do so with close attention to  
16  
17 the language and versions of Tobit.<sup>6</sup> One clearly significant theme in Tobit's diaspora setting  
18  
19 is resistance to assimilation, especially through maintaining ethnically endogamous marriages  
20  
21 (Ego 2005: 50 cf. Dimant 2009: 162. Fröhlich 2010: 62-63). However, as we shall demonstrate,  
22  
23 in Tobit endogamy is taken to an extreme level. One key moment wherein the theme of  
24  
25 endogamous marriage emerges is in the advice given to Tobias (Tob. 4:12-13). This emerges  
26  
27 in the text, after Tobit's supposed last "Testament," which, ironically, is not actually his last  
28  
29 (Tob. 14:3-11). The character Tobit prayed for death, as the climax of his prayer (Tob. 3:2-6)  
30  
31 and seemed to assume his prayer would automatically be granted by Yhwh, saying to himself  
32  
33 'now I have asked for death...' and then resolving that the next thing he should do is give  
34  
35 instructional wisdom to his son (Tob. 4:3-19).<sup>7</sup> Within this advice, the idea of exogamy is  
36  
37 introduced using the strongly negative descriptor "fornication" (πορνεία G1 Tob. 4:12). The  
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50 <sup>6</sup> Throughout the article, we will be referring to the critical edition of Tobit produced by  
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52 Weeks et al (2004). All translations from this edition are my own.  
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54 <sup>7</sup> Miller points out that Tobit's prayer is rather self-centered,  
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56  
57 In his desperate prayer to God Tobit thinks only of his own suffering; he shows no  
58 concern for his wife and son.... once an orphan himself (Tob 1:8), he does not seem  
59 to reflect on the ramifications of his death for his family (Miller 2011: 194).  
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3 strength of this language is replicated in the versions.<sup>8</sup> This term, like its Hebrew equivalent  
4  
5 (זנה), essentially rules out illegitimate sexual activities and can also refer to prostitution. Tobit's  
6  
7 description of exogamy goes beyond the language used in Ezra – which is already vehement –  
8  
9 linking exogamous marriages with foreign women to טמא 'impurity' (Ezr. 9:11), חטא 'sin' (Neh.  
10  
11 9:2, 37; 10:33), מעל 'sacrilege' (Ezr. 9:4, 6; 10:2, 6), נדה 'defilement' (Ezr. 9:11); אשם 'guilt'  
12  
13 (Ezr. 9:6-7, 13 10:10) and תעבות 'abominations' (Ezr. 9:1, 11, 14).<sup>9</sup> However, Tobit follows  
14  
15 this hyperbolic description of exogamy with the reasoning that Tobias should not marry outside  
16  
17 of the tribe because of being 'descendants of the prophets,'<sup>10</sup> highlighting the fact that 'Noah,  
18  
19 Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' had endogamous marriages.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps what is intended here is a  
20  
21 reference to the instructions about levirate marriage within the tribe for the sake of inheritance  
22  
23 that emerges in the narrative about the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27; 36:2-3; Josh. 17:3-  
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36 <sup>8</sup> For example, the Latin texts have 'fornication' (L1, L2; L3; L4). So too does the Hebrew  
37  
38 (זנה 'prostitution' H4). However, some Aramaic and Hebrew versions simply describe  
39  
40 exogamy or intermarriage as 'sinful' (e.g. אטת A5) or 'unclean' (טמא H3).  
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43 <sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that Ezra's emphasis on inheriting the land is also mirrored in Tobit's  
44  
45 motivation for endogamy (το σπέρμα αὐτῶν κληρονομήσει γην Tob. 4:12).  
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48 <sup>10</sup> The term 'prophets' seems to be used rather loosely here. Miller suggests it is 'a synonym  
49  
50 for "patriarch"' (Gen. 20:7; Ps. 105:15; Jub. 8:18; Miller 2011: 79).  
51

52 <sup>11</sup> Tob. 4:12-13; Jub. 4:33; Gen. 11:29; 24; 28; cf. Nickelsburg 2001: 46-48; Trotter 2015: 462.  
53  
54 Note, however, the highly *selective* nature of Tobit's evidence. As Bredin highlights, 'there are  
55  
56 a number of examples where the patriarchs or early Israelites married a foreigner' including  
57  
58 Joseph who 'marries an Egyptian (Gen. 41:45), Moses a Midianite (Exod. 2:16, 21) and, as the  
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3 6)?<sup>12</sup> Like Ezra, Tobit calls on a certain notion of supposedly divinely-sanctioned ancestral  
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5  
6 'history' to legitimise endogamous marriages as if they were matches made in heaven. Unlike  
7  
8 Ezra, however, Tobit's restrictions on endogamy are very radical: not only is one to shun  
9  
10 'foreign women' generally, but marriage must occur specifically within the tribe (Tob. 4:12).  
11  
12 This exaggerated depiction of Tobit's interpretations of endogamy could be understood through  
13  
14 the notion of what Jackson referred to as the 'parody' mode of comedy, as described above.  
15  
16 Tobit's characterisation here betrays the idea of endogamy at its most excessive, and a  
17  
18 hyperbolic assessment of the dangers posed by exogamy.  
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21  
22 The way that the information is delivered may also be interpreted as part of this parody  
23  
24 "mode" of comedy. The setting, advice to a "son" from a "father," could also point toward a  
25  
26 parody of the instructional genre of wisdom.<sup>13</sup> The echo of this genre sets Tobit up as a kind of  
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39 book of Ruth describes, Boas, the ancestor of David, a Moabitess' (Bredin 2006: 107). There  
40  
41 are clear synergies between Tobit and the Testament of Job, which depends more closely on  
42  
43 the Old Greek of Job, with regard to endogamy and the burial of corpses (Testament of Job  
44  
45 39:1-10; 40:6-14; 53:5-7). Similarly, like Tobit, the "Job" of the Testament of Job emphasises  
46  
47 his acts of charity and piety (Testament of Job 9-15). Indeed, this characterisation of Job is so  
48  
49 obsessed with his charity that even his own servants find it hard to bear all the work he  
50  
51 generates for them in the actual delivery of such "kindness" (Testament of Job 13:1-6). Finally,  
52  
53 like Tobit, in the Testament of Job women feature as key parts of the story. Just as Anna is a  
54  
55 foil for Tobit, in the Testament of Job, Sitis functions to accentuate Job's troubles. Therefore,  
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57 as Trotter observes,  
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3 “wise sage,” and Tobias as a passive recipient of instructional wisdom. However, Tobit’s  
4 characterisation does quite not match this ideal because of his, rather simplistic, assumption  
5 that Yhwh would automatically grant him the death wish he outlined in his prayer, as betrayed  
6 by the fact of the testament’s very existence. This undermines the strongly-worded advice  
7 about endogamy, as does the fact that the “Testament” is not his last. The superiority theory of  
8 humour can be considered in Tobit’s characterisation here. Audiences familiar with the widely-  
9 copied story of Tobit who reflect on the narrative may note the absurdity of the length of Tobit’s  
10 ‘Testament’ followed by the fact that the character doesn’t actually die. The contrast created  
11 between the character Tobit who hastily acts without waiting for Yhwh’s response to his  
12 prayer,<sup>14</sup> and the ideal of a wise sage aligns with the incongruence theory of comedy. This  
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In both the Book of Tobit and the Testament of Job, the protagonist is presented originally as extremely pious through very special attention to his charity. Then, after unjustly suffering the loss of possessions and even of physical well-being, Tobit and Job are restored with the effect that they immediately return to life as usual: righteous living as manifested specifically through almsgiving (Trotter 2015: 455).

Trotter’s connections between ideas are helpful here. Although we do not know if there is any direct relationship between the Testament of Job and Tobit, there does seem to be a developing tradition in various texts about a certain type of Yahwistic piety that lacks the ability to engage with life’s real problems and challenges in anything more than a one-dimensional way.

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2  
3 functions to undermine the moral authority of the character Tobit and to bring into question the  
4 merits of his fervent viewpoints about endogamous marriage. The comic characterisation here  
5 aligns with the conflict approach to comedy, wherein it functions as a vehicle through which  
6 to make a didactic point. A comic situation is, therefore, deliberately painted about a very  
7 serious matter in order to make an ethical point and to test the authority of Tobit's views about  
8 endogamy. Tobit's desperation to adhere to a life of 'righteousness and truth,' in order to please  
9 Yhwh,<sup>15</sup> is here undermined by the assumptions he makes about the deity.

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11  
12 This message about endogamy is emphasised at a further, even more restrictive, level  
13 within the narrative when Tobias is cast as marrying not just within the tribe but a member of  
14 his extended family. Sarah's main function in the text is as an example of appropriate marriage  
15 (Tob. 3:8-15; 7:11-13; 10:10). Indeed, at parts in the text, Tobias is told that he 'inherits' Sarah  
16 (Tob. 6:12; 7:10).<sup>16</sup> So close are the endogamous marriages in the text that the characters even

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36 <sup>12</sup> Some scholars have discussed this with regard to levirate marriage. For example, Fitzmyer  
37 (2003: 212). Likewise, Miller suggests that 'the angel is encouraging Tobias to fulfil his duty  
38 as a *levir* by marrying the widow Sarah' (Miller 2011: 75). Note the parallel situation in Mt  
39 22:23-38. For an excellent recent discussion of gender and power with reference to the  
40 daughters of Zelophehad refer to Claassens (2013). Cf. Sakenfeld (1988).

41  
42  
43 <sup>13</sup> An example of this genre include the Sumerian Instructions of Shurppak. It is particularly  
44 interesting that, like many Egyptian examples of instructional wisdom, Ahiqar for example,  
45 in Tobit the poetic instructional speech is framed by narrative. This is also the case in  
46 demotic instructional material including Ptahhotep and the Teachings of Khasheshonqy  
47 (Quack 2011: 380).

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50 <sup>14</sup> A response which was, in fact, to heal Tobit rather than let him die Tob. 3:16-17.

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2  
3 make a semantic shift from regular terms for husband and wife to terms usually designated for  
4 close kinship such as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ (Tob. 5:21; 7:15; 8:4; 10:6).<sup>17</sup> However, this union  
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6  
7 also takes several comic turns. The way that endogamy is introduced to Tobias by Raphael  
8 makes it abundantly clear that he must marry Sarah. The key rationale that Raphael provides  
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10  
11 is the fact that she is a relative (Tob. 6:11, 12, 13, 16). Here, again, we have a very exaggerated  
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13  
14 depiction of endogamy with the sensational threat of the ‘penalty of death’ should Raguel  
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16  
17 refuse the matrimonial arrangements (Tob. 6:13). The implications of the endogamous  
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19  
20 marriage slowly dawn on Tobias: seven previous husbands have died in the monstrous bridal  
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23 chamber. Overdone repetition here is a comic device, which also implies a future repetition,  
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25  
26 adding a morbid air to the proposed marriage arrangement.<sup>18</sup> The ironic incongruence of the  
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42 <sup>15</sup> The idea of a ‘single trait’ doubling as a name, as Jackson describes it, is ironically  
43 presented in Tobit (Jackson 2012: 17). Nowell notes that even Tobit’s name “‘Yhwh is my  
44  
45 good” seems ironic’ (Nowell 1983: 196). We should note the ironic nature of all of the named  
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47  
48 characters. As Hicks-Keeton argues,

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51 Tobiah (“Yhwh-is-my-good”) has received no evidence in his life of God as his  
52 “good.” Hannah (“Grace”) caustically berates her husband; she is apparently not  
53 gracious. Raguel (“Friend-of-God”) despairs at his inability to marry his daughter, a  
54 circumstance divergent from friendship with God .... Edna (“Pleasure”) endures  
55 family troubles that are far from pleasurable. Indeed, at the moment these characters  
56 first appear in the narrative, their names mock their present circumstances. (Hicks-  
57  
58 Keeton 2013): 107, referencing Moore 1996: 25).

59 Refer also to Radday 1990.  
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3 scene is striking: Sarah is described as heaven-sent, ‘set apart for you before the world was  
4 made,’ but the seemingly inevitable outcome for the character Tobias is death (Tob. 6:18). The  
5  
6 dramatic irony created through the fact that, despite Raphael’s advice (Tob. 6:16-18), Tobias  
7  
8 seems unaware of the possibility that he will actually escape death adds comedy to the scene  
9  
10 as does the incongruence of the connection between marriage and the loss of life. Likewise,  
11  
12 the impossible situation this puts Tobias in is comical: as Raphael points out, this (morbid)  
13  
14 endogamous marriage arrangement is his ‘father’s orders’ (Tob. 6:16). Here, therefore, a comic  
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16 moment appears in what Jackson describes as the farce mode.  
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21 The characterisation of Tobias here is also important.<sup>19</sup> Rather than questioning his  
22  
23 father’s judgements, Tobias is overly passive and obedient even in the face of the possibility  
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30 <sup>16</sup> This is literally the case in 4Q197 ‘you have the right to *inherit her* [למירתה].’ This is  
31  
32 perhaps an amplification of Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:4; Jub. 30.  
33

34  
35 <sup>17</sup> It should be noted that there are some occasions when the terms ‘wife’ ‘bride’ and ‘sister’  
36  
37 are conflated (Gen 12:13; 20:2; 2 Sam. 13:11; Cant. 4:9, 12). The emphasis on kinship and  
38  
39 marriage is highlighted by the union between Tobias and Sarah. As Faßbeck observes,  
40

41 eleven kinship terms are employed within the first chapter: σπέρμα (1:1), φυλή (1:1),  
42 ἀδελφός (1:3), ἔθνος (1:3), πατήρ (1:4), οἶκος (1:5), especially in the combination  
43 οἶκος τοῦ πατρός μου which reflects the standard Hebrew term בית אב, πατριά (1:9),  
44 γένος (1:10), οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραήλ (1:18), ἑξαδελφός (1:22), συγγένεια (1:22). (Faßbeck  
45 2005: 177).  
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47 Within Tobit, Faßbeck argues, the seriousness of proper conduct in obedience to the rules of  
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49 kinship relations is evidence in the narrative figure of the demon who is ‘employed as a  
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51 boundary marker’ (Faßbeck 2005: 180).  
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55 <sup>18</sup> As McCracken comments that ‘losing one husband on the wedding night is sad ... while  
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57 losing seven is almost inevitably comic’ (McCracken 1995: 417).  
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60 <sup>19</sup> Note the importance of his name, as part of the comedic impact.

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3 of his own death being an outcome of the endogamous union. Some also suggest that he is  
4 depicted as unintelligent. For example, when notified of the medicinal qualities the fish gall  
5 contains, he, as Eynde puts it, ‘fails to put two and two together’ by considering Tobit’s plight  
6 (Tob. 6:5; Eynde 2005: 277). Therefore, through comic treatment of the theme of endogamy in  
7 Tobit and simplistic characterisations of Tobit and Tobias, an ethical and didactic point is  
8 made. Tobit and Tobias’ supposedly ‘authentic’ Yahwistic piety is problematic because of its  
9 rigid adherence to a sense of duty that comes before love between family members and a sense  
10 of common humanity. As Oeming observes, there is ‘solidarity only for those who have acted  
11 in solidarity’ as well as ‘no mixed marriages and no mercy for the unmerciful’ (Oeming 2011:  
12 556). Comedic characterisation, and comedic moments in the text, therefore, are a device that  
13 exposes the flaws with the characters’ obsessive emphasis on boundary maintenance.

14 Tobias’s wedding night is a further key comic moment. Tobias’s first night of wedded  
15 passion is, described by Hieke as ‘divine matchmaking,’ is, at best, prosaic (Hieke 2005: 120).  
16 The chaste newlyweds sit and pray together, and then they sleep (Tob. 8:5-9). There is no  
17 tension (of any sort) here, just tedious assurances of happy outcomes. The prayer’s connection  
18 between their marriage and Adam and Eve underlines the fact that they consider their union to  
19 be part of the primordial order and divinely ordained (Gen. 2-3). This is made explicit in the  
20 juxtaposition at the end of the prayer between πορνεία (‘fornication’) and ἀλήθεια (‘truth’): οὐ  
21 διὰ πορνείαν ἐγὼ λαμβάνω τὴν ἀδελφὴν μου ταύτην ἀλλ’ ἐπ’ ἀληθείας.<sup>20</sup> These qualities are  
22 dichotomously opposed in the prayer to emphasize the legitimacy of the union (while also  
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54 <sup>20</sup> H5 inserts a lengthy prayer beginning with the creedal address to Yhwh (Exod. 34:6-7).

55 This large interpolation, departs quite markedly from the Greek, Latin, and Syriac  
56 translations (Weeks et. al. 2004: 226-227).  
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3 suggesting that other types of marriage are ‘illicit’). However, this is incongruously juxtaposed  
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5 next to the absurd scene that follows. Schellenberg points out that:  
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8 Raguel’s late-night grave digging ... reminds the reader of the already averted  
9 tragedy. Here the reader can hardly be expected to entertain Tobias's death as a real  
10 possibility; instead, the narrator plays the reader’s knowledge off against the inferior  
11 knowledge possessed by the story’s characters to create dramatic irony (Schellenberg  
12 2011: 319).  
13

14 Here is a classic example of the superiority theory at work through dramatic irony. This allows  
15 the audience to laugh, from a critical distance at Raguel. They are privy to the entire farcical  
16 scenario, while the character himself is not. The entire charade of attempting to hush-up the  
17 embarrassing problem of Sarah’s husband’s all dying by burying the bodies is made all the  
18 more ridiculous by the fact that the rationale that justifies it: to avoid becoming ‘an object of  
19 ridicule and derision’ (Tob. 8:10). Raguel’s fixation on avoiding public ridicule, which  
20 ironically makes him an object of ridicule amongst readers, is well reflected in the texts and  
21 translations of Tob. 8:10.<sup>21</sup> Here, the supposedly serious matter of endogamous marriage is  
22 undercut by the grave-digging, and then – upon finding that Tobias is not dead – the  
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39 <sup>21</sup> The translations of Tobit are largely in agreement about Raguel’s fear of being dishonored  
40 in the eyes of his neighbors. G2 has γάρ μήποτε ἀποθάνη καὶ γενώμεθα κατάγελως καὶ  
41 ὄνειδισμός (lest he will die and we become an object of mockery and disgrace). L1 has et  
42 omnibus fiam derisio et opprobrium (that I should derided and criticized); cf. L2 et simus  
43 omnibus in derisu. Likewise, H3 has אם מת הבחור נקברנו בלילה ואיש אל ידע ולא יהיה לנו חרפה  
44 ויאמר (And he said if the young man dies, we bury him in the night. Then no man will know  
45 and [lit. there will not be to us reproach] we will not be an object of reproach). Similarly, H4  
46 ולא יודע הדבר ונהיה עוד לבוז (the matter will not be known and we will no longer be despised).  
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48 Additionally, A5 has לא יידע ולא יהא לנא חיסודא (The matter will not be known and the shame  
49 will not be ours).  
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3 awkwardness of having to fill his grave again, perhaps also an example of the relief theory at  
4 work.<sup>22</sup> Here, Davis's observation that comedy has the potential subversively to expose  
5 underlying social and political structures is helpful (Davies 2008: 157-182). A conflict  
6 approach to comedy is, therefore, apt. Raguel's needless, harried grave-digging exposes the  
7 lengths he will go to in order to avoid humiliation. Perhaps Raguel did not quite believe that  
8 Tobias was a relative, as potentially betrayed by his unwittingly morbid invitation that his guest  
9 should 'eat, drink, and be merry' (with an implied 'for tomorrow you will die') (Tob. 7:10; Isa.  
10 22:13; cf. Qoh. 2:14; 8:15)? To the outside world, he displays every pious decorum as he  
11 repeats claims to act in accordance with the book of Moses (Tob. 7:11, 12, 13). But his real  
12 concern is betrayed by his actions, which are laid bare before audiences using dramatic irony.  
13 Raguel is depicted as needing to avoid humiliation to a very exaggerated degree. This is  
14 demonstrated through his extreme of behaviour of late night grave-digging for his son-in-law,  
15 an act betraying that in the character's estimation it is better to quickly dispose of the body than  
16 to become a laughingstock in the eyes of his neighbours. Comedy emerges in this moment in  
17 Tobit through the accumulation of factors associated with way that the theme of endogamy is  
18 treated in Tobit, through the characterisations involved, and through the use of dramatic irony.  
19 This serves to put audiences as a critical distance from the story and, didactically, to create  
20 doubt about the nature of ethnic and religious endogamy.

### **Insults, truth-telling, and the distinction between public and private behaviour in Tobit.**

21 Macatangay comments 'more than any other element in the story, it is the concern over disgrace  
22 and verbal abuse that precipitates the desperate actions of Tobit, Sarah, and Raguel'

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<sup>22</sup> Note also the skulduggery concerning in the telling of Raguel's grave-digging in G3 5:19  
and 8:10.



(Macatangay 2011: 273). Even in Tobit's confession, the theme of insults emerges comically when we note his lack of directness, requesting forgiveness for 'inadvertent errors' and 'unjust insults' (Tob. 3:3, 6). This incisive observation is particularly clear through the heavily repeated use of synonyms in all the versions such as 'insult,' 'disgrace,' and 'reproach.'<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is through the motifs of "having to endure reproaches" that Tobit's and Sarah's stories hang together.<sup>24</sup> As with Raguel, there is a clear desire in the character Tobit to be respected amongst his immediate community. However, this is not always achieved. As Weeks argues, his 'self-perception sits uncomfortably beside the comments of others' in the narrative (Weeks 2011: 392). For example, Tobit reports his virtue in leaving his feast to bury a corpse, interpreting the situation through a doomsday quotation (Tob. 2:4-6; Amos 8:10). Tobit's interpretation of things here is comical through its incongruence (thus incongruity theory): when confronted privately with a family feast, Tobit instead – without hesitation – 'jumps up'

<sup>23</sup> For example ὀνειδισμός appears in G1 3: 4; 3:6; 3:13; 3:15; G2 3:4, 3:6 [x2]; 3:7; 3:10; 3:13; 3:15; 8:10; G3 8:10. Similarly, הרפה appears in H3 1:18; 2:14; 3:4 3:6; 3:10; 3:13; 3:15; 8:10; H4 3:6; 4:13 [x2]; H5 12:14 [x2] H6 3:6; 3:7; 3:15 H7 3:6; 3:10. There are various synonyms used in the translations attest the sense in which 'insults' are understood here (Tob. 3:6). G1 and G2 have διότι λυσιτελεῖ μοι ἀποθανεῖν ἢ ζῆν ὅτι ὀνειδισμοὺς ψευδεῖς ἤκουσα (For it is better for me to die than to live, because I have had to listen to false insults). L1, L2, and L3 have impropria falsa (false reproaches). H2 and H6 have הרפתי עוד (reproach my hear longer no will I). H4 has כבר נלאיתי שמוע הרפת (because I make myself weary of hearing reproach). Finally, A5 ובחיסודא suggests that (shame) is the problem.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah's opening words state her anxiety about her father's potential reproach, ὀνειδος (disgrace), G1 3:10; ὀνειδίζω (reproach) G1 3:7; G2 3:10. καὶ εἶπεν μία μὲν εἰμι τῷ πατρὶ μου ἐὰν ποιήσω τοῦτο ὀνειδος αὐτῷ ἐστὶν καὶ τὸ γῆρας αὐτοῦ κατάξω μετ' ὀδύνης εἰς ἄδου.

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3 (ἀναπηδάω) to tend to an unburied corpse. Portier-Young observes here that ‘Tobit ... exhibits  
4 greater concern for the dead than for this living’ through leaving his gathered family for a  
5 corpse.<sup>25</sup> This incongruence here lies in the public **versus** private display of values: public and  
6 community shows of piety overrule the needs of Tobit’s immediate family. As Efthimiadis-  
7  
8 Keith argues:

14 While his perseverance in doing good, particularly in burying the dead, might be seen  
15 as a manifestation of his piety and faithfulness, for me, there was something compulsive  
16 about his behaviour, something diseased. He seemed so obsessed with his doing good  
17 that he could see little else, let alone the needs and deeds of his own immediate family.  
18 I wondered what Anna and Tobias were doing while Tobit was feeding the hungry,  
19 clothing the naked and burying the dead (Efthimiadis-Keith 2018: 4).

22 Tobit’s characterisation here suggests that his top priority in this moment is his religious duty.  
23 The incongruence of ‘duty over family’ somewhat undermines Tobit’s often exaggerated  
24 emphasis on the importance of kinship and lineage.<sup>26</sup> This leads Egger-Wenzel to describe  
25 Tobit’s character as a “madcap” who only makes life impossible for himself (Egger-Wenzel  
26 2015: 35). Tobit’s exaggerated notions of duty here are comical in the “mode,” as Jackson  
27 describes it, of satire. The comedy here operates as a weapon to draw audience’s attentions to  
28 Tobit’s hyper-religiosity as a didactic device which warns against the dangers of such rigid  
29 piety.  
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50 <sup>25</sup> Portier-Young 2001: 39; cf. Bolyko 2005. As MacDonald argues, “Tobit is not without  
51 comic uses of food... A more overlooked comic motif is the interrupted feast” (Macdonald  
52 2006: 174; cf. Jacobs 2015).

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57 <sup>26</sup> For example, through using the superlative μονώτατος ‘I, utterly alone, regularly went to  
58 Jerusalem’ (Tob. 1:6).  
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Another key comic moment in Tobit occurs when he describes his neighbours ‘laughing’ at him, and the versions are relatively consistent in this translation (Tob. 2:8).<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, therefore, even the community wherein the main character operates do not hold Tobit in high-esteem, thus creating a level of incongruence between their estimations of Tobit and his own? However, key to the comedy is the fact that having buried the corpse, Tobit dutifully remains outside and ‘a remarkable double hit’ of warm sparrow droppings impair the character’s sight (McCracken 1995: 402). This is an example of the farcical mode of comedy, as Jackson describes it. Tobit tries to do exactly what is right, but ends up all the worse off for it.

The distinction between private and public is particularly clear through Anna’s interactions with her husband. For example, when ‘the Bible’s first working mother’ is given a goat as a bonus by her employer, Tobit makes a fuss (Tob. 2:11-14; Nowell 1983: 1003). Instead of expressing gratitude, Tobit accuses she stole it (Tob. 2:13-14). The way the scene is narrated is comical, partly owing to characterisation. A large incongruence is created between the Tobit of the outset who claims to have ‘walked in the ways of truth and righteousness’ all of his life and the Tobit of this scene (Tob. 1:3). This scene’s characterisation sees Tobit become ‘red in the face (ἐρυθρίαω)’ with anger and fail to believe his wife, whom the audience knows is telling the truth (dramatic irony). This comical device of incongruity casts serious doubts on Tobit’s integrity, as Cousland comments, here Tobit ‘relinquishes moral

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<sup>27</sup> G1 has καὶ οἱ πλησίον ἐπεγέλων (and my neighbours laughed). Similarly, G2 καὶ οἱ πλησίον μου κατεγέλων. L1 and L2 have et omnes proximi mei deridebant me (and my neighbors laughed at me), likewise L3 et propinqui mei deridebant. Likewise, A5 has עלוהי גחכין וקריוהי גחכין (and my neighbors laughed at me). In slight contrast, however, H5 has קרוביו ויריבו אותו (and my neighbors quarreled with me).

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3 authority' (Cousland 2003: 538). Anna's response directly alludes to Tobit's self-description  
4 of his virtue: ποῦ εἰσὶν αἱ ἐλεημοσύναι σου καὶ αἱ δικαιοσύναι σου (Where are your alms?  
5 Where are your righteous deeds? Tob. 2:14; cf. Tob. 1:3-9). Although the scene is quaint and  
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authority' (Cousland 2003: 538). Anna's response directly alludes to Tobit's self-description of his virtue: ποῦ εἰσὶν αἱ ἐλεημοσύναι σου καὶ αἱ δικαιοσύναι σου (Where are your alms? Where are your righteous deeds? Tob. 2:14; cf. Tob. 1:3-9). Although the scene is quaint and mundane – an elderly couple bickering in the privacy of their home – a powerful point is made. Anna's rhetorical questions expose the terrifying void where God ought to be in Tobit's dutiful piety. His devout Yahwism, which is publically known, does not extend into private situations wherein he feels undermined and inconvenienced.

The relationship between Tobit and Anna is characterised by trivial, but belligerent, squabbles. To use an English colloquialism: Tobit constantly “gets her goat” (annoys Anna). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the comic moment in the text when Tobit sends their son away on a dangerous journey with what she thinks is a complete stranger in order to retrieve the ‘nest-egg’ (θέμα ‘prize’, נחמ”ש ‘nest-egg’ 4Q200; Tob. 4:20-21).<sup>28</sup> Tobias's dangerous journey causes Anna understandable anxiety and, once again, gives occasion for the couple to quarrel. Indeed, as Miller points out, their interaction throughout is shaped by the ‘recurring feature’ of ‘discord’: they ‘converse with each other four times’ and ‘in three of these the wife rebukes the husband’ (Miller 2011: 186-187). Translation is difficult here, but Anna's accusation at this point seems to be that Tobit has prioritized money over their son. As she says ‘do not heap money upon money’ since ‘as it is given us to live by the Lord, this is sufficient

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<sup>28</sup> The emphasis in the chapter is on the fact that the disguised Angel Raphael (alias “Azariah”) is kin, as repeated several times (Tob. 5:5, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16). Save for the fact that he claims to be related to the family and apparently knows the way to Media, no further information is known about him. Ironically, even Azariah questions the reasons why Tobit needs to know what tribe he is from, asking ‘why do you need to know my tribe?’ (Tob. 5:12).

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3 for us' (Tob. 5:19-20).<sup>29</sup> Jacobs describes Anna at this point as 'a foil for Tobit' (Jacobs 2015:  
4 81). The contrast between the priorities of the two characters creates a large incongruity, and  
5 therefore may also contribute to comedy. Tobit focuses on Azariah's lineage and in contrast,  
6 Anna's focus is their son's wellbeing. The stark contrast between the characters' priorities here  
7 emphasizes the inadequacies in Tobit's piety: he works tirelessly to try and do what is good,  
8 but he misses the matters of obvious significance, like the life and death stakes in the security  
9 of his only son. Dramatic irony also contributes to the comical nature of the moment in the  
10 narrative. Tobit unwittingly points out, twice, that 'an angel' will accompany Tobias on his  
11 journey (Tob. 5:17, 22). Here the satirical nature of Azariah's accompanying Tobias is a good  
12 example of the superiority and relief theories of comedy working at once. Audiences know  
13 what the characters do not, and the information leads to superiority. Likewise, tension has built  
14 through Sarah's fearfulness over the danger that awaits Tobias but this is released (relief  
15 theory) by the assurance that his travel companion is, in fact, an angel. Therefore, comedy  
16 appears at key moments in the story to expose the inconsistencies between public and private  
17 behavior in Tobit.

### Conclusion and implications of this article.

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<sup>29</sup> Note the problematic nature of 5:19β. In 5:19β, translation from the Greek is 'May it [the money?] be an offscouring for our lad.' The word περιψημα ('offscouring' or 'dregs') is puzzling. Perhaps the sense of it is 'Do not treat my son as dirt clinging to the money, but the money as dirt that our boy washes off'? The term has attracted speculation. 4Q197 has אל ברי ידבק [בכס]ף ברי, 'May my son not be attached [to mone]y.' The Latin has 'would that that money had never been, but might be rubbish [to my son] but lest it be for a cleansing' (Fitzmyer 2003: 197-198).

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3 This article has argued that comedic moments and characterisations act as a didactic device in  
4 Tobit that is designed to address the dangers of vacuous piety. We have explored various  
5 aspects of comedy and theories about comedy in order to identify where and how features that  
6 are comedic contribute towards this didactic message. Specifically, the focus on restrictive  
7 endogamy, the characterisation, and the contrast between public and private behaviors serve to  
8 expose areas in Tobit's piety where depth and sincerity may be lacking. What are the  
9 implications of this comedy for the social world and context of Tobit's original audiences? One  
10 key thing to acknowledge here is the significance of the text's diaspora setting. This should not  
11 be underestimated in Tobit. The text<sup>30</sup> paints a dire picture of diaspora living wherein a  
12 'dominant place' is given 'to the reality of death,' where 'perpetual movement' occurs, and  
13 wherein deported communities are subject to the changing whims of foreign kings (Griffin  
14 1984: 82; Levine 2015: 7; Tob. 1:15, 19-20). The text is dominated by instability and spatial  
15 movement as is evident through the word-motif 'captivity' (αἰχμαλωσία) which is repeated in  
16 various versions of Tobit.<sup>31</sup> This can be recognised through references to deportation, and  
17 pilgrimage, as well as the motifs of 'the journey' and 'the road.'<sup>32</sup> This leads Eynde to argue  
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43 <sup>30</sup> While Tobit is set in Assyria and Media in the Neo-Assyrian period, its date is probably  
44 between the early or mid-third and the mid to late second century BCE 'depending on  
45 whether one interprets the omission of Antiochene/Maccabean themes as lack of knowledge'  
46 (Perrin 2014: 114-115).  
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52 <sup>31</sup> G1 1:2; 1:10; 3:4; 3:15; 7:3 13:6; 13:10; 14:5; 14:15; G2 1:2; 1:3; 1:10; 2:2; 3:4; 3:15; 7:3;  
53 13:10; 14:4; 14:5; 14:15; G3 13:6. Weeks et. al., 2004: 144-145.  
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57 <sup>32</sup> Tob. 1:2, 6-8, 10, 15; 2:1; 5:2, 4-7, 10, 14, 16-17; 6:1-10; 7:1; 10:5, 7, 11-13; 11:1-6, 15-  
58 16; 13:10-11; 14:5-7.  
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3 that the book 'is mainly a travel story.'<sup>33</sup> Tobit also aligns well with the typical features of  
4 diaspora communities (Cohen 2008: 7). One striking area, however, wherein Tobit is not  
5 typical of diaspora communities is through the lack of recognising what Cohen described as  
6 'the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for  
7 pluralism' (Cohen 2008: 7). If anything, Tobit is the polar opposite to Cohen's statement. This  
8 is particularly evident through the way that endogamy and kinship are handled (Tob. 1:9; 4:12-  
9 13; 6:10-18; 7:9-11). As Cousland comments 'virtually every character in the work, including  
10 the famous sage Ahiqar, is related to Tobit or belongs to the tribe of Naphtali' (Cousland 2003:  
11 538). Or, as Gruen puts it 'this is endogamy with a vengeance – one big, happy family' (Gruen  
12 2002:157). Effectively, genealogies honouring the homogeneity of Tobit's tribe and family are  
13 all-important, and the possibility of pluralism and exogamy is shunned (Tob. 5:10-14; 7:3-10).

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Perhaps the kind of audience that Tobit is aimed at are diaspora Jews keen to be perfect Yahwists (rather like Tobit) whose quest to achieve flawless piety has become unhealthily over-zealous? Of course, it goes beyond the available evidence to make this suggestion. We simply cannot say with confidence what ancient diaspora Jews would have thought comedic, and different ancient readers will, of course, come to different conclusions about the emotional affect of the book, just as modern readers do. All that we can suggest is that the evidence surveyed seemed to point towards comedy. But certainty is always impossible to establish, and

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<sup>33</sup> Eynde 2005: 274. Eynde also compares the journeys to acquire a bride for Isaac with Tobias's journey to Sarah (Gen 24; 28; Tob. 6:10-18; Eynde 2005: 275). Other scholars make similar comparisons. For example, Novick compares the travel in Tobit with Abraham's journey to Moriah (Novick 2007). Similarly, Macatangay compares Deuteronomy 30:1-10 with Tobit 13-14 in light of the motif of exile and return (Macatangay 2011: 32. On the motif of the Odyssey, refer also to Macdonald 2001; Nickelsburg 2001.

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3 should probably also be avoided since it could lead to intellectual laziness. Nevertheless, if  
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5 comedy is part of a social and political protest in Tobit which undermines the main character's  
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7 hyper-religiosity, then as this article has sought to argue, then maybe the possibility is worth  
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9 entertaining. Maybe many diaspora Jews, like Tobit, were anxious not to put a foot wrong?  
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11 What the comedy in Tobit seeks to do is ridicule the extremes of endogamy and piety. While  
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13 such measures are necessary for diaspora survival, when taken to the extreme they become  
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15 destructive. If humour is part of a social protest, then Tobit may represent an internal critique  
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17 by diaspora Jews of other more rigidly pious diaspora Jews.  
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