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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Collins, Matthew A.
Citation	Collins, M. A. (2019). On the trail of a Biblical serial killer: Sherlock Holmes and the Book of Tobit. In C. Blyth, & A. Jack (Eds), <i>The Bible in Crime Fiction and Drama: Murderous Texts</i> (pp. 9-28). London: T&T Clark.
Publisher	T&T Clark
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-05-16 01:54:08
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/621829

[Pre-publication version of article published in C. Blyth and A. Jack (eds), *The Bible in Crime Fiction and Drama: Murderous Texts* (STr 16/LHBOTS 678; London: T&T Clark, 2019), 9–28.]

On the Trail of a Biblical Serial Killer: Sherlock Holmes and the Book of Tobit

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1. Introduction

In the apocryphal/deuterocanonical book of Tobit, Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, is tormented by the demon Asmodeus. She has been married seven times, but each time the demon kills her husband on her wedding night. In despair, she contemplates suicide and prays for deliverance. In the course of the narrative, Tobias, the son of Tobit, travels from Nineveh to Ecbatana and, with the help of the archangel Raphael, defeats the demon and marries Sarah.

Between 1939 and 1946, Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce starred together in *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a series of radio plays broadcast in the United States. One episode, aired on 26 March 1945, was titled ‘The Book of Tobit’ and featured Holmes and Watson investigating the deaths of a woman’s previous three husbands, each of whom, prior to his death, had received a threatening letter signed ‘Asmodeus’. Though substantially different in both content and context, numerous comparisons are made throughout the case with its scriptural forebear.

After briefly unpacking the plot of the book of Tobit itself, this essay will first explore the use of and engagement with Tobit in this wartime murder mystery, before subsequently returning to re-examine the biblical text in the light of Holmes’ namesake investigation.¹ By effectively transposing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s celebrated detective to ancient Ecbatana, the inherently murderous nature of the

¹ Though more accurately described as an ‘apocryphal’ or ‘deuterocanonical’ work (being entirely absent from the Jewish Tanak), the book of Tobit can nevertheless be regarded ‘biblical’ in the broadest sense, having been considered such for at least the first 1,500 years of Christianity, and continuing to constitute an authoritative part of Catholic and Orthodox Bibles today. Indeed, the radio play itself twice refers to Tobit as an ‘Old Testament story’.

biblical tale comes into sharper focus and the peculiarities of the narrative and its folkloric origins are both reassessed and illuminated from a perspective informed by crime fiction. In doing so, this essay will further illustrate the extent to which the ‘genre lens’ through which we approach a text may govern our reading of it. Putting Sherlock Holmes on the case, a rather different interpretation of the text emerges – one in which there is a serial killer on the loose in the book of Tobit, and Sarah may not in fact be as innocent as she seems.

2. Murder and Death in the Book of Tobit

The book of Tobit exists in two main Greek versions: G^I (the so-called ‘short recension’, preserved in Codex Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, and Venetus) and G^{II} (the ‘long recension’, preserved in Codex Sinaiticus and attested in MSS 319 and 910).² The ‘long recension’ (G^{II}), rediscovered in the nineteenth century, is probably the earlier of the two.³ Long-held suspicions that the Greek text reflected a translation from a Semitic original were seemingly confirmed by the discovery of fragments of one Hebrew and four Aramaic copies among the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q196–200 = 4QTob^{a–e}).⁴ Other extant versions include a third Greek recension (G^{III}), the

² Both can be viewed in parallel in: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, CEJL (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); Robert Hanhart, *Tobit*, Septuaginta Vetus Testamentum Graecum VIII.5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983). Both versions appear consecutively in Robert J. Littman, *Tobit: The Book of Tobit in Codex Sinaiticus*, Septuagint Commentary Series (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

³ Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 5–6; Robert Hanhart, *Text und Textgeschichte des Buches Tobit*, MSU 17 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 21–48; Carey A. Moore, *Tobit: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 40A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 53–60; Merten Rabenau, *Studien zum Buch Tobit*, BZAW 220 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 3–7. G^{II} is also the version found in more recent translations, such as the NRSV.

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ‘Tobit’, in *Qumran Cave 4.XIV: Parabiblical Texts, Part 2*, ed. Magen Broshi et al., DJD 19 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1–76 and pls. I–X; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, ‘The Aramaic and Hebrew Fragments of Tobit from Qumran Cave 4’, *CBQ* 57 (1995): 655–75; Michaela Hallermayer, *Text und Überlieferung des Buches Tobit*, DCLS 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 33–185; Armin Schmitt, ‘Die hebräischen Textfunde zum Buch Tobit aus Qumran 4QTob^e (4Q200)’, *ZAW* 113 (2001): 566–82. For a possible fifth Aramaic copy from Qumran (originally attributed to 4Q196), see Michaela Hallermayer and Torleif Elgvin, ‘Schøyen Ms. 5234: Ein neues Tobit-Fragment vom Toten Meer’, *RevQ* 22 (2006): 451–61; cf. Andrew B. Perrin, ‘An Almanac of Tobit Studies: 2000–2014’, *CurBR* 13 (2014): 107–42 (109). On the question of composition language, see: Fitzmyer, *Tobit*,

Old Latin and Vulgate editions, medieval Semitic copies (both Hebrew and Aramaic), plus Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Armenian versions.⁵ It has been speculated that the tale had its origins in folkloric traditions, gradually evolving from secular folktale to Jewish religious novella.⁶

Though clearly post-exilic in its present form⁷ and likely dating from the early second century BCE,⁸ the narrative itself is set in the eastern diaspora of the seventh

18–28; Littman, *Tobit*, xxvi–xxvii; Moore, *Tobit*, 33–39; Perrin, ‘Almanac of Tobit Studies’, 111–13; Frank Zimmermann, *The Book of Tobit*, JAL 7 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 139–49.

⁵ Maria Cioatã, ‘Medieval Hebrew Tellings of Tobit: “Versions” of the Book of Tobit or New Texts?’, in *Is There a Text in this Cave? Studies in the Textuality of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of George J. Brooke*, ed. Ariel Feldman, Maria Cioatã, and Charlotte Hempel, STDJ 119 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 334–67; Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 3–17; Littman, *Tobit*, xix–xxv; Benedikt Otzen, *Tobit and Judith* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 60–66; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, ‘The “Fagius” Hebrew Version of Tobit: An English Translation Based on the Constantinople Text of 1519’, in *The Book of Tobit: Text, Tradition, Theology*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits and József Zsengellér, JSJSup 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 189–219; Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Stuart Weeks, ‘The Medieval Hebrew and Aramaic Texts of Tobit’, in *Intertextual Studies in Ben Sira and Tobit*, ed. Jeremy Corley and Vincent Skemp, CBQMS 38 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2005), 71–86; Stuart Weeks, ‘Some Neglected Texts of Tobit: The Third Greek Version’, in *Studies in the Book of Tobit: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Mark Bredin, LSTS 55 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 12–42; Zimmermann, *Book of Tobit*, 127–38. See further: Christian J. Wagner, *Polyglotte Tobit-Synopse: Griechisch – Lateinisch – Syrisch – Hebräisch – Aramäisch*, MSU 28 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Stuart Weeks, Simon Gathercole, and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, eds., *The Book of Tobit: Texts from the Principal Ancient and Medieval Traditions*, FSBP 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), esp. 1–60.

⁶ Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 8–20. See further, Robert H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 269–71; Will Soll, ‘Misfortune and Exile in Tobit: The Juncture of a Fairy Tale Source and Deuteronomic Theology’, *CBQ* 51 (1989): 209–31; Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 73–76; Zimmermann, *Book of Tobit*, 5–12. Cf. Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 36–41.

⁷ For example, Tob 13:9–10 and 14:4–5 appear to show awareness of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the Babylonian exile of 587/6 BCE, as well as the return from exile and subsequent rebuilding of the temple in the latter half of the sixth century BCE.

⁸ Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 50–54; Littman, *Tobit*, xxviii; Moore, *Tobit*, 40–42; Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 57–59; Perrin, ‘Almanac of Tobit Studies’, 113–15.

century BCE, which resulted from the Assyrian deportation of Israel (Tob 1:1–3; cf. 2 Kgs 15:29). Tobit, belonging to the tribe of Naphtali and living in Nineveh, has a habit of digging graves and secretly burying the corpses of any of his people who were left without a proper burial (Tob 1:16–19; 2:3–8). After becoming blind (2:9–10) he prays for death (3:1–6). Meanwhile in Ecbatana, Sarah (the daughter of Tobit’s kinsman, Raguel) has been married seven times but on each occasion her husband has been killed on the wedding night (3:7–9; 6:14–15; 7:11). With the demon Asmodeus (Gk. *Asmodaios* [G^{II} 3:17]; cf. *Asmodeos* [G^{II} 3:8]; *Asmodaus* [G^I 3:8, 17]) seemingly responsible for the series of murders, Sarah likewise prays for death and deliverance (3:10–15). Though both Tobit and Sarah continue to live, by the end of chapter 3 the book is already littered with dead bodies.

Tobit’s son, Tobias, is dispatched by his father to collect a financial deposit from Gabael, living in Rages in Media (4:1–2; 4:20–5:3; cf. 1:14). Accompanied by the archangel Raphael, though unaware of his true identity (5:4–22), Tobias stops en route at Ecbatana where he is encouraged by Raphael to marry Sarah and ‘inherit her father’s possessions’ (6:10–13). Knowing of the seven previous men who have ‘died in the bridal chamber’ (6:14), Tobias is understandably reluctant but Raphael reassures him, revealing how to dispel the demon (6:16–18; cf. 6:7–9). Tobias and Sarah are married (7:9–16) and Asmodeus is successfully driven away (8:1–3), though not before Raguel pre-emptively digs a grave for his latest son-in-law (8:9–12), intending to cover-up as best he can an anticipated eighth murder (8:12: ‘if he is dead, let us bury him without anyone knowing it’). Tobias, however, survives the wedding night, the grave is filled in (8:18), and after much celebrating Tobias and Sarah leave Ecbatana and return to Nineveh (10:7–13). Raphael helps Tobias heal his father’s blindness (11:1–15), before revealing his true identity and departing (12:11–22). All live happily ever after (14:1–2, 12–15).

Thus the book of Tobit has at its heart a series of mysterious murders. As Amy-Jill Levine notes, ‘corpses are piling up at Sarah’s house’.⁹ Indeed, there is throughout a conspicuously high concentration of terms such as *thaptō* (‘to bury’) and *taphos* (‘grave’), with 22 per cent of the verses in G^{II} (53 out of 244) containing

⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, ‘Redrawing the Boundaries: A New Look at “Diaspora as Metaphor: Bodies and Boundaries in the Book of Tobit”’, in *A Feminist Companion to Tobit and Judith*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan with Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, FCB 20 (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 3–22 (18).

‘some allusion to death, dying, or burial’.¹⁰ The killer in this instance is identified as the demon Asmodeus, who in Tob 6:15 is described as being in love with Sarah (in MS 319, G¹, 4Q196, and OL, though not Sinaiticus), suggesting that his motive is jealousy and perhaps further casting him in the role of a murderously possessive incubus.¹¹

3. Sherlock Holmes and the Book of Tobit

The epitomical fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, and his faithful companion Dr Watson, were the literary creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). Originally appearing in 4 novels and 56 short stories (the so-called ‘canon’), the characters have since featured in thousands of different adaptations and new works by subsequent authors across a wide variety of media.¹² Most notably, between 1939 and 1946, Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce starred as Holmes and Watson not only in 14 feature-length films¹³ but also in 217 episodes of *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a series of radio plays broadcast in the United States on the NBC

¹⁰ Moore, *Tobit*, 130 (also 120). Moore further notes that only chapter 9 (itself just six verses long) is seemingly devoid of allusions to death and burial (*Tobit*, 129–30).

¹¹ Beate Ego, “‘Denn er liebt sie’” (Tob 6,15 Ms. 319): Zur Rolle des Dämons Asmodäus in der Tobit-Erzählung’, in *Die Dämonen – Demons: Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt*, ed. Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K.F. Diethard Römheld (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 309–17; Beate Ego, ‘The Banishment of the Demon in Tobit: Textual Variants as a Result of Enculturation’, in Brenner-Idan with Efthimiadis-Keith, *A Feminist Companion*, 67–74; Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 215.

¹² These derivative and/or updated works include most recently, for instance, the award-winning television series *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010–present) and *Elementary* (CBS, 2012–present), set in twenty-first-century London and New York respectively, over 120 years after the characters’ first appearance in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (London: Ward Lock & Co., 1887).

¹³ *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (20th Century Fox, 1939); *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (20th Century Fox, 1939); *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (Universal, 1942); *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (Universal, 1943); *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (Universal, 1943); *Sherlock Holmes Faces Death* (Universal, 1943); *The Spider Woman* (Universal, 1944); *The Scarlet Claw* (Universal, 1944); *The Pearl of Death* (Universal, 1944); *The House of Fear* (Universal, 1945); *The Woman in Green* (Universal, 1945); *Pursuit to Algiers* (Universal, 1945); *Terror by Night* (Universal, 1946); *Dressed to Kill* (Universal, 1946).

Blue Network and Mutual Broadcasting System (and overseas via the Armed Forces Radio Service).¹⁴

One of these episodes, written by Anthony Boucher and Denis Green and first aired on 26 March 1945, was titled ‘The Book of Tobit’.¹⁵ Though markedly distinct from its scriptural forebear, it nevertheless drew both heavily and explicitly on the apocryphal/deuterocanonical work, with Holmes and Watson investigating the deaths of a woman’s previous three husbands, each of whom, prior to his death, had received a threatening letter signed ‘Asmodeus’.¹⁶ At just 30 minutes long (several minutes of which are also taken up by messages from the show’s sponsor, Petri Wine), the set-up, investigation, and resolution are fast-paced and economically written, yet contain numerous references to and comparisons with the original murders of the book of Tobit.

¹⁴ For a full listing of the 217 Rathbone-Bruce episodes, including original broadcast dates, see ‘The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (Radio Show 1939–1946)’ in the *Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia*, available online [https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes \(radio show 1939-1946\)](https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=The%20New%20Adventures%20of%20Sherlock%20Holmes%20(radio%20show%201939-1946)).

After Rathbone left in May 1946, the series continued until 1950, though with Bruce leaving in July 1947, after which time it was retitled first *Sherlock Holmes* (September 1947–June 1949) and then *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (September 1949–June 1950).

¹⁵ Anthony Boucher and Denis Green, ‘The Book of Tobit’, *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (26 March 1945) (radio play). This episode was later released on audio cassette: Anthony Boucher and Denis Green, *The Book of Tobit and Murder Beyond the Mountains*, vol. 19 of *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Simon & Schuster Audioworks, 1993) (audio cassette). The recordings are now in the public domain and many, including ‘The Book of Tobit’, can be readily found online, for example at: <http://www.rathboneandbruce.net/the-new-adventures-of-sherlock-holmes-old-time-radio-show-episodes.html>.

¹⁶ The radio play has twice been adapted into a short story: Carla Coupe, ‘The Book of Tobit’, *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine* 2.2, issue 6 (2011): 95–121; H. Paul Jeffers, *The Forgotten Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Based on the Original Radio Plays by Anthony Boucher and Denis Green* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), 91–106. Though both closely follow the original script (especially Coupe, who moreover leaves Boucher and Green entirely uncredited!), some differences and changes exist. Jeffers notes that ‘translating radio programs to be *read* as short stories necessitates occasional expansion of the original texts to take the place of the radio listener’s imagination, giving additional information, inserting narrative for a sound effect or musical element, and providing context’ (original emphasis) (*Forgotten Adventures*, 5). Thus, the version predominantly engaged with here is the original radio play (for the availability of which, see n. 15 above).

As the tale begins, Lady Diana Vennering ('something of a femme fatale in the early 1900s' [02:53–02:57]) has already lost two previous husbands, Señor Rossoni and Sir Wilfred Vennering, both of whom were mysteriously stabbed to death on their wedding night.¹⁷ After the second murder Holmes and Watson attend the trial of a suspect, Major Beckwith ('cousin of the dead man and an ardent suitor of the fair Diana' [03:27–03:31]), but he is found not guilty and released. Leaving the courtroom (and only four minutes into the story), Holmes first highlights the scriptural connection:

- Holmes: Have you ever read the book of Tobit, Watson?
Watson: Tobit? I don't think so. When was it published?
Holmes: Oh, a little before our time, old chap. It's an Old Testament story.
Watson: Whatever made you think of it at this moment?
Holmes: Well it's so remarkably apposite for the case of Lady Vennering. It deals with a highly peculiar series of murders. Seven of them, if I remember correctly.
Watson: Who was the murderer?
Holmes: A jealous demon by the name of Asmodeus, who strangled husbands on their wedding nights.
Watson: Well, judging by the verdict just now, Major Beckwith isn't the Asmodeus, or whatever you call him, in this case.
- (04:37–05:08)

The case is thus presented from the outset (indeed, from the title) as in some way mirroring the 'highly peculiar series of murders' of the book of Tobit, with Holmes and Watson on the trail of their very own 'Asmodeus'.

The two soon learn that the twice-widowed Diana Vennering intends next to marry the acquitted Major Beckwith. They are visited by the Reverend Arthur Weyland, who officiated at the previous two wedding ceremonies and who wishes to prevent the third:

¹⁷ Indicative time references for quotations from the radio play will be provided in brackets, and correspond to the original recording. Timings are approximate and based on the overall running time of 29:33, which includes introductory and concluding messages from the show's sponsor.

Weyland: May I ask you, are you familiar with the book of Tobit?

Watson: The book of Tobit? Good gracious me. You were talking about that yesterday, Holmes.

Holmes: I see that you've come to consult me about the Vennering case.

Weyland: Well that's amazing. How did you know? Has Lady Vennering been in touch with you?

Holmes: Errr, no sir, but I'm familiar with the book of Tobit, and Lady Vennering's case closely resembles that of the woman Sarah in the Old Testament story.

Weyland: More closely than you realise, Mr Holmes.

(07:21–07:44)

The Reverend Weyland goes on to explain that each husband, before the wedding, received a threatening note in 'ancient Hebrew writing' signed 'Asmodeus'. Apparently concerned for Diana's safety ('Murder is stalking her, Mr Holmes' [08:27–08:29]), he asks the detective to intervene and help deter her from marrying Beckwith. Though neither Holmes nor Watson are convinced 'that Mr Weyland's motives are entirely impersonal' (09:45–09:49), they nevertheless agree to speak to her.

Further suspects appear, in the form of magician's assistant Vernon Gaultier ('a stupid, good-looking boy who thought he was in love with me' [11:58–12:01]) and artist Peter McComas, who angrily storms in while Holmes and Watson are with her ('You're planning to marry Beckwith. But I won't stand for it. If you think you can throw me over like some silly boy, you're very much mistaken' [13:33–13:40]). Diana also discloses that Weyland translated the Asmodeus messages for her and read her the book of Tobit in its entirety, noting, 'He's always been particularly fond of that book' (12:31–12:33). Shortly thereafter it is revealed that she has in fact secretly married Beckwith that very morning. As Holmes asks to speak to him, the butler comes downstairs to report that he too has been murdered ('It's Major Beckwith, m'lady – he's been stabbed to death in his bath' [15:03–15:08]).

With Diana now thrice-widowed, and the police no closer to catching the killer, Holmes himself appears to become enamoured of her, spending all his time with her (and thereby incurring the ire of the Reverend Weyland). When finally

confronted by Watson, Holmes reveals that he and Diana are to be married the following day. His friend is understandably concerned: ‘But Holmes, three of her husbands murdered on their wedding night! And you’re proposing to be the fourth’ (19:58–20:02). After the wedding ceremony, this time presided over not by Weyland, but ‘a clergyman named Vernet’ (20:39–20:40), the new Mrs Holmes retires upstairs while Holmes divulges to Watson that ‘just before the ceremony I received one of those warning notes signed by “Asmodeus”’ (22:02–22:06). Making his own exit, he subsequently shouts for Watson who runs upstairs to join him:

Watson: What on earth’s the matter, Holmes?

Holmes: Follow me and lock the door behind you.

[Watson shuts and locks the door.]

Holmes: Allow me to introduce you to the demon Asmodeus, Watson. Unfortunately at the moment she’s in a faint.

Watson: Good lord, ...it’s Diana!

(23:09–23:24)

Holmes explains that she attempted to stab him as he bent over to strap up a suitcase, but that he had been expecting the attack and watching her in the mirror, revealing to Watson that he had suspected her all along (‘the problem was to find the proof’ [23:38–23:39]). ‘Asmodeus’ is exposed as a fiction, created by the murderess in order to throw others off the scent:

Holmes: These murders have been a perfect example of misdirection of motive.

Watson: How do you mean, Holmes?

Holmes: Well, by creating Asmodeus – thanks to the well-meaning stories of the Reverend Mr Weyland, from whose theological libraries she must have copied the Hebrew signature – she focused the murders on jealousy, concealing the fact that the one person with the perfect motive was herself – the widow who was to inherit!

(23:45–24:07)

Holmes further reveals that the clergyman who presided over the wedding, Vernet, was in fact his brother Mycroft in disguise and that he is therefore not actually married. Diana is arrested, and Holmes and Watson, having solved the case, return once more to Baker Street.

Though only a short radio play, ‘the book of Tobit’ is referred to by name nine times in the course of the dialogue, while there are seven further references to ‘Asmodeus’. In addition, there are several explicit conversations between characters about the nature and/or plot of the book of Tobit, drawing further links between the two works.¹⁸ Early on, Holmes even likens his own role to that of the archangel Raphael:

Watson: Hmm, what are you laughing about?

Holmes: I was thinking of the book of Tobit, Watson. In that, the role of protector – the role I’ve just been asked to take – was played by the archangel Raphael. I can’t help feeling, Watson, that I’m making distinct strides in my profession!¹⁹

(09:52–10:08)

As a result (and as anticipated by the title of the episode), Holmes and Watson are effectively presented with their own Tobit case to solve, faced with a series of husbands murdered on their wedding nights and on the trail of the mysterious ‘Asmodeus’. Significantly, however, they ultimately come to the conclusion that ‘Asmodeus’ does not in fact exist and that the real murderer is none other than the widow, Diana. Thus, in this revisiting and reinterpretation of the biblical book, it is the bride herself who is the serial killer!

¹⁸ In Jeffers’ short story based on the episode, this is expanded to provide even more detail about the plot of the book and its apocryphal/deuterocanonical status (e.g., *Forgotten Adventures*, 95).

¹⁹ Of course, Holmes’ role might also be likened to that of Tobias, especially inasmuch as he ‘marries’ Diana himself and thereby brings an end to the killing spree. Interestingly, Diana’s four husbands (Señor Rossoni, Sir Wilfred Vennering, Major Beckwith, and Sherlock Holmes) plus three suitors (Vernon Gaultier, Peter McComas, and Reverend Arthur Weyland) bring the total number of (potential) male victims in the story to seven (cf. Tob 6:14; 7:11).

4. Reopening the Case

Returning to the book of Tobit and re-examining it in the light of Sherlock Holmes' namesake investigation opens up some intriguing interpretative possibilities.²⁰ In particular, reading Tobit through the lens of crime fiction (a conceptual genre switch) creates new points of emphasis or interest in the text, and brings the inherently murderous nature of the biblical tale into sharper focus.²¹ The suggestion here is not that Tobit was intended as a work of crime fiction, but that approaching it as such helps highlight a number of peculiarities in the text and might unlock a rather different interpretation of the narrative. Indeed, it is this very aspect which is seized upon and accentuated in Holmes' own extremely succinct summary of the text. At its heart, '[the book of Tobit] deals with a highly peculiar series of murders' (04:53–04:56).

Reconsidering the events of the book of Tobit through the eyes of Sherlock Holmes (in effect, transposing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's celebrated detective to ancient Ecbatana), cracks start to appear in the officially-presented account. The deaths of Sarah's seven previous husbands (each strangled on their wedding night)²²

²⁰ Thus, to borrow Larry J. Kreitzer's phrase, 'reversing the hermeneutical flow'. See, for instance, Larry J. Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*, BibSem 17 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Larry J. Kreitzer, *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*, BibSem 24 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). Examining the use and interpretation of biblical texts in contemporary culture, John Barton likewise suggests that 'the "hermeneutical flow" can [also] be "reversed", as these modern versions send us back to the originals with fresh eyes'. See John Barton, foreword to Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film*, 7–9 (8).

²¹ The genre lens through which a text is read, and the corresponding preconceptions and expectations which go with it, influence and shape its interpretation. How we understand and approach the book of Tobit will thus affect our reading of it. For example, on approaching Tobit as a work of comedy, see: David McCracken, 'Narration and Comedy in the Book of Tobit', *JBL* 114 (1995): 401–18; cf. J.R.C. Cousland, 'Tobit: A Comedy in Error?', *CBQ* 65 (2003), 535–53. On the application of different genre lenses to Tobit, see further: Paul Deselaers, *Das Buch Tobit: Studien zu seiner Entstehung, Komposition und Theologie*, OBO 43 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 262–79; David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 69–70; Moore, *Tobit*, 17–21.

²² At Tob 3:8, G^I details that Sarah's husbands meet their end via strangulation (*apognigō*; similarly OL: *suffocas*), while G^{II} simply states that they were killed (*apoktennō*).

are blamed on the demon Asmodeus (Tob 3:8, 17). However, despite ostensibly being the primary antagonist of the narrative, not only is he surprisingly swiftly and anticlimactically dispatched (8:2–3), on closer inspection there is no real evidence that he ever existed! He has no dialogue, the text provides us with no physical description of the demon, and there are seemingly no witnesses to his murderous actions. Indeed, there is no indication that anyone (including Tobias in the bridal chamber) has ever actually seen him.²³ J. Edward Owens notes that Asmodeus is ‘absent but implied’.²⁴ The alleged perpetrator makes no explicit appearance, but is instead simply ‘spoken about and acted against’.²⁵ Given the paucity of evidence against the accused (or indeed for his very existence), it seems unlikely that Sherlock Holmes would consider the case closed but would continue to seek an alternative explanation.

Moreover, the name ‘Asmodeus’ appears only in the mouth of the narrator (3:8, 17). When Tobias is encouraged by Raphael to marry Sarah, his own tentative attribution of the murders to a demon is presented as the result of mere speculation and rumour as to the possible cause:

I have heard that she already has been married to seven husbands and that they died in the bridal chamber. On the night when they went in to her, they would die. I have heard people saying that it was a demon that killed them. (Tob 6:14)

Significantly, however, it is not a rumour that appears to have been heard and/or held by Sarah’s own household. When Sarah’s father, Raguel, explains ‘the true situation more fully’ to Tobias, no third party (demonic or otherwise) is mentioned:

²³ One possible exception is the supposed (and unwitnessed) encounter between Asmodeus and Raphael in Tob 8:3.

²⁴ J. Edward Owens, ‘Asmodeus: A Less Than Minor Character in the Book of Tobit – A Narrative-Critical Study’, in *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, ed. Friedrich V. Reiterer, Tobias Nicklas, and Karin Schöpflin, DCLY 2007 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 277–90 (283).

²⁵ Owens, ‘Asmodeus’, 278.

I am not at liberty to give her to any other man than yourself, because you are my nearest relative. But let me explain to you the true situation more fully, my child. I have given her to seven men of our kinsmen, and all died on the night when they went in to her. But now, my child, eat and drink, and the Lord will act on behalf of you both. (Tob 7:10–11)

Raguel nevertheless does not expect Tobias to survive the wedding night and preemptively digs a grave in an attempt to cover-up an anticipated eighth murder (8:12: ‘if he is dead, let us bury him without anyone knowing it’). We are not explicitly told who he thinks is responsible for the murders, or who he believes he is covering for, but the maidservants are far more forthcoming. One accuses Sarah directly (3:8):

‘You are the one who kills your husbands!’ (G^{II})

‘Don’t you realise that you strangle your husbands?’ (G^I)²⁶

The Vulgate continues at the end of 3:9 (and the start of 3:10) with the maidservant adding, ‘O killer of your husbands. You don’t want to kill me too, as you already killed the seven, do you?’²⁷ The accusation, *interfectorix virorum*, is translated rather more pointedly by Carey A. Moore as ‘husbands-murderer’.²⁸

The repeated emphasis on the murder of *seven* previous husbands (e.g., 3:8; 3:15; 6:14; 7:11) would certainly have been treated with suspicion in later rabbinic tradition, where a woman who had buried two or three husbands was labelled a *qatlanit* (‘murderous wife’) and prohibited from remarrying (b. Yebam. 64b; cf. b. Ketub. 65a).

[She was regarded] as if there were something in her that was man-killing. Cf. Yeb. 64b: if a woman is married to one husband, and he dies; to a second, and he dies; she should not be married to a third. Such is the opinion of R. Judah.

R. Simon ben Gamaliel avers, ‘She may be married to a third, but not married

²⁶ The Old Latin, which generally follows G^{II}, has ‘You are the one who suffocates [*suffocas*] your husbands!’ (OL). Also, see n. 22 above. See further: Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 147–52; Moore, *Tobit*, 142.

²⁷ Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 152.

²⁸ Moore, *Tobit*, 142.

to a fourth'. R. Huna declares 'The source is the cause' i.e., such is the nature of this woman.²⁹

The implication, inherent in the label, is that the widow herself is to blame and therefore dangerous. In this context, it is perhaps also worth noting the brief assertion in Tob 3:9 that Sarah beats her maidservants ('Why do you beat us?'), suggesting that she is 'not quite the meek and mild child most commentators claim' and potentially indicative of a violent temper.³⁰ Reading the book of Tobit through a somewhat different lens (specifically, on the trail of a serial killer), 'clues' such as these, when drawn together, may raise questions about whether Sarah is really as innocent as she seems. Although the narrator of Tobit is keen to pin the murders on the elusive and unseen 'Asmodeus', on closer inspection the more obvious chief suspect within the world of the narrative (explicitly identified by the maid, implicitly via the actions of her father, and a *qatlanit* several times over in the eyes of the rabbis) would appear to be none other than Sarah herself.

In Sherlock Holmes' namesake case, the widow utilises the fictional 'Asmodeus' in order to focus the murders on jealousy (cf. Tob 6:14–15),³¹ while the true motive is revealed to be inheritance ('a perfect example of misdirection of motive' [23:47–23:49]). In the biblical tale, there is no clear indication that Sarah benefits financially from the deaths of her seven husbands; indeed, Tob 3:15 (cf. 6:12; 8:21; 14:13) suggests that she does not directly inherit.³² We may, nevertheless, perhaps speculate that Raguel acquired a bride-price from each of them (cf. Gen

²⁹ Zimmermann, *Book of Tobit*, 62–63. See further, Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 262–72; Mordechai A. Friedman, 'Tamar, A Symbol of Life: The "Killer Wife" Superstition in the Bible and Jewish Tradition', *AJSR* 15 (1990): 23–61; Isaac Sassoon, *The Status of Women in Jewish Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 124–26.

³⁰ Moore, *Tobit*, 148.

³¹ See n. 11 above.

³² Though cf. Num 27:1–11 and 36:1–13, which further share with the book of Tobit a focus on endogamous marriage. See too, Levine, 'Redrawing the Boundaries', 11–12; Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times*, 266.

34:12; Exod 22:16–17; Deut 22:28–29),³³ which would then form part of the overall fortune ultimately inherited by Tobias and Sarah (Tob 8:21; 10:10; 14:13). We shall return to this below. However, the G^I version of Tob 3:8 (‘Don’t you realise that you strangle your husbands?’) raises an intriguing alternative possibility – that Sarah is unaware of her murderous behaviour. Such an interpretation might recast Sarah as suffering from some kind of mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder) and thus not in control of her actions, which are being covered up by her father and household (e.g., 3:7–9; 8:9–18). Within the narrative/historical context, this could legitimately be interpreted as a case of ‘demonic possession’, with Tob 8:2–3 (cf. 6:7–8, 17–18) thus reflecting an exorcism ritual, driving ‘the demon’ out of Sarah and so curing her from her murderous inclinations (3:17; 6:8).³⁴

Several other retellings of the story have likewise in some way identified Sarah as the killer. For example, in James Bridie’s play, *Tobias and the Angel* (premiered in 1930), Sarah is referred to disparagingly by her maids as ‘Sara the Strangler! Madame Asmoday!’.³⁵ When asked by Tobias what happened to her seven previous husbands, her father, Raguel, claims ‘We don’t exactly know’, though confirms that ‘every one of them was strangled on his wedding night’, adding that she ‘looked each daybreak like one whose soul has been on a long journey. She remembered nothing’.³⁶ He further notes that ‘there are stories going about. Not too pleasant ones either. It is all superstition and old wives’ tales, of course’.³⁷ In similar

³³ See further, Gen 24:10, 22, 30, 47–48, 51–53; cf. 29:18–20, 27–30. Also, Esther Fuchs, ‘Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes’, in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45–51 (esp. 49–50).

³⁴ Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 150; Littman, *Tobit*, 86; Moore, *Tobit*, 47–48; Stuckenbruck and Weeks, ‘Medieval Hebrew’, 75. Cf. e.g., Mark 1:32–34; 5:1–20; 7:24–30; 9:17–29; Luke 4:33–35; 8:2; John 10:20–21; Acts 19:11–16; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.45–47; *J.W.* 7.185. See further, Amanda Witmer, *Jesus, The Galilean Exorcist: His Exorcisms in Social and Political Context*, LNTS 459 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 22–60 (esp. 44–46). Conversely, questioning the notion that the narrative presents an example of demonic possession, see Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles*, JSNTSup 231 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 227–29; also John P. Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 405.

³⁵ James Bridie, *Tobias and the Angel* (London: Constable & Co., 1995), 35.

³⁶ Bridie, *Tobias and the Angel*, 46–47.

³⁷ Bridie, *Tobias and the Angel*, 45.

fashion, the opera *Tobias and the Angel* (premiered in 1999) by Jonathan Dove (music) and David Lan (libretto) presents Sarah as the one who physically strangles her husbands ('Such small hands. / Such raw weals / all over his body. / What are you?'), albeit under the control of Asmodeus, who at one point causes Sarah to start strangling herself.³⁸ In this version, it is clear that Raguel has all along been helping to cover up the actions of his murderous daughter ('We buried / the others / in the orchard. / It's full'),³⁹ while, before her wedding to Tobias, Sarah's mother states pointedly, 'You look so lovely /you'll take his breath away'.⁴⁰

Reopening the case in this manner and identifying Sarah as the killer also sheds light on (and is itself illuminated by) the narrative's apparent folkloric origins. Striking similarities have been noted between the plot and structure of the book of Tobit and those of numerous folktale types, especially those associated with 'The Grateful Dead' motif (E341)⁴¹ in which, following an act of generosity in burying a corpse, the hero is accompanied by a mysterious stranger who aids him in his quest

³⁸ David Lan, *Tobias and the Angel* (London: Oberon Books, 2006), 32–34.

³⁹ Lan, *Tobias and the Angel*, 33.

⁴⁰ Lan, *Tobias and the Angel*, 49. Other examples include Frank Yerby's novel, *Tobias and the Angel* (London: William Heinemann, 1975; repr., London: Pan Books, 1977), a retelling set in the early twentieth century, in which Sarah is depicted as suffering from dissociative identity disorder and engaged in an incestuous relationship with her bestial brother, Harold (the 'Asmodeus' and apparent murderer of the piece). Sarah herself, however, admits to doing 'awful, lewd, wicked things' when her other personality is dominant (255), and is described by her maid as 'a murderin' maniac' (220). The book of Tobit has also been specifically rewritten as crime fiction by René Reouven in his French novel, *Tobie or Not Tobie* (Paris: Denoël, 1980). Interestingly, Reouven is also known as the author of a cycle of Sherlock Holmes pastiches published between 1982 and 1989, and at one point in his Tobit novel (packed with cultural allusions) even includes Tobias (Tobie) saying to his companion (Azarias/Raphaël), 'Elémentaire, mon cher Azarias' ('Elementary, my dear Azarias')!

⁴¹ Number classifications for 'tale types' follow the Aarne-Thompson index (Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* [Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961]), while those for 'motifs' follow Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols., rev. and enl. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58). Also, Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 481–500. See further, Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography – Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, 3 vols. (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004).

(cf. Tob 1:16–19; 2:3–8; 5:4–7).⁴² These tale types include most notably ‘The Monster in the Bridal Chamber’ (AT 507B) and ‘The Serpent Maiden’ (AT 507C). In the first (AT 507B): a bride’s previous husbands have all died on the wedding night; the companion encourages the hero to marry her; a dragon/serpent attempts to kill the hero, but is slain by the companion; it is revealed that the bride has serpents in her body; the serpents are driven from her mouth, breaking the enchantment. In the second (AT 507C): a bride’s previous (five) husbands have all died on the wedding night; the companion encourages the hero to marry her; a serpent emerges from the bride’s mouth to strangle the hero, but is slain by the companion; the bride is hung upside down and a second serpent comes out of her mouth, breaking the enchantment.⁴³ Afterwards, in both cases, the companion, who had been promised half of the spoils (cf. Tob 12:1–5), reveals his true identity and disappears (cf. Tob 12:6–22). Given that these folktale types appear to share some narrative foundation with the book of Tobit, it is significant that here too the *bride* is the killer who needs to be cured.⁴⁴ Aligning Tobit with this folkloric tradition both strengthens and simultaneously helps explain the mounting case against Sarah in the biblical tale.

Thus, using Holmes and Watson’s investigation of their own Tobit case as a springboard from which to reconsider the biblical murders, and re-examining the narrative from a perspective informed by crime fiction, it soon becomes apparent that there is really very little evidence for the existence of ‘Asmodeus’ beyond the say-so

⁴² Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 8–20, 39–40; Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times*, 269–71; Thompson, *The Folktale*, 50–53; Wills, *The Jewish Novel*, 73–76; Zimmermann, *Book of Tobit*, 5–12. See further, Sven Liljeblad, *Die Tobiasgeschichte und andere Märchen mit toten Helfern* (Lund: Ph. Lindstedt, 1927). Cf. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 70–72; Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 36–41; T. Francis Glasson, ‘The Main Source of Tobit’, *ZAW* 71 (1959): 275–77. An alternative approach favours the use and application of Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). See, e.g., Cioată, ‘Medieval Hebrew Tellings’ and Soll, ‘Misfortune and Exile’.

⁴³ Note also ‘The Monster’s Bride’ (AT 507A), and association with the ‘Poison Damsel’ (F582) and ‘Serpent Damsel’ (F582.1) motifs, as well as T172–T173.2 concerning dangers in the bridal chamber (including a murderous strangling bride). See further, Liljeblad, *Die Tobiasgeschichte*, 33–39; Otzen, *Tobit and Judith*, 8–11; Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times*, 269–71; Thompson, *The Folktale*, 50–53.

⁴⁴ Cf. Tob 6:18 (‘You will save her’).

of the narrator, while (as with Diana in Holmes' namesake investigation) the majority of the evidence points instead to Sarah herself as the biblical serial killer.

Watson: Oh, why hasn't she been caught before?

Holmes: Because she was clever, devilishly clever. She left no clues except an indirect one that I at once spotted – that the likeliest person to be able to approach a bridegroom unsuspected and stab him is his bride!

(24:07–24:19)

5. A Final Twist?

There is, however, perhaps one final twist in the tale. There remains one oft-ignored yet ultimately unsolved murder in the book of Tobit, and it occurs before we even hear about Sarah and her seven husbands:

So Tobias went to look for some poor person of our people. When he had returned he said, ... 'Look, father, one of our own people has been murdered and thrown into the market-place, and now he lies there strangled'. (Tob 2:3)

This particular incident is easily overlooked since, read as scripture or religious novella (or indeed, folktale), its primary purpose is simply to provide the narrative means whereby Tobit is blinded (Tob 2:4–10). The circumstances, motive, and perpetrator are thus largely irrelevant. Yet reading and approaching the text as a work of crime fiction (with the corresponding preconceptions and expectations which go with it),⁴⁵ our ears would surely prick up at this first unsolved murder so early in the book and we would anticipate some resolution by the end of the tale. This expectation would only be heightened upon realising that it is the same *modus operandi* (strangulation) as employed by the killer on the loose in Ecbatana.⁴⁶ Reading through

⁴⁵ See n. 21 above.

⁴⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer notes that, in this instance, strangulation 'may imply some kind of execution', though 'nothing indicates that the Jew was slain by the Assyrian king, as in 1:18' (Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, 134). See further, Littman, *Tobit*, 65; Zimmermann, *Book of Tobit*, 55. Cf. variations in 4Q196, Vulg., and OL.

this particular lens, we would be unlikely to consider this either coincidence or insignificant. Sherlock Holmes, we may be sure, would not ignore this initial body and would seek a solution that encompasses or explains *all* the murder victims of the book of Tobit.⁴⁷

It is noteworthy, however, that this initial murder takes place in Nineveh rather than Ecbatana. Moreover, it is Tobias who (unwitnessed) discovers the body, having left the house alone sometime previously (2:2–3). We are not told who the victim is (beyond being ‘one of our own people’) and so have no clear sense of motive, but it is perhaps interesting that this results in yet another body hurriedly and furtively buried by a worried father (2:4–7; cf. 8:9–12). Assuming Sarah has not made a murderous nocturnal visit to Nineveh, this might open up another (somewhat fanciful) interpretative possibility – that Tobias and Sarah are in on it together! If so, we can dispense with the notion that Tobias miraculously ‘cures’ her of her murderous inclinations and it becomes clear why she does not also kill him. In Sherlock Holmes’ namesake case, Diana’s motive was inheritance. In this light, it is a perhaps not insignificant detail that, with seven previous husbands in the ground and her parents delighted to have finally married her off, Sarah and Tobias return to Nineveh extremely well off (10:10; also 8:21; 14:13).⁴⁸

6. Conclusion

As Sherlock Holmes himself notes, whatever else it may be, at its heart ‘[the book of Tobit] deals with a highly peculiar series of murders’ (04:53–4:56). There is a serial killer on the loose and a growing number of bodies buried in the backyard. Recognising this allowed Anthony Boucher and Denis Green to create a Sherlock Holmes pastiche in which he and Dr Watson are given their own Tobit case to solve

⁴⁷ In this context, note that when the popular British television series, *Midsomer Murders* (Bentley Productions, 1997–present), notorious for its high body count, infamously failed/forgot in one episode to explain one of the many deaths (‘Electric Vendetta’, season 4, episode 3; first aired, 2 September 2001), reviews were predominantly negative with viewers keenly alert to the omission. For example, ‘You can’t have a multiple murder mystery & leave one of the death’s [sic] unsolved especially in such bizarre circumstances’ (Paul Andrews, ‘The worst Midsomer Murders episode ever? Maybe’, *IMDb*, 7 December 2007, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0647505/reviews>). Read as crime fiction, that same comment could apply just as appropriately to the book of Tobit.

⁴⁸ See also, n. 33 above.

and put on the trail of the mysterious ‘Asmodeus’. As well as drawing both extensively and intriguingly upon the biblical tale, however, this wartime murder mystery further highlights the murderous nature of the source material itself and thus encourages a return to the text with an eye to this particular literary dimension. Reassessed from a perspective informed by crime fiction, this murderous nature comes to the fore, with a series of strangled and hastily-buried bodies stretching from Nineveh to Ecbatana, and with the tale’s reimagining in the radio play allowing Boucher and Green to cast their own verdict on the identity of the guilty party. Specifically, reopening the case and reading the text through this new genre lens provides a rather different interpretation of events, one in which Sarah moves from innocent victim to probable serial killer. Re-examining the case through the critical eyes of Sherlock Holmes, we appear to have an unreliable narrator who wishes to pin the blame on the elusive ‘Asmodeus’, while the majority of the evidence points solidly in the direction of Sarah (with or without an accomplice in the form of Tobias). This particular interpretation moreover makes sense of some of the many peculiarities of the narrative (e.g., the apparent ‘absence’ of Asmodeus, and the actions of Sarah’s household) and is coherent with its folkloric origins. Unlike Diana, Sarah appears to get away with it and she and Tobias live happily ever after. However, transposing Sherlock Holmes to ancient Ecbatana and putting him on the case, the outcome of the book of Tobit would likely have been quite different.

Watson: You mean you suspected her all along?

Holmes: Of course I did, old fellow.

(23:34–23:37)

It’s elementary, dear reader, elementary.

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