

ALTRUISTIC ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT
APOCRYPHAL BOOKS OF TOBIT AND JUDITH

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ABSTRACT:

The biblical canon determines the number and authority of the books to be included in the Bible. There are books that are excluded as well as accepted by some Christian groups which are known as Apocryphal literature. The books of Tobit and Judith are the two inevitable part of the Apocryphal books. The book of Tobit, used in the Christian circle, narrates the tale of a devout Israelite called Tobit and his family that exiled along with his community to Nineveh. The book mainly covers the themes of faith, perseverance, and focuses on the concept of family and community bond. The book of Judith is the fascinating story in Apocrypha regarding the brave deed of Judith that led to solace among the Jewish community of the province of Bethulia from the Assyrian aggression. The female heroism in a patriarchal society could be marked as prominent idea of this book. The proposed research paper intends to highlight and mark the altruistic attitudes and behaviours depicted in the books of Tobit and Judith.

Keywords: Apocrypha literature, Deuterocanonical books, Inter- testament, Altruism

The research paper attempts to study the works of Tobit and Judith from a literary and theoretical perspective which would highlight the essence of altruism and its different types. Ann Birgitta Pessi, a theologian and Emilia Saukko, a scholar in an article titled 'Altruism' from 'Encyclopaedia of Quality of Life and Well- Being Research' state about term altruism as it derived from a Latin word 'Alter' which means "other" is a later addition to english vocabulary specifically in 1853 (146). As the meaning of the word suggests it is a selfless action and thereby a concern and care for the well being of other/others without expecting any gain or profit in return. According to Jacqueline Macaulay and Leonard Berkowitz, social psychologists in "Altruism and Helping Behavior" altruism is "the behaviour carried out to benefit another without anticipation of rewards from external source" (3). Altruism as a theory mainly highlights the actions or works of an individual in a way or other can benefit the other. This concept cannot be pointed out particularly as a specific discipline but is multifaceted as it can be marked in philosophy, biology, psychology, sociology and even in economics. In philosophy, altruism is marked as a strong pillar of ethics attempting in addressing the morality and selflessness. In psychology, the study is focused on the human behaviour and attitude and emotions behind the expression of selfless behaviour. The focus of the biologists are on the biological causes for altruistic attitude like groups, kin or races. Thus altruism is a broad and multifaceted concept still being explored and studied in all disciplines of study. Altruism, to define and to categorize, is a complex process. Richard Kraut, a philosopher, in an article 'Altruism' mentions altruism as highly influenced by cultural norms, social pressure and religious beliefs as far as varied society is concerned. Precisely, some culture may prioritise helping family members which is generally stated as kin altruism while others highlight the value of helping those within a community that is referred as group selected altruism. Secondly, social pressures refer to the social norms and expectations based on the value of generosity to help those in need. Finally, religious teachings can promote altruistic behaviour and could define what could constitute a good deed as the emphasize is over help for those in need and the needy. As religious teachings play a vital role in promoting good and selflessness among the faithful, the biblical texts also affirm and depict the above qualities which actually is altruistic. The biblical texts especially the apocryphal texts of Tobit and Judith, kin altruism or group selected altruism can clearly be marked. This is because of the

oneness that they feel within the community and all the more of the concept 'chosen people of God' as mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 7, verse 6. (NRSV Bible, 2018). Altruism as a relevant topic in the contemporary world could be approached from a literary perspective. Apocryphal literature as a continuation of the Old Testament got inspiration from the later and imbibes themes, concepts and ideas from the Biblical texts. So, in the Old Testament, the feeling of being one and united, community feeling and brotherhood could be easily traced out from Apocrypha books. Apocryphal literature is a unique set of literature canonically accepted by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles but not by the non-canonical Hebrew Bible and by the Protestant Christians. W.O.E. Oesterley, a theologian, in 'An Introduction to the Books of Apocrypha' point out the origin of term "Apocrypha" from the Greek word "Apokryphos", meaning 'hidden' or 'veiled'(4). These books are also known as Deuterocanonical books as they are kept as a separate part of the canon and Inter-Testament books as they narrate mainly the events and happenings that fill the time gap between the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible. As they are kept as a separate section these works are least explored. As the biblical literature is enriched with variety of literary genres, themes and subjects for the well being of the humankind, the altruistic reading of the apocryphal books of Tobit and Judith would facilitate and highlight the intact bond and interconnectedness among the human individuals by way of selfless contribution to their society and family with no selfish motives and any kind of expectations in return for the favor. As far as literature is concerned, altruism has got a key role as a motif down through the ages. There are numerous characters and narratives portraying selfless actions and duties sacrificing even their own lives for the good and betterment of the other. Exploring altruistic attitude in literature provides an in-depth insight into human relationship with a strong and lively bond between an individual and another individual, with their community and the society without excluding the nature. Bible being a global literature has influenced and contributed for enhancing the moral values of the society. There are numerous altruistic teachings, morals, parables and stories included in the Bible, both in the books of the Old and the New Testament. The most prominent altruistic statement can be noted in the book of Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18 (NRSV Bible, 2018) where it states to love one's neighbour as their own selves. The care and empathetic attitude towards the poor, needy, widows and even to strangers explicitly stated in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 1 (NRSV 2018). These are few important passages explicitly dealing with altruistic attitude that have influenced not only the Jewish community but also any lay people who read the scripture. Scholars mainly divided altruism as four types such as, kin, reciprocal, cultural group and pure altruisms. Jerzy Osinski, a psychologist, in his article 'Kin Altruism, Reciprocal Altruism, and Social Discounting' published in *Personality and Individual Differences* volume 47 defines kin altruism as altruistic behaviour towards the kith and kin without any kind of selfish motive and nothing in return (375) and reciprocal altruism as type of altruism shown towards closely related ones anticipating near future benefit (376). Daniel Smith, an epidemiologist, in his article 'Cultural Group Selection and Human Cooperation: A Conceptual and Empirical Review' published in *Evolutionary Human Sciences* volume 2 mentions a third type which is known as cultural group altruism is that for the benefit of others at the expense of the individual within a cultural group (2) Finally, economists Mark Ottoni- Wilhelm, Lisi Vesterlund et.al in an article called 'Why Do People Give? Testing Pure and Impure Altruism' published in *American Economic Review* volume 107 refer pure altruism which is also called as moral altruism is that help someone in the midst of risk and expecting no rewards (3617). All the above altruistic types can be noted in both the books of Tobit and Judith. The priority they have given for their kith and kin and community in an alien land even in an unfavorable situation depicts the depths altruistic feel in them.

The book of Tobit, a historical fiction within the apocrypha literature, narrates the story of a devout Jewish man named Tobit who is in exile along with his community at Nineveh. The book stresses the moral principles of Tobit that points to the altruistic attitude that upheld him. The living condition of the protagonist in itself is filled with agony and distress since the entire community was living a life of bondage under the Assyrian rule.

The charitable acts initiated by the protagonist have been explicitly stated at the beginning of plot itself. As per *book of Tobit* chapter 1 verse 3, “I did many kind acts to my countrymen and my nation, who went with me into the land of the Assyrians, to Nineveh”(NRSV, 2018) clearly reveals the heights of his altruistic attitude. Moreover, Tobit is much concerned in burying the dead of those from his community which is an act against the decree of the usurper, explicitly shows the willingness of Tobit even to an extent of giving up his own life for his own people. The way Tobit valued the life of his men from his own community clearly brings out his concern and love that he had for his people. In so doing, Tobit did never expected any benefits in return. The character Azarias, one of the arch angels, who is in human disguise, comes forward to help Tobit with his blindness. Azarias for no personal benefit accompanies Tobias, the son of Tobit, to Media, a city in Persia, to buy medicine for Tobit. Azarias comes forward to help a total stranger, brings out a scriptural teaching of being selfless and loving even to strangers in times of need. Here the deed of Raphael, as mentioned as Azarias, is completely altruistic as it is for the upsurge of one’s welfare and no direct or indirect benefit is gained for the performer. Both Raphael and Tobias, in the narrative, help Sarah who is entangled by demon called Asmodeus. Though there are different kinds of altruistic approaches that reveal the humanitarian concern and care, ultimately promote the mandatory need for the humanitarian concern for the known and the unknown individual. This would result in the building up of an utopian society that is constructed with a sacrificial love for the others resulting in a community that is built only in selfless love. As per the biologists altruistic approach and inclination towards one’s own kith and kin or community is defined as ‘Kin Altruism’ by psychologist Michael C Ashton et.al in article ‘Kin Altruism, Reciprocal Altruism and the Big Five Personality Factors’ published in *Evolution and Human Behavior* volume 19 (245). Here, kin altruism can be marked from the deeds and words of protagonist himself. From the narrative it could also identify selflessness risking of ones own life without any kind of expectation which is the purest form of altruism. All the more, the protagonist is quite happy and is ready at any time risking himself to save and serve his people which reveal the cultural group altruistic nature of the text.

The book of Judith is also built on the altruistic themes through the acts of the character, Judith. The protagonist, Judith, a Jewish widow, living in the city of Bethulia, risks her life to save the entire Jewish community from the hands of Holofernes and his army. It is read that the men in the city of Bethulia, who are already living in exile under the kingship of Nebuchadnezzar, do not come forward to fight the opponent Holofernes, an Assyrian general, who comes forth to capture the city. Judith, putting forth her trust in her God, comes forward to fight against the Assyrians who mock at the Jewish God. Judith’s spiritual courage and her love for her community, has brought her as a dynamic character who saved the Jews from the hands of the Assyrians. She puts her life into a total threat when she comes forward to meet Holofernes in person and seduces him and ultimately kills him with his own sword. The action of the Jewish widow stands as an epitome of moral and spiritual courage that saved her people from the disaster that would have otherwise happened. Doing so, Judith does not gain any personal gain but she risked her own life for the sake of her people. This narrative thus highlights kin altruism and cultural altruism as an aid, is selflessly done for the betterment of the protagonist’s own community. All the more her deed of risking her own life without any expectation of profit, reveals the pure altruistic element of the character. Finally, the action of Judith can be categorised under the Heroic Altruism, which is a brave selfless action by risking life for the welfare of others in times of need. Genuinely being empathetic is the root of Heroic Altruism. The sense of responsibility or a sense of obligation is the main driving force behind Heroic Altruism is being stated by Samuel P Oliver, a sociologist, in his work *‘The Altruistic Personality’* (331), that which could be drawn out from the deed of Judith. To conclude, being altruistic is much significant for sustenance, be it during the biblical era or in the contemporary world of technology. It infill in humankind the quality of cooperation, empathy and compassion which are the base for the human survival. An American Rabbi called Harold M.Schulweis is being quoted “Goodness is rare but sacred in history; it must not be neglected” in an article called ‘Heroic Altruism: Heroic and Moral

Behaviour in a Variety of Settings' by Samuel P Oliner published in *Remembering for the Future* volume 3 (331). Being Altruistic is exactly as being good and thereby leave a valuable legacy for the future. Gregg E. Gardner, an expert in Jewish law and ethics, in his article 'Care for the Poor and Origins of Charity: In Early Rabbanic Literature' published in *Wealth and Poverty in Jewish Literature* volume 26 point out that the Hebrew religious tradition uphold a terminology for selfless giving of care and love for the other - 'Tzedakah'(20). Even though the word 'Tzedakah' is used more than hundred times in Bible, it actually denoted righteousness. Later, during the second temple period, specifically during apocrypha period it gained the meaning and idea of charity (20). This could be traced in particular from the *Book of Tobit* chapter 4 verses 5 through 7 where it states: "Be mindful of the Lord all your days, my son, and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments. Do what is right all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing, for those who act honestly will prosper in all their activities. To all those who practice righteousness, give alms according to your circumstances, my son, and do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor. Then the face of God will not be turned away from you" (NRSV, 2018). The continuation of the concept and its practice can be traced from other apocrypha literature as well as from the later New Testament also. So, this concept uphold the goodness and well being of the other and go hand in hand with altruism and being altruistic to the other which is the moral standard set in the Apocryphal books of Tobit and Judith.

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