

# Jasper



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OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Pleasantry of the day:

## The Family Dog

Put on your Bible antennae, and tune them up, because I have a question for you. Is there a family dog in the Bible?

If I were asking the question about the ancient Romans, it would be easy to answer.

The Romans were fond of dogs, and the bigger the better. If you go to the ruins of Pompeii, you can see the remains of a porch in front of one of the houses, inlaid with black and white tiles,

and some red for the tongue, to show a fierce watchdog all ready to protect his family.

*CAVE CANEM*, reads the inscription: Beware of the Dog! If you read the *Odyssey*, set in ancient Greece, you will come upon the scene where Odysseus, back home after twenty years, but in disguise so that the wicked suitors for his wife's hand in marriage will not know who he is, is walking to his own house, alongside a



faithful herder of pigs. And he sees, lying on a heap of refuse, a very old dog, twenty years old, a white hound dog he trained himself, and named Argos – Flash, we might say. Poor Flash is half devoured with fleas. Nobody takes care of him anymore. And even though the man next to Odysseus doesn't recognize his master, Flash

does, and he flattens his ears a little, and tries to wag his tail, and he whimpers for joy. But he is too weak to move.

And Odysseus sees it, and wipes a tear from his eye, and

without giving himself away, he asks his servant whether that dog was a good dog, or just a layabout. The pig herder says he was the best of hounds, never losing the scent, always first in the chase, but when the master is gone, half of the will and the duty go out of servants in a household, and they have neglected the poor fellow. Odysseus passes by, but the sight was too much for the dog, for in that moment “death

and darkness shut the eyes of Flash,” who had seen his master again, Odysseus, after so many years.

I cannot think that the Hebrews, so many of whom kept sheep, did not also keep dogs to round up and protect the sheep; it is pretty hard to be a shepherd at all without dogs. And Jesus gives us a kindly scene with dogs in it, when he tells us the story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. The rich man enjoyed all the good things in life and never gave a thought to the ragged man beside him, who would eat from the crumbs that fell from his table, while the dogs – the merciful dogs – licked his sores. They do that, you know, to clean you and heal you. Lazarus could not afford the oil and the wine that other people would use. The rich man didn’t give him any. The dogs would have, had they known about it.

Still, that isn’t really a story about a family dog. Here I have to draw a distinction between what the Catholics have in their Bibles and what the Protestants have in theirs. There are a few books of the Old Testament for which we have no Hebrew text, but only Greek. That’s not a surprise, since after Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, smashed Jerusalem to the ground, some of the Jews were hauled off to Babylon, but others were scattered all over the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, and if you were going to talk to people outside of your group, you would have to speak Greek, just as now, if a man from China, a man from Brazil, and a man from Germany are going to do business

together, they aren’t going to speak Chinese or Portuguese or German, but English. So a few of the Old Testament books may have been written in Greek, or they may have been translated into Greek but far away from Jerusalem, so that we have only the Greek to go by.

One of those books is Tobit, which tells the story of a holy man by that name who lives under Persian rule. He buries his fellow Jews, against the edict of the emperor, and for that he is persecuted and is always in danger of death. One day he is struck blind. He now needs very much a large sum of money he lent long ago to one of his kinsmen, Raguel, who lives far away. It’s a difficult journey. His wife is too old to go, and

besides, who would take care of the blind man? But he has a young son, a boy named Tobias. His name, by the way, means “The Lord is Good.” Still, how can you send a boy to walk hundreds of miles away, to a land he has never seen before? He needs a companion, and he ends up with two of them. One is the angel Raphael, who appears in the form of a man, named Azarias. He will guide and guard the boy. The other is the family dog. We don’t know what his name was.

I won’t tell you the whole of the story here, which you should read for yourselves. It isn’t difficult, and it isn’t long. I won’t tell you the details about how the angel, in disguise, told Tobias to catch a big fish in a lake they were passing by, so as to secure its liver and gall bladder, and what they were going to do with those things; or how Raguel was overjoyed to

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see the son of his old friend and kinsman; or how Raguel had a daughter named Sarah who was unfortunate in the business of marrying; or how Tobias and Sarah fell in love; or how Tobit was cured of his blindness. You will have to read about that.

All I want to say is that the family dog went with them, as you will see in every painting of their journey. And when Azarias who was really Raphael and Tobias were coming back home, and they drew near to their old house, what does the sacred author do but tell us that the dog ran ahead and wagged his tail?

Why should such a humble little thing like that be in the Bible? But why shouldn't it be? God is the maker of all creatures great and small. He likes dogs too; he made them, and made them so as to be a friend to man. When you see your dog wagging his tail for joy, remember that he is doing what he should, and remember too that if you could someday be as innocent and as loyal as your dog, you would be a fine creature indeed.



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