On the Exegetical Function of the Abraham/Ravens Tradition in *Jubilees* 11

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Those familiar with the biblical Abraham cycle and its surrounding traditions no doubt find odd the account in *Jubilees* 11 of the young Abraham, or Abram, and his strivings against rapacious crows. This story does not lend itself as readily to explanation as do, for example, the exegetical accounts in *Jubilees* of Abram’s conversion to monotheism and his study of astronomy. According to *Jubilees* 11, well before Abram’s birth, the land of his fathers was devastated by swarms of ravens that would eat the farmers’ seed before it was covered by the ground. The problem persisted until Abram was “two weeks of years old,” at which time he went out with the planters and drove the birds away. He continued doing this until the harvest, and thus the plague was lifted for that year. In the following year, Abram taught the “skillful woodworkers” to make a plow that inserted the seed directly into the ground, thus rendering the crows’ efforts ineffective and freeing the farmers from their fear of the ravens.

To date there has been no successful attempt to explain the provenance of this unusual pericope. The few works that treat it tend to focus on its counterparts in other literatures, on its reflections in later writings, or on the contextual role of the story with respect to *Jubilees* as a whole. The purpose of this short study is to probe the origins of this account in *Jubilees* by emulating James L. Kugel’s well-established modus operandi. Kugel argues that the origins of postbiblical traditions, especially those ostensibly linked to the Hebrew Bible, may often be attributed to the desire to reconcile a perceived conflict in the canon.

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Thus, I shall seek to identify the exegetical questions answered by Jubilees 11; the recovery of those questions will, in turn, help to clarify the origin of this unusual narrative.

Michael P. Knowles and James C. VanderKam have observed correctly that the ravens episode draws on Genesis 15, a text that contains an iteration of the promises of land and posterity to the patriarch. The most obvious connection between Genesis 15 and Jubilees 11 lies in the report in Jub. 11.19 that Abram “would shout at [the ravens] before they could settle on the ground to eat the seed and would say: ‘Do not come down; return to the place from which you came!’ And they returned.” Genesis 15 describes how Abram prevented birds of prey from feeding on the animals he had killed in preparation for his covenant with Yahweh: “When the birds of prey descended (בְּבַיוֹת הַשָּׁרֶשׁ) upon the pieces, Abram drove them away (בָּמַר בְּבָא יְדֵו).” (v. 11). The Masoretes understood the form בָּיָא as a Hiphil derived from the root בָּבָא, “to drive away, shoo,” and pointed it accordingly (בָּיָא). But it can also be read as a Hiphil from the more common root בָּבָא, “to return” (בָּבָא). Abram’s command to the ravens to “return” to their places reflects an understanding of Gen 15:11’s בָּיָא as “and he caused [the birds] to return.”

calls it a “laudatory expansion of the biblical narrative (possibly inspired by Gen 15.11).” He then discusses briefly this episode’s twofold purpose in furthering Jubilees’s views on certain issues by showing, e.g., that Abram restored the agricultural cycle guaranteed in the Noahide covenant and that Abram continued to keep Mastema’s minions in check, a dominion which also began with Noah (p. 146). While I have no major qualms about the accuracy of these observations as they pertain to the pericope’s function within Jubilees, I find the explanation to be rather weak in speaking to questions of origin, as it does not directly account for major features of the narrative, such as the birds, the invention of the plow, or the reason a story with such purposes should have been extrapolated from Genesis 15 in the first place. In his monograph on Jubilees (The Book of Jubilees [Sheffield: Sheffield, 2001] 46–47), James C. VanderKam offers only the following: “The theme of Abraham’s success in chasing birds away may be related to the comment in Gen. 15:11 (in a different context).” And Klaus Berger (Das Buch der Jubiläen [JSHRZ 2.3; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1981] 388 n. 11e) briefly attempts to connect the story to the difficult reading in the apocryphal Epistle of Jeremiah in a long footnote to his translation of Jubilees 11.11, asserting, “Der Ursprung der Rabenlegende und der Tradition von der anschließenden Götzenverbrennung könnte in Ep Jer 53f. liegen.” He rightfully sees a connection between Jubilees and the Epistle of Jeremiah, in that the pairing of crows and idol worship in Ep Jer 53–54 and in some Syriac accounts that resemble our Jubilees text cannot be mere coincidence, an observation that Knowles (“Abram and the Birds,” 146 n. 5) dismisses too quickly and without sufficient explanation. We shall discuss further the importance of the Epistle of Jeremiah below.


Recently Richard E. Friedman (Commentary on the Torah [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001] 57) has translated the verse as follows: “And birds of prey came down on the carcasses, and Abram retrieved them.” Louis Ginzburg (Legends of the Jews [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998] 1:236; 7:229 n. 113) points out several traditions that report a revival of animals after they have been slaughtered, some of which are based on Gen 15:11, and can be understood as a reading based on the root בָּבָא: the animals are “restored” insofar as they are “returned” to life. Yet a third understanding is found in LXX, apparently reading the form from the verbal root בָּבָא, “to sit, dwell”: καὶ συνεκαύθησεν αὐτοῖς Ἀβραὰμ.
Even though this connection is readily apparent, one is still left to ask why *Jubilees* should craft this “expansion” of Gen 15:11 in the first place. In Gen 15:7, Yahweh’s initial statement “I . . . brought you from Ur . . . to give you this land to possess” causes Abram to ask for a more certain knowledge: “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” (15:8). This question prompts an enigmatic ceremony, commonly known as the covenant “between the pieces,” during which Abram drives away the descending birds of prey and learns of his posterity’s future four-hundred-year (or four-generation) enslavement and subsequent manumission at the behest of Yahweh. Yahweh concludes and confirms the covenant by stating that “To your descendants (גוּלָם) I have given this land ( hete ַוְתָלִים), from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (15:18). The chapter ends with a list of ten nations who apparently inhabited or would inhabit the land just demarcated.

Genesis 15 raises questions that have garnered the careful attention of ancient and modern exegetes. The problematic and ambiguous constructions, the poorly understood ceremony, the prediction of later Israelite captivity, and, in the case of *Jubilees*, the scope of its promise to Abram and the future Israelites have all generated interpretive efforts. This last question stems from an apparent conflict surrounding Yahweh’s statements to Abram in Gen 15:7 and 15:18. In the first of these verses, Yahweh states that he had brought the patriarch to “this land” for the purpose of allowing Abram to possess it (Gen 15:7); yet according to the second, it is only Abram’s offspring, his “seed,” to whom the land (from the River of Egypt to the River Euphrates) will be given. When these remarks are considered within the greater biblical context, the discrepancy widens, for Abraham will never really possess the land. More importantly, in Gen 15:18, not only is Abram no longer explicitly included as an inheritor of “this land”; indeed, the boundaries of “this land” enclose a vast territory that no Israelite king, no “seed” of Abraham, would ever control. This discrepancy is just the sort of thing that cries out for a solution, and *Jubilees* solves it.

1. E.g., יָרָה מְשַׁקָּה (v. 2); a deep sleep (הָאָשִׁיט, v. 1); and the problem of nighttime followed by sunset (vv. 5, 12).


3. See Lewis M. Barth, “Genesis 15 and the Problems of Abraham’s Seventh Trial,” *Maarav* 8 (1992) 245–63. Several sources he cites attempt to deal with the explicit connection between this Abrahamic covenant and the enslavement in Egypt. Several interpreters found a causal relationship between Abraham’s reactions to the promises and the predicted captivity, reasoning that the question “How shall I know that I am to inherit it?” (v. 8) indicated complaint or disbelief and earned his posterity a four-hundred-year punishment.

4. Edwin M. Good (*Irony in the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965] 97), along the same lines, has observed the irony in the fact that Abraham would not possess the land, even toward the end of his life: “The irony of the episode [Abraham’s purchase of a burial plot] arises out of the theme of God’s promise of the land to Abraham. The first time Abram arrives in Canaan, the promise is given, and it is reiterated when he and Lot separate, in the covenant ceremony, and in the promise related to the circumcision. The land is Abram’s by promise. Yet he must bargain with a Hittite over a purchase of a piece of it for a burial ground.”


6. This inconsistency may be at the heart of Stephen’s assertion in Acts 7:5a: “[God] did not give
Jubilees solves the problem by allowing the statement about the boundaries of the land to be fulfilled literally. It appears that, according to Jubilees, Yahweh’s statement in Gen 15:18, “I have given [or, “I gave”]: יתן יתנ to your seed this land,” indicated that Yahweh was referring to a past event. But for Jubilees, the “seed” of Abram to which the land had previously been given was not Abram’s offspring, as the term יתנ in Gen 15:18 is usually understood; rather, Jubilees construed יתנ here as a reference to Abram’s agricultural seed, or his sowing, both of which יתנ can indicate. Thus, according to Jubilees, Yahweh did not make in Gen 15:8 a promise that would go unfulfilled. Instead, Yahweh was describing a promise that he already had fulfilled. Yahweh had already given the land to Abram’s literal “seed,” when Abram “returned” the ravens and invented the seed plow in order to allow his method of sowing, his יתנ, to be used forever after in the land of all the peoples from the Euphrates to the Nile. As Brock points out, the seed plow indicated in Jubilees is known from ancient Mesopotamia, and “perhaps introduced from there into Syria and Palestine (where it is still used) already in antiquity.” Jubilees clearly reports Abram’s influence on the population: “all who were with him in any of the fields would see him shouting. . . . His reputation grew large throughout the entire land of the Chaldeans. All who were planting seed came to him. . . . They planted seed, and all the land did as Abram told them” (Jub. 11.21–22, 24; emphasis added).

The Jubilees episode may also represent a literal fulfillment of other Abrahamic promises. According to Gen 12:3, “all the families of the land [or “ground”] will be blessed” by (or “in”) Abram (בעם בן ארץ אברם). Understood in light of Jubilees, which credits Abram with inventing a new method of sowing, this promise may be interpreted to mean that all the families of the “ground” (perhaps understood here as farmers?) would be blessed by the use of his plow. This connection is even more explicit in a restatement of the Abrahamic grant in Gen 26:4: “I will make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your seed.” As the episode in Jubilees 11 concludes, “So they [all who were with him; all the land] were no longer afraid of the birds,” and it is quite possible that Jubilees envisioned here the realization of an implicit “blessing” mediated by Abram.

In Gen 13:16, Yahweh promises that Abram’s “seed” (’étan) will be as numerous as “the dust of the earth” (את אברם יתנ). This comparison may also have contributed to Jubilees’s
construal of the בֹּד of Gen 15:18 as agricultural seed, for the earlier promise creates a connection between Abram’s “seed” and the “ground” or “dust.” If both “seed” and “dust” are taken literally, it is not a far stretch to cast Abraham as Israel’s agriculturally savvy progenitor. It is also possible that the kaf of בֹּד was read as a bet at some point, yielding “your seed shall be in the dust of the earth,” and thus providing further evidence for Abraham as inventor of the seed plow. Although this is tenuous, it is to be noted that, orthographically speaking, kaf and bet are quite similar; and, moreover, Kugel has described an exegetical tradition (regarding Reuben’s sin with Bilhah) witnessed in some texts, including Jubilees, that reads a bet in place of a kaf in order to explain an ambiguous phrase. Even if this is not applicable to Jubilees 11, however, the close proximity between an allusion to cultivation and the promise of land to Abram in Genesis 13 remains a factor that likely influenced the author of Jubilees.

Thus, the cryptic narrative in Jubilees 11 can be decoded as an exegetical reconciliation of various promises that Yahweh made to Abram. But the motif of Abram’s encounter with the ravens is not itself unique to Jubilees. It appears in a vein of Syriac literature as well, and thus it is necessary to raise the question of Traditionsgeschichte: How does the account in Jubilees relate to the Syriac attestations of the motif? Although none of the Syriac sources antedates Jubilees, there is good support for a ravens tradition already in circulation at the time of the authorship of Jubilees, on which tradition Jubilees drew in its biblical retelling. For this postulate Brock cites as key evidence the differing treatment of Abram’s age at his departure from Haran in the Syriac sources and Jubilees, and he also lists the many differences between the reports in Jubilees and their Syriac counterparts. For example, in some Syriac sources, God sends the crows as punishment, but only the Jubilees account attributes 17

17In the episode of Reuben’s sin with Bilhah (Jub. 33.2), the kaf of בֹּד, “unstable as water” (Gen 49:4) was understood in some exegetical circles, including Jubilees, as a bet, yielding בֹּד, “unstable (or “wanton”) in water.” See James L. Kugel, “Reuben’s Sin with Bilhah in the Testament of Reuben,” in Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom (ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 525–31, esp. 530. Gen. Rab. 98:4 also attests this understanding, as Kugel indicates.

18Jubilees is not the only extrabiblical text in which Abraham was cast as a farmer, an understanding not explicit in the Hebrew Bible; among the patriarchs only Isaac is seen in this role (Gen 26:12). In both recensions of the pseudepigraphical Testament of Abraham, Abraham is called by the archangel Michael while “sitting beside yokes of plow oxen with the sons of Masek and other servants” (Recension A 2:1; trans. E. P. Sanders in Old Testament Pseudepigrapha [ed. James H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1983] 1:882–902). It is interesting to note that T. Ab. seems to be built on a reference to Gen 15:15: “But you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.” T. Ab. in fact describes how God prepared Abraham for death, and how he finally sent Death himself to get Abraham to follow him. Another connection with Genesis 15 is seen in the T. Ab. verse quoted above, where the phrase “sons of Masek” is based on a reading of Gen 15:2 (בֹּד בֹּד).

19Viz., Jacob of Edessa, the Catena Severi, Michael the Syrian, Bar Hebraeus, and the Anonymous Christian Chronicle. See n. 3, above.

20Brock (“Abraham and the Ravens,” 144) asserts that the Syriac accounts keep “closer to the reasoning that produced the figure 60 for Abraham’s age than does Jubilees,” and, further, that “the author of Jubilees, while he knew the figure ‘60’, ignored (whether wittingly or unwittingly) the rationale behind it.”
the plague of birds to Mastema; and only Syriac sources link the ravens episode to Abram’s rejection of idolatry. Brock’s observations on this point make it clear that Jubilees went to some lengths to shape an existing tradition to its own ends.

This in turn raises the question, then, of whence came the tradition in the first place. The answer to the question, I believe, lies in Berger’s claim in his comment to Jub. 11.11. He postulates that the germ of the Rabenlegende lies in the difficulties of the following verses of the apocryphal Epistle of Jeremiah:

For [idols] cannot set up a king over a country or give rain to people. They cannot judge their own cause or deliver one who is wronged, for they have no power; they are like crows (κορώνα) between heaven and earth. When fire breaks out in a temple of wooden gods overlaid with gold or silver, their priests will flee and escape, but they will be burned up like timbers. (Ep Jer 53–55)

This letter has been dated as early as the fourth century B.C.E., but no later than the second century B.C.E., for it is alluded to in 2 Macc 2:1–3. Given the possibility of a fourth- or third-century B.C.E. date, it therefore seems likely that this text was in existence before Jubilees, and, as Berger held, may have been the common source of the tradition witnessed both in the Syriac sources and in Jubilees. It is easy to see how this passage from the Epistle of Jeremiah would have aroused exegetical attention and become associated with Abrahamic traditions, especially those concerning his rejection of idols and the burning of the house of idols (including the death of Haran); this passage may even have motivated the association of the ravens episode with the episode of Abram’s conversion to monotheism. It is also in light of this text that the introduction of the type of bird, the raven, is most easily explained. If we presume, as seems likely, that the verses from the Epistle of Jeremiah became associated with Abrahamic traditions, then we can also hypothesize that the ravens tradition, of which reflections are seen in Jubilees and the Syriac literature, arose as an explanation of the odd use of the word “crow” and became part and parcel of the patriarch’s discovery of monotheism and rejection of idols. The difficulty we encounter is discerning whether or not Genesis 15 had a part to play in the pre-Jubilees forms of the ravens tradition. It is possible that Jubilees itself educed the link between Genesis 15 and the ravens tradition by using the latter to illuminate the former.

If this reasoning holds, our picture of Jubilees 11 becomes clearer, and the shortcomings of Brock’s explanation of Jubilees’s motivations are brought into greater relief. Brock’s assertion that Jubilees’s purpose was merely to provide the etiology of the seed plow cannot account for the connection of the ravens episode to Genesis 15, for the reshaping of the entire

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21Ibid., 140–42
22See n. 3, above.
24Incidentally, the odd mention of “crows between heaven and earth” has attracted a text-critical solution, namely, that the Hebrew text used to translate Ep Jer into Greek (or the translator himself) read שַׁלְמִים, “as the ravens,” instead of שָׁלְמִים, “as the clouds”; see Charles J. Ball, “Epistle of Jeremy,” in Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English (ed. Robert H. Charles; Oxford: Clarendon, 1913) 607–8. See also Moore, Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah, 352–55. One wonders, further, whether these variant readings may have been combined, yielding the phrase “cloud of ravens” (Jub. 11.20).
tradition, or, perhaps most damagingly, for the motivations that would have prompted the attachment of such an etiology to Abram in the first place. We must hold that although an etiological function is present, our narrative does not reduce to that function, and indeed serves a greater purpose, namely, the reconciliation of the unfulfilled Abrahamic promise.

In conclusion, we have seen that previous attempts to uncover the provenance of the ravens tradition in Jubilees have failed to discern an exegetical need within the biblical text sufficient to explain Jubilees’s use of the tradition. The highly visible reliance of Jubilees on Gen 15:11 is an indication that something in that particular text required reconciliation. We have argued that the fact that no Israelite king ever attained the boundaries described in Genesis 15—perhaps coupled with the ambiguity over whether Abraham ever actually possessed the land himself—motivated the author of Jubilees to put a new construction on God’s promise to give the land to Abram’s “seed.” The author of Jubilees would thus have capitalized upon the agrarian connotations of הָרֹת, reshaping the existing tradition of Abram’s scattering of the ravens to include an etiology of the invention of the seed plow and, more importantly, to create a situation in which the text of Gen 15:18 had already realized its literal fulfillment. The fact that Genesis 15 is not the only Abrahamic promise of land to use the term הָרֹת adds further “evidence” of Abram’s knowledge of agriculture, a detail that likely informed Jubilees’s appropriation of the ravens tradition. Much remains to be uncovered about this interesting tradition—especially from the perspective of Traditionsgeschichte, including the relationship between the ravens tradition and those of Abram’s “call” and conversion, the burning of the idols, and the departure from Haran—and it is hoped that the evidence presented in this short study will assist in such discovery.

25Jon D. Levenson (The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993] 124) made a similar conclusion regarding the etiological function of the Aqedah and the two accounts of Hagar’s expulsion: “Each of the three stories has its etiological features, but the meaning of none of them reduces to its etiological function. Each tells the story of the symbolic death and unexpected new life of the beloved son, a story of far more than mere etiological significance.” These remarks underscore the narrative and theological importance of those stories over against their etiological function. Although the ravens episode is designed to resolve exegetical questions rather than narrative or theological questions, the same idea holds true: etiological concerns alone do not dictate the action in Jubilees 11. Knowles (“Abram and the Birds,” 146 n. 6) also criticizes Brock’s etiological claim, but this critique is itself errant: “[Brock’s etiological] attribution is incidental to the narrative’s broader themes of fruitfulness, covenantal fulfilment, and the role of demonic opposition in the lives of God’s people.” The same could be said for almost any of the exegetical phrases and pericopes in Jubilees, as the whole book has been brought into conformity along the lines Knowles indicates. While pre-existing traditions are incorporated, shaped, and augmented in Jubilees, even along such lines, neither their exegetical nor their narrative function can be assessed simply by an appeal to these broad thematic elements. Knowles’s assertion gets us no closer to an understanding of the pericope’s origin or even its function than does Brock’s. A story about a teenager “returning” birds and inventing a plow is a strange and indirect choice for an author who wants to illustrate the themes of fruitfulness, fulfillment of covenant, and demonic opposition.