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.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3] 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.

[1]On these see James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 244–54.

[2]All English translations of *Jubilees* follow James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (CSCO 511; Louvain: Peeters, 1989).

[3]Sebastian P. Brock ("Abraham and the Ravens: A Syriac Counterpart to Jubilees 11–12 and Its Implications," *JSJ* 9 [1978] 135–52) brings to light Syriac accounts that rely on a similar tradition. About the episode's function in *Jubilees*, he says only that "Jubilees gives the episode of the ravens in order to introduce Abraham as the inventor of the seed-plough" (140). Michael P. Knowles ("Abram and the Birds in Jubilees 11: A Subtext for the Parable of the Sower?" *NTS* 41 [1995] 146–47)

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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.[4]

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.[5] 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 (וירד העיט) upon the pieces, Abram drove them away (וישב אתם אברם)" (v. 11). The Masoretes understood the form וישב as a Hiphil derived from the root נשב, "to drive away, shoo," and pointed it accordingly (וַיַּשֵּׁב). But it can also be read as a Hiphil from the more common root שוב, "to return" (וַיָּשֶׁב).[6] Abram's command to the ravens to "return" to their places reflects an understanding of Gen 15:11's וישב as "and he caused [the birds] to return."

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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.

[4]See James L. Kugel, "The World of Ancient Biblical Interpreters" and "Epilogue," in *Traditions of the Bible*, 1–41 and 889–98, respectively. See also his more recent discussion in "Ancient Biblical Interpretation and the Biblical Sage," in *Studies in Ancient Midrash* (ed. J. L. Kugel; Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2001) 1–26.

[5]See n. 3, above.

[6]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 שוב: 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 ישׁב, "to sit, dwell": καὶ συνεκάθισεν αὐτοῖς Ἀβράμ.

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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 (לזרעך) I have given this land (נתתי את הארץ הזאת), 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,[7] the poorly understood ceremony,[8] the prediction of later Israelite captivity,[9] 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.[10] 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.[11] This discrepancy is just the sort of thing that cries out for a solution, and *Jubilees* solves it.[12]

[7]E.g., ובן משק ביתי (v. 2); ויחשבה לו צדקה (v. 6); a deep sleep (תרדמה, v. 12) experienced within a vision (מחזה, v. 1); and the problem of nighttime followed by sunset (vv. 5, 12).

[8]For early exegetical attempts to deal with the ritual, see Christopher T. Begg, "Rereadings of the 'Animal Rite' of Genesis 15 in Early Jewish Narratives," *CBQ* 50 (1988) 36–46.

[9]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.

[10]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."

[11]On this point see, e.g., John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) 265–66; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987) 333; and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985) 229. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for *HTR* who alerted me to this point's relevance to the discussion.

[12]This inconsistency may be at the heart of Stephen's assertion in Acts 7:5a: "[God] did not give

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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": נתתי] to your seed this land,"[13] 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 זרע in Gen 15:18 is usually understood; rather, *Jubilees* construed זרע here as a reference to Abram's *agricultural* seed, or his sowing, both of which זרע can indicate.[14] 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 זרע, 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."[15] *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).[16]

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 (ונברכו בך כל משפחת אדמה). 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" (זרע) will be as numerous as "the dust of the earth" (כעפר הארץ). This comparison may also have contributed to *Jubilees*'s

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[Abraham] any of [the land] as a heritage, not even a foot's length." About this John J. Kilgallen (*The Stephen Speech* [AnBib 67; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1976] 36) remarks: "This verse follows upon arrival in the promised land. It offers, however, a new point of interest upon which the reader should focus. Abraham actually does not receive the land. Arrival, then, in the land does not mean possession—and possession . . . has more meaning than simple arrival in the land. God's interest, however, is that Abraham possess the land: He promise[s] it to him and his offspring, even though he has no children at the time. God's direct command, then, in v. 3 will have its fulfillment, not in arrival, but in a future possession."

[13]Compare Gen 12:7: "To your seed I *will give* (אֶתֵּן) this land."

[14]For זרע as "sowing," see Gen 47:24; Num 20:5; Ezek 17:5.

[15]"Abraham and the Ravens," 140, with n. 18.

[16]VanderKam notes that there is some difficulty with the Syriac phrase rendered "all the land" (*Jubilees*, 69n.) Some manuscripts have the phrase in the accusative, leaving "they tilled all the land, as Abram told them." But VanderKam goes on to say that the better manuscripts make the phrase the subject of the verb.

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construal of the זרע 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 כעפר 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.[17] 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*.[18]

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[19] 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*,[20] 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]In the episode of Reuben's sin with Bilhah (*Jub*. 33.2), the *kaf* of פחז כמים, "unstable *as* water" (Gen 49:4) was understood in some exegetical circles, including *Jubilees*, as a *bet*, yielding פחז במים, "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.

[18]*Jubilees* 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 (ובן משׁק).

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

[20]Brock ("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."

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the plague of birds to Mastema; and only Syriac sources link the ravens episode to Abram's rejection of idolatry.[21] 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.[22] 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 (κορῶναι) 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.,[23] 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.[24] 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

[21]Ibid., 140–42

[22]See n. 3, above.

[23]Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions* (AB 44; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) 327–28.

[24]Incidentally, 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 כערבים, "as the ravens," instead of כעבים, "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*, 352–53. One wonders, further, whether these variant readings may have been combined, yielding the phrase "cloud of ravens" (*Jub*. 11.20).

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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,[25] 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 זרע, 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 זרע 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.

[25]Jon 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.

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