CHAPTER EIGHT

“AND I SAW THERE THE LIKENESS OF THE IDOL OF JEALOUSY”
THE APOCALYPSE OF ABRAHAM AND JEWISH IDOLATRY

It is perhaps natural that an aniconic religion would have a conflicted relationship with idolatry. That there should be external conflict against those who worship idols is not surprising. It might be a little more surprising that there would be internal conflict, as well. For the Jews of Antiquity, living in the midst of, and often in subordination to, peoples who worshipped idols, their own rejection of idols was a strong mark of separation, but also for some Jews the wellspring of a desire to conform to pagan practices.

Even as Moses descended from his meeting with God on the summit of Mount Sinai carrying with him the tablets containing God’s commandments for Israel, chief among which were the first and second demanding that Israel worship God alone and avoid all idols, the Israelites left in the charge of his brother Aaron had already constructed an idol in the form of a golden calf that they might worship it (Exod 32). After breaking the tablets and killing about 3000 of the people Moses ascended the mountain again and managed to obtain forgiveness for Israel and a new set of tablets. Nevertheless, the attraction of idols continued to plague Israel down through the centuries.

The temptations of idolatry were especially strong for the kings of Israel and Judah. Among them it was Manasseh’s adoption that brought the most trouble for his kingdom and people (2 Kgs 21.1–18; 2 Chr 33.1–20). Manasseh’s father, Hezekiah, had been one of the great religious reformers of the kingdom of Judah. His zeal for the Lord had preserved Jerusalem from the Assyrian king Sennacherib. When Manasseh succeeded his father he scrapped Hezekiah’s reforms and rebuilt the high places, erected altars to Baal, and even built altars to various gods in the temple. He set the seal on his wickedness when he offered his son as a sacrifice to his new gods. The God of Israel was provoked by these evils and promised that he would bring a great chastisement on Judah and Jerusalem. The Holy City would be wiped, as one wipes a dish, and the people would be given into the hand
of their enemies. According to the book of Jeremiah (15.4), it was Manasseh’s embrace of the idols that ultimately led to the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

In addition to the attempts of some of their own kings to impose the worship of idols on them, the Jews were also targeted at times by pagan kings ruling over them. Antiochus IV’s desecration of the temple is recorded in the book of Daniel and 1 Maccabees. Three times Daniel (9.27; 11.31; 12.11) mentions the “abomination of desolation”, which Antiochus set up in place of the regular sacrificial offerings. 1 Maccabees (1.54) records that, whatever this sacrilegious object was, it was installed on the altar of burnt offering in the temple.

The Roman period was not without its own attempt to desecrate the temple. Both Philo and Josephus recall the emperor Gaius’ order to set up a statue within the sanctuary of the temple. According to both Josephus (B.J. 2.184–5) and Philo (Legat. 198; cf. 75–119) it was Gaius’ wish to be considered a god and his suspicion that the Jews would not go along with it that prompted the emperor to order the governor of Syria to set up his statue in the temple. Fortunately, or perhaps providentially, Gaius died before he was able to achieve his aim.

The Apocalypse of Abraham is concerned with idolatry. The author explores the rejection of idolatry as the basis of Jewish identity. He also warns that the attraction of idolatry, in the case of worshipping the Roman emperor, will lead to the forfeiture of that identity and the blessings that will accompany it in the world to come.

8.1 Summary of the Text

The Apocalypse of Abraham is divided into two parts. The first eight chapters are a midrash on God’s command to Abram to leave his father’s house (Gen 12.1–3).1 Seeking a reason not provided by the biblical account, the author has ascribed Abraham’s departure to his conversion from the idolatry of his father Terah, who in this text was not only an idol worshipper but even a crafter of idols (Apoc. Ab.

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1 Scholars since G. N. Bonwetsch, Die Apokalypse Abrahams (Studien zur Geschichte der Theologie und der Kirche 1; Leipzig: Deichert, 1897), 41, have recognized a division between the first eight chapters and the final twenty-four (9–32). The first eight contain the story of Abraham’s conversion from the idolatry of his father; the second part consists of the apocalypse proper.