ABRAHAM AND THE NATIONS
IN THE BOOK OF JUBILEES

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1. The Nations in the Book of Jubilees

The theme of the nations in relation to Israel touches the very heart of the book of Jubilees because the nations play a very important role in the book, although a negative one. In many places the author refers to the nations, and in most cases he creates a dichotomy between the nations and the nation par excellence (Israel). The author is erecting sharp boundaries between Israel and other people, between insiders and outsiders. Israel is summoned to separate from the nations. The people of Israel should stay far away from them, and from their customs and their practices.

The theme of the status of the nations for Israel is not only an important issue for the book of Jubilees, but also for the whole spectrum of Jewish movements in the Second Temple period. In his source-book Judaism and the Gentiles (2007), Donaldson points to the fact that questions with regard to the religious status of non-Jewish people were inevitable for Jews in the Graeco-Roman world, due to both intrinsic and extrinsic circumstances. Jews could not tell their own self-defining story without pointing in one way or another to other nations. Despite the differences in interpretation, one can say that in the biblical story the cosmic and the universal are interwoven with the national and particular. There is the one universal God, who had created the whole world and who had continued to exercise power over the created order and all the nations within it. On the other hand, this God had chosen Israel from out of all nations of the world to be a special people. God’s will had been revealed uniquely in Israel’s Scriptures; despite the fact that God had created the whole cosmos, he was nevertheless uniquely present in the temple of

1 T.L. Donaldson, Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE) (Waco, Tex., 2007).
Jerusalem. Despite temporal misfortunes, Israel would be vindicated in the end and exalted to a position of pre-eminence over all other nations.

The question of the extent to which Jews could adopt Gentile ways or accommodate their life to the wider non-Jewish world was a very important and defining issue (see the Maccabean revolt and the wars against Rome), but the ways in which the Gentiles could participate in the Jewish way of life, on the other hand, were probably of less interest to the Jewish people.

In his work, Donaldson collected many early Jewish texts in which this second element (participation of non-Jews in Jewish life) plays an important part, and he managed to give a classification of four Jewish patterns of universalism up until the 2nd century CE: sympathizers; converts; ethical monotheists; and participants in the eschatological redemption.

It comes as no surprise that the book of Jubilees plays no role in this universalistic spectrum. Not a single page is devoted to this book in Donaldson’s collection because Jubilees opts for a sharp exclusion of other nations. There are other early Jewish works that establish the culpability of the Gentiles (and therefore a justification of divine punishment of the nations, as for example in Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, the Apocalypse of Abraham and the Testament of Moses), but the book of Jubilees occupies by far the most extreme position on the negative side of the spectrum. For the author of this work, the only way to please God is to abide by the Torah, the ancestral laws, in its totality. Because, according to Jubilees, the Torah demands that a man be circumcised by the eighth day, Gentiles are excluded right from the beginning. The author does not explain the reason for this exclusion, it is just axiomatic.

Anybody who reads the book of Jubilees discovers right from the beginning that the theme of the nations is not restricted to Abraham. It plays a role everywhere. However, most texts that speak about the erection of the boundaries between Israel and its environment can be found in the so-called farewell speeches, thus in material that is added to the rewriting of Genesis 1—Exodus 19, just before the patriarchs die. It concerns the testaments of Noah, of Abraham, of Rebekah, and of Isaac. In these speeches, it is the sons of the patriarch who are addressed, and in this respect it is Jacob in particular who plays an important role.2 Further, the separation from the nations also plays an important role.

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