REVISITING THE REBEKAH OF THE BOOK OF JUBILEES

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Without any doubt, Jim VanderKam stands out as one of the most important contributors to the current scholarly discussion of the book of Jubilees. My debt of gratitude to him reaches back to the summer of 1981 when he agreed to read with me portions of the Ge’ez text of Jubilees 19–30 (at that time I was preparing to write a dissertation on this author’s interpretation of sacred materials). His mentoring at that time and friendship since then render this essay in his honor a very happy task.

While working through texts from Jubilees and comparing them with biblical texts, the character Rebekah intrigued me because of her prominence. An article entitled “The God of Rebekah” confirmed some of my observations and prompted continuing attention to her.1 My own study convinced me of the centrality of the figure of Rebekah in Jubilees, and these observations continue to fascinate me; it seems they have also connected with the research of others in this field. In a 2008 article by VanderKam, “Recent Scholarship on the Book of Jubilees,” there appears a thematic subsection entitled “Women.”2 Among the studies that VanderKam reviews are some which focus on Rebekah, including sections of my own monograph.3 In his survey of the contents of Jubilees, VanderKam carefully chronicles Rebekah’s role and then comments: “No other woman is granted a part anything like Rebecca’s….“4 Rebekah has also figured in other recent studies, which have benefited from the insights of additional studies on women in Jewish Palestine as well as new and more sophisticated methodological bases.

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4 James C. VanderKam, The Book of Jubilees (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 116; henceforth “Jubilees.”
My goal in this essay is to review the most significant new contributions to our perspective on Rebekah in *Jubilees*, which constitutes part of the recent growth in scholarship on the book of *Jubilees*. Much of this activity is due in no small part to the pioneering work and continual mentoring of scholars and students by Jim VanderKam. The “revisiting” I envisage, then, begins with an overview of Rebekah’s presentation in *Jubilees*. It continues by incorporating reflections engendered by newer studies, which contain extended treatment of the Rebekah materials. A synthesis of the major themes uncovered in this review follows, demonstrating how new angles of vision add complexity to the significance of *Jubilees*’ portrait of Rebekah. Brief suggestions regarding the theological significance of the material conclude the essay.

This essay begins with two recent approaches to this material, and then continues with an overview of Rebecca’s role in *Jubilees*. Betsy Halpern-Amaru has made numerous contributions to our understanding of the book of *Jubilees*.

5 Her monograph, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees* provides a sustained treatment of the ascendancy of women in *Jubilees*, and Rebekah plays no small role in her study. In her view, ethnic purity, deriving from an interpretation of Exod 19:6 (“You shall be unto Me a Kingdom of priests and a holy people”) and applying it to the people of Israel, provides the major goal of this writer. The reason for this focus is that “in *Jubilees* only one standard determines purity—descent from a woman who carries the appropriate genealogical credentials.” For Halpern-Amaru, only this position can explain the fact that in *Jubilees* all the focus on exogamy

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