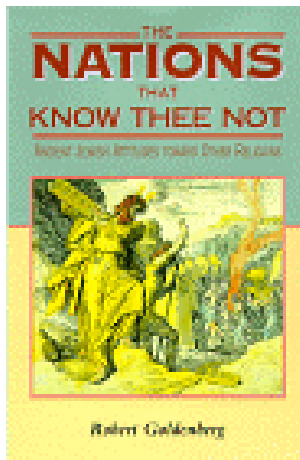


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Goldenberg, Robert

The Nations That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Towards Other Religions

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997. Pp. 214, Paperback, \$19.95, ISBN 1850758425.

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The recurring question addressed by Robert Goldenberg in his *The Nations That Know Thee Not* is the Israelite (later Jewish) attitude towards non-Israelite (later non-Jewish) paganism. The issue was of fundamental importance then, and remains so even today. The Hebrew Scripture's attitude toward idolatry by the Israelites is unequivocal; worshiping others gods is absolutely forbidden, and is subject to the most severe sanctions. There is but one God, and any worship of other gods was clearly an affront to God.

But what of those who were not Israelites, and who did not share in the Covenant with God? Was there anything wrong with non-Israelites worshiping other gods? Despite the unremitting opposition to idolatry by Israelites, the scriptural view of the appropriateness of idolatry by non-Israelites is not so clear. In some places, such idolatry is characterized as evil, and its destruction by Israelites seen as a righteous act. Under other circumstances, however, idolatry by non-Israelites was seen as silly, naïve, ill-advised, unwise, and unsophisticated, but not as inherently evil; as such, it could be tolerated, and did not have to be eradicated.

The question of how the Israelites were to treat non-Israelite idolatry does not end with what G. Boccaccini has called "early Judaism." The same question arises later in history, in "middle Judaism" (from the end of the canonized Hebrew scriptures to the talmudic era), as well as in "late Judaism" (roughly rabbinic Judaism). Furthermore, these questions are not only of historical import; they bear on the question of religious

tolerance and liberalism in that period to which Western civilization traces its intellectual and spiritual roots.

There are two approaches that one might take to such a study: taxonomic and evolutionary. The taxonomic approach seeks to list the various perspectives: here are sources that advocate tolerance, liberalism, and acceptance; here are some other sources that are illiberal, that advocate the destruction of non-Israelite (or, in middle and late Judaism, non-Jewish) idolatry. The evolutionary approach seeks to outline the roots of these different approaches to foreign idolatry, and to trace connections among different texts.

Goldenberg begins his taxonomy with a review of "middle Judaism" of Hebrew Scriptures, and finds a broad range of attitudes. In some instances, non-Israelite gods are seen as divine, but subservient to Israel's God. In other instances, non-Israelite gods are mocked as mere bits of stone and wood. In some cases, the Israelites destroy the non-Israelite gods; in other cases, it appears that worship of non-Israelite gods (by non-Israelites, of course) is either tolerated as innocent folly or even praised as admirable.

Goldenberg then goes on to show that in "middle Judaism" (under the Maccabees and in the war against Rome) Jewish antipathy toward foreign gods was often expressed with physical violence, as well as with inflammatory rhetoric. Yet, he suggests, at the same time and places (or at least at *about* the same time and in *about* the same places), at least some Jews occasionally treated paganism with tolerance, or even respect.

In some instances, readers might feel that Goldenberg is going far beyond the data. How much is one to make of the fact that some Jews bore theophoric names, or of the occasional reports of apostasy? Other readers may be disturbed by Goldenberg's suggestion that Philo took a "soft stance" on idolatry. But if Goldenberg will not fully convince every reader, he will at least challenge and stimulate; even those who disagree with him will not be able to dismiss him out of hand.

There is no question of the value and importance of Goldenberg's taxonomic approach. In its absence, many (perhaps most) would have assumed that the unremitting opposition to idolatry by Israelites also implied similar opposition to non-Israelite idolatry. But there is also no question that Goldenberg's very careful approach is frustrating, because it preempts deeper understanding of the historical, cultural, social, and economic roots of religious tolerance and intolerance. If, for example, we review talmudic literature and find that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai advocated a relatively hard-line against Roman paganism, and that Rabban Gamaliel adopted a much more tolerant approach, we could distill from biographical details of these two sages the roots of the two different approaches. But Goldenberg (and he is certainly not the only scholar who does so) finds this impossible; we cannot know the biographical details, and, in any

event, the fact that statements were attributed to one of these two sages cannot be taken as historical evidence that they made the statements. There is, of course, an alternative. Regardless of the actual historicity of the statements, one might still conclude that sages to whom certain biographical details were attributed were also likely to have been reported to have made certain statements. But this is not the arena for engaging in such historiographic battles.

In any event, Goldenberg's volume is an important contribution, whether one is interested in the history of Judaism or in the history of religious tolerance. Some may find his taxonomy (and unwillingness to try tracing evolutionary roots) frustrating. But the taxonomy and analysis is indeed provocative and stimulating, and worth careful reading.