STUDIA PATRISTICA
VOL. XXXIV

Historica, Biblica, Theologica et Philosophica

Edited by
M.F. WILES and E.J. YARNOLD

with the assistance of
P.M. PARVIS

Index Auctorum and Table of Contents in Vol. XXXVIII

PEETERS
LEUVEN
2001
A Comparison between Early Jewish and Early Christian Interpretations of the Jubilee Year

D.P. O'BRIEN, Oxford

What is the Jubilee Year?

The word 'Jubilee' derives from the Hebrew ישיב or 'ram's horn'. This trumpet, according to Lev. 25,8ff., was to be sounded every 50 years, that is, after each cycle of seven sabbatical years, to herald the beginning of the Jubilee Year. In this special time, all the Israelites who were dispossessed of their inherited property, presumably in order to service defaulted debts, were to return to their homes and fields with all obligations annulled, a complete tabula rasa. In addition, according to Lev. 25,8ff., the Jubilee Year legislation subsumes the Sabbatical Year laws in which the fields were to lay fallow and all slaves were to be released (Lev. 25,1-7)1.

Historically, we can be reasonably certain that the Sabbatical Year in some form or other was observed at the turn of the Common Era.2 However, there is no evidence that the Jubilee Year was ever observed in either the biblical or the post-biblical period. That is, our extant sources are completely silent when it comes to mentioning a particular occasion when Israelites or Jews returned to their patrimonies in the event of a Jubilee Year. Nevertheless, we do find in several passages of the Torah, allusions to, or themes based on, the Jubilee Year legislation. Perhaps, the best known passage is that of the biblical midrash based on Lev. 25,10 in Isa. 61,1-2 whereby the prophet is anointed by the spirit of the Lord to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison, the year of the Lord's favour and the day of the vengeance of our God.3

Curious, however, in light of the fact that the Jubilee Year was unlikely to have been ever observed, is the importance of the 'idea' of the Jubilee played in the thought of Jews living in the two centuries before and after the turn of the Common Era. Some Jews, Philo4 and Josephus5 in particular, were extremely proud of Moses' iustitia and clementia, which any sensible man could clearly observe for himself from the lawgiver's Jubilee Year legislation. Some Jews saw the utility in deriving from Jubilee Year materials halakoth, or

1 What actually constituted the Sabbatical Year laws is slightly more complex than this. Laws corresponding to the Sabbatical Year are to be found in the Covenant (Ex. 21,2-11; 23,10ff.) and Deuteronomistic (Dt. 15,1-17) codes of the Pentateuch, in addition to the Holiness code (Lev. 25,1-7), each with slight inconsistencies. Each code differs as to whether the Sabbatical Year was to be universally applied at the same time throughout the land of Israel, or whether the seven-year cycle was merely to be applied to each field separately; whether slaves were to be manumitted after a full seven years of service or at a universally agreed Sabbatical Year irrespective of how much time the servant spent in bondage etc.

2 Other exilic or post-exilic passages which either mention the Jubilee or touch on Jubilee themes include: the daughters of Zelophehad narrative (Numbers 26) where halakah is derived from the Jubilee legislation to allow daughters to inherit property from their father, deceased sine mancipio prole. The resolution of the economic crisis during Nehemiah's governorship (Neh. 5,1-13) involved the immediate absolution of the interest component of loans and the release of patrimonial estates pledged as security. Interestingly, there is no mention here of any past or future Jubilee Year which presumably would have alleviated the economic crisis. Nehemiah's resolution is not unusual in the Ancient Near East. Cf. N. P. Lemche, 'The Manumission of Slaves — the Fallow Year — the Sabbatical Year — the Jubel Year', VT XXVI (1976) 38-41; I. Lewy, 'The Biblical Institution of Deor in the Light of Akkadoid Documents', EI V (1958) 21-31; J. Finkelstein, 'Some New Misharit Material and its Implications,' Assyriological Studies XVI (1965) 233-246. Central to the covenant made between Zedekiah and the people of Judah during the siege of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 34,8-22) is the immediate and wholesale manumission of Israeliite slaves. Here is a certain conflation of Jubilee (cf. יִשְׁבָּתת בָּיִת in Lev. 25,10 and Dc. 15,12). Finally, extremely interesting halakah is derived from the Jubilee Year in the description of the acts of justice by the futurist Davidic king whom God would place over a reunited Israel (Ezek. 46,16-18).

3 Cf. Spec.Leg. ii, 110-121 which follows the Leviticus 25 Viringo closely. Writing to his colleagues, Philo contends that, with the Jubilee Legislation, the Lawgiver [Moses] was showing sympathy for the poor man, who during times of hardship might be compelled to sell his property (112, 115). Nevertheless, Philo is quick to caution the poor man not to take advantage of such a statute but to strive to redeem the property prior to the Jubilee Year so as not to occasion loss to the purchaser 'who helped him at a time when he needed it' (112, 114). The addition of minor moral or halakhic guidelines like this made by both Philo and Josephus is curious in light of the fact that the Jubilee Year was not being observed at the time of their writing. Nevertheless, we occasionally find that these additions reflect the prejudices of their aristocratic class as in the case of Philo cited above (112, 114) and Josephus' rather involved financial dealings between the original land-owner and the lessee which is so construed that the latter cannot lose (Ant. iii, 283-4).

4 Josephus differs on the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee Year legislation as part of his exposition of the Mosaic laws pertaining to the political constitution of the Jews ( ספר הלאוטיאוכ בֵּית היִשְׂרָאֵל [Ant. iii, 213, iv, 197]. In contrast to Philo, Josephus intended his readership to comprehend 'the Galilee-speaking world' (Ant. i, 8). Therefore, the amount of attention that he pays to the Jubilee material indicates the important part it plays in his apologist attempt to show the positive side of Judaism.

5 The Jubilee Year has been seen as the basis for the 'year of jubilee' for the exiles. Thus, it is considered that the year of the Jubilee is the year that the exiles are set free. This idea is further reinforced by the fact that the Jubilee Year is mentioned in the Old Testament. The year of Jubilee is also considered to be a year of forgiveness and remission of debts. Therefore, it is seen as a time of restoration and renewal.

6 The Jubilee Year is also considered to be a time of rest and relaxation for the land. The land is allowed to lie fallow for a year, which means that it is not worked and allowed to rest and regenerate. This is considered to be a way of preserving the land and ensuring its continued productivity.

7 The Jubilee Year is also considered to be a time of social justice. It is seen as a time when the poor are able to reclaim their lands andUI.
instructions, on more immediate issues that they faced (Tannaim)⁶. Other Jews saw significance in the 7x7 cyclic nature of the Jubilee Year, which for them emphasized the twin themes of the sabbath and the future repossessions of the inheritance (the Book of Jubilee and Qumran sectarians). I must assert, however, that futuristic interpretations of the Jubilee Year comprise only a small part of the whole number of Jewish interpretations on the Jubilee themes.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the importance of the ‘idea’ of the Jubilee Year in several streams of early Judaism, it does not seem to have been an inroads into earliest Christianity. Indeed, there seems to be an almost total lack of awareness of the Jubilee Year material in early Christian literature. This is perhaps surprising. One would have thought that motifs like the ‘release of slaves’ and the ‘poor inheriting their patrimonies’ could have been quite useful in expressing future hopes as indeed writers of the Book of Jubilees and IQS expressed them. I shall argue in this paper: 1) that Jubilee Year material was practically ignored by Christians until the late 2⁶th century and 2) that it was introduced into Christian thought by Clement of Alexandria, who largely inherited his views on the Jubilee from the Jewish philosopher Philo, who also hailed from the city of Alexandria, although some 150 years earlier.

Common Assumption: Link between Isa. 61,1-2 and Jubilee Year in Luke 4

The major obstacle for my proposal that the Jubilee Year notion did not figure in early Christian thinking prior to Clement of Alexandria is the common assumption that Jubilee Year ideology plays an important role in the Gospel of Luke. For example, it is often assumed that an eschatological Jubilee Year lies behind Jesus’ offering sermon in Nazareth in Luke 4 where he reads before the congregation a conflation of texts from Isa. 61,1-2 (and 58,6).⁴ This is in spite of the fact that there is no occurrence of the word ‘Jubilee’ no exhortation for the oppressed to return to their patrimonies, no blowing of a shofar, no

⁶ Cf. the use of Jubilee Year materials from Leviticus 25 to determine the time of the year for the beginning of the Sabbatical Year M.R.H. 11 = T.R.H. 1,7; the type of shofar to be blown on various festal occasions M.R.H. 3,2-3; the import and immutability of property inherited by the first-bom, cf. T. Bekh. 6,19 with M. Bekh. 8,10; calculations on the redemption of property (M. Arakhin 2,9).

⁴ I QS 10,6-10; 4Q Borkhot (4Q286) and 11QMelchizedek.


⁹ Cf. M.I. Edwards, 'Not yet fifty years old': John 8,57,' NTS XL (1994) 449-454. Edwards posits that the Jews’ curious question to Jesus, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ could be explained by John’s knowledge of the Book of Jubilees. Thus, the Jewish objection might be paraphrased as: ‘Since the time of Abraham, many Jubilees have passed, and no-one has lived through more than two of them. How then can you have seen them, who have not completed one?’ (p. 453). The popularity of the Book of Jubilees and its widespread attestation in the first century enhances the plausibility of Edwards’ case. Nevertheless, if there is an allusion to the Jubilee Year here then it is extremely suppressed and no explicit mention is made of any other aspects of the Jubilee Year legislation in the Gospel of John.


make a neat package, perhaps overly neat. Elsewhere in the Gospel, in the prayer of Zechariah, Luke is quite content to conflate the ideas of a physical salvation from the hands of enemies and the forgiveness, ἀφέσεως, of sins (Lk. 1:77). The point is that one need not have recourse to the Jubilee Year legislation, or at least its exegesis by the Qumran sectarians, in order to explain the multivalent meanings of ἀφέσεως in Luke 4.

3. We grant that Isa. 61,1-2 figures prominently in Luke and Acts. For example, in Lk. 7,22, when John the Baptist’s disciples ask Jesus if he is the one to come, his reply is heavily indebted to the actions of the prophet depicted in Isa. 61,1-2. However, it has been argued, I think successfully, that the link between the description of Jesus’ ministry and Isa. 61,1-2 derives from one of Luke’s sources, possibly Q. The question again arises as to Luke’s awareness of the midrashic background to a prophetic text (i.e. Isaiah 61) that he inherited from one of his sources.

The proposition that it was not self-evident that Isaiah 61 was in any way linked to Leviticus 25, particularly for Greek readers, is further supported by the lack of awareness of such a link shown by the early Christian writers.

In the Epistle of Barnabas 14, the author cites Isa. 61,1-2 as a part of a catena of Isianic texts supporting his contention that God has fulfilled his promise of a covenant that he made with the Patriarchs by means of Jesus’ act in redeeming from darkness those who were caught up in lawlessness. The point I am making here is that the author of the epistle of Barnabas feels no need to resort to Jubilee ideology in order to wrestle a spiritualized interpretation of Isaiah 61, in which the proclamation of ἀφέσεως to the captives is understood as forgiveness of sins for those in the darkness.

Irenaeus cites Isa. 61,1-2 several times in his ‘Against Heresies’ and in none of these instances, indeed nowhere in his extant writings, is there a clear allusion to the Jubilee Year (Haer, 2.22: 3.9.3; 3.17.1; 4.23.1). This is quite surprising because the themes of ‘inheritance of incorruption’ and the ‘new covenant of liberty’ (e.g. Haer, 3.12.14) are obviously very important to him and could easily lend themselves to a spiritual reading of Leviticus 25. Nevertheless, Irenaeus is either unaware of that exegetical move or sees no need to resort to the Jubilee Year legislation. Thus, for example, in order to show that the anointed prophet’s proclamation of the favourable year of the Lord in Isa. 61,1-2 signifies the time that God shall grant forgiveness to all those who were led into captivity by their sins, Irenaeus resorts not to the Jubilee material in Leviticus 25 but rather Prov. 5,22, ‘Every one shall be held with the cords of his own sins’ (Haer. 3.9.3).

The first reference to the Jubilee Year in Christian literature

So when does the Jubilee Year ideology first appear in Christian consciousness? I suggest that the first obvious reference to the Jubilee Year was made at the end of the second century by Clement of Alexandria. In this case, Clement praises the humanity of the Mosaic Law and refers to the intrinsic seven-ness of the Jubilee and the link between the Jubilee Year and the Sabbaths by describing the former as the chiefest rest (Strom. 2.18; 4.25). Clearly Clement is dependent upon Philo here, who also makes the same observations (cf. Dec. 164; Spec. Leg. ii, 110). Nevertheless, Clement’s interpretation of the Jubilee does not go further than that of his source, Philo, although he does tantalizingly suggest that the Jubilee Year impacts the twin themes of rest and inheritance, which, unfortunately, he does not discuss any further, at least in any of the material now extant.

Link between Jubilee and Pentecost made by Origen and Hippolytus

Indeed, it is Origen, also from the city of Alexandria, who makes the first distinctively Christian interpretation of the Jubilee Year. The significance of the ‘mystery of Jubilee’ arises in his exposition of Luke’s account of the feeding of the 5,000. Origen’s explanation focuses on Christ’s command to His disciples that they sit the people down in companies of about fifty each. To Origen it is evident that Jesus chose the number 50 because the number symbolized the remission of sins. That is, because the Jubilee took place every 50 years it acts as an Old Testament adumbration of the feast of Pentecost (Comm. Matthew 11.3.44). Origen evidently makes the connection between the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 and the feast of Pentecost in Acts 2 by means of the words ἀφέσεως and πεντηκοστήσατο, which are common to both texts and, when taken together, eliminate any other possible combination in the New and Old Testaments.

Hippolytus, a contemporary of Origen, makes a very similar claim although with a slight twist. In his exposition of the Psalms, Hippolytus explains that there are 150 psalms because the number 50 is sacred as is manifest from the days of the celebrated festival of Pentecost, which indicates release from labours, and the possession of joy. For which reason neither fasting nor binding the knee is decreed for those days (clear dependency on the Jewish feast of Shabuoth). For this is a symbol of the great assembly that is reserved for future times. Of which times there was a shadow in the land of Israel in the year called among the Hebrews 'Jobel', which is the fiftieth year in number, and brings with it liberty for the slave, and release from debt, and the like (On the Psalms 1.3. ANCL Transl.).

In this passage, both Pentecost and the Jubilee point to some future event, a great assembly. The difference between the two feasts is that of degree of
resolution. The Jubilee Year in the Old Testament is a mere shadow of this future event whilst, by implication, Pentecost is a far more representative symbol.

Conclusions

It is unlikely that early Christian interpreters ever made the link between Isaiah 61 and the Jubilee Year of Leviticus 25. Isaiah 61 together with other exilic and post-exilic prophetic texts proved sufficient in providing the founts for early Christian descriptions of Jesus’ mission.

Second, the evidence seems to be that Christians only began dealing with the Jubilee Year material after inheriting late, second-Temple, Jewish writings on the subject, as exemplified in the case of Clement of Alexandria’s dependence on Philo.

Third, it follows that Christian interpreters at least up until the mid-third century did not understand Jesus’ mission in terms of an eschatological proclamation of the Jubilee Year. Rather, the link was forged between the Jubilee and Pentecost based on the common Greek words ὑπεριτικός and πεντεκοστή. Again, Pentecost was not viewed as an eschatological Jubilee but rather a New Testament counterpart to that which was merely a shadow in the Old.