

SUMMER SERMON SERIES – THE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

THE BOOK OF JUBILEES

July 11, 2014

Shabbat shalom!

The war in Israel raged on for three years, with the army of the powerful Hasmonean Family of Jews finally defeating the Assyrian invaders. The idols were finally cleared out of the great Temple in Jerusalem, and the priests were finally able to resume their sacrifices according to the laws of Torah. As the Hasmoneans, led by Judah Maccabee, lit the sacred oil, they called the ceremony “Chanukah” – the Hebrew word means “dedication” – and we’ve been celebrating ever since that fateful day nearly 2,200 years ago.

But alas! The Hasmoneans weren’t content to be war heroes; they took over the government of Israel and within a generation had established a dictatorship that was as cruel as anything Israel had experienced – including the slaughter of thousands of their political opponents. Even worse, the Hasmoneans consolidated their power by taking over the priesthood. Judah Maccabaeus, the great war hero, installed his kid brother Jonathan as high priest 13 years after that first Chanukah, and Jonathan wasn’t even legitimate, having no connection to the priestly line. We don’t usually mention during our annual Chanukah celebration the uproar that followed.

The coup forced the legitimate priests to flee, leaving them only enough time to take some of their sacred texts from the Temple Library, and they made their way down to the Dead Sea, where they established a refuge in some caves at Qumran, putting their sacred texts into earthen jars for safe-keeping. There this priestly community survived for over 200 years, hoping to return to Jerusalem, and in the meantime living a life of purity, copying and writing texts to keep their teachings and traditions alive. As you’ve guessed, these were the Dead Sea Scrolls, rediscovered since 1947 by Bedouin shepherds.

The Library at Qumran included virtually every book of our Bible, in whole or in part, and many other Jewish books that have otherwise been unknown to us. If a book’s popularity can be judged by how many times it was copied, then one of the most popular of all – copied more than virtually every biblical book at Qumran – was the Book of Jubilees. Jubilees was at least as important as Torah, and one of the community’s core governing documents – and yet throughout our history the Book of Jubilees has been almost completely unknown, except for some obscure references in early Christian

authors and a fragmentary 15th century manuscript found in an Ethiopian Church and written in the Ge'ez language. When the early rabbis decided what books should be canonized – included as sacred in our Bible – Jubilees, one of the most important and influential books of the Second Temple period, was left out as heretical. It was expunged from the record.

If you look at the sermon topic on this week's flyer, you'll see that I've started a Summer Sermon Series – my third – on the Pseudepigrapha. “Pseudo”; “Epigraph” – “false writings” – a vast body of ancient Jewish literature, most of it unknown until rediscovered in modern times, over 200 texts that the “powers that be” decided shouldn't have canonical status. For reasons that often had to do with power politics as much as religion, these books, including the popular Book of Jubilees, were deemed to be out of bounds.

These pseudepigraphical writings, while largely unknown, are crucial for the understanding of early Judaism, and especially for early Christianity and the Jewish/Christian split. We read of angels and demons, messianic expectations, apocalyptic visions of the end times, and where we are headed in the world to come. Every major theme of early Christianity, it turns out, comes right out of Jewish sources. If we think Jewish life today is fragmented among Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Hasidic, Reconstructionist Judaism and Jewish Renewal – the sects and divisions of Judaism in those days were far worse, and often violent to the point of civil war. During these next several weeks, we'll be taking a look at some of these hidden books, and we'll start tonight with the Book of Jubilees.

“Jubilees” is a term in Torah. In Torah, a Jubilee is a unit of time. Every seventh year is a sabbatical year when the land lies fallow; after seven sabbatical years – that is, after 49 years – the land is to lie fallow for two years in a row; all debts are to be forgiven, and all land must be returned to original owners. There's no evidence that Jubilee years were ever observed, and Jewish law considers the law unobservable.

The Book of Jubilees – a retelling of the stories of Torah – places the counting of jubilee years at the core of our story, by telling the stories – from the Creation right through the Exodus – according to time units of 49 years each. Every event is pegged to a jubilee period; thus we read, “At the end of the 19th jubilee, in the 6th year of the 7th period, Adam died.” Larger Torah history is seen the same way; somehow it comes out that the period from Creation to the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land takes exactly 50 jubilee periods of 49 years each.

The Book of Jubilees retells the stories from Adam and Noah right through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Moses – but with significant editorial changes. Torah doesn't explain, for example, how the world became populated, since Adam and Eve only had two sons, Cain and Abel. In Jubilees, Adam and Eve also had daughters, the only way that being fruitful and multiplying could really happen.

Women have a much larger role to play in Jubilees – which no doubt didn't hurt the book's popularity. Rebecca, in Jubilees, is more important than Isaac – she's the one who blesses Jacob, and negotiates the peaceful reconciliation between Jacob and Esau.

But it's the calendar itself that takes center stage in Jubilees.

The calendar in Jubilees, is not the lunar calendar of later Judaism, but a solar calendar of 52 weeks, where Sabbaths fall on fixed dates, festivals always fall on the same day each year, but festivals could never fall on the Sabbath.

Why is this important? It's called: "He who pays the piper calls the tune," otherwise known as "he who controls the calendar controls the community." Torah says that Moses received the Law on Mt. Sinai. Jubilees declares that the calendar predates the beginning of the world, and a solar calendar is the only one that is authentic and legitimate. Following the correct calendar is crucial – because every marriage contract, every trade agreement, every land sale or business contract's validity depends on being properly dated. The Qumran Community, in other words, was in a political battle for supremacy with the Hasmoneans back in Jerusalem, and by following a solar calendar they sought to delegitimize the authorities in Israel. If the leaders of Qumran could have won back power in Jerusalem, today's Judaism would have been vastly different, and Christianity might never have come to be at all.

The Book of Jubilees retells the stories of Torah – but doesn't mention priests. In Torah, priests have all the power; in Jubilees, it's the people who have power, and national identity – without the priests – is the theme. Again, if you leave out the priests, it undermines the whole structure of Jewish life and the power center in Jerusalem.

Torah gives detailed genealogies for men. Jubilees, to strengthen national identity, adds the family backgrounds for all the women – including the wives of Jacob's 12 sons, some of whom aren't even named in Torah. By providing genealogies for the women, national identities are much more clearly defined. Jubilees also shows that our patriarchs observed Jewish law, with even Noah and Abraham observing Jewish holidays – while in Torah Jewish law doesn't start until the revelation at Sinai. By showing that Jewish law was much more ancient, its authenticity and the role of Judaism were underscored.

Jubilees has a much greater focus on eschatology – projections on what will be at the end of time – than Torah. Torah has no speculation at all about the World to Come; the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished, but that's it. Jubilees promises that no matter how bad things get, and despite any wrongdoing in Israel, Israel will be saved and restored, and will always be God's people. At a time of turmoil, with a dictatorship in Jerusalem, the challenges of Hellenistic culture and the growing power of Rome already on the horizon, this was a powerful message. The message that God will always be there for us, no matter what, became a compelling argument – one of the Dead Sea sect's few contributions to Jewish thought that became normative in rabbinic Judaism after Rome destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70.

Let me close by quoting a brief passage from the Book of Jubilees – a vision of a messianic era when redemption will come to all, both the wicked and the righteous:

“In those days, children will begin to search the law, and to search the commandments and to return to the way of righteousness.

And the days will begin to increase and grow longer among those sons of men, generation by generation, and year by year, until their days approach a thousand years, and to a great number of years than days.

And there will be no old men and none who is full of days, because all of them will be infants and children.

And all of their days they will be complete and live in peace and rejoicing, and there will be no Satan and no evil one who will destroy, because all of their days will be days of blessing and healing.

And then the Lord will heal His servants, and they will rejoice forever and ever with joy, and the Lord will show mercy to hundreds and thousands, to all who love Him.”