CHAPTER TWO

INTERPRETATION AS PRIMORDIAL WRITING: 
JUBILEES AND ITS AUTHORITY CONFERRING STRATEGIES*

Introduction

Writings from the Second Temple period consistently invoked the 
Torah of Moses as authoritative sacred writing. Although the tradition 
was shared, attempts to make Scripture relevant and accessible gener-
ated diverse views about how to interpret and apply this authoritative 
writing. As a result, distinctive interpretations and practices emerged. 
It became essential that writers justify their interpretations.

One solution to this problem was to establish an authorizing link to 
the already accepted Torah of Moses. This solution might involve the 
claim that an interpretation assumed the status of prophecy, at times 
even Mosaic prophecy. The book of Jubilees is a Second Temple work 
in which one version of this strategy is presented: it bases its own 
authority on the Torah of Moses by linking its interpretations to the 
divine heavenly revelation that is also responsible for the production 
of the Torah of Moses. Thus, Jubilees1 is an especially striking exam-
ple of a Second Temple text that intertwines the issue of interpretive 
authority with the authority of sacred writing.

The most important work so far on Jubilees’ authorizing strategies 
is the seminal study of Jubilees’ heavenly tablets by Florentino García

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Martínez. He emphasizes the importance of the heavenly tablets as a way of understanding Jubilees’ attempts at self-authorization and legitimation. However, I want to emphasize that the heavenly tablets must be situated in the context of four strategies for Jubilees’ self-authorization. García Martínez’s discussion is particularly relevant to the first of the following four claims:

1) Jubilees repeatedly claims that it reproduces material that had been written long before on the “heavenly tablets,” a great corpus of divine teachings kept in heaven.

2) The entire content of the book of Jubilees was dictated by the Angel of the Presence at God’s own command. Hence, it is itself the product of divine revelation.

3) Jubilees was dictated to Moses, the same Moses to whom the Torah had been given on Mount Sinai. Thus, the book of Jubilees is the co-equal accompaniment of the Torah; both were transmitted by the same true prophet.

4) Jubilees claims that its teachings are the true interpretation of the Torah. Thus, its teachings also derive their authority from that of the Torah; that its interpretations match the Torah’s words and resolve all interpretive problems further substantiates its veracity.

My primary concern in this article will be, not the details of Jubilees’ interpretive methods, but rather its modes of self-authorization. They

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3 The tablets themselves, as Garcia Martínez repeatedly and correctly emphasizes, are variegated and manifold in their content and character, and he has helpfully organized the material said to be inscribed upon Jubilees’ heavenly tablets into a fivefold taxonomy. Texts of the first kind identify the material on the heavenly tablets with the Torah of Moses. Those of the second kind seem to portray the heavenly tablets as a record of deeds, both good and evil. Texts of the third kind claim that the heavenly tablets record not only past events but also future events, a kind of history of the world in a manner parallel to 1 Enoch, as García Martínez points out. In the fourth class, the heavenly tablets legitimate the calendar and feasts which serve to authorize Jubilees’ chronology and distinctive calendar. The fifth and final species of texts record new interpretations, or what García Martínez calls “amplifications” of the biblical law, whose authority rests upon their being already inscribed upon the heavenly tablets.