CHAPTER FIVE

THE JUBILEE IN OTHER PENTATEUCHAL TEXTS

Outside of Lev 25, the jubilee is mentioned in the Pentateuch also in Lev 27:16–25 and Num 36:4. In addition, the legislation for the year of shemittah (release) in Deut 15 overlaps with the jubilee legislation to such a degree that some explanation must be offered for the relationship of the two institutions. In examining these texts, the goal will be to ascertain what light they shed on the development and reception of the jubilee concept.

1. **Leviticus 27**

Leviticus 27 provides regulations governing the dedication of persons, animals, real estate, or produce to the Lord, i.e. to his sanctuary. The jubilee is mentioned six times in Lev 27, all in the unit concerning consecration of real estate, vv. 16–24.

1.1. **Sitz-im-Leben**

The dating of Lev 27 is difficult to establish, since it is a short, seemingly independent unit with virtually no references to historically identifiable events or conditions. Nonetheless, “there are other indications that the language and provisions of that chapter are rooted in archaic and conservative cultic practices.” Some of the evidence of the antiquity and at least pre-exilic date of the text include the following:

A. The obscure animal-exchange transaction of v. 12 “has been shown to be part of an authentic and old economic procedure with analogues at Nuzi.”

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B. The rare word “your valuation” (שָׁלֵם) is, by all appearances, archaic.⁴

C. The classification of persons in Lev 27 is remarkably similar to Middle Babylonian work rosters for slaves.⁵

D. The practice of vowing persons is very old, attested in narratives dealing with the pre-monarchic period (1 Sam 1:11; Judg 13:7; cf. Num 6:2). Vow-regulations at least similar to Lev 27 must have been in existence at that time.⁶

E. The same organizing principle for the different kinds of sancta in Lev 25 is attested in the Hittite “Instruction to Temple Officials.”⁷

F. Outside of the Bible, the only attestation of the word בִּרְיָה is the 9th-century B.C.E. Moabite Inscription, which certainly indicates at least a pre-exilic provenance for this concept.⁸

It seems reasonable to conclude with Meyers that “an early date for this chapter in its overall form and content, if not all its specific details, cannot be ruled out.”⁹ There are no fatal objections to understanding this chapter in the same historical context argued for Lev 25 above.

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⁶ Meyers, “Procreation,” 585.


⁸ Milgrom, Leviticus 23–27, 2391; cf. ANET, 320; also noted by Norman H. Snaith, Leviticus and Numbers (The Century Bible; London: Nelson, 1967), 176.

⁹ See Meyers, “Procreation,” 584. It is sometimes claimed that Lev 27 represents a currency-economy which only arose in the Persian period. However, “shekel” can refer to weight, and does not necessarily indicate coinage (idem, 585). Milgrom cites evidence that fifty shekels for an adult male corresponds to Assyrian slave-market prices in the 8th and 7th centuries (Milgrom, Leviticus 23–27, 2409; citing Kenneth A. Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” BAR 21 [1995]: 52 and Claude H. W. Johns, Assyrian Deeds and Documents, 3 vols. [Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1924], 3:542–46; cf. 2 Kgs 15:20). This is a good piece of evidence for Milgrom’s contention that H is from the 8th century, but it is not conclusive, since slave-prices are known to have varied considerably in practice throughout the ancient Near East (see Isaac Mendelsohn, Slavery in the Ancient Near East [New York: Oxford University Press, 1949], 117–18). Furthermore, we do not know if the prices in Lev 27 represent the going rate for slaves at the time of composition, or were intentionally higher or lower.