THE STATUS AND INTERPRETATION OF
JUBILEES IN 4Q390*

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The study of the book of Jubilees connects several areas of scholarship on Jewish thought and literature in antiquity. The Dead Sea Scrolls cast light on our understanding of Ethiopic Jubilees, and Ethiopic Jubilees casts light on our understanding of the Scrolls. Jubilees witnesses to the growing authority of the Pentateuch, and the ongoing pluriformity of texts. Jubilees can be studied as interpretation, and also as a source for interpretation. This contribution addresses the authority of Jubilees as reflected in the way it is used in 4Q390. Parallels between Jubilees and 4Q390 have long been noted. Careful examination of the parallels indicates that 4Q390 interprets Jubilees as Scripture.¹

The two parts of this essay treat two major foundations of this claim. The first is the way 4Q390 continuously adopts language and themes from Jubilees. The second is the way 4Q390 wrestles with the plain sense of the text to fit a different set of beliefs. This creative adaptation does not negate the claim that Jubilees was used as authoritative literature, but rather strengthens it. One measure of a text’s authoritativeness is the attention paid to adapting it to fit new and different meanings.²

This example from 4Q390 has broader implications. It adds to the evidence challenging the use of the category “biblical” in the study of the Scrolls, especially if the category excludes Jubilees. The appreciation of 4Q390 as a form of scriptural interpretation in turn casts light on our understanding of scriptural interpretation in general.

¹ In order to conform to editorial standards, titles of non-canonical books are distinguished from those of canonical works by italics, and the word “Scripture” is capitalized. It should be clear, however, that these modern conventions are not indicative of the centuries before the Common Era.

The present argument does not require a firm stance on the issues of relationship to other fragments, title, chronology, or date. It is legitimate to focus on 4Q390 as a unit of text without committing to any one of the numerous possible ways of characterizing the relationship between 4Q390 and other fragments labeled “Apocryphon of Jeremiah.” Similarly, referring to the text by number aids clarity in comparing the text to Jubilees, an address to Moses, without denying that a similar revelation could have been addressed to Jeremiah. The chronology proposed by 4Q390 involves some complexity beyond the scope of the present essay, but it warrants a brief discussion in that all of the likely possibilities support a date of composition of 4Q390 much later than that of Jubilees. The “historical apocalypse” in Jubilees 23 corresponds with the events described in 1 Maccabees, perhaps up through the retreat of Bacchides in 159 B.C.E., but there is strikingly no trace of the high-priesthood of Jonathan starting in 152. Even the latest possible date of composition before the oldest copy, dated by J. T. Milik to the second half of the second century, would still leave plenty of time before 4Q390. While Jubilees predicts an eschatological restoration (such as it is) in the same generation as the Maccabean revolt, 4Q390 allows for 140 years following the revolt, or at least seventy years. Eschatological chronologies are usually revised to “correct” unfulfilled predictions and still keep the promise in the

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4 Hanan Eshel favors the interpretation that 4Q390 counts seventy years after the Maccabean revolt, but Eshel also notes the possibility that 140 years should be counted. See Hanan Eshel, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 26 n. 37, 131. Eshel reads the seven jubilee periods of the devastation of the land (4Q390 1 7–8) as starting after the seventy years of exile, but admits the problem that the devastation of the land should have started with the exile. If seven jubilees (343 years) preceded the revolt (seven years, 4Q390 2 i 4), and the total chronology is 490 years, then 140 years remain afterwards. If this is the case, seventy of those years are mentioned in 4Q390 2 i 6 as internal strife. Explicit mention of another seventy years would have to be imagined in the unreadable second column. The paleographic dating of 4Q390 allows for 140 years after the Maccabean revolt. Cana Werman reads the periods in the first fragment out of textual order, producing a chronology of 343 years + 70 years + 7 years + 70 years. See Werman, “Epochs and End-Time,” 244–45.