A Problem in the Book of Jubilees and an Indian Doctrine

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The Book of Jubilees has not been dated with certainty, nor are the sectarian affiliations of its author (if any) as yet known. The predominant view, that it was written about 110 B.C., has recently been shaken by arguments tending to show that it was written considerably earlier, even before the Maccabean period. That the author was not a Pharisee seems to be generally agreed, and the present tendency is to see him as a learned priest with somewhat peculiar, and even visionary views on such fundamental questions as the calendar. But no one doubts his seriousness. Interspersed in his commentary on Genesis (for that is after all what the Little Genesis, as the book is sometimes called, really turns out to be) appear rules of a juridical character, and if these do not tally exactly with the propositions of the Torah as traditionally taught we are by no means entitled to suppose either that they were not observed by some Jews of the author’s period or that (however small such group might conceivably be) they would not be received with respect by the public to which the book was addressed. It is as well to remember that handwritten books depend for their survival upon an accuracy and literary integrity, an ‘appeal’, very different from that needed by the modern printed book. A few passages of arrant nonsense might be excised by a reader or copyist – or they might lead to the author’s literary extinction. In any case Jubilees had a long literary existence


amongst Jews, so far as we know both in Erets Israel and in the Hellenistic Jewish world outside. And the author in no part of the work shows a tendency to treat lightly, or hastily, any matter bearing upon the moral welfare of the Jewish people. If his theories are not now followed, and his doctrines are not exactly reproduced in rabbinical circles it is possible to suppose that the sect, or school, if any, to which he belonged ceased to exert influence in those respects in the circles whence our rabbinical information comes — and we know that our sources of information on Jewish traditional learning have been somewhat brutally truncated as a result of the events of A.D. 70 and after.

At XXVIII 6—7 there appears a most curious and unexpected rule of morals, expressed with the utmost emphasis. The author spends a quite unusual amount of space on the topic, and he obviously intends his readers to take it to heart:

6. And Laban said to Jacob: ‘It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the elder.’ And it is not right to do this; for thus it is ordained and written in the heavenly tables, that no one should give his younger daughter before the elder — but the elder one giveth first and after her the younger — and the man who doeth so, they set down guilt against him in heaven, and none is righteous that does this thing, for this deed is evil before the Lord. 7. And command thou the children of Israel that they do not this thing; let them neither take nor give the younger before they have given the elder, for it is very wicked.”

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3 Its importance is shown by its third title: καθαρσίας. O. Eissfeldt, Einleitung in das alte Testament, 2nd. edn. (Tübingen, 1956), 749—752. At 751 n. 2 he mentions the fragment of Jub. in Hebrew. The discovery may have to be reconciled with the opinion of Büchler (above) that the author used a Greek, and not a Hebrew, version of Genesis. In view of the Dead Sea discoveries a more likely explanation of the discrepancies which Büchler notes may be that our author had before him a Hebrew text of Genesis more akin to that used by the LXX than that established by the Masoretes. Incidentally, the indignation of rabbis against Jesus’ report of the oral law at Mt. V, 43 (see, e.g. Pentateuch and Haftorahs, Hebrew text, English translation and commentary, ed. J. H. Hertz, London, 1956, 316) may be modified if they inspect Jubilees XXXVI, 38. „Primitive” and „harsh” Jub. may be, but its echoes may have been (indeed, probably were) heard in the time of Christ.