

“COVENANTAL NOMISM” IN *JUBILEES*?

ADAM SZABADOS

According to E. P. Sanders “the soteriology of the book of *Jubilees* is that which we have found to be so widespread in Palestinian Judaism: salvation is given graciously by God in his establishing the covenant with the fathers, a covenant which he will not forsake; individuals may, however, be excluded from Israel if they sin in such a way as to spurn the covenant itself.”¹ This is the model that Sanders calls “covenantal nomism.” “Getting in” the covenant is by grace, based on the election of the Jewish nation; “staying in” the covenant depends on basic obedience to the commandments. In his monograph on early Jewish soteriology, Simon Gathercole criticizes Sanders that his treatment of the soteriology of Palestinian Judaism leaves out a third category: future judgment. “In Sanders’s taxonomy, there is a great deal of past (‘getting in’) and present (‘staying in’) but very little eschatology.”² To avoid this one-sidedness, I will discuss the soteriology of *Jubilees* in all three aspects: past, present and future.

PAST (“GETTING IN”)

The historical character of *Jubilees* (it is a recounting of Genesis and part of Exodus) makes it natural that the book would discuss the historical foundations of Israelite identity and issues related to “getting in” (covenant, election, the role of the patriarchs, and the significance of the exodus). Sanders is right in emphasizing that covenant plays a central role in the language of *Jubilees*. In the beginning chapter the author conveys the words of God: “I have not forsaken them on account of all the evil they have done in transgressing the covenant that I am establishing between me and you on Mount Sinai today for all their generations.”³ Covenantal language is ubiquitous in *Jubilees*.⁴ The author leaves no doubt as to the basis of the relationship between Israel and the Lord: it is God’s covenant with them in Abraham and at Mount Sinai. “And the Lord did everything for Israel’s sake, and in accordance with his covenant that he had made with Abraham.”⁵ It is an everlasting covenant,⁶ but a covenant that

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 370.

² Simon Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 23.

³ *Jubilees*, I/5. All quotations are from the translation of R.H. Charles (revised by C. Rabin) in H.F.D. Sparks (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984).

⁴ In the Sparks edition we find covenantal language (where the word itself is used!) on pages 11, 16, 28, 31, 53, 54, 55, 56, 66, 72, 73, 75, 78, 95, 104, 133.

⁵ *Jubilees*, XLVIII/8.

⁶ *Jubilees*, XV/12, 20.

nevertheless must be observed⁷ and can be broken.⁸ Observing the covenant means keeping the commandments of the Lord,⁹ especially the special signs of the covenant: circumcision¹⁰ and the Sabbath.¹¹ The covenant can be renewed by God,¹² and there is a promise that God *will* eventually renew his covenant with Israel in a way that will give them obedient hearts.¹³

The basis of this covenant relationship is God's election of Israel out of all other nations,¹⁴ as a "special possession," "to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹⁵ Separation is an important consequence of being the elect people of God. "Keep yourself separate from the nations, and do not eat with them, and do not imitate their rites, nor associate yourself with them."¹⁶ Part of the purpose of this election is that Israel would keep the Sabbath: "I will set apart for myself a people out of all the peoples, and they shall keep the Sabbath day."¹⁷ The basis of Israel's election is God's covenant with Abraham¹⁸ and the election of Jacob.¹⁹ It is not clear whether the election of Abraham and Jacob was based on grace alone or on some "merit" of the patriarchs as well. When we compare the accounts of the patriarchs in *Jubilees* with those of Genesis, it is obvious that the former put them in much better light than the biblical accounts.²⁰ The election of the Jewish people is taken for granted on the basis of the election of Abraham (and Jacob) – the exodus is a consequence of God's covenant with the patriarchs. It is the saving event that the sons of Abraham (and Jacob) must build their identities on. Chapter XLIX of *Jubilees* therefore discusses the importance of the regular Passover meal in the lives of the Israelites, as a reminder of the origin and basis of their status before God. This should be the story of *all* Israelites. They are "in" because of the story recounted in the book.

⁷ Jubilees, XV/28.

⁸ Jubilees, I/3; XV/34.

⁹ Jubilees, XXIII/16.

¹⁰ Jubilees, XV/11.

¹¹ Jubilees, II/16-25.

¹² Jubilees, XXII/15; 30.

¹³ "I will circumcise the foreskin of their hearts and the foreskin of the hearts of their sons, and I will create in them a holy spirit, and I will cleanse them so that they shall not turn away from me again, from that day till eternity. And they will hold fast to me and to all the commandments, and fulfil my commandments; and I will be their father and they shall be my children." (Jubilees, I/24-5)

¹⁴ Jubilees, XV,30-1.

¹⁵ Jubilees, XVI,28.

¹⁶ Jubilees, XXII/16.

¹⁷ Jubilees, II/19; also 31.

¹⁸ Jubilees, XV/1-10; XLVIII/8.

¹⁹ It is not only the choosing of Abraham, since a further choice was needed between the sons of Isaac, which is reflected by Abraham's blessing on Jacob: "may he choose you and your seed to be always a people for his own possession according to his will." (Jubilees, XXII/10)

²⁰ E.g. Jubilees, XXIII/10; II/20.

PRESENT (“STAYING IN”)

Many sentences of *Jubilees* confirm Sanders` claim that though “getting in” the covenant was automatic for Jacob`s descendents, every Israelite had to “stay in” the covenant through keeping the commandments and making atonement for sins. For example, if the sons of Israel do not circumcise their children, “great will be the Lord`s wrath,”²¹ and they will be “removed and uprooted from the land.”²² This vocabulary is common in the book.²³ “And many will perish; and others will be taken captive and fall into the enemy`s hands, because they have forsaken my law and commandment, and the festivals of my covenant and my Sabbaths, and my holy offerings...”²⁴ The Israelite who plans evil against his brother “will be blotted out of the book of the discipline of mortal men, and not be recorded in the book of life.”²⁵ This appears to indicate that the default position of all Israelites is to be in the book of life, unless proven otherwise.

Was there a way to stay in the covenant after one committed a sin? The answer is a qualified yes. When Abraham blesses Jacob and his future descendents, he prays, “And may he cleanse you from all unrighteousness and impurity, so that you may be forgiven all your transgressions and your errors committed in ignorance.”²⁶ He talks about the renewing of the covenant in that context, too. God`s forgiveness was based on various forms of atonement offered to God. Blood-sacrifices had to be offered regularly by all generations to “seek forgiveness on their behalf perpetually before the Lord, that they may... not be rooted up.”²⁷ This is the pattern seen in the lives of Noah,²⁸ Abraham,²⁹ Jacob,³⁰ Joseph,³¹ and this is what Israel should also do on every Sabbath day.³²

The picture so far confirms the main thrust of Sanders` “covenantal nomism” model. Getting in the covenant was automatic for all Israelites, and they could stay in the covenant as long as they kept the main commandments (circumcision, Sabbath, basic moral standards), and offered sacrifices for the sins they committed (except some grievous ones that could not be atoned for). But this picture has yet left out the future element of the soteriology of *Jubilees* that can potentially undermine “covenantal nomism.”

²¹ *Jubilees*, XV/32.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ E.g. XXI/22; XXXVI/9; XLIX/9.

²⁴ *Jubilee*, I/10.

²⁵ *Jubilees*, XXXVI/10.

²⁶ *Jubilees*, XXII/14.

²⁷ *Jubilees* VI/14.

²⁸ *Jubilees*, VII/4.

²⁹ *Jubilees*, XVI/22.

³⁰ *Jubilees*, XXXI/26; XLIV/1.

³¹ *Jubilees*, XXXIV/18.

³² *Jubilees*, L/11.

FUTURE (ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT)

There is an emphasis on *individual righteousness* in *Jubilees* that is closely related to the idea of a future day of judgment. An eschatological judgment is one of the recurring themes of the book. Although it is not entirely clear whether the author is referring to a final judgment when he talks about Lot's descendents,³³ and it is similarly vague what Abraham means when he says that God "executes judgment on all who transgress his commandments and despise his covenant,"³⁴ there are plenty of unambiguous references to a final judgment in *Jubilees*. It is referred to as "the great judgment-day,"³⁵ "a day of judgment,"³⁶ "the day of the wrath of judgment,"³⁷ "the day of turmoil and execration and indignation and anger,"³⁸ or "the judgment of every one."³⁹ There is a future aspect of God's evaluation which will scrutinize both Gentiles and Jews. What will be the basis of this final judgment and how can one stand before God on that day and not be "uprooted from the land" or "blotted out from the book of life"?

There is a clear requirement in the book for righteous living.⁴⁰ Noah and Enoch are examples of mortal men achieving "perfect righteousness."⁴¹ Is righteous living then the basis of final justification before God? The text is ambiguous. On the one hand *Jubilees* quotes Genesis: "[Abram] believed in the Lord; and it was counted to him as righteousness."⁴² Righteousness is counted to Isaac on account of his prayer over the two sons of Jacob.⁴³ However, the author does not appear to interpret these as examples of final acquitting from guilt before God, but rather as examples of righteous acts accepted by the Lord. Gaining favor before God is through a lifetime of righteousness. "For Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favour by his righteousness throughout his life."⁴⁴ Similarly, the violent act of Simeon and Levi was "reckoned to them as righteousness and accounted to their credit."⁴⁵ "And so blessing and righteousness are inscribed on the heavenly tablets as a testimony in his favour before the God of all."⁴⁶ Levi's descendents and all the sons of Israel should follow his example, lest "their names are erased from the book of life, and they

³³ Jubilees, XVI/9.

³⁴ Jubilees, XXI/4.

³⁵ Jubilees, V/10.

³⁶ Jubilees, IV/25; XXIII/11; XXIV/33. In X/17 the same expression probably refers to the flood.

³⁷ Jubilees, XXIV/30.

³⁸ Jubilees, XXXVI/10.

³⁹ Jubilees, V/13.

⁴⁰ Jubilees, XX/2-3; XXI/15.

⁴¹ Jubilees, X/17.

⁴² Jubilees, XIV/6.

⁴³ Jubilees, XXXI/24.

⁴⁴ Jubilees, XXIII/10.

⁴⁵ Jubilees, XXX/17.

⁴⁶ Jubilees, XXX/19.

will be recorded in the book of those who are to be destroyed and uprooted from the earth."⁴⁷

The clearest example of judgment by one's way of life is found in chapter V. This is worth being quoted in more length here:

13 And the judgment of every one is ordained and written on the heavenly tablets, and there is no injustice in it: all who stray from the path marked out for them to follow, and do not follow it – judgment is written down for them, for every creature and every kind of creature. 14 And there is nothing in heaven or earth, or in light or darkness, or in Sheol or in the depth, or in the place of darkness, which is not judged; and all their judgments are ordained and written and engraved. 15 From every angle he will judge them, the great man as a great man, and the small man as a small man, and each according to his way of life. 16 And He is not one to respect persons, nor is he one who will accept bribes, when he says he will pass sentence on everyone: if one were to give him everything on earth, he would not take notice of the bribes or of the person of anyone, nor would he accept anything at his hands; for he is a righteous judge. 17 And about the sons of Israel it has been written and ordained, If they repent in righteousness, he will forgive all their transgressions and pardon all their sins. 18 It is written and ordained that he will show mercy to all who repent of all their sins they have committed inadvertently, once every year.⁴⁸

The passage emphasizes that God will judge impartially every man according to their way of life. Their judgment will be just and the Judge will be unbiased. But the picture is also painted with the green color of mercy, since all Israelites had the chance to repent and ask God to pardon their sins every year. The text does not explicitly say this, but most likely this yearly pardon refers to the atonement presented to the Lord in the Temple.

CONCLUSION

Sanders correctly states that the basis of the soteriology of *Jubilees* is the covenant that God made with the patriarchs and with Israel at Mount Sinai. Every Jew was in the covenant by default. He is also right in emphasizing the need to keep the demands of the covenant, especially circumcision, the Sabbath, and basic moral requirements. It is possible to be uprooted from the land and being blotted out of the book of life. The emphasis on a future judgment somewhat complicates the picture. It shows that the demand of righteous living is deeper than an outward conformance to Jewish identity markers and a general righteous behavior. *Everything* in people's lives will be judged on the day of judgment. However, we cannot conclude from this that *Jubilees* presented a legalistic soteriology. There is a strong emphasis on the need for repentance and atonement on the one hand, and on God's mercy and his promise to renew the covenant on the other. Sanders`

⁴⁷ Jubilees, XXX/22.

⁴⁸ Jubilees, V/13-8.

conclusion stands: "Despite a strict legalism of one sort, the author's view is not the kind of legalism which is summed up in the phrase 'works righteousness', for salvation depends on the grace of God."⁴⁹ But it would be an overstatement either that Jubilees has a soteriology that clearly bases salvation on grace through faith. There is enough ambiguity about the basis of final acceptance to cause some confusion in the readers' minds.

⁴⁹ Sanders, 383.