

HOLIDAYS

Satan at the Seder

How one not-quite-biblical book gives us a very different read on the familiar
Passover story

BY STUART HALPERN

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Satan Creating the Monsters from 'Les Sataniques', c. 1882 LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM
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HE GREATEST TRICK THE DEVIL EVER PULLED WAS CONVINCING
the world he didn't exist."

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-Roger “Verbal” Kint, *The Usual Suspects* (1995)

“I will pass through the land of Egypt,” I and not an angel;
“And I will smite every first-born in the land of Egypt,” I and not a seraph;
“And I will carry out judgments against all the gods of Egypt,” I and not a
messenger;
“I – the Lord,” it is I, and none other!

-Passover Haggadah

A few years ago, when my parents asked me what I would like for my 30th birthday present, my answer was 6,000 pages long and around 2,200 years old. The gift I requested for this milestone celebration was *Outside the Bible*. This three volume series is an anthology of books, actually, scrolls, from around the time of the biblical Second Temple period, which for one reason or another, had been excluded from the traditional Jewish canon (though some of the books had been preserved in various denominations of Christianity). Presented, in English translation, were these once-lost, at least to us Jews, works, along with running commentaries by Jewish scholars with expertise in that historical era.

The gem of the collection is, to my birthday-present loving self, without a doubt, the book of Jubilees. The work, which scholars think was composed around 170 BCE, seems to have been written right before the Maccabean War (the 4 books of Maccabees, by the way, are also in *Outside the Bible*). It amounts to a bizarre rewriting of parts of the Bible purporting to be told over by an angel to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Over its “verses,” it retells the biblical books of Genesis and parts of Exodus in charmingly off-kilter ways. And it is a favorite subject of a good few contemporary Bible professors (including, in recent years, Ari Mermelstein, Michael Segal and James Kugel) as it is the earliest written attestation we have of what Kugel has referred to as “midrashic motifs” –

traditions, passed down, in varying oral and written forms, for generations. Hundreds of years after the book of Jubilees, when the Second Temple sect of Pharisees evolved into what became known as rabbis, and rabbis composed the Talmud a few centuries into the Common Era, strikingly creative connections between characters, events, and places within the otherwise disparate parts of the Bible became the norm. But before that, there was this work.

The book of Jubilees, so named by scholars because it situates the stories it retells within certain years of the biblical *yovel* (Jubilee) cycle of seven times seven *shemittah* cycles, was written by a Jew, or a couple of Jews, in the Second Temple period, that notoriously fractured and sectarian time (the more things change...). Its perspective on certain issues, and its calendar, falls squarely on the non-Pharisee, i.e. non-rabbinic, side. The holiday of Shavuot, for example, was observed by the author on the 15th of Sivan, so his Pharisee friends and neighbors would have eaten their traditional cheesecake nine days earlier, on the 6th of that month, as rabbinic Jews do today.

Part of the brilliance of the pre-midrashic midrash that is this text is its insistence that all Jewish holidays had origin stories in the actions of the characters in the book of Genesis. Disregarding the chronology of the Bible in which the Israelites are commanded, in the midst of the Exodus story, to bring the Passover sacrifice, and then later, to observe the rest of the biblical holidays, Jubilees stakes the claim that individuals in the pre-Sinai days are the reason we later Jews keep the holidays. And here, the devil enters into the details.

In its rewriting of the beginning of the Binding of Isaac, “and it was, after these things, God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22:1), a seminal Patriarchal moment if there ever was one, the book of Jubilees has the story play out this way:

And it came to pass in the seventh week [of years], in the first year thereof, in the first month in this jubilee, on the twelfth of this month, there were voices in heaven regarding Abraham, that he was faithful in all that He told him,

and that he loved the Lord, and that in every affliction he was faithful. And the prince Mastema (read: Satan) came and said before God, “Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son, and he delights in him above all things else; bid him offer him as a burnt-offering on the altar, and Thou wilt see if he will do this command, and Thou wilt know if he is faithful in everything wherein Thou dost try him.”

Through the ancient practice of copying and pasting, the author borrowed the story of Satan’s encouraging God to test Job, and inserted it into the heart-wrenching tale the trial of Abraham. As in the original, Abraham is stopped by an angel instructing him to stay his hand and not kill his son. Instead of Isaac, the ram of “stuck-in-the-thicket” fame ends up sacrificed. Presumably intrigued by the questions of what exactly the Bible was referring to when it said “And after these things (in Hebrew, *devarim*) God tested Abraham” (i.e. what *things?*) and why, exactly, God felt the need to test Abraham, Jubilees offers answers. In its creative recounting, it was the *devarim*, which can also mean “words,” of none other than Satan, who came to God and urged him to test his ever-faithful knight Abraham to see just how faithful the first Forefather really was. Kind of like in Job. And wouldn’t you know it, hundreds of years later, the Talmud has a similar retelling of the tale, also crediting Satan with suggested to God that he ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

This wasn’t the only pre-midrashic move the author utilized. He also gave us a date for God’s charging Abraham to bring his beloved son Isaac up on the altar. The actual biblical episode provides no date, but Jubilees informs us that it took place the twelfth day of the first month, which in that era was the month of Nisan (the current practice of considering Tishrei the beginning of the new year arose later). He did this to tie the story, ever so subtly, to another, similar biblical tale, the commandment the Israelites received, in the book of Exodus, to slaughter the paschal lamb and smear the blood on their doorposts. In that tale, a seemingly demonic figure makes an appearance. We read, in Exodus 12:21-23:

Moses then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning. For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home.”

Whoever, or whatever, the Destroyer was, credited with laying waste to the Egyptian firstborns, he seems to be under the employ of God. Jubilees, not surprisingly, says, in his retelling, that it was the “powers of Mastema” who were “let loose” upon the enslavers. (The Passover Haggadah, hundreds of years later, seems to have been so disturbed by the reference to a “Destroyer,” it assures us, repeatedly, that it was none other than God himself who had done the damage.)

Furthermore, Jubilees had noticed something when reading the Exodus story. He had seen this episode before. Here, in Egypt, there was the narrow avoidance of the death of the favored children (Exodus 4:22 has God instructing Moses to tell Pharaoh “Israel is my first-born son”) and the sacrifice, in place of said chosen son, of a lamb. There was the active presence of a divine emissary (in Jubilees’ eyes, in both instances, Mastema, the Satan-figure, playing the devilish role). And, fast forwarding a bit to the book of Deuteronomy 16:2, there was the commandment to bring the communal paschal sacrifice, once the Israelites entered the Promised Land, on “the place where the Lord will choose to establish His name.” This place, by all accounts, was Mt. Moriah, the site of both the Temple and the much earlier near-sacrifice of Isaac. Divine beings. The same mountain. The survival of the chosen child. And the non-survival of the poor ram/lamb. Shared elements in both the Binding of Isaac and the paschal sacrifice. Thus, in the book of Jubilees’ calendrical calculations, we have the date on which the Binding of Isaac took place. If God, in its account, came to

Abraham and tested him on the 12th of Nisan, and it was a three-day journey undertaken by Abraham and Isaac, as the actual Bible tells us, to Mt. Moriah, then when did the Akedah take place? It must be, this ancient author's retelling seeks to teach us, that the *original* Passover was none other than this earlier sacrificial scene, commemorated, throughout the centuries henceforth, on the 15th of Nisan. (Sure enough, hundreds of years later, a rabbinic midrashic collection connects the blood of the paschal lamb to the "blood" of the near-sacrifice of Isaac.)

Jubilees is a window into the intellectual history of biblical interpretation. Its preservation of ancient traditions that later appear in midrash, albeit in slightly (or more than slightly) different ways, is insightful, enlightening, and often entertaining. And this book, not included in the Hebrew Bible, though included in the now slightly dusty volumes I received six years ago, is actually not that far off, at least in this Passover-origin-story instance, from contemporary Jewish practice. Though the Haggadah (and certain journalists) might be skeptical of Satanic interference, the idea that members of the nation of Israel are willing to rise, early in the morning, to undertake immeasurable sacrifices for their faith, and are willing to stay up late into the night to enable redemption, resonates. Friday night, throughout the year, Jews around the world, upon returning home from synagogue, ask the accompanying angels "*barchuni le-shalom*," "bless me with peace." And through folk customs and prayers, we seek to avoid the demonic interference of the "evil eye." So, it seems, we are not too different than the world of ancient Israel that produced the book of Jubilees. And that is ok.

Though Jubilees never did make it into the Bible, maybe it's time to restore Satan to the seder. Or at the very least, remind ourselves that on the night that commemorates God's passing over, in protection, of the houses of Israel, the night the Destroyer didn't harm us, it was because God asked us to be willing to sacrifice for Him. And we listened. And we were redeemed.

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern is Senior Adviser to the Provost of Yeshiva University and Senior Program Officer of Y.U.'s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought. His edited books include the recently released *Esther in America*, the first full-length treatment of the Megillah's interpretation in and impact on the United States, as well as *Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth* and *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States*.

#PASSOVER READ