

The Book of Jubilees as Total History and the Struggle for the Future of Israel

Introduction

In his book *Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire*, Paul Kosmin argues the unique technologies of time introduced by the Seleucids made way for new ways of thinking about time among their subject populations.¹ The closing off of the Seleucid era from all that had come before and the institution of a rolling year count eventually prompted the writing of what Kosmin calls “total histories.” These histories sometimes attempted to make sense of all that preceded the Seleucid Empire from the now externalized position of Seleucid time.² Others attempted to comprehend the Seleucid era by framing it as a mere episode in the full scope of a divinely guided history.³ Kosmin leaves Jubilees out of his discussion because it does not fit neatly within either classification. But Jubilees creates a third kind of total history by appropriating the Seleucid rolling year count and projecting it over the entirety of history from the creation of the world through Israel’s sacred past and up to the new creation at history’s end. In order to argue this point, I will begin with an extended summary of how Seleucid time functioned, drawing heavily on Kosmin’s work, before turning to examine how the Book of Jubilees adopted and reappropriated the Seleucid rolling year count.

Seleucid Time

The founders of the Seleucid empire introduced the first rolling year count.⁴ Instead of counting time by regnal years and starting over with the death of Seleucus I and the enthronement of Antiochus I, they simply kept the era count going. The first year of Antiochus I’s rule was not year 1 of his reign, but year 30 of the Seleucid Era.⁵

¹ Paul Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

² Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 105–136.

³ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 137–186.

⁴ Johannes Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia: Dialogues in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 128.

⁵ For Antiochus I’s possible role in crafting this era count, see Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 27–28.

The Seleucids thus introduced a new chronologic technology into the world, a new way of relating to both the past and future.

The fixing of the era's first year provided a simple and idealized beginning to the empire which, in reality, was the product of a complicated struggle. Eighteen years passed between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE and the formal coronation of Seleucus I in Babylon in 305 BCE. However, Seleucus chose not to begin his era count here, but 6 years earlier. Seleucus had been expelled from Babylon by one of his military competitors "for Asia, Antigonos Monophthalmus. Seleucus returned to Babylon five years later, in 311 BCE, to assume the generalship of Asia, technically still under the auspices of the king of Macedon. However, upon his coronation, Seleucus chose to retroject his era count to this moment, his return to Babylon, which also coincided with the *akitu* festival celebrating the Babylonian new year. Seleucus intentionally drew upon the symbolic capital of the festival itself.⁶ The festival involved a ritualized departure and return of the Babylonian gods, a re-founding of the city, invoking Marduk's own overcoming of Tiamat and creation of the world. The festival had always effected an identification between Marduk and the reigning Babylonian king. Seleucus simply stepped into this role.⁷

Significantly, Marduk's overcoming of Tiamat was also the moment of his establishment of time. It was this moment that he ordered the times and seasons, the beginning of the world as it could be marked off by time as the Babylonians knew it. So also, the return of Seleucus I to Babylon to "re-found" the city was the moment of his empire's beginning. It marked a moment of historical closure from the past. The Seleucids would not acknowledge their heritage from the empires that had come before it, neither its Persian roots in Asia nor its Argead roots from Alexander the Great. The

⁶ For Seleucid participation in the ritual in the context of that of other foreign kings, see Stefan Pfeiffer and Hilmar Klinkott, "Legitimizing the Foreign King in the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires: The Role of Local Elites and Priests," in *Comparing The Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires: Integration, Communication, and Resistance*, eds. Christelle Fischer-Bovet and Sitta von Reden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 252–255.

⁷ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 26–35.

beginning of the empire was, in the memory of the Seleucids and their subject peoples, the beginning of history itself.⁸

By replacing regnal year counts with a rolling year count, the Seleucids imbued time with a novel sense of linearity. Regnal year counts are, by their nature, cyclical. The reign of each king forms its own microcosm of time. The death and accession of each king marks a moment of rupture and rebirth for the kingdom. The rolling year count meant there was no turning the clock backwards, erasing past events and ritually enacting this rebirth. Time would simply roll onwards. This had a formative effect on how the Seleucids interacted with its own imperial past and future. The past began at Babylon, at the founding of the empire. It also formed the ideal against which the empire was always called to compare itself. The expressed land claims of Seleucus I, even if they did not align with the actual holdings of the Seleucids at this time, formed the high-water mark against which the empire would be measured each successive year.⁹

The Seleucid Era count also opened the way for a new relationship with the future. The future could now be comprehended within the same dating system utilized in the Seleucid present. Future time could now be measured in the same way as the past. Ten years from this moment now had a particular date in the same way as ten years in the past and this created the sense that history was moving unstoppably towards these years. Comprehending the future as well as the past into a unitary dating system bound history together into a system of linear forward movement. Kosmin puts it succinctly: “The regularized directionality of the Seleucid Era gave future time the same texture as the present and recent past, accessing a previously unreached chronographic extension.”¹⁰ The goal of this movement was not abstract. All of history was united into a single imperial mission—the maintenance of the original glories of the beginning, of the empire as Seleucus I was imagined to have held it.¹¹

⁸ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 31–35.

⁹ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 84–92

¹⁰ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, p. 25.

¹¹ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. pp. 84–92.

Within this system, the Seleucids could not hope for a rebirth or new beginning to solve problems of decline. Kosmin cobbles together the fragmentary evidence concerning how the Seleucids did conceptualize decline, as a merely temporary aberration caused by the distraction of the king. This may have had spatial implications as the Seleucids might have understood the physical presence of the king to safeguard imperial holdings against unrest and revolution. But the idealized beginning stood over the Seleucids as a constant imperative for later rulers, a perpetual measure of whether or not the empire was in good shape. The sense of decline could not be erased by the accession of a new ruler. It could only be overcome by the gradual successes of the Seleucid kings who were to provide continuity to the royal mission through their rule and reconquest. Seleucid time required rulers to measure their rule against the beginning. If they fell short, they needed to turn their attention back to those neglected parts of the empire and reclaim them. This imperative was taken up most seriously by Antiochus III around the turn of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE who succeeded in conquering basically the entirety of the land claimed by Seleucus I, realizing in actuality what Seleucus I was only imagined to have done in the past.

The Seleucid Era count was also not confined to the royal house as a private or abstracted dating system. Seleucid time was itself a method of imperial incorporation. As Kosmin argues, it came to function “as a synecdoche of the empire, its claims, and its demands.”¹² Subject populations, including those of the Jews after 200 BCE, encountered this dating system at every level of Seleucid bureaucracy.¹³ To live according to Seleucid time was to live under Seleucid rule and vice-versa. The fact of this is made even more clear by the various formulations of time by which indigenous populations sought to counteract Seleucid time and thus assert their autonomy from Seleucid rule. One such formulation among local populations was the crafting of what Kosmin has called “total histories.”¹⁴ But these total histories sought to displace

¹² Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, p. 49.

¹³ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 45–76.

¹⁴ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 105–186.

Seleucid time through, in some sense, affirming its reality in the present. I am thinking specifically of the periodizing schemata of Daniel's dream visions.

In the dream visions of Daniel 2 and Daniel 7, the sense of rupture the Seleucids created with the past is affirmed. They were creating a new beginning by taking over the rule of the whole world. Daniel's contention is simply that this does not tell the whole story. The visions question the absoluteness of the Seleucid beginning by contextualizing it within a longer succession of empires that made similar claims to world domination. It is only by affirming this that Daniel can declare that there will likewise be an end to this Seleucid kingdom, an end brought about by its destruction and displacement by the ultimately more expansive kingdom of Israel's God.¹⁵ Seleucid time is here now. God's time will arrive with the immanent reassertion of his rule over Israel and over the world.

The Book of Jubilees does not adopt this strategy. It does not seek to periodize the rule of the Seleucids in the same way or to relativize Seleucid time by positing its eventual closure and replacement by another chronological regime. Jubilees poses a unique response to Seleucid time that is nevertheless modeled on Seleucid chronological technology. Jubilees introduces its own rolling year count to counter that of the Seleucids.

Jubilees' Unique Response: An Adversarial Rolling Year Count

In the Book of Jubilees, time unfolds in successive jubilee periods, stretches of 49 years, and runs unhindered from the creation to the new creation. This chronological system is a sacred institution which Israel's God wove into the fabric of the cosmic order. The fixing of sacred time at the creation allows the chronological system to perform similar roles to that of Seleucid time. It functions as a "synecdoche" for God's rule over all things. To live in accordance with sacred time is to live under his rule. To live out of step with sacred time is a direct affront to God's claims over the creation. It

¹⁵ Dan 2:43–45; 7:26–27.

also creates a similar sense of closure at the front end of the rolling era count. The institution of sacred time was quite literally the beginning of history.

At the end of the first week, recorded in Jubilees 2, God institutes the sabbath as the first marker of sacred time. God rests on, and therefore consecrates, the seventh day. This rhythm of seven days becomes the basic building block for the larger units of time, the festival cycles, the weeks of years, and the jubilees themselves.¹⁶ It is also disclosed at this point that God bestows the privilege of observing these sacred rhythms with the highest orders of angels, the angels of the presence and the angels of holiness. Notably, they are said to observe sabbath both in heaven and on earth (Jub 2:18). This provides sacred time with a certain robust quality. The basic unit of sacred time will continue to be observed even on earth regardless of human actions moving forward. God retains a claim on the earth and sacred time continues to roll forward even as these things are challenged by sinful humanity. However, God also announces in the celebration of the first sabbath his intention to share the privilege of sacred time-keeping with Israel (2:19–22). God's chronological empire would reach its height only when sacred time was disclosed and kept by Israel. God's announcement of his intention at the creation sets the high-water mark against which all subsequent history would be measured.

God does not, in fact, disclose the sabbath to Israel until Sinai, more than 49 jubilee periods after the creation of the world and the disclosure of the time of the jubilee would only occur 40 years after Sinai (Jub 50:2). The entirety of the first jubilee of jubilees might therefore be understood as the gradual fulfillment of God stated purpose of disclosing the system of sacred time to Israel and positioning them to play their privileged role at the beginning of the 50th jubilee period. But Jubilees also looks outside of its own narrative boundaries to the time beyond this disclosure at Sinai. Israel would go on to have a troubled relationship with sacred time, often neglecting it and thus also hindering the success of God's intention stated at the creation.¹⁷ But the book ultimately

¹⁶ Lutz Doering, "The Concept of Sabbath in the Book of Jubilees," in *Studies in the Book of Jubilees*, eds. Matthias Albani, Jörg Frey, and Armin Lange, *Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 65 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), p. 201.

¹⁷ See for example Jub. 1:14; 6:32–38.

looks forward to the triumph of God's purpose for Israel, their successful keeping of time leading to the arrival of the new creation. All of time between creation and new creation in the Book of Jubilees is therefore united by the divine mission of establishing sacred time, disclosing it to Israel, and ensuring that Israel keeps it properly.¹⁸

Israel would struggle mightily to do this, not least because of those who would try to assert another calendar based on observations of the moon in Jubilees chapter 6.¹⁹ This was a direct swipe at the lunisolar calendar used and imposed by the Seleucids. It's not coincidental that sinful lunar observations are associated in chapters 8 and 11 with Chaldean wisdom as the Seleucids had adopted their calendar from the Babylonians.²⁰ Utilizing such a calendar would cause Israel to observe their sacred feasts on the wrong days. This was tantamount to celebrating the feasts of the gentiles in 6:35 and would lead to Israel becoming subject to the evil spirits who ruled over the gentiles.²¹ But not even this could interrupt the forward movement of sacred time. Jubilees does not grant Seleucid time the legitimacy that Daniel does. As is affirmed in the prologue of the book and reaffirmed throughout, all of the events of history between the creation and the new creation were written on the heavenly tablets and dated according to their respective jubilee periods.²² This means that everything, even Israel's disobedience and decline, occurs within sacred time.

¹⁸ Doering ("The Concept of Sabbath in the Book of Jubilees," p. 188) notes the relationship between the establishment of the Sabbath at the creation and the disclosure of the sabbath to Israel, writing, "If the sabbath is anchored in creation, what is, then, the *characteristic feature of the Sinaitic revelation* with regard to the sabbath commandment? It may be determined in the fact that with the Sinaitic revelation there is a *noetic* correspondence to the *ontic* establishment of the sabbath keeping community of God, higher angels, and Israel on the sabbath of creation: Now, all of Israel know of the sabbath commandment and of this day being celebrated together with the heavenly world."

¹⁹ 6:32–38.

²⁰ Kosmin mentions that the Seleucid calendar was also sometimes called "the Era of the Astronomers of Babylon" (*Time and its Adversaries*, p. 21).

²¹ See Jub. 1:9.

²² 1:26, 29; the writings shown to Jacob in Jub. 32:16–26 might also be relevant here. Even if Nati's suggestion ("What Did Jacob Read at Bethel?: Scrolls and Scripture in Jubilees 32:21–26," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 15.1 [2023]: pp. 98–119) is correct and these should be understood as parchment scrolls rather than the heavenly tablets, they still represent a heavenly archiving of future events according to the dating system that stretches across all time, past, present, and future.

Jubilees did not understand Israel's frequent disobedience as an interruption of sacred time. The book frames it rather as forgetfulness.²³ God announces this as the fountain of Israel's woes in the opening chapter: "They will forget all my laws, all my commandments, and all my verdicts. They will forget beginning of the month, Sabbath, festival, jubilee, and covenant" (1.14).²⁴ For the Seleucids, decline was caused by a lapse of attention. In Jubilees, it is a lapse of memory. But in both cases, the impetus to turn the tide back towards the success of the chronological mission in the future falls squarely on those who were guilty of such a lapse. But this would not require a rupture in the present and the institution of a new chronological regime. The jubilees continued to roll on, even if unobserved by forgetful Israel. They would simply pass Israel by until Israel purified itself and began to observe them properly again (50:2).

The Book of Jubilees itself, functioning as testimony, rendered the remembrance of God's disclosure of sacred time continuously present to Israel.²⁵ This is why the book does not depict restoration as a sudden return of God or the triumphal accession of a new ruler. Restoration begins when the people turn back to God with their whole heart in chapter 1 or when Israelite children begin to study the laws again in chapter 23. In remembering God's laws, Israel can realign itself with sacred time, beginning to turn history slowly, gradually, back towards the success of God's chronological mission. Like Antiochus III's program of reconquering ancestral lands, this would not happen all at once. But the remembering was the first and most essential step that guaranteed the success of the rest. The realignment of Israel with sacred time would progressively push creation back to its uncorrupted state from before the flood. Human lifetimes would grow gradually longer (23:26–29). The nations who obeyed demonic knowledge would be conquered and the evil spirits would be expelled from the earth altogether (50:5). There would no longer be those who observed the moon and the stars as signs for the

²³ Jub. 1:14; 6:32–38.

²⁴ All direct quotations are from Vanderkam unless stated otherwise.

²⁵ Jub. 6:23, 32 explicitly connect the festival days with the testimony. Even as Israel transgressed, the testimony of Noah preserved in Jubilees itself called Israel to repentance and a resumption of proper observance of the holy days.

patterns of the year, leading to the renewal of the luminaries, allowing them to play a healing role for Israel, just as they was meant to bring about well-being to the earth's creatures from the beginning (1:29; 2:10; 19:25). In contrast with Daniel, restoration for Jubilees would not require the displacement of one chronological regime with another. Rather, "new creation" would mark the final triumph of sacred time as Israel fully and finally appropriated it. It would be Israel's proper observance of sacred time (as well as God's commendments more generally) that would bring about the new creation.²⁶

Jubilees and Competition among Jewish Elites

Reading Jubilees in this way gives us some clues as to the circumstances of Jubilees' composition. The Macedonian kings after Alexander relied heavily upon local rulers and priests to broker power between themselves and subject populations and this was even more true in the wake of Antiochus III's conquest of Phoenicia and Coele Syria. The empire was held together by relationships of negotiated interests between the emperor at the center and local elites on the peripheries. But the question of *which* elites would best represent the emperor's interests to the people, and the people's interests to the emperor, was not straightforward. Local elites jockeyed for position at various times as they sought to be the ones who shaped the imperial relationships between the Seleucids and their own populations. They competed for the support of the emperor and the support of the local populations.²⁷ Usually, this competitive enterprise is mostly hidden from our eyes. The local leaders who prevailed controlled communications with the monarch and silenced the dissent of other local leaders and groups. However, we are occasionally allowed a peek behind the curtain as with the conflict between Onias III and Jason.²⁸

²⁶ This gradual restoration brought about by Israel's repentance is noted by Todd R. Hanneken, *The Subversion of the Apocalypses in the Book of Jubilees*, Early Judaism and its Literature 34 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), pp. 172–173.

²⁷ For a good overview of how these relationships worked in the Seleucid Empire, see Boris Chrubasik, "Sanctuaries, Priest-Dynasts and the Seleukid Empire," in *Times of Transition: Judea in the Early Hellenistic Period*, eds. Sylvie Honigman, Christophe Nihan, and Oded Lipschits (Eisenbrauns, 2021), pp. 161–176.

²⁸ Chrubasik, "Sanctuaries, Priest-Dynasts and the Seleukid Empire," p. 164. For "Greekness" as a tool of differentiation utilized by Jason and the priests of Uzunçaburc in Rough Kilikia, see Boris Chrubasik, "From Pre-Makkabaeon Judaea to Hekatomnid Karia and Back Again," in *Hellenism and the Local*

I contend rather that Jubilees offers us one such window into the squabbles among local elites during the 150's BCE. The competition for the high priesthood between Onias III and Jason had precipitated the Maccabean revolt. Dissatisfaction with Antiochus IV's management of Judaeian affairs had almost certainly played a role in the outbreak of the war and his attempt to exercise more control over Jewish ancestral customs hardly lowered the temperature. It was clear that the relationship between the Jews and their Seleucid overlords would need to be renegotiated. But on whose terms? And what shape would the relationship take after the conflict was over? Various elites appear to have competed to set themselves apart as the ones who would impose their own vision. The Hasmoneans were obviously among the competitors and they were ultimately triumphant with Jonathan receiving the high priesthood from Alexander Balas in 152 BCE. By their own admission, the Hasmoneans did not immediately bring Seleucid imperial time to an end. Simon would only proclaim an end to the Seleucid Era's hegemony over the Jews in 142 BCE with the reassertion of Simon's own regnal count, minting coins to broadcast year 1 of his own reign.²⁹ But it is perhaps telling that even in the Hasmonean court literature postdating the beginning of Simon's rule, 1 & 2 Maccabees, the authors continue to utilize the Seleucid Era dating system, the lunisolar calendar, and continue to draw on the social capital of the relationships between the victorious Hasmoneans and the Seleucid monarchs.³⁰

But other elites struggled with the Hasmoneans for the leadership of Judea, leaving scant textual traces of themselves, sometimes even in Hasmonean court literature itself, such as the ἄνδρες λοιμοί in 1 Macc 10:61. The textual production of these groups themselves also seems to have played a role in this renegotiation. Rotem Aveni Meir has recently made a case for the book of Daniel as a work written "toward the local court" in the

Communities of the Eastern Mediterranean: 400 BCE–250 CE, eds. Boris Chrubasik and Daniel King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁹ Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries*, pp. 94–97.

³⁰ For the ongoing value of the Seleucids to the Hasmoneans, see Chrubasik, "Sanctuaries, Priest-Dynasts and the Seleukid Empire," pp. 161–164.

effort to shape these relationships in this time of flux.³¹ As noted above, Daniel seems to advocate for a more radical break with the Seleucid temporal regime, envisioning an end to the Seleucid Era with the immanent death of Antiochus IV (Dan 7:26–27). It is difficult to imagine the author(s) of Daniel would have been pleased with the Hasmonean compromises.

It is into this literary fray that the author of Jubilees entered. It is not correct, then, to argue, as Jonathan Kaplan recently has, that Jubilees was written to support “the efforts towards Judean independence undertaken in the early years of the Hasmonean dynasty.”³² This is falsely to collapse all Judeans into a single anti-Seleucid group. James Vanderkam seems closer to the mark in placing Jubilees in a dispute between conservative and progressive priests in response to a Seleucid attempt to conform the Jewish ritual calendar to the that of the Seleucids, although the finer details of his reconstruction are more difficult to confirm.³³ It is clear, however, that the author took issue with those who would flout the Jewish solar calendar in favor of the Babylonian lunisolar calendar championed by the Seleucids, the calendar eventually adopted by the Hasmoneans themselves. In rejecting this calendar and crafting an alternative temporal system, the author of Jubilees advocated for a more radical break from the Seleucids than the Hasmoneans would later enact. I would submit, therefore, that the Book of Jubilees serves as a unique window into the disagreements among Jewish elites as to how they would position themselves, and how they would shape their own institutions, in relation to the Seleucids in the years of conflict following the Maccabean revolt. The writing posed solutions that were ultimately rejected by the Hasmoneans who ultimately emerged from this intra-nicene conflict victorious with the appointment of Jonathan as the high priest around 150 BCE. The solutions posed by the book of Jubilees were taken up and reformulated rather by people who were later marginalized from these central institutions, by the community at Qumran.

³¹ Rotem Aveni Meir, “The Emergence of the Hasmonean Dynasty on the Margins of the Seleukid Empire,” PhD Dissertation (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2023), p. 246.

³² Jonathan Kaplan, “The Chronography of Daniel 9 and Jubilees in the Shadow of the Seleucid Era,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 10.2 (May 2019): p. 132.

³³ James C. Vanderkam, “2 Maccabees 6,7a and Calendrical Change in Jerusalem,” in *From Revelation to Canon: Studies in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 62 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 126–127.

Conclusion

The Book of Jubilees represents a unique total history crafted in part to combat Seleucid time and its interference with Israel's traditional 364-day calendar. Rather than affirming Seleucid time and displacing it by the arrival of a new chronological regime, the Book of Jubilees posits a competing rolling year count with an earlier and more permanent beginning than that of the Seleucids. Jubilees further disarms Seleucid time as impotent to disrupt the onward march of the jubilee periods, even when Jews and Jewish institutions adopted it. Such disobedience was anticipated by God, written on the heavenly tablets, and even dated according to the jubilee in which it would occur. Israel's sin was merely a temporary aberration, a spell of amnesia that could itself be remedied by heeding the testimony preserved in Jubilees itself. The Book of Jubilees held out the possibility that Israel could, at any time, return to God and align itself with God's sacred time. This invective was aimed, not directly at a Seleucid audience, but represents debate internal to Jewish elites as to how they would shape their sacred and state institutions in relation to Seleucid imperial rule.