

# *Jubilees* and Hebrews 2:10–18: Passover and the defeat of the Devil

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## Chapter 3

*Jubilees* and Hebrews 2:10–18:

Passover and the Defeat of the Devil

David M. Moffitt

In Hebrews 2:10–18 the author continues to explain his puzzling claims in 1:4–14 and 2:5–9 about the elevation of the divine Son of God above the angels. There are real tensions in Hebrews 1 regarding the Son. On the one hand, the Son is the agent and sustainer of all of creation (esp. 1:2–3, 10–12). On the other hand, the Son has also been elevated above the angels. How can the Son, who existed before creation and through whom God created all things, have been elevated above the angels whom he created? When was the Son ever below the angels such that his status and position would change? These tensions find resolution in 2:5–18 where the author states that the heavenly Son of God became the incarnate human being, Jesus. As a human being the pre-existent, divine Son died, was perfected, and was elevated to the throne at his Father's right hand.

The author's argument in Hebrews 2 partly relies on his reading of Psalm 8 (Heb. 2:5–9). This psalm indicates that while human beings presently stand a little lower than the angels, God always intended to place the angels under human authority. Thus, the divine Son was "made a little lower" than the angels by becoming a human being. This happened so that he could then be the "son of man" who would ultimately be exalted above all creation, including the angels. Jesus is the pre-existent Son of God who, as a human being, was made lower than the angels for a time but has now been elevated above them to the royal throne in the heavens. Thus, the

incarnation of the divine Son resolves the tension of Hebrews 1. As a human being, God's Son has been crowned with glory and exalted to the place of rule over all that he himself created.

Hebrews only further underlines the importance of the heavenly Son's incarnation in 2:10–18. The divine Son's humanity not only means that he is the “son of man” elevated to God's heavenly throne, it also means that he is able to make his fellow human beings holy (2:10–11). He does this by representing them before his Father as their incarnate high priest (2:12–13; 16–18), a theme the author develops much more robustly in 4:14–10:25.

Yet, the Son's ongoing high-priestly work of intercession for his siblings (see esp. 7:25) is only one aspect of how he saves them. An additional part of his salvific work is highlighted in 2:14–15. Jesus has liberated his siblings from the power of one of the very angelic beings over whom he has now been exalted—the malevolent angel known as “the devil.”

Our author does not give any clear indication that he knows or is drawing from the Second Temple Jewish text known as *Jubilees*. Nevertheless, *Jubilees*' account of Moses' deliverance of Israel from Egypt in terms of the people's liberation from the malevolent angelic being known as Mastema, who is identified with Satan, offers some highly illuminating parallels to aspects of Hebrews' argument that help make sense of the author's claims about Jesus' defeat of the devil in 2:14–15.

*Jubilees*—“All the powers of Mastema had been let loose to slay all the first-born in the land of Egypt”

The book of *Jubilees* was likely composed sometime in the early- to mid-second century BC.<sup>1</sup> *Jubilees* consists of a rewriting of Genesis and the first part of Exodus. The book begins with Moses on Mount Sinai where an angel reveals to him the history of the world up to that point as it is written down on tablets in heaven. *Jubilees* then retells many of the stories found in Genesis from creation up to the events of Exodus 19–24. The name of the book comes from the fact that it divides the history it relates into 49-year periods or “jubilees” (a unit of time defined in Lev. 25).

*Mastema as Satan.* In *Jubilees* the main enemy of God and his people is Mastema, “the chief of the spirits” (10:8).<sup>2</sup> He is a malevolent angelic being explicitly identified as “the Satan” in *Jubilees* 10:11.<sup>3</sup> These very verses also make it clear that God allows Mastema to command a host of other evil spirits. Mastema, in other words, is the powerful evil angel known in biblical texts as Satan. He is the accusing spirit who seeks to lead humanity to destruction and to test and tempt God’s people. He also holds sway over a host of demons, other malevolent angels who have rebelled against God. There are even clear parallels in *Jubilees* between Mastema and Satan in Job (see esp. Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6). *Jubilees* says that Mastema sought to test Abraham by having him offer Isaac. Mastema, like Satan in Job, went before God in heaven and said, “Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son, and he delights in him above everything else; ask him to offer Isaac as a burnt-offering on the altar, and you will see if he will do this command, and you will know if he is faithful in everything in which you test him” (*Jub.* 17:16).

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent introduction to and survey of *Jubilees*, see esp. James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, GAP (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001). More detailed discussion can be found in James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary*, 2 vols., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> All citations of *Jubilees* are taken and/or modified from the translation of R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English: With Introductions and Critical and Explanatory Notes to the Several Books* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913).

<sup>3</sup> This malevolent being shows up in the Qumran scrolls sometimes called Belial and is likely to be identified with the angel of darkness (see, e.g., 1QS 3–4). For further information see Michael Mach, “Demons,” *EDSS* 1:189–92; and, J.W. van Henten, “Mastemah,” *DDD* 1033–35.

*Moses' Defeat of Mastema.* *Jubilees* 48–49 retell the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt at the first Passover. These chapters focus on aspects of Exodus 2, 4, and 7–14. Mastema initially attempts to thwart Israel's liberation from Egypt by trying to kill Moses when he returned to Egypt from Midian. The angel speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai reminds him that Mastema sought "with all his power . . . to slay you and deliver the Egyptians out of your hand when he saw that you were sent to execute judgment and vengeance on the Egyptians" (*Jub.* 48:3). When Mastema's first attempt to prevent the exodus failed, he and his minions sought other means to keep Israel enslaved. *Jubilees* explains that these evil spirits were at work in the actions of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. It was Mastema who "helped the Egyptian sorcerers" perform signs and wonders like Moses performed (48:9). After Moses led the people out of Egypt, it was Mastema who "hardened the Egyptians' hearts and made them stubborn" so that they pursued the fleeing Israelites (48:17). *Jubilees* also states that as the people of Israel "were eating the Passover in Egypt . . . all the powers of Mastema had been let loose to slay all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the captive maidservant in the mill, and to the cattle" (49:2). Mastema's forces were, however, prevented from entering any "house on the doorframes of which they saw the blood of a lamb" having to "pass by (it), so that all those that were in the house should be saved because the sign of the blood was on its doorframes" (49:3).

*Jubilees'* identification both of Mastema as the evil power at work within Pharaoh and the Egyptians and of Mastema's demonic minions as the agents who struck down the firstborn during the night of the first Passover are remarkable when compared with the account in Exodus itself. In Exodus, the Lord is the one who both hardens Pharaoh's heart (e.g., Exod. 14:4) and who strikes down the firstborn when Pharaoh refuses to let the people go (e.g., Exod. 12:12,

29). There is, however, one important exception to this last point. Exodus 12:23 explains that the Lord did not permit “the destroyer” to enter houses with blood on their doorframes. This verse suggests not the Lord but some other agent, the destroyer, struck down the firstborn at Passover. *Jubilees* has seized upon this verse and, together with a number of other interpretive moves and traditions, identified “the destroyer” with Mastema and his demonic hosts. This means that in *Jubilees* the exodus is far more than a showdown between Pharaoh and Moses, who is backed by Israel’s God. By identifying Mastema, whom *Jubilees* also refers to as an “evil destroyer” (cf. *Jub.* 23:29), in play behind the scenes, *Jubilees* has recast the story of Israel’s exodus in terms of a larger battle between Israel’s God and Moses, on one side, and Satan who seeks to accuse and destroy Israel itself and Pharaoh on the other. Moses’ liberation of Israel was, in other words, as much a kind of defeat of Mastema, the destroyer, as it was a freeing of the people from Egyptian enslavement.

*Jubilees* does not imagine Mastema as a fully independent agent of evil doing whatever he pleases to foil and hinder God’s purposes. Clearly Mastema seeks to keep Israel in slavery. Clearly, too, he does harden Pharaoh’s heart and impel the Egyptians to pursue Israel after they were liberated. As in Exodus, however, this was all part of the Lord’s plan. Thus *Jubilees* says, Mastema’s actions were “the device . . . devised by the Lord our God that he might smite the Egyptians and cast them into the sea” (*Jub.* 48:17). Nevertheless, and this is significant for reading Hebrews 2:14–15, *Jubilees* demonstrates the existence of a Jewish interpretive tradition that understood the exodus to be as much about the liberation of God’s people from the power of Mastema, the satanic “destroyer,” as it was about being freed from Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

*Hebrews 2:10-18*—“By his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death”

*The Destroyer as the Devil.* Hebrews only explicitly refers to the first Passover once. In Hebrews 11:28 the author speaks of Moses faithfully keeping “the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.” Yet, Hebrews’ reference to “the destroyer” of Exodus 12:23 as the agent who struck down the firstborn at the first Passover is telling. In the light of *Jubilees* (together with a number of other texts and Jewish traditions about Satan and the angel of death), it appears that Hebrews envisions the first Passover in terms of Moses’ liberation of Israel from the malevolent angel who killed the firstborn. This evil spirit who seeks to enslave and destroy humanity is, moreover, the evil angel whom Jesus fully defeated—the devil.

*Jesus’ Defeat of the Devil.* Hebrews 2:14–15 reads, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” That Jesus’ defeat of the devil here recalls Moses’ liberation of God’s people at the first Passover from “the destroyer,” the malevolent angelic figure *Jubilees* calls Mastema, can be seen from the fact that Hebrews’ opening chapters draw heavily on the larger exodus narrative. Hebrews connects Jesus’ defeat of the devil with liberation from enslavement to the fear of death (2:15). The themes of liberation from enslavement are redolent of Passover and exodus. Moreover, the author’s allusion to the giving of the law at Sinai through angels (2:2) and reference to God performing “signs and wonders” (2:4) among them has already pointed readers to the larger Exodus narrative. The fact that the writer moves on in Hebrews 3–4 to speak about Moses (3:2–6), the one who led God’s people out of Egypt, and to compare readers to Israel in the wilderness (3:7–4:11), the very place Israel was after being freed from

Egypt, all support the conclusion that the author of Hebrews intentionally works with the story of the exodus and the liberation of God's people from enslavement when he speaks about Jesus' defeat of the devil and liberation of his siblings from the enslaving fear of the power of death.

Moses faced off against "the destroyer" when he performed the first Passover and led God's people safely out of bondage in Egypt (Heb 11:28). *Jubilees* offers a vivid account of this liberation in terms of a spiritual battle, clearly indicating that some Jews understood "the destroyer" of Exodus 12:23 to be the devil and his demons. Hebrews plays on this tradition of the devil as the true enslaver to show that when Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, died and rose again, the ultimate Passover and liberation of God's people occurred. God's Son, who took upon himself the blood and flesh of Abraham's seed (2:16), performed the Passover and exodus *par excellence* when, by means of his death and resurrection, he finally and fully liberated his siblings from the power of their age-old enemy. By his death and resurrection, he has defeated the devil himself. Now, as the exalted human being "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9), Jesus rules even over the angels who must worship him. Satan, the great tempter and accuser of God's people, has been defeated and put in his proper place.

#### For Further Reading

##### *Additional Ancient Texts*

The story of the exodus in Exodus 7–14 forms part of the foundational narrative Hebrews uses. For other texts that speak about "the destroyer" in the broad context of the exodus and wilderness period see Wisdom 17–18 (esp. 18:25) and 1 Corinthians 10:10. For good information on this figure in Rabbinic literature see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:537–38, esp. n. 216.



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