Saulnier, Stéphane

Calendrical Variations in Second Temple Judaism: New Perspectives on the ‘Date of the Last Supper’ Debate

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The study attempts to identify new calendrical issues during the period of late Second Temple Judaism. It is the author’s dissertation (“somewhat revised,” xi) from Canterbury Christ Church University (U.K.), focusing on a subfield in biblical studies that was catapulted into its own interdisciplinary genre due to the ground-breaking work of Annie Jaubert.

It was she who put forward the proposal in the early 1950s that the difference between the date of the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John was that the narratives in the Synoptics used a liturgical calendar based on the Book of Jubilees. Her ideas were supported when it was revealed that the then-unpublished calendars of the priestly courses in the Dead Sea Scrolls contained such a calendar. Saulnier’s exploration of early Jewish calendars takes Jaubert’s research and the subsequent scholarly discourse that it engendered as the intellectual springboard for his investigation.

It needs to be stated at the outset that the second part of the book’s title requires some clarification, as this is not a study that engages with the chronological theories on the date of the Last Supper. The research is not concerned with whether the Last Supper occurred
in 30 C.E., 33 C.E., or any other hypothesis connected with an actual possible date. Readers interested in that topic will find that this work goes in a different direction.

The “enquiry,” as Saulnier refers to his work, is divided into three parts preceded by an informative fifteen-page introduction that details the history of scholarship behind Jaubert’s theory. Her research question was why, according to the Synoptics, the Last Supper was held on Tuesday night and in the Fourth Gospel the final meal of Jesus and his disciples took place on Thursday night. The introduction discusses the literary background to the problem of whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Saulnier further explains that the hypothesis that the Last Supper narratives in the Synoptics and John were structured on two completely different calendars did not originate with Jaubert; the idea was put forward by F. Prat in 1947 (14). It was Jaubert who claimed that the Synoptics used a 364-day calendar that she identified as the calendar from the Book of Jubilees (14–15). Saulnier states that some fifty years (actually, sixty years now) since the publication of Jaubert’s theory, his work “lays the foundations for its comprehensive timely re-assessment” (15).

Part 1 usefully outlines the variant chronologies of the Last Supper (38–44) and describes the Jubilees calendar of Jaubert’s theory and its subsequent reception—both positive and negative—in the following decades. The 364-day calendar identified by Jaubert based on the Book of Jubilees (Jub. 23–38) includes the days of the week. In her paradigm, the year begins on Wednesday, echoing the fourth day of creation, and the festivals occur on Wednesday, Sunday, and Friday, the days that, according to Jaubert, the patriarchs traveled in the Jubilees narratives. Jaubert’s theory was fortunately confirmed early on after J. T. Milik communicated to her that the Qumran fragments from Cave 4 contained such a calendrical scheme, with the festivals falling on the particular days of the week as she had described (25–31).

Jaubert’s ideas have been reassessed many times over the decades by different scholars, and these are placed in context in an in-depth historical and literary review of the subject (19–63). Saulnier claims that Jaubert’s theory has not received widespread acceptance because the 364-day calendar cannot work in practice without intercalation (that is, a correction to the year by adding leap days to stay in line with the 365-day solar year) (63). Without a correction, the 364-day year slips back against the solar year and the agricultural cycle does not coincide with the Jewish festivals. These are seasonally based; for example, there must be lambs to be slaughtered on the 14th day of the first month, for

1. Her first article was “Le calendrier des Jubilés et de la secte de Qumrân: Ses origins bibliques,” VT 3 (1953): 250–64.
Passover. Various theories of how the 364-day calendar may have been intercalated have been a major plank of Qumran and Jubilees calendar scholarship (47–50).

In part 2 Saulnier sets out to prove that the 364-day Jubilees calendar was intercalated and, therefore, that the Last Supper could have been a Passover meal. This section delineates and discusses the cycle of the festivals in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Jubilees, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other primary source material from antiquity, including Elephantine, Josephus, Philo, and the Bar Kokhba letters (67–159). It argues that there is no evidence to show that the 364-day calendar was not intercalated, since it is clear that the festivals in all these texts were synchronized with the seasons. The centrepiece of this section is the author’s highlighting of the Second Passover in Num 9:1–14, a festival that does not exist in Exodus and is apparently excised in Jub. 49:1–14 (95–106), but which does appear in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in 4Q321 (121). Saulnier does not think that the Second Passover is recorded in the Temple Scroll precisely because it is not linked to the seasons (137). He suggests that the problem for the author of Jubilees was that the celebration of the Second Passover meant that the festival would not be celebrated in its proper time. If the 364-day calendar were not fixed to the liturgical cycle by the biblical festivals occurring in their assigned seasons, Saulnier argues, then there would be no need for Jubilees to take such a firm stance on the matter. Therefore, he surmises, intercalation must have taken place.

In the third part of the monograph, Saulnier produces revisions of existing calendrical theories. He agrees with Milik that the Qumran Astronomical Book possibly dated to the fifth century B.C.E., considers M. Chuytin’s suggestion that the month in the 364-day calendar can be traced back to second millennium B.C.E. Egypt, and appears to accept W. Horowitz’s theory that the 364-day year of early Judaism can be identified in the tenth–seventh century B.C.E. Babylonian astronomical and astrological treatise MUL.APIN.

Saulnier then suggests that there are two kinds of reckoning of the lunar calendar in 1 En. 73 and 74. He argues that the lunar month in 1 En. 73 is reckoned from the appearance of the first crescent of the moon and that the lunar month of 1 En. 74 begins with the full moon. Therefore, a puzzling textual variant between different Ethiopic manuscripts at 1 En. 74:14 may be solved by his theory that one lunar calendar runs sixteen days behind the other (the time difference between the first crescent and the full moon, in some months) (163–203).

Part 3 continues with Saulnier’s revision of a theory by J. Ben-Dov and W. Horowitz that the lunar calendar component of the 364-day calendars of the priestly courses at Qumran coincides with particular early Babylonian mathematical calculations: that is, the time intervals between the rising and setting of the sun and the moon at different points in the
lunar cycle. The preexisting theory claims that the Qumran liturgical month began when the thin crescent of the waning moon is last seen before sunrise. Saulnier stays with the basic hypothesis that the month in these Qumran texts begins when the moon is last seen, but he argues that the month commences when last lunar crescent is seen in daylight, not before sunrise. His monograph concludes that his enquiry proves that the calendar was centrally important to the observance of seasonally fixed festivals in Second Temple Judaism and that two calendars—an intercalated 364-day year cycle in the Synoptics and a luni-solar calendar in the Fourth Gospel—underlay the different chronologies of the Last Supper, as Jaubert had argued (205–26, 239–45).

Saulnier’s writing style is flowing and easy to read, aside from a very occasional awkward sentence (most of us publishing our dissertations will also plead guilty to that). The author’s overview of the theological and patristic scholarly background that informed Jaubert’s hypothesis is informative, as is the valuable in-depth survey on Jaubert’s work. This section is probably the most comprehensive review of modern research in the “Date of the Last Supper” debate published in recent times. The discussion on the Second Passover in the second part of the book is engaging and stimulating; it does not matter whether one agrees with his hypothesis. It was enjoyable to read, and it is likely to stimulate a response. A small point, not a criticism, is that the analysis of the “joy” motif in the celebration of festivals and Passover in the Book of Jubilees and the Hebrew Bible (94–5) omits to mention the discourse on 4Q503 (4QDaily Prayers) col vii, line 13 to “the pilgrim festivals of joy and the appointed times of glory,” which is understood by some scholars to be a reference to Passover.

I found Saulnier’s theory on the different lunar reckonings in 1 En. 73 and 74 appealing, if rather labored (178–203); however, the Ethiopic Book of Luminaries is itself a specialist subject, and the author did not prove that these particular sections derived from the Qumran fragments, although there is some recent scholarly discussion as to whether the beginning of 1 En. 73 may have originally existed conceptually in some form at Qumran. Another problem is that the link here to the date of the Last Supper debate has not been made. Saulnier’s research on the early Babylonian astronomical techniques contained


3. Drawnel has reconstructed 4Q209 (Astronomical Enoch a) to include 1 En. 73:4–8, 6–7; for illustrative purposes, see H. Drawnel, The Aramaic Astronomical Book (4Q208-4Q211) from Qumran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 440–41, 446–47, also 39–64, 260–301; VanderKam expresses some reservations about Drawnel’s interpretations of the early section of ch. 73; see G. W. E. Nickelsburg and J. C. VanderKam, 1 Enoch 2: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch Chapters 37–82 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 438–39.
technical inaccuracies: KUR is a morning, not a night-time phenomenon (226); and ŠÛ is a morning-time period, not a night-time one (225). I have critiqued the earlier, original theory and Saulnier’s response to it elsewhere in detail. Neither analysis has mentioned or considered any possible influences from Hellenistic astronomy on the Qumran texts in question although a case may be made to that effect.

I am not convinced that there is a rejection of Jaubert’s thesis on the basis that one cannot prove whether the 364-day calendar was actually used. She herself questioned how the 364-day calendar could function in practice, as cited by Saulnier, and she stated that scholars are reduced to conjecture (23 and n. 18). Her importance in the field was to present a true, early Jewish calendrical model before the calendars of the priestly courses from Qumran had been published. This contributed to the idea that the Essenes, or the Dead Sea Scrolls, were linked to the embryonic Jesus movement. However, we now study these ancient Jewish calendars in their own right and within their own historical and cultural contexts. Perhaps that point could have been made more clearly.

Saulnier’s richly referenced book will appeal to anyone interested in the New Testament, scholarship on early Jewish calendars, and both of these together. It contains a detailed, valuable bibliographic review of early Christian material that is not usually read in the general field of Qumran calendars, and Saulnier asks thought-provoking questions on why Jewish festivals were listed in different ways. Finally, I am grateful to the author for referring to this pioneering thinker as Professor Jaubert, rather than as Mlle Jaubert, which to English scholars seems to be a less important title. Stéphane Saulnier has achieved his goal of calling for a timely reassessment of Jaubert’s contribution to the field of calendrical diversity in Second Temple Judaism, and he has continued that task.