Kalimi, Isaac

_The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles_


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Although this volume is based on Kalimi’s earlier contribution in Hebrew, it is not merely an English translation but rather a revision and expansion of that earlier work (The Book of Chronicles: Historical Writing and Literary Devices [Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2000]; cf. Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten: Literarisch-historiographische Abweichungen der Chronik von ihren Paralleltexen in den Samuel- und Königsbüchern [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995]). Kalimi’s main focus is “to identify and define the literary and historiographical forms and techniques by which the author of Chronicles … shaped the texts that he took from the books of Samuel-Kings and to examine his use of these devices in recounting the history of the Davidic kingdom,” but also “to understand the foremost principles and motives that may have guided the Chronicler in his various literary-historiographical modifications” (2).

As expected, the opening chapter defines the purpose and shape of the volume as a whole, while setting Kalimi’s research within the broader context of the academic study of Chronicles. The bulk of the work is devoted to a careful presentation of the various techniques that Kalimi has discerned from his meticulous reading of the text of Chronicles, especially in reference to the Chronicler’s dominant Vorlage, Samuel-Kings. Each chapter covers a different technique of the Chronicler, all based on Kalimi’s extensive comparisons of Chronicles with its Vorlagen: literary-chronological proximity,
historiographical revision, completions/additions, omissions, given name/equivalent name interchanges, treatment of problematic texts, harmonizations, character creation, “measure for measure,” allusion, chiasmus, chiasmus between parallel texts, repetitions, inclusio, antithesis, smile, key words, numerical patterns, generalization/specification, inconsistency/disharmony/historical Mistakes. The work concludes with a simple review of the results of the analysis as well as the implications for our understanding of the Chronicler and his methods.

There is no question that this book is a timely gift for the English-speaking scholarly community. The book provides an exhaustive catalogue of the Chronicler’s techniques, in each case offering not only a careful definition of the technique but also the reasons for the particular technique. Thus, this book goes beyond mere cataloguing of technique to provide insight into the motivations of the Chronicler, especially as to his literary strategies. Although the book may be intimidating to some young scholars due to its size, the inclusion of the evidence from the text of Chronicles (in both Hebrew text and English translation) lends credibility as well as accessibility to Kalimi’s arguments. Kalimi’s volume fills out in vivid color the “art” of biblical narrative, as summarized by the author in the depiction of the Chronicler as “an inspired artist … a skilled professional historian with sophisticated writing methods at his disposal” (407). Kalimi has shown the impact of the discernment of the historiographic methods and literary techniques on the wise use of a source of modern historical reconstruction. Although some may disagree with some of his conclusions on various techniques, he has identified some key trends that are helpful for discerning the contribution of the book of Chronicles to the reconstruction of the history of Israel.

Of course, in a work of this magnitude there are bound to be points of disagreement, none of which in any way threaten the basic argument or conclusion of the book. It may have been helpful at the outset also to note recent developments in the study of ancient (and, in particular, Hebrew) historiography, especially in light of his desire “to explore certain methodological aspects of biblical historiography” (404). There may be examples here or there that one may not think is illustrative of the technique or that would be better placed in another chapter, but Kalimi wisely relies on multiple examples of evidence to establish his point.

Not surprisingly I have my concerns about the “ubiquity” of chiasmus, which receives treatment in two chapters (see *JSOT* 71 [1996]: 55–70). It is the second of these chapters (ch. 12: “Chiasmus between Parallel Texts”) that raised my concern over a broader issue related to Kalimi’s study. In this chapter Kalimi makes the claim that the Chronicler presents textual components from his *Vorlage* (Samuel-Kings) in an order inverse to their original appearance. The chiasmus is only evident, then, if one reads the two passages
(Samuel-Kings and Chronicles) in parallel columns. On the surface level, there is a sense that Kalimi is isolating certain words to create his chiasmus while ignoring other ones that do not fit his structure. But on a deeper level, even if “chiasmus” can be discerned one wonders whether this was intentional on the Chronicler’s part or rather natural for someone who is retelling a story (that word order is slightly different) and randomly would produce chiasm in a certain percentage of the cases. Furthermore, would he have expected his audience to read his text this way? The Chronicler would have to assume that his readers would be reading Chronicles in light of Samuel-Kings, much as modern scholarship does in order to investigate literary-historiographical techniques.

This approach is also apparent in Kalimi’s treatment of allusions in chapter 10, where he makes the claim: “At any rate, a reader would be unable to understand many passages in the book of Chronicles without prior knowledge of the contents of Samuel-Kings. It thus seems likely that the Chronicler attempted, on principle, to base his work on the narratives in the earlier books, rather than to undermine them or replace them, as several scholars have claimed” (194–95). Of course, when he says that “a reader would be unable to understand,” this could be taken to mean that a reader would be unable to understand the way the passage is treated in Samuel-Kings. However, the question is whether the Chronicler is seeking to create a different narrative world that should be experienced apart from Samuel-Kings.

Is it possible that the lasting legacy of Kalimi’s work lies in its enabling of others to take the next step in literary-historiographical reflection and consider the techniques of the Chronicler apart from comparison with the Vorlagen? For this one would need to follow the leadership of John Wright, who reminded us over a decade ago of the “subtle danger” of isolating differences in the Chronicles text and rereading them “within the Deuteronomistic framework, rather than that provided by Chronicles itself” (JSOT 60 [1993]: 88). In the same way, rather than being limited to the techniques isolated by the differences between the Vorlagen and Chronicles, it is important also to discern narrative techniques in the book of Chronicles in its own right.

We realize how much we are motivated and enabled to do just this because of the superb research in Kalimi’s volume, which sets the trajectory for future reflection. Kalimi appears to leave room for this when he notes in his conclusion that the Chronicler’s “methods and techniques are elusive” and thus “the scholar must ferret them out through close literary examination of the text. It is in this process that the parallel texts prove to be of great value” (404). Kalimi says the parallel texts are “of great value” but never claims that they are the exclusive avenue for discerning the methods and techniques, methods and techniques that are “of paramount importance in understanding the content, ethos, and full meaning of the text of Chronicles” (404).
Kalimi concludes by setting the book of Chronicles within its own sociological context, stressing how it was “sorely needed by its generation, considering the religious, social, linguistic, and literary norms that had developed since the composition of Samuel and Kings. In other words, Chronicles illustrates the principle of ‘each generation with its own historiography.’” In the same way, for the present generation living “since the composition of Williamson, Japhet, Mosis and Dillard,” this volume is another prime example of Kalimi’s positive shaping of contemporary Hebrew Bible historiography.