Japhet, Sara

The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought.


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This is an excellent book that has been influential in Chronicles studies for the previous two decades. It is based on the author’s 1973 Ph.D. dissertation at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and it was first published in Hebrew in 1977. The first English edition appeared in 1989 as volume 9 of Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des Antiken Judentums (Frankfurt: Lang). The excellent translation into English was done by Anna Barber. The present publication, the 2009 volume published by Eisenbrauns, is an unchanged version of the former publication. It has been completely retypeset and reprinted by the publisher, since the book has been out of print for a number of years. The blurb on the back of the book rightly indicates that “Japhet’s groundbreaking work continues to make a lasting contribution to our understanding of the historical and theological position of the Chronicler.”

The 1989-publication was well-received in reviews that appeared during the early 1990s. W. Johnstone, in Expository Times 102.1 (1990): 10–11, praises this work with the following remark: “[I]t seems to me unquestionable that Japhet’s book … is the most significant work on the Chronicler in modern times” (10). J. A. Emerton, in a short review published in Vetus Testamentum 41.3 (1991): 379, commended the book as follows: “This substantial book is a major contribution to the study of the Chronicler, and
its appearance in an English translation deserves a warm welcome.” P. B. Dirksen states: “In the world of the Chronicler, Japhet is an able guide whose insights deserve attention and deliberation. Also in the subparts where one would not be able to agree with her completely, she provides good stimulation to come to one’s own judgment. To everyone who studies the book of Chronicles, this book can only be recommended”). The present reviewer completely agrees with the above-mentioned estimations of this publication.

Departing from the presupposition that Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah were written by different authors and that the first-mentioned originated in the late Persian era Yehud, Japhet identifies five themes that characterize the ideology (or, theology) of the book of Chronicles. The first is the view of “YHWH, the God of Israel.” She studies the different names of God in Chronicles, the monotheistic idea presented by the book, the view that YHWH is the Creator and Ruler of the World, the issue of God’s presence in the world, the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel, and God’s involvement in the history of Israel.

The second theme discussed is “the worship of YHWH.” The Chronicler’s views on the prohibition against idolatry, the maintenance of temple worship, and wholehearted devotion to YHWH are discussed in this chapter.

The next focal point of Japhet’s discussion is the Chronicler’s portrayal of “the people of Israel.” She investigates how the Chronicler uses the term “all Israel.” Thereafter, the tribal system as reflected in the Chronicler’s genealogies (1 Chr 1–9), the David and Solomon narratives (1 Chr 10–2 Chr 9), and the stories about the kings of Judah (2 Chr 10–36) are scrutinized. Japhet remarks at the end of her discussion on the tribal system that

the book of Chronicles is not bound by a schematic view of the people and it therefore provides a freer, more diverse expression of Israel’s ethnic reality [than Samuel–Kings]. At least some of its evidence on the subject reflects the political reality of the First Commonwealth and preserves sources dating from the period. Nevertheless, it must be said that both aspects of the tribal idea [i.e., the ongoing existence of two distinct entities, Israel and Judah, while, at the same time, describing each of the two sides as a unified body with no internal groupings or conflicts] provide the Chronicler with an excellent means of expressing his own
views. An emphasis on the people’s abiding unity and completeness is central to the book’s concept of Israel…. At the same time, the tribal idea expressed the view that a number of different elements—the tribes themselves—were represented in the people of Israel. (241)

The discussion about the idea of “all Israel” ends with paragraphs on the Chronicler’s attitude toward the northern kingdom and the Samaritans.

As a continuation of the discussion on the people of Israel, Japhet develops another aspect, the Chronicler’s view on the relationship between the people of Israel and the land of Israel. She investigates the geographic dimensions reflected in Chronicles, as well as the view of the uninterrupted settlement of the land. With reference to the religious basis for the bond between people and land, Japhet comes to the conclusion that “Chronicles does not explain or attempt to justify Israel’s right to the land of Israel. The bond is taken for granted, axiomatic to the entire experience of Israel’s relationship with its God” (307).

The fourth ideological theme discussed is “kingship.” Japhet first looks at the Chronicler’s view on the institution of monarchy as such. According to her, “the book of Chronicles regards Israelite monarchy as such as ‘the kingship of YHWH over Israel’; YHWH’s kingship is realized by means of the monarch who rules over the people” (320). The Davidic dynasty and other Judean monarchs are then discussed from this perspective.

The shortest discussion is dedicated to the last theme, “the hope of redemption.” Japhet finds, similar to other studies on pre-Hasmonean literature, that the book of Chronicles does not provide explicit indications of a doctrine of redemption. However, “the Chronicler believed in redemption in practical terms: with complete trust in the power and justness of Israel’s God, he awaited the restoration of Israel’s fortunes” (393).

In an epilogue Japhet reflects on what her study on the ideology of Chronicles brings to the table of scholarship: “Examining the ideology of Chronicles does more than uncover the book’s spiritual world and its constellation of views on the fundamental matters of religious thought; it also helps us understand Chronicles in its entirety—sources, character, genre, and purpose. … (A) study of the book’s ideology reveals its uniqueness in the context of biblical thought” (395). She closes the book by asking “the most basic question of all: … Why did the Chronicler feel a need to retell the story of a period in the distant past, a period that had already been described at great length? What impelled him to write his book?” (403). Japhet’s answer to this basic question is worth quoting at length (as I have done in several previous publications of my own):
The past was increasingly sanctified by later generations; yet, at the same time, there developed a gap, which steadily increased, between their own complex reality and the reality they found described in the Bible [sic!]. A gap of this sort, the inevitable result of historical development, undermines the stability of both realities: first, early history becomes incomprehensible to the present generation and the norms of a so-called formative period are in fact no longer appropriate to contemporary needs and aspirations; second, present-day institutions, religious tenets, and ritual observance are severed from their origins and lose their authoritative source of legitimation.

The book of Chronicles represents a powerful effort to bridge this gap. By reformulating Israel’s history in its formative period, the Chronicler gives new significance to the two components of Israelite life: the past is explained so that its institutions and religious principles become relevant to the present, and the ways of the present are legitimized anew by being connected to the prime source of authority—the formative period in the people’s past.

Thus, Chronicles is a comprehensive expression of the perpetual need to renew and revitalize the religion of Israel. It makes an extremely important attempt to affirm the meaningfulness of contemporary life without severing ties between the present and the sources of the past; in fact, it strengthens the bond between past and present and proclaims the continuity of Israel’s faith and history. (403–4)

There is no doubt about the excellent quality of scholarship embodied in the present publication. However, I see it as a great pity that the author and publisher did not use the opportunity of a reprint to update the contents. Since the book has a well-organized and coherent structure, it would probably have been a daunting task to do an overall reworking of the material. However, a closing section in each chapter, or an additional chapter at the end, would have granted a younger generation of Chronicles scholars the privilege of a great scholar such as Japhet interacting with their work. Even an extended preface to this new reprint would have served that purpose well.

Chronicles studies blossomed since the first publication of this book in 1989, and surely Sara Japhet contributed immensely to this development—not only through the 1989 publication but also through her seminal commentary on Chronicles (see S. Japhet, I and II Chronicles: A Commentary [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993]). I therefore find it awkward to read a 2009 publication with absolutely no reference to Chronicles scholarship of the past twenty years. To page through the index of authors and not to find prominent names there such as G. N. Knoppers, R. W. Klein, S. L. McKenzie, and P. B. Dirksen leaves a feeling of disappointment. Chronicles scholarship could have benefitted tremendously from an update in which the author could have shown how her
work on the ideology of Chronicles developed since 1989—in interaction with a new generation of Chronicles scholarship, but also by providing an estimation of more recent scholarship. (As a matter of fact, Johnstone—in the above-mentioned review—already criticized the first English version with the following comment: “(I)t is a pity that opportunity has not been taken in the context of the English translation to bring the very extensive apparatus of footnotes up to date.”)

After this being said, let me commend the publisher for recognizing the importance of keeping this seminal work in print! If the aim was to make the former (and out-of-print) publication more readable (as stated on the back cover), the effort was indeed successful.