Johnstone, William

1 and 2 Chronicles


JSOTSup 253-54


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Given the explosion of the academic study of the biblical text, classical critical philological commentaries have tended to become scribal affairs. Unless the commentator is extremely diligent, contemporary scholarship, rather than the biblical text itself, becomes the main dialogue partner for the commentator--and the reader of the commentary. The length of commentaries grows, yet the biblical text itself becomes a more distant voice, submerged beneath the cacophony of contemporary discussions.

William Johnstone seeks to avoid this dilemma in his 700 plus page commentary on 1 and 2 Chronicles by selectively engaging contemporary scholarship and essentially foregoing a scholarly apparatus as he presents his reading of Chronicles to his audience. Yet his intent is not to present a postmodern exercise in the ideology of reading; Johnstone seeks to write "the inductive description of the material in the work itself, written with as few preconceptions as possible about what the theme or themes may turn out to be" (vol.1, p. 377). He methodically utilizes a concordance to trace the use of language within Chronicles and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, especially Leviticus, to construct "inductively" the message of the text, while comparing Chronicles to its Vorlage in Samuel--Kings.

Johnstone helpfully summarizes his basic reading of Chronicles in introductions to each volume (vol.1, pp.9-23; vol.2, pp.9-20). The bulk of the commentary develops the general hypothesis that the historiographic genre of Chronicles masks its deeper function as a theological work related to midrash, written for "the edification of the community"
According to Johnstone in 1 Chronicles 1-9 the Chronicler spells out the "universal relationship" of God and humanity, and how Israel finds its place amidst the nations in response to the "breakdown" of this relationship. 1 Chronicles 10-2 Chronicles 9 presents Israel attempting to achieve its ideal amidst the nations, sacramentally representing the sovereignty of God amidst the nations through the Davidic dynasty. Yet even here, failure is seen on the horizon. As a consequence, 2 Chronicles 10-36 engages the "exilic" situation of the Chronicler's original audience to understand Israel's failure "and to look beyond it to the conditions for the eventual recognition of God's sovereignty on earth, which will solve the problem of the relationship between God and human with which the work began" (vol.2, p.11). The Chronicler thus subordinates the "Jerusalemite" royal tradition to the levitical theology of the Temple and its rites in anticipation of the eschatological fulfillment of God's sacramental sovereignty exercised over all creation.

Despite Johnstone's claim to investigate inductively Chronicles with minimal presuppositions, his reading operates with a very strong, conservative, and questionable MT bias. Indeed, he produces a commentary on the MT of Chronicles, confusing it with its textual predecessors. Johnstone consistently works with MT paragraphing as significant to his interpretation; textual criticism in the work is basically nonexistent--the MT as the textus receptus is judged to be historically superior. More seriously, he rejects Qumran textual evidence for the Vorlage of Chronicles in his redactional comments, arguing that "the reader is presented with two given texts--Samuel-Kings and Chronicles--and these two texts will endure as the received texts for interpretation. It is thus wholly appropriate that every last variation between these two texts be taken with seriousness as evidence for the differing purposes for which both texts have been received as holy Scripture" (vol.1, p.23). While an interbiblical reading of the text may make this claim, it is not valid in making historical, redactional conclusions of the sort that Johnstone desires to make. Finally, Johnstone's understanding of the text as "midrash" presupposes that the Chronicler--and his Second Temple audience--had a concept of canon similar to that which emerged three centuries later. Johnstone's "few presuppositions as possible," therefore, turns out to have considerable force in shaping his reading.

What Johnstone offers, therefore, is not a historical-critical commentary, but a theological, intertextual reading of the MT of Chronicles in dialogue with other biblical books for contemporary communities of faith. This is a valid enterprise, but should not be confused with the historicist claims that Johnstone desires to make in order to legitimate his reading. Johnstone's reading does produce several interesting observations, literary and historical. Echoes of Leviticus do roll through Chronicles. Johnstone therefore pushes the text back towards the Priestly tradition as was standard before Martin Noth linked Chronicles so closely to the Deuteronomistic tradition. As Johnstone notes, the chronology of the post-Josianic kings does lose its chronological sequence, though whether it combines them all into one generation is debatable. Yet, ultimately, Johnstone's reading of Chronicles seems to tell us as much about Johnstone as about
Chronicles itself. Christian theological terms and themes, such as sacramental, guilt, atonement determine the reading. A failed Davidic dynasty awaiting its final eschatological fulfillment ends up presenting Chronicles as "praeparatio evangelica." Johnstone's reading forces the text into a mold that is not immediately apparent: Do the brief genealogies of 1 Chronicles really depict the broken relationship between God and humanity because the Chronicler goes from Adam to Seth rather than from Cain to Abel? Does the initial place of the tribe of Judah in the genealogy of Israel really show the subordination of the house of David to the house of the Levites, who stand in the center of the genealogies? Finally, and most basically, Chronicles reads very well as ancient historiography rather than as midrash. While there is no doubt a theology operating in Chronicles, to claim the text is primarily theological seems to underplay significantly the royalist political claims against a cultic reading. Throughout Chronicles, the Davidic king always stands in authority over temple personnel, the cult, and even the law written in the Book of Moses, as when Hezekiah, by royal fiat, changes the Passover legislation (2 Chr 30:3-4) and prays for forgiveness for those who violate the Law (2 Chr 30:18-20).

Johnstone has produced a coherent reading of Chronicles, one that places the text in conversation with the Hebrew Bible with echoes of Christian convictions reverberating through the book. It will be of service within this community. Others as well will find the book helpful, as Johnstone's clearly articulate reading will allow their own convictions about Chronicles to emerge for reflection and consideration.