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# Was the Chronicler a Spin Doctor?: David in the Books of Chronicles

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## Was the Chronicler a Spin Doctor? David in the Books of Chronicles

MARK A. THRONTVEIT

See what Chronicles has made out of David! The founder of the kingdom has become the founder of the temple and the public worship, the king and hero at the head of his companions in arms has become the singer and master of ceremonies at the head of a swarm of priests and Levites; his clearly cut figure has become a feeble holy picture, seen through a cloud of incense.

Julius Wellhausen<sup>1</sup>

As Wellhausen's sardonic eighteenth-century observation indicates, scholars have long recognized the differing depictions of David in the books of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles.<sup>2</sup> The Chronicler's portrait is usually dismissed as a nonhistorical, colorless idealization of David that intentionally omits objectionable material such as his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband.<sup>3</sup> But neither Samuel-Kings nor Chronicles is what we would call "history." Both are theologically motivated interpretations of the traditions of Israel. Today, "mini-

<sup>1</sup>Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, trans. Allan Menzies and J. Sutherland Black (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957) 182.

<sup>2</sup>Besides the commentaries, see especially Marti J. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), and Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Though many now consider this episode to be a later expansion; see Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 34–35, 155–161.

*Yes, the Chronicler was a spin doctor—but a necessary one. He used the David story to address the needs of his postexilic community who questioned the value of God's old promises to David in this new time of Persian domination, without a king, worshiping in a temple that was the mere shadow of Solomon's glorious edifice.*

malist” historians deny David existed at all.<sup>4</sup> Recent challengers of the minimalists discover in David “a Middle Eastern tyrant”<sup>5</sup> and, after describing him as a “brigand-king,” who ruled “by employing murder and mayhem as tools of statecraft,” state with a wink, “The real David was not someone whom it would be wise to invite to dinner.”<sup>6</sup>

The books of Steussy and Brueggemann, cited above, excel in demonstrating the diversity of these Davidic portraits that seek to present a coherent message to their various readers. To put it crudely, the three (or four, or five?) biblical presentations of David are interpretations, readings, understandings designed to speak to the needs of a particular audience in much the same way that so-called “spin doctors” spin the news in ways that put the best (or worst!) possible construction on the events of the day. You may like CNN, I may like the BBC, and Fox News may invite us into its vaunted “No-Spin Zone” in recognition of the bias of others; but we all know that an “unbiased report” is a one that is biased in the same way that I am.

In this article I would like to examine some of the rotations of the Chronicler’s spin on David that emerge in four significant Davidic relationships: David and Israel, David and Saul, David and Moses, and David and Solomon.

#### DAVID AND ISRAEL

The Chronicler’s initial portrayal of David is embedded in the nine chapters of genealogies that defend the entrance to the narrative as fiercely as does “Fluffy,” the three-headed guard dog of *Harry Potter* fame. Following an introduction that establishes Israel’s worldwide context by tracing their ancestors from Adam to Israel’s twelve sons (1:1–2:2), two concentric arrangements emphasize three major themes in Chronicles: the southern tribes of Judah, Levi, and Benjamin; the inclusion of the schismatic northern tribes in “all Israel”;<sup>7</sup> and, above all, the importance of David, all major themes in Chronicles.

In the first arrangement, the king-producing tribes of Judah (David; 2:3–4:43) and Benjamin (Saul; 8:1–40) open and close the passage while the priestly tribe of Levi (6:1–81) anchors the center, stressing the Chronicler’s interest in these southern tribes that had remained loyal to the Davidic dynasty when the north rebelled in 922 B.C.E. and his overarching interest in king and cult: David’s throne and Solomon’s temple. The important inclusion of the northern tribes in “all Israel” is achieved by first dividing them into those tribes east of the Jordan

<sup>4</sup>For example, Philip R. Davies, *In Search of “Ancient Israel”* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992) 16–48; Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 306–307, 415–423.

<sup>5</sup>McKenzie, *King David*, 188.

<sup>6</sup>Baruch Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 479.

<sup>7</sup>The Chronicler’s concept of “Israel” is not confined to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (as in 2 Chr 11:3; 12:1; contrast 10:16; 11:13, where “all Israel” refers to the north, and 9:30, where both north and south are meant). Thus, the Chronicler sees the division of the kingdom as a severing of God’s people (2 Chr 13:4–12) necessitating calls for the people to return to worship in Jerusalem. See H. G. M. Williamson’s exhaustive treatment, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

(5:1–26) and those west of the Jordan (7:1–40) and then incorporating them as an inner frame around the central tribe of Levi:

- A David’s royal tribe of Judah (2:3–4:43)
- B Northern tribes east of Jordan (5:1–26)
- X The priestly tribe of Levi (6:1–81)
- B’ Northern tribes west of Jordan (7:1–40)
- A’ Saul’s royal tribe of Benjamin (8:1–40)

A second concentric arrangement focuses on the tribe of Judah (2:10–3:24; A, above) and centers upon the family of Judah’s grandson, Hezron: Jerahmeel, Ram, and Chelubai (Caleb).<sup>8</sup> The descendants of Ram (up to David in 2:9–17; and following David in 3:1–24) form an outer frame that encloses an inner frame of Caleb’s family (2:18–24; 2:42–55) that, in turn, surrounds the family of Jerahmeel (2:25–41). The whole is enclosed by references to Shelah, Judah’s only surviving son (2:3–8; 4:21–23):

- A Descendants of Judah: Er, Onan, and Shelah (2:3–8)
- B Descendants of Ram up to David (2:9–17)
- C Descendants of Caleb (2:18–24)
- D Descendants of Jerahmeel (2:25–33)
- D’ Descendants of Jerahmeel (2:34–41)
- C’ Descendants of Caleb (2:42–55)
- B’ Descendants of Ram following David [David’s descendants] (3:1–24)
- A’ Descendants of Shelah, Judah’s only surviving son (4:21–23)

Ram’s commanding position within the Judah material (B, B’) illustrates the Chronicler’s conviction that Ram is the most important clan of the most important tribe. Since this is David’s clan, his significance for preexilic Israel is similarly heightened. This makes the extent of the second Ram list (3:1–24; B’) all the more striking. By extending this list past the exile into the fourth century the Chronicler announces that the influence of David and his family continues into the present lives of the postexilic community.

In 1 Chr 11–12 the Chronicler combines a variety of chronologically and geographically disparate lists to demonstrate the unity of “all Israel,” north and south, and their immediate and unanimous recognition of David’s kingship. An outer framework describing David’s anointing at Hebron (11:1–3; 12:38–40) encloses lists of the warriors who attended the festivities (11:10–47; 12:23–38), while an inner framework of David’s forces while stationed at Ziklag (12:1–7; 12:19–22) encloses those who joined him at “the stronghold” (12:8–18).<sup>9</sup> The events of 2 Sam 1–4 are passed over without comment. In accordance with the notice that all Saul’s house had perished in the battle

<sup>8</sup>H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 25–28.

<sup>9</sup>H. G. M. Williamson, “We are Yours, O David: The Setting and Purpose of 1 Chronicles xii 1–23,” in B. Albrektson et al., *Remembering All the Way* (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 164–176.

with the Philistines (10:6) the disputes between the families of David and Saul are omitted. In addition, the anointing of David as king over Israel ignores the separate ceremonies performed by Judah (2 Sam 2:4) and Israel (2 Sam 5:3). The repetition of the anointing at the end of the unit (1 Chr 12:38–40), where once again “all Israel,” north and south, unanimously proclaims David king, demonstrates the total, widespread, immediate support that David enjoyed, in contrast to what we find in Samuel-Kings.

#### DAVID AND SAUL

First Samuel devotes twenty-three chapters to Saul and his reign. The Chronicler is only interested in the final story of his death at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 31). By beginning his narrative without the long, complicated story of Saul’s decline and David’s rise, the Chronicler alerts careful readers to a very different picture of Saul, a picture that serves his portrayal of David. Brueggemann’s executive summary, “In the end, Saul is humiliated and then honored,” is only half true in Chronicles.<sup>10</sup> Here, the story functions as a sermonic paradigm of the factors that lead to exile. The story falls into three parts: Saul’s death (1 Chr 10:1–7), the humiliation of Saul’s house (vv. 8–12), and the Chronicler’s all-important theological evaluation (vv. 13–14).

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Two modifications clarify the Chronicler’s use of the story. 1 Sam 31:6 reads, “So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together on the same day” (NRSV). But in 1 Chr 10 “all his men” is replaced by “all his house” (v. 6). This alteration, at some odds with the genealogies in 1 Chr 8:29–40 and 9:35–44, stresses that this is the end of Saul’s line. This point reemerges in the concluding theological evaluation that *God* “slew Saul and turned the kingdom over to David” as a direct consequence of Saul’s “unfaithfulness” (1 Chr 10:13–14, RSV). This crucial term (לְעַוְבָה) has appeared before in 1 Chr. Both the north and the south experienced military defeat and exile due to their unfaithfulness (1 Chr 5:25 NIV; 1 Chr 9:1; cf. 2 Chr 36:14).<sup>11</sup> Verse 7 records another theme that will reappear throughout Chronicles as a symbol for the exile: “[T]hey (the Israelites) abandoned their towns.” Thus, the Chronicler begins his narrative with the story of Saul: a picture of Israel in “exile,” defeated by enemies because of the unfaithful-

<sup>10</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 208.

<sup>11</sup>The appearance of this term just prior to the exile suggests unfaithfulness as the inclusio for the Chronicler’s narrative work; see Simon J. De Vries, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 424–425.

ness of a king who is everything a king should not be. The message is clear. In Chronicles, exile is always a possibility for those who, like Saul, are unfaithful and for those who, like the Israelites in v. 7, follow after them.

Later, the Chronicler rearranges his source (2 Sam 5:11–23) in order to contrast David and Saul (1 Chr 14:8–17). There, the pattern of Israel “in exile,” drawn in the portrait of Saul’s demise (1 Chr 10), is completely reversed: David’s kingdom was established (14:2), Saul’s had been taken away (10:14); David’s house increased (14:3–7), Saul’s was eliminated (10:6); David inquired of God (14:10, 14), Saul had not (10:13–14); David defeats the very Philistines who had defeated Saul and burns the gods before whom Saul’s head had been presented (14:16; 10:8–10). Furthermore, the statement that the ark was not sought “in the days of Saul” (13:3) appears in a chapter at pains to show that David’s first official act was to bring the ark up to Jerusalem.

Thus, the major paradigm of the Chronicler’s work is established. In Saul, we see that “exilic” situations are brought about by unfaithfulness and an unwillingness to seek guidance from God, and that “restoration” is only possible through the kind of faithfulness exemplified in David.

#### DAVID AND MOSES

The relationship between David and Moses further sharpens the Chronicler’s portrayal of David. Most significant here is the Chronicler’s de-emphasis of exodus themes found in Samuel-Kings. In this regard, Solomon’s words at the temple dedication (2 Chr 6 // 1 Kings 8) are especially instructive. While the two versions are nearly verbatim, at three points the Chronicler has eliminated or altered allusions to the exodus:<sup>12</sup>

1 Kings 8:21

There I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with our ancestors *when he brought them out of the land of Egypt.*

1 Kings 8:51–53

...(for they are your people and heritage, *which you brought out of Egypt*, from the midst of the iron-smelter). Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant, and to the plea of your people Israel, listening to them whenever they call to you. For you have separated them from among all the peoples of the earth, to be your heritage, just as you promised through *Moses, your servant, when you brought our ancestors out of Egypt*, O Lord GOD.

2 Chr 6:11

There I have set the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with the people of Israel.

2 Chr 6:40–42 // Ps 132:8–10, 1

Now, O my God, let your eyes be open and your ears attentive to prayer from this place. “Now rise up, O LORD God, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. Let your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, and let your faithful rejoice in your goodness. O LORD God, do not reject your anointed one. *Remember your steadfast love for your servant David.*” (NRSV)

The second set of comparisons provides the warrant for Solomon’s request

<sup>12</sup>To be fair, the Chronicler does not eliminate every allusion to the exodus, even in this chapter; see 2 Chr 6:5; cf. 1 Chr 17:21; 2 Chr 5:10; 7:22; 20:10.

that God be attentive to the prayers of Israel in both versions of the prayer. In Kings, this warrant comes through God's promise to "Moses, your servant, when you brought our ancestors out of Egypt." In Chronicles, the warrant is based upon Ps 132:8–10, 1, and appeals to David's faithfulness regarding the ark.

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In addition to presenting David's accession, rather than the exodus, as the definitive moment in Israel's history, the Chronicler massively expands David's role regarding the cult. David, not Moses, is presented as the founder or organizer of the Levites, the priests, the singers, the gatekeepers, and other cultic officials in four unparalleled chapters (1 Chr 23:2–26:32). In contrast to Samuel-Kings, David provides all the building materials for the temple (22:2–5), recruits the builders (22:2, 15), and successfully solicits financial and popular support (22:17–19; 29:6–9). David's reception of the detailed plans for the temple from God passed on in written form to Solomon (28:11–19) strongly parallels the divine revelation of the plans (תְּבִנִיָּה, same Hebrew word) for the tabernacle to Moses and preserved in the law (Exod 25:9, 40).<sup>13</sup> Like Moses (Exod 25:1–7; 35:4–9, 20–29) David seeks contributions from the people (29:3–5). David's generous personal contribution is a new element, however, and challenges the people to respond similarly. Most dramatically, *David* chooses the site for the temple (1 Chr 22:1) despite the Deuteronomic requirement that the site should be "the place *the LORD your God* shall choose" (Deut 12:5, 11, 14, emphasis added), and, as the previous two verses make clear, that place is not Gibeon, the site of Moses' tabernacle.

Another parallel between Moses and David is found in David's charge to Solomon (1 Chr 22:6–16), which appears to be modeled upon Moses' appointment of Joshua as his successor (Deut 31; Josh 1).<sup>14</sup> Just as God had denied Moses entry into the promised land, so David was denied participation in the culmination of his life's work, the actual construction of the temple. Furthermore, the charges with which their respective successors, Joshua and Solomon, were designated to complete these tasks are very similar, including a promise of divine presence and assistance, an allusion to the task, and words of encouragement (cf. 1 Chr 22:11–13; Deut 31:23; and Josh 1:6, 9). In addition, both Moses and David announce the appointment of their successors twice, once in private (Deut 1:23; 1 Chr 22:6) and once in a public setting (Deut 31:2; 1 Chr 28:8).

David doesn't replace Moses, however, as is often claimed. Mosaic authority

<sup>13</sup>See Simon J. De Vries, "Moses and David as Cult Founders in Chronicles," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988) 619–639.

<sup>14</sup>See especially H. G. M. Williamson, "The Accession of Solomon in the Books of Chronicles," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976) 351–361.

remains, chiefly with regard to the law. On several occasions, David submits to and implements Mosaic authority (e.g., 1 Chr 15:11–15; 22:12–13), at other times he adapts Mosaic legislation to contemporary circumstances (cf. Num 3:5–9 and 1 Chr 15:23, with respect to the Levites). Nevertheless, the contrast with Moses is strong and clearly favorable to David.

#### DAVID AND SOLOMON

H. G. M. Williamson represents the current scholarly opinion that the Chronicler sought “to present the reign of David and Solomon as a single, unified event within the divine economy for the life of the nation, in which the complementary nature of the two kings’ functions plays an important role.”<sup>15</sup> Both kings are selected by divine choice (1 Chr 17:11; 22:7–10); both ascend to the throne with the full support of “all Israel” (11:1–3; 29:22b–25a); and both are equally devoted to the temple cult.<sup>16</sup> Since David prepares for the temple and Solomon carries out the actual construction, however, it is the temple that gives focus to the unified reign of these two kings. Perhaps the strongest contrast with Samuel-Kings is the Chronicler’s depiction of a vigorous David totally in charge of the elaborate preparations for Solomon’s seamless accession, an accession hailed by Israel’s leaders, God, and David’s other sons (1 Chr 29:23b–25) instead of the cold-blooded assassinations and political intrigue of 1 Kings 1–2.

Within this period two divine promises, to David concerning the monarchy (1 Chr 17:3–14) and to Solomon concerning the temple (2 Chr 7:11–22), are of unequalled theological importance:

While the first divine promise (1 Chr 17) follows 2 Sam 7 closely, two differences reveal the Chronicler’s concerns. First of all, the statements that link David with a God-given “rest” (2 Sam 7:1, 11) are omitted (v. 1) or altered to “subdue” (v. 10). “Rest” is characteristic of Solomon’s reign and a prerequisite for the temple. As such, it plays a crucial role in Solomon being the chosen temple builder rather than David (22:6–10). Second, instead of “your [David’s] house and your [David’s] kingdom” (2 Sam 7:16), the Chronicler has “my [God’s] house and my [God’s] kingdom” (v. 14). In 2 Samuel “your house” means David’s descendants; in 1 Chronicles “my house” means God’s house, that is, the temple. Besides the obvious emphasis on the temple the chronicler also stresses that God alone is king (cf. 28:5–6; 29:23; 2 Chr 1:11; 9:8; 13:4–8).

The second promise (2 Chr 7:11–22 // 1 Kings 9:1–9), God’s response to Solomon’s prayer, is contained in an expansion (2 Chr 7:13–15):

When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

<sup>15</sup>H. G. M. Williamson, “Eschatology in Chronicles,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977) 140.

<sup>16</sup>Roddy L. Braun, “Solomonic Apologetic in Chronicles,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973) 503–516.

Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. (NRSV)

This is the essence of the Chronicler's message. The four verbs of verse 14 (humble oneself, pray, seek God's face, and turn from evil) introduce the vocabulary of repentance and provide four possible responses to divine punishment that promise forgiveness and restoration. The portraits of subsequent kings will be drawn with this promise in mind (2 Chr 10–36).

This verse is often used to illustrate the view that obedience leads to blessing and disobedience leads to judgment. The Chronicler does retain from Samuel-Kings this concept of retributive justice, but it is neither as mechanical nor as simplistically applied as usually suggested. One need only recall the many episodes relating the withholding of judgment after a repentant response to prophetic warning (e.g., 2 Chr 12:5–8; 15:1–15) to realize that the Chronicler is more concerned with repentance and restoration than retribution.<sup>17</sup>

Was the Chronicler a spin doctor? Yes, if that means he tried to address the needs of a particular audience, in this case the postexilic community, who questioned the value of God's promises to David in a community under Persian domination, without a king, worshiping in a temple that was a mere shadow of Solomon's glorious edifice. To a postexilic community looking for identity and meaning, David's relationship to Israel, as portrayed in the genealogies, confirms that God has a plan that stretches back to Adam. To a community that had experienced exile due to unfaithfulness, as had Saul, David's seeking God provides a vehicle for restoration. To a community gathered around the temple, not a throne, David's implementation and adaptation of Moses speaks a word of continuity and relevance. To a community living under Persian domination, without a king, the assurance that it is *God's* kingdom encourages them to look for the final fulfillment of that hope.

Those who deplore the Chronicler's idealization of David usually fail to acknowledge the explicit episodes of David's sin, especially with regard to the census of the people where his culpability is increased over the account in Samuel-Kings.<sup>18</sup> The basis of David's idealization was not his lack of sin; rather, he was portrayed as one who does sin, but also as one who seeks God, confesses his sin, and claims the promise of forgiveness, thereby enabling the community to see themselves as God sees them, and encouraging them to respond, as had he, in repentance. ⊕

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<sup>17</sup>Besides the pioneering work of Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (Frankfort: Peter Lang, 1989) 154–166, and H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 31–33, see now the full treatment by Brian E. Kelly, *Retribution and Eschatology in Chronicles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

<sup>18</sup>1 Chr 21:1, 7, 8, 17; cf. his failures in moving the ark (13:11–12; 15:13), and God's refusal to let David build the temple (22:8; 28:3); and see Japhet, *Ideology*, 467–478.