

## A NEW OUTLOOK ON THE BOOK OF CHRONICLES

by YAIRAH AMIT

**Sarah Japhet**, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its place in Biblical Thought* (Jerusalem, 1977).

שרה יפת, אמונות ודעות בספר דברי הימים ומקומן בעולם המחשבה המקראית, ירושלים, מוסד ביאליק, תשל"ז, 475 ע'.

In this encompassing and balanced study, Sarah Japhet describes the complex of beliefs and concepts of the Book of Chronicles and their place in the world of biblical thought. In the course of her presentation of basic assumptions of the work, the author stresses that "in order to understand the entire spectrum of beliefs and concepts in the Book of Chronicles, it must be examined vis a vis its own terminology... without including it in a predetermined ideological system. The unique nature of the book should be understood within the framework of biblical thought, and the line of continuity and the point in intersection between the Biblical period and the period following should be determined as much as possible... The Book was written as an historiographical work... and not as a philosophical essay... The expression of beliefs and concepts is indirect and non-systematic.... In terms of its content it is parallel, therefore, to material related in other books... These two facts dictate the research methodology of this work." (p. 12)

With these limited givens, Sarah Japhet moulds "from the testimony of the sources" her formulation of the complex of beliefs and opinions of the Book of Chronicles. In her system of thought, there are two prominent qualitative statements which are contingent upon each other. The first is connected to the research methodology and the second to the originality of her conclusions. Both statements contribute to the understanding of the "uniqueness of the Book within

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the framework of biblical thought. The author of Chronicles reveals himself to be an independent thinker having very clear and distinct conceptions on fundamental issues of faith and history of Israel.” (p. 423)

Japhet transfers the thrust of her study from an examination of the historicity of details included in the book to an examination of the unique nature of their formulation. Questions of realia give way to questions of selection and combination and the underlying and activating principles behind them. The uncovering of Chronicle’s theological-national message as a principle of formulation and editing shows that the Book of Chronicles is an independent and uniform work. The preference of the author to examine the Book of Chronicles in light of biblical traditions, rooted in the dynamic world of biblical thought and not as a transitional phase towards the intellectual world of post-biblical Judaism or of Christianity, led the author both to shatter a whole series of accepted axioms and to the understanding of the innovations and original contributions of the Book of Chronicles to the multi-faceted world of Biblical thought. Thus, for example, Japhet stresses that the Book of Chronicles contains no messianic aspirations (pp. 413–422); on the contrary, the Book of Chronicles expresses a “realistic hope for a national redemption”. The majority of scholars<sup>1</sup> stress, however, the existence of messianic aspirations in the Book and some even consider this to be the purpose of the Book’s having been written.

Another example of the original method of the author can be found in her discussion of the “relationship to the Samaritans” (pp. 278–285). The author denies the accepted opinion that the Book of Chronicles was written as a polemic against the Samaritans.<sup>2</sup> She stresses and proves that according to the annexationist tendencies of the author of the Book of Chronicles, the Samaritans were not a separate sect, but part of the People of Israel and it is possible to describe the author’s outlook “as a call directed to the abolition of tension and hatred between the various segments of the nation and its complete unification in the worship of God in Jerusalem.”

Japhet systematically illuminates fundamentals in the theological thought of the author of the Book of Chronicles. The disregard of the Book of Chronicles for the Exodus traditions has already been noted in research<sup>3</sup>, but the attempted explanations are far from convincing, especially in light of the appearance of this tradition as a central motif in works written after the destruction. It is interesting to note Japhet’s claim that this disregard is part of the author’s attempt to stress the continuous bond between the people and its land, for in this bond the continuous

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1. See p. 413, nn. 1–3.

2. See p. 278, nn. 217–220.

3. See p. 322, n. 391.

bond between the people and God is also realized and every instance of exile or estrangement should be examined in accordance with this system of thought (pp. 309–327).

A survey of the context of Japhet's book will serve as the most convincing proof of the quality of the points mentioned above. The survey will deviate slightly from the order of chapters appearing in the work in order to accentuate the systems described.

In Japhet's opinion, the starting point for the understanding of the work is in its conception of the Divinity. This aids the author of the Book of Chronicles in understanding the course of history as a continuous expression of the permanent relationship between God and His people. Therefore, the topics upon which the author of the Book of Chronicles touches are connected to the essence of God, the people and the relationship between the two.

In the first part of Chapter I — The Lord God of Israel (ה' אלהי ישראל) (pp. 17–18) — the author deals with the Divine essence. It is especially possible to learn about this Divine essence from the different usages of the names of God. A preference for appellations such as: God of the father (אלהי האבות), your God (אלהיכם), God of Israel (אלהי ישראל), expresses the feeling of a continuous bond between the people and God. As in Japhet's opinion monotheism is already part of the accepted background of the Book of Chronicles, it merits only a quite insignificant treatment and is dealt with only as something commonly accepted. A preference for the use the Divine appellation of Elohim (אלהים) as a proper name expresses His abstractness, while the appearance of the definite form (האלהים) expresses the uniqueness and individuality of God. The Lord (ה') is the creator of the universe and its ruler and, therefore, the reigning force in history. However, there is also an echo of the popular belief that the gods of the nations were real entities. The enormity and the certainty of the experience of the Divine presence are so powerful that the various points of view concerning the Divine presence — in the Temple, the Heavens, or the idea that neither can contain Him — do not fully express the idea of His presence.

The essential nature of the people is discussed in the third chapter (pp. 228–333). The People of Israel is understood by the author of the Book of Chronicles in its wide and inclusive sense: 'כל ישראל' — the *entire* People of Israel. The use of this inclusive term expresses, in many cases, the tendency to expand the historical description to the entire People of Israel, its tribes and component parts, throughout the entire period of the description, i.e., not just the period of David and Solomon. This tendency is expressed by stressing the inclusive nature of the people, uniting within it the twelve tribes originating from the same father. Thus, in his description of the division of the monarchy, the “entire People of Israel”

(כל ישראל) remained in the Kingdom of Judah and the division took place only in geographical terms and not in ethnic terms (Chronicles II 10:17, 11:3).

This inclusive point of view results in a unique outlook regarding the Northern Kingdom, the Samaritans, proselytes, and idolaters — each belonging to the “entire People of Israel”.

Although the Northern Kingdom originated in sin and the entire course of its history represents a non-broken chain of sins leading to its destruction, it is a part of Israel and the Northern tribes are a necessary component for the existence of the entire People of Israel. Therefore, the Book of Chronicles refers quite often of the Northern Kingdom and describes the inhabitants of the North as “brethren” or the “nation of God” (עם ה'). It even stresses the explicit tendency to re-absorb them and to settle them in Judah during the days of Hezekiah and Josiah.

Likewise, according to the Book of Chronicles, the Samaritans are not a separate sect. The inhabitants of Samaria are descendants of the tribes of Israel, brethren of the people of Judah and an integral part of the People of Israel. Moreover, there is no separate non-Jewish entity in Israel. Regardless of the origins, they are a part of the People of Israel. Non-Jews became an organic part of the Tribes of Israel, either through absorption — mixed marriage — or through annexation — geneologies which express *ethnic* developments and the creation of a category of “proselytes” which became an integral part of the people. Both of these methods fulfill the ideal of the “entire People of Israel” — “the People of Israel in its widest and fullest composition and in the most complete sense of unity as one nation.” (p. 299)

The boundaries of Eretz Israel of the “entire People of Israel” are quite extensive (pp. 299–309): “from Shihor the brook of Egypt even unto the entrance of Hamath” (Chronicles I 13:2–5). The entire expanse of this area is inhabited only by the Children of Israel.

In the second part of Chapter I — “Lord God of Israel” (pp. 78–172), Chapter II — “The Service and Worship of God” (pp. 173–227) and the end of Chapter III — “The Continuity of Settlement” (pp. 309–327) and the “Religious Basis for a Bond between the People and their Land (pp. 327–333), the author deals with the essence of the relationship between God and His people. This essence is not explained in the historical terms of selection and covenant, but rather the relationship between God and His people is an established fact *ab initio*. Through the use of geneologies (I Chronicles, 1–9), the author of the Book of Chronicles stresses the continuous historical chain from the creation of the world until the declaration of Cyrus. This new approach rejects both the concept of selection, which is connected to the Exodus, a one-time historical event, and the concept of

the covenant which assumes that the relationship between God and His people is expressed in the terminology of a contract and is also connected to a one-time covenantal act at the covenant of Sinai in which God appears as a side to a contract.

The guiding principle, therefore, of God's actions vis a vis the history of Israel is the principle of reward and punishment, according to the pragmatic outlook of the author of the Book of Chronicles. Every event in the history of Israel is explained in light of this principle. Every act merits either reward or punishment and therefore every generation is responsible for its fate. Within this inflexible system the role of repentance is great because it is capable of neutralizing the mechanical outlook of the principle of reward and punishment. However, events which do not fit into this rigid scheme are often omitted, described in a different manner, or as events in which God is testing man.

The method of God's actions is direct, individual and immediate, — and without intermediaries. This outlook invests history with a unique perspective on miraculous events. God himself intervenes in the course of events, acts immediately in accordance with His absolute principles, and breaks the natural law of cause and result. This outlook on the essence of the relationship between God and His people illuminates, on one hand, the approach of the author of the Book of Chronicles to the worship of God, and, on the other hand, the unique approach to the bond between the people and their land. Just as the relationship between God and His people is part of the original plan of creation, the obligation of the People of Israel to worship God is not to be considered a clause in a contract. The worship of God by the People of Israel is part of the world plan and there is an immediate and direct connection between this plan and the fate of the people. The People of Israel is obligated to adhere to an absolute exclusivity in the worship of God and to execute completely all aspects of this worship. Likewise, the bond between the People and the land is described as a continuous and uninterrupted one which is not determined by one-time events, but as a fact established from the very beginning in reality. In accordance with this unique outlook the author ignores the Exodus traditions and therefore limits his description of the period of the destruction and the exile in the history of Israel. Thus, for example, the description of the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah is condensed both in the scope of the story and in the extent of the destruction. The term "exile" applies only to the two and a half tribes on the east bank of the Jordan. In the western part of the Land of Israel (the Kingdom of the North and Judah) there was always continuous settlement.

The realization of the continuous bond between the People, God and the Land is expressed through the institution of the monarchy (pp. 334–412). The historical section of the Book of Chronicles begins in chapter 10 ff. In other words, it means

that history begins with the founding of the monarchy. The genealogies of I Chronicles 1–9 provide the background for the monarchy. The genealogies, however, lack a time dimension. They create a static picture and chronological progress really begins from the death of Saul, the first king and ends with the proclamation of Cyrus. The realization of political government is an expression of the Divine kingdom. The king who fulfills the functions of the monarchy is the representative of God and the permanent representative is the Son of David who sits on the throne of God (I Ch. 29:23). Therefore, the kingdom of Saul was part of the Kingdom of God, even if this is not explicitly stated, as it realized the ideal of the “entire People of Israel.” For the same reason, the kingdoms of Ish-Bosheth or of David in Hebron are not mentioned at all and the Kingdom of Israel is regarded as an act of rebellion on the part of “certain worthless scoundrels” (II Ch. 13:6–7). In this manner, the Book of Chronicles preserves a direct connection between the Kingdom of God tied to the ideal of the “entire People of Israel” in the Land of Israel, i.e. with the idea of continuous settlement.

In her summary, Japhet stresses that in the Book of Chronicle there are no eschatological expectations. These would be totally inconsistent with the very nature of the book. There is not even a single verse which expresses messianic hope. All expectations in the book are limited to the realm of the possible and to what has occurred in the past. From these the author of the Book of Chronicles learns that following the path of God according to the principles of a perfect performance of Divine worship insures the existence of the “entire People of Israel” in the Land of Israel under the leadership of a king from the House of David who realizes the Kingdom of God.

The motivation for the writing of the work is grounded, according to Japhet, in the desire to bridge the gap between the lofty past and the problematical present. The purpose of the Book is to explain the past and to instill new meaning and legitimacy to belief and its institution in the present which will strengthen the bond with the past and stress the continuity of Jewish history.

In the introduction to his book, *Testing in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Post-Biblical Judaism*,<sup>4</sup> Jacob Licht writes: “Whoever attempts to deal with the beliefs expressed in the Bible confronts the problem of the lack of abstract, systematic thinking. In every subject under consideration, the student must gather all of the statements scattered throughout the Bible into his own system, and therefore cannot be free of his own personal viewpoint or the exegetical tradition within which he was trained, as the texts do not cohere into a sufficient general and clear statement by themselves...”.

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4. J. Licht, *ha-Nisayon ba-Mikra uve-Yahadut shel Tequfat Bayit Sheni*, Jerusalem, 1973, p. 7.

Sarah Japhet has confined herself to treating the beliefs expressed in the Book of Chronicles so that, even if the title of her book refers to “their place in the world of Biblical thought,” she does not deeply confront the world of Biblical thought in those places which are relevant to her concerns. She sometimes settles for incidental and unsystematic references to passages which suit her purposes. Thus, for example, in her discussion of “God, Creator and ruler of the world” (p. 52–57), she fails to relate the outlook of the Chronicler to Isa. 10:5 ff. or to Deut. 32:21–30. At other times, she treats the opinions of other scholars as definitive, utilizing them as the primary basis for her description of the “Biblical world of thought.” An example of this subjugation may be seen in her approach to the belief in the unity of God and its expressions (p. 42–52). At the start, she states: “During the period in which *Chronicles* was composed, the idea of monotheism was already firmly established in the Israelite religion” (p. 42, see note 101 there); and further on “it seems reasonable to say that the author took the idea of monotheism as self-evident, and saw no need to proclaim it...” (p. 46). From this, she reaches the conclusion that *Chronicles* expresses the monotheistic faith, and that other viewpoints which might be found within it are merely echos of popular beliefs. The prejudicial assumption that a non-monotheistic viewpoint can only be an expression of folk thinking, and that Israelite history and literature were moving toward absolute monotheism, prevented the author from drawing all of the conclusions which could have been drawn from the details of the text, on the one hand, and allowed her to fall into a pattern of forced interpretation, on the other. Despite her perceptive comments that: 1) *Chronicles* ignores the statements of monotheistic faith found in its sources (p. 45); 2) that *Chronicles* is liberal in its use of terms for other gods (p. 48–49); 3) that a prophet of God is also quoted there as expressing folk-beliefs (II Ch. 25:15, and see p. 50); 4) that Josiah was required to obey the god of Pharaoh by the logic of the narrative (II Ch. 35:21–22, see p. 52); she reaches the conclusion that the author and his contemporaries had no interest in the question of monotheism “and that Israelite religious awareness and its relation to the other nations had already reached a situation of balance” (p. 52). The cumulative weight of the facts mentioned may also teach us about the Chronicler’s unique approach to this subject: the gods of the nations are concrete, real entities, because they operate with God’s power and are therefore not to be condemned. The chronicler believed that the gods of the nations are a reality which cannot be denied or changed, and that the struggle with them must be fought through the method of inclusion — thus the gods of the nations are an expression of the power of the God of Israel. This method of negation through inclusion appears, for example, in the treatment of the problem of the Samaritans and the strangers.

Unlike Licht’s “anarchic” approach, the author assumes that there is a systematic, abstract approach within Biblical thought, particularly in the Deuteronomistic writings and later. Therefore, she tries to prove, as we have at-

tempted to demonstrate, that the various statements within the book coalesce into a coherent, crystallized world-view. The result is that, at times, she forces the text into the mold of her theory — only in this manner can we understand her struggle with the Satan and with the angelic world of *Chronicles* generally (p. 121–132) — and at times she resolves difficulties and eliminates inconsistencies with claims of “inconsistent editing” or “it was self-evident.” The “inconsistent editing” mentioned so often in her book — in the chapter dealing with the high places (p. 192) or in her discussion of the problem of determinism and free-will (p. 218) and other subjects — perhaps reflects different, conflicting editorial tendencies which, contrary to the expectations of the modern reader, were not obscured or smoothed over in those places where there was no definitive conclusion. The editor or editors of this book wished to place a number of different claims and viewpoints side by side, inasmuch as they had not arrived at a definite theological viewpoint of their own, as later generations attempt to ascribe to them. In any event, the Chronicler does perform systematic editing in those places which are important to him, such as the description of the period of the Solomonic Kingship, and his use of a wide range of editorial tools — elimination, silence, revision and addition — reveals that he does perform systematic editing in those matters about which he had developed clear, specific concepts, while in those matters about which he had no specific stance, he is tolerant towards the admission of a variety of opinions. The very use of the term “unsystematic editing” assumes the existence of a system; it seems to me that, in many cases, Japhet tends towards over-systematization.

As the author tends to stress the element of system, she occasionally uses rather dogmatic language: “It follows that ‘the Sinai Covenant,’ in its exact meaning and within its specific historical context, is not mentioned at all in *Chronicles*” (p. 94) and “the lack of ‘the Sinai Covenant’ stems from the reluctance of *Chronicles* to see the relationship of God and the people of Israel as dependent upon any one-time historical event” (p. 95). The existence of II Ch. 5:10 is clear evidence that her first statement is inexact, while the latter statement properly refers to a diminishment of this idea, but not its total absence.

At times, the needs of her theory cause her to state ideas which have insufficient basis in the text. One may ask, for example, whether it is proper to infer anything about more aspects of religious life apart from the Temple cult from an isolated and difficult verse, such as II Ch. 19:10 (p. 210–212).

Her deliberate avoidance of the conventional questions of research — such as: which period finds its expression in the book? The viewpoint of which group does it express? To which needs of society does it attempt to answer? — stresses her desire to present an exact and documented piece of research, which is not dependent upon questionable and inadequately documented theories. This approach

enables her to avoid circular thinking, which assumes that which is sought to be proven, and frees her from assumptions connecting the Chronicler with specific levels of Biblical literature (Deuteronomistic or Priestly documents, etc.). On the other hand, this kind of discussion leads her, not infrequently, to discuss undefined tendencies (p. 28), tendencies whose motivation is unclear (p. 29, 30) and tendencies whose purpose is unclear, such as: What caused Solomon to be transformed into an ideal figure? Why did the author of *Chronicles* portray Abiah in such a positive way? and others. In the end, many important questions, such as why *Chronicles* portrays the high priests as subservient to the kings, are left unanswered.

Despite the limitations she imposed upon herself, Sarah Japhet molds, in the second half of her study, a clear and exciting world of theological-political thought: the “pan-Israelite” idea, in its broad understanding, and its connecting with views concerning the borders of the land; the continuity of the settlement and the entire set of relationships between God and His people; the definition of the unique place of the kingship in Israel; and more. In this section, the author is loyal to that approach which could be called “*Sitz im Text*”, that is, the building of the conclusions upon the totality of the givens of the text, while in the first part of her study, dealing with the theological values of the book, she tends to force the subjects and the texts into a forced system.

Sarah Japhet has stressed the theological and historiographic approach of the author of the book, but has devoted too little attention to his literary techniques. A greater sensitivity to this subject would have prevented such claims as that “the repeated references to the establishment of the Temple service do not come from a literary desire to stress the subject, but are a *necessary consequence* of the sequence of events” (p. 202, my emphasis). Is it not possible to see in the order of events, as reconstructed in keeping with the needs of the author, a pretext for the selection and literary and ideological extension?

It is not the intent of these comments, or of others which are not detailed here, to detract from the fundamental importance of this deep inclusive work. The clear form of presentation; the systematic attention to textual problems; her attention to grammatical, syntactical and stylistic phenomena; the general presentation of the givens of the text, through their classification and characterization; the war Sarah Japhet wages — and with much success — against a long list of deeply-rooted scholarly opinions and conventions, particularly those related to the attempt to interpret *Chronicles* in terms of Christian theology (the Davidic covenant, Messianism, the true Israel, etc....); and above all her important innovations in presenting the theological-national thesis of the author of *Chronicles* — all these contribute to making her study an important landmark in the history of *Chronicles* studies in particular, and the world of biblical thought generally.

In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes:<sup>5</sup> “Concerning the two books of *Chronicles*, I have nothing particular or important to remark... As to their actual writer, their authority, utility and doctrine, I come to no conclusion.” Sarah Japhet clarifies in her study the importance, value and teaching of this book. She even opens a new window, enabling us to see a unique stream in the national and spiritual existence of the people of Israel at the beginning of the Second Temple period.

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5. B. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* (Ch. 10), Tr., R.H.M. Elwes, London and New York, Routledge, 1905 (Reprinted, New York, Dover, 1951), p. 146.