

# WORSHIP AND FOUR KINGS IN CHRONICLES

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This essay explores some of the Chronicler's concerns with respect to worship. Four kings of Israel help guide this search: David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

## I CHRONICLES 15-16: REMEMBERING DAVID FOR A NEW DAY

Julius Wellhausen was an outspoken critic of the Chronicler's work. Wellhausen favored the books of Samuel and Kings instead, because he took them to be more historically accurate. He was especially vexed with the Chronicler's portrayal of David as the founder of Israel's worship practices: "See what Chronicles has made 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 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."<sup>1</sup>

To put it mildly, however, this quote shows the extent to which Wellhausen misunderstood the message of Chronicles. Indeed, Chronicles is a rich resource for understanding the tender mercies of God and the joy of worship.<sup>2</sup> So that we might not make the same mistake as Wellhausen, let us consider the shape and the meaning of worship as we find it in Chronicles.

In I Chronicles 10, Saul's leadership is regarded as deeply problematic. At the root of Saul's failure is his unwillingness to seek God's guidance, *to inquire of the Lord*.<sup>3</sup> For the Chronicler, this is the flaw in Saul's character that ruins his reign and leaves Israel teetering on the brink of disaster.

Like many good teachers, though, the Chronicler also draws attention to the very model of a good king, David, who *often* worships and inquires of the Lord. David's concern for the proper solemnity and joy of worship is highlighted in I Chronicles 15-16. Here, the Ark of the Covenant is carried in a well-organized procession from Kiriath-jearim to its new resting place in Jerusalem. Recognizing that the Levites have a special role to play in caring for The Ark, David enjoins them to *consecrate themselves* for this task (I  
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Chr. 15:11-15). They respond readily, and the difficulties that had marred the king's previous attempt to move the Ark to Jerusalem pose no further problem.

For the Chronicler, the Ark is one of many "public goods" enjoyed by Israel during the reigns of David and Solomon.<sup>4</sup> Other such public goods are: national independence, a strong sovereign ruler, widespread wealth, international prestige, the twelve tribes dwelling together in unity, and The Temple – first as a dream cherished by David, then as a completed project in Solomon's time. Nearly all of those goods were swept away, however, in the Babylonian invasion of 587 BCE.

Although the exiles are allowed to return to Jerusalem after Babylon falls in 539 BCE, the Chronicler can have little expectation that an independent monarchy will be re-established in Jerusalem at any time in the near future. Cyrus of Persia *is* something of an emancipator, but he still believes that all the kingdoms of the earth have been given to him alone (II Chr. 36:23). The Chronicler discerns, nonetheless, that there is one reservoir of meaning from which Israel can draw hope and strength: genuine worship of the One True God.<sup>5</sup>

The norms for true worship had been handed down through many generations of Levites, from the time of Moses to the era of David, and beyond. The main purpose, then, of the Chronicler's recounting the story of the Ark is to assure those who have returned from Babylon that God may yet be encountered in the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Their new house of worship, dedicated in 516 BCE (see Ezra 5-6), no longer has an Ark, but the proper liturgy can still be practiced there, thanks to the guidance offered by Levitical traditions.

## II CHRONICLES 6: SOLOMON AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

Compared to I Kings, the portrait of Solomon in Chronicles is all light, with no moral shadows. Consider what the Chronicler omits from his account of Solomon: The era of blessing ends with attacks from adversaries (I Kg. 11:14-25) and rebellion from within (I Kg. 11:26-40); the schism itself is attributed to judgment for the sins of Solomon (I Kg. 11:1-6, 31-33). Solomon's corvée labor and his numerous wives make him the negation of the ideal king (Deut. 17:17; I Sam. 8:11-18; I Kg. 11:1-6; 4:6-7, 22-28; 5:13-18;

9:15-23; 12:3-19). For the deuteronomic historian the record of the sins of Solomon, as well as those of David, is one more ingredient in the answer for the exilic community to the "why" for the destruction of Jerusalem; although David and Solomon were Israel's glorious kings, they too had their part in the failure to live according to God's covenant with his people, a failure which ultimately led to judgment.<sup>6</sup>

But we would do well to recognize that the Chronicler's story has an altogether different goal from that of I and II Kings. II Chronicles 5-7 tells the story of Solomon's dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Kneeling at the altar, Solomon spreads his hands in supplication to the Lord, and offers up a prayer of intercession (II Chr. 6:21-42):

1. For all of Israel, in every circumstance.
2. For justice between neighbors.
3. If Israel suffers military defeat, let it repent and be restored.
4. Should Israel suffer drought, let repentance come, and rain.
5. May Israel be delivered from plague and from famine.
6. In this Temple, may foreigners learn of the Lord's name.
7. May the Lord comfort all those in exile, and forgive them.<sup>7</sup>

Sacred music also marks the occasion, with the music of instruments and voices blending together. This is joyous worship, the kind that lifts human hearts to heaven.<sup>8</sup> We should note, however, that this is not simply an aesthetic experience. This is music and prayer meant to shape Israel's obedience. *But if ye turn away, and forsake My statutes and My commandments which I have set before you, and shall go and serve other gods, and worship them; then will I pluck them up by the roots out of My land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for My name, will I cast out of My sight* (II Chr. 7:19-20).

Throughout Chronicles a somewhat specialized vocabulary is used when speaking of The Temple: *bet ha-mikdash*, "the house of the sanctuary" (II Chr. 36:17); *bet ha-kodesh*, "the holy house" (I Chr. 29:3); *bet kodesh ha-kodashim*, "the house of the most holy place" (II Chr. 3:8, 10); *bet ha-kapporet*, "the house of the mercy seat" (I Chr. 28:11); *bet menuhah*, "the house of rest" (I Chr 28:2); *bet zevah*, "the house of sacrifice" (II Chr. 7:12); and *bet ha-ohel*, "the house of the tent" (I Chr. 9:23).<sup>9</sup> Holiness, rest, trust in

God and fellowship with Him in prayer – these are needed in every generation, and that is what a truly wise leader will model for his people.

#### HEZEKIAH: THE FEAST OF UNLEAVENED BREAD AND PASSOVER

The prophet Isaiah is highly critical of Hezekiah's eagerness to impress a group of foreign dignitaries (Isa. 39). The diplomats will return to Babylon with stories of Israel's wealth, a foreshadowing of the disaster that will come upon Israel in the next century. In the Chronicler's view, however, Hezekiah is the greatest Judean monarch after David and Solomon.<sup>10</sup> What does Hezekiah do to earn this level of respect in Chronicles?

Very early in his reign (ca. 715 BCE), Hezekiah opens the doors to the Temple and orders the Levites to purify (*le-taher*) and sanctify (*le-kadesh*) it. Previous generations had abandoned the ways of the Lord. In their day, the lamps in the Temple were extinguished, and the practice of offering incense and sacrifices to the Most High came to a halt. Hezekiah, however, intends to make a covenant with the Lord to renew Israel's worship (II Chr. 29:1-10).

What starts with one individual's desire for renewal (*Now it is in my heart... II Chr. 29:10*), soon begins to gain momentum with many more people. The priests and the Levites consecrate themselves and make preparations for the day when the sacrifices are to be made. When that day comes, Hezekiah gathers the officials of Jerusalem so that they may participate, too. He stations the musicians and singers in their places. The priests make sin-offerings on behalf of *all Israel* (II Chr. 29:24). Then, thank offerings are brought in from all those *with a willing heart* (II Chr. 29:31). The people's spontaneous response is so overwhelming that an unanticipated problem emerges: there are not enough priests to handle all the bulls, rams, goats, and lambs that are being brought into The Temple (II Chr. 29:34).

In II Chronicles 30, Hezekiah turns his attention to the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. Since this feast has not been celebrated for many years, a special effort is made to invite the tribes of the North. Many of them scoff, but a few faithful ones do make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There, they join the people of Judah for seven days of worship and thanksgiving. However, many who enter into the celebration have never been taught about the laws of ritual purity, and they participate without having prepared themselves properly.

When this problem comes to light, Hezekiah prays for them: *May the good Lord pardon every one that setteth his heart to seek God* (II Chr. 30:18-19). God listens favorably to Hezekiah's request, and grants healing and forgiveness to all. Then a second week of worship and celebration follows. As the Chronicler sees it, only in the time of Josiah was a more fitting observance of Passover performed (II Chr. 35:1-19).<sup>11</sup> By way of Hezekiah's example, then, Chronicles encourages worshippers to faithfully remember the joy of the Exodus, to be grateful to God for His bountiful gifts, to be ready to give in a sacrificial way, and to be mindful of their need for God's mercy and healing.<sup>12</sup>

#### II CHRONICLES 34: JOSIAH AND COVENANT RENEWAL

In 621 BCE, seeing that the Temple has fallen into ruins, Josiah embarks on an extensive campaign to repair and restore it. Shaphan, Maaseiah, and Joah are in the middle of their work, when Hilkiah, the high priest, finds some old scrolls in the archives. Perhaps not fully realizing how precious the scrolls are, Hilkiah hands them over to his assistant, Shaphan, as if to say, "By the way, give these to the king."

So Shaphan reads the scrolls to Josiah. Josiah realizes instantly that Israel has failed to follow the Lord's commands, and that the moral and spiritual direction of the entire nation needs to change immediately. He tears his garments as a sign of repentance. It is instructive to compare this scene to the one in Jeremiah 36:1-25. There, Jehudi reads the scroll of Jeremiah to King Jehoiakim. Instead of repenting, though, Jehoiakim hardens his heart, cuts the scroll into strips with his knife, and throws each piece into the fireplace as soon as it is read to him.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Josiah has a receptive heart. Promptly and sincerely, he responds to the word of the Lord.

Rather than encouraging the young king, however, Huldah the prophetess delivers a message that Josiah can scarcely take in. It is not only "their fathers" who have sinned. This generation, too, has turned away from the Lord. The fate of the people, the land, and the city cannot be averted, not by prayer, not by repentance, not by reform. The verdict is final: catastrophic events will soon inundate Israel like a flood (II Chr. 34:22-28).<sup>14</sup>

No doubt Josiah is perplexed by Huldah's prophecy, but he does not give up, nor does he despise his responsibilities as king over Israel. He makes ar-

rangements for a covenant renewal ceremony on a national level.<sup>15</sup> The people are called together. The Book of the Law is read out to them. Josiah makes a covenant before the Lord to keep the Law, and he does his best to teach it to the rest of Israel, too, no matter what history may bring (*he did not turn asidethy did not turn aside* II Chr. 34:2, 34:33). This is the covenant in which they are all to "stand" (*va-ya'amod*) as 34:32 puts it.<sup>16</sup>

So David cherishes a dream about a temple for the Lord. Solomon builds it, and Hezekiah restores it. But not many years after Josiah's death, Huldah's prophecy comes to pass, and Solomon's Temple is utterly destroyed. What is Israel to do now? We get a glimpse of one answer to this question in the scrolls that were discovered by Hilkiah.<sup>17</sup> Faithful obedience to God is nourished by worship, certainly, but for a religion of the Book, neither the time nor the place of worship have to be restricted to a house built by human beings.

## NOTES

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3. Baruch Halpern, "Sacred History and Ideology: Chronicles" in Richard Elliott Friedman, ed. *The Creation of Sacred Literature: Composition and Redaction of the Biblical Text* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) pp. 35-54.
4. Deirdre Ann Dempsey, "The Ark and the Temple in I and II Chronicles" *Bible Today* 36 (1998) pp. 233-239. Christopher T. Begg, "The Ark in Chronicles" in *The Chronicler as Theologian* (London/New York: T. and T. Clark, 2003) pp. 133-145.
5. Louis Jonkers, "The Rhetorics of Finding a New Identity in a Multi-Religious and Multi-Ethnic Society: The Case of the Book of Chronicles" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 24 (2003) pp. 396-416.
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8. J. W. Kleinig, "The Divine Institution of the Lord's Song in Chronicles" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992) pp. 75-83.
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10. Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) p. 912.

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12. M. Patrick Graham, "Setting the Heart to Seek God: Worship in II Chronicles 30.1-31.3" in *Worship in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) pp. 124-141; Rolf Rendtorff, "Chronicles and the Priestly Torah" *Haran Festschrift* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996) pp. 259-266.
13. J. Andrew Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) pp. 403-421.
14. David A. Glatt-Gilad, "The Role of Huldah's Prophecy in the Chronicler's Portrayal of Josiah's Reform" *Biblica* 77 (1996) pp. 6-31. Lamentations Rabbah 1:53 says that idols remained in Judah, indicating that some people did not embrace Josiah's reforms. See *The Midrash Volume VII* (London: Socino Press, 1939) p. 143.
15. Lyle Eslinger, "Josiah and the Torah Book: Comparison of II Kings 22:1-23:28 and II Chronicles 34:1-35:19" *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986) pp. 37-62. Philip R. Davies, "Josiah and the Law Book" in Lester Grabbe, ed. *Good Kings and Bad Kings* (London: T & T Clark International, 2005) pp. 65-77. Maarten J. Paul, "King Josiah's Renewal of the Covenant (2 Kings 22-23)" in C. H. W. Brekelmans and J. Lust eds., *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies* (Leuven : Leuven University Press: 1990) pp. 269-276.
16. For more on *amad* ("to stand"), see the entry by Samuel Amsler in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* ed. E. Jenni and C. Westermann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) Volume 2, pp. 921-924.
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