

The God of the Chronicler

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After an initial nine-chapter genealogy, the book of 1 Chronicles¹ tells the story of King David in chs. 10-29, beginning with the death of Saul on Mt. Gilboa. Readers soon notice that this is an idealized David. There is nothing about his secret anointing by Samuel, his friendship with Jonathan and Jonathan's acknowledgment of his impending kingship, his guerrilla war against Saul, his politically advantageous and controversial marriages to Michal and Abigail, and his suspicious collaboration with the Philistines at the time of Saul's death. There is no interregnum, no rival King Ishbaal in the north, and no killing of the Amalekite who claimed he had killed Saul or of the assassins of Ishbaal. After David's enthronement, one looks in vain in Chronicles for the story of his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah her husband, for Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar and David's weak response to this crime, for stories about the rebellious Absalom and the civil war that ensued, for David's complicity in the deaths of Saul's descendants, or for the infighting among his sons to succeed him. David dies at the height of his powers in 1 Chronicles, brimming with generosity for the ensuing temple, and making sure in every way that Solomon will succeed him without incident. David, like Solomon after him, is an ideal king, whose words and deeds give authorization to the temple, its clergy, and its sacrificial rites.

¹ The translations of Chronicles are my own. Textual criticism and other justification for these renderings can be found in my forthcoming commentary on 1 Chronicles in the Hermeneia Series, which will be published by Fortress Press in the spring of 2006.

Temple, clergy, and sacrificial rites—these express the themes and purpose of the Chronicler. But this essay, in honor of long-time friend and colleague Terence C. Fretheim, pursues a Fretheimian passion: What sort of God appears in these chapters? Who is the God of the Chronicler, or at least the God depicted by the David narratives in Chronicles?

The Divine Names²

It is no surprise to find that the names Yahweh and Elohim are used frequently in the book. A search in the computer concordance program *Bible Works* turned up 559 hits for Yahweh and 321 hits for various forms of Elohim. Thirty-two times Elohim replaces the name Yahweh that was present in the parallel text of Samuel or Kings, but the word Yahweh has hardly gone out of usage. The same cannot be said for Adonay, which occurs more than 450 times elsewhere in the Bible, but never in Chronicles. The “God of Heaven,” a characteristic name for God in Persian period literature also never appears in Chronicles. Several other divine names, however, deserve consideration:

- (Yahweh) the God of our ancestors. This term occurs four times in the David narratives and 27 times all told in Chronicles. In the rest of the Old Testament it appears only 19 times. This name emphasizes the continuity in the divine-human relationship, which is a frequent theme in Chronicles.
- Yahweh the God of Israel. This term occurs 9 times in the David narratives³ and 33 times all told in Chronicles. Eight of these occurrences stem from the Chronicler’s sources in Samuel and Kings. This term also expresses the idea of a significant and enduring bond between Yahweh and the people. David articulates

² For further discussion of this issue see Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought*, BEATAJ 9. (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1989): 11-62.

³ 1 Chr 15:12, 14; 16:4, 36; 22:6; 23:25; 24:19; 28:4; 29:10.

this theme somewhat redundantly in 1 Chr 17:24: “Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel, is Israel’s God.”⁴ The same idea is expressed in different words when David asks that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel⁵ would keep forever the inclination of the thoughts of the hearts of your people (1 Chr 29:18). David’s prayer for the permanent commitment of the people would no doubt include the audience for whom the Chronicler was writing.

- Yahweh of hosts. This term occurs six times in 1 and 2 Samuel, but only three times in Chronicles, all in the David narratives. We are told that David became greater and greater since Yahweh of hosts was with him (1 Chr 11:9; cf. 2 Sam 5:10). This military epithet is followed immediately by a list of David’s mighty men in 1 Chr 11:10-47. In the second occurrence, 1 Chr 17:7, the reference to Yahweh of hosts is followed by the claim that Yahweh has cut off all of David’s enemies. The third occurrence, 1 Chr 17:24, mentioned in the previous paragraph above, affirms David’s exclusive allegiance to the God who raised him up as king and established Israel as his people.
- Yahweh God. This term appears six times in the David narratives in 1 Chronicles⁶ and twelve times in Chronicles all told, twenty times in the story of the fall in Genesis 2-3, and nine times elsewhere in the Bible. When the Chronicler cites Ps 132:8-10 in 2 Chr 6:41-42, he inserts the title Yahweh God into each of the three petitions: Arise, O Yahweh God, and go to your resting place, Let your priests, O Yahweh God, be clothed with victory; and O Yahweh

⁴ Cf. the source text, 2 Sam 7:26: “Yahweh of hosts is God over Israel.”

⁵ See also 2 Chr 30:26, a verse penned by the Chronicler, and 1 Kgs 18:36, a verse not included in Chronicles.

⁶ 1 Chr 17:16, 17; 22:1, 19; 28:20; and 29:1. In the latter passage we are told that the temple is for Yahweh God and not for human beings.

God, do not turn away the face of your anointed one. David assures Solomon his son that “Yahweh God, my God, is with you” (1 Chr 28:20). This formula of accompaniment—Yahweh is with you—is frequent in 1 Chronicles and expresses a significant aspect of God’s relationship to David, Solomon, and the leaders of Israel (1 Chr 11:9; 17:2, 8; 22:11, 16, 18;⁷ 28:20).

Yahweh and the gods

By the time of the Chronicler (mid fourth century BCE), monotheism was firmly established in Israel and seems to be presupposed by the Chronicler even if his terminology leaves some ambiguity on the subject. His most direct statement on the subject is taken over from the Deuteronomistic History: “Yahweh, there is no one like you and no God besides you, according to all we have heard with our ears” (1 Chr 17:20//2 Sam 7:22). The denial that there is any god besides Yahweh seems to be in some tension with the notion that there is no God like Yahweh. The same tension may be observed in 1 Chr 16:25-26//Ps 96:4-5:

“For great is Yahweh and to be praised exceedingly,

He is to be feared above all the gods.

For all the gods of the peoples are idols,

But Yahweh made the heavens.”

The first verse proclaims Yahweh’s supremacy over other deities, but the second classifies all other would-be deities as idols. Yahweh’s supremacy without an explicit affirmation of exclusiveness is affirmed in 1 Chr 29:11-12: “To you Yahweh

⁷ “Is not Yahweh your God with you, and has he not given you rest on every side?” David here and in 1 Chr 23:25 claims that rest has been achieved during his reign, but elsewhere in Chronicles rest is delayed until the reign of Solomon (1 Chr 17:1, 10 [per contra 2 Sam 7:1, 11]; 22:9). Solomon is a person of rest (1 Chr 22:9) whereas David a person of wars who has shed much blood (1 Chr 22:8; 28:3).

belong greatness, and power, and honor, and splendor, and majesty, indeed all things in heaven and earth; yours is the kingdom, Yahweh, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and wealth come from you, and you rule over all, and in your hand are strength and power, and it is in your power to make great and to give strength to all.”⁸ Sennacherib and his servants argued that since the gods of the nations had not been able to rescue them so the God of Hezekiah would be unable to rescue his people from Sennacherib’s hand. But the Chronicler comments editorially: “They spoke of the God of Jerusalem as if he were like the gods of the peoples of the earth, which are the work of human hands” (2 Chr 32:19). Nevertheless, in Chronicles foreign deities are not given derogatory names, but are called “the gods of the peoples of the land” (1 Chr 5:25), “the gods of the people of Seir” (2 Chr 25:14), “the gods of Edom” (2 Chr 25:20), or the like. When the Philistines abandoned “their gods” after a battle with David, he burned them, implying that they were nothing but idols (1 Chr 14:12).

Yahweh and the Doctrine of Retribution

The doctrine of retribution is attested in many parts of Scripture, and criticisms of it are voiced especially in Job and Ecclesiastes. Whereas the effects of negative behavior are cumulative in the Deuteronomistic History, with the ultimate punishment delayed until the final destruction of Samaria in 2 Kings 17 and of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 25, retribution in Chronicles, whether for bane or blessing, usually takes place within a person’s own lifetime. Modern readers wince at the capital punishment meted out to Saul by Yahweh in 1 Chr 10:13-14 or to Uzzah, who

⁸ The doxology appended to the Lord’s Prayer in many late manuscripts of Matt 6:13 is dependent on 1 Chr 29:11-12.

touched the ark to keep it from falling, in 1 Chr 13:10. Since the matter of the census was displeasing to Yahweh, he also struck Israel retributively (1 Chr 21:7). From a positive understanding of the doctrine of retribution, the blessing Yahweh gave to Obed-edom and his house is a direct response to his providing a safe harbor for the ark after the Uzzah incident until it could be brought to Jerusalem (1 Chr 13:14). David pleads for individual rather than collective retributive consequences for his sin in numbering the people: “Was it not I who gave the command to number the people? It was I who sinned and acted very wickedly. But these sheep, what have they done? Yahweh my God, let your hand be against me and against my father’s house, but let not the plague be against your own people” (1 Chr 21:17). David also enunciates the positive consequences of retribution in his admonition to Solomon: “Then you will prosper if you are careful to do the statutes and the ordinances which Yahweh commanded Moses for Israel” (1 Chr 22:13). Thus, Solomon’s success is dependent on his obedience. Later, the Chronicler makes Yahweh’s eternal establishment of the kingdom itself conditional on Solomon’s obedience: “I will establish his kingdom forever if he is resolute in keeping my commandments and my judgments” (1 Chr 28:7). Obedience by Solomon is considered possible and plausible, as for people in general in Deut 30:11-14, and the Chronicler presents Solomon as meeting this requirement and therefore guaranteeing the continuation of the dynasty. The bottom line, however, is a clear statement of the doctrine of retribution: “If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you abandon him, he will cast you off forever” (1 Chr 28:9).

Characteristic Behaviors of Yahweh

God the Revealer

The Chronicler speaks of Yahweh revealing himself to prophets, both in material inherited from the Deuteronomistic History and in words of his own composition. Nathan, for example, receives a word from God at night that changes radically the preliminary advice he had given to David (1 Chr 17:3-15; contrast v. 2//2 Sam 7:4-17; contrast v. 3). Yahweh also spoke to Gad the seer of David, with an offer to give David three choices of punishment for his sin in taking the census (1 Chr 21:9-10). In the Vorlage, it was the “word of Yahweh” that came to Gad, and he is named both a seer and a prophet (2 Sam 24:11). In a later verse in this chapter the Chronicler reworded his Vorlage to make clear that Gad is speaking on divine authority and not just on his own initiative. He has the angel of Yahweh give orders to Gad to establish an altar for Yahweh (1 Chr 21:18) whereas in the Vorlage Gad speaks without any explicit divine instructions (2 Sam 24:18). In 1 Chr 17:3//2 Sam 7:4 (see above) the divine oracle forbidding David to build the temple came through Nathan, but in 1 Chr 22:8 David himself functions as a prophetic recipient of the word: “The word of Yahweh came to me, saying.”⁹ Here and in 1 Chr 28:3, 6, the role of the prophet Nathan recedes into the background and David claims to be directly instructed by God.¹⁰

⁹ The “word of Yahweh” is also used to describe God’s ethical commands in Chronicles. Saul acted unfaithfully and did not keep the word of Yahweh (1 Chr 10:13). While the Chronicler does not specify which word of Yahweh was disobeyed, he may have had in mind Saul’s inappropriate sacrifice (1 Sam 13:13-14), his sparing of the animals of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:1-3, 23, 26), or his killing of the priests of Nob (1 Sam 22:18-19). Solomon is urged to keep the law of Yahweh in 1 Chr 22:12-13 and 28:7, 9. In 1 Chr 28:19, David prays: “Give to Solomon my son a perfect heart to keep your commandments, your decrees, and your statutes, and to build the temple.”

¹⁰ In the “Last Words of David” in 2 Sam 23:1-7 David also claims the role of prophet: “The spirit of Yahweh speaks through me, his word is upon my tongue” (2 Sam 23:2).

God's revelation to David also includes details about the future temple. When David gives Solomon the plan for the temple in 1 Chr 28:11, the text recalls Exod 25:9, 40; 27:8 where Yahweh instructed Moses to make the tabernacle and its vessels according to the plan that had been shown him, and Ezekiel was instructed by Yahweh to make known the plan of the future temple (Ezek 43:11). David is a second Moses, communicating the plan of the temple to Solomon, as Moses had revealed the plan of the temple to the Israelites. In 1 Chr 28:19 the Chronicler claims that the plan of the temple had been revealed to David by God, just as the plan of the tabernacle had been revealed to Moses: "All this was in a document—since the hand of Yahweh was upon him—that made clear all the details of the plan." Hence the plan for the temple and its furnishings was contained in a written document, and this plan had divine authorship even if it was mediated through David. The reference to the hand of Yahweh being on David is a paraphrase for what we might call divine inspiration. Yahweh's explicit endorsement of the temple is brought out in 1 Chr 21:26 when David calls to Yahweh and he answers by fire from heaven that consumes the burnt offering.¹¹

God the one who chooses

Yahweh's election of various figures plays a significant role in 1 Chronicles. In 1 Chr 16:13 the poem created by the Chronicler from three Psalms (105, 106, and 96)¹² speaks of "seed of Israel his servant, children of Jacob his chosen ones." The text focuses attention on the faithful community, Israel, whereas in the Vorlage in Ps 105:6 there is a contrast between the seed of Abraham and the children of Jacob, thus

¹¹ See also Lev 9:24; Judg 6:11; and 2 Chr 7:1.

¹² See Ralph W. Klein, "Psalms in Chronicles," *CurTM* 32 (2005): 264-275.

those genealogically descended from two different ancestors. This is the only verse in Chronicles that speaks explicitly of the election of Israel.¹³ In the previous chapter the Chronicler referred to the Levites as those chosen to carry the ark (1 Chr 15:2; cf. 2 Chr 29:11), following Pentateuchal legislation (Num 4:15; Deut 10:8). The main point in 1 Chronicles is that God has chosen Solomon (1 Chr 28:5-6, 10; 29:1).¹⁴ God's choice of David as king forever is attested already in the Deuteronomistic History and in the corresponding passages in Chronicles where they are extant (1 Sam 16:8-12 [by implication]; 2 Sam 6:21; 1 Kgs 8:16//2 Chr 6:6; 1 Kgs 11:34), just as Yahweh had chosen Saul before David (1 Sam 10:24). In 1 Chr 28:4 the choice of David is spelled out in a narrowing-down process—first, Judah, then the house of my father, and finally, among the sons of my father—that resembles the process used to determine Achan's guilt (Josh 7:16-18) and Saul's choice to be king (1 Sam 10:20-21). The four references cited above to Solomon as the chosen king and temple builder are the only times Solomon is designated in the Bible as someone chosen by God. The birth oracle contained in 1 Chr 22:9 suggests that Solomon, like Jeremiah, was chosen before his birth (Jer 1:5). For the Chronicler it is important that both the one who made preparations for the temple and provided a plan for its erection (David) and the one who executed the plan (Solomon) were chosen by God. Later kings rule only because of the promise to David, not because of their election.

¹³ The text of 2 Chr 1:9-10 is quite different from the Vorlage in 1 Kgs 3:8-9, which affirms Israel's election. Another reference to Israel's election in Kings (1 Kgs 8:51-53) is omitted by the Chronicler, who inserts instead a quotation from Psalm 132 (vv. 8-10 and v. 1). The uniqueness of Israel in Yahweh's eyes, nevertheless, is brought out clearly in David's prayer after receiving the oracle of Nathan: "Who is like your people Israel, one nation on the earth, whom God has gone to redeem to be his people...by driving out nations from before your people whom you have redeemed from Egypt" (1 Chr 17:21)?

¹⁴ In 2 Chronicles we find references to the choice of Jerusalem and David (2 Chr 6:5-6; cf. 6:34, 38; 7:12; 12:13; 33:7) and to the choice of the temple (7:16).

Divine choice of David and Solomon is also indicated by other phraseology. David knew, for example, that Yahweh had established him as king over Israel (1 Chr 14:2) and Yahweh put the fear of David on all the nations (1 Chr 14:17). Nathan told David that Yahweh would build him a house (1 Chr 17:10) and establish the kingdom of his seed (1 Chr 17:11, 12). Yahweh uses an adoption formula for Solomon: “I will be to him a father, and he will be for me a son” (1 Chr 17:13). Yahweh promises to install Solomon in Yahweh’s temple and in his kingdom (1 Chr 17:14), and Solomon sat in fact on Yahweh’s throne (1 Chr 29:23).¹⁵

God indeed tempts no one

On at least one occasion, the Chronicler defends Yahweh against the charge of causing David to sin. According to 2 Sam 24:1, the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel, and Yahweh incited David to number the people. Chronicles omits the problematic idea of Yahweh’s anger leading to his temptation of David and attributes this temptation instead to Satan (1 Chr 21:1). Satan plays a similar accusatory role in his other two occurrences in the Old Testament: the prologue to the book of Job (chs. 1-2) and the post-exilic prophet Zechariah (3:1-2). Only in Chronicles, however, does this word lack the definite article and therefore function as a personal name. A similar use of a supernatural evil force to lessen problematic actions by Yahweh can be seen in the book of Jubilees where the author says it was Mastema (= Satan) who suggested to God that he test Abraham by having him sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1; Jub 17:15-18), and who further insists that it was Mastema, and not Yahweh, who tried to kill Moses on his way to Egypt (Exod 4:24; Jub 48:2). The Targum to Chronicles

¹⁵ By way of contrast, in Kings Solomon sat on the royal throne (1 Kgs 1:46).

harmonizes Samuel and Chronicles by having Yahweh cause Satan to stand up against Israel.

God who is faithful

Faithfulness is another characteristic of Yahweh according to the Chronicler. David assured Solomon that Yahweh would be with him and added: “He will not fail or forsake you until all the work for the service of the house of Yahweh is completed” (1 Chr 28:20). By denying that Yahweh will “fail” or “forsake” Solomon, the Chronicler is using well-known Deuteronomic vocabulary (Deut 4:31; 31:6, 8; Josh 1:5). The expression “work for the service” refers to the work of construction of the temple rather than to the ongoing cultic rites.

The manifold mercies of Yahweh

Perhaps the most endearing characteristics of Yahweh in 1 Chronicles are his manifold mercies, his willingness to change his mind about judgment, and the way he searches longingly for his people. Yahweh offered to David through Gad three possible punishments for his role in taking the census: three years of famine, three months of fleeing before foes while the enemies’ sword would overtake David, or three days of the sword of Yahweh, pestilence in the land, and the angel of Yahweh destroying throughout the territory of Israel (1 Chr 21:12). Faced with this dilemma, David chose what could be the most devastating punishment delivered by Yahweh himself, even if this punishment lasts for the shortest duration. David said, “Let me fall into the hand of Yahweh for his mercies are exceedingly manifold” (1 Chr 21:13). David counted on the fact that the one delivering these blows is the same one whose mercies are exceedingly manifold. One thinks immediately of the confession that

appears several times in the Old Testament: “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loyalty and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6-7; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). The Chronicler may also have thought of the divine characteristics reported in Psalm 103: Yahweh is merciful; he does not deal with us according to our sins; he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust (vv. 8-14). David did not want to fall into human hands since such human agents might overstep their bounds as Assyria did in Isa 10:5-12 or 37:26-39. David never seems to consider the first choice, three years of famine.

God, who changes his mind

The second endearing characteristic of Yahweh is his willingness to change his mind about punishment. God had sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, after the pestilence had killed seventy thousand in Israel, but when he was about to destroy it, Yahweh looked and changed his mind about the calamity and said to the destroying angel, “Enough! Now let your hand drop” (1 Chr 21:15). David’s wager, in the Chronicler’s mind, had paid off. He had chosen punishment delivered by one whose mercies were exceedingly manifold. Yahweh’s compassion arose, according to an addition made by the Chronicler, precisely when he saw the people’s devastation taking place. Similarly, when God had looked on the Israelites in Egypt, he thoroughly understood their condition and acted to save them (Exod 2:25).

God longingly searches all hearts

God’s omniscience and omnipresence can be comforting (Psalm 139) or threatening (Amos 9:1-4). David admonishes Solomon, “Acknowledge the God of your father and serve him with a perfect heart and a willing spirit for Yahweh

searches longingly all hearts and understands every motive behind thoughts” (1 Chr 28:9). Some might see Yahweh’s searching and understanding as attempts to bully Solomon into obedience. J. G. McConville, however, understands the word “seek” to have a connotation of longing rather than judgment.¹⁶ As Solomon acknowledges Yahweh, Yahweh understands human thoughts, and as Solomon serves Yahweh, Yahweh searches for a positive human response. After all, it is Yahweh’s intention that Solomon’s obedience will validate the promise made to David. In 1 Chr 29:17 David also confesses that God’s knowledge about human moral conduct has a positive overtone: “I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness.” Yahweh’s seeking with longing leads to Solomon’s seeking Yahweh and being found by him.

Conclusion

The God in the David narratives in Chronicles rewards and punishes kings for their actions, but this God also reveals his plan for the temple and discloses his message to prophets and prophetic kings, chooses the kings of the United Monarchy, does not tempt his own, proves to be faithful, is known for his manifold mercies, changes his mind about punishment, and lovingly searches the hearts of all with the hope and the expectation that they will prove obedient. This God of the Chronicler is worthy to stand with the depictions of Israel’s God discovered by our honoree in other canonical contexts.

¹⁶ “1 Chronicles 28:9: Yahweh ‘Seeks out’ Solomon,” *JTS* 37 (1986): 105-108.