History, Memory, Hebrew Scriptures

A Festschrift for Ehud Ben Zvi

edited by
Ian Douglas Wilson and Diana Edelman
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edited by
Ian Douglas Wilson and Diana V. Edelman

Winona Lake, Indiana
Eisenbrauns
2015
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Chronicles and Utopia: Likely Bedfellows?

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In recent years biblical scholarship has discovered utopia.¹ Learned works have utilized the concept to study the prophetic books and their visions, the book of Numbers’ depiction of the promised land and its reception, the literate society of Persian-era Yehud in general, and the “Bible” as a whole, to mention a few examples (see Ben Zvi 2006b, 2013; Davies 2012; Uhlenbruch 2015). The concept has been a boon to scholarship on Chronicles in particular: it has contributed to the development of a new paradigm for thinking about the book as a work of Yehudite literature and historiography. R. Boer (1999) and J. Blenkinsopp (2013), for example, have penned essays on the issue, and S. Schweitzer’s monograph Reading Utopia in Chronicles (2007) has been well received. I want to take a closer look at this trend. Recently, M. Atwood said, “Every utopia—let’s just stick with the literary ones—faces the same problem: What do you do with the people who don’t fit in?” (Bland 2013). Similarly, regarding Chronicles, I want to ask: Are there aspects of Chronicles and its milieu that don’t fit the utopian paradigm, or that militate against it? What are the potential problems with reading Chronicles as a utopian work, and how do these affect the usefulness of utopia as a concept for studying the book of Chronicles and Yehudite historiography more broadly?² Can this newfound relationship between utopia and Chronicles thrive or not?

Author’s note: I presented versions of this essay at the 2014 CSBS annual meeting at Brock University in St. Catherines, Ontario; and at the 2014 EABS conference (held jointly with the SBL international meeting) at the University of Vienna.

1. And Ehud Ben Zvi has been a leader in its exploration, an important voice in an ongoing conversation about the utility of “utopia” and “dystopia” as heuristic concepts for the study of the ancient books we know from the Hebrew Bible (see Ben Zvi 2006b: 1–2). He has also been on the forefront of Chronicles scholarship for nearly three decades (e.g., Ben Zvi 2006a). I am, therefore, delighted to present these observations on utopia and the book of Chronicles to my doctoral supervisor and friend, Ehud (“Call me Ehud”)—a truly outstanding scholar and human being, חכם andنبון (cf. Hos 14:10).

2. I consider Chronicles to be a work of ancient “historiography,” though I realize, as with all genre labels, this is somewhat problematic. Cf. Mitchell 2013: 270–72. Ehud also refers to
Before advocating for the devil, so to speak, I want to emphasize that the concept of utopia has been and can continue to be fruitful for biblical studies in general and for historical-critical studies in particular. In this essay I am going to problematize the concept’s use vis-à-vis Chronicles, but that does not mean that I think we should necessarily abandon it in our work. Schweitzer has made an important contribution to the study of Chronicles by questioning the usefulness of the book for reconstructing historical and sociocultural realities in the early Second Temple period. He rightly challenges those who assume that Chronicles is a reliable source of “historical data” for this era, and he argues instead that the book represents ideological struggles of the period rather than any actual status quo (see Schweitzer 2007: 28–29). Many parts of Chronicles indeed present “idealized portraits” of the past that contributed to the negotiation of Yehudite social memory and identity (cf. Boda 2009: 251). I do not wish to argue with the idea that Chronicles presents an alternative take on the past and the past’s meaning for the present; the problem I address in this essay is the idea that Chronicles, as a work of literature in its Yehudite milieu, was broadly utopian in scope and contributed to utopianism.

When historical critics of the Hebrew Bible take a concept like utopia—a term famously coined by Thomas More in the 16th century—they are reading the concept anachronistically into the ancient Judean texts, hoping to gain some new insights. The concept is a heuristic, an analytical tool for discovering new aspects of old literature, for revealing perspectives that may contribute to new understandings of the ancient society and culture responsible for the literature. Now, I am duly aware that there is a litany of texts from the ancient world that one may label “utopia” or “utopian” (e.g., Homer, Od. books 6–8; Plato, Rep.; Diodorus Siculus 2.55–60, 5.41–46; etc.; see Schweitzer 2007: 19–20, 26–27), and indeed these texts probably functioned in their milieux in a manner similar to More’s text in his, that is, they took part in “utopianism.” 3 Nevertheless, these texts were not utopias or utopian before they were declared to be so, post More (cf. Uhlenbruch 2015: 64). Again, this is, I think, not a problem in itself—many of our generic labels and critical tools are anachronistic (e.g., I have used science-fiction literary theory to study the prophetic books: see Wilson forthcoming a)—but it necessarily requires a careful consideration of the texts involved, their primary literary and sociocultural milieux, and the relevance of the concept for a study of said texts and sociocultural settings. These issues, though, have received much attention (e.g., Boda and Lowe 2009), so I do not intend to dwell on them here. My goal in this essay is to raise some questions and make some observations about the book of Chronicles specifically, about the society in which it initially circulated as a literary work.

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3. Schweitzer (2007: 14) understands utopia, utopian, and utopianism in relation to literary genre, ideology, and sociology, respectively.
with some amount of authority, and about the relevance of utopia/utopianism as a heuristic concept for studies of this particular text in this setting. I will focus mostly upon the issue of kingship and politics, which is one of the major themes upon which Schweitzer focuses in his monograph (2007: 76–131).

There are four interrelated points I want to make: the first two being more general and the latter two dealing with more specific issues concerning the monarchy and kingship. First, attempting to read utopia in Chronicles necessarily requires reading it vis-à-vis Samuel–Kings. One’s understanding of the relationship between Samuel–Kings and Chronicles directly determines the viability of utopia and utopianism in Chronicles—the idea that Chronicles recounts a “better alternative reality” or “ideal counterreality.” Second, and related to the first, one should consider the authoritative status of these books in the Persian period and later, which raises some questions about what the ancient readership considered to be “better” or “ideal” about Chronicles’ version of the past. Third, and again related to the first, Chronicles obviously “forgets” or brackets certain aspects of Samuel–Kings’ account of the monarchy, while it also adds to or expands that account. How do we understand these alterations with regard to the concept of utopia? Precisely how these texts contributed to social memory and remembering in Yehud is a significant issue. Finally, and related to the previous point, many of the arguments for reading utopian politics in Chronicles rely upon the differences between Chronicles and Samuel–Kings in their depictions of kingship. But what about the similarities? In my view, focusing on the affinity between the two historiographies ends up impeding attempts to find widespread interest in utopia or utopianism in the book of Chronicles.

* * *

First is the issue of Chronicles’ relationship with Samuel–Kings. In my mind there is little doubt that Chronicles postdates Samuel–Kings and that Chronicles relied upon some version of Samuel–Kings as a source (cf. Knoppers 2003: 66–71). However, we have no idea what intentions the literate Yehudite community had for the book of Chronicles (cf. Mitchell 2013: 270–71). Despite many and various hypotheses, no consensus idea has emerged. What we know for sure is that one community—a small and most likely tightly knit community⁵—ended up with

4. Cf. Ehud’s two-part working definition (Ben Zvi 2013: 466): “(a) any (historically-contingent) socially construed memory/image of a future or past ‘reality’ substantially better than the present as understood by the community and which, among other things, allows for an exploration of a ‘reality’ different from the one it perceives; and (b) memories associated with claims that construct the present of the community as ‘ideal’ as opposed to alternative less than ideal circumstances” (italics original). Notably, Ehud deals with Chronicles only tangentially in this recent essay, and when he does so he refers to Schweitzer and Blenkinsopp.

5. On the demographics of late Persian Yehud and Jerusalem, see Faust 2007; Lipschits 2009; Finkelstein 2012; and their bibliographies. On the literate community there, see also the seminal essays by Ehud: Ben Zvi 1997, 2000.
two separate works of literature that focus mainly upon the story of Israel’s/Ju
dah’s monarchical pasts. These two works offered different perspectives; they con
tributed different narratives to the ongoing formation of Yehudite social memory
and identity, the construction of shared (hi)stories and the interpretation of those
(hi)stories vis-à-vis understandings of the community’s present and future. This
should be our starting point, and from here we may work backward to reconstruct
the sociocultural discourses of Persian Yehud as they are reflected in these differ
tent works of literature. To begin with the assumption that Chronicles somehow
intentionally altered the vision of the past represented in Samuel–Kings is to ap
proach the problem from the wrong direction, in my opinion. Of course, one may
credibly end up at that conclusion, but one must begin with the knowledge that the
late Persian-period Yehudites were reading both of these historiographical works,
and both carried some level of authority within the literate segment of Yehudite
society.

As J. Van Seters (2012: 76) states in a recent essay, “[T]here was already in the
late Persian period a strong dissenting voice to any ‘orthodoxy’ in the collective
memory . . . and to the indoctrination of a single identity for the Jews of Yehud
and the Diaspora.” He states this after explicating the various memories created
by the Yahwist, the Priestly writer, the Deuteronomist, etc., for Yehudite society.
Whether or not one agrees with Van Seters’s understandings of the literature and
its compositions, one can appreciate the major implication of his argument: this
community possessed and gave authority to a number of diverse and sometimes
even contradictory texts, all of which contributed something to the formation of
individual and social memories and identities in Yehud. In a similar way of think
ing, and in relation to Samuel–Kings and Chronicles in particular, C. Mitchell
(1999: 326) writes, “The Chronicler’s text can be read as simply showing another
position while accepting that Samuel had a valid position as well; it does not have
to be a correction or a replacement for Samuel; it is more of a ‘yes, but....’” These
texts are in dialogue. Of course, we can read each text independently, and each
stands on its own as an ancient Yehudite historiographical work. But to read uto
pia in Chronicles necessarily requires comparison, dialogue, discourse. One can
not have a “better alternative reality” if there is nothing to alter. This first point
of mine says nothing really about the viability of utopia as a critical concept for
the study of Chronicles, but it is the foundation of my entire argument: any use
of utopia to study Chronicles’ conceptualizations of kingship and politics in the
past requires one to think about the interrelationship between Chronicles and
Samuel–Kings.6

6. This first point already creates a problem for Blenkinsopp (2011), who understands
Chronicles as the product of a “school” of thought that postdated and stood apart from the
thought represented in Samuel–Kings. The problem is that this “school” was obviously reading
Samuel–Kings too, and that Samuel–Kings was likely very important to this group.
My second point, which builds upon the first, is the issue of authority. It appears that, on the whole, Samuel–Kings carried more authority than Chronicles. Hellenistic literature cites and alludes to both texts, suggesting that both were authoritative on some level, but on many issues it seems that Samuel–Kings was the preferred source, the more authoritative vision of the past. Consider, for instance, Ben Sira’s comments about the great kings of Israel and Judah. This is a text that knows and alludes to Chronicles (see Sir 47:9–10; cf. Knoppers 2003: 107). However, the text’s account of David and Davidic kingship relies heavily upon the vision of Samuel–Kings. Ben Sira mentions Goliath and also David’s “sins.” Moreover, it sharply criticizes Solomon for his lust, and it heaps effusive praise upon Josiah (cf. Sirach 47–49). This is not the picture presented in Chronicles, in which Solomon is essentially flawless and in which Josiah’s role is somewhat diminished on account of the further lionizing of Hezekiah. Again, this does not say anything about utopia per se, but it raises some interesting questions for those who want to see Chronicles as utopian. If Chronicles was utopian, then did Yehudites and Judeans eventually disprefer this “better” vision of their monarchic past? Did the utopia become a dystopia? In this case, then, did Chronicles even depict a “better” alternative reality in the first place? What goes into a “better” or “ideal” depiction of the monarchy anyway? And how can we know? These rhetorical questions are overly reductive and simple—thinkers who employ the concept of utopia have ready answers—but these types of questions, I argue below, eventually undermine attempts to find utopia or utopianism in Chronicles’ historiography of kingship.

The third point is the question of differences between Samuel–Kings and Chronicles. Chronicles famously “forgets” or brackets certain elements of the historiography in Samuel–Kings. One thinks of the Greek title for the book, Παραλειπόμενα (“what is omitted”), which traditionally refers to what is lacking in Genesis–Kings and present in Chronicles, but could also just as likely (and ironically) refer to what is lacking in Chronicles but present in Genesis–Kings (see Sabo 2013: 45; cf. Mitchell 1999: 311; Knoppers and Harvey 2002). Well known and oft-discussed examples of omissions in Chronicles include: the bracketing of Samuel’s story, nearly all of Saul’s reign, and most of the events of David’s accession; the sins of Solomon and many details concerning the kingdom’s division;

8. Ben Sira indeed follows Samuel–Kings in many details, but it nevertheless crafts its own unique vision of the monarchic past, ultimately claiming that all the kings—except David, Hezekiah, and Josiah—were “terrible sinners” (49:4).
10. I recognize that dystopia is the other side of the utopian coin. Utopia is “highly ambiguous,” in the words of P. Ricoeur (1986: 1): it has “a positive and a negative side, a constructive and a deconstructive role, a constitutive and a pathological dimension.” I return to this issue below.
and of course nearly all the details of the northern kingdom’s story. Now, the problem is: How do we understand that which is bracketed in Chronicles, knowing that Yehudites were reading Samuel–Kings as well, and knowing that they likely considered Samuel–Kings the more authoritative version of the past? The psychoanalytic concept of repression is interesting to consider here: the Freudian idea that “forgotten memories [are] not lost” (Freud 1977: 23). Did the fact that Chronicles omits or brackets this material concerning the kingship promote the forgetting of this material, or did it actually call attention to it? In other words, does this apparent repression evince a definite obsession, within Yehudite society, with that which had been repressed? To be sure, Chronicles deserves to be read on its own, and in doing so one would not and should not be bothered by these omissions at all (see Sabo 2013: 45–49; cf. Mitchell 1999: 320–24). But the likelihood remains that a small and tightly knit group of Yehudite individuals read these texts concurrently. In certain cases, Chronicles’ bracketing might have unintentionally highlighted the “forgotten” details of Samuel–Kings, that is, it might have actually brought memories of the bracketed information to the forefront. Or, in other instances, perhaps the community simply took these details for granted, and thus did not think anything of that which had been bracketed. Or maybe the bracketing indeed represented the repression of certain memories of Yehud’s monarchic past, giving readers license to “forget” such memories (see Ben Zvi 2006a: 86–92; 2012: 140–42; Stone and Hirst 2014). The interpretive possibilities multiply. In any case, information found solely in Samuel–Kings would have taken on new meanings for a reader when that reader knew and acknowledged that the information was bracketed in Chronicles, and the same was true for information found in Chronicles that was lacking in Samuel–Kings (e.g., the cultic reforms of Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah or the decree of Cyrus). The discursive nature of these texts, their dialogic relationship and their crucial import for the complex processes of social remembering, suggests to me that seeing one as an “alternative” to the other, for better or worse, is misguided.

This leads me to an important sub-point concerning historiography in general. Here I submit a quote from the historical critic Hayden White (1978: 3; italics original):

> Every mimetic text can be shown to have left something out of the description of its object or to have put something into it that is inessential to what some reader, with more or less authority, will regard as an adequate description. On analysis, every mimesis can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon, one claiming to be more realistic, more “faithful to the facts.”

11. As mentioned above, I presented this paper at a meeting held at the University of Vienna, so at the time this consideration was especially apt.
When scholars talk about Chronicles as utopian, they speak of an alternative *past* reality, since Chronicles obviously deals with events in Yehud’s distant and recent pasts. Any utopian vision of Chronicles is, then, a historiographical utopia, a “no-history” and/or a “good-history” (see Boer 2009: 12). As H. White and many other theorists of historiography have shown, however, *all* historiographies are a sort of alternative past reality. They all must privilege some sets of data over others, must organize that data into a meaningful narrative with an inherent worldview or ideology, a preferred teleology, etc., all of which speaks to and is informed by the present. In this sense, Chronicles was no different than Samuel–Kings. Both works offered visions of the world that were potentially alternative to what any given Yehudite reader may or may not have known or understood about the present world and the import of Judah’s monarchic past for that present.

The operative word for reading utopia in Chronicles then becomes “better” or “ideal.” This brings us back to a question I raised above: How do we recognize what is “better” about kingship and politics in Chronicles’ alternative past reality versus Samuel–Kings’ alternative past reality? On a macro scale, kingship in both Samuel–Kings and Chronicles follows the same trajectory. To be sure, the two works play with the details (cf. Ben Zvi 2003, 2006a: 78–99), but in both historiographies the Judahite kingdom falls, on account of its sins, to the mighty Babylon. And in both, the endings are ambiguous. The Davidic king Jehoiachin is alive and doing relatively well at the end of Kings, but he is in exile in the land of a foreign conqueror (see Chan 2013; Wilson 2014). At the conclusion to Chronicles, Cyrus—a foreigner—announces the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Schweitzer (2009: 18) rightly emphasizes that, unlike Samuel–Kings, Chronicles “[deflates] the Exile as a traumatic event.” The book’s conclusion greatly contributes to this deflation by making the exile a definite time period, a seventy-year sabbath for the “empty” land (2 Chr 36:21; cf. Lev 26:3–45; Jer 29:10–14) (see Carroll 1998: 64–65; Ben Zvi 2010). Cyrus, however, is nonetheless an outsider, a non-Israelite ruling over Yahweh’s people, a situation that flies in the face of the Torah ideal. The endings of both works are, despite their differences, equally problematic and ambiguous on issues of Yehudite political identity and the viability of Davidic kingship. I tend to understand Chronicles’ ending as the more hopeful of the two, but this does not necessitate seeing Chronicles’ understanding of kingship and the monarchy as “better” than what one finds in Kings.

At this point, some will undoubtedly protest, arguing that Chronicles, on the whole, certainly has a more positive take on the monarchy. For example, R. Boer (1999: 390) writes, “The monarchy in Chronicles is if anything more highly placed than in the much more critical account of Samuel–Kings.” Yet, in the end, the

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13. Here Boer attempts to situate the image of kingship in Chronicles within a matrix of Utopian politics/ancient (that is, classical) mode of production and divine-human despotism/
monarchy still fails miserably. So it falls even farther in Chronicles than in Samuel–Kings. At least in Samuel–Kings, David and Solomon are complex and tragic characters who, for readers, lower the expectations for subsequent monarchs, the issue of an “everlasting” Davidic throne notwithstanding. To be sure, in Chronicles, as Schweitzer himself admits, David is certainly not perfect. The great king of Israel is neither flawless (1 Chr 13:7–13; 15:11–15; 22:8; 28:3) nor sinless (1 Chr 21:17) (cf. Knoppers 1995, 2004: 762–64). This slightly imperfect depiction of David perhaps lends itself to a utopian reading: one may think of David in Chronicles as a “better alternative [to David in Samuel–Kings] . . . without being perfect”—to use Schweitzer’s words (2007: 79). But one is still left with the question of what precisely is “better” about this alternative. And did readers indeed construe this depiction as “better”? Schweitzer (2007: 80) would answer that David’s (and Solomon’s) rule in Chronicles is “utopian” because it reorients the monarchy toward cultic concerns: it suggests “innovative ways for the cult to be organized [in the postmonarchic era] or to perform in the future.” But again I would ask: Is the ideal relationship between monarchy and cult any less imaginative in Samuel–Kings, or is it somehow “worse” in these books than it is in Chronicles?

There is good reason to believe that, in some regards, Chronicles is actually more sympathetic to Torah, especially to Deuteronomy, than Samuel–Kings is. Chronicles’ theme of immediate divine reward or punishment and its interest in priests and Levites in the judicial system, for example, are in fact very Deuteronomic (cf. Knoppers 2001: 396, 399). If Deuteronomistic law was any kind of benchmark (which it no doubt was), then Chronicles, in this case, was actually closer to the mark. Likewise, consider Chronicles’ telling of the various cultic reforms instituted by Judahite kings. The reforms of Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah each appear to have a strong awareness of and interest in Deuteronomic law (cf. Jonker 2008, 2013). When Schweitzer discusses Jehoshaphat, for example, he does not consider how the depiction of priestly/levitical/judicial duties and activities in 2 Chronicles 17–20 might or might not interrelate to similar duties and activities outlined in Pentateuchal texts like Exodus 18 or Deuteronomy 17–18, and how this might impact the construction of a “better alternative reality” in Chronicles (cf. Schweitzer 2007: 96–99, 139, 143, 166–67, 170–71). Moreover, in a recent essay, Knoppers (2013: 192) discusses Chronicles’ understanding of prophecy vis-à-vis Deuteronomy and argues that Chronicles’ “[r]ecourse to the standards (re)confirmed on the Steppes of Moab [i.e., in the book of Deuteronomy] draws the foundational epoch

Asiatic mode of production. He argues (1999: 391–92) that, in 2 Chronicles 10–13 at least, “the former is clearly dominant: politics over religion, polis over despot, Rome over Babylon, ancient over Asiatic modes of production,” and that the text ultimately “attempts a reconstruction of Judah by presenting it in the past as a Utopian enclave and then uses that reconstruction as a model for a restored Judah.”

14. On the promises to David, see Knoppers 1998; Boda 2013. On divine promises in general, see Ben Zvi 2015.
of divine revelation and the monarchical era closer together.” In these examples, one might say Chronicles innovates, but its innovation is ultimately a conservative affair, an attempt to bring the monarchical era closer in line with the Mosaic. Was Chronicles’ depiction of the past, then, any more “innovative” or imaginative than Samuel–Kings’? Which one was more challenging to the Yehudite status quo?

Even in instances where it is clear that Chronicles improves the picture of the monarchical past—for example, its treatment of palace and temple treasuries and Judah’s economic (mis)fortunes—the picture is still not an entirely positive one (cf. Knoppers 1999: 204–5). As mentioned, it could not override or erase the more negative depictions in Samuel–Kings because it emerged within a milieu in which Samuel–Kings was something of an authoritative historiographical work (compare, e.g., 2 Chr 32:24–31 and 2 Kings 20). Chronicles contributed to a debate about the merits of the monarchical past and kingship’s relationship with the cult in the past, but it did not per se utopianize that past. Moreover, if a utopia is meant to reflect an alternative better than one’s current reality, a challenge to the status quo, then I would argue that, in Samuel–Kings and in Chronicles, the height of monarchical glory—kingship at its best under David and Solomon—was depicted as “better” than Yehud’s current condition as a peripheral province under the Persian empire. Both texts emphasize the extent and power of the so-called united monarchy; both emphasize the wealth and prosperity of Solomon, which are said to be gifts of Yahweh, not sinful indulgences. To Yehudites, whether they considered these accounts of Davidic greatness to be historically “real” or not, both narratives must have appeared as fantastical, as “good-histories” or even “no-histories,” as hardly imaginable from the perspective of Yehud’s present.

This brings me to my final point: Really how “different” are these two works? This is an important question and one that has received some attention recently (cf. Ben Zvi 2009; Jonker 2013). Often, in comparative studies, we tend to overemphasize similarity (cf. Smith 1982), but in this case perhaps we have overemphasized difference. Differences between the two historiographies are well known and frequently observed. But what do the similarities tell us about the society that read and studied these two works (cf. Ben Zvi 2006a: 79)? Do the similarities justify seeing one of the works as utopian and the other not? Schweitzer (2009: 16) states that his interest is to show how the Chronicler “emphasizes values and traditions which often stand in tension to the perspective provided in the Deuteronomic History and even in the Pentateuch” (cf. Schweitzer 2007: 76). But what about the shared values of these texts, and what does this say about the literati? Read discursively or dialogically, each of the two works of historiography has what one might call utopian or dystopian elements: where one reader finds utopia another finds dystopia (one of the mantras of utopian studies) (cf. Ben Zvi 2013: 470–71; Uhlenbruch 2015: 126–57). Chronicles and Samuel–Kings conversed with one another, balancing each other’s perspectives and creating a variety of potential understandings of the monarchical past and its sociopolitical import for the present and future.
In Chronicles, Hezekiah is the foremost reforming King, while in Kings it is Josiah. In Kings, Manasseh is the great sinner, leading the people to inexcusable apostasy, while in Chronicles it is Ahaz. In each the Judahite monarchy fails, but in each a kind of Davidic hope remains: in Chronicles, hope stands with a quasi-Davidic foreigner; in Kings, with an actual Davidic king in a foreign land.

Again, this does not problematize the concept of utopia or utopianism per se, but it brings us to the very crux of the problem with reading utopia in Yehudite historiography. Once one recognizes that Chronicles and Samuel–Kings were read concurrently as more or less authoritative works of literature, and that each represented alternative past realities, and that each contained elements that an ancient reader might have construed as better or worse, utopian or dystopian, then one has to admit that the same is true for all Yehudite historiographical works. If one is willing to label Chronicles and Samuel–Kings as utopian in scope, then one must be prepared to do the same for Ezra–Nehemiah, for Joshua and Judges, for historiographic-like texts in the Pentateuch, and so on—all of these books contained alternative past realities that were in one way or another “better” or “worse” than the reality of Yehud’s present. If one indeed takes this path, then one inevitably discovers an entire literary corpus that is, in some respect, utopian. Now, if we want to think about the Hebrew Bible in toto as a work of utopian literature (or how it might be read as such), that is a fine and interesting topic (see, for example, Davies 2012), but then I think we are doing something different than the historical-criticism that scholars like Schweitzer and Blenkinsopp (and Ehud) want to do (cf. Uhlenbruch 2015: 192–96). In the end, I am afraid we run the risk of making every historiographical text some sort of utopia or dystopia, which then weakens the concept as a historical-critical tool, not unlike the problem we have run into (and continue running into) with the “Deuteronomist(s)” and “Deuteronomism” (see McKenzie and Shearing 1999).

To conclude, I emphasize again that I do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. As mentioned, there are a number of places in the Hebrew Bible where scholars have employed the concept to great benefit: for example, the promised land in Numbers 13 and readers’ receptions of this story (Uhlenbruch 2015); or visions of future politics and geographies found throughout the prophetic books (Ben Zvi 2006b). Even though I have been critical of reading utopia in Chronicles’ historiography, I want to be clear that many of Schweitzer’s and Blenkinsopp’s observations about the book and its sociocultural and political import in ancient Yehud are extremely insightful. There are parts of Chronicles that do indeed lend themselves to utopianism. A good example, of course, is Boer’s original analysis of 2 Chronicles 11, especially his discussion of the dialectic of disjunction and connection in this text and in More’s book (see Boer 1999: 381–83; cf. Uhlenbruch’s reading of Numbers 13 [2015: 75–123]). His study works well because it deals with a limited section of Chronicles, which differs substantially from the parallel account in 1 Kings, and in which the major themes (fortify-
ing the state against the invading Other, reinforcement of the insider religion and cult, and reinforcement of the Self via procreation) link up well with themes in More’s Utopia. Another good example, already mentioned above, is Chronicles’ depiction of the exile and the “empty” land (2 Chr 36:21) (see Schweitzer 2007: 58–59, 127–28). As soon as one zooms out, however, utopia and utopianism become more and more diminished and ultimately unrecognizable, in my view. If one finds utopias under every green tree, then they are no longer “no-places” or even “good-places”—they are just places. This undermines any attempt to read Chronicles in toto as “Utopia,” an approach that at least Schweitzer and Blenkinsopp hesitate to take anyway, but it also presents an obstacle for any study that presents Chronicles an sich as utopian historiography or as a historiographical work with an express interest in utopianism.

15. As Boer (1999: 383–84) shows, however, the Utopia is immediately subverted in 2 Chr 12, when Rehoboam’s fortified cities all fall to Shishak, which shows that the Utopia, in the ideology of the text, has not been fully realized; it is still a work in progress on account of Rehoboam’s and the people’s disobedience. The theme of immediate divine retribution “constantly poses a threat to the Utopian construct” throughout the passage of 2 Chronicles 10–13 (Boer 1999: 386).


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