

EXPLORING THE PLACE OF THE BOOK OF CHRONICLES IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

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A review of

The Retelling of Chronicles in Jewish Tradition and Literature: A Historical Journey. By Isaac Kalimi. Pp. xx + 395. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009. Cloth, \$59.50;

The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimḥi to Chronicles: A Translation with Introduction and Supercommentary. By Yitzhak Berger. BJS 345. Pp. ix + 318. Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 2007. Cloth, \$44.95;

and

הפירוש המיוחס לרש"י לספר דברי הימים (The commentary on Chronicles attributed to Rashi). By Eran Viesel. Pp. 457. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010. Paper, \$39.00.

The history of interpretation and reception is a rapidly growing field in biblical studies, as witnessed by the steady flow of books and articles on the topic and the launching of a new reference work, *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009–), and a new annual journal, *Biblical Reception* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, to begin publication in October 2012). The field is vast, but one of the essential topics deserving attention is the role that the various biblical books played in the history, literature, and culture of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, something that is only beginning to be addressed. Thus, the comprehensive study of Chronicles in the history of Jewish tradition and literature by Isaac Kalimi is a welcome pioneering effort, unprecedented in the sheer scope of its coverage.

Chronicles has not traditionally been a very popular book for Jews to study. But in recent years, it has become an important subject of research for biblical scholars, among them, Isaac Kalimi, who has made the study of Chronicles the main focus of his scholarly career. He has written several monographs and many articles on the Chronicler and his work, dealing with the book of Chronicles in its historical context, as well as a classified bibliography of Chronicles scholarship. In the work here under review, he expands his range to deal with the history of interpretation and reception of the book in Jewish literature and tradition from the Second Temple Period

until the end of the seventeenth century, a very ambitious undertaking. This book is certainly impressive in its thoroughness and scope. Sixteen chapters cover the use of Chronicles in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Hellenistic-Greek literature (Septuagint, Judeo-Hellenistic historians, Philo of Alexandria), Dead Sea Scrolls and Cairo Genizah, Dura-Europos and cognate arts, the mosaic inscription in the ancient synagogue of En-Gedi, rabbinic literature, Targum Chronicles, Jewish liturgy and ritual, medieval Jewish biblical interpretation, the Zohar, medieval Hebrew poetry, Jewish-Christian disputations, and early modern critical scholarship (Azariah de' Rossi, Uriel da-Costa, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, and Baruch Spinoza).

The author is certainly to be praised for his thoroughness and comprehensiveness of coverage. Hardly a stone (or better, leaf) is left unturned in his quest for references or allusions to Chronicles in post-biblical Jewish literature. Nevertheless, a study of such ambitious scope is bound to have lacunae and include some erroneous information which the reader should be aware of. The author is at his best in discussing Chronicles in late biblical and early post-biblical literature, the periods he has done most of his research on. Most of my remarks will focus on the Middle Ages, the area I am most familiar with.

I find the title of the book a little misleading. In almost every case cited, what is under review is not the retelling of Chronicles, but rather, the use of quotations from Chronicles, allusions to verses in the book, or the use of themes mentioned in it. As the author points out, there is no midrashic compilation on Chronicles, and even the late collection in *Yalqut Shimoni* is sparse, compared to that of other books, such as Samuel and Kings, in relation to its size. Thus, a better title would have been *The Reception of the Book of Chronicles in Jewish Tradition and Literature* or simply *The Book of Chronicles in Jewish Tradition and Literature*.

The book of Chronicles did not receive a lot of attention from medieval exegetes; in fact there are only nineteen extant commentaries till the end of the eighteenth century, a very low figure. The best known are the commentaries attributed to Rashi, that was published in standard editions of the Rabbinic Bible under Rashi's name, and that of David Kimḥi, the Provençal grammarian and exegete, whose work marked the culmination of that school's exegetical enterprise. His commentary has recently been translated into English by Yitzhak Berger. The commentary, whose attribution to Rashi originated among the school of disciples of Rashi, was recently treated in a monograph by Eran Viezel. Both of these works are also reviewed in this essay.

Kalimi devotes a section to Saadia Gaon even though Saadia never commented on Chronicles. He refers in a footnote to Ratzabi's compilation

of Saadia's comments on the Bible from other sources but does not quote even one of these comments (p. 193 n. 12). This seems odd.

His statement that Chronicles "was studied much more, commented on, and better handled in the former lands [i.e., Sephardi-Oriental and Mediterranean] than in the latter [Ashkenazi]," needs to be amended in the light of Eran Viesel's exhaustive study of the commentary attributed to Rashi and his conclusion that there was an active circle of scholars studying Chronicles in the mid- to late-twelfth century in Germany (see below). His placing the author of this commentary in Narbonne (the statement on pp. 202–203 is more correct than that on p. 306) also needs to be revised. According to Viesel, he probably spent some time in that Provençal center but lived for most of his life in Ashkenaz.

Furthermore, the identity of the author of the "Commentary attributed to a Student of Saadia Gaon" needs to be revised in light of the study by Viesel who argues that the commentary was written in Ashkenaz at the turn of the eleventh century by a scholar who originated in the Middle East but was unlikely to have been a student of Saadiah Gaon (see E. Viesel, "The Anonymous Commentary to Chronicles Attributed to a Student of Rasag: Its Place in the History of Jewish Peshat Interpretation," *Tarbits* [2007]: 415–434). Admittedly, the situation is complex, but it seems to be clear that the author could not have been a student of Saadiah. (This item was not consulted by Kalimi.) Richard Steiner is of the opinion that the commentary dates from the tenth or eleventh century and stems from North Africa, though he only mentions this in passing ("A Jewish Theory of Biblical Redaction from Byzantium: Its Rabbinic Roots, Its Diffusion and Its Encounter with the Muslim Doctrine of Falsification," *JSIJ* 2 [2003]: 142).

The statement on p. 197 implying that the Karaite Japheth ben Eli's commentary on Samuel has been published is incorrect. In fact none of Japheth's commentaries on the Former Prophets have been published.

Kalimi's evaluation of the commentary attributed to Rashi has been superseded by Viesel's thorough study, which properly situates this work in the history of Jewish exegesis (see below).

Mention should be made of the important commentary attributed to Joseph Kara, which exists in three manuscripts and was apparently written by a student of the author of the commentary attributed to Rashi. (On this, see E. Viesel, *הפירוש המיוחס לרש"י*, p. 272). Kalimi does not seem to have realized the importance of this commentary and does not discuss it. In general, he does not pay much attention to commentaries in manuscript, focusing only on printed sources.

Finally, it is incorrect to say that the Altschulers, (David and Jehiel Hillel) eighteenth century authors of the Metsudot commentaries were from

Italy (pp. 241, 306); rather they were from Jaworow, Galicia, as the author himself states earlier on (p. 237).

Occasionally it seems that Kalimi's zeal for Chronicles clouds his judgment. He takes Spinoza to task for questioning the very existence of the book (p. 297) and for expressing a wish that Chronicles be excluded from the canon (p. 301). Yet, in the very passage he quotes (p. 297), Spinoza says,

I have always been astonished that they have been included in the Bible by those who excluded from the canon the book of Wisdom, the book of Tobit and the other books that are called Apocryphal. *However, it is not my intention to detract from their authority; as they have been universally accepted, I leave it at that.* (Cited from the recent translation of the Theological-Political Treatise by J. Israel and M. Silverthorne [Cambridge 2007]).

While Spinoza might not have included Chronicles in his canon, he distinctly states that he is not out to question the book's authority (or try to exclude it from the canon), since they have been received by all. Spinoza is entitled to his opinion, which seems quite reasonable, and Kalimi's righteous indignation is misplaced. (See also p. 302 where he continues to rant against Spinoza, who merely said he had no opinion about the book's "authority, utility or doctrine"; hardly worth the fuss, it would seem).

I was puzzled by Kalimi's statement in several places (e.g., p. 307) that modern Bible scholars argue that "the Hebrew Bible in general and Chronicles in particular were neglected by Jews and Judaism throughout the ages." Kalimi is obviously polemicizing against someone, but he does not mention his opponents or give any direct quotes of their statements. It is possible that some modern biblical scholars (Jews? Christians?) were unaware of the long and rich history of Jewish Bible study, but surely this is no longer the case. It is unclear who Kalimi is polemicizing with. He does seem to have a mission in this project, namely, to prove that Chronicles was noticed, studied, and used by Jews over the centuries. He does succeed in this goal, for the most part, although time and again he must admit that the book did not receive a lot of attention, especially when compared with other biblical books. But he does demonstrate that it was never totally neglected, which is not exactly surprising, since it was after all, part of the canon.

There are two ways to do such a study: 1) diachronically, moving through the sources in chronological order, or 2) synchronically and thematically, tracing recurring themes through the sources and pointing out similarities and differences in how they are treated. Kalimi has chosen the former method, which I would argue results in a book that is less interesting and more plodding and repetitious. A lot of extraneous information is

introduced in the discussion as background for very minor points. The author makes up for this deficiency somewhat in the last chapter (“Summary and Conclusion”), but even here for the most part he still adheres to the chronological order of the units as set out in the main part of the book and merely summarizes the material already presented. While he does make some connections between the different sources (e.g., pointing out the stress by Pseudo-Rashi, Kimhi, and Abarbanel on David and his dynasty as the central theme of the book), this could have been done more thoroughly and systematically.

Some themes that could have been covered in such a survey are: the authorship of the book (just Ezra-Nehemiah, or also Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi); the genealogies in 1 Chronicles and the discrepancies between the names and those in other books of the Bible; the discrepancies between the stories in Chronicles and those in Samuel and Kings and how to address them (usually harmonization); the issue of Davidic centrality in Chronicles and how it is addressed.

Too often, the author seems to be out to demonstrate that post-biblical authors knew and utilized Chronicles and never abandoned it, a point that perhaps could be made once or twice, but does not need to be hammered at repeatedly. In sum, Kalimi’s book is a very useful compilation and summary of post-biblical use and reception of the book of Chronicles in Jewish tradition and literature. As Judaism editor for the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, I and my fellow editors must find authors to write on the post-biblical interpretation and reception of the various books of the Hebrew Bible. If there were books similar to that of Kalimi’s available for the other books of the Bible, our task would be a lot easier. Kalimi’s book is an important pioneering effort. Nevertheless, the section on medieval exegesis needs serious revision and in general, a thematic approach would have made for more interesting reading.

Berger’s book is based on his doctoral thesis. It provides a translation of and supercommentary on Radak’s Chronicles commentary along with a fairly brief introduction, in which the author discusses Radak’s approach to name variants between Chronicles and other biblical books, his views on the integrity of Scripture, and his approach to the exegesis of Chronicles, which focuses on resolving the glaring textual difficulties presented by the text (p. 13). Scholarly translations of medieval commentaries are always welcome as they help these important works reach a wider audience of biblical scholars who may not read Medieval or Modern Hebrew. Berger’s book is a welcome addition to the growing body of translated Medieval Hebrew commentary. His extensive supercommentary is very valuable for the appreciation of Radak and his work. My main regret is that the author did not include his edition of the Hebrew text in this book. Since the Hebrew text had been

edited as part of his thesis and thus would not have involved additional work on his part, it is to be lamented that the author/publisher did not see fit to include it in the publication, thereby depriving scholars of the opportunity to be able to readily consult the original text in a superior edition alongside the translation and supercommentary.

Viezel's book is a detailed study of the anonymous Chronicles commentary from the school of Rashi, usually called Pseudo-Rashi. Based on the author's doctoral thesis, it examines in painstaking detail every aspect of the commentary, including its sources, both rabbinic and medieval; its exegetical methodology, including its use of peshat and derash; its structure and style, including use of *le'azim* (vernacular glosses); linguistic and literary features of the commentary; the author's positions on the authorship, composition, sources, and aims of Chronicles and his attitude to the discrepancies between Chronicles and other biblical books; the reception of the commentary by later exegetes and Viezel's attempts to identify the author of the commentary. To my knowledge, this is one of the most exhaustive studies of a single biblical commentary ever produced.

The commentary must have been included in manuscripts containing Rashi's commentary on the Tanakh or at least the Ketuvim, whence the attribution to Rashi at an early stage. The attribution began to be questioned as early as 1525 (Venice Rabbinic Bible) and 1623 (Lublin Rabbinic Bible), but even in the twentieth century, there were some who wished to maintain the attribution to Rashi (Yitzhak Avineri, Yoel Floersheim). Viezel's book should put this matter to rest. He proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the commentary is not Rashi's in whole or part (chapter 7). After reviewing all the previously proposed suggestions for author of the commentary, he proceeds to date and locate the commentary (1155, Germany), though he is unable to identify its author, who was already not known to Radak thirty-five years after it appeared (Radak's commentary was published in 1190). While J. N. Epstein's suggests that the author is Samuel he-Hasid, Viezel demonstrates that the identification does not hold up to scrutiny. In the end, he is unable to make a positive identification of the author, though he can say a great deal about him—that he was a student of Eleazar b. Meshullam, that he knew Samuel he-Hasid, learned from Joseph Kara, and was greatly influenced by him, was the teacher of the author of the Chronicles commentary attributed to Kara, and was part of a school of exegetes that was active in the late-eleventh to mid-twelfth century in Germany that had a particular though not exclusive interest in the book of Chronicles. This school, which is revealed here for the first time, was a link between the exegetes of pre-Crusade France and Germany and the exegetes of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries—the tosafists and Hasidei Ashkenaz.

Viezel's book is an important contribution to the history of biblical interpretation in Western Europe in the twelfth century. My one quibble with this book is that it does not include the text of the commentary. But this would probably have delayed the publication and increased the length of the book considerably. We must look forward then to the publication of the text of the commentary in a separate volume at some future date.

In conclusion, it seems that the book of Chronicles is finally getting the attention it deserves not only from biblical scholars but also from scholars of medieval exegesis. We look forward to further studies by these and other scholars in this long neglected area of biblical studies.