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REMEMBERING WITH ADVANTAGES: CHRONICLES AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF REVISION AND REDACTION

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In the essay that serves as the epigraph to this volume, Blaire French considers the biblical Chronicler not as a historian in the traditional sense, but as an exemplary "history-teller." A "history-teller"—in Walter Benjamin's idiom—offers not an "accurate concatenation of definite events" but rather an interpretation of how these events "are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world."[1] In the wake of the trauma of the Babylonian exile, the Chronicler imaginatively re-narrates the Israelites' past to those returning after so many years to both their land and their law. Adapting and expanding prior histories and lending a parabolic quality to their narratives, the Chronicler creatively adapts the sources of a tradition to lend it shape and consequence for a new generation—to render it "a story worth remembering and repeating."[2]

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Story Teller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 96.

[2] Blaire French, "A D'var Torah for Beha'alotcha: The Search for Evocative History," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 9, no. 1 (December 2016): 6-11, esp. 8.

It is an odd thing to include two versions of a history in the same canon, and the juxtaposition of the historical narratives of Chronicles with the texts that serve as its *vorlage* in Kings and Samuel presents hermeneutic questions that are not unlike those encountered in the divergences between the gospel narratives in the New Testament. These questions are particularly charged in the case of the Chronicler because of his tendency to "remember with advantages"—to edit his source materials so as to whitewash the legacy of biblical heroes and draw straighter, cleaner lines between Torah observance and divine blessing in order to commend these forms of piety to his audience.[3]

Indeed, Julius Wellhausen wrote that Chronicles was not history at all, but a kind of "midrash" (in a pejorative sense)—"a wholly peculiar, artificial way of awakening dry bones" that spins and amends its source materials "in the most arbitrary way."[4] While few modern readers would consider Wellhausen an authority in these matters, particularly given his general disparagement of Jewish tradition and ritual practice, his concerns about the Chronicler's "arbitrary" method of modifying historical narratives into moralizing parables are worth our attention—particularly if we wish to take French's claim seriously that the Chronicler might serve as a model for negotiation with our own received traditions in the present.

By including two histories in its canon, one with obvious debts to the other, the Bible foregrounds the role of method and interpretation in the work of storytelling. In so doing, the canon raises questions, such as those posed by Wellhausen above, about the nature and limits of faithful representation. Should the Chronicler's "selective recollection and strategic forgetting" be evaluated by its fruits—that is, by its capacity to commend faithfulness to both God and Torah in a time of "rupture" from tradition?[5] Or should we instead see wider hermeneutic dangers implicit

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[3] The phrase "remember with advantages" is taken from a speech given by Henry V in William Shakespeare's play by the same name: "Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,/But he'll remember with advantages/What feats he did that day."

[4] Wellhausen, 227.

[5] French.

in these seemingly "arbitrary" historiographic methods that erase the graver indiscretions of national heroes to give their biographies clearer moral weight? Does the transmission of a tradition at times demand edifying fictions for its own preservation, or should it instead be tethered to sobering facts?

This essay will take up these considerations first by engaging Wellhausen's charges against the arbitrary quality of the Chronicler's historiography, taking a closer look at his redaction strategies in one of the Chronicler's adaptations of historical narrative. Second, it will consider similar and perhaps clearer hermeneutic moves in the Chronicler's adaptations of legal materials. Finally, the paper will turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of "legal hermeneutics" to address Wellhausen's concerns about the arbitrary quality of the Chronicler's redactions, and to look at wider questions about how we ought to interpret the Chronicler's redactive strategy.

One of the creative adaptations that Wellhausen cites in his charges against the Chronicler's "arbitrary" method is his recapitulation of the reign of King Asa of Judah.[6] Looking at the Chronicler's modifications of Asa's biography, Wellhausen points to a "strange vacillation between the timeless manner of looking at things which is natural to [the Chronicler], and the historical tradition which he uses and appropriates."[7] It is this "arbitrary" vacillation between competing allegiances that Wellhausen takes as grounds for serious skepticism about the Chronicler's reliability —between the faithful transmission of his source texts, which the Chronicler "mechanically transcribes," and the theological commitments that provoke his pious additions.

The Chronicler's source text can be found in 1 Kings: fifteen short verses that briefly describe Asa's various religious reforms, his wars with the Northern Kingdom, and the unfortunate foot disease that preceded his

[6] Wellhausen, 227.

[7] Wellhausen, 193.

death.[8] In this account, though Asa is judged by the narrator to have done what was "right in the eyes of the Lord," he is portrayed neither as a straightforwardly "good" or successful king, nor a purely wicked one.[9] Asa's failure to remove the high places is set immediately next to a statement about his whole-hearted dedication to God, and a report of the wealth that he dedicated to the Lord and brought into the temple is juxtaposed with a description of the lengthy wars that plagued his kingdom.

When the Chronicler relays the story of Asa's reign, he more than triples the length of the narrative in 1 Kings[10] and lends a clearer causal nexus to Asa's biography, adding narrative material that more closely connects Asa's good deeds and religious devotion with periods of divine blessing, and his waywardness to later misfortunes. While the author of Kings juxtaposes claims about Asa's faithfulness to God with his failure to remove the high places,[11] the Chronicler makes a careful separation between this act of negligence and the religious reforms that earned Asa divine favor.

On a first read, the Chronicler appears to directly contradict the testimony of Kings about Asa's failure to take down the high places in his discussion of Asa's religious reforms in Judah, insisting twice that Asa did in fact remove the high places.[12] But reading further, we find that the Chronicler preserves the exact phrase from Kings—"the high places were not removed"—while identifying this error with Asa's later failure to remove the high places in *Israel* (that is, the Northern Kingdom). The Chronicler locates this failure safely out of Asa's own kingdom and long after the initial religious reforms.[13]

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[8] 1 Kings 15:9-24.

[9] 1 Kings 15:11.

[10] While 1 Kings' description of Asa's reign lasts for 15 verses, 2 Chronicles expands that to 48 verses.

[11] 1 Kings 15:11-14.

[12] 2 Chronicles 14:2, 4.

[13] It is also noteworthy that the Chronicler amends the second half of this verse as well. While 1 Kings 15:14 reads, "But the high places were not taken away; nevertheless the heart of Asa

This move accords with the wider theological agenda that many scholars understand as the guiding force behind the Chronicler's reconstructed history.[14] Wellhausen explains this theological agenda as a carefully constructed "plan," a narrative pattern guided by a strong commitment to a theology of divine retribution. This commitment can be seen throughout Chronicles, but is made explicit in this particular narrative in the words spoken to Asa by a prophet who tells him, "The Lord is with you while you are with him; if you seek him, he will be found by you, and if you abandon him, he will abandon you."[15] The Chronicler's redactions of the text in 1 Kings play out along these lines: Asa's foot disease (which the Chronicler paints as the cause of his death) is linked to his failure to trust God,[16] and the above-mentioned clarification about those high places that he *did* successfully remove is linked to the Chronicler's judgment that Asa "did what was right and good in the eyes of the Lord."[17] In other words, the Chronicler's method is not exactly "arbitrary". He preserves the testimony of Kings nearly word-for-word,[18]

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was whole with the Lord all his days," 2 Chronicles both specifies the location of these yet standing high places (Israel) and removes the phrase "with the Lord" so that the verse retains a description of the fullness of Asa's heart but loses any connection to divine favor in the wake of this grave omission.

[14] For an introduction to the theme of retribution in Chronicles, see Brian E. Kelly's *Retribution and Eschatology in Chronicles* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 1996).

[15] 2 Chronicles 15:2. Translation here and throughout are my own. Variations on this theme can be found in 1 Chronicles 28:8-9; 2 Chronicles 7:14, 12:5. Cf. Raymond Dillard, "The Reign of Asa (2 Chronicles 1416): An Example of the Chronicler's Theological Method," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23, no.3 (Sep 1980).

[16] 2 Chronicles 16:10-12.

[17] 2 Chronicles 14:1.

[18] The Chronicler does omit any mention of the temple prostitutes that were expelled in the 1 Kings narrative, but this omission is uniform across his narrative redactions. Some scholars suspect that this might be due to the fact that the Hebrew word for these prostitutes is "*kadeshim*" or "holy ones," a term that the Chronicler did not wish to profane. See William Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles: Volume 2: 2 Chronicles 10-36: Guilt and Atonement* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 1998), 61.

rearranging the plot and filling in narrative material but showing himself to be beholden, in some respect, to the verbal conditions of his sources.

To explore this interpretive method further, we might set aside the Chronicler's creative re-renderings of historical events for a moment and look instead to what might be a clearer example of his interpretive method: his work on the law. As the Chronicler relays the restoration of various ritual practices, he also recounts the laws that govern them. But the Chronicler's description of these laws is not always a straightforward repetition of the way these laws are first outlined in the Torah. Rather, as we see in the depiction of the Paschal sacrifice, the Chronicler demonstrates the fruit of astute legal reasoning as he imparts a creative rendering of two seemingly contradictory ordinances. As in his efforts to lend a coherent shape and meaning to the history of his people in order to commend a particular mode of religious piety, here the Chronicler makes sense of a ritual code that may have previously seemed inscrutable (and therefore un-performable), so as to enable this tradition to take on new life in this reconstituted community.

In 2 Chronicles 25, the Chronicler describes the proper preparation of the Paschal sacrifice. He writes, "and they boiled (*bshl*) the Paschal sacrifice with fire, according to the ordinance." An attempt to clarify the "ordinance" that lends this particular performance its authority would lead a reader to two separate texts in the Torah, each with their own distinct set of instructions on how to prepare this sacrifice. Exodus 12:9 commands, "Do not eat it half-cooked, nor boiled (*bshl*) at all with water, but rather roast it with fire, its head with its legs and its innards." Deuteronomy's version puts it differently, insisting instead that, "you shall boil (*bshl*) and eat it in the place which the Lord thy God shall choose."[19] Each of these imperatives corresponds to one of the two basic modes of meat preparation we find described in the Hebrew Bible: roasting meat over an open fire, or boiling it in a pot of hot liquid. Neither imperative is problematic in and of itself; each text offers clear and coherent instructions to its reader about how to prepare the Paschal

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[19] Deuteronomy 16:7.

offering. The problem arises when these texts are read together as a unity and understood to present a coherent set of instructions to the reader who wishes to obey the law in this particular ritual act.

If a reader like the Chronicler wished to uphold the authority of both texts while still enabling the performance of this ritual, he would be forced to reckon with the various conflicts that emerge between the commandments in these two texts. In Exodus' account, the writer offers one negative commandment and one positive commandment. First, do not boil the sacrifice at all with water, and second, roast the sacrifice with fire. Deuteronomy's positive commandment—"boil the sacrifice"—appears, at first blush, to contradict both Exodus' prohibition against boiling in water and the positive commandment to roast the sacrifice over fire. Thus, the reader who wishes to uphold all three of these commandments in their preparation of the sacrifice must reckon with two problems. The first is the apparent tension between the two positive commandments. The commandment to roast seems to exclude the possibility of boiling and vice-versa—one cannot do both at once. The second is that between Deuteronomy's positive commandment (boil the sacrifice) with Exodus' negative commandment (do not boil the sacrifice in water).

Given these interpretive issues, we can now try to reverse engineer the reasoning process by which the Chronicler reconciles these two apparent contradictions in order to provide his audience with a coherent halakhah. The Chronicler retells the story of Josiah's reinstatement of the Passover, and unlike the parallel account in 2 Kings, which says only that the Israelites kept the Passover "according to the book of the covenant" (23:21), the Chronicler chooses to give an account of how the Israelites interpreted the terms of these disparate directives. The Chronicler reports "They *bshl*-ed the Passover sacrifice with fire, according to the ordinance, then they *bshl*-ed the holy offerings in pots, cauldrons and pans and carried them quickly to the people" (35:13) Here, the Chronicler uses the verb *bshl* twice—first to mean roasting (with fire) and second to mean boiling (in pots and cauldrons).

As the Chronicler reads these two texts together, the specificity of Exodus' prohibition (do not *bshl* at all *in water*) stands out against the vagueness of the imperative in Deuteronomy, which simply reads "*bshl*." In fact, Exodus' choice to specify the particular type of *bhsl*-ing that was prohibited allows the Chronicler to consider other possibilities for the term *bshl*, to consider the possibility that liquid may be an accidental rather than essential part of what it means to *bshl* meat. If Deuteronomy's unspecified injunction is conditioned by a reading of Exodus—that is, if we take from Exodus the prohibition against water and the admonition to use fire—then we arrive at the Chronicler's conclusion: to read these texts together, we must conclude that one can *bshl* meat in fire and, in so doing, faithfully perform all three imperatives. Thus, the Chronicler provides a reading that is beholden to the terms of the received texts. The difficulties that emerge in the relation between these imperatives become the generative conditions that allow the Chronicler to render an interpretation that is faithful to both texts and that renders a determinate judgment about how these commands ought to be performed.

The legal ruling offered by the Chronicler on the proper preparation of this sacrifice provides clearer insight into his hermeneutic method. As he adapts transmitted law to the particular contingencies of the present, the Chronicler seeks both to establish the conceptual clarity that would render this law practical, and at the same time to accord with the "legal idea" he mediates into the present. In so doing, he discloses something about the nature of legal hermeneutics, something described by Hans-Georg Gadamer in an often-overlooked section of *Truth and Method*. Namely, for the jurist, the two interpretive acts described above cannot be effectively isolated. As a jurist, the Chronicler's vacillation between the horizon of the received tradition and that of the present moment does not make the interpretation that mediates between the two, as Wellhausen thought, "merely for that reason an arbitrary revision."[20] Historical objects cannot remain purely objective to their observer, and neither can jurists

[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 328.

provide faithful directives from a law if they do not first reckon with the terms of the received text.

This is true not only for matters of law, but matters of history well. As Gadamer adds, legal hermeneutics "serves to remind us what the real procedure of the human sciences is" in that it makes plain the "fusion of horizons" that is always present between an observer and the object of her attention in the moment of understanding.[21] The Chronicler's task in his transmission of the narrative of King Asa of Judah is not unlike that of the legal idea he mediates for the Passover ritual. In each case, the Chronicler attempts to be true to the verbal conditions of the text before him, while performing the practical task of retrieving meaning and practicable understanding from a posture of estrangement from that original tradition.[22]

Gadamer's insight helps to address Wellhausen's concerns about the seemingly "arbitrary" quality of the Chronicler's hermeneutics, diffusing Wellhausen's "prejudice against prejudice" by revealing the Chronicler's "strange vacillation" as the natural process of human understanding. Once we recognize the Chronicler's attempts to mediate between historical understanding and present concern as a general description of the hermeneutic task, however, we might still have lingering questions about the *mode* of his work of mediation, specifically in regards to his redaction of historical narratives. How do we interpret his choice to respond to his communities' alienation from their tradition by remembering Israel's past with specific theological advantages, and preserving that version of events for his community?

On the one hand, the restoration period might be a prime example of a time in which edifying fictions or the intentional burial of more ignoble facts might serve as a necessary means to a tradition's faithful transmission. These fictions might lend hope or meaning in a time of estrangement or enable a piety that would otherwise be lost. On the other

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[21] Gadamer, 327.

[22] For more on this, see Paul Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

hand, there is much to be said for keeping a record of wrongs, for leaving history or the biographies of great men and women as messy as they truly were. It is worthy of note that when Job asks why the wicked prosper, or why the presence of God so often feels far from those who fear him, God does not answer him, except only to say that he is the God who numbered the clouds and tilted the waterskins of the heavens, for there are some grim truths from which no moralizing tale can spare us.[23]

I am reminded here of a conversation I had with my students in a Religion and Modern Fiction course as we read Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. To avoid spoiling the plot, I will simply say that the narrator of this book tells two stories of the 227 days he spent in a lifeboat on the Pacific Ocean. One of these stories is believable but truly awful, and the other is beautiful but rather far-fetched (amiable Bengal-tigers and the like). At the end of the book, the narrator asks the men who have been listening to tell him which story they prefer, which is the better story among the two. Both of them pick the beautiful one, "the story with the animals." "Yes," the narrator replies, and then adds, mysteriously, "and so it goes with God." I raised this same question to my students: do you prefer the better story or the true story? My future-scientists and future-historians puzzled over this for some time before the majority of them decided that they also preferred magical realism to the realistic but heartbreaking tragedy. We must choose, they said, to tell the stories that enable us to keep on living.

In the Hebrew Bible, as in Martel's novel, we are left with both stories, though Kings and Samuel could hardly be labeled a tragedy and it is unlikely that any reader would identify Chronicles with magical realism after struggling through its extensive genealogies. Though they are, in comparison to Pi's stories, quite similar in the end, the inclusion of these occasionally divergent histories within the canon foregrounds the work and strategy of storytelling in a similar way—particularly in Chronicles which bears the marks of its intentional construction in more obvious ways.

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[23] Job 21:7, Job 38:37.

Christians find similar divergences in the gospel narratives—variant accounts of Jesus' sermons or variously ordered plots of his days on earth. There is a disagreement between the evangelists about when Jesus may have driven the money-changers out from the temple. The gospel of John places this event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry while Mark, Matthew, and Luke locate it near the end, leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Origen of Alexandria, seeing no hope of reconciling these discrepancies historically, reasons that the differences between the gospel narratives must themselves be *interpreted*. Origen explains that in cases like these, "the spiritual truth was often preserved, one might say, in the material falsehood."[24] That is, a contrived date may bear its own kind of revelation.

The lesson here, as in Chronicles, is that we may have as much to learn from the way these authors construct their narratives or conduct their legal reasoning as we do from the historical realities themselves. Conflicts that arise between texts that interpret the same historical object provide a unique vantage point from which to consider authorial method and the careful construction of literary and legal meanings within the canon. For this reason such conflicts should not be silenced or avoided, but rather diligently sought out.

[24] Origen, *Commentary on John*, X.4.