

The Ethics of Reading and the Quest for the audience in the Book of Chronicles

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ABSTRACT

This article will illustrate the validity of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's SBL Presidential address of 1987 on the topic of the ethics of interpretation, namely doing justice to the text in its historical originating context by inquiring, inter alia into the author's responsibility towards his audience. Firstly, Schüssler Fiorenza's ideas on the socio-political location of the reader will be stated, after which that specific location for Chronicles will be explored in terms of the power in the Persian Empire as well as a look at the Persian Empire through modern imperial eyes. The article will conclude with a few remarks on the identity of the author and audience.

A AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

Sara Japhet is of the opinion that the Persian period cannot bear the burden of being the origin of biblical history, or that the province of Yehud of the Persian period cannot be the cradle of almost all the biblical literature.¹ She has a point, because it would mean that the literature has been written in a very short period of time and it will not be able to explain the enormous diversity of the literature in terms of style, language, literary form, contents and views or the complexity of the composition of some of the books that is thought to have undergone a long process of development and change.² Moreover, I would add, would a sparsely populated Yehud have been able to publish such a large literary corpus? However, although one may reject a late dating for the biblical material, it does not address the issue of ideology and the role of Persian power in the composition of those books and cannot be made out to be the latest fashion of deconstruction.³

¹ Sara Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah. Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 346.

² Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 351. She aims her criticism especially at Phillip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 104, 114, who argues for a late date for the Hebrew texts as if they were written by a few nominated scribes in an artificial scribal language for a group of people who were foreign to Yehud in order to establish an identity that rendered their status as ruling elite secure. In other words, the biblical literature indigenises the ruling elite of Yehud by providing them an identity that connects them to the province (Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 348).

³ Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon*, 342. She views deconstruction as "devoid of transcendental concepts, where all religions are ideological systems and all ideology

It does not seem as if the Chronicles scholarship is concerned with the Chronicler's relationship with Persian power, or with the influence that imperial power would have had on the composition of the book. The closest one can get, is McKenzie's recognition of a social setting for the book in which he argues that the Chronicler was educated and familiar with the literary works that the literary elite produced in Jerusalem. His audience was not the general population in Jerusalem, but rather members of the elite, namely the political and religious leadership in Jerusalem.⁴

Under a rubric "Implications for further research," James T. Sparks moots the place of the Persian kings in the Chronicler's Yehud as a possible theme. If the Persian kings receive the kingdom from Yahweh and they rebuild the temple as David once did, Sparks asks what the Chronicler felt was the required response and attitude of the people toward the Persian kings. Would rebellion against them constitute rebellion against Yahweh, as was the case with the Davidic kings? These questions raise further questions: what was the historical context of these writings? Was their rebellion? If the Chronicler advocated Persian loyalty, does it mean one has to reckon with factions in the Yehud community? What are the implications for the date of Chronicles?⁵

Gary Knoppers too is not much concerned with the issue of the audience in his commentary on Chronicles and the debate on the authorship of Chronicles is drowned in the problems in dating the book.⁶ He is very cautious to link a text to a context:

The [...] attempts to situate Chronicles within a specific historical context are commendable, but their presumption of a direct correlation between a text and a given context needs to be rethought. Authors can respond to or even react against their circumstances. To be sure, a literary work may betray its historical milieu in spite of itself. [...] Nevertheless, the literary products need not exactly mirror the conditions – whether dreary or ebullient – in which their authors

is politics in the service of the ruling classes, where history-writing is no more than an expression of the ruler's ideology..." In her commentary on Chronicles, she links ideology to religion (Sara Japhet, *I&II Chronicles. A Commentary* [SCM: London, 1993], 49) and Jonker, in a review of her book *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009) equates her reference to ideology with theology (Louis Jonker, Review, RBL 05/2010 [cited 7 September 2010]. Online: <http://www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=7303>).

⁴ Steven L. McKenzie, *1-2 Chronicles* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2004).

⁵ James T. Sparks, *The Chronicler's Genealogies. Towards an Understanding of 1 Chronicles 1-9* (SBL: Atlanta, 2008), 366-7.

⁶ Gary N. Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 1-9* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 101-117. He opts for a date in the late fourth or mid-third century B.C.E.

lived.⁷

He does not draw any connotation between the Book of Chronicles and power within the Persian period. Could it be that the reluctance to draw a link between text and context has its origin in the minimalist-maximalist debate Japhet drew the attention to? But even so, from a socio-rhetorical point of view, the link between text and context can be important, especially for an ethics of reading.

This article will illustrate the validity of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's SBL Presidential address of 1987 on the topic of the ethics of interpretation, namely doing justice to the text in its historical originating context by inquiring, *inter alia* into the author's responsibility towards his audience.⁸ Firstly, Schüssler Fiorenza's ideas on the socio-political location of the reader will be stated, after which that specific location for Chronicles will be explored in terms of the power in the Persian Empire as well as a look at the Persian Empire through modern imperial eyes. The article will conclude with a few remarks on the identity of the author and audience.

B ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in her 1987 presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in the USA, refers to the public-political responsibility of Bible readers. To her, biblical texts and their interpretations do not only involve authorial aims and strategies, but also audience perceptions and constructions.

She bases her arguments on two aspects, namely social location and political ethos:⁹

- Social location has to do with a person's place in society. It involves a relationship of power that is influenced by race, gender, sexuality, economy, etcetera. Thus one's perceptions are shaped by this position in which one finds oneself. It does not mean one thinks in a particular way because of one's gender or race, but on a continuum of power. Within a particular gender relationship such as patriarchy, women will find themselves in a subordinate position and may perceive the world around them in that way. The readers' social location determines how they see the world, how they construct their reality and how they interpret texts.
- The reading of the biblical text is not done within a political vacuum. The Bible reader does not stand outside the common circumstances of

⁷ Knoppers, *1 Chronicles* 1-9, 105.

⁸ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation. Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (1988): 3-17.

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 9-13; 17-18.

life in society. Schüssler Fiorenza claims that just as natural science cultivates a public that is aware of the improvements science can bring to and increase human welfare, biblical scholarship can cultivate a public that is aware of the improvements it can bring to our reading and understanding of the Bible. However, it appears to her that the public of biblical scholarship is organised religion within Christianity that is more concerned in defending certain doctrines than with any human betterment accruing from new religious insights.¹⁰

She then posits a double ethics of interpretation that constitutes two sides of the same coin: an *ethics of historical reading* and an *ethics of accountability*. Regarding the first, she argues that an “ethics of historical reading changes the task of interpretation from finding out ‘what the text meant’ to the question of what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical contexts.”¹¹ She defines the second aspect as being “responsible not only for the choice of theoretical interpretive models but also for the ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meanings.”¹²

An ethics of interpretation is concerned with balancing readers’ responsibilities to the text, to themselves as readers and to those who will eventually bear the marks of another reader’s reading. In other words, an ethics of reading can be defined as that condition in which a reader takes seriously not only his or her social location from which the reading will be done, but also that of the author who once produced the text as well as that of the readers who are implicated by the text either as intended or real readers. In this way the historicity of the text, author and readers can be given its due. But that is not the whole story. A reader also needs to take seriously the political implications of his or her social position in the act of reading within that particular society. “Taking seriously the political implications” also has a bearing on the author of a text, as his or her writing would have had consequences for the community in whose midst he or she produced the text. Thus, it implies that the author of the text needs to take responsibility for the political implications and consequences on the immediate (real or intended) audience for his or her writing a text within a particular community.

¹⁰ Evidence of scholarship serving the needs of organised religion can especially be seen in the debate on creation and ecology. See Peet J. van Dyk, “Challenges in the Search for an Ecotheology,” *OTE* 22/1 (2009): 186-204. He exposes those reasons why ecological issues previously played such an insignificant role in biblical theology. For example, he (p. 199) refers to the notion of salvation history with its focus on the salvation of the individual soul that is all that really matters. Subsequently, there was no developing of a biblical concept of nature that needs to be sustained. Given Gen 1:28 and Ps 8, the imperative for humankind is to subdue the earth and rule over it. Yet it is precisely the subjugation that led to the ecological crisis.

¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation,” 14.

¹² Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation,” 15.

Schüssler Fiorenza's focus is on current readers of the biblical text and biblical scholarship. However, it can be equally applicable to the context of text production of the biblical text. The author is determined by a particular relationship of power that influences his or her social standing. His or her production of a text in a community would have had ramifications for that community as texts assume readers. In an ancient scribal¹³ society texts would have been part of the power mechanism in society, as they would have been written to link up in some way to the current public transcript.

C ETHICS OF INTERPRETATION AND CHRONICLES

If an ethics of interpretation requires from the reader "an explicit articulation of one's rhetorical strategies, interested perspectives, ethical criteria, theoretical frameworks, religious presuppositions, and socio-political locations" for public scrutiny within a rhetorical paradigm of OT studies,¹⁴ the reader may ask similar ethical questions to the author of an OT text, namely his socio-political location and interested perspective in writing the particular text. I want to bring these two questions to the Book of Chronicles, especially in terms of the socio-political location of the Chronicler within Yehud and the interests with which he wrote.

But doing justice to the text also implies looking at the face of the Other in the text, namely, those caught up in the text's signifying power as the text is deployed as a weapon or a tool:¹⁵ "When we read the Bible, the Other as face is already present, in the Bible, behind the Bible, in front of the Bible, and forever in the Bible's shadow, signifying."¹⁶ In other words, who came under the milling stone in the Chronicler's text? In the light of this,

[i]t becomes all the more urgent then to attend to the complicated nature of the text, to possible social locations, to attend to the textual details, to what the text mirrors and distorts, plays back and rerecords, constructs and fissures. What is other is at stake, maybe even at risk: Just whose face is being snatched back from Nothingness ...?

¹³ Scribal culture is understood as a culture where writing is considerably important, but technology prohibited its production on a vast scale, so that texts were constructed for a public audience. See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 18.

¹⁵ See Gary A. Phillips & Danna Nolan Fewell, "Ethics, Bible, Reading As If," in *Bible and Ethics of Reading* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 3. A weapon acts on a sentient surface and a tool on a non-sentient surface. The hand that pounds a human face is a weapon, but the hand pounding dough is a tool. A text that kills becomes a weapon.

¹⁶ Phillips & Fewell, "Ethics, Bible, Reading As If," 7. Introducing the concept of the "face" in the act of reading, Phillips and Fewell summon the informed reader to consider what was at stake in the very act of writing a particular biblical text.

Our responsibility as critical readers is to uncode all of the text's mortal faces that plead for us to snatch them back from the Nothingness ... to expose what is unsaid for the sake of those wounded, for the sake ultimately and originarily of justice.¹⁷

The question of the face of the Other becomes pressing in the Book of Chronicles when the Persian imperial context is considered. Over-against Gary Knoppers' view on Chronicles as a result of inner-Yehudite dynamics, Louis Jonker draws in the Persian royal ideology and administrative system to understand the Saul narrative in the book.¹⁸ Acknowledging Knoppers' notion of intra-group identity negotiation,¹⁹ Jonker argues that the Chronicler also brings into play the Persian imperial context in employing the notions of peace and order to describe the royal history. In other words, the Chronicler, in the words of Jonker, "thinks and writes as a citizen of the empire"²⁰ in making use of the notions of peace and order to describe the monarchical past of Yehud. Jonker then argues that the Chronicler's reference to Cyrus at the end of the book is a logical conclusion in terms of peace and order. Moreover, he regards the Chronicler as a master of "speaking-in-the-imperium," a possible attempt to come to terms with Yehud's provinciality in the larger Persian Empire.²¹

But given our current knowledge of what empire entails, is the Chronicler's attempt to negotiate a social identity benevolent? Jonker sees the Chronicler as someone who distances himself somewhat from particular Benjaminite power claims and who associates with "All Israel" in a province within the larger Persian Empire.²²

¹⁷ Phillips & Fewell, "Ethics, Bible, Reading As If," 8.

¹⁸ Louis Jonker, "Revisiting the Saul Narrative in Chronicles: Interacting with the Persian Imperial Context?" *OTE* 23/2 (2010): 297.

¹⁹ Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 1-9*, 209-10. Knoppers deems the presence of the tribe of Benjamin in the Saul narrative very important, since their presence underscores the unity of the Judahite monarchy with the tribes of Levi and Judah. After Saul, David is portrayed as a man of all Israel, and the Chronicler is thought to urge the readers of the tribe of Benjamin to accept David's role in this regard.

²⁰ Jonker, "Revisiting the Saul Narrative in Chronicles," 302.

²¹ Jonker, "Revisiting the Saul Narrative in Chronicles," 303-4. The monarchy is not used for its historiographical interest, but is employed to negotiate a social identity within a context of a widely influential Persian royal ideology. Cyrus then becomes the king to whom Yahweh gave all the kingdoms of the earth and commands him to rebuild the temple as a house of rest.

²² Jonker, "Revisiting the Saul Narrative in Chronicles," 301. With Jerusalem on the border of Judah and Benjamin, the first temple and Davidic House was surrounded by Benjaminite territory. In the relaxed administrative Persian dispensation, it was possible that the Benjaminites could renew their claim to the centre of political influence, a claim that could be strengthened by the fact that Saul's death benefited the Davidic

An ethics of interpretation aims at doing justice to the text in its historical original context. "Doing justice" in this sense means that the historical contexts of the author as well as the reader of that text need to be considered. But the author should also be submitted to ethical scrutiny quite similar to the process to which a reader of the biblical text would be submitted to, namely in terms of responsibility towards those who would carry the marks of the text. The author's text has political implications for the readers of the time.

The biblical texts were not written within a political vacuum. Nor were the authors emotionally detached or dispassionate. They, as any reader, do not stand "outside the common circumstances of collective life."²³ If this is true, how should one then conceive of the author and readers of the Book of Chronicles? Is the Book of Chronicles an imperial text putting the subordinates in Yehud "in line" or is it a book solely presenting us with the raucous development of Judaism with no obvious connection to the socio-political situation created by Persian rule? If reading and writing were a mode of exercising power, authors could then be closely associated with those power structures. The readers would then constitute the subordinates over whom power would be exerted.

D IMPERIUM

1 Conquest and dominium of the Persian Empire

If Chronicles constitute an imperial text, what is meant by empire as in the Persian Empire? The term "empire" has no real correspondence in ancient languages, but Pierre Briant is of the opinion that the term "empire" constitutes some territorial authority.²⁴ But what kind of authority should one conceive of? Briant says:

This is in fact the basic problem posed by the origin and construction of the Achaemenid Empire. Marked by extraordinary ethnocultural diversity and by a thriving variety of forms of local organization, it evokes two interpretations: one that sees it as a sort of loose federation of autonomous countries under the distant aegis of a Great King, a federation that is evident solely from the perspective of tribute levies and military conscriptions; and another that without rejecting the evidence of diversity emphasizes the organizational

dynasty. The Chronicler had no desire to estrange the Benjaminites, but he could neither negate the Persian rule of peace and order within the provinces.

²³ Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation," 10, argues here against the scholarly or scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry of biblical studies. I am of the opinion that this value free detached inquiry influences the readers' view on the authors of these ancient texts, namely detached of any socio-historical and political framework, they only made statements about deities and religion.

²⁴ Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 1. In the ancient languages, the texts refer to land, peoples, royal territories, the power of the king or his satraps, or to dynasties, kings and cities.

dynamic of the many sorts of intervention by the central authority and the intense process of acculturation.²⁵

Briant argues for the latter.²⁶ The former point of view is supported by a material lack of evidence, but contradicted by literary texts and inscriptions. After all, the Persians anchored themselves in local traditions. However, on re-examining the evidence it was found Achaemenid ware were present at some sites all the way, and as scholars looked anew, the quantity of evidence grew. It all pointed toward the “theory that Achaemenid imperial occupation was much more dense than has been imagined in the past.”²⁷

But what would be signs of imperial presence in a province? Briant mentions the following:²⁸

- evidence that indicate the presence of colonists in a province that points towards control of the territory and population (i.e. the density of Persian and Iranian personal names and sanctuaries dedicated to Persian gods)
- the spread of iconographic motifs and its borrowing by the local elites (for example tombs, coinage, artistic motifs, administrative residences, exploitation of land).

Furthermore, although the Persian conquest(s) did not always cause the downfall of kings and their dynasties, it does not mean the army was without military force or power.²⁹ In addition, Briant argues that diversity and unity as two necessary components of the Persian Empire prohibited the empire from imposing the kind of centralisation one finds in modern states based on the national ideal. The idea of a nation state is foreign to “a multiethnic, multicultural Empire.”³⁰ And of the kings or territories left in place, Briant contends that friendship and alliance was very basic to Persian control over that territory. The Persians would impose dominion and hegemony in a flexible way yet with significant weight. However, in the public transcript there may be a difference in presentation. The Persians may regard a ruler as a governor, but the latter may regard himself as a king, or the community may see themselves as a civic

²⁵ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 1.

²⁶ See Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 762-768.

²⁷ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 763.

²⁸ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 765. Briant warns that the evidence may not always show cultural borrowing constituting political control, but the political nature of some of the evidence cannot be ignored, i.e. royal motifs on coins.

²⁹ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 765.

³⁰ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 766. For the development of the nation state, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 139-174.

community, whereas the Persian view may be that they are a mere fortress.³¹ In the case of the Sanballat family, they were in fact descendants of a Samaritan dynast, and became kings. But in Persian eyes, they were first and foremost the authorised representatives of the central authority.³²

Briant argues that conquest and dominion played out on two levels: unification and diversity, which meant that the unification of the administration did not imply a loss of local traditions.³³ Aramaic as imperial language did not displace local languages. Official imperial texts were translated into the local language of the territory the correspondence targeted. Linguistic diversity did not endanger political unity and any order, no matter which language retained its Persian effective value.³⁴ Similarly, in the same way the diversity of languages was accepted as a reality, the different laws of the respective territories were also respected. But the accent is political and not judicial. The local tradition and customs of Yehud were recognised by the imperium (as was the case in Ezra 7:25-26), yet the recognition meant these customs become included in what is called “royal law,” an authority that does not proceed from the local people’s own tradition. Being royal law, inhabitants could then be protected from satrapal arbitrariness.³⁵

2 Persian power through modern imperial eyes

Briant sees the long duration of the Persian Empire in its ability of organisational intervention and acculturation. What about power? Patricia Marchak observes that the right of monarchs to use their power and maintain and increase their wealth in the court as well as within the nobility is taken for granted in feudal society: “That was what kings did, and there was no point in expecting them to be concerned with the plight of the poor.”³⁶ It was also taken for granted that kings will have armies and spies to keep the population subordinate, always in a process of sustaining and reproducing the system of a hierarchy of power and wealth. Armies are critical to the maintenance of legitimacy, yet they defend the empire as the empire defines the interest.³⁷ Given the preva-

³¹ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 767. This is the case of the bilingual inscription on a Syrian dynast where he presents himself as a king in Aramaic, whereas the Assyrian text describes him as a governor. Xanthus describes themselves as a civic community, but the Persians regard them as a mere fortress in which the satrap installed a governor.

³² Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 767.

³³ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 507.

³⁴ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 510.

³⁵ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 511: “[W]hile they symbolized and marked submission, they also strictly limited the unfortunate impulses of satrapal authorities.”

³⁶ Patricia Marchak, *Reigns of Terror* (McGill-Queen’s University Press: Montreal, 2003), 10.

³⁷ Marchak, *Reigns of Terror*, 8.

lence of what is perceived to be a *pax Persica* or *Achaemenida*, how dominant was the use of terror to subordinate? One knows what happened to those who rebelled against Persian rule, but dare one assume that

a carefully planned, organized system that requires the coordinated contributions of agencies engaged in the gathering of information; the sleuthing and stalking of potential victims; abduction or capture, incarceration, torture, and murder of victims; and the disposal of corpses³⁸

is the case when modern states terrorise their citizens? When Cyrus II was on his way to Babylon, he brutally killed the inhabitants of Opis on the banks of the Tigris and plundered the city as an example of what happens to those who resist the Persian advance.³⁹ The terror manifested in Opis served as a deterrent in the next city, Sippar, and most probably Babylon, who surrendered both without offering resistance.

David Day asks how does a society that moves onto the land of another make that place its own:

Ever since the evolution of modern humans, the history of the world has been the history of peoples on the move, as they occupy new lands and establish their particular claims of proprietorship over them. Whether slowly or incrementally, ... it almost invariably involves the violent dispossession of pre-existing inhabitants. But how can the newcomers make their occupation secure? It is a fundamental question of human existence that all societies have confronted over the centuries and have sought in varying ways to resolve.⁴⁰

He regards the history of the world “the history of wave after wave of people intruding on the lands of others.”⁴¹ Each wave set off a drawn out and multifaceted development as prior occupiers were being displaced. The story of the Conquest is such a story of displacing the Canaanites and biblical Israel occupying a territory not their own.⁴² They, in turn, faced invasions of the Assyri-

³⁸ Marchak, *Reigns of Terror*, 34.

³⁹ Maria Brosius, *The Persians. An Introduction* (Routledge: London, 2006), 11.

⁴⁰ David Day, *Conquest. How Societies Overwhelm Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xii-xiii.

⁴¹ Day, *Conquest*, 3.

⁴² The story of the Conquest served as a matrix for Europe’s imperial endeavours. Says Day, *Conquest*, 96: “They could take pious justification from the commandment that was supposedly made to the tribe of Israel when it was led out of Egypt by Moses to ‘occupy the territory of nations greater and more powerful than you.’ They were assured that everywhere that ‘you set the soles of your feet shall be yours.’ The Bible told of how Moses was commanded by God to take the land of a certain King Sihon and occupy it. When the king resisted, ‘the lord our God put him in our power, and we killed him, ... We left no survivors.’ The conquistadors followed in the footsteps of

ans, Babylonians and Persians. Israel initially colonised Canaan, supplanting the indigenous inhabitants. After them the Assyrians and Babylonians did the same. And then came the Persians. The advance of their Empire was a process of colonising territories. Moreover, the colonisers may leave, but those who remained behind, are forced to deal with the historical legacy of colonialism.⁴³

But were the Persians a supplanting society? A supplanting society moves onto the land of another with the intention of making that land its own through a prolonged process whereby its claim to that land is being made superior to the claim of the pre-existing people as well as any other society that may challenge its claim.⁴⁴ Day identified three stages:

- (i) The establishment of a legal claim to the land by some symbolic act, such as mapping or naming; followed by
- (ii) making the legal claim an effective of *de facto* proprietorship over the territory that has been invaded; and ending the process by
- (iii) establishing a claim of moral proprietorship.⁴⁵

A legal claim is signalled in modern times by the raising of a flag or the unveiling of a plaque or a statue. The Cyrus Cylinder (lines 17-23) narrates how this legal claim was processed when Cyrus conquered Babylon, by the city handing over Nabonidus the king, and having everybody kneeling down and kissing his feet with Cyrus ultimately expressing his lordship over the territory:⁴⁶

17. Without battle and fighting he let him enter his city Babylon. He saved Babylon from its oppression. Nabonidus, the king who did not honour him, he handed over to him.

18. All the inhabitants of Babylon, the whole of the land of Sumer

Moses, brandishing the banners of their Christian Church alongside the banners of their respective sovereigns when invading new lands, just as the Spanish had brandished them in their earlier reconquest of southern Spain from the Muslims. And they were fortified by their Christian faith in wreaking similarly merciless assaults on any peoples who dared to resist their encroachments.”

⁴³ Day, *Conquest*, 4.

⁴⁴ Day, *Conquest*, 6. Day prefers the concept of “supplanting society” to the term “colonialism.” The latter refers to a process that stops once the colonial cord between the colonising centre and the colonised periphery is cut. But the supplanting society may still continue to displace the indigenous inhabitants in the colonised country. When South Africa declared itself a republic in 1961, it cut its ties with the British colonial centre, but it went on to displace the indigenous inhabitants with the laws of apartheid.

⁴⁵ Day, *Conquest*, 7-10.

⁴⁶ The Cyrus Cylinder is a building inscription that commemorates the work done on the Babylonian temple after Cyrus’ victory over the Babylonians. See Amélie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid imperial policy,” *JSOT* 25(1983): 83-97.

and Akkad, princes and governors knelt before him, kissed his feet, rejoiced at his kingship, their faces shone.

19. “The lord, who through his help has brought the dead to life, who in (a time of) disaster and oppression has benefited all”- thus they joyfully celebrated him, honoured his name.

20. I, Cyrus, king of the universe, might king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters,

21. son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, descendent of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan,

22. eternal seed of kingship, whose reign was loved by Bel and Nabu and whose kingship they wanted to please their hearts – when I have entered Babylon peacefully,

23. I set up, with acclamation and rejoicing, the seat of lordship in the palace of the ruler.⁴⁷

Earlier in the text the author maps the territory that has been conquered in naming the kingdoms and the people, the inhabitants of Akkad and Sumer and Media. Cyrus is called by Marduk for “dominion over the totality he named his name, Gutium and all the Umman-manda he made subject to him” (line 12-13).

In order for this claim to become effective (in modernity), the conquering force needs to establish effective proprietorship “by exploring the territory’s furthest reaches, naming its geographic and other features, fortifying its borders, tilling its soil, developing its resources, and, most importantly, peopling the invaded lands.”⁴⁸ The supplanting society needs to show the conquered people that they have been superseded. One of the ways is to construct new stories that invest the conquering with a sense of belonging to the land. Another way is to appropriate existing stories to install this sense of belonging.⁴⁹

The Assyrians established their effective claim to the kingdom of Judah by capturing the local elite and moving them into Babylonian territory. The Persians too moved people around, but in the case of Judah, they seemed to have moved some people back into the territory, not out of pity, but to fortify the border with Egypt and to establish logistics for when the army will move in

⁴⁷ The text of the Cylinder that I use, have been published by Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire. A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (vol. 1, Routledge: London, 2007), 70-74.

⁴⁸ Day, *Conquest*, 8.

⁴⁹ Day, *Conquest*, 8. See also ch. 4 of the book: “Supplanting the Savages.”

that direction towards Egypt. They were perhaps more intent on asserting control over the conquered territory of Yehud than supplanting them.

Of considerable importance is Day's discussion of foundation stories.⁵⁰ He bases his ideas on Constantinople whose foundation story legitimated its existence for more than a millennium, with each major conquering force adopting the story to serve their needs and ideologies: "While the city itself survived through the ages, it was successfully conquered and occupied by several different societies, with each in its turn creating a foundation story to fortify its control of the strategic headland and the territory that it dominated."⁵¹ Day also refers to Great Britain who was content to control the colonies by partly drawing on their own foundation stories. Recognising that India had a rich past they saw their role as one of rediscovering this rich ideal classical past "by adopting the guise of Indian nobility and using Indian forms and means of communication."⁵²

It can also happen that the supplanting society already has a pre-existing association with the land that is occupied, as is the case of the state of Israel:

Israel proves an interesting example of a supplanting society in the unusual position of returning after an absence of two millennia to claim a territory that its people had once invaded and occupied but which was now occupied by others. While there were some Jews still living in Palestine in the late nineteenth century, they comprised just a tiny minority of the mainly Muslim population.⁵³

Can one regard the Book of Chronicles as a foundation story? At face value, one can indeed argue that the text exhibits a foundational trend. Regarding the empire, Cyrus is brought into the picture at the end of the book (2 Chr 36:22-23). On the surface nothing is said that estranges the Persian power. Cyrus is portrayed as fulfilling the word of YHWH through Jeremiah in setting the ball rolling for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. But the book is a rewriting of the history of the story of Yehud, with a genealogy at the beginning, a stop at the story of Saul. Whereas Saul provides a negative paradigm with the kings following in his footsteps except David and Solomon, the figure of Cyrus provides a positive one, the heights towards which the kings should

⁵⁰ Day, *Conquest*, 132-158 (ch. 7).

⁵¹ Day, *Conquest*, 132.

⁵² Day, *Conquest*, 144. However, later during the occupation the story of a rich past was supplanted by "a purely British story that portrayed the British occupiers as the selfless bringers of a civilized modernity to an otherwise savage land" (p. 145).

⁵³ Day, *Conquest*, 151. See also Day, *Conquest*, 146, i.e. the Japanese in colonising the Korean Peninsula argued that the latter were part of the extended family and should be brought back under the rule of the emperor.

have gone in their respective reigns.⁵⁴ The impression a reader has of the book is that one is dealing with an empty land that is repopulated with an entirely new society with a dominant elite of proven loyalty that is situated in Jerusalem. They were a core from outside the province of Yehud and generated an identity by adapting the history of the former inhabitants and identifying with their heritage. But they were not complete strangers to Jerusalem, the religious cult practiced there and the tradition. They had the power and were backed by the Persian Empire, and imposed themselves on those inhabitants who were present when they arrived. The latter most probably were those who were not taken captive, but who were nevertheless descendants of those who were part of the kingdom of Judah, namely the tribe of Benjamin and Judah.⁵⁵

Oded Lipschits argues on the basis of archaeological evidence that at the destruction of Jerusalem, life went on in the territory of Benjamin.⁵⁶ In fact, Mizpah seemed to have become the administrative centre. It is only at the end of the sixth century, beginning of the fifth that there is a decline in activities in Benjamin, but it coincides with new life (relatively speaking) that has been pumped into Jerusalem during the Persian period. However, the return was not that massive, as it did not leave any imprint on the archaeological data.⁵⁷ In fact, at the height of the Persian period the population of Jerusalem was not more than 3 000, 12% of the population of the city on the eve of its destruction. The rest of the population of Yehud lived in Benjamin (75%) with 15% in the Shephalah. Jerusalem was dealt a blow by the Babylonians and the city could not recover during the Persian period.⁵⁸ And one should add that until about 400 B.C.E. when Egypt became independent, “the Persian authorities deliberately permitted [in southern Palestine] a certain degree of independence with regard to the resettlement in the area.”⁵⁹ However, with Egypt as a power to reckon with since 400 B.C.E., the region experienced a heightened level of direct imperial interference in the local administration. In the brief period the

⁵⁴ Gerrie F. Snyman, “’Tis a Vice to Know Him. Readers’ response-ability and responsibility in 2 Chronicles 14-16,” in *Bible and Ethics of Reading* Semeia 77 (eds. Danna Nolan Fewell & Gary Phillips, Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1997), 97-109.

⁵⁵ Oded Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries B.C.E.,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (eds. Oded Lipschits & Joseph Blenkinsopp, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 323-376.

⁵⁶ Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 364, argues that the settlement and demography lend support to the historical premise that the Babylonians dealt Judah a major blow, but there is no evidence that the region of Benjamin was seriously hit too.

⁵⁷ Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 365.

⁵⁸ Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 366.

⁵⁹ Oded Lipschits & Oren Tal, “The Settlement Archaeology of the Province of Judah: A Case Study,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers & Rainer Albertz, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 33-52.

Persian Empire regained control of Egypt, certain settlements in Southern Palestine was abandoned and not repopulated any further.⁶⁰

The third stage of the supplanting process is that of establishing a claim of moral proprietorship over the colonised territory. It usually occurs with the other two stages and constitutes a justification of the invasion “by arguing that they [the invaders] are bringing a higher order of civilisation, economic organization, or religion to lands that they depict as being in some way savage.”⁶¹ Day calls it “tilling the soil.”⁶² Mere occupation of the land was not enough:

To be considered as its rightful owners, the occupiers of land had to dig its soil, improve it with manure, plant crops, and selectively breed and pasture their animals on it. In the absence of such activities, it was open to others to claim the land as their own.⁶³

I do not think the Persian Empire established a claim to moral proprietorship over the land in Yehud. Charles Carter argues that the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests into Palestine did not mean a scorched earth policy, but there was a significant decrease in population and activities with no process of re-establishing its productive capacities.⁶⁴ Life did not go on as usual, and one should reckon with a measure of discontinuity. Lipschits is of the opinion the discontinuity may be true for the Jerusalem and its adjacent lands, but not for Benjamin, where farming went on as usual.⁶⁵ But, it was the inhabitants and not colonisers who tilled the soil. Throughout the Persian period Yehud remained a rural province with a subsistence economy, and therefore not left with much money to throw around or develop the territory. Jerusalem appears to have been even sparsely repopulated in the Persian period with a small settlement at

⁶⁰ Lipshits & Tal, “The Settlement Archaeology of the Province of Judah,” 46.

⁶¹ Day, *Conquest*, 9.

⁶² Day, *Conquest*, 159-175.

⁶³ Day, *Conquest*, 159. Day says the Dutch established their claim to moral proprietorship by developing the land’s resources. They soon established farming lands and grazing pastures into the countryside where the nomadic Khoisan roamed. Whereas the Dutch settlers regarded the lack of agriculture on the side of the Khoisan as indicative of their uncivilised condition, their very act of ploughing made them slaves of the soil in the eyes of the Khoisan. Their disdain for ploughing and their preference for a nomadic existence made them in their own eyes the true owners of the land (165).

⁶⁴ Charles E. Carter, “Ideology and Archaeology in the Neo-Babylonian Period: Excavating Text and Tell,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (eds. Oded Lipschits & Joseph Blenkinsopp, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 311.

⁶⁵ Lipschits, “Demographic Changes in Judah,” 327. Before the Assyrian invasion, Jerusalem in the eighth and seventh century B.C.E. consisted of a large settlement with unfortified neighbourhoods and agricultural farms surrounding Jerusalem. With the Babylonian destruction, most of Jerusalem was emptied of people.

the temple site and a number of additional residents.⁶⁶ It is only in the fifth century B.C.E. when it was made the centre of the Province of Yehud that renewed settlements on a small scale appeared. Before the Persian Period small farms were established around the historic City of David and half of them were in Ramat Raḥel that was an administrative centre.⁶⁷ The recovery was limited and did not provide an economic basis for the villages and farms in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The villages and farms that were maintained were in Benjamin territory.

E REMARKS ON CHRONICLES' AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE

If one wants to construct the community in Jerusalem as audience and context for the origin of Chronicles, one needs to reckon with a very small group of people gathering around the temple amidst a subsistence economy. Were they a supplanting society? Wherever they came from, not much was going on in Jerusalem. Only when Jerusalem's status was heightened by the Persian administration, did the activities increase in Jerusalem and decrease in the Benjamin area. The likelihood is that they were not strangers and had a link with the former Judah. In any case, their presence would have strengthened the Persian military presence to curb Egypt. With regard to Egypt, the reference to Jeremiah in 2 Chr 36:22 may be insightful, since Jeremiah prophesied against Egypt, and thereby the Persian Empire would have found an ally in him. The composition of the Book of Chronicles would also make sense within a Persian sphere of supplanting societies and the construction of new foundation stories, even by adopting older traditions and create something new. It is clear Chronicles supplanted a Deuteronomist version of the history of Israel. The audience would be part of this supplanting society, and the book could have been written for self-consumption, given the few people who inhabited Jerusalem at that specific time. Furthermore, the presence of Cyrus at the end of Chronicles suggests the circle in which the book originated, recognised Persian authority, even if the reference to him simply suggests he merely did what kings were supposed to do. It may also indicate in what way the Persians became anchored in local literary traditions in supplanting the previous favourites. The reference to Cyrus would be in line with the public transcript that came with him.

What does this tell us about the socio-political location of the author and his audience? The Book of Chronicles participates in the process of maintaining the empire in that it is composed as a foundation text for a new community in Jerusalem. As foundation text it links the community as audience, real or intended, to Cyrus as symbol of the Empire under whose auspices they can make a living in Yehud.

⁶⁶ Lipschits, "Demographic Changes in Judah," 330.

⁶⁷ Lipschits, "Demographic Changes in Judah," 331.

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