

Divine Providence and Retribution in Ancient Historiography: A Comparative Analysis of the Book of Chronicles and Herodotus' *Histories*

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Introduction

This paper compares the conventional use of themes of divine providence and retribution in biblical historiography and ancient Greek historiography, more specifically, the role of the prophet in the book of Chronicles to that of the wise advisor in Herodotus' *Histories*. Moreover, this study finds not only that the roles of the prophet and wise adviser are strikingly similar but also that both these characters are instrumental in enacting the theme of divine retribution.

First, the socio-historical context of the eastern Mediterranean in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE will be considered to establish the foundation for a valid comparison. Second, the various roles of the prophet and wise adviser will be explored. Third, some possible functions of direct discourse in ancient Israelite and Greek historiographies will be examined. Finally, textual examples of arrogant rulers who ignore the warnings and exhortations of prophetic voices will be provided from both Chronicles and the *Histories*. Although this paper proposes that ancient Israelite and Greek traditions be considered in the same broad socio-cultural context, it is important to mention that this paper will not consider

speculative proposals of origins, common sources, or direct influences. These matters are not only highly hypothetical but also unnecessary for an exploration of the actual use of ancient conventions in historiographical works that emerged in separate social, political, and cultural settings.

1. Ancient Israelite and Greek Historiographies

Arnaldo Momigliano considered post-exilic Israelite historiography and fifth century Greek historiography to be parallel phenomena.¹ The ancient Israelites and Greeks used other common ancient historiographical conventions such as citations and stock/exaggerated numbers for the purpose of authentication, as well as genealogies, in addition to the conventions of divine retribution and the role of prophets/wise advisors. It is noteworthy that Gary Knoppers contends that the closest counterpart to the phenomenon of 1 Chronicles 1-9 (Chronicles' genealogy) may be found in the works of the Greek genealogists.²

Knoppers also acknowledges the possibilities of better understanding ancient historiographical conventions via cross-cultural comparisons and analyses. He states:

The failure to explore comparisons with the conventions of classical historiography is unfortunate. Cross-cultural studies offer the benefits of comparing similar phenomena in a plurality of social settings, illuminating otherwise odd or inexplicable traits of certain literary works, exploring a set of problems in different societies, and calling attention to the unique features of a particular era of writing. Moreover, ancient Greece does offer

¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, "Elements in Jewish, and Greek, Historiography," *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 26.

² Gary N. Knoppers, "Greek Historiography and the Chronicler's History: A Reexamination," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122.4 (2003), 633.

national histories that may be compared with the Deuteronomistic History and the Chronicler's History.³

Furthermore, the ancient Israelites and Greeks may have shared some ideas and conventions by the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, possibly through diffusion or cultural contact. Close contact between the ancient Israelites and Greeks during the Hellenistic period (323-30 BCE) is, of course, well known, but a great deal of physical evidence has been unearthed indicating cultural contact between the two groups during the Persian period (550-330 BCE).⁴ Thus, Greek contact with Yehud/Judah preceded Alexander by centuries, as Persian period archaeological evidence, as well as archaeological evidence from even earlier periods,⁵ reveals. In fact, Knoppers refers to the fifth and fourth centuries as "a time of rapid

³ Knoppers, "Greek Historiography and the Chronicler," 628.

⁴ See Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period: A Social and Demographic Study* (JSOTSup 294; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 249, 256-57. Eric M. Meyers states that archaeology teaches us that the influence of the Greeks in Yehud predated Alexander. By the fifth century BCE, the initial signs of the appeal of Greek culture had begun to emerge in Yehud: "the adoption of coinage as a medium of exchange along with the use as the standard of the Attic tetradrachm with Greek symbols, such as the Athenian owl; the establishment of Greek trading emporia along the coastal plain; the importation of Attic black-glazed ceramic wares as luxury items; and the opening of new trade routes connecting the Persian Gulf with the Aegean as well as others that would bring Egypt in closer touch with both the Levant and the Aegean." Numerous Palestinian sites, both inland and coastal, have yielded statues of Greek figures. All of this occurred in Persian Yehud ("Jewish Culture in Greco-Roman Palestine," in D. Biale (ed.), *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* [New York: Schocken Books, 2002], 140-41).

⁵ The Israelites may have had cultural contact with the Greeks, probably indirectly, as early as the eighth century BCE. Preceding Hellenism, the first Greek colonization (eighth to sixth centuries BCE) reached the Levant by the eighth century; sites like Al Mina on the Orontes River have left ample physical remains to indicate that the Greeks and the denizens of the Levant were in contact with one another. Eighth century Greek pottery has been unearthed from coastal sites in the Levant, such as Tyre (which even has some tenth century Greek sherds). But the quantities of Greek pottery unearthed at Al Mina in the eighth century greatly exceed the amounts discovered at other Near Eastern sites. During this period, it is thought that the Northwest Semitic alphabet was diffused to the Greeks; in addition to this, it is also thought that artistic and literary conventions diffused across the Mediterranean (Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making: 1200-479 BC* [New York: Routledge, 1996], 112-13).

Hellenization” in Judah.⁶ It was during the Persian and Hellenistic periods that “... intellectual elites from a variety of societies found themselves confronted with empires aspiring to dominate the entire ancient Mediterranean world. These societies were both united and divided by trade, travel, taxation, and war.”⁷ In sum, the Chronicler and Herodotus, who were near contemporaries,⁸ shared a common fifth to fourth century BCE eastern Mediterranean socio-historical setting.

2. The Roles of Prophets and Wise Advisors

In Chronicles, a prophet (2 Chron. 12:5-7; 20:37; 21:12; 25:15; 28:9), a seer (2 Chron. 16:7), a man of God (2 Chron. 25:7), a Levite (2 Chron. 20:14), a priest (2 Chron. 24:20), a king (2 Chron. 35:21), or any other ad hoc prophet may fulfil the role of the prophetic figure.⁹ Prophetic figures interpret historical events within the context of divine retribution, predict immediate future events, warn, and exhort. In many instances, prophetic figures provide warnings and exhortations

⁶ Knoppers, “Greek Historiography and the Chronicler,” 648.

⁷ Knoppers, “Greek Historiography and the Chronicler,” 650.

⁸ Chronicles is dated to between the late Persian period and early Hellenistic period and the composition of the *Histories* is dated between 430-420 BCE.

⁹ I do not share William Schniedewind’s (*The Word of God in Transition: From Prophet to Exegete in the Second Temple Period* [JSOTSup 197; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 80-129) view on a distinction between “prophets” and “inspired messengers,” because, in my view, anyone who utters a prophetic utterance in Chronicles is a prophet, as all prophetic figures seem to serve similar purposes within the narrative; that is, regardless of the proper title of the prophet in Chronicles, either prophet or otherwise, they warn and /or exhort. *Contra* Schniedewind, see Rex Mason, *Preaching the Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 137. Mason states: “Whether or not, then, the speakers are named or given genealogies, and however they are described, they all seem to be doing and saying very similar things... All we can say is that there is a certain broad fitness in the themes of the addresses given to kings, priests, or prophetic figures. Beyond that we can say only that the Chronicler sees them all as ‘messengers’.”

for kings, and if a king fails to heed a prophetic message, he becomes an object of divine retribution. Yairah Amit suggests that the institutions of prophecy and monarchy are associated, even so closely that Davidic monarchs can act as prophets (1 Chron. 22:17-19; 2 Chron. 20:20; 29:5-11; 30:6-9; 32:7-8).¹⁰ Moreover, whenever the link between a Davidic king and YHWH is broken because of misconduct by the kings, prophetic figures are deployed to warn and exhort. In other words, the king is the one who determines the course of history, which is, of course, contingent upon his actions, while the prophet merely interprets and directs. A king who “seeks YHWH”¹¹ (1 Chronicles 10-2 Chronicles 9; 2 Chron. 14:2-5; 17:3-4; 19:3; 20:3; 26:4-5; 29:2-3; 34:2-7) by following God’s ways does not require a prophet, and if one appears, he is there to offer encouragement. However, those who do not “seek YHWH” and dismiss the prophetic word are punished.¹²

Comparable to the prophetic figure in Chronicles, the wise advisor in Herodotus’ *Histories* recurs throughout the narrative under a variety of guises and with a variety of names. The wise advisor may be male or female, a king’s counsellor (1.207; 3.36; 4.83; 7.10, 46-49, 51) or a king himself (3.40; 9.122), or

¹⁰ Amit’s observation is correct; however, it is important to add that a main or an authoritative character, Davidic king or not, in a particular narrative can fulfil a prophetic role. For instance, a foreign king, Pharaoh Neco, fulfils the role of the prophetic figure in 2 Chron. 35:21.

¹¹ In addition to explicit references to “seeking YHWH”, acts such as “doing right in the sight of YHWH”, “walking in the ways” of a righteous predecessor, humbling oneself, and preserving the Jerusalem cult also constitute instances of “seeking YHWH”. See Rodney K. Duke, “A Rhetorical Approach to Appreciating the Books of Chronicles,” in M.P. Graham and S.L. McKenzie (eds.), *The Chronicler as Author: Studies in Text and Textuality* (JSOTSup 263; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 122.

¹² Yairah Amit, “The Role of Prophecy and Prophets in the Chronicler’s World,” *forthcoming*.

may even be a little girl, such as Gorgo (5.51), Cleomenes' daughter. Richmond Lattimore distinguishes between the two types of wise advisors, the "tragic warner" and the "practical advisor," and since the two are not mutually exclusive, their roles may overlap. The tragic warner often attempts to caution an arrogant and headstrong leader against doing or continuing a certain action. The tragic warner usually is pessimistic, unheeded, and correct. When the advice of the tragic warner goes unheeded, disaster and retribution strikes the headstrong leader. The practical advisor, on the other hand, generally gives sound advice which is accepted with positive results.¹³ Furthermore, according to Henry Immerwahr, the effect of the advice is contingent upon its acceptance or rejection.¹⁴

3. Direct Speech in Ancient Israelite and Greek Historiographies¹⁵

Rodney Duke considers direct discourse in Chronicles to be an external proof which gives authority, support, and authentication to the Chronicler's teachings. External proof is material which supposedly is not created by the speaker or writer but is derived from external sources and is used to support an argument; it

¹³ Richmond Lattimore, "The Wise Adviser in Herodotus," *Classical Philology* 34 (1939), 24-35. Also see Henry R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Philological Monographs 23; Cleveland, OH: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), 72-78.

¹⁴ Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, 74.

¹⁵ It is significant that both ancient Israelite and Greek historiographies use direct discourse, as this convention was not always used in ancient historiography. For example, ancient Mesopotamian historiographies such as the *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* do not provide instances of direct discourse.

may include eyewitness testimony, physical evidence, and letters or other documents. In Chronicles, in addition to speeches, other conventions such as genealogies, lists, and citation of sources also function as external proofs. Duke adds that it is irrelevant if these are authentic or fabricated, since they function rhetorically as external proofs. Direct discourse is an effective external proof in that it purports to be not the words of the Chronicler, but rather the testimony of other people, who usually are authoritative figures such as a king (55 times), a prophetic figure (18 times), and YHWH (8 times). Even if the words are those of the Chronicler and represent his/her theological principles and teachings, the authoritative third party authenticates the content and its messages. For such reasons, the Chronicler does not have to depend on his/her own authority. Finally, many instances of direct speech in Chronicles, either implicitly or explicitly, include the “seeking YHWH” paradigm; therefore, direct discourse functions to imprint the paradigm on the minds of the intended audience.¹⁶ Thus, prophetic speeches authenticate a central doctrine of the Chronicler: those who seek YHWH prosper (military victories, peace, wisdom, wealth, building projects, many children, etc.), while those who turn away from him and do not heed the prophetic word are punished (military defeat, illness or death, rebellion of the people, etc.).

Duke’s model of the Chronicler’s rhetorical device of direct discourse is also applicable to Greek historiography. For instance, in Xenophon’s *Hellenica*, Theramenes gives a speech which the author uses to direct the reader’s attention

¹⁶ Duke, “A Rhetorical Approach,” 129-32.

to the impiety of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens, who violate sanctuary by dragging Theramenes to his death from the altar at which he took refuge. Theramenes' speech refers to the Thirty's impiety toward the gods, for which they are punished soon after. Frances Pownall notes that by means of Theramenes' speech, Xenophon directs the reader's attention to the Thirty's violation of sanctuary without passing judgment himself.¹⁷

Similarly, in the *Histories*, direct discourse by authoritative figures represents and authenticates Herodotus' central themes and didactic lessons. Herodotus emphasizes that human existence is in a state of flux; that is, human fortune is never static, and as a result, the small may become mighty and the mighty may fall, particularly when those who have power become arrogant and are guilty of *hybris*.¹⁸ Cyrus, Croesus, Cambyses, Polycrates, and Xerxes are examples of individuals who possess great power, fortune, and wealth, only to meet an eventual demise via divine retribution, which maintains a separation between humans and the divine.¹⁹

The instability of human fortune, according to Herodotus, results from a combination of human excess and arrogance, that is, *hybris*, and divine jealousy. This theme begins with Solon's speech to Croesus (1.32) and continues through to

¹⁷ Frances Skoczylas Pownall, "Condemnation of the Impious in Xenophon's *Hellenica*," *Harvard Theological Review* 91.3 (1998), 259.

¹⁸ Herodotus writes: "I will cover minor and major human settlements equally, because most of those which were important in the past have diminished in significance by now, and those which were great in my own time were small in times past. I will mention both equally because I know that human happiness never remains long in the same place" (1.5).

¹⁹ Thomas Harrison, *Divinity and History: The Religion of Herodotus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 62.

Croesus and Cyrus (1.207), Amasis and Polycrates (3.40), Artabanus and Xerxes (7.10), and concludes the book with Cyrus' closing advice to the Persians (9.122).²⁰ Herodotus reinforces his core theme through speeches from authoritative wise advisors, including the Athenian law-giver Solon (1.32), Croesus king of Lydia (1.207), Pharaoh Amasis (3.40), and the great Athenian general Themistocles (8.109).²¹

4. Textual Examples

Textual examples from Chronicles and Herodotus' *Histories* in which direct speech emphasizes and authenticates the worldviews of each respective author will now be considered. Moreover, in each instance, an arrogant ruler dismisses the advice of the prophet or wise advisor and subsequently meets an end via divine retribution. It is important to mention that examples from Chronicles will be read in tandem with examples from the *Histories* in order illustrate how the convention functions similarly in the two texts. In concentrating on the similarities of the two texts, it is not my intention to gloss over the differences or to suggest that these are similar stories. Rather, the following examples are the works of different authors with very different core messages; that is, as mentioned above, the Chronicler's emphasizes the "seeking YHWH" paradigm, while

²⁰ Harrison, *Divinity and History*, 62.

²¹ See Harrison, *Divinity and History*, 31-63; Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus*, 77, 310-13.

Herodotus stresses the instability of human fortune. In other words, the abounding differences are self-evident.

4.1 AMAZIAH AND POLYCRATES

After Amaziah hires 100,000 Israelite mercenaries from the Northern Kingdom, a man of God advises him not to go to battle with the Israelite army because YHWH is with neither Israel nor Ephraim. Furthermore, the man of God warns that if Amaziah goes to battle with his mercenaries, God will bring him down, since YHWH has the power to help or harm (2 Chron. 25:7-8). Amaziah heeds the prophetic word and leaves the mercenaries behind, and as a result, is victorious in battle (2 Chron. 25:10-13). Then after returning from slaughtering the Edomites, Amaziah inexplicably brings back and worships the gods of the defeated Edomites (2 Chron. 25:14). As a result, an angry YHWH sends a prophet to Amaziah in order to advise him against his senseless idolatry, but the king interrupts the speech by asking the prophet if he has been appointed as a royal counsellor. The prophet recognizes that divine retribution is imminent, as he says, "I know that God has planned to destroy you, because you have done this, and have not listened to my counsel" (2 Chron. 25:15-16). Amaziah's ignorance and arrogance are exhibited clearly when he challenges Joash king of Israel. Joash warns the Judahite king that his heart has become proud and boastful and that trouble will fall on Amaziah and Judah. However, Amaziah does not listen and

God delivers him into the hand of Joash as retribution for seeking the gods of Edom, rather than YHWH, and for not heeding the prophetic word (2 Chron. 25:17-20).²² Thereafter, Amaziah flees to Lachish where he is killed (2 Chron. 25:27).

Similarly, Polycrates is successful in all of his military campaigns and he conquers many Aegean Islands and numerous mainland communities as well. He is so prosperous that he becomes the talk of all of Greece (3.39). Polycrates' success becomes a concern for his guest-friend Pharaoh Amasis²³ who writes a letter to warn him that continual fortune is dangerous since the gods are jealous of success. Furthermore, Amasis advises Polycrates that he has never encountered a person succeeding in all matters who did not meet a horrible end. Thus, Amasis advises Polycrates to throw away his most valuable possession in order to change his luck, for it is best to have a mix of good and bad luck (3.40). Polycrates heeds Amasis' advice and throws his prized ring into the sea (3.41); however, the gods already had decided Polycrates' fate, as his ring returns to him in the belly of a fish which a fisherman presents to him as a gift (3.42). Upon hearing the news, Amasis realizes that one cannot save another from fate and that Polycrates would die a miserable death (3.43).

²² Hoglund notes the Chronicler's expansion of 2 Kgs 14:7-14. In the DtrH account there is no man of God, no prophet, and no worship of Edomite gods (The Chronicler as Historian: A Comparativist Perspective," in M.P. Graham, K.G. Hoglund, and S.L. McKenzie [eds.], *Chronicler as Historian* [JSOTSup 238; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 24).

²³ Interestingly, like Herodotus, the Chronicler places prophetic words into the mouth of an Egyptian ruler, Pharaoh Neco (2 Chron. 35:21-22). However, the main difference is that Neco is a divinely inspired speaker, that is, he speaks the word of YHWH. Amasis, on the other hand, is a wise advisor, or tragic warner, who correctly interprets human instability and divine intentions.

Polycrates finally meets his unfortunate end at the hands of Oroetes, who tricks him by the ruse of great wealth. The story goes that Polycrates plans to rule the sea, an act of *hybris* in itself, and Oroetes offers to help the over ambitious Samian tyrant by sharing his fortune with him. However, Oroetes' offer is a trick to lure Polycrates to his death. Before Polycrates embarks on the voyage to his unfortunate end, he is warned by both oracles and friends; even Polycrates' daughter, who has a dream about his demise, tries to warn him about his arrangement with Oroetes. Nevertheless, Polycrates fails to heed the warnings of the wise advisors and dies a horrible death, as Amasis had warned; he is crucified just as his daughter had foreseen in her dream.

Thus, both Amaziah and Polycrates act arrogantly and disregard prophetic warnings, and consequently, they become objects of divine retribution. Moreover, in both instances, the prophetic figure realizes that an arrogant king is fated to meet a disastrous end, that is, destruction by divine hand.

4.2 UZZIAH AND CROESUS

In 2 Chronicles 26, Uzziah's reign begins piously as he seeks YHWH (v. 5), a decision which results in divine assistance in his military victories (v. 6), tribute (v. 8), fame (v. 8), building projects (v. 10), and great military strength (vv. 11-15). However, when Uzziah becomes strong, he also becomes very arrogant, as "his heart was lifted up" (v. 16). Thus, Uzziah's excessive pride leads him to turn

away from YHWH and attempt to burn incense in the temple (v. 16). Azariah the priest, along with eighty other priests, warn Uzziah not to burn incense on the incense altar in the temple because only priests are permitted to do so (v. 18).²⁴ The excessively proud Uzziah angrily dismisses the prophetic warning from the priests, an act which results immediately in a divinely afflicted case of leprosy. Uzziah is forced to live in a separate house, is cut off from the house of YHWH, and remains a leper until he dies (vv. 19-21).

In the Croesus narrative, Solon acknowledges that Croesus is a very wealthy man who rules over many people but advises him that plenty of wealthy people are unlucky and that many people of moderate means are lucky. Moreover, a lucky person is much better off since that person is safeguarded from disaster by his or her luck. In addition, also consistent with luck is good health, fine children, good looks, and a heroic death. Finally, Solon warns Croesus that he is a mere mortal and no mortal can have all blessings (wealth, luck, health, fine children, and a heroic death) since the god often offers prosperity to humans, but then destroys them utterly and completely (1.32). Croesus dismisses Solon's account as nonsense, because, in his view, anyone who ignores such great wealth and power is a fool (1.33). After Solon's departure, Herodotus informs the reader, "... the weight of divine anger descended on Croesus, in all likelihood for thinking that he was the happiest man in the world" (1.33). Soon after, Croesus' beloved

²⁴ Num. 16:40; cf. Exod. 30:1-20; Num. 18:1-7.

son dies (1.43) and, because he misinterprets the Delphic Oracle, his empire is toppled by the Persians in a war that he expected to win (1.71).

In both cases, an arrogant king rejects a warning and is punished immediately. However, it is important to mention that although divine retribution descends on Croesus immediately after Solon leaves, the Lydian king is a victim of deferred retribution and fate; that is, Croesus is punished for the impiety of his ancestor, Gyges, four generations earlier (1.91).

5. Conclusions

Although developing in separate social, political, and cultural settings, the roles of the prophet in Chronicles and the wise advisor in the *Histories* share a great deal. Without seeking origins or a direct relationship between the texts, one can observe this similarity, in part, as being due to the fact that both texts emerged from a loosely constituted fifth to fourth century BCE eastern Mediterranean cultural milieu.

The Chronicler and Herodotus used speeches by prophetic figures to emphasize, reinforce, and authenticate their very different core messages. In both texts, arrogant rulers who fail to heed prophetic words become objects of divine retribution. However, although the two texts have common elements, it seems best not to search for origins or common sources. Rather, as cited above, it seems most beneficial to follow Knoppers' approach: "Cross-cultural studies offer the

benefits of comparing similar phenomena in a plurality of social settings, illuminating otherwise odd or inexplicable traits of certain literary works, exploring a set of problems in different societies, and calling attention to the unique features of a particular era of writing.” Because of the use of conventions such as divine providence and retribution, as well as fabricated speeches, the historical accuracy of the historiographies of the Chronicler and Herodotus may be questioned by a modern reader using his or her contemporary methods; however, evidence from this study suggests that both the Chronicler and Herodotus used historiographical conventions that were accepted at that time. Thus, observations of the juxtaposed texts are valuable for our understanding of the general historiographical conventions of that milieu; that is, ancient historiographical conventions of divine retribution and didactic prophetic speeches used for the purpose of authentication seem to have been relatively widespread. Perhaps further studies into the national histories of the ancient Israelites and Greeks from the late Persian period to early Hellenistic period can help us better understand conventions used by the Chronicler that are without ancient Near Eastern parallels, namely the roles of prophetic speakers and direct discourse.

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