The Chess King of the Sciences? How Biblical Studies Appropriates Insights from Other Academic Disciplines

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Abstract: Academic study of the Bible and theology used to be regarded as “the queen of the sciences.” The area of biblical studies has evolved into a derivative enterprise, relying heavily on insights from other disciplines. This talk will present two applications of the social sciences in the study of the biblical book of Chronicles, including the notion of “textual identity and community memory,” and the twin concepts from political economy known as “selectorate theory” and “heresthetic.” We will also discuss some of the challenges that academic study of the Bible presents to faith communities.

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I. INTRODUCTION

What could possibly be interesting about biblical studies research for my colleagues at a Christian liberal arts institution, and our guests? It’s not as easy a question as one might think.

One positive aspect of sharing biblical studies research in this context is that you have a built-in audience of people who automatically care—at least, they have to say that they care. This is a PR advantage for biblical studies research more generally: Christians and Jews claim to be “people of the Book,” and both religions require that each generation wrestle anew with how to read the Book in ever-changing contexts.

A less complimentary way of labeling my discipline is that it is highly derivative, following behind the other branches of the humanities—sometimes closely behind, sometimes not-so-closely—and picking up their droppings. Since the eighteenth century in particular, nearly every major scholarly movement in the West—philosophical, historical, literary, sociocultural, linguistic—has found some champion in biblical scholarship between ten and forty years after its introduction.

The advantage of this is that we are always getting fresh insights from studies of history, literature, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, etc. The danger in this pattern is when biblical scholars try to jump the curve: In the quest to be innovative and relevant, we sometimes follow bad ideas in these disciplines before those ideas are proven and widely accepted. The result is a lot of egg on our collective face, and a lot of libraries full of obsolete journals and pointless dissertations. We are always walking the line between relevance and prudence—and that includes “prudence” as defined by the confessions of faith communities.

In the Middle Ages, theology was sometimes called “the queen of the sciences,” the capstone to the Trivium and the Quadrivium. In my title I have suggested that for contemporary biblical studies, “chess king of the sciences” might be more appropriate; in chess, of course, the king is the most valuable piece, but it moves very slowly, a single move at a time, in any direction, mostly hanging back behind the other pieces which can advance very quickly. And at the end of the game, win or lose, the king always remains on the board, even though many other swiftly-moving pieces have long disappeared.

With that somewhat severe, rather obscure introduction, I’d like to present to you today some ideas that I’m currently working on in the area of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. My focus will be two specific ideas from the social sciences that I attempted to incorporate into my dissertation. One of these concepts—which I will sum up in the phrase, “the interplay between textual identity and social memory”—is not unique to my work, but is part of a growing literature in biblical and ancient studies. The second concept—the twin ideas of “heresthetic” and “selectorate”—I have adopted from the field of political economy. This second pair of ideas is an “innovative derivation” (if I might use an oxymoron) in biblical studies: no one else that I’ve read is consciously applying these models, but I hope to help them catch on.

I’d like for this to be not strictly a presentation—“Here’s what I’ve been doing in biblical studies research, and you might be interested if you like the Bible”—but also the beginning of a dialogue. I’m soliciting from you in your various disciplines: what do you think of this, and what are some other valuable “droppings” from your disciplines that biblical studies can pick up and use? Even if this is not directly applicable to your specialization, it may stimulate some cross-disciplinary discussions that will bear fruit in your own research.
II. CONTROLLING ASSUMPTIONS

Before I get into the specific goals and methods of my dissertation, I should set the scene by outlining my assumptions within the study. These are several important points that are certainly nuanced and debated within biblical scholarship, but for the most part they are generally accepted, and I will not be defending them today—merely asserting them as premises, and moving on.

First: **Texts, even inspired texts, are a product of context.** This point is quite obvious, but it is not always applied to the Bible when it is considered as an inspired text. I am aware that certain contextual readings may be more or less helpful for “religious” or “devotional” readings of the texts. But the point remains that the text is the result of a context, and some understanding of context is fundamental to interpretation.

Second: **The Hebrew Bible in its final form, and in most of its constituent parts, is the product of post-587-BCE scribal communities that were decidedly pro-Levi and pro-Judah.** There are four components of this statement. The first component reminds us that the Bible is composed of different parts at different times, and only later did those parts become a canon. The second component is the post-587 part: This is the date of the destruction of the first temple. It’s hard to understate the importance of “templelessness” and “exile” for the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Third, we have the “scribal communities” part of the statement: we must remember that most people in the ancient world couldn’t read, and that texts were composed, edited, read, and controlled by a small group of scribes—until the late Hellenistic period. Fourth, these scribes were nearly all Levites connected in some way to the temple, and they were naturally interested in Levitical topics, as well as topics related to Judah, because the king and the capital of Israel were Judahite.

My third assumption: **The texts that made it into the Hebrew Bible are those that these scribal communities thought most important for the continuation of the Jews as a distinct identity.** Scribes had to decide which books to read as scripture in public venues, and they chose based on their understanding of the books’ antiquity, authority, and community value.

Fourth: **The so-called “Deuteronomistic History,” consisting of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, was composed during the late monarchy, the exilic period, and the early Persian period.** There are many different varieties of this view, but when I use the term “Deuteronomist,” I’m referring to the school of scribes who (over several generations, perhaps) put these books together. The prevailing scholarly orthodoxy places the final form of these books in the early Persian period.

Fifth: **The book of Chronicles is a rewritten history of Israel’s monarchy that is dependent upon the books of Samuel and Kings as a source.** Most scholars place Chronicles in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, and most argue for Chronicles’ dependence on Samuel-Kings. However, a small minority of scholars see these two works—the Deuteronomistic History and Chronicles—as contemporary, competing historiographies.¹

My sixth and final premise is that the main tribal identities that survived the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests of the Israelite monarchies are: Judah, Levi, Benjamin. This is an oversimplification, but it is generally true that the other tribal identities recede into the background after the Assyrian conquest of Northern Israel in 722 BCE. Some refugees came south and were incorporated into Judah, but they were never as prominent as Judah, Levi and Benjamin.

III. TEXTUAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY MEMORY

With these assumptions in mind, many biblical scholars ask the intriguing question: Given the apparent Levitical and Judahite interests of the authors/redactors/editors of the biblical texts, why do the Northern Israelite tribes have such an important presence in those texts? This might not be something you’ve thought about before, but it is quite odd that Israel is even represented at all when we consider the sharp slant of some of the biblical texts.

Let me give a couple of examples. The book of Judges is structured around a core of traditions about Northern Israelite judges—mostly from the Josephite tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh. These traditions—chapters 4-16—are surrounded by stories that place Judah and Benjamin into stark contrast with one another, and into contrast with the Northern judges. The message of the book is: we definitely need a king from the tribe of Judah, not these Northern shmucks, or—God forbid—a Benjaminite!

Second example: the book of Samuel seems to have been crafted using a pro-Benjamin story of Saul’s rise—possibly represented in 1 Samuel 1-14. But the editor of Samuel is very pro-Judah, pro-David—so he takes Saul’s strengths, and turns them into weaknesses. We see this with the two origin stories of the saying, “Is Saul also among the prophets?!” The version in 1 Sam 10 is positive, highlighting Saul’s election by YHWH, but the second version in 1 Sam 19 is a shameful episode where Saul is prevented from killing David.

Given the slant of the texts, it’s possible to ask why these portraits of the Northern judges and the Benjaminite rulers were preserved at all! Why bother with any positive stories of the judges, or any positive material about Saul? We’ll come back to this in a second.

The converse of the puzzling inclusion of Israelite traditions in Judah’s Bible is the inclusion of negative material about Judah, David, and the Levites in the Bible. Given the clear presence of an agenda, why mention David’s sins at all? I think this is a strong indication that the events described in the texts really happened! And, after all, the authors are able to construe David’s shortcomings in such a way as to turn them into positives: David is a sinner, but he is a model of repentance.

The biblical texts are neither ideologically neutral, “pure” historiography—nor are they strictly propagandistic fiction. We have competing tendencies reflected in these texts: on the one hand, the ideologies and rhetorical goals of the authors (which, I have argued, include community survival), and on the other hand, the boundaries created by community memory and tradition. The scribes weren’t free to just make stuff up; oral tradition in their communities made that impossible. Rather, they shaped tradition gradually, “along the margin.”

(Re)Formation as the Historical Circumstances Required,” in Historiography and Identity (Re)formation in Second Temple Historiographical Literature (ed. Louis C. Jonker; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 113-121.
So, what was the identity that the scribal communities hoped to maintain/shape/propagate, and how did they do it? When we turn to the question of “Jewish identity” in the second temple period (Persian and Hellenistic), this is where models from anthropology and the social sciences become helpful in determining what is plausible in historical context and what makes the best sense of the texts we receive from this period.

What does it mean to be a Jew? Jews have debated this question internally for thousands of years. Jewish communities throughout history have quite flexibly emphasized ethnicity, religion or nationality to varying degrees depending on the needs of the community at the time. But we need to ask, what did it mean to be a Jew—more precisely, a Yehudi, a person connected to the province of Yehud? Was it primarily an ethnic distinction, or religious? What about nationality? Did ancient peoples even consider identity in these terms?

Two important concepts informed my work in this area: the idea of identity formation as a dynamic process, and models that account for the multidimensionality of identity within imperial hierarchies.

Jon Berquist argues that identity in Persian Yehud must be sought in the processes of imperialization and resistance, rather than in the statuses of imperialism and autonomy. It is more appropriate to speak “not of identity but of identity formation.” Berquist acknowledges the inherent difficulty of this sort of inquiry, given that history deals with facts, discrete points of information, which it must interpret and from which it must interpolate the presence of societal forces. He concludes:

Understanding Judean identity formation involves a complex analysis of multiple social levels with attention to numerous processes in which people internalize the forces of imperialization and decolonization. As social agents, these self-identifying Judeans together constructed a story of the development of Judah during the Achaemenid Period, as they turned their role scripts into social action and deployed themselves in patterns of ethnicity, politics, and religion, as well as myriad other complex social patterns. Such attention to identity formation necessitates deeper and more critical understandings of the forces of imperialization and decolonization and the way that these forces shape identity and difference within societies.

Louis Jonker underscores the multidimensionality of self-categorization in Persian Yehud. The history of this period reflects a process of self-identification not within a single socio-historical level but within multiple levels—imperial, regional, ethnic, and cultic. Reflecting on the evidence of this process in Chronicles, Jonker argues: “It is important to emphasise that these levels never functioned in isolation. The inhabitants of Yehud, and particularly the literati who were responsible for the writing of another historiography, the books of Chronicles, were exposed to all these contexts, and were active participants in all of them.”

The move toward a model of identity formation along multiple dimensions reflects the changes in the discipline of sociology and its rippling effects on the other social sciences.

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Next, we need to think about the ways that texts reflect social identities through the presentation of individual data and the ways that historians and literary critics attempt to use those data in reconstructing those trajectories of identity formation. History, like other social-scientific disciplines, still deals with the single datum, the discrete fact and the unique event or individual—the historian must interpolate a force, movement or trajectory.

How do we think about *textual identities*, the community identities embedded within a ritual text? Here is another gain of anthropology and the social sciences: More recent studies of the role of ritual text in oral communities point to a force that is not merely *conservative*, but also *socially transformative*. Nathaniel Levtow suggests that developments in the understanding of text production in the ancient world may illumine the process of Israelite scribal activity. He argues that the old models of orality and literacy used in biblical studies—models that considered oral tradition as more dynamic and enscripturation as freezing that discourse—need to be modified based on the recent discoveries of social anthropologists.

This is a fascinating literature—orality and literacy in relation to ritual texts—that is causing biblical scholars to reassess many old theories of textual development and function. The punchline for our study is that this *socially transformative* role of a text opens up new avenues for us to consider what the Chronicler might have been trying to achieve rhetorically with his new history of Israel—avenues that might have been dismissed as implausible a generation ago.

I will briefly summarize my hypothesis concerning this transformative rhetorical goal of the Chronicler in revising the Deuteronomistic History. **First**, I observe that embedded in the Deuteronomistic History (and in the Pentateuch, though this is not part of my study) are elements of the community identities of the Northern tribes, even though we must acknowledge that these “textual identities” are filtered through the lens of Southern concerns.

**Second**, the tribal identity of Benjamin is particularly complex, and this complexity is represented in the Deuteronomistic texts. Benjaminite territory is situated between the Josephite tribes to the north—Ephraim and Manasseh—and Judah to the south. In the tribal origin stories of the patriarchs, Benjamin enjoys a close kinship to Joseph as a full brother. But because of geography and economics, Benjaminites also had close ties to their southern neighbors. The ambiguity of Benjamin’s allegiance is clearly present in the account of the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam in 1 Kings 11-12, which describes that “ten tribes” follow Jeroboam, but “one tribe” is left for David’s house. Looking further back into the story, Benjamin is the tribe of the first king of Israel, Saul—a king whose dynasty was replaced by a Judahite, David. Gary Knoppers observes that the Deuteronomist’s accounts of Saul “would provide Benjaminite readers with plenty of ammunition to claim that their most famous ancestor and his house were treated poorly by Judah’s hero.” In short, even though by the time we get to the exile Judah and Benjamin (with the Levites in Jerusalem) are the main constituent tribes of “the kingdom of Judah” (and of the Babylonian and Persian provinces called “Yehud”), there is a history of conflict between the two tribes. Benjaminites are partly northern, partly southern, partly…their

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9 Gary N. Knoppers, “Israel’s First King and ‘the Kingdom of YHWH in the hands of the sons of David’: The Place of the Saulide Monarchy in the Chronicler’s Historiography,” in *Saul in Story and Tradition* (ed. Carl S. Ehrlich and Marsha C. White; FAT 47; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2006), 209.
own identity. Even though they may identify with Judahites against outsiders, there is still some resentment about David replacing Saul and conveniently disposing of most of Saul’s house.

Third, Chronicles represents a later snapshot of Judah-Benjamin relations. The Chronicler consciously attempts to reshape the identity of All Israel by revising the contentious history between Judah and Benjamin. Even though there is no doubt that the Chronicler is a Levite who is pro-David and pro-Judah, there is a great deal of positive material about Benjamin in Chronicles, and nearly all the negative material about Benjamin (especially Saul) is removed. The Chronicler highlights—and probably exaggerates—the historic association of Benjamin with Judah, removing any ambiguity by linking Benjaminites with David and the Davidic house from the beginning of the narrative of Chronicles. Hints of the division or neutrality of Benjamin in the Rehoboam narrative are removed, in order to “clarify” that Benjamin and Judah together followed the house of David (2 Chr 11:1), along with the Levites and priests (11:13-16). Ten times in the Sondergut (the material that is unique to Chronicles) the Chronicler uses the phrase, “Judah and Benjamin,”10 highlighting the association between the tribes.

By undertaking this revisionary project, I believe that the Chronicler hoped to “bury the hatchet” between Benjamin and Judah, and to attract wealthier Benjaminite Yehudians into the Jerusalem temple’s sphere of influence. The Chronicler hoped to achieve this by re-casting the significance of three important Israelite symbols, which I will discuss in more detail after the next section.

IV. SELECTORATE AND HERESTHETIC

Now, I’m going to switch gears and talk about the “innovative derivation” of my project: The appropriation of the ideas of “selectorate theory” and “heresthetic.” There is a long tradition in Old Testament studies of influence from political theory: Alt’s amphictyony model of the emergence of Israel; the Mendenhall-Gottwald peasant-revolt hypothesis; etc. When I began to notice in the scholarly literature an increasing interest in Benjamin and the contrast between the portraits of Benjamin in the Deuteronomistic History and Chronicles, I began seeking a political model that might provide an explanation for the Chronicler’s revisionary historiographical project.

We shouldn’t underestimate the connection between religion, politics and economics in the ancient world, nor should we imagine that someone would have simply decided on a whim to re-write the history of his people, or that that history would have become canonical if it did not serve some sort of valuable rhetorical function. But what sort of sociopolitical, economic and religious situation would have demanded a re-written history that pulls the grand narrative in a pro-Benjamin direction?

My suggestion is that a heresthetical strategy is a helpful way of understanding the Chronicler’s motivation. “Heresthetic” is a term coined by political game theorist William H. Riker, but it is easiest to explain its significance for my study in terms of selectorate theory, so I will explain “selectorate” first.

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One of the inherent difficulties of political theory is making valid comparisons of vastly disparate political systems (monarchy, republic, democracy, dictatorship, parliamentarianism, etc.) within many different historical contexts (democracy in ancient Greece vs. modern democracy). Selectorate theory attempts to place these political systems on a spectrum of quantifiable attributes. This spectrum offers significant heuristic value, since unique political actors and institutional constraints can be compared across time and culture.

Selectorate theory seeks to explain the different methods of allocating resources based on a politician’s desire to gain and retain power and the institutional context in which the politician operates. According to this theory, every polity has an institutional space composed of four subsets of individuals. The first subset is quite small: the single leader or group leadership of the polity. The second subset is larger by definition: the selectorate, which is “the group that has a formal role in expressing a preference over the selection of the leadership that rules them, though their expression of preference may or may not directly influence the outcome.” The third subset is the winning coalition, which is “the group whose support is essential if a leader is to remain in power” (not necessarily a simple “democratic” majority). The winning coalition is a subset of the selectorate. Finally, every polity includes a constituency that is outside the selectorate and is said to be “disenfranchised.”

In order to maintain power, the leadership must maintain support of the winning coalition. The leader or leaders have two sorts of benefits they may provide in order to garner support: effective “public goods” that benefit the polity generally, and “private goods” given to the winning coalition. A change in the leadership occurs when a challenger is able to “convince a sufficient number of members of the current winning coalition to defect to him,” generally by credibly promising more rewards (through some combination of public and private goods) than the current leadership. A change in leadership is occasionally effected by institutional transition. Institutional transition occurs when the size or composition of the selectorate changes. A skillful leader might, by expanding the size of the selectorate but maintaining the size of the winning coalition, produce a fiercely loyal winning coalition, since its members know that they

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12 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005 [2003]).
13 Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival, 38.
14 Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival, 38.
15 Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival, 39.
16 In an institutional context with a large winning coalition and a large selectorate—such as a democracy—it becomes less efficient for a leader to provide private goods and more effective to reward his winning coalition with public goods (generally understood as a more just outcome). In an institutional context in which a leader need only please a small winning coalition in order to retain power—such as a dictatorship, a military junta, or an absolute monarchy—it becomes more efficient for him to reward the winning coalition with private goods (Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival, 58-59).
17 It is important to note that a winning coalition need not be a “democratic” majority of the selectorate—rather, the crucial factor is the cumulative influence of the winning coalition members. Consider, for example, a military junta in which one general controls forty percent of the troops, and four other generals control fifteen percent each. Two generals could form a winning coalition against the three, provided that the strong general is one of the two (who would control fifty-five percent of the troops compared to forty-five percent among the three), and granted that military might is decisive in that context.
18 Bueno de Mesquita et al., The Logic of Political Survival, 59.
can easily be replaced by other selectorate members. Conversely, a skillful challenger might seek to incorporate new selectorate members who might become loyal to him. The crucial point is that changing the size and composition of the selectorate is closely related to social and institutional transition.

Political power in Persian Yehud appears to have been distributed among different entities across several dimensions. Jonker highlights “four levels of socio-political and socio-religious existence” during this period: the Persian imperial context, the regional provincial context, the inner-Yehudite context, and the cultic context. In each of these dimensions, groups and individuals competed for power and influence. Collective identity was complex and multidimensional.

For example, on the imperial and regional dimensions, Yehud was defined partly by its nearness to the geographic corridors of power that extended the reach of the Persian Empire. On the inner-Yehudite dimension, cultic centers served not only as “religious” authorities but also as collection centers for royal tax revenue (Ezr 4:13, 20), distributional centers for charity for the poor (cf. Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-13), and as purveyors of “private goods.” Though the elites of Yehud had some influence over the imperial choice for regional administrator, the “market” in cultic centers was slightly less constrained: there were other choices. Finally, different sects vied for influence within the Jerusalem cult itself.

In at least three of these dimensions (regional provincial context, inner-Yehudite context, and Jerusalem cultic context), the wealthier inhabitants of Yehud constituted a selectorate that could form a winning coalition whose support the leadership (or various sectarian aspirants to leadership) needed in order to achieve power.

The term heresthetic was coined by Riker from the Greek αἱρεῖν, “to choose.” Heresthetic is a strategy of restructuring the process of collective decision-making so as to ensure a desired outcome.

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19 One example is the result of the Russian Revolution in 1917, which shifted the institutional arrangement from a small selectorate (the aristocracy) and a small winning coalition (essentially a majority of the aristocracy), to a large selectorate (the entire Soviet population) and a small winning coalition (the Communist Party, by rule approximately ten percent of the Soviet population). Bueno de Mesquita et al. argue that as a result of this shift the Soviet leadership was significantly more secure in its position than the deposed Czar had been (The Logic of Political Survival, 53-55).

20 Jonker, “Engaging with Different Contexts,” 63-93.

21 Though the coastal regions such as Syro-Phoenicia were wealthier and more crucial to imperial control of Egypt and Asia (Jonker, “Engaging with Different Contexts,” 69-70).


23 Certain portions were allotted to the priests and Levites (Lev 3:3-5, 16); abuse of this privilege for personal gain was widespread as evidenced by its condemnation by the prophets (cf. 1 Sam 2:12-17; Ezek 22:25, 34:2-3; Mic 3:1-3, 11).

24 Lester L. Grabbe, A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 154. Sheshbazzar (c. 530s BCE; Ezr 5:14), Zerubbabel (c. 520 BCE; Hag 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21) and Nehemiah (c. 445-432 BCE; Neh 2:9) appear to have held this office at the pleasure of the king, under the authority of the governor of the Ebir-nari satrapy (Grabbe, History of the Jews and Judaism Vol. 1, 148; cf. Jonker, “Engaging with Different Contexts,” 69).


26 Jonker, “Engaging with Different Contexts,” 71-74.

Heresthetic takes several different forms. One form of this strategy involves restructuring issues so as to create previously untenable alliances between portions of the selectorate. A second application involves controlling the order in which options are considered when three or more options are in view. A third and perhaps most difficult form of heresthetic seeks to enfranchise or disenfranchise portions of a selectorate so as to create or dismantle a winning coalition.

Heresthetic strategy may be contrasted with a strategy that is purely “rhetorical.” Rhetoric attempts to persuade; heresthetic utilizes rhetoric, but additionally—more significantly—restructures the game. In this way, a successful heresthetic maneuver can bring about an outcome previously thought unpopular or untenable. Many successful modern herestheticians—such as Lincoln, Churchill, Reagan, and Yeltsin—had views that would have been considered outside the mainstream of the selectorates in their institutional contexts. Most experienced at least one significant political defeat. But they were able to emerge from the political “wilderness” by creatively grouping issues in ways that their political opponents could not. Heresthetic may explain why certain leaders or ideas succeed despite their apparent lack of broad appeal.

(I will point out that there is a growing literature on selectorate and heresthetic—analyzing both the present and the past—but some of the most interesting work on these ideas pertains to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which may be of particular interest in our research context.)

These two theories are based on the fundamental premise that political actors behave consonant with their perceived self-interest. Yet it should be noted that a leader’s perceived self-interest need not by definition be contrary to the interests of society as a whole.

So, to bring this back around to Chronicles, the payoff of my dissertation is that the Chronicler was employing a heresthetical strategy by shaping the communal memory of Yehud with respect to Benjamin. In the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, Benjaminitic regions to the north actually prospered well into the Persian period, and even as Jerusalem recovered it still was something of a backwater town. The Chronicler, a member of the literati associated with the Jerusalem cult, knew that if Jerusalem was going to succeed it would need support from wealthier Benjaminitic Yehudians. These Yehudians had other cultic options; if they wanted to stay local, Gibeon, Bethel and Mizpah were well-established centers of Yahwistic


Riker suggests that Lincoln’s heresthetic maneuver in the 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas successfully linked the ideas of “free-soil” and “commercial expansion” in such a way that united Lincoln’s own fragmented Whig-Republican coalition but fragmented Douglas’s Democratic party (The Art of Political Manipulation, 5-6).

29 See, for example, Riker’s account of Pliny the Younger’s attempt to achieve a certain vote in the Roman Senate with a plurality but not a majority (The Art of Political Manipulation, 78-88).

30 A striking example from modern history is Boris Yeltsin’s successful plan to co-opt Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership of the Soviet Union by appealing to Russian popular sentiment in the creation of a Russian Communist Party to rival the Soviet Communist Party. By essentially creating a new political institution alongside the previous one, Yeltsin created a selectorate that he could lead, eventually outstripping Gorbachev. See Kiron Skinner et al., The Strategy of Campaigning: Lessons from Ronald Reagan and Boris Yeltsin (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 205-248.

31 Skinner et al., The Strategy of Campaigning, 2-3.
worship. Samarians—Samaritans—their Josephite cousins to the north, had established an important altar on Mount Gerizim. Even though many Benjaminites Yehudians were no doubt sympathetic toward Jerusalem, the reigning history of Israel and Judah (the Deuteronomistic History) did not favorably dispose those Benjaminites toward Judah and David.

Another important dimension that comes into play is the inner-Jerusalem-temple dynamic between the Zadoqite priests and the non-priestly Levites. The Chronicler included material in his work that he hoped would mollify the competing factions within his existing political sphere (e.g., the Levitical and priestly groups, and lay supporters of these groups). Such a move could create a winning coalition comprised of selectorate members within both groups and thereby secure the temple’s support base. The Chronicler also sought to change the composition of the selectorate by attracting additional participants into that sphere (especially Benjaminites)—additional participants that he hoped would join his winning coalition.

So, how did the Chronicler intend to achieve this unifying heresthetic strategy on multiple levels? Let me merely mention three important texts, and three key political and religious questions that the Chronicler sought to re-order.

First text: 1 Chronicles 8, the genealogy of Benjamin. 1 Chronicles 1-9 is a carefully crafted genealogy of the tribes of Israel with a concentric structure. That structure begins in chapter 2 with Judah, climaxes in the middle with Levi and the priests, and ends with Benjamin, effectively placing Benjamin on equal footing with Judah in the Chronicler’s conception of All Israel.

Second text: 1 Chronicles 11-12, the early supporters of David’s monarchy. From 2 Samuel 2-4, we know that following Saul’s death there was a seven-year civil war between Israel following Benjamin on the one hand, and Judah following David on the other. Chronicles erases this whole war, and rather includes Benjaminites as the very first and most prominent supporters of David’s reign.

Third text: 1 Chronicles 21. The Chronicler transforms the story of the census, the plague, and David’s altar on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite from an appended narrative (as we find this story in 2 Sam 24) to a catalyst for the discovery of the temple site (1 Chr 21:1-22:1). This location happens to be right on the border between Benjaminites and Judahite territory, a perfect location for a temple that should belong to both tribes.

With these examples in mind, let’s consider three important questions pertaining to the cult:

1) Who should be part of the worship of YHWH?
2) Where should the cult be located?
3) Which group should oversee the YHWH cult?

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If the third question is asked first and the Chronicler provides the answer, “the Aaronides and the Levites, with the support of the Davidide kings,” then he risks alienating Benjaminites who might dissociate themselves from “all Israel” (first question) and reject Jerusalem in favor of Benjaminites cultic locations (second question). In 1 Chronicles 21 and following, the Chronicler cleverly answers the questions in the order given above:

1) “All Israel” should worship YHWH, including Benjamin (21:6). Benjamin has “early and always” been an important connection between Judah and “all Israel” (1 Chr 8; 11-12).
2) YHWH should be worshiped in Jerusalem, and Benjamin has always been associated with Jerusalem and its cult (21:18-22:1).
3) Given the first two answers, Levi should administer the cult for the benefit of Benjamin and “all Israel,” with the support of the Jerusalemite kings (1 Chr 22-26).

The Chronicler thus frames “all Israel” to include Benjamin prominently, which then lends credence to the Jerusalem temple. After commending the Jerusalem cult to Benjaminites, Jonker argues, the Chronicler also protects the cult from cooption by Benjamin.

So, that’s how the logic goes! If you would like to see the data of my literary study of Joshua through Kings and Chronicles, there is more than you ever wanted to know about Benjamin and tribal relations in my dissertation, which I’m working with a publisher now to turn into a book.

As I assess the value of this political economy element for understanding the dynamics of Yehud, I really wish we had more data! I’m not sure how I would prove all this empirically, or gauge the effectiveness of the Chronicler’s “heresthetic” move. This was the area of my study

Benjaminite-Levite rivalry for cultic prominence in the period of the judges and the monarchy, as demonstrated by the number of Benjaminite cultic sites (other than Jerusalem), the hostility shown by Benjaminites toward Levites (e.g., Jdg 19; 1 Sam 21-22), and indications of YHWH’s hostility toward Benjaminites acting as cultic leaders (e.g., Saul in 1 Sam 13:9; Abinadab’s sons in 2 Sam 6:3-8).

However, Langston’s work is less than convincing in many respects. He uses Chronicles as evidence that Samuel had Levitical heritage rather than Ephraimitic (Cultic Sites, 186-187), and that Joab in fact excluded Benjamin and Levi from the census (1 Chr 21:6; no parallel in 2 Sam 24) because “Benjamin’s role in the cult was not forgotten completely” (Cultic Sites, 189)—historical claims that are shaky at best.

Furthermore, Langston overlooks the evidence that Levites enjoyed prominence within Benjamin as cultic leaders—for example, Ahimelech and the Elide priests at Nob (1 Sam 21-22), and Jeremiah of Anathoth (Jer 1:1; 29:27; 32:6-15). Jeremiah is a particularly good example of a Levitical priest serving in Jerusalem with strong ties to Benjamin and pro-Benjamin sympathies (cf. §4.1.3, §4.2.3). A simpler argument would be that Levites were primary cultic leaders (cf. Jdg 17-18), and ministered at various cultic sites throughout Northern, Southern and Benjaminites territories.

In any case, Langston’s arguments are limited to the judges and monarchical periods and do not necessarily constitute evidence for a Benjamin-Levi rivalry during the Babylonian and Persian periods. It seems more plausible (to this author) that the anti-Benjamin material in the DtrH should be explained in the Babylonian or early Persian periods by a Benjamin-Judah rivalry for political leadership rather than by a Benjamin-Levi rivalry for cultic leadership. It is even more difficult to find evidence of a Benjamin-Levi rivalry for cultic leadership in Chronicles—the tension over cultic leadership seems to be between a Priestly faction and a Levitical faction (cf. Knoppers, “Hierodules, Priests, or Janitors?”).
that my supervisor and my committee members were least familiar with, but they all thought it was intriguing and urged me to pursue it further.

After I had done much of the research for this project, I discovered a biblical scholar from New York University who is working with a similar sort of model to the selectorate model, though he is coming at it as “collaborative politics” through comparisons to the Mari people, Meso-American societies, and Vikings. I spoke with him last year, and he was interested in further discussions—but I haven’t followed up with him since then.

V. BIBLICAL STUDIES AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

I’d like to conclude by saying something about the role of the broader project of “biblical studies” in faith communities. As most of you know, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment moved the role of the Bible in the scholarly enterprise from the epistemological foundation to an object of critical inquiry. Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible have wrestled with how much to incorporate methods from other disciplines—which are now not consciously founded on religious truths—into their “trusting/believing” readings of the Bible. Reactions vary significantly from community to community, and different groups are welcoming of some approaches and hostile to others.

When I step back and evaluate my dissertation and much of the work I’m building off of it, I don’t believe that it presents a particular challenge to “faithful/believing” readings of the Bible, even though I’m operating in a purely “critical” mode when I do so. But I’m also not sure that it contributes much directly to “believing” readings of the Bible. When I taught a Sunday School class on Chronicles at my fairly conservative church two years ago, I barely mentioned any of the things I was writing about. When I did, I was mostly met with ambivalence—no hostility, but only tepid interest.

My choice of a topic and a set of critical methods was intentional in this respect! If I had written about an Old Testament topic or book that is more contested in my circles, such as Genesis or Isaiah, I would have been pulled much more strongly in opposite directions by my faith community and the critical mode of scholarship. This is always a problem in biblical studies: the line between faith and criticism is a minefield. In my case, it helped that the very conservative seminary with close ties to my church had had a fine Chronicles scholar in recent memory who had wrestled with many of these issues very ably, who had taught our pastor and some of our elders.

If we think of the two pillars of biblical studies as historical criticism and literary criticism, each of those two has gone through phases where it is the “darling” of believers while the other is looked upon with suspicion. Until the 1970s, before the so-called “Biblical Archaeology Movement” under William F. Albright lost its steam, historical and archaeological studies were favored by Christians as a domain that would confirm the Bible’s historical accuracy in its details. Nowadays, following the influence of the post-liberals at Yale and Duke, literary and theological readings of the texts in their final form (without as much concern for historical precision and compositional process) are more popular among both Christians and Jews. In New Testament studies, we can see something of the inverse. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, literary/theological readings of Jesus and Paul were favored by many Protestants, because looking at the historical Jesus or Paul made these figures look “too Jewish.” After the Holocaust and the discovery of a plethora of Jewish texts at Qumran, movements such
as the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus” and the “New Perspective on Paul” sought to situate the NT once again in historical context. These trends are welcomed (with a few minor quibbles) by most Christian believers as placing trusting historical readings “back on the map” of scholarly inquiry.

For me, it comes down to the presupposition, which is a faith claim, that these texts are God’s Word in human words. That opens the door for all the areas of the humanities to contribute to our understanding of the human authors’ intentions. But I can’t stop there: After I ask, what did the human authors mean by this, I have to ask, what does God mean in this human-generated text in the present to me as a human reader? That is where I find my meaning and purpose, and that is why biblical scholars—especially believing biblical scholars—cannot neglect the humanities.