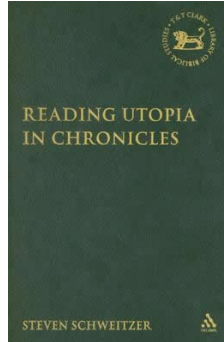


○ REVIEW OF STEVEN SCHWEITZER, *READING UTOPIA IN CHRONICLES*

(LIBRARY OF HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES 442. NEW YORK: T & T CLARK, 2007)

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It is wonderful to see a number of new studies of Chronicles that break the stranglehold of more traditional historical-critical concerns. Not that long ago you had to search quite hard for something a little more interesting in that corner of the Hebrew Bible. No longer is that the case. Alongside a string of articles by Christine Mitchell and Julie Kelso's new book, *O Mother, Where Art Thou?* (Equinox 2008), comes Steven Schweitzer's *Reading Utopia in Chronicles*. This work is overdue for sure. Suddenly the Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah section at the annual Society of Biblical Literature meeting in North America, where in 2007 at San Diego, I was on a panel discussing Schweitzer's book, has become a whole lot more fascinating.

As for Schweitzer's book, he argues that the substantial insights of utopian literary theory are able to make sense of many of the problems in Chronicles. Even more, the text itself becomes a series of utopian visions that turn around three key elements: the genealogies, the retelling of political history and the detailed attention to the cult, or the organisation of the temple and its worship. While the genealogies play with time, stretching it, collapsing it, moving from one type of genealogy to another, and connecting unexpected characters, the political history of the kings of Judah offer a very different picture from that other account in 1 and 2 Kings. In the Chronicler's political history we find, argues Schweitzer, a more hopeful picture than the fatalistic inevitability of the books of Kings. Finally, in its careful attention to the cult, Chronicles gives us a better world in which ritual and organisation are properly ordered.

While Schweitzer defines 'utopia' as a 'better alternative reality' (a phrase you will find more than once in the book), it seems to me that a better insight into his whole argument is that the Chronicler (the name given the unknown author or group of authors) was an innovator and not a legislator (p. 136). That is, unlike the majority of commentators who seek out historical detail, or who see the Chronicler as one who wanted to lock in certain practices of his (or their) time, Schweitzer argues that the Chronicler is far more imaginative than that.

What I like about this book is the way Schweitzer provides in the first chapter as good an overview of utopian literary theory as you are likely to find. Here are the key figures, such as Ernst Bloch, Darko Suvin, Louis Marin, Fredric Jameson, Lyman Tower Sargent, as well as a useful excursus on Thomas More. We quickly find out (if we didn't know it already) that utopia is not some fanciful world of hopeless dreamers. Rather, utopia is more often a critique of existing society and a proposal for ways to improve it – hence the phrase 'better alternative reality'. On this definition, any political programme worth its salt is utopian. Schweitzer also points out that utopia is not necessarily a future reality (as is popularly understood). Rather, it may well be contemporary with the author and the society being criticised, as Thomas More's work of the same name shows very well. A third element that drew me in was his careful reading of the story of the kings of Judah in Chronicles. He tracks the way dystopia and utopia (the two are inseparable) play off against one another. For example, while David and Solomon are utopian kings, Jehoram, Ahaziah and Athaliah all come through as dystopian rulers. Even more, Jehoshaphat moves from utopia to dystopia while Hezekiah shifts from a dystopian beginning to a utopian close.

A further attractive feature about this book is the way Schweitzer avoids the idea that 'utopia' is some fixed agenda for social improvement. In other words, we do not find blueprints for a better world. Rather, as Louis Marin shows in his wonderful *Utopiques*, utopias are unstable things; you can't quite lay your hand on one, for as soon as you do, it slips away. Marin argues how even Thomas More's *Utopia* was full of formal contradictions and problems. For example, More's effort to describe the layout of towns on the island of Utopus doesn't work when you try to draw a map according to his guidelines. There are anomalies and confusions in the map. Now, More may well have just been lazy, or perhaps a bad describer of such things, but Marin argues that these anomalies are the stuff of utopia. In fact, utopias begin to emerge in these cracks in the footpath, in the contradictions and tensions where a new possibility begins. In a similar fashion, Schweitzer shows how the Chronicler plays with time and space, and especially how the description of the temple and its organisation doesn't quite work. He suggests that what we have are shifting utopias, experiments with different types that then overlay one another, an adaptability in the effort to construct utopia.

However, there are also points where I felt that more needed to be done. I was not overly impressed with the discussion of Marxism, especially the argument that Marxism has been opposed to utopias and their plans. At one level, Schweitzer has a point, for Marx did add the utopian socialists (such as Fourier and St. Simon) to his list of undesirables. On the other hand, utopia is often a code for socialism itself. Names such as Darko Suvin, Elisa Cevasco, Peter Fitting, Andrew Milner, China Miéville, Karl Kautsky, William Morris and of course Fredric Jameson suggest that socialism and utopia have a lot in common, for all of these are Marxists vitally interested in utopia. In fact, I would suggest that the development of the idea that utopia means 'pie in the sky' may in fact be read as a response to socialism's close connection with utopian social movements: that way you can dismiss socialism as the stuff of hopeless dreamers.

Further, it seems to me that Schweitzer's study begs the category of uchronia. If utopia is the 'no place' that is also the 'good place', then uchronia is both 'no time' and 'good time'. Uchronia, then, is an alternative and better way of dealing with time, and the most common way that happens is through rewriting history. In telling a different story, usually one of the underside and of the oppressed, you open up a different path to the present and thereby alternative possib-

ilities for that present and its future. There are hints in Schweitzer's book, such as the mention of an 'idealized portrayal set in Israel's past' (p. 30) when he refers to the retelling of the history of the kings of Judah. In fact, I would suggest that his discussion of the genealogies and that history is really the uchronian moment of Chronicles. In rewriting the history, through the genealogies and the story of the kings, the Chronicler opens up the chance for a very different and better present. At this point, the third category of Schweitzer's work comes into play, namely, the cult. Here we find the various overlapping efforts at presenting a better alternative reality, focussed on the temple and its worship. In other words, uchronia leads to utopia.

Finally, let me return to the Schweitzer's emphasis on instability and adaptability in the Chronicler's utopian vision. I read this as an implicit discussion of the tension between an open and closed utopia. David Harvey has put this rather well in his *Spaces of Hope*: many utopias feel the need at some point to say 'this is it, we've achieved it'. However, that moment of closure needs someone to make the decision to close, and at that moment you get the possibility of authoritarianism. Utopia is frozen. The other possibility is that utopia is perpetually open. As an experiment, as an exploration of different possibilities, open to failure and the need to start again, an open utopia does not need to face the authoritarian threat of closure. For all its failings, Chronicles at least seems to achieve that.

All the same, there are two questions that need to be asked. When speaking of utopia we always need to ask: utopia for whom? Dystopia for whom? For Schweitzer, it may well be a series of utopias for the Levites, who come out rather well in the reconstructions of the cult. But then we need to ask for whom this might well be a dystopia.

A final personal note: about ten years ago I gave a paper at the same session at the Society of Biblical Literature on the utopian politics of Chronicles. The Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah group of the mid 1990s looked at me with those quizzical looks kept for the alien from outer space (Australia may as well be for many). They seemed to say, what the hell is he going on with? I vowed never to return to this coterie of traditional historical critics. What a pleasant surprise then to come to the same session ten years later, be part of it and find it a ferment of ideas and debates – about utopia and Chronicles.