

DISSERTATION SUMMARY

The Formation of Israelite Identity in the Book of Chronicles¹

Zhang Xinyu

Fujian Theological Seminary, China
zxyreaky@gmail.com

In recent years, the study of Chronicles has risen in prominence. The book has even become a hot topic in Old Testament studies. Chronicles arose within and reflects its socio-historical context, revealing how Israelites of its time understood their past. As with all peoples in all times, the Israelites' past shaped their perceived identity.

As for identity, the question מִי אֲנִי (*mi ani* - 'Who am I?' - 1 Chr 17:16; 29:14; 2 Chr 2:6) asked by David and Solomon is precisely the question that the Israelites asked of themselves in the Persian period. Examining the Hebrew Bible through the lens of identity theory, Old Testament scholars have begun to view Chronicles as a literary space for identity formation. Accordingly, this dissertation explores identity formation in Chronicles, exploring how the book shaped Israelite identity through symbolism, recorded memory, and narrative literary structure.

'Identity' is inherently subjective and influenced by recorded historical memory, and, further, identity forms within a prevailing socio-historical context. Therefore, one may decode literary symbolism through a synchronic understanding of social context and a diachronic understanding of historical memory. The received text of Chronicles presents and connects these symbols

1. Zhang Xinyu, 'The Formation of Israelite Identity in the Book of Chronicles' (PhD diss., Trinity Theological College, Singapore, 2023). Supervisor: Prof. Chan Yew Ming. (Dissertation written in Chinese 《从〈历代志〉看以色列人的身份构建》).

within its typical narrative forms and serves as a key for unlocking how ancient Israelites understood their identity (figure 1).

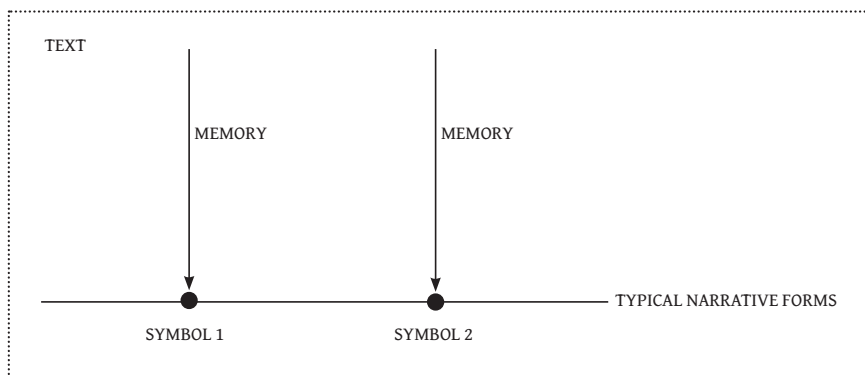


Figure 1: How the meaning of a text is constructed.

Needless to say, the world described in Chronicles differs greatly from that of its modern readers. To shed light upon Chronicles as a document of its times, in Chapter 1 I present a theory of history and identity to explore the limitations that the ancient Israelites' socio-cultural setting imposed upon them. Naturally, prevailing socio-cultural conditions affected the Chronicler's literary style.

Chapter 2 presents the analytical method of the dissertation, employing the insights of anthropologist Wang Mingke. He asserts that prevailing social structures impact writing, therefore historical writing takes place with a significant degree of 'history mindedness' (历史心性 *li shi xin xing*). History mindedness encapsulates a people's self-understanding of their culture as they remember and narrate their history. Wang describes two kinds of history mindedness: ancestral kin-centred history mindedness (弟兄祖先历史心性 *di xiong zu xian li shi xin xing*) and ancestral hero-centred history mindedness (英雄祖先历史心性 *ying xiong zu xian li shi xin xing*). However, Chronicles does not fit either of Wang's categories, so I propose a third: ancestral temple-centred history mindedness (圣殿祖先历史心性 *sheng dian zu xian li shi xin xing*), because the temple in the Persian period served as the centre of Israelite social life.

Then, in Chapter 3, I move into discussion of structures of human societies. Although 'theocracy' could well summarise the idealised image of Israelite society as presented in Chronicles, the actual political, economic, demographic, and geographic situation of Judah in the Persian period seems to cast doubt upon the generalisation that Judah could function as a theocracy. Furthermore, it is not governmental, administrative factors that most influence the writing

of history, but social structures. Since the monarchy that once symbolised the identity of the Israelites no longer existed in the Persian period, the only remaining unifying symbol was the temple. Therefore ‘ancestral temple-centred history mindedness’ came into being.

In Chapter 4, I mainly discuss ideologies that shaped Israelite understanding of symbols. I argue that due to monotheism, the temple essentially became the centre of the universe, a conduit connecting heaven (the abode of God) and earth (the seat of past Davidic kings). In this temple-centred universe, the world was shaped like a large circle. At the centre along with the temple was Israel, and at the margins lay the world. Various symbols mediated the relationship between the centre and the margins: group symbols (Israel, congregation, people, other groups, etc.), religious symbols (temple, priests), and geographic symbols (Jerusalem, twelve tribes, other territories). The relationship between these symbols is well-organised and transmitted through the Chronicles narrative. Chronicles thus connects the identity of the Israelites with Yahweh, the only God, the king of heaven and earth. As a community connected to God, the Israelites are also connected to the world.

In the final chapter, I summarise how these group symbols, religious symbols, and geographic symbols connect and cohere within ancestral temple-centred history mindedness. Chronicles presents a full-orbed view of identity based on its narrative structure, which reconstructs historical memory with geographic, group, and religious symbols. As the pre-eminent symbol of Yahweh’s identity and transcendence, the temple is the centre of Israel. Further, Yahweh, the temple, and Jerusalem serve as the central symbols in the narrative of Chronicles. Hence the core of Israelite society was comprised of those connected with the temple. Radiating outward from the centre, next are the twelve tribes of Israel, and then all ethnic groups in the world stand at the margins (figure 2). This is the worldview of Israelite group identity in

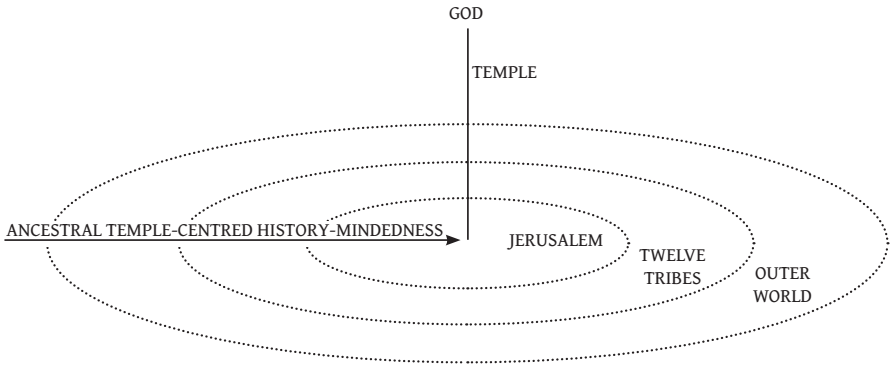


Figure 2: The orb view of identity of Chronicles.

Yahweh's new kingdom order (1 Chr 28:5; 2 Chr 13:8). Hence in the Persian period, Chronicles helped the Israelites understand the relationship between their setting in the empire and their distinct group identity.

Unlike Ezra-Nehemiah, the concept of identity expressed in Chronicles is inclusive. This inclusiveness in Chronicles contributes greatly to the stability and development of groups and communities. This inclusive identity is consistent with the concept expressed in Genesis 12:2-3, though Genesis focuses upon Abraham while Chronicles emphasises the community. This difference of focus illustrates that Genesis and Chronicles employ varying types of history mindedness. Genesis displays ancestral hero-centred history mindedness while Chronicles is the product of ancestral temple-centred history mindedness, as seen in its focus on the temple and the community.

The chief contribution of this dissertation is its exploration of the ideological formation process of Chronicles without splitting the book into disunified parts as in previous literary approaches. Indeed, this work focuses on the final form of the text of Chronicles and labours to understand why and how it was written. This dissertation also attempts to discern the relationship between socio-cultural context, subjective thinking, and patterns in the writing of history. Its method could be further employed in research upon the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic history, as it could well facilitate explaining the different tendencies in historiography between them.

Chronicles also provides an example for contemporary people in the formation of identity as it integrates symbolism through its historical narratives. This integrative, inclusive ethos not only fosters the establishment of in-group identity, but also promotes stability for broader community development through its openness to outsider groups. Chronicles' history mindedness may also aid understanding of the New Testament Christian community in the first century, for whom Jesus was their core symbol. Radiating from the symbolic centre of Jesus, one finds an expanding circle of inclusive identity, from Jesus to the apostles to Christians of all times. Lastly, Jesus stands as mediator between God and humanity, connecting the world with God.