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A Transmission of Tradition: The Number of Jesse's Sons

Biblical Writings, Judeo-Hellenistic Arts,
Rabbinic Literature and Medieval Christian Art

1. The Number of Jesse's Sons According to Samuel and Chronicles

In I Sam 16-17 two traditions have remained concerning the number of Jesse's sons. According to the one, the earlier tradition, Jesse had *four* sons: Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah and David (I Sam 16,6-9,11-13; 17,13-14); whereas according to the other tradition, the later of the two, Jesse had double that number – *eight* sons: the aforementioned four, whose names appear in the text, and four, whom the text leaves anonymous (*ibid.* 16,10-11; 17,12).¹

However, neither one of these traditions concerning the sons of Jesse is presented in the Chronicler's writings. He created an alternative list, in which he set the number of Jesse's sons at *seven*:

«And Jesse begot his first-born Eliab, and Abinadab the second, and Shimea the third, Nethanel the fourth, Raddai the fifth, Ozem the sixth, David the seventh» (I Chr 2,13-15).²

¹ Compare I. Kalimi, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten* (BZAW 226), Berlin & New York 1995, 308, and there detailed discussion. For a discussion of the Masoretic Text and LXX to I Sam 17 (verses 12-31 are lacking in Codex Vaticanus and are signed with an asterisk in some manuscripts of MT), see P.K. McCarter, *I Samuel – A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary* (Anchor Bible 8), Garden City, NY 1980, 299-309; D. Barthélemy, D.W. Gooding, J. Lust and E. Tov, *The Story of David and Goliath: Textual and literary Criticism* (OBO 73), Göttingen 1986.

² The names: Eliab, Abinadab, Shimea and David are according to I Sam 16,6-9; 17,13 while the names: Nethanel, Raddai and Ozem are created by the Chronicler himself, see in detail Kalimi, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten*, 71. In I Chr 27,18 is mentioned David's brother named «Elihu». However, most probably it should be read «Eliab», as

It seems that listing Jesse's sons as seven in number, and formulating them according to the numerical pattern <six – seven>, that is, the *six* elder sons of Jesse who were disqualified from the kingdom, while David, who was the youngest son and the *seventh*, elected to succeed Saul – was not done by chance. Defining the number of Jesse's sons as *seven* and listing David in the *seventh* spot has not been done accidentally as some scholars assumed.³ It stems, probably, from the special importance the Chronicler ascribed to the perfect, mystical number seven.⁴

2. *The Dura-Europos Synagogue and its Fresco <Samuel Anointing David>*

The Hellenistic city Dura-Europos, which is located on the upper west bank of the Euphrates River (contemporary *A-Salichiyeh*, at the northeast edge of the Syrian desert), was uncovered accidentally by British forces during the First World War. In the course of the archaeological excavations of 1932-33, the ancient synagogues of the city were discovered: an earlier and smaller one, and a later and larger built above it, and according to its Aramaic inscription was completed in 244-245 CE. The synagogue was destroyed by the Sassanid Persians, along with the whole city, around 256 CE.

The walls of the second synagogue were covered with a variety of invaluable colorful paintings, portraying especially Biblical scenes. The themes of the scenes were drawn from the stories in Ezekiel, and mainly from the historical books of Pentateuch (Patriarchs, Moses), Former Prophets (Joshua, Samuel,

the Greek version, Ελιῶβ. In the Peshitta is inserted the name «Elihu» into I Chr 2,13-15 in order to create a harmonization between I Chr 2,13-15 and I Sam 16,10-11; 17,12, that is both books account eight sons of Jesse.

³ So, for instance, Y. Zakovitch, *The Pattern of the Numerical Sequence Three-Four in the Bible* (Dissertation; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Jerusalem 1978, 49 (Hebrew). See in detail Kalimi, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten*, 309-310.

⁴ For detailed discussion on this issue, see Kalimi, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten*, 308-310. Several Jewish as well as Christian Medieval commentators attempted to harmonize the contradictory writings of Chronicles and Samuel. For example, the commentary ascribed to Rashi (12th century) expounded that the Chronicler stops counting the eighth son of Jesse, Elijah, since when he reached *David* «he already found the diamond»! In other words, after mentioning the most important person, he saw no need to list another name (compare Genesis Rabbah 39,13; Ruth Rabbah 8,3; Tanchuma [Buber], Wayyesheb, 1). Radak (Narbonne, ca. 1160-1235) was of the opinion that Jesse had a second wife, and a son from her. The Chronicler mentioned David's brethren from his own mother merely, while in Samuel all of Jesse's sons were taken into account, including David's step brother. A similarly observation was made by a midrash which has remained in the ninth century Christian source, Pseudo-Jerome (for details, see below). All in all, the contradiction between Chronicles and Samuel about the number of David's brethren, cause for an imaginative interpretation among Jews and Christians, that is, a creation of stories that have hardly any basis in the Biblical text.

David, Solomon and Elijah), and Esther, but not even one was taken directly from Chronicles. It is reasonable to expect that among the fifty-eight paintings of episodes and persons depicted on the synagogue's walls, which are based specifically on the Biblical historical writings, would be found at least one or two scenes that were derived from the stories which appear in the Book Chronicles only. Let us not forget, that the unparalleled passages (the <additions>) of Chronicles comprise approximately half of the composition, that is, ca. 32-33 chapters, more than three times the whole Book of Esther, and not less important and appealing stories. There are, for example, the account of the divine response to Solomon's prayer (II Chr 7,1-3); Abijah's victory over Jeroboam (II Chr 13,3-22); Jehoshaphat's victory over the Moabites and Ammonites (II Chr 20), and many other stories that are not mentioned previously either in Biblical or non-Biblical sources. Thus, one may conclude that the book under discussion did not play a special role in life and thought of the Jewish community in Dura-Europos. Nevertheless, in spite of this situation, it seems that a shred of Chronicles' literary heritage influenced the synagogue's paintings, and accordingly shaped also the historical view of its audience.

Among the frescos on the west wall of the synagogue, above the benches and on the right side of the niche (most reasonably, the Torah shrine), appears Samuel anointing David in the presence of his brethren.⁵ The fresco illustrates the final act of the prophet Samuel, the anointment of David as successor of King Saul (I Sam 16,13),⁶ and reflects the story of the election as detailed in I Sam 16,1-12 as well. The fresco – which is preserved remarkably in top condition – describes Samuel in a white *pallium* (a man's square woolen robe worn generally by the Hellenic people) pouring oil from a dark brown horn onto the head of David. Dura's frescoes are lacking any written explanation, the fresco under discussion accompanied with such one:⁷ To the left side of Samuel's head, above his shoulder, appears an Aramaic inscription of two lines, which is as follows:

«Samuel when he anointed David.»⁸ שמואל כד משח [ד]ויד

⁵ Regarding the issue of the ancient synagogues with figurative paintings and the Second Commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20,4 // Dt 5,8), see J. Gutmann, *The Dura-Europos Synagogue Paintings: The State of Research*, in L.I. Levine (ed.), *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, Philadelphia 1987, 61-72 esp. 65-66.

⁶ Indeed, this point is specifically noted by the Aramaic inscription on the fresco, see below.

⁷ It is question for itself, what precisely the criteria for adding a short inscription to some frescoes and not to others.

⁸ See C.H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue – The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report*, vol. VIII, part I, New Haven 1956, 272, fig. 87, inscription no. 11. Sukenik suggested to read here «Samuel *son of Hannah* anoints David», see E.L. Sukenik, *The Synagogue of Dura-Europos and its Frescoes* Jerusalem 1947, 104 (Hebrew). Nevertheless,

In addition to the prophet at the left of the fresco, who is distinguished also by his large figure, there are seven portraits: *six* of David's brothers, and the *seventh* – David himself. In order to emphasize this view, the painter presented all the brothers, who are somehow overlapping each other, as those that are standing *behind* David, who is equal in size to them but visible in his entirety. Furthermore, while the six young men behind are dressed in white or a light colored *pallia*, the seventh *in front* is wearing a purple *pallium*, which symbolizes his forthcoming royal authority.⁹ The six brothers are described with their right hands up, presumably as a sign of admiration of their young brother (*acclamatio*). David's hands are covered by his *pallium*.¹⁰ Consequently, already from first glance one can see the uniqueness of David among Jesse's sons, and his election from all of them.¹¹ Therefore, it seems that:

1. The painter interprets the verse וַיִּמְשַׁח אֹתוֹ בְּקֶרֶב אֶחָיו (I Sam 16,13b) correctly as «and anointed him *in the midst of his brothers*» by describing David being anointed when all his brothers are nearby. However, at the same time David is described as one who is elected *from among* all his brothers, that is, the painter expresses the word בְּקֶרֶב also as מִקֶּרֶב «from among / from the midst of» (exchange of ב / מ).¹²

the space which holds the entire inscription does not indicate the insertion of the words *son of Hannah*. It is worthwhile to remark, that the name דָּוִד is written here with ך. The author of the inscription adopted the late – and the full – orthography of the name as it appears *always* in the Books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, and only sometimes in other books, for example: I Kgs 3,14; 11,4; Amos 9,11; Ezekiel 34,23; Canticum 4,4; and specifically in the late book of Deutero-Zechariah 12,7-8.10.12; 13,1. This late version of the name is not common in the rabbinic literature. However, it appears also on the David mosaic of the Gaza synagogue from the sixth century, see M. Barasch, *The David Mosaic at Gaza*, Eretz Israel 10 (Zalman Shazar Volume), Jerusalem 1971, 94-99 and plates 51a and 51b (Hebrew).

⁹ Purple is the common color in descriptions of the Roman emperors at that time, see Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 166 note 624, and the earlier references listed there.

¹⁰ Compare Sukenik, *The Synagogue of Dura-Europos*, 104. For detailed interpretation of this issue, see Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 166-167.

¹¹ Since I Sam 16,11; 17,14 presented David as הקטן «the youngest» among his brothers, one may expect the artist to represent David as smaller than his brothers. Indeed, it is the case in several Medieval Christian illustrations, such as in the miniatures of the *Sacra Parallela* and of Athos monastery Vatopedi (see below). Contrarily, David is described in the fresco even somewhat taller than the men behind. Sonne is of the opinion that the painter «apparently follows the Midrashic interpretation of «little», i.e. that he [David, I.K.] considered himself little, or that he humbled himself before Samuel, the tallest figure in the panel. On account of his humility, according to the midrashich [sic!] conception, David was preferred to his brethren.» see I. Sonne, *The Paintings of the Dura Synagogue*, HUCA 20 (1947), 255-362 esp. 316-318.

¹² Cf., e.g., Lev 8,32; 22,4. So interpreted several Jewish Medieval commentators, such as Rabbi Joseph Kara (see S. Epenstein [ed.], *The Commentary of Rabbi Joseph Kara to the Former Prophets*, Jerusalem 1972, 65 [Hebrew]); Rabbi David Kimchi and Don Isaac Abarbanel ad loc.

2. The painter chose from all Biblical traditions concerning the number of Jesse's sons, precisely the one which appears in the late historiography. He attempted to provide an aesthetic-pictorial expression for the literary heritage of I Chr 2,13-15, which speaks about the *seven* sons of Jesse, and David as the *seventh* and the most distinguished. So, the painter actually drew the scene accounted in I Sam 16,13 while he preferred the view of the Chronicler concerning the number of David's brothers (I Chr 2,13-15). He combined both Scriptures, and represented them in a single artistic work.

3. *Excursus: The Number of David's Brothers in the Fresco from Dura-Europos – A State of Research*

In his description of the fresco under discussion, Eliezer L. Sukenik did not refer at all to the issue concerning the number of David's brothers, who stood behind him.¹³ Isaiah Sonne in his interpretation of the fresco mentioned, indeed, the «six brethren» of David.¹⁴ However, he did not discuss specifically the number of Jesse's sons in the fresco neither did he refer to the contradictory Biblical traditions, nor to the relationship between the latter and the former. Rachel Wischnitzer states, nonetheless, that «there are seven brothers in all, although according to I Sam 16,10 Jesse had seven sons besides young David», and does not offer any solution to the problem.¹⁵ Erwin R. Goodenough and Michael Avi-Yonah are of the opinion that the six figures in a row behind David represent «Jesse and five brothers» of David.¹⁶ This assumption seems extremely unreasonable. First and foremost, since there is no such tradition that speaks about five brothers of David or about the six sons of Jesse, neither Biblical nor Extra-Biblical sources. Moreover, the painter did not make any unique distinction in his drawing between the one who could have represented the father (Jesse); and the other figures representing his sons (the «five brothers»). He made such a clear distinction between David and the six young men behind him, as well as between Samuel and all other figures of the drawing. The six young men behind David bear a resemblance to each other. All of them are of almost the same height and stature, have a youthful appearance, and no one in particular is distinguished by his *pallium* from the others. If the artist desired to represent Jesse, most probably he could have identified him a bit differently, by changing his style of clothes, facial features (older appearance), by his stature (i.e., somehow taller than the

¹³ See Sukenik, *The Synagogue of Dura-Europos*, 103-105.

¹⁴ See Sonne, *The Paintings of the Dura Synagogue*, 316-320 esp. 316.

¹⁵ See R. Wischnitzer, *The Messianic Theme in the Paintings of the Dura Synagogue*, Chicago 1948, 50-52 esp. 50.

¹⁶ See E.R. Goodenough – M. Avi-Yonah, *Dura-Europos*, *Encyclopedia Judaica* 6, Jerusalem 1971, 275-298 esp. 295.

others, as he described Samuel), etc., as has been done, for instance, in the miniature painting of the *Sacra Parallela*, which too shows Samuel anointing David, and in the Paris Psalter, Bibliothèque Nationale Cod. gr. 139, fol. 3v.¹⁷ The absence of Jesse from the fresco is, probably, due to his effort to concentrate on the main deed of the prophetic anointing of the future king, just as indicated in I Sam 16,13.

A long time after I realized that the artist of the fresco from Dura-Europos adopted the number of David's brethren found in I Chr 2,13-15, I read that Carl H. Kraeling had also made a similar observation.¹⁸ However, Kraeling did not suggest any explanation for the artist's preference of the late tradition in Chronicles over those in the Former Prophets.

Although Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler did not negate the possibility that the fresco is based on the text of Chronicles, they assumed also that «there simply was not enough space left for an additional figure».¹⁹ In other words, the illustrator intended to base his fresco on the text of I Samuel, but could not squeeze one more figure in among the brothers. Yet, if such is the case, he, indeed, could have planned the figures to be a bit smaller so as to leave room for all the figures, or anticipate from the beginning that more space would be needed for the size of the figures.

Joseph Gutmann assumed²⁰ that the artist of Dura resorted his fresco Samuel anointing David on a midrash which has remained in the ninth century Christian source, Pseudo-Jerome. According to that midrash, one of Jesse's eight sons, Nethanel (who was identified as Nathan the Prophet) was not really his own son but his grandson, the son of Shimea, whom he had raised as his own child.²¹ Thus, Jesse had seven sons only. But, the probability that the artist under discussion based his fresco in the synagogue of Dura-Europos on a neglected Jewish midrash, which found its place finally in Christian literature, rather than in the handy Biblical source, the Book of Chronicles, is very improbable.

All in all, although one scholar (Kraeling) has pointed to the fact that there are seven sons portrayed in the fresco, as of today none have ever attempted to explain why the fresco follows the tradition of the Chronicles.

¹⁷ See the illustrations in K. Weitzmann and H.L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, Washington, DC 1990, fig. no. 111 and 115.

¹⁸ Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 168.

¹⁹ Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, 1990, 81.

²⁰ See J. Gutmann, *The Illustrated Midrash in the Dura Synagogue Paintings – A New Dimension for the Study of Judaism*, PAAJR 50 (1983), 91-104 esp. 96-98.

²¹ See A. Saltman (ed.), *Pseudo-Jerome, Questions on the Book of Samuel*, Leiden 1975, 91; Gutmann, *The Illustrated Midrash in the Dura Synagogue Paintings*, 97-98.

4. *Josephus Flavius, the Artist from Dura-Europos, Rabbinic Sources, and the Medieval Christian Art*

The combination of part of the early Biblical text with the late one, has been done already about one hundred fifty years earlier by Josephus Flavius. In his historical writing, Josephus relied on the story of I Sam 16, but counted altogether only six brothers of David, as related in the Chronic history (*Jewish Antiquities* 6,156-165 esp. 161-163).

Apparently, the artist of Dura-Europos expounded the Scriptures independently (although it is not impossible that he may have relied on Josephus' description, if we assume that he had access to the *Jewish Antiquities*). Nevertheless, the main point is that the historian and the artist worked in different times and places in the Hellenistic-Roman cultural world: the one in the center, Rome ca. 93-94 CE, the other in the periphery, the outpost of Dura ca. 244-245 CE, both works present a preference of the late Biblical tradition concerning the number of Jesse's sons to the earlier ones.

Indeed, Josephus on the one hand and the artist of the fresco on the other confronted contradictory traditions in the Scriptures, and must have decided which tradition to follow. But why did they prefer the Chronicler's viewpoint over the much earlier traditions of Samuel? In fact, the artist of the fresco had to draw a precise number of figures in his description, and finally he decided to draw seven sons of Jesse. Josephus, however, could certainly have chosen another point of view as well, like, for instance, Pseudo-Philo who composed the early history of Israel, based, too, on the Biblical books, just a bit earlier. In his *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, Pseudo-Philo relates the story concerning Samuel anointing David based on I Sam 16,1-13, while ignoring the contradictory Biblical traditions about the number of David's brethren (59,1-3). He narrates simply the anointing of David, «the youngest shepherd among all of them» (verses 2-3), without indicating any number of brethren.²²

Apparently, the preference of the late Biblical tradition by Josephus and the artist from Dura stems from the special role that the number *seven* (and the *seventh* place) still played in the religious view of their own generations. In fact, the Chronicler's view found its way also into the rabbinic literature on the one hand, and into some Medieval Christian artistic compositions on the other.

²² For English translation of Pseudo-Philo, see D.J. Harrington, Pseudo-Philo, in: J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, Garden City, NY 1985, 372. For a recent new translation of the book, see H. Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, with Latin Text and English Translation* (*Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums XXXI*), Leiden/New York/Köln 1996, ad loc.

In Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 23,10 (Palestine, 3rd-4th century), for example, it is stated:²³

«Anything that comes seventh in order is the one most loved. Thus in the order of the realms... Of [Jesse's] sons also, the seventh is the one most loved: Eliab, Abinadab, Shimeael, Nethanel, Raddai, Ozem, and *David the seventh* (I Chr 2,15)».

Similarly it is accounted in the later parallel version, Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 29,11 (Palestine, ca. 5th century):²⁴ «All sevenths [in a series, I.K.] are always favored,... Among the sons the seventh is favored, as it is said: «David – the seventh» (I Chr 2,15).»²⁵

Some Christian arts, for instance the famous Paris Psalter, Bibliothèque Nationale Cod. gr. 139 (tenth century), show Samuel anointing David, while Jesse and *six* brothers of David – as in I Chr 2,13-15 – staying behind,²⁶ similarly to the fresco from Dura-Europos. The same number of brothers could be seen also in the miniature «Samuel anointing David» of Athos monastery Vatopedi, Cod. 761, fol. 12r., of the Byzantine Psalters of the so called artistic recension (the last quarter of the eleventh century).²⁷

It is worthwhile to mention, on the other hand, that there are other arts which followed the tradition of I Sam 16 concerning the numbers of Jesse's sons. For example, one of the Byzantine miniatures in the outer margin of the Greek manuscript which is known as the *Sacra Parallela* (ninth century), describes Samuel anointing David, while Jesse and his other *seven* sons stay behind.²⁸ Similarly seven additional brothers could be seen also in the illustrati-

²³ See B. Mandelbaum (ed.), *Pesikta de Rav Kahana According to an Oxford Manuscript*, New York 1962, vol. II, 343-344 esp. 344 (Hebrew); for English translation cf. I.J. Kapstein, *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, London 1975, 359-360 esp. 360.

²⁴ See M. Margulies (ed.), *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah – A Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts and Genizah Fragments with Variants and Notes*, Jerusalem 1956, 680-681 esp. 681 (Hebrew).

²⁵ See also the parallel version in the Midrash on Psalms *Shocheh-Tov* 9,11; S. Buber, *Midrash Tehillim*, Vilna 1891; reprinted in Jerusalem 1977, 87-88 (Hebrew); for the English translation see W.G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale Judaica Series XIII), New Haven 1976, vol. I, 143.

²⁶ See Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, fig. no. 115.

²⁷ For the illustration, see Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, fig. no. 112; A. Cutler, *A Psalter from Mar Saba and the Evaluation of the Byzantine David Cycle*, *Journal of Jewish Art* 5 (1978), 43, fig. 5, and see also p. 46. On the Psalter itself, see K. Weitzmann, *The Psalter Vatopedi 761. Its Place in the Aristocratic Psalter Recension*, *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 10 (1947), 21-51, and there fig. 5.

²⁸ See K. Weitzmann, *The Miniatures of the Sacra Parallela: Parisinus Graecus 923*, Princeton, NJ 1979, 77-78, and plate 117, Folio 80r. on p. xxxi. *Sacra Parallela* is a florilegium of quotations from the Bible and patristic texts for moral and ethical edification. For the history of the manuscript, its text, author, date, and etc., see in detail, *ibid.*, 3-25. For a very detailed comparison of the fresco from Dura and the miniature of the *Sacra Parallela*, see Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, 80-84.

on «Samuel anointing David» in the Vatican Book of Kings, Biblioteca, Cod. gr. 333, fol. 22v.²⁹

5. Conclusion

This study traces the portrayal of the number of Jesse's sons in several Biblical and Post-Biblical works of literature and art. The Biblical literature reflects three opposing views about the number of Jesse's sons. Two of them appear in the early historical book, namely in I Sam 16-17: in one, Jesse has four sons in all, in the other, he has eight. The third is in the late historiography, that is, in I Chr 2, in which Jesse has seven sons, David being in the seventh position. A close observation on the transmission of these traditions reveals, that in the Judeo-Hellenistic arts, in the rabbinic literature as well as in some Christian art a preference had been given to the later tradition. In other words, Josephus Flavius in his historical writing on the monarchic period and the painter of the fresco «Samuel anointing David» in the synagogue of Dura-Europos on the one hand, and the rabbis of the midrashic literature and some Medieval Christian illustrators on the other, all preferred the Chronicler's view concerning the sum of David's brethren, that is six brothers, to the traditions which were preserved in Samuel, i.e., three/seven brothers, as we attempted to demonstrate and clarify in this essay. It seems, that the belief on the uniqueness of number *seven*, the significance that is attributed to this perfect, mystical number, and the special function of being in the *seventh* place, caused the preference of the later tradition in Chronicles for the earlier ones in Samuel.

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²⁹ See Weitzmann and Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, fig. no. 114.