

The Books of Chronicles – Part 1

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Starting with David, the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles go over most of the same history described in 1 and 2 Kings. While Kings was written during the period of Babylonian exile, Chronicles' historical accounts likely extend later to the Persian period. Although Chronicles quotes liberally from Kings, its version of the story feels like a world away. Ezra and Nehemiah sound the most like Chronicles and they were probably written sometime during the 4th c. BCE. For some reason, the Chronicler felt compelled to go back over the same stories told in Samuel and Kings hundreds of years after they were written.

King Hezekiah

It was not till after exile that the southern kingdom started paying close attention to the law of Moses. The Deuteronomic historian regards Hezekiah as one of Israel's greatest kings (2Kgs 18; 2Chr 29). The time of Hezekiah also seems to have been a time of literary flourishing. The Bible credits him with collecting proverbs and many prophetic books tie back to his reign. Hezekiah is also credited with some religious reforms, including centralizing worship in the cult in Jerusalem.

Scholarly arguments continue over whether Hezekiah or Josiah ought to receive credit for the move toward centralized worship. It is possible that Hezekiah sought to consolidate smaller countryside sanctuaries in Jerusalem because they were economic hubs. Some scholars argue, however, that the Assyrians ultimately deserve credit for centralizing worship in Jerusalem because most of these smaller shrines were probably destroyed during their invasion.

Rewriting History

It was not unusual for ancient societies to re-write their literature. 1 Chronicles depicts a sanitized version of the same stories already told in Samuel and Kings. The Chronicler chooses to leave out sordid details that might cast David and Solomon in a bad light. The version of King David portrayed in Samuel, for example, is more flawed than the David of Chronicles. Instead, David is portrayed as the source and catalyst for every good thing that happens in Israel after he dies. He gives Solomon blueprints to build the temple, sets up the priesthood, creates liturgies, and more. Once David is gone, Solomon simply follows his instructions.

By placing the temple's origin with David rather than Solomon, the Chronicler reinforces the idea that this was always the temple's intended purpose. Emphasizing an origin story lends authority to the tradition. Namely, that the cult's purpose was to keep the temple in Jerusalem running smoothly.

Priestly Powers

Chronicles was written during what's known as the second temple period. There was no longer a kingship in Israel. Instead, power was located in the temple with the priests. The Chronicler adopts David, the ancestor of a royal line, as the priestly line's ancestor as well.

In Samuel, David is promised that one of his sons would always sit on the throne. Although this worked for a while, David's sons did not in fact sit on the throne forever. This suggests that Samuel was written during an earlier time when it was plausible that David's line could continue. The Chronicler accounts for this inconsistency by tweaking the language, adding "in my house" to David's promise (17:14). In this way, the promise is transferred to the temple. The priesthood is included rather than just David's genetic line. The connection between the monarchy and temple has always been close. Yet the second temple ends up becoming a replacement for the monarchy itself.

The Character of Satan

In 2 Samuel 24, David takes a census in Israel. This does not pan out well for David in the original version of this story. 1 Chronicles smooths David's culpability in its version of the story by transferring responsibility to the character of Satan. Satan is not a common biblical figure. It could be that the Satan in Chronicles is similar to the one found in Job—an adversary who tests and challenges people. This version of Satan is more of a troublemaker than an incarnation of evil.

The census story is intimately connected to the story of the temple. For this reason, the writers could not simply leave the census out of the narrative. They had to find a way to make it make sense without David looking too bad. This is a touch point in the development of Satan as a character in the biblical tradition. What Satan does in this story is cast as bad, even though it also had some positive outcomes.

Chronicles vs. Kings

What does the Chronicler's choice to rewrite history tell us about the authority and significance of Kings? Is Chronicles affirming the book of Kings' authority, or undermining it? It is possible that Kings had not yet reached the status of sacred scripture at the time when Chronicles was written. In this case, rewriting Kings would not have been viewed as an attempt to rewrite the biblical Torah.

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