The Books of Chronicles – Part 2

The Chronicles Continue

The same trends found in 1 Chronicles continue in 2 Chronicles. The writer still sanitizes previous stories found in Samuel and Kings. Cross-referencing Chronicles with other texts can provides a window into the kinds of things that bothered priests during this period. What did the Chronicler choose to remove from the original texts? There is no deathbed speech from David to Solomon, for example, no mention of prostitutes, and Gibeon is no longer described as a "high place" (sacred site) as it was in Kings.

Chronicles' decision to cut some of the most intriguing stories from Israel's history contributes to this text's "boring" reputation. Readers are told Israel's history as though the temple was all that really mattered. Deuteronomy vaguely says only to build the temple *somewhere*. In Kings, the temple is built in Jerusalem by chance. Meanwhile, Chronicles includes references to Mount Moriah (for the first time since Genesis), which creates historical roots for the temple and supports its authoritative status.

Remembering and Reconstructing

Chronicles has a broad awareness of the biblical canon in a way that prior books did not. It calls back to other stories. This is an example of what the literary critic Harold Bloom calls "belated literature"—books that derive their material from older literature. You're not immediately struck by originality when you read Chronicles.

Although Chronicles uses Kings as its primary source, the text also reveals new information not found in Kings. There are whole chapters in Chronicles about figures never mentioned before in the biblical canon. Jehosaphat's story, for example, lasts five chapters in Chronicles. In the book of Kings, he is only mentioned in a couple verses. In Chronicles, Jehosaphat institutes a reform in which Levites are sent out to preach the Torah in the provinces. There is also a battle against the Moabites in which Jehosaphat simply prays to God and all their adversaries kill one another without Israel having to do anything.

Where does the material come from? Are these stories purely inventive? The Chronicler focuses more on Hezekiah's reign than on Josiah's and, at times, it seems like an attempt to shift praise from Josiah to Hezekiah. Some scholars argue that Chronicles used a different

source (possibly an original draft of Kings) that ended with Hezekiah's reign to tell its version of Israel's history. This was probably not the case. Baruch Halpern argued that we should think of biblical historians as writers who made good faith attempts to construct how it "really" happened, despite the fact that they did not have the same resources available today. Although this could be the case, the Chronicler's attempts to sanitize unsavory aspects of Israel's history suggests that there is more at play in this particular text.

King Manasseh

The book of Kings portrays Manasseh as the worst king of all (worshiping foreign gods, etc.). According to the Deuteronomistic Historian, he is responsible for the southern kingdom's fall. From a historical perspective, Manasseh was the longest-reigning king in Israel's history, ruling for 55 years. To successfully govern for that long under pressure from the Mesopotamian empires suggests that Manasseh must have been at least a decent king.

Deuteronomistic History has a sense of trans-generational punishment that is absent in Chronicles. Chronicles sanitizes Mannasseh's reign, claiming that he underwent a religious conversion. This is the Chronicler's way of explaining why he was able to stay on the throne for 55 years. The book of Chronicles thus allows room for redemption in its narrative. Like Mannasseh, the character Jeroboam also repents and is redeemed on an individual level.

Chronicles manages even to clean up the character of Josiah, despite the fact that he was already portrayed favorably in Kings. How do you make a hero even more heroic? According to Chronicles, who begins seeking God even as a young child. Josiah also does not discover the scroll in Chronicles. While the law gives the books of Kings and Deuteronomy their authoritative weight, it seems that the Chronicler does not feel the need to insert this detail in the story.

In the end, there is no explanation offered for Josiah's death in Chronicles. The text does, however, change the story regarding *how* he died, claiming that he was killed in battle rather than by Pharaoh. This could be because this was considered a more noble, honorable death. Josiah's death does not convey the same level of surprise in Chronicles as it does in Kings.

A Moralizing Vision of History

The question remains: Why did the Chronicler feel the need to rewrite Kings? While the benefits of transferring power from the monarchy to the temple are clear, it does not fully explain why Kings was so insufficient that it needed to be completely rewritten. It could be that Kings did not attach enough importance to the cult, Levites, and temple. There could also have been a concern Kings would give readers an impression Israel's greatest heroes were poorly behaved.

Chronicles presents a moralizing vision that reads more smoothly than the book of Kings. There are very few places in Chronicles that contradict the narrator's own voice. In this version of the

story, Judah becomes Israel. The whole book serves as a reminder that useful histories change over time. The second temple period is wildly different from the first temple period. So different that it seemingly needed to reimagine itself by retelling its own story.

The biblical canon was not set until long after Chronicles was written. Yet in Chronicles already hints at some pietistic intentions that would eventually contribute to codifying the canon. The appeal of Samuel and Kings is that these books' "loose edges" were allowed to remain in the text. Chronicles' attempts to clean up and tighten these narratives, though perhaps well-intentioned, were arguably counterproductive because the stories lost their intrigue. As a result, Chronicles is not very widely read today.