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History, Historiography, Historicity, and the Hebrew Bible

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Most historians today are acutely aware that premodern history writing efforts—including those of the biblical text—were far from objective undertakings to record history “as it really happened.”¹ This comment alone

¹. The phrase “as it actually happened” or “how it really was” (“wie es eigentlich gewesen”) comes from the influential nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, who believed that the historian’s role was not to judge the past to instruct the future but to aim for an accurate reconstruction of how it really occurred. See Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1885), vii. Yet, for ancient historians this was “neither an important consideration nor a claim one could substantiate.” Rather, “the study and writing of history” for ancient historians was “a form of ideology.” On this see, respectively, Moses I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking, 1986), 4, and Moses I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Viking, 1975), 29. Even most modern historians do not espouse the approach of von Ranke and recognize that such objectivity simply cannot be achieved. Today, for example, more than simply cataloguing and presenting objective knowledge about events as they occurred in the past, historians connect with and “generate a discourse about the past” that is as much a cultural and literary construction as anything else. See Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 245. See also Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988); and others. As it relates to reconstructing history in the Hebrew Bible, see, for example, the various articles in Lester L. Grabbe, ed., *Can a “History of Israel” Be Written?* (JSOTSup 245; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). For other relevant discussions that touch upon these issues in relation to biblical scholarship, see, for example, Jens Bruun Kofoed, *Text and History: Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), especially 1–33, and John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 1–51. (For further references, see note 30 below.) While complete objectivity is impossible, there is no need to go the way of postmodernism and dismiss the efforts of the modern historical-critical enterprise entirely. Postmodernism has provided many useful course corrections, but that doesn’t necessitate that any interpretation is as valid as another. Despite the flaws of the genre of modern history, this study maintains the belief that when sufficient data is available, it is still possible to interact with and interpret all of the available data to determine what essentially may have
is, of course, somewhat pedestrian and nowadays met with a yawn by most scholars. However, the details and implications behind such an assertion are more nuanced and complex than simple acknowledgement and, when discussing the Hebrew Bible or the history of Israel, are also difficult to appreciate and be embraced by traditional/lay readers. Indeed, history writing, historicity, and historical reliability are perennial topics when discussing the texts of the Bible. For even among some of its most “history-like” sections, there are numerous difficulties and details that raise questions about the Bible as history. Thus, with an introductory (and pedagogical) perspective in mind, the following threefold approach will be pursued with respect to the values and limitations of reading and using the biblical text as history: (1) as models of Israelite historiography, briefly comment on the production of Kings and Chronicles as they factor into a discussion of historical reliability; (2) provide a concise evaluation of a few passages in Kings with comparative data in Chronicles; and (3) offer some general observations about history, history writing, and historicity in the Hebrew Bible and in general.

A PORTRAIT OF KINGS AND CHRONICLES

Kings and Chronicles arguably represent the most characteristically “historical-looking” sections of the Hebrew Bible, texts that portray the Bible in its best historical light as it were. Yet, they are nonetheless similar to any other piece of ancient literature (and even some modern histories for that matter) in their ideological motivations and content—political, social, theological, and otherwise. In this, although Kings and Chronicles might contain what can be considered authentic historical content, and while the author(s) may have happened, and be able to create a reasonable interpretation that is useful for understanding and explaining the past for the present. This, however, should not be confused with the historical idealism of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries akin to von Ranke.

2. Depending on the scholar, the term “historiography” can mean different things. In this paper it is used to convey both the act of history writing itself along with the method and shape the writing of history took—specifically, the writing of history within the Bible and among its neighbors.

3. The term “historical looking” is meant to convey the idea that it conforms to the expectations, traits, and characteristics of modern popular understandings of history as a record of events, and history writing as the apparent gathering and presentation of authentic and unworked historical sources to recount the events of the past in a relatively chronological order. In other words, it looks and smells like “history writing,” in contrast to the other more mythic, folkloric, legendary, or story-like biblical texts; or the prophetic books which are more a collection of oracles given in specific historical situations rather than attempts at history writing. While the present study is limited to passages in Kings and Chronicles, various biblical texts fall under the term “historical books” and usually include Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and Ezra and Nehemiah. For a useful survey of this and other elements see Richard D. Nelson, The Historical Books (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).
picted situations and elements of the past somewhat accurately in their general contours, determining their historical value and whether they can be used to reconstruct the histories of Israel and Judah is a complex matter that is not comforting for those seeking certainty.

Comments on the Production of Kings and Chronicles

With respect to the content, social setting, dates, themes, and so on behind the books of Kings and Chronicles, some careful selectivity is in order. To survey such elements in their entirety would be well beyond the scope of this paper and would demand the interrogation of all the pertinent textual, archaeological, and historical remains, not to mention the important secondary literature on the subject. Here, it will be enough to cover a few broad and commonly-accepted generalities.

At its most basic level, the book of Kings is a narrative account structured around the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah (including the united Israel under Solomon). It contains a variety of material, such as annalistic data for monarchical reigns, speeches, prayers, legendary stories, and miracles, reflections on personalities and characters, descriptions of building activities, long narratives of important events, and more. It also appears to have been made up of a variety of sources, the nature and extent of which is debatable. Its

Kings itself refers explicitly to several "sources" for its information, among those the "Book of the Acts of Solomon" (1 Kgs 11:41), the "Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah" (e.g. 1 Kgs 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:45; 2 Kgs 8:23; 12:19; 14:18; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5), and the "Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel" (e.g. 1 Kgs 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39; 2 Kgs 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31). Other unmentioned sources could also be postulated for material such as the popular stories of Elijah and Elisha, or for long narrative sections such as the story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib. However, assessing any one of these "sources" is problematic as they have to be reconstructed and cannot be assured (e.g. the continued debate as to the directional influence between parallel passages in Isa 36–39 and 2 Kgs 18–19). Even those sources that are explicitly mentioned are not available for consultation; there is no compositional data, their nature and extent is unknown, and even surety as to their existence is unavailable. Even then, how would it be known which material in Kings is quoted from those sources? Or, how does it explain significant passages that are much more than one would find in annals? Moreover, parallel passages in Chronicles seem to conflate what Kings mentions as the separate annals of Israel and Judah and calls them the "Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel" (e.g. 2 Chr 16:11; 25:26; 27:27; 28:26; 32:32; 35:26–27; 36:8). Are these references to the current book of Kings or something else? Another passage has a reference to simply a "Book of the Kings" (2 Chr 24:27). Is Chronicles freely altering or creatively recording sources, and if so, what are the implications for the book of Kings? Even more problematic is the passage mentioning the "Book of the Acts of Solomon" that implies some sort of royal biography when such writings were unlikely to have been produced so early. However, using these sources to assume or buttress the claim to the historical reliability of Kings is suspect in its methodology. Sources or not, each historical claim made by Kings needs to be examined individually and carefully. For a recent volume discussing the sources and composition of Kings among other elements, see the various articles in Baruch Halpern and
composite nature is rightly ascribed to various sources of some kind, but not much should be made of this as the text is so much more than a compilation of potential sources. It is a remarkable achievement in its final compilation that betrays itself as a work of sustained editing by Israelite scribes. For this reason, seeking a date of composition is difficult. Its terminus a quo is obviously sometime after the “thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah” in the sixth century B.C.E. (2 Kgs 25:7), but this may only represent a later stage of its development. However, a first edition of Kings should likely not be sought before the latter eighth century B.C.E. Its terminus ad quem is even more difficult.\(^6\)

\(^5\) The largest factor in this determination is the evidence for the rise and spread of writing and literacy in ancient Israel and Judah and the origin of its literature. See, for example, Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 11; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 127–35 who sees justifiable context for allowing the possibility of the creation of Israelite literature to reach back to the ninth century B.C.E., or David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archaeological Approach* (JSOTSup 109; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991) who maintains a date in the late eighth century B.C.E. Other considerations should include the combination of Israelite material of a northern provenance with Judahite material which would make sense after the fall of Samaria in 722/721 B.C.E. 2 Kgs 18:5 could be a possible demarcation of a first “edition/version” of Kings commissioned in Hezekiah’s time in a nationalistic effort to resurrect the glory days of David and Solomon as it were, now that the northern kingdom was gone. For this line of reasoning and the view that much of the literature in the Bible originated in Hezekiah’s time, see, for example, William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64–90; for an overview of the dating of Kings specifically see 77–81. Hezekiah is certainly portrayed as a model Davidic king and said to be like none other before or after; a perfect leader that all Israel could unite together under. The mention of Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 18:5 seems to be at odds with the note about Josiah in 2 Kgs 23:25, lending itself as potential evidence of an early edition of Kings begun in the days of Hezekiah. In the context of the larger so-called Deuteronomistic History Kings is a part of, the date of the beginning of a book of Kings is likely somewhat later during Josiah’s time. For a useful discussion of multiple views from various scholars on the Deuteronomistic History that has bearing on the book of Kings, see Raymond F. Person, Jr., ed., “In Conversation with Thomas Römer, The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction” (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9.17 (2009): 1–49. This is not a denial that Kings is based on sources of an earlier date, but that even if a limited, core book of Kings was created and then edited/updated over the centuries, its creation should not be sought before the latter eighth century B.C.E.

\(^6\) Unfortunately, the earliest extant manuscript fragments are from the Hellenistic-period province of Yehud. To postulate its creation at this time is, of course, drastic and unnecessary. Yet, this is a significant obstacle for determining the editorial history of Kings with absoluteness. On the issue of the extant manuscripts, the lateness of the text, and an informed response as to why this should not a priori remove Kings from the “pool of reliable evidence” about the period it describes, see Kofoed, *Text and History*, 33–112.
As for Chronicles, though a large portion is dedicated to the monarchical reigns of the kings of Judah akin to the book of Kings, it is more of a condensed history that begins with an extensive genealogy starting with Adam and traced down to David, at which point significant attention is devoted to the Judean kings up through the exile into Babylon, with brief mention of the royal Persian decree for the Jews to return and rebuild the temple. Not only does the last verse indicate that its current form did not occur before Cyrus the Great’s decree in 539 B.C.E., based on other clues it is likely that its compilation occurred even later. Once again, a terminus ad quem is difficult for much the same reasons as for Kings. With respect to Chronicles, it is generally agreed that the Chronicler relied on earlier portions of the Hebrew Bible—particularly the book of Kings—and was probably a scribe associated with the Jerusalem temple.

Since both Kings and Chronicles are extended narrative texts, brief mention of their general themes, interests, and ideologies is important for elucidating their own internal purposes, as well as the purpose to which readers might use each text as reliable history. Both emphasize acceptable and unacceptable forms of worship, the cult and the Jerusalem temple, theological elements more than political, which center on the Judean monarchy and its covenantal promise with Yahweh established with the model ruler David, as well as an evaluation of each king based on theological considerations. More themes and characteristics could be mentioned, and in many instances Kings and Chronicles come across as quite different, but the similarities above bring attention to a distinction that should be made. What is important here is that, first and foremost, both Kings and Chronicles are religious/ideological histories.

In sum, Kings and Chronicles are late, ideologically-biased, and heavily edited texts. This alone should be enough to give a reader pause about their

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7. The northern kings are omitted entirely.
8. For details see Ralph W. Klein, “Chronicles, Book of 1–2,” ABD 1:994.
9. Internally, Chronicles references sources much like Kings does and comes with similar criticisms (see note 4 above). Aside from this, there have been noticeable attempts to argue for the idea that Kings and Chronicles were parallel histories that had common sources at their disposal, and not that Chronicles is reliant on Kings. For example A. Graeme Auld, Kings Without Privilege: David and Moses in the Story of the Bible’s Kings (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994). Notwithstanding, there is still good reason to believe that Chronicles was reliant on a Samuel–Kings text as well as other biblical material. See, for example, Marc Zvi Brettler, The Creation of History in Ancient Israel (London; Routledge, 1995), 20–47 or Steven L. McKenzie, The Chronicler’s Use of the Deuteronomistic History (HSM; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985). See also the varied opinions expressed in Patrick M. Graham, Kenneth G. Hoglund, and Steven L. McKenzie, eds., The Chronicler as Historian (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
historical value. However, before exploring this and similar questions, a look at a few particular parallel passages in Kings and Chronicles is in order, so as to offer a context for illuminating the general discussion of biblical history writing and historicity reserved for the end. The passages that will be given attention are from the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah, found in 2 Kgs 18:1–20:21 and 2 Chr 29:1–32:33.¹⁰

Hezekiah in Second Kings: A Brief Analysis

For purposes here, the portion of Second Kings devoted to Hezekiah can be divided into the following large units: an introduction, summary, and reflection upon Hezekiah (vv. 18:1–8); a recapitulation of the fall of Samaria (vv. 18:9–12); recounting of the Assyrian invasion of Judah and Jerusalem's miraculous deliverance (vv. 18:13–19:37); mention of Hezekiah's illness and recovery (vv. 20:1–11); reference to Hezekiah's visit by Babylon (vv. 20:12–19); and a concluding summary (vv. 20:20–21). Each one of these units (excepting the concluding summary for obvious reasons) begins with some sort of reference to a period of time,¹¹ the summary in 2 Kgs 20:20–21 then concludes the reign of Hezekiah with a formulaic reference to the “Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah” and how the rest of his deeds are recorded there. These blocks of individual episodes, coupled with the summary reference, give the story its history like character and the appearance that the author of these passages was using an annalistic source for material. Yet, a close reading of the text along with other biblical passages and extra-biblical evidence indicates that the author was doing much more than simply presenting the deeds and details of Hezekiah's reign from available sources. In fact, each one of these units contain details that play a part in presenting several interpretational problems—chronological, literary, historical, and archaeological—for anyone trying to reconstruct a “history” of Hezekiah's reign.

Problems of Chronology

To begin with, one is immediately confronted with inconsistencies in the chronological details presented as well as the chronological arrangement of the

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¹⁰. Rather than focus on the accounts of kings from a much earlier period, those dealing with the reign of Hezekiah will be considered as potentially close in time to the actual events described (see note 5 above), thus serving as an illustration that even close proximity (let alone the distant past) is not necessarily an indicator of historical accuracy.

¹¹. For example: “In the third year . . .” (2 Kgs 18:1); “In the fourth year . . .” (2 Kgs 18:9); “In the fourteenth year . . .” (2 Kgs 18:13); “In those days . . .” (2 Kgs 20:1); and “At that time . . .” (2 Kgs 20:12).

¹². The term “author” is used here in the singular for sake of convenience, with recognition that multiple authors likely had a hand in the text as it stands.
individual units. Regarding the chronological details, it is known from fairly accurate external dating that Samaria fell in 722/721 B.C.E. and Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 B.C.E. However, as the former is said to have occurred in Hezekiah's sixth year (2 Kgs 18:9–10) and the latter in his fourteenth year (2 Kgs 18:13), we are confronted with problematic time spans for various periods of Hezekiah's life, leading scholars to figure his reign differently. This is, of course, compounded by the presentation of the units in the order they appear.

**Problems of a Literary Nature**

The chronological problems mentioned above do pose problems of a literary nature in the sense of how they fit and flow together; yet, there are additional issues that arise when reading in a literary-critical manner. For example, there are theological concerns that seem to override attention to exactness in historical reporting. There are signs of literary shaping that

13. While the external dates for Samaria's destruction and Sennacherib's invasion of Judah are generally accepted, depending on which date is used as the reference point, scholars come up with different years of Hezekiah's reign. There are, of course, other details that figure into such dating schemes, but the basics come down to (1) if Samaria's destruction and Hezekiah's sixth year are synchronized, then Hezekiah's reign is figured as 727/726–699/698 B.C.E. (e.g., Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 11; Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1988], 228); or (2) if Sennacherib's invasion is correlated with Hezekiah's fourteenth year, then Hezekiah's reign is figured as 715/714–687/686 B.C.E. (e.g., Nadav Na'aman, "Hezekiah and the Kings of Assyria," *TA* 21 [1994]: 235–54). In either case, at least one external synchronism has to be ignored and many other problems are caused by the internal chronology in Kings. It must be admitted, then, that either literary concerns superseded accurate chronological ordering, or the author was separated from the events enough in time that mistakes were made in creating the various units that make up Hezekiah's reign. For a summary, as well as details on the possible chronological ordering of certain events see, for example, J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (2d ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 403–04.

14. Tensions in chronology, history, and other details have led some to suggest that the position of some passages is out of order chronologically. For example, the mention of the fourteenth year in 2 Kgs 18:13 may have originally been associated with the episode of Hezekiah's sickness beginning in 2 Kgs 20:1–11 and in a roundabout way associated with Sennacherib's invasion. Or, that the following verses (2 Kgs 18:14–16) may have been originally associated with the payment of tribute, not to Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E., but to Sargon II as part of an earlier campaign in Hezekiah's reign. For an example of the former see Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 228; for the latter see Jeremy Goldberg, "Two Assyrian Campaigns Against Hezekiah and Later Eighth Century Biblical Chronology," *Bib* 80 (1999): 360–90.

15. An example of this can be seen in the mention of Sennacherib's death in 2 Kgs 19:37, wherein the impression is given that Sennacherib died soon after his "defeat" at Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. Sennacherib, however, died roughly two decades later. But the reporting of his death in such a way serves the function of fulfilling the comment in 2 Kgs 19:6–7—literarily telescoping the intervening time dramatizes the reasons for Sennacherib's death in a much more meaningful way than simply reporting that he died two decades later, but also draws tenuous connections between his death as a result of a run in with
affect the presentation of Hezekiah with the Judean kings who come before and after.⁶ Even in the case of the story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib in 2 Kgs 18:13–19:37, one of the most lengthy narrative passages and one that can be compared to external sources, we can see that we are dealing with a literary creation. The attention this narrative receives in the text is evidence of the importance of this episode and its impact on Judean ideology. It is not a simple reporting of the events of 701 B.C.E. when the Assyrian king ravaged the Judean countryside and threatened Jerusalem, but a powerfully crafted narrative overlaying a historical core. Unpacking the historical tidbits, the

the God of Israel decades before. For an interpretation that the murder of Sennacherib, coupled with other elements of the story, is literarily fashioned in such a way as to highlight that Sennacherib’s death is due to his blasphemying of Yahweh, “in line with the ‘logic’ of the time” where murder or some other terrible fate was a “sign of divine wrath” (118–19), see Arie van der Kooij, “The Story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18–19): A Sample of Ancient Historiography,” in Past, Present, Future: The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets (ed. Johannes C. de Moor and Harry F. Van Rooy; OtSt 44; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 107–19.

16. It is simply a fact of life that all people have both virtues and vices, and if the biblical evidence is examined critically, such a reality didn’t preclude the kings of Judah. Even so, the biblical portrayal of the Judean kings are not necessarily realistic reconstructions of such persons, more than they are oversimplified portraits that hint to the underlying motivations of the author to create a pattern of “good” or “bad,” when the underlying details in reality demonstrate a mixture of both. On this see, for example, Peter R. Ackroyd, “The Biblical Interpretations of the Reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah,” in In The Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life an Literature in Honour of G. W. Ahlström (ed. W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer; JSOTSup 31; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 247–59.

An example of this is how Hezekiah is portrayed as an ideal king, despite the existence of some historical and textual considerations that this may be a glorification. The mention of Hezekiah’s revolt in 2 Kgs 18:7 seems to be a righteous action in that Hezekiah would not serve Assyria and had Yahweh’s approval of rebellion. Yet it was this that precipitated Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah, and even though Jerusalem was eventually spared, the rest of Judah was utterly devastated. And this is not to even mention the fact that although Hezekiah retained the throne, Judah remained a vassal of Assyria for many years to come. Hezekiah’s revolt could, then, be characterized as a disaster economically and politically. This is just one example among others that the events and details of Hezekiah’s reign were idealized depictions. In fact, if one were to remove 2 Kgs 18:14–16 in which Hezekiah capitulates to Sennacherib and pays him a hefty tribute for his rebellious pretensions, as well as 2 Kgs 20:13–19 where Hezekiah opens the treasure-house to Babylonian envoys and is chastised by Isaiah—both arguably later insertions to tone down Hezekiah’s image in order to glorify Josiah—the remaining verses dedicated to Hezekiah are entirely laudatory of him (and even those that are—such as the one-verse mention of his cultic reform—are questionable data). On the possibility that 2 Kgs 18:14–16 is a later insertion and only makes sense in relation to the larger work of Kings (hence, why it does not exist in the parallel account in Isaiah) see Christopher R. Seitz, “Account A and the Annals of Sennacherib: A Reassessment,” JSOT 58 (1993): 47–57 and his fuller treatment in Christopher R. Seitz, Zion’s Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah: A Reassessment of Isaiah 36–39 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991). Regarding 2 Kgs 20:13–19, with its clear overtones and foreshadowing of the Babylonian exile, it is a passage inserted much later and not a prophetic utterance of the eighth-century prophet Isaiah. For problems with Hezekiah’s cultic reform, see note 18 below.
obvious narrative seams and sources, the parallel accounts, the language and literary style, the linguistic elements, textual variations, the context and content of various speeches and prayers, and a host of other details, has given rise to a vast amount of secondary literature by scholars trying to understand the story both literally and historically.\(^{17}\)

**Problems of History (and Archaeology)**

Unfortunately, the problems do not end with chronological and literary difficulties, as these merely feed into issues of a historical nature (with archaeology playing an important part in places). A few historical problems arising from chronological inconsistencies and literary shaping could include the

depiction of cult reformation,\(^{18}\) possible anachronistic references,\(^{19}\) differing accounts of the same event,\(^{20}\) issues in determining cause and effect,\(^{21}\) reliability of the recreation of various speeches,\(^{22}\) and questions of contemporary witnesses and material. In brief, if Kings is a creative working of sources and past


\(^{19}\) Many have dealt with the anachronistic reference to the Egyptian King Tiharqa in 2 Kgs 19:9 and have tried to explain it in various ways. As an example, a recent proposal can be found in Il-Sung Andrew Yun, “Different Readings of the Taharqa Passage in 2 Kings 19 and the Chronology of the 25th Egyptian Dynasty,” in From Babel to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History and Literature in Honour of Brian Peckham (ed. Joyce Rilet Wood, John E. Harvey and Mark Leuchter; New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 169–81.

\(^{20}\) For example, there are clear tensions between the portrayals of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in the biblical account when compared to the Assyrian record. It is a given that the biblical text is being written with a clear ideology that is not above sacrificing historical accuracy for its story. Assyrian annals are somewhat different. Yes, they are prone to exaggeration and propaganda to serve their own ideology (on this see Antti Laato, “Assyrian Propaganda and the Falsification of History in the Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib,” VT 45.2 [1995]: 198–226), yet one cannot assert that they are both of equal historical value, first and foremost for reasons of genre.

\(^{21}\) What is meant by this is that the author of Kings interprets various episodes as having specific causes that are either historically unverifiable, or explainable by other historical means. For example, was Yahweh the ultimate cause of Sennacherib’s death (indicated by 2 Kgs 19:6–7, 37) or was it due to internal political happenings in the Assyrian homeland? Was it the rumor of Taharqa’s approach that caused Sennacherib to withdraw from Palestine (if one accepts the source-critical reading that isolates 2 Kgs 18:17–19:9b, 36–37, this is indicated by the flow from verses 7–9 to 36) or the angel of Yahweh striking the Assyrian army down (2 Kgs 19:35–36)? Or, did the payment of tribute in 2 Kgs 18:14–16 have anything to do with it as its current placement might suggest? This list could be multiplied to the same effect.

\(^{22}\) How historically reliable are the various speeches in these verses? Did Isaiah and Hezekiah really say the words that are placed on their lips, or are they simply dramatic recreations for the sake of the story (akin to what many ancient authors did in order to demonstrate what the character would have said in a given situation)? It might also be asked, as has been done, whether the speeches of the Rabshakeh are historically reliable words from an Assyrian official (that an Assyrian official did come to Jerusalem with a message is not in question), or creations of a Judean author, whether partly or in whole? On this, see Ehud Ben-Zvi, “Who Wrote the Speech of the Rabshakeh and When?” JBL 109.1 (1990): 79–92. See also Chaim Cohen, “Neo-Assyrian Elements in the First Speech of the Biblical Rab-Šaqê,” IOS 9 (1979): 32–48; Dominic Rudman, “Is the Rabshakeh Also among the Prophets? A Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings XVIII 17–35,” VT 50.1 (2000): 100–110; and Peter Machinist, “The Rab Šaqêth at the Wall of Jerusalem: Israelite Identity in the Face of the Assyrian ‘Other,’” Hebrew Studies 41 (2000): 151–68.
events both chronologically and literarily, then what really happened in exact detail and time? Further, can such historical ambiguities and inconsistencies be completely resolved?

**Hezekiah in Second Chronicles: A Comparison**

For purposes of comparison with Second Kings, the relevant passages in Second Chronicles dealing with Hezekiah’s reign can be broken out as follows: an introduction (2 Chr 29:1–2); a recounting of Hezekiah’s religious reform and celebrations with summary praise for Hezekiah (2 Chr 31:20–21); a narration of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah and the deliverance of Jerusalem (2 Chr 32:1–23); mention of Hezekiah’s illness and recovery (2 Chr 32:24–26); a recounting of Hezekiah’s riches and deeds (2 Chr 32:27–31); and a conclusion (2 Chr 32:32–33). It is clear from the above breakdown that there is a similar framework in comparison with Second Kings but also some radical differences.

One need only follow the organizational units to briefly unpack the comparative details and explore their commonalities and divergences. In both Kings and Chronicles there are similar introductions to Hezekiah and his reign, but where in Kings there is only a passing reference to Hezekiah’s religious reforms as part of the introduction, in Chronicles those religious reforms and the activities associated with them receive extended attention. In this case, there is a clear focus on Hezekiah and his religious achievements in favor of political and military details, among which is the absence from Chronicles of the entire next unit in Kings referring to the fall of Samaria. Following this there is the narration of the story of Hezekiah and Sennacherib with Chronicles being a noticeably more condensed version that highlights Hezekiah’s exceptionality and omits potentially negative material. Then, there is Hezekiah’s illness and recovery receiving attention in both texts, but with marked differences in the material included. Lastly, mention of the visit from the envoys of the

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23. This unit was simply a synchronism with the fall of the northern kingdom and the material in 2 Kings directly preceding the account of Hezekiah. Nevertheless it is entirely missing in Chronicles. Other examples of missing political and military details include the lack of mention of Hezekiah’s revolt against Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18:7) and the absence of reference to Hezekiah’s tribute to Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18:14–16).

24. For example, it was all Hezekiah’s “faithful deeds” (2 Chr 32:1) and his leadership that prepared him for his victory over Assyria, not potentially his capitulation hinted at in 2 Kgs 18:14–16 (if this is to be associated with tribute to Sennacherib; see note 14 above). Even Isaiah has no significant role here as the person and leadership of Hezekiah is highlighted.

25. Even in the episode of Hezekiah’s illness, Isaiah is absent in Chronicles since Hezekiah’s recovery is a result of his humbling of himself and not because of Isaiah’s help. Associated with Hezekiah’s sickness is the visit of the envoys from Babylon and even here
Babylonian King and Hezekiah’s opening and tour of the treasury as seen in Kings, is contrasted with Chronicle’s recounting of Hezekiah’s riches and deeds and a later reference to officials of Babylon with the two not clearly connected. To be sure, then, there are noticeable and important differences between the two. Still, there is an overarching similarity in the pattern of the chronological ordering of events that carries with it certain implications.

**On Comparing Kings and Chronicles**

Admittedly, a comparative approach to the specific passages in Kings and Chronicles relating to Hezekiah could be reflected on much more. As well, akin to the brief analysis of Hezekiah in Kings, Chronicles could have been given its own treatment. In this regard, it is important to note the following. First, an analysis of the Hezekiah material in Chronicles leads to chronological, literary, historical, and archaeological issues of the same magnitude as those adumbrated for Kings. Hence, for purposes here, the brief analysis of Second Kings should be enough to provide a general framework with which to answer questions of historical reliability. Second, the similarities and differences between the Hezekiah passages in Kings and Chronicles are important only as they factor into a discussion of the cumulative value and limitations of the Bible’s witness of the reign of Hezekiah. In this regard, the comparison above is beneficial insofar as it offers an example of history writing in ancient Israel. In reality, each must stand on its own when addressing the larger question of historical reliability. It will not do to simply combine the two accounts together as many traditional readers do and imply a fuller historical account.

**A PICTURE OF HISTORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND HISTORICITY**

Although only a cursory glance, the discussion above should provide enough reasons for a reader to proceed carefully when using Kings and

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26. Is Chronicles simply taking the basic Kings text and its structure and expanding and omitting material to suit the Chronicler’s own purposes? If this is evidence of Chronicles reliance on Kings, and if Kings has problems with historical reliability, then how much more so is Chronicles unreliable?

27. Not to mention Isa 36–39 (= 2 Kgs 18–19) if talking about the biblical witness of Hezekiah as a whole.

28. In some senses, such comparanda leads to more questions of potential literary reliance on Kings by Chronicles, or the value of the scholar being able to witness the methods of the Chronicler as a historian at work on sources available to the scholar (i.e., Kings), than it does to the historical value of taking material from both *in toto*.
Chronicles (together or separate) in an effort to explain things “as they really
happened” or to reconstruct an historically accurate picture of the Israelite
past. Equally important, such details do not portend well for biblical texts be-
yond the so-called historical books.\(^29\) Leaving the issue here, however, high-
lights only the limitations of reading and using the Bible as history, without
much discussion of its value or the nuances involved in considering these
issues in context.

**History and History Writing in Ancient Israel**

Inquiring as to the values and limitations of historical accounts in the
Hebrew Bible such as Kings and Chronicles raises questions not only of their
historical reliability but also of their nature as history writing. In other words,
were the biblical authors in fact doing “history” and did they think they were
(if can such even be determined), or were they doing something else and what
might that something else be if not history in the modern sense? With respect
to the history writing of ancient Israel, these questions and many more exist in
abundance by numerous scholars who have taken up the task of analyzing the
biblical text and other comparative data to get at questions of historiography
and historicity.\(^30\) The theoretical elements involved in such a discussion (e.g.,
the nature, status and classification of certain biblical texts as history writing)
are well beyond the focus here; what is more important is how such definitions
often influence opinions of historical reliability.

The brief review of Kings and Chronicles above demonstrates that even
these two books—examples of probably the closest thing to history writing
that the Hebrew Bible offers—are rooted in and shaped by theological and
other concerns that often sacrifice historical details and accuracy. Still, is this
reason to deny what was being done in Kings and Chronicles the title of his-
tory writing?\(^31\) At least in the case of Kings, while it is arguably not antiquarian

\(^{29}\) For the historical books, see note 3 above.

\(^{30}\) For the seminal work on this, see John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography
in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1983; repr., Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997); see also Baruch J. Halpern, *The First
Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State
University Press, 1988); Brettler, *Creation of History in Ancient Israel*; Grabbe, *Can a “History
of Israel” Be Written?*; Kofod, *Text and History*; and, for a more recent survey of the study
of Israel’s past and the relationship of the Bible and history, see Megan Bishop Moore and
Brad E. Kelle, *Biblical History and Israel’s Past: The Changing Study of the Bible and History*
(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011). For a valuable comparison and example of history
writing from the perspective of Mesopotamia, see Marc van de Meiroop, *Cuneiform Texts

\(^{31}\) History and history writing means many things to many people: how does one
define the terms; does history or history writing necessarily equate with historical reality
in its interests, it is typical of the literature of its time and should be credited as being an example of ancient historiography.32

It must be made clear, however, that historical accuracy and reliability do not necessarily follow from the claim that Kings and other parts of the Hebrew Bible are history writing. All sorts of ideology and literary creativity played a part in Israelite historiography. As has been demonstrated, in the case of Kings and Chronicles, theological/religious concerns played an important part in the recording, interpretation, and even the structure and content of the act of history writing. Not surprisingly, ideological elements were often at work in the writing of Israel’s neighbors as well.33 What is seen by modern readers as clear theologizing and literary creativity that was free with its use of facts, the Israelites and other ancient peoples likely saw as historical reality. In contrast to the definition of history writing as objective reporting and reconstruction of the past, Israel and her neighbors appear to not have even conceptualized history this way nor was there even a precedent for them doing so. History was not archival reporting (although they were not incapable of this when they wanted to be); rather, it was a complex cultural construction and interplay

or is that reality in a sense created by it; are there different qualities to these terms in different cultures and different times; what issues should be considered and how do those issues affect historians? All of these (and more) are important questions that call attention to the difficulties in delineating how one should approach history, history writing, and questions of historical reliability, both in the Hebrew Bible and in general. Incidentally, even bibli cal scholars can’t agree on what constitutes history/history writing (see note 30 above for examples).

32. While it is by no means “history writing” in the modern sense of the term, and it is ideologically and literarily shaped, there are compelling reasons why it should be considered one example of ancient history writing, albeit of a different kind than that of Mesopotamia, Greece, or wherever. I agree with Kofoed’s assessment that “there is nothing on the explanatory and representational levels that prevents us from regarding [Kings] as history writing.” See Kofoed, Text and History, 247, as well as additional details in his fuller discussion, synthesis, and approach to Kings in 235–47.

33. Perhaps a prime example of this is the so-called Weidner Chronicle whose structure and content are preserved within a theological framework (see “The Weidner Chronicle,” translated by Alan R. Millard [COS 1.138:468–70]). While it is exponentially longer than the Weidner Chronicle, the Deuteronomistic History that the book of Kings is a part of shares the same basic feature. Taking the book of Deuteronomy as its rule of judgment, the “history” of the nation of Israel (later Israel and Judah) is evaluated based on a particular religious ideal. Each king is either “bad” or “good” based on how well they matched up to, and followed the decrees of, Yahweh according to Deuteronomic values and ideals. Similar to the Weidner Chronicle, then, based on its overall form and contents the Deuteronomistic History is by and large a religious interpretation of the past. As “religion” was something simply part of the fabric of culture and not conceived of as an individual actuality, it was an important component in many texts that sought to preserve and interpret the past through the genre of history.
among tradition, societal reality, historical memory,\textsuperscript{34} ideology, collective understanding, and historical detail (real or imagined), often to create and shape an identity and reconnect the past with the present in a meaningful way.\textsuperscript{35} In this way, historical details important to the author were included while those that did not fit with what the author wanted to say were not; moreover, the details that did find their way in were often modified, embellished, or even reworked as a new literary creation. For many legitimate reasons, then, a good dose of historical skepticism is necessary when reading and using Kings and Chronicles—and even more so other texts of the Hebrew Bible\textsuperscript{36}—as history.


\textsuperscript{35} What we are dealing with in the biblical text is a narrative retelling of the past that, while containing actual historical elements, is creatively shaped by its author(s) ideologies, biases, and motivations; it is not the unimpeded and unfiltered past itself, if such can even be obtained. The biblical text is something well beyond a compilation of unworked historical sources—in many ways a presentation of the past that is literally “innovative” and “imaginative” as well (for an example from Kings see Burke O. Long, “Historical Narrative and the Fictionalizing Imagination,” VT 35.4 (1985): 405–16). When discussing historical reliability this should not be taken lightly. History is always, in a sense, a creation and interpretation in which “[e]vents transpire, [and] people record, select and reshape them [into] historical texts,” thus making it difficult to use the Bible simply as a source or repository of historical details. See Brettler, The Creation of History in Ancient Israel, 1.

\textsuperscript{36} It is not coincidence that, aside from conservative works, recent treatments of the history of Israel do not even begin until after the patriarchal history. For examples of conservative works, see, John Bright, A History of Israel (4th ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster...
as it really happened. However, while each detail should be taken into account and carefully weighed, it does not follow that Kings, Chronicles, or other texts are historically worthless and devoid of any value.\textsuperscript{37}

**History and History-writing in General**

This leads to the fact that any written manifestation of the past—whether ideologically motivated or an honest attempt at objectivity—is an interpretation in some form. Indeed, interpretation is the basic element involved in the remembering and recording of history. Of course, other elements play their part as well: things such as the nature and extent of historical sources, the cultural differences in how peoples reflect critically on their past (if at all), human memory, epistemological issues, and others, are all factors involved one way or another in the remembering or recording of history. Still, all of these in their own way feed back into the issue of interpretation. Examples of this could be multiplied many times over.\textsuperscript{38} In the end, whether in its remember-

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\textsuperscript{37} There are details in Kings that suggest a historical core and provide a generally reliable picture. For example, the general correlation of Egyptian data with the invasion of Shishak in 1 Kgs 15:25–27 (all the more remarkable when the composition date of Kings is considered), the interactions of Israel with Syria, Assyria, Egypt, and Babylonia all throughout their history, the parallels with the Moabite Stone, the mention of Israelite and Judean kings in Assyrian and Babylonian records that fit in the time period they are placed in the book of Kings, the striking similarities with the Hezekiah and Sennacherib incident from both sides, the general and for the most part correct ordering of the kings; the list could go on. These are all remarkable historical details that can be of value as long as it is recognized that the presentation of these details in their larger context are carried out by ancient historians with more in mind than reporting the cold, hard facts. Thus, they should be evaluated accordingly. It is up to each reader to determine what is of historical value—sometimes that value will exist, often it will not.

\textsuperscript{38} Memory, for example, whether collective or individual, affects what is remembered and what is forgotten about the past, but the memories themselves are always interpreted by those doing the remembering. This not only clearly affects the remembering of the past, but also the recording of it, as even the person who has experienced and is remembering a past, cannot write about that past without first interpreting it. The problem is only compounded when an individual (such as an historian, ancient or modern) is writing about such memories from a secondary point of view. With respect to historical sources, in some sense it doesn’t matter how much or how little one has to reconstruct the past, because any source is already someone else’s interpretation of that past which is now being used as part of a secondary interpretation. In this case, even first-hand sources are still interpretations at their root. To speak of cultural differences and the intellectual recording of history only
ing or recording, all history is an interpretation to one degree or another—it cannot be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The limitations of reading and using the Hebrew Bible as history are many. Through some comments on the production of Kings and Chronicles as they relate to historical reliability, as well as a review of the various chronological, literary, and historical problems in the biblical presentation of Hezekiah, the need for caution and careful scrutiny was demonstrated in some particulars. In addition, the observations about history and the genre of history writing in the Hebrew Bible and in general have provided a context that can be applied beyond Kings and Chronicles to the Bible as a whole. However, the historical value of the Bible is not entirely absent either. In the end, what this paper hopes to have emphasized is the complexities involved and the issues that need to be considered in order to offer a real, informed evaluation as to the value and limitations of reading the Bible as history. In sum, for questions related to history, historiography, historicity and the Hebrew Bible, conclusions need to be approached carefully and put in the appropriate context by each individual reader, for the answers are varied, nuanced, and complex.

leads to more issues of interpretation: whether it is an ancient historian who felt free to shape, embellish, and otherwise create their history for religious, political, or other purposes, or a modern historian who strives to be free of bias, both still interpret history rather than simply record things as they really happened. This leads to another important issue—whether or not anyone even has the ability to get at the truth or reality behind what really happened. For example, even something as simple as recording the day the second Iraq war started is an interpretation based on what the recorder believes constitutes the beginning of that war (e.g., is it the day America decided to invade Iraq, is it the actual day the invasion took place, is it the time that the first shot was fired, or is it events that occurred even before all these that set these events in motion and therefore is the “real” beginning of the war?). Or, as an example from Kings, what did cause Sennacherib to leave Jerusalem intact? Whatever reality was behind it (tribute, the rumor of Tiharqa’s approach, a “plague”), for the author God was the ultimate reason Jerusalem was spared. The reality behind any historical “event” evades complete objectivity and requires interpretation.