The Books of Kings and Chronicles: Their Value and Limitations for the Study of Ancient Israelite History

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Recently I studied the history of ancient Israel while living in modern Israel. The professor for the course, Ray Huntington, selected a textbook that closely followed the “histories” found in Kings and Chronicles. The author of the textbook is an evangelical Christian who accepts much of the Bible as inerrant. Having made introductions with the history of ancient Israel previously, I found the textbook problematic. On a few occasions, such as dating the exodus from Egypt, the author neglected significant scholarship because it did not fit with his religious model. Once on a fieldtrip I saw Professor Huntington reading *The History of Ancient Israel*, edited by Hershel Shanks. Having at the time read only the first (and most minimalist) chapter of Shanks’ book, I wondered why Dr. Huntington would read a book on one end of the spectrum and assign a book on the opposite end. As he and I discussed my question, it became clear that every scholar and student had to decide the value and limitations of using the Bible, especially Kings and Chronicles, as a source of historical data. My objective here is to evaluate Kings and Chronicles as historical sources, looking specifically at 1 Kings 15:1–25 and 2 Chronicles 13:1–17:1.

**Place and Time of the Origin of Chronicles**

In determining the place and time of Chronicles’ origin place seems much easier to determine. As one scholar writes, “Jerusalem is clearly the place of authorship.” If you adhere to the idea that Chronicles was composed by the same author as Ezra and Nehemiah, whose title characters each labored in Jerusalem, placing Chronicles’ origins in Jerusalem is a natural conclusion.

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1. The author does not explicitly state his personal beliefs, but it seems apparent from the text and particularly the publisher.
2. As I supposed, since I had only read the first chapter.
3. Unless otherwise stated, I use the NIV.
As modern historians we cannot know with certainty when Chronicles was written. We are then left to look for clues and evidence that suggests approximate dates. After reviewing the evidence, Meyers believes Chronicles to have been written in the fourth century, a time when, “the concern with insularity was paramount in Judah.” However, this is not the only view. “Other scholars, who see the Chronicler as much more of a royalist, situate Chronicles within historical contexts characterized by renewed nationalism. For some, the late sixth century (the time in which the temple is rebuilt) holds the key to explaining the Chronicler’s emphasis on the Davidic promises, Solomon’s temple, and David’s ordering of its personnel.”

When we look inside the text for evidence, we can gain insight by looking at 1 Chr 3:17–24. If you assume the author recorded genealogy down until his time, “this genealogy of the sons of Jeconiah (= Jehoiachin, exiled in 597 B.C.E.) extends for six generations in the MT. . . . Depending on how many years one allows per generation, MT suggests a date between 400–350.”

Further textual evidence, found in 1 Chr 29:7, suggests a cap for dating Chronicles. “The mention of darics, a Persian coin not minted before 515 B.C.E., in the reign of Darius I, is here used anachronistically of contributions for the temple in the time of David.”

Place and Time of the Origin of Kings

Finding the date and time for Kings can be equally challenging. “The view associated with Frank Moore Cross and his students [is], namely, that Kings developed in two stages: the first major edition appeared during the reign of Josiah and was redacted and extended in a second edition during the exile.” So Kings, according to Cross, was first compiled about 600 B.C.E. and finished about 560 B.C.E.

The author of Kings has been called the Deuteronomist or Deuteronomistic Historian because of “telltale signs that indicate his adoption of Deuteronomic thought and its application in conceptualizing the history of Israel.” Much of the Deuteronomistic School’s work involved centralizing the cult at Jerusalem, so, without additional evidence, Jerusalem is a likely site for the first compilation of Kings.

6. Knoppers, 1 Chronicles, 104.
8. Klein, ABD 1:994.
10. Cogan, 1 Kings, 96.
Main Themes and Emphases of Chronicles

In Chronicles a number of themes recur. Chronicles ends with Cyrus’s decree to return and rebuild the temple.11 Additionally, the reigns of David and Solomon are a major theme. “The Chronicler devotes an extraordinary amount of attention to David and Solomon, and in fact treats the two of them in equal or parallel fashion.”12 Each receives unanimous approval to reign. This contradicts the account in Kings. The Chronicler notes how David and Solomon both interacted with the temple-building initiative. In Chronicles, “the work of David and Solomon centered on building the temple, with its completion appropriately noted in 2 Chronicles 8:16. . . . The two of them were concerned both with the ark and the temple. Their words and efforts gave legitimacy to the Jerusalem temple as the only appropriate worship site.”13

The Chronicler also focuses on Levites, including their roles at the Jerusalem temple. Sermons in Chronicles are often called Levitical sermons—by Von Rad, for example. Levite genealogies occur in 1 Chr 5:27–41; 6:1–15, and 16–32. Levitical cities are delineated in 1 Chr 23–26.14

Finally, retribution as a theme occurs repeatedly in Chronicles. “The Chronicler often interprets divine punishments or blessings as a retributive response to a king’s behavior. Rehoboam, for example, was attacked by Shishak I in his fifth year (1 Kgs 14:25–26) because he had forsaken the law of Yahweh the previous year (2 Chr 12:1). Asa became seriously ill in his old age (1 Kgs 15:23) because he had not relied on Yahweh in a war with Baasha and had imprisoned a prophet who rebuked him (2 Chr 16:7–10).”15

Main Themes and Emphases of Kings

As one reads Kings, main themes focused on by the Deuteronomist become discernable. Kings focuses on the conflict between the correct, divinely invested cult and the wrong, man-made cults. The most dramatic example of this conflict occurs on Mount Carmel, where Elijah challenges the priests of Baal to a contest of divine power between yhwh and Baal (1 Kgs 18:20–40). Another example of this reoccurring theme in Kings occurs with the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, especially attested in the speech of Rabshakeh (2 Kgs 18:19–25: 27–35). This conflict also explains why Josiah is so well received by the Deuteronomist: he centralized the worship of yhwh and took efforts to disengage worship of any other god.16

11. See Knoppers, 1 Chronicles, 137.
15. Klein, ABD 1:1000.
Another theme in Kings concerns prophecy. Having an interest in prophecy, “Dtr regularly noted fulfillment of the word of yhwh.” Further, Steve Holloway writes, “In contrast to the prophetic corpus in the Hebrew Bible, virtually every prophecy (by a true prophet) in Kings pointedly linked with its fulfillment in the realm of history.” This theme becomes all the more interesting to modern scholarship when Josiah is killed by Necho and when the Davidic line of rule is broken by Nebuchadnezzar.

Additionally, Cogan writes “the two pervasive themes of Kings, the sins of Jeroboam and the promise to David of an eternal dynasty, find their culmination in the actions of Josiah.”

Similarities between Kings and Chronicles

While much of scholarship (and this paper) concerns the differences between Kings and Chronicles, many similarities exist. This is due, in part, to homogenous subject matter. Knoppers suggests that “Chronicles complements and supplements the primary history, that is, Genesis through 2 Kings.” Further, the Chronicler would have had access to the Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy through 2 Kings) when he compiled his book. Additionally, although Auld and Ho disagree, “some passages in the Chronicler’s narration of Judahite history presuppose texts known from Kings dealing with the northern kingdom, even though the Chronicler does not include these texts within his own narration.”

From a theological standpoint, Kings and Chronicles are even more similar. Each pays specific attention to the Jerusalem temple and the worship of yhwh. Each lauds David and Solomon. Each carries a bias against the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Each is primarily didactic.

Differences between Kings and Chronicles

Kings, especially the second redaction, has a decidedly pessimistic view of Israelite/Judahite history. Only the slightest hint of optimism for the people of Yhwh is found. In the final lines of Kings, mention is made to Jehoiachin, the last, legitimate, Davidic ruler, being restored to a position of prominence while in exile by the Babylonian king Amel-Marduk. This may suggest hope

17. Cogan, 1 Kings, 98.
19. Cogan, 1 Kings, 97.
20. Knoppers, 1 Chronicles, 135.
22. Although, this admiration has limits within Kings.
23. Additionally, “Both works are profoundly concerned with the land—how Israel emerges in, consolidates its control over, and is finally expelled from the territory Yhwh gave it. The Primary history ends with Judah’s exile from the land, but the Chronicistic History supplements this earlier work by announcing the people’s return” (Knoppers, 1 Chronicles, 135).
for a return of the Davidic line to rule Judah. More so than Kings, Chronicles
maintains some optimism for the people of yhwh. The last lines of Chronicles
highlight Cyrus’s decree in which Jews are encouraged to return to Jerusalem to
build a temple to yhwh. Hope has been restored and permeates the Chronicler’s
work.

When comparing Kings and Chronicles historiographically, more differ-
ences emerge. Holloway argues, “More so than DTR, the Chronicler altered his
sources and introduced midrashim to ‘rectify’ his historical datum according
to the exigencies of his theological program.” Chronicles also includes more
specifics and details, including conversations, than found in Kings.

Main Differences in 1 Kings 15:1–25 and 2 Chronicles 13:1–17:1

Looking specifically at 1 Kgs 15:1–25 and 2 Chr 13:1–17:1, I see three main
areas of digression among the two histories. The first concerns Abijah’s treatment
in the histories. The second area of digression occurs when the two histories discuss
the reign of Asa’s, and specifically his reforms. The final divergence between the two
histories centers on Hanani’s rebuke of Asa. We will discuss each of these in turn.

2 Chronicles 13: 3–14:1: Abijah’s Reign

Kings dedicates only eight verses to Abijah’s reign, comparing Abijah
negatively with the nearly ideal David. The Chronicler, however, writes 23
verses, including an impassioned diatribe in which Abijah exhorts the army of
the northern kingdom to desist from attacking Judah’s army. The account pits
800,000 Israelite soldiers against a force of 400,000 Judahites. These numbers
are inflated for emphasis. While Kings comments about continuing hostilities
between north and south, the events of the battle and the speech are found
only in Chronicles. Kings recommends the “book of the annals of the kings
of Judah” (1 Kgs 15:7) to the reader for further accounts, while Chronicles
recommends “annotations of the prophet Iddo” (1 Chr 13:22). However, this
last difference may not be significant after all.

The difference between the passages could be attributed to the Chroni-
cler writing historical fiction or using additional sources. It is also possible the
didactic purpose of Kings was not directly served by the inclusion of the pas-
sage and thus was omitted. While we are unable to check the sources available
to the compilers of each history, looking at the apparent didactic themes and
purposes of each book does shed light on this divergence. The variant passage
in Chronicles shows a king who is wicked, by the Deuteronomist’s account,
triumphing in battle through providential intervention. Including this passage
in Kings would not teach that the kings who prosper are exclusively kings who
centralize worship and serve yhwh alone.

24. Holloway, ABD 4:79.
On the other hand, including this passage in Chronicles fits with one of the main themes of the Chronicler. Retribution, specifically divine retribution, is a main theme in Chronicles. Jeroboam, according to Abijah’s speech, committed a grave offense against God when he rebelled and set up competing shrines in Dan and Bethel. Despite Jeroboam’s superior army, God handed Jeroboam a crushing defeat. This defeated condition continued until his death (2 Chr 13:20).  

2 Chronicles 15:1–15: Asa’s Reform

While both Kings and Chronicles mention that Asa reformed the cultic worship in Judah towards a disavowal of Asherah and a renewed commitment to yhwh, only Chronicles highlights how Asa gained courage to enact his reform after hearing a prophesy from Azariah son of Oded (2 Chr 15:2–8). Similarly, only Chronicles records a large gathering of Judahites to Jerusalem where they renewed their covenantal relationship with yhwh and killed any and all who would not likewise covenant.

This variance between the Kings and Chronicles is less easily explained. Each book focuses on the temple and worship in Jerusalem. Each gives praise to Asa as having a heart like David’s. Perhaps the Deuteronomistic Historian figured the reader would have access to and consult “the book of the annals of the kings of Judah” (1 Kings 15:23), while the Chronicler felt that if he did not include the account, it would not be readily accessible to his audience. This argument, however, is tenuous.

2 Chronicles 16:7–10, 12: Hanani Rebukes Asa; Asa Afflicted

When Hanani rebukes Asa, he references Asa’s battle with the Cushites, which may in part explain the earlier inclusion of the battle in Chronicles but not Kings (see 2 Chr 14:9–15). Hanani declares that Asa sinfully relied on Ben-Hadad to save Judah rather than relying on yhwh. Asa responds poorly to the rebuke Hanani gave him and throws Hanani into prison. Asa later is struck with a severe foot disease.

The Chronicler likely included this passage to illustrate his theme of divine retribution. The Deuteronomist, however, had no incentive to include a passage where an otherwise admirable king sins against God. In Kings, the focus centers on worshipping yhwh and excluding other gods from the pantheon. This story would not directly support the theme in Kings, so it was deemed unnecessary.

It could easily be argued that one might ascribe some of the above diver-

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25. Additional variations occur in the texts but due to space constraints, I have omitted them. For example, in this section, Kings describes Maacah as the “daughter of Abishalom” (1 Kgs 15:2), while Chronicles describes Maacah as “a daughter of Uriel of Gibeah” (1 Chr 13:2).

26. See section on themes for Kings and Chronicles.
ences to disproportionate space constraints faced by the compilers. This is an especially valid argument for topics where one book, usually Kings, is silent. However, we have little evidence to support the claim that the compilers of Kings and Chronicles, who seem to have been connected to the ruling class (Josiah and Nehemiah, respectively), had significantly greater space constraints under Josiah's reign than under Nehemiah's governance.

The General Value of Chronicles as a Source

In evaluating historical sources, primary sources are preferred. In the case of Chronicles, it is compiled much after the majority events took place. Time duration between events and the record is vital in determining historical value of records. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C.E., and the literate class taken into exile, historical information and records (king lists, for example) were most likely lost. Since Chronicles was compiled after the fall of Jerusalem, its value as a historical source is lessened.

The Chronicler had access to Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zachariah, and the Deuteronomistic history. However, on a less positive note, Klein feels that the external sources mentioned in Chronicles are, in fact, sources from Deuteronomistic history that have been renamed. He doesn't believe the Chronicler had these sources available. While evidence exists for the Chronicler having additional source material, such as knowledge of Hezekiah's tunnel, none of these additional sources are explicitly named.27

When we keep in mind that "the Chronicler altered his sources and introduced midrashim to 'rectify' his historical datum," the overall value of Chronicles overall value as a historical source is lessened.28

The General Value of Kings as a Source

When compared with Chronicles, Kings gets slightly higher marks due to its earlier date of composition. Kings also relies on additional sources. The Deuteronomist explicitly mentions three sources utilized in compiling Kings: Book of the Deeds of Solomon (1 Kgs 11:41), Book of the Daily Deeds or Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs 14:19; 15:31; 16:5), and the Book of the Daily Deeds or Chronicles of the Kings of Judah (1 Kgs 14:29; 15:7).29 Additionally, the author must have had access to "prophetic tales and narratives and Temple records."30 These sources hint that they are close to what modern historians define as primary sources. Because the Deuteronomistic Historian used these sources, our using Kings as a source for modern historiography gains increased credibility.

29. See also Holloway, ABD 4:71.
30. Cogan, 1 Kings, 89.
However, less approving viewpoints exist. Holloway writes, “1 and 2 Kings is a theological history; it does not attempt to offer and objective or dispassionate reportage of the ‘facts.’ Its authors were primarily concerned with the didactic possibilities of the reigns of their kings for illustrating the interplay of the divine and human wills in light of the [audience.]”31

Regardless of the didactic intent of the Deuteronomist, historical kernels can still be gained from the text. For example, “generally speaking, the names and order of reigns of the monarchs of Israel and Judah in Kings are historically accurate.”32

Combined Value as Historical Sources

In assessing the combined value of Kings and Chronicles, we may benefit greatly from looking at these books from a relative perspective. Certainly, they do not in most instances qualify as primary sources under the modern historian’s definition. But with that point being made, without Kings and Chronicles, historical knowledge of ancient Israel would be pitiful. Modern historians would, at best, be able to piece together an incomplete skeleton of the events that took place in Palestine from 1200 B.C.E. to 586 B.C.E. The historical knowledge of earlier years would be especially sparse. So then, a modern historian is faced with a dilemma. Do we use Kings and Chronicles, flawed as they are, to provide a framework (or a more complete skeleton) to which we can attach material data and related ancient Near Eastern primary sources? Answers to this question run the full spectrum of choice. My opinion is that modern scholars should use these books with caution, leading them to correlate the data in Kings and Chronicles with external evidence wherever possible. With that said, I see moderate historical value in a Kings-Chronicles bundle.

Conclusion

More so than any other book, the Bible inspires its readers to learn more about its subject matter. This inspiration led me to spend a summer term in Israel, just as it leads students and scholars of the Bible to continually learn more and delve deeper. As we try to flesh out a skeleton of historical events in the Hebrew Bible, we are confronted with dilemmas. What of the “histories” is actually history in the modern, critical sense? In using Kings and Chronicles as historical sources, we should take care to note the differences in the two and reason out whether what we are reading is valuable to historiography. The books of Kings and Chronicles have historical value. Our challenge is to define it.

31. Holloway, ABD 4:79.
32. Holloway, ABD 4:80.