

# 1 & 2 CHRONICLES



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**A** first time reader wandering into 1 and 2 Chronicles unawares is more likely to flip hurriedly elsewhere than to linger. After all, what spiritual insight or personal guidance can possibly be gleaned from the convoluted family trees in 1 Chronicles 1–9? Should the reader come into these books in the midst of the stories of David (1 Chr 10–29), Solomon (2 Chr 1–9), or the kings of Judah (2 Chr 10–36), she or he is likely to wonder, “Haven’t I read this before?” Indeed, flipping back to the books of Samuel and Kings, this reader will discover that whole swaths of material in Chronicles are taken verbatim from those earlier historical books. Why, we might well ask, should we linger here—indeed, why are these plagiarized texts even in the Bible?

### *Chronicles’ Scope and Genre*

Similar concerns about the value of 1 and 2 Chronicles may be reflected in

the title given to these books in the Septuagint: *Paraleipomena*, meaning “things left out,” or perhaps even “left over!” But the early Christian teacher Jerome, who translated the Scriptures into Latin, had a very different perspective. Jerome said that these books contained “the meaning of the whole of sacred history.” Indeed, the genealogies that open 1 Chronicles begin with Adam (1 Chr 1:1), and follow the line of David down to Anani: seventh son of Elioenai in the seventh generation after the Babylonian exile, born in the fifth century B.C.E. (1 Chr 3:24). If we think of the books from Genesis through 2 Kings as the fundamental story line of the people Israel, then Chronicles presents a retelling of that story, for a particular audience at a particular time.

We know of other books like this from the ancient world. The Jewish historian Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* was a retelling of the biblical story of Israel, specifically for a Roman audience. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls

are found such books as Jubilees and the Genesis Apocryphon, which retell select stories from Genesis. Such texts are sometimes called “rewritten Bible.” Chronicles may well be the first book of this kind to be written (originally a single book in Hebrew, Chronicles was divided into two books in the Septuagint—a division reflected in both Jewish and Christian Bibles today). Rewritten Bible texts have in common the attempt to draw out of a revered tradition its core truths: to be, in a sense, more “biblical” than the Bible. They do not set out to replace their source texts—indeed, knowledge of the source text is generally assumed by these writers. Perhaps another way to put this is to refer to these retellings as Bible studies. The writers of Chronicles—call them the Chroniclers—come to the texts of Scripture just as we do, seeking guidance, insight, and transformation: seeking, in short, the word of God. That Chronicles itself in time became part of the canon is a witness to

the power and effectiveness the community of faith found in the Chroniclers' retelling of Israel's ancient story.

## ***The Date and Composition of Chronicles***

To understand the perspective from which Israel's past is retold in these books, we need to understand the community Chronicles addresses. Specific reference is made to Persia in the closing verses of 2 Chronicles (2 Chr 36:20, 22–23), making it clear that Chronicles was written in the Persian period: after the fall of Babylon and the end of the Babylonian exile, when Judah was reconstructing its culture as well as its villages. The mention of Anani, born around 445 B.C.E., tells us that the book was finished by the fifth century. However, Chronicles may have been written in stages, over a long period of time. As we will see, the temple and David's line are particular concerns of Chronicles. This suggests that work on

the Chroniclers' retelling of Israel's past may have begun in the sixth century: soon after the exile ended, when the rebuilding of the temple and the role of David's descendants in the new Judean society were important and controversial issues.

Since we have many of the sources used in Chronicles in hand (particularly, in our books of Samuel-Kings), another window into the mindset of this book's composers and audience may be through what Chronicles adds to or leaves out of the story. We need to tread carefully, though. Not every difference between our texts of Chronicles and of Samuel-Kings indicates a change the Chronicler has made. Intriguingly, Chronicles is often closer in reading to the Greek translation of those books than to the Hebrew. Evidence from among the Dead Sea fragments (especially a text of Samuel called 4QSam<sup>a</sup>) has confirmed that our Hebrew text of Samuel-Kings was not the only version, or even the best ver-

sion, available. The translators of the Septuagint and the authors of Chronicles used a different Hebrew text of Samuel-Kings than the one that has come down to us, which accounts for many of the differences between these texts.

Even so, some of the gaps are huge, and glaringly obvious. For example, Chronicles leaves out of the story of David the king's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah (2 Sam 11:1—12:25). The squabbling over succession (e.g., 2 Sam 13:1—20:22) is also left out; in Chronicles, David's heir is always, unquestionably, Solomon. In their account of Solomon's reign, the Chroniclers choose not to relate Solomon's use of Israelite forced labor (1 Kgs 5:13–14), or to discuss his many wives and the idolatrous temples Solomon built for them (1 Kgs 11:1–13). Little wonder that many have read Chronicles as a whitewash. However, this superficial conclusion doesn't really fit the

evidence. After all, Chronicles also skips over positive stories of David and Solomon (stories of David's early days in 1 Sam 16–30; stories illustrating Solomon's wisdom in 1 Kgs 3:16–28 and 4:29–34), and includes negative material (for example, David's census from 2 Sam 24:1–25 is retold in 1 Chr 21:1–27). Keep in mind as well that rewritten Bible texts presuppose knowledge of their sources. So, while Chronicles does not describe Solomon's sins, it assumes that its readers are aware of them. The “prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite,” who predicted that because of Solomon's idolatry, his son Rehoboam would lose control over the northern tribes, and only rule over the southern territory of Judah (1 Kgs 11:13–39), is mentioned twice in Chronicles (2 Chr 10:15 and 9:29). In short, the Chroniclers are not attempting to conceal the sins of David and Solomon; they just choose not to recount them.



The Chroniclers' selective use of their sources is most apparent in 2 Chronicles 10–36, where only the reigns of the Judean kings descended from David are recounted, and the kings of the northern kingdom are mostly ignored. Again, on the surface this could seem to indicate a negative bias against the north—and indeed, a great deal of 2 Chronicles is highly critical of the northern kingdom (e.g., 2 Chr 11:14–15; 13:8–12; 25:7). But on the other hand, the story of the divided kingdom in 2 Chronicles is bracketed by speeches calling the northern kingdom to repentance (2 Chr 13:4–12 and 30:6–9), and the Chroniclers do relate positive stories about northerners (e.g., 2 Chr 28:5–15; 30:10–27). Another reason must be found, then, for this focus on David's line.

## ***The Theology of Chronicles***

The net effect of the selective retelling of Israel's story in Chronicles

is to place emphasis upon the temple and its liturgy. In 1 Chronicles, David's first acts as king are to conquer Jerusalem (1 Chr 11:4–9), to bring into that city the Lord's footstool, the ark of the covenant, and to establish in Jerusalem a shrine dedicated to the Lord (1 Chr 13:1—16:43). His last act is to pass on to his son Solomon the design of the temple and the plan for its liturgy (1 Chr 28:11–19). David stands with Moses as a founder of Israel's worship; he is the author of Israel's liturgy, and the architect of Israel's temple. Similarly, of the nine chapters in 2 Chronicles that concern Solomon (2 Chr 1–9), six deal with the preparations for the temple (2 Chr 2:1–18), its construction (2 Chr 3:1—5:1), and its dedication (2 Chr 5:2—7:22). Solomon is the temple builder, putting into place the plans of his father David. By now, the reason for the Chroniclers' focus on the southern kingdom and the Davidic line is apparent. David's descendants are meant to be the guarantors of the

Jerusalem temple and its liturgy. Therefore, Judah's kings are either praised for supporting or renewing the temple and its liturgy, or condemned for acting faithlessly, and so bringing corruption and ruin to the temple. But beginning to end, it is worship that is the focus.

The theme of Chronicles is stated in David's warning to his son Solomon: "If you seek [the Lord], he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will abandon you forever" (1 Chr 28:9; see also 2 Chr 15:2). To "seek the Lord" means, in Chronicles, to worship before the Lord's temple (e.g., 1 Chr 16:11//Ps 105:4). However, guidance as to how one is to seek the Lord is to be sought in the Lord's word. In Chronicles, "the word of the Lord" refers always either to prophetic revelation (e.g., 1 Chr 11:3; 2 Chr 36:21) or to the words of Scripture, specifically the Law of Moses (1 Chr 15:15; 2 Chr 30:12; 34:21; 35:6). But since in the Chroniclers' view prophets write books (for example, Samuel, Nathan and Gad in 1 Chr

29:29; Iddo in 2 Chr 13:22; Isaiah in 2 Chr 26:22), and so may be seen as composers of Scripture, these two ideas may actually be one and the same. Significantly, the plan for the temple and its worship is also revealed to David as a written text (1 Chr 28:19). In Chronicles, the purpose of life is to seek God, in the words of Scripture and through worship. Only those who seek God can find God's will and purpose for their lives, and living accordingly, experience blessing. To ignore God's word is to ignore God, and cut oneself off from blessing.

## ***The Content of Chronicles***

This theme is worked out throughout the content of 1 and 2 Chronicles, beginning with the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1–9. The genealogies in Chronicles have a definite structure, which demonstrates the Chroniclers' purpose. 1 Chronicles 1:1—2:2 traces the line from Adam to

Israel's twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes, while 1 Chronicles 5:1—9:44 lists the genealogies of the tribes (apart from David's tribe, Judah). Between these two collections, in 1 Chronicles 2:3—4:23, is placed material related to Judah's line. The Davidic line comes in the middle of the Judah material (1 Chr 3:1–24), sandwiched between Judahite genealogical lists in 1 Chronicles 2:3–31 and 4:1–23. So, David and his line are the center and climax of the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1–9.

The genealogies also give special place to Levi (1 Chr 6:1–81; 9:2–24), devoting more attention to this priestly tribe than to any tribe other than Judah. The Levitical material in 1 Chronicles 6 falls into two parts. The first part, 1 Chronicles 6:1–53, deals with the three major Levitical groups in the service of Jerusalem's temple: the priests (1 Chr 6:1–15), the Levites (1 Chr 6:16–30), and the temple singers (1 Chr 6:31–48). Each group is traced all the way back to

Levi; however, 1 Chronicles 23:3—26:32 ascribes the assignment of these groups to service in the temple to David. The second part, 1 Chronicles 6:54–81, lists the Levitical cities and towns scattered throughout the territories possessed by the other tribes. 1 Chronicles 9:2–34, an appendix to the tribal genealogies, describes the priests and Levitical families who returned to Jerusalem after the exile (this list also appears, with minor variations, in Neh 11:4–19). Its placement here, in the opening section of Chronicles, prefigures the eventual reestablishment of the temple and its worship following the disaster of exile. Like the Davidic genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3, the list of returnees also provides a connection with the “present day” of the Chroniclers’ own community in the Persian period.

Chronicles presents David’s story in three great movements. Following a prologue that depicts the death of Saul (1 Chr 10:1–14), the first act (1 Chr

11:1—12:40) tells of how David was proclaimed king by all the tribes of Israel. Supported by “a great army, like an army of God” (1 Chr 12:22), he conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital.

In the second act (1 Chr 13:1—21:30), the accomplishments and failures of David’s reign are described. As is appropriate for the author of Jerusalem’s liturgy, David’s first and greatest act was to bring the sacred ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chr 13:1—16:43). David’s victories in war and successes at home demonstrate that God’s blessing rests on him. Indeed, God promised to preserve David’s line forever (1 Chr 17:1–15). The promise was threatened by David’s sin, when in his pride he undertook a census of all Israel (1 Chr 21:1–30). But good came from David’s evil: the threshing-floor of Ornan, where David set up an altar and offered sacrifices to avert God’s wrath, was revealed as the future site of God’s temple (1 Chr 22:1). In his repentance

as in his faithfulness, David is a model for the Chroniclers' community.

The final act of David's story (1 Chronicles 22:1—29:30) focuses on the temple that David's son Solomon would build. David assembled the materials needed for the temple's construction, and the personnel needed for its maintenance and liturgy. Then, bequeathing to Solomon both the plans for the temple and the throne of his kingdom, David died in peace and security.

Solomon's story also unfolds in three acts. Second Chronicles begins with an account of his accession to the throne (2 Chr 1:1–17). Solomon's first act as king was an act of worship: he offered a thousand sacrifices to the Lord on the ancient bronze altar of Bezalel at Gibeon. There, in response to Solomon's prayer, God granted the king wisdom and knowledge, as well as promising material blessings. A brief description of Solomon's wealth and power demonstrates that God's promise was kept, and confirms that Solomon



had both the means and the authority to build a temple for the Lord.

The second, and major, section of Solomon's story concerns the temple. Solomon's building preparations, including negotiations with Hiram of Tyre, are found in 2 Chronicles 2:1–18. Then, the actual building of the temple and its description follows in 2 Chronicles 3:1—5:1. Finally, in 2 Chronicles 5:2—7:22, the ark of the covenant is carried into the completed structure, and the temple is dedicated.

Only after describing Solomon's temple do the Chroniclers consider Solomon's reign (2 Chr 8:1—9:31). The king's other construction projects (including his palace), his military accomplishments, his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, his piety, and his successes in commerce and diplomacy are all briefly described. Greater attention is paid to the visit of the queen of Sheba (2 Chr 9:1–12), perhaps because this visit demonstrated the extent of Solomon's fame, as well as his

legendary wisdom. Finally, Chronicles returns to the matter of Solomon's great wealth, which was raised at the beginning of his account (2 Chr 9:13–28), and winds up the story with Solomon's death (2 Chr 9:29–31).

The reigns of Judah's kings, from Rehoboam (2 Chr 10:1—12:16) through Zedekiah (2 Chr 36:11–21), are described following the pattern set by the depiction of David and Solomon. Although attention is paid to the historical circumstances of each king's rule, including political accomplishments and military victories and setbacks, the true focus of the narrative remains theological rather than historical. Those who heed the divine word expressed in Scripture and through the prophets, and demonstrate their faithfulness by support for David's liturgy and Solomon's temple, and are blessed. This is particularly true of the four great reforming kings in Chronicles, Asa (2 Chr 14:1—16:14), Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 17:1—20:37), Hezekiah (2 Chr 29:1—

32:33), and Josiah (2 Chr 34:1—35:27). Faithlessness, shown by rejection of the divine word, corruption of the liturgy, and defilement of the temple, leads to curse. This is particularly apparent in the Chroniclers' account of Judah's last four kings, Jehoahaz (2 Chr 36:1–4), Jehoiakim (2 Chr 36:5–8), Jehoiachin (2 Chr 36:9–10), and Zedekiah (2 Chr 36:11–21), all of whom die in exile, and whose people finally follow them into exile and destruction.

Looking back on Israel's past from the perspective of the Persian-period restoration of Judah, the Chroniclers' community saw itself reflected in that ancient narrative. Like David, they found themselves seeking order and stability after years of chaos. Like Solomon, they had (re)built the temple and (re)established the liturgy God revealed to David. Like the great reforming kings, they were attempting to recover what had been lost, but like the faithless figures of Israel's past, they were tempted to surrender to anomie

and despair. The Chroniclers' retelling of Israel's ancient story, then, turned out to be their own story, as it may turn out to be ours. Chronicles still challenges God's people to discover the "meaning of the whole of sacred history." In worship and the study of Scripture, may we as well "seek the Lord," and so find blessing.



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