

CHRONICLES: NOT JUST A REPEAT

How Did God View Israel's History?

by **BibleProject Team**

Okay friends, it is about time we discussed those two books in the Bible you may have been avoiding. Or maybe you never really noticed they were in the Bible in the first place? We're talking about the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles.

I admit that starting any book with nine chapters of genealogies (1 Chron. 1-9) isn't the best way to grab a modern reader's attention. However, once you understand how 1-2 Chronicles are a work of literary genius that's in conversation with the rest of the Old Testament, you'll come to see these books as one of the many gems in the Bible.

A New Lens

The story begins with page one of the Bible: the first word of 1 Chronicles is "Adam." From there, the Chronicler has woven the entire story of Abraham's family leading up to David and beyond into a series of elaborately arranged genealogies.

For ancient Israelite readers, these genealogies weren't just a matter of family lines but a shorthand way of retelling the stories of all these characters in an annotated form. These names would have provoked whole memories of earlier scriptural stories. The genealogies were meant to activate all kinds of mental links and collective stories deeply ingrained in Hebrew culture. After reading through the genealogies, readers come to the very brief story of Saul's reign and failure as a king (1 Chron. 10). Then we quickly move on to King David (1 Chron. 11-29), which retells the stories from 2 Samuel. You might even come to appreciate these genealogies. They are the introduction to a retelling of Israel's entire story, focusing on the future hope of a messianic king like David, who will restore the temple and God's kingdom over the nations.

The book of Chronicles, composed as one unified literary work, was produced by an anonymous author living in Jerusalem more than 200 years after the return from exile. Look at the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3:1-24; this takes you six generations after the return from the exile that took place in the 530s B.C.E. Bible scholars refer to this author as "the Chronicler," which is a pretty awesome title!

1 and 2 Chronicles is in large part a retelling of the story you read in the books of 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. This is why the books often get overlooked, as readers assume it is just a repeat of what they already read. But this book is way, way more! The Chronicler was living at a time when the Jewish people had long resettled in Jerusalem after returning from the Babylonian exile. Things were okay (read Ezra-Nehemiah or Malachi for a flavor of daily life in this period), but there was a growing awareness that God's ancient covenant promises to Abraham, Moses, and David, which were reaffirmed by the prophets, had not yet come to pass. They awaited a messianic king of Isaiah who would rebuild the temple and invite all the nations into God's kingdom (see Isaiah chapters 2, 9, 11, and 60 for an overview). But where was this new David?

Reshaping a Story

One of the main goals of the Chronicler was to reshape the stories of Israel's past to rekindle hope for the future. He had before him most of the books of the Old Testament (if you pay attention he's adopted material from the Torah, Joshua-Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Psalms, Proverbs, and more!), and he retells the stories of David and Israel's kings in a way that turns them into models and portraits of the future king they hope for. The book of Chronicles is kind of like the *Reader's Digest* of the Old Testament. This author has reflected on the Scriptures and offers an interpretation of Israel's past that highlights their future hope. These books were designed to sustain the hopes and prayers of God's people as they wait for God to fulfill his ancient promises.

Resist your desire to skip this part because you've already read the version in 2 Samuel. A surface reading of these books just won't give readers an awareness of the Chronicler's genius in editing and compiling his work. You have to go deeper and compare the stories in Chronicles with his sources, especially 2 Samuel. When you compare carefully, you'll find all kinds of stories about David in 2 Samuel that the Chronicler has omitted, and all kinds of new stories that the Chronicler has included. And what is the result?

In 1-2 Samuel, we saw the rise of David as the underdog who bests the giant Goliath, outwits his adversaries, and unifies the people. David is presented as a king after God's own heart who sings his praises, has crazy dance fits for the Lord without regard for his own dignity, and is an all around upstanding man and king. Well, except for his adulterous scandal that resulted in murder (see 2 Sam. 11-12). Oh yeah, and the stories of his homicidal, sex-crazed children who perform heinous acts of abuse and murder (see 2 Sam. 13-20). Upon reflection, the story of David shows us a mixed-bag kind of king. First and Second Samuel present us with a portrait of David that was constantly fleeing powerful adversaries like Saul (1 Sam. 21-26) and his own son Absalom (2 Sam.



BibleProject

15-18), resolving to hide in the hills of the Judean wilderness. We also saw the weakness of David's character when he ordered his successor to assassinate both his political opponents, and those who created more tension than was desirable during David's tumultuous years of struggle (1 Kings 1:2).

That's our first clue. Almost all of these stories in 1-2 Samuel that portray David as weak and morally flawed are missing from Chronicles. It's like the Chronicler purposely chose not to add the messy stuff. Which raises the question: Why?

Let's eliminate one possible interpretation: that the Chronicler was whitewashing David's story and denying that David was a flawed human being. He knows perfectly well that anyone can read the version of David's story that portrays him as a mix of good and evil.

The Great Chronicler

The Chronicler is doing something else. He is using all of the best moments in David's story and creating a "literary portrait" of a "greater than David." The Chronicler had also read and pondered the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, who pointed towards a "new David." That is, a future king from David's line who would be the kind of ruler that Israel's monarchy never quite lived up to. Even historical David was not the ideal king, but he was a good start. Good enough that the Chronicler adapts the past portrait of David to become an image of the future, hoped-for David that Israel was still waiting for after the exile.

In this way, the Chronicler is acting as the first commentary on the Old Testament. He's offering us a prophetic interpretation of Israel's history that is meant to guide the reader's attention forward to the hope of a coming king who will restore order and pursue the Lord as David once did, at least mostly. In other words, 1-2 Chronicles are a "prophetic work." That is, they represent God's point of view on Israel's past, and announce that exile and disappointment is not the end of the story. This author is offering the same prophetic hope we find in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and in the rest of the prophets.

But the Chronicler is not only in the business of omitting material from the earlier stories of David and his descendants. He also adds to them. He had access to all kinds of traditions and archival materials that told stories about David and Israel's kings that you do not find in 2 Samuel through 2 Kings. In David's story alone, there are seven chapters of new material in Chronicles that work to further paint the portrait of David as an ideal king (1 Chronicles 15-16, 22-29). For example, we discover that although David did not oversee the building of the temple, he did begin the planning and resourced building processes. He's even portrayed as a "new Moses." The Chronicler tells us that he received the blueprints for the Jerusalem temple as a "pattern" shown him by God (see 1 Chronicles 28:11-12), just as Moses was shown the "pattern" for building the tabernacle in the wilderness (see Ex. 25:9, 25:40).

This use of David as an image of the future hope extends to the portrait of Solomon presented in Chronicles (see 2 Chronicles 1-9). The Chronicler includes more stories about Solomon's failures than he did for David. However, he also added new material to Solomon's story to make him a figure of future hope for those living centuries after the return from exile. Take for example this completely new portion of Solomon's temple blessing presented in Chronicles.

If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among my people, and my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer offered in this place. For now, I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever, and my eyes and my heart will be there perpetually.

The Chronicler is making a new presentation of old material in a way that speaks greater volumes to the audience during the post-exilic period. These words from Solomon, therefore, are reaching across the boundaries of time to pull readers back to the covenant and create expectant hope in the Day of the Lord's mercy.

Chronicles functions as both a commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures and as a theological statement in its own right. So what does that mean for us?

Not the End of Israel's Story

The book of Chronicles is a journey through the entire Old Testament that makes crystal clear that the story isn't over. We've looked at just a few examples and details. Every page is brimming with more evidence of the future prophetic angle of 1-2 Chronicles.

And this wasn't just cool theology for the Chronicler. The book's message has a pastoral purpose: to bring comfort and hope to generations of God's people who were tempted towards despair or apathy. During a time when many wondered if God was ever going to fulfill his promises, the Chronicler retold the story of their collective past in order to rekindle hope for the future. As you read and ponder these retold stories, may you find your own faith and hope reignited as we still await the return of the world's true king.