

CHRONICLES: THE SENSE OF AN ENDING: WHAT IS THE REAL LAST BOOK OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

A Book With History, Poetry, Narrative, and Hope

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Bible Project's mission is to show how the Bible is one unified story that leads to Jesus. Sometimes this means that we have to tackle topics that may come as a surprise to our audience. This week, we are addressing a question that many of you may already be clued in on, but many will not. Ready for it? The Old Testament didn't originally conclude with the book of Malachi. (What? Say that again?) Turn to any Bible you have right now and look at the table of contents. The last book in the Old Testament is definitely Malachi, but I'll explain more.

Time Warp

Okay. While this is true of your Bible, this has not always been the case, and it certainly wasn't in Jesus' time. Here's what I mean. The Bible that Jesus was familiar with, what we now refer to as the Old Testament, did not end with Malachi. In fact, it wasn't even a single volume book. Rather, it was a collection of separate scrolls that were made to be read as a unified collection, and the book designed as the concluding crown jewel was Chronicles! Your favorite books of the Bible, I'm sure.

Now I'm not saying that there was anything inherently wrong with the decision to re-order the books with a new name, "the Old Testament." In fact, we don't even know precisely when this change happened. Our earliest manuscripts with the order of the modern Bible are in Christian manuscripts dating to the mid-300s B.C.E. However, this original design shape of the Hebrew scrolls was never lost in Jewish tradition up to this day. So it's more than likely that the re-ordering was done by Christians who were no longer familiar with the Bible in Hebrew, and had therefore lost touch with its original design shape.

This is too bad because when you read the Old Testament in its traditional order, the storyline shows a remarkable unity that doesn't quite come through in the order most Christians are accustomed to. For example, let's say you muster up the energy to read the Bible from Genesis chapter one through the historical books. You'll eventually come to 2 Kings 25 (last chapter in Kings), where one of Judah's kings, Jehoiachin, is released from prison. Then you turn the page to 1 Chronicles 1 and discover nine chapters of genealogies copied from Genesis, followed by a repeat of the stories of David and Solomon that you just read in Samuel and Kings. And you say to yourself, "Great, I've already covered all of this!" So if someone's behind on their Bible reading plan, Chronicles is the point where they can catch up again because, seriously, do we need to read all that again? But this raises an important question: Why are Chronicles in the Old Testament at all?

The TaNaK

It may be a surprise to find out that the two books of Chronicles were originally one scroll, simply called Chronicles. And the book was placed at the end of the traditional Hebrew canon. The Hebrew canon refers to the collection of Hebrew (and some Aramaic) books that were recognized as Scripture in ancient Israel. The traditional order that we've been talking about has been referred to as "TaNaK." The TaNaK is an acronym for the names of the three large subcollections of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*.

Torah, often referred to as "The Torah," "Pentateuch," or the "first five books of Moses," is directly translated as "law" or "instruction."

Nevi'im means "prophets," and this section was traditionally split into two groups, the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel - 2 Kings) and the latter prophets (Isaiah - Malachi). In Christian tradition, the former prophets are thought of as the "historical" books, and the latter prophets are categorized as the major and minor prophets.

Ketuvim means "writings," and this subcollection includes the rest of the Old Testament, everything from Daniel to Esther, from Proverbs to Job, and more. It is here, nestled at the end of the *Ketuvim*, that we see Chronicles wrap up the Hebrew canon.

What About Malachi?

First, let's take a look at Malachi. Why did this book eventually get adopted as the conclusion of the Christian Old Testament? It actually makes a lot of sense. Through the prophet Malachi, the God of Israel exposes just how corrupt the post-exilic generations have become after returning from Babylon. The general picture we get from the book is that the long years of Israel's exile did not fundamentally change the hearts of the people. They're still in rebellion against



God, the temple is corrupted, and the reader is left waiting for some kind of resolution. And that's exactly what Malachi announces. The Day of the Lord is coming to purify Israel from all moral compromise and evil, so that a faithful remnant can emerge out of the other side. While the tone of the book is kind of a downer, it ends with a hopeful note that God will come one day to sort everything out. And that final, hopeful note is precisely what makes Malachi a great ending to the Christian Old Testament. But remember, it's not the original ending.

Why Chronicles?

Contrast Malachi with Chronicles, which is placed at the end of the Hebrew canon. This book, which is mostly narrative with genealogy and poetry mixed in, leaves a different impression. Chronicles opens with introductory genealogies that recap the entire biblical storyline from Adam all the way to the post-exile generation. The emphasis of Chronicles is to foster hope in God's promise to David for a new king and a new Jerusalem, which will become a dwelling place for the divine glory along with a new, restored Israel. From here, the book moves on to recount the story of the kings of Jerusalem. Again, the focus is on David and God's covenant promise of the seed that would come through his line. This promised king would build a new temple and reign over Israel and the nations. As you read about every descendant of David, all of them fail, but there are a handful of bright-spot characters (Hezekiah and Josiah, for example) who succeed more than they fail. For the Chronicler, these narratives about the past kings from David's line serve as a prophetic pointer to what the future promised king will be like, only better!

When you read the last portion of the scroll of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 36), you'll notice a bit of a time warp, to the tune of 70 years! 2 Chronicles 36:21 says,

"This fulfilled the word of the Lord through Jeremiah, and the land enjoyed its Sabbath rest all the days of the desolation until seventy years were fulfilled."

This is referring to the exile by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar (the reference is to Jeremiah 25

Jeremiah 25). Jump to the next verse (and skip 70 years) in 2 Chronicles 36:22, "In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia..." It's here where we read that the Persian King Cyrus is letting the Israelites return home. By skipping the period of the exile, the Chronicler highlights that the exile was 70 years long. This raises the question: does this number hold significance? Could it possibly be related to why the people were in exile to begin with?

It's All About the Sevens

God's original desire for his people and their land was for their lives to revolve around rest. Over the course of the time, from David up until the exile, the land the Lord gave as an inheritance to his people should have received a total of seventy Sabbath years (you can read all about this in Leviticus 25). Why seventy? The Jewish calendar was set up in sequences of sevens. Every seven days, there was to be rest in the land. Every seven years, there was to be a year of release, where a mini-restoration took place. After seven of these seven-year cycles occurred, there was to be a year of Jubilee, the major release year when all sold land was restored to the original owners, when slaves were freed, and celebrations abounded! These cycles were symbolic festivals that retold the exodus story and commemorated how the Lord brought his people out of captivity as slaves and introduced joy back into their lives. However, if you recall from reading Chronicles, the kings of Israel and Judah did not observe any of these Sabbath celebrations, rendering the land in dire need of rest, the way the Lord intended. The author wants us to view the seventy years of Babylonian exile as a repayment for all of the ignored Jubilee years throughout Israel's history. If you can do the math, seventy times seven years of ignored Sabbath-Jubilees equals 490 years! And if you go back and carefully track the chronology of Chronicles from the reign of David to the exile, guess what? It adds up to 490 years!

So, in the Chronicler's mind, those lost Sabbath-Jubilee years, seventy in total, were being made up for all at once through the exile. Let's follow that logic. If Israel's negligence and failure lasted 490 years, resulting in seventy years of exile, then surely Israel's restoration would be matched by something of equal or greater proportions, a whole new cycle of Sabbath-Jubilee celebration! Keep reading in 2 Chronicles 36:22 The expectation of this new cycle has to be connected with the main themes from the rest of the book, the hope for a promised king reigning over the new Jerusalem. And, lo and behold, what do we read about in the final sentence of 2 Chronicles? The Persian king Cyrus ordered that someone go to Jerusalem, someone "whose God is with him," so that this person can rebuild the new temple, "and let him go up... ."

70 x 7

If you're reading 2 Chronicles in Hebrew (which most of us aren't, so it helps to have someone tell us what's going on!), it's crystal clear that Cyrus' decree ends with an incomplete sentence: "and let him go up... ." It's not incomplete in English, but it is in Hebrew, which raises the question: Was this a mistake? No way.

To understand what's happening with the incomplete sentence at the end of the TaNaK, let's jump to Daniel 9, Daniel is sitting in Babylon reading the scroll of Jeremiah, which announced the seventy-year exile. From where

Daniel sat, those seventy years were almost at their end, and he ponders when Israel will be restored. While he is praying, an angel appears to him (Daniel 9:21) and tells him that Israel's sin, even after seventy years, hasn't been adequately dealt with. So just as the Israelites took 490 years to break the covenant, there will be a corresponding seventy times seven years to restore the covenant. The exile's punishment is not over; another 490 years are necessary before the messianic kingdom of God will come.

Now back to 2 Chronicles 36. The question remains as to why Chronicles—and the Hebrew canon—ends with the incomplete decree from Cyrus. When the formation of the canon took place, the compiler placed Cyrus' decree at the end of Chronicles to remind us that the promise to David of the messianic king was not fulfilled when many Israelites returned after seventy years (the story's told in Ezra-Nehemiah). Rather, there will be another seventy sevens, that is, another super-Jubilee cycle. The unfinished sentence of Cyrus' decree functions as a hyperlink that says, "go read Daniel 9," and when we make the connection, it's clear that Israel still has another round of exile ahead of them before the real kingdom of God comes.

Is your head spinning yet? Take a deep breath because the numbers game is about to get real. If you put together all of these numbers we've been considering, you get the following: 490 years of Israel's disobedience, seventy years of exile in Babylon, and now another 490 years of a new kind of "exile," that is, Israel suffering under an oppressive foreign rule. The fulfillment of the real Jubilee will come after the second installment of the exile. But why must there be another round of seventy times seven? Let's remember Daniel 9. It's because Israel's sin is still ongoing. There was still covenant unfaithfulness in the post-exilic community, further affirming the need for their Messiah! Exile did not purify the hearts of the people as Malachi promised. They needed a rescuing from a problem deeper than outward exile. The Chronicler lives among this "still-in-exile" community, and he composed this book to help God's people understand their true situation. Through these ancient texts, he was able to paint a picture of the future hope for which they were waiting and had not yet seen.

Exile Didn't End in Babylon

So the return from exile under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah didn't solve the people's problems. The decree from Cyrus is incomplete because the authors of the TaNaK were still waiting for a real return from exile and the coming of the Messianic kingdom of God. God's people need a deliverer from a deeper kind of exile than simply being ruled by Babylon. In Chronicles, the literal exile has become an image of Israel's ongoing "spiritual" exile, their slavery to evil and sin and their inability to obey the Torah. This is all representative of the human condition: home and yet not home until the kingdom of God comes. The Chronicler, and the people, are anxiously awaiting this day.

Jesus and Chronicles

This is the package deal we get when our Old Testament concludes with Chronicles! Hope, return, surprise, longing, and anticipation. We finish Chronicles with reassuring anticipation for a king from the line of David to bring about the true return from exile. He's the one who will build the new dwelling place for his people and deal with humanity's sin. The end of Chronicles and all that comes with it is yet another way that Christians can see how the Old Testament points forward to Jesus, what he said, and what he did. In John 5:39, Jesus says, "You pore over the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, and yet they testify about me."

Jesus knew he was the fulfillment of Chronicles. What's even more beautiful is that when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:17-2, He reads,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus is tuned into all of these core themes in the TaNaK! He identifies that he is the one to bring about the new Jubilee. Chronicles presents the hope of a promised king from the line of David (ever wonder why Matthew opens with a genealogy? Hint: it's a continuation of 1 Chronicles chs. 1-9). He is to bring about the true freedom from exile, and in the New Testament, we see that the king and redeemer we were waiting for is Jesus! The Scriptures are about him; he was steeped in them, and he came to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). We hope this reinvigorates your desire to take a renewed look at Chronicles because it isn't just a weird rehashing of everything that came before; it's a beautiful picture of everything that was yet to come, before the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus.