

The Purpose and Methods of the Chronicler

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The Books of Chronicles are among the more neglected of the Old Testament Scriptures. They have a rival in the Books of Samuel and Kings, and the interested reader and the historian alike agree that the latter have the greater appeal and value, since they are more vividly and compellingly written, and are moreover of earlier date. The ordinary reader finds little value or interest in the lengthy lists of names and wealth of cultic description in Chronicles; while the academic student since Wellhausen's time has had certain, sometimes grave, doubts whether these 'historical' books have any historical value.

But the neglect of Chronicles in academic circles has been no more than relative. A considerable amount has been written about the various problems posed by the books; and it is remarkable how little agreement scholars have exhibited. The dating of Chronicles veers between 250 B.C. (Pfeiffer) and Ezra's own lifetime (Albright); while Welch has placed the original draft of Chronicles as early as the sixth century. There is general agreement that the two books form a unity with Ezra-Nehemiah; but Welch and Young (for very different reasons) have disputed this. The internal unity of Chronicles has also been called in question; the older view that 1 and 2 Chronicles, at least, were homogeneous was seriously attacked in 1927, and since Welch's Schweich Lectures in 1938 many incline to think with him that there are at least two hands discernible. At the present time, majority opinion would at any rate detach 1 Chronicles i-ix from the remainder of the work.

The number and nature of the Chronicler's sources, especially those he himself named, have been much discussed. Clearly he used Samuel-Kings (though probably not exactly our recension of them), often quoting verbatim; but what else did he utilise? The Chronicler's nomenclature of other works itself raises problems; and in some quarters there has been considerable scepticism about all but his canonical sources. However, it is now made certain by archaeological evidence that he must have had some sources available to him, whatever they were. Our difficulties are caused by the fact that, of the documents he used, only the canonical material is now extant.

As for the historical value of Chronicles, Pfeiffer could still write, less than twenty years ago, 'it is an error to consider the Chronicler as a

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writer of history. It is futile to inquire seriously into the reality of any story or incident not taken bodily from Samuel or Kings. His own contribution should be classed... as historical fiction' (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 806). But long before the second World War the critical pendulum was beginning to swing away from such thoroughgoing scepticism as this. The general attitude of today is well expressed by Rowley: 'There is a certain idealizing of history. Nevertheless the Chronicler had access to sources not elsewhere preserved in the Old Testament, and where his particular interests are not concerned, it is probable that we may find some reliable... material' (*The Growth of the Old Testament*, pp. 163 f.). Albright would go much further than this, and on more objective grounds: 'Every pertinent find has increased the evidence... for the care with which the Chronicler excerpted and compiled from

older books, documents and oral traditions which were at his disposal' (*The Biblical Archaeologist*, v (1942), p.53). Unfortunately, pertinent finds are rare, and for much of the Chronicler's work there is no confirmation as yet. But in view of such archaeological evidence, Bright in his *History of Israel* has treated the Chronicler with respect, assessing each item of information from him on its merits; and time and time again the conclusion is that the balance of probability supports the Chronicler's accuracy. Such may be the trend of opinion; but not all would share the faith in the Chronicler exhibited by the Albright school. It is certain that there is among scholars considerable difference of opinion in detail as to what is fact and what fiction in the Books of Chronicles.

But of all the problems of Chronicles, probably the one which has received the widest variety of proposed solutions is the question of the writer's purpose. To name but two suggestions, there is the anti-Samaritan-polemic hypothesis of Torrey, and the pro-Levite-propaganda theory of Pfeiffer (who goes so far as to suggest that the Chronicler was threatening that the Levites would go on strike unless their conditions of service improved!). The weakness of both of these theories is that they entail so much reading between the lines. Torrey, for example, speaks of a 'half-concealed polemic', remarking that the Chronicler, was of course much too shrewd... to introduce into his history any open polemic against the Samaritans' (*American Journal of Semitic-Languages and Literatures*, xxv (1909), p. 200). The polemic is more than half-concealed, one feels; and it is by no means self-evident, despite Torrey's 'of course', why it required concealment at all. Nobody would suggest that the Chronicler approved of the schismatic worship

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of the north; but the evidence suggests that he was ignoring the Samaritan cultus rather than attacking it. As for Pfeiffer's proposition, none can deny that the Chronicler was very interested in the Levites (and the view that he himself was a Levite has much to commend it); but it may be doubted whether a blatantly un-historical portrayal of the Levites and their status would have had much value or effect as propaganda. It seems that both Torrey and Pfeiffer may have confused the Chronicler's interests and presuppositions, on the one hand, with his purpose and aims on the other. There is virtual unanimity between scholars about his interests—the cult, the theocracy, and the house of David. But was his aim to bolster up belief in, or support for, any of these; or do these recurrent themes simply indicate which historical aspects most appealed to him?

While the quest for a biblical writer's purpose is an important and profitable study, there does exist the danger of overlooking the obvious. Concerning the Chronicler in particular, the quest for his purpose is often based on the premise that he was no historian (cf. the quotation from Pfeiffer, above). If he was writing historical fiction, clearly he must have had some justification for it, and felt it would serve some purpose. Thus we find ourselves returning to the question of historicity. Did the Chronicler himself think he was a historian? Or was he consciously a propagandist, disinterested in historical truth? Some analysis of his work is essential, not only in order to ascertain the historical value of it for us, but also to gain some insight into the writer's mind and outlook. Why is it that he is not generally viewed as a reliable historian?

Some of the charges of inaccuracy brought against the Chronicler are relatively trivial—for instance, the fact that his battle scenes appear rather unrealistic and idealised. The chief problems are the figures he records, which are at times impossibly high, and moreover at

variance with those of Samuel-Kings sometimes; the fact that a number of unsupported stories of the Chronicler fit his philosophy so remarkably that they could well be inventions to lend support to that philosophy; thirdly, that there are occasions (not frequent, admittedly) where it is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile Chronicles with Samuel-Kings; and finally that his cultic description seems totally anachronistic.

Many writers have treated the numerical issue as paramount, and taken it by itself as proving conclusively that the Chronicler was careless of historical truth. But the matter is not so simple, as is made clear by some very pertinent remarks by H. L. Ellison (in the *New Bible Commentary*) and E. J. Young (*Introduction to the Old Testament*). The numbers

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found in Chronicles are not uniformly higher than those of Samuel-Kings; they are not invariably astronomical; and here and there they seem to be based on sources not utilised by the earlier account. 2 Chronicles xxi. 5 (compared with 2 Sam. xxiv. 9) will serve as a good illustration of these three facts. However the figures are to be explained, a charge of gross exaggeration does not cover all the facts. In view of the frequent differences in spelling of names between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, one feels that the strong probability of errors in transmission must be taken into account. That the numbers in Chronicles present problems is undeniable; but the relevance of these problems to the question of historicity is uncertain.

It is also unsafe to assume that because the Chronicler had a clearly discernible motive for telling some story he must therefore have invented it. It is evident that he included the report of Manasseh's misadventure and subsequent repentance to prove a point, i.e. the doctrine of divine retribution and reward; but that in itself does not prove the tale to be a fiction. To this day, historians select material that is likely to support their theses; the invention of suitable material is a rarer phenomenon. If, then, we approach each unsupported story of the Chronicler with this sole criterion, whether or not his motive for including it is transparently clear, we shall have no way of telling what is selected and what invented material. Archaeology may yet provide some answers; the criterion of historical probability may be utilised; but we have not always adequate criteria on which to assess the record, and it is therefore vital that some assessment of the Chronicler himself be undertaken. If he counted himself a historian, and if he had regard for historical verity, then we may well find his writings valuable and generally reliable records; but if on the other hand he was heedless of historical accuracy, then of course we may brush his unsupported statements aside as quite untrustworthy.

Three pertinent questions about the Chronicler suggest themselves: what exactly was his attitude to sources; did he hope to supersede Samuel-Kings; and what was his attitude towards historical truth?

It is none too clear how many separate sources the Chronicler names. He alludes to Samuel-Kings under several titles; and indeed Wellhausen concluded that by all his references to sources he meant the same, single work. But an examination of such references indicates that at least the 'Acts of Uzziah' (2 Chron. xxvi. 22) and the 'Chronicles of the Kings of Israel' (2 Chron. xxxiii. 18) can have been no part of Samuel-Kings. Torrey and Pfeiffer, however, contended that the Chronicler 'invented'

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sources; they were particularly suspicious of his 'Commentary on the Book of the Kings' (2 Chron. xxiv. 27). But there is no logical reason why the Chronicler should have used at least one source (i.e. Samuel-Kings, or its component parts) with extreme care, frequently quoting verbatim, and at the same time invented others. Whatever we make of the Chronicler, we must presume that he was at least consistent. Furthermore, there is no logical reason why he should have needed to invent sources at all. It is sometimes suggested that he referred to non-existent sources in order to lend verisimilitude to his 'history'. But his use of references to other works does not support this thesis, which assumes that by them the Chronicler means 'My material comes from X', or even, 'If you don't believe me, see X'; whereas in fact he means 'if you want further information, see X'. Thus the source references lend no credence to his own statements whatever, and to invent them would have been pointless. If verisimilitude had been his intention, moreover, he would surely have given references every time he borrowed from earlier biblical works; but this is far from being his standard practice. The evidence, internal and external, indicates that he did make considerable use of source material; and one can find no plausible reason why he should have invented the names of non-existent works.

Relatively few writers seem to have asked themselves the question whether the Chronicler hoped to supersede Samuel-Kings; but Torrey did give an answer, and a categorical one: 'It is certain that he did not mean to supplant the books of Samuel and Kings; he intended rather to supplement them' (op. cit. p. 163). His certainty seems well-founded; it is scarcely possible that the Chronicler can have hoped to eliminate the earlier biblical books, which must by his lifetime have possessed canonical authority. And in view of the whole range of his sources, it is highly improbable that our writer can have entertained for a moment any thought of superseding other works. Apart from the general unlikelihood, there is definite evidence against it. First, as we have seen, he himself refers readers to other sources for information. Second, here and there in his narrative he presupposes information contained in earlier works; thus he can commence his story proper (in 1 Chron. x) with an account of the battle of Gilboa and Saul's death there, without laying any foundations for this situation.

We may well share Torrey's certainty on this issue; the Chronicler cannot have hoped to supersede his sources. From this conclusion it follows that one can no longer accuse the Chronicler of distorting

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history by his omissions (such as his lack of reference to David's adultery and murder and Solomon's apostasy). In any case, he did not consistently include the good and omit the bad points of these monarchs; while this is in general true, he included for instance the story of David's census and excluded the story of his generous treatment of Mephibosheth; and we must conclude that it was the writer's principles of selection, cultic and institutional matters having priority, that prompted his inclusions and omissions. It may be admitted, all the same, that did we not possess Samuel-Kings, we should have a rather different impression of David and Solomon than we do. But we do possess Samuel and Kings; and did not the Chronicler's first readers too have access to the earlier biblical books, or at least thorough acquaintance with their contents? Can the writer have hoped to persuade his readers that David was innocent of the seduction of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband? Surely not. Unless his express design was to supplant the earlier work, we can acquit him of any charge of distortion. It may perhaps be asked why he should include so much from Samuel-Kings if he

wished merely to supplement, not to supersede. A ready answer is that he needed such material to fill out his history and to lay foundations for and to connect up his own contributions. For instance, he included the story of David's census (although detrimental to the great king) to lay a foundation for the choice of the temple site, and that in turn to lay a basis for all the cultic organisation he attributed to David. But it is not entirely fair to the Chronicler to compare his history with Samuel-Kings alone, and to speak of fresh material in Chronicles as being his own contribution. Since we possess none of his other sources, it is natural for us to speak in this way; but it is quite conceivable (unless he was Ezra, as Albright has suggested) that none of the material was his own contribution, only the compiling and editing and re-styling. If so, we can say that his purpose was to produce, utilising many sources, a history emphasising certain aspects of his nation's past.

What of his concern for historical truth? We have already suggested that in view of the existence of canonical and other records, the Chronicler could not have hoped to distort history by omissions. But he could, on the other hand, have been guilty of sins of commission, by incorporating fictitious details and stories. It is often argued or assumed that he had no regard for historical accuracy, and might well have acted in this way, relating imaginary incidents just to support his theological view-point. But a comparison of Chronicles with Samuel-Kings, and with relevant parts of the Pentateuch, shows that for the most part the

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writer was scrupulously careful to record with accuracy. In many cases where there are noteworthy changes, it is of interest to note that he kept as closely as possible to his source. His description of the accession of Joash, for instance, certainly introduces the mention of Levites, and sets them in a prominent position; but all the detail of 2 Kings xi is included. The name 'Carites' no longer appears, it is true, but they still figure in the narrative, as 'captains of hundreds'. Similarly where Manasseh's reign is concerned; a falsifier of history would surely have found it easy enough to gloss over the length of the reign, or else to dispute or disregard the king's wickedness; the Chronicler accepts both these features of the story as incontrovertible facts. Pfeiffer himself, for all his disparagement of the Chronicler, points out how careful he was not to attribute to Moses any non-Pentateuchal cultic regulation (with a single exception). Welch attributes to his hypothetical reviser (the second hand in Chronicles) a similar meticulous care; for when this reviser was faced with data which offended him cultically, he was happy to add and to distort, we are told, but it appears that time and time again he left the original data in the text. In his discussion of Josiah's passover (2 Chron. xxxv), for instance, Welch states that the reviser 'objected to the presence of cattle among the paschal victims, and therefore he turned them into burnt offerings, though the law did not provide for sacrifices of that character at passover' (*The Work of the Chronicler*, p. 146). But surely it would have been so much simpler quietly to excise the offending animals from the text? It is particularly remarkable that the priestly reviser should have failed to remove or to transform 2 Chronicles xxix. 34, with its disparagement of the priests.

Such pieces of evidence lead to the conclusion that the Chronicler (and a later editor too, possibly) was careful not to change the data gleaned from earlier records. Against this one has to set the fact that there are here and there in Chronicles details difficult to reconcile with Samuel-Kings. The argument that here, at least, the Chronicler has deliberately distorted facts to achieve some purpose of his own seems plausible enough, until one stops to ask exactly what that purpose was in each instance; for there are passages where the alterations serve no discernible theological motive. Why, for example, did he find it necessary to revise the details

of the death of Ahaziah of Judah (2 Chron. xxii. 7-9)? The changes concern nothing but venue and chronology, and it is difficult to account for them. Or again the genealogy of Benjamin in 1 Chronicles viii. 1-5 is considerably different from the lists of names in Genesis xli. 21 and Numbers xxvi. 38-40 alike. Major textual disorder

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may account for both of these variations in Chronicles; but another possible explanation for the Chronicler's alterations presents itself when we read 2 Chronicles xxxvi. 5-7, and observe that the writer appears to retract from Jehoiachin's reign to Jehoiakim's the date of the first deportation to Babylon. Here, to be sure, a theological motive for the change is readily found; but there is evidence that the Chronicler did not invent the story in the fact that Daniel i. 1 f. also refers to the incident, giving slightly different details. This evidence points to the conclusion that the Chronicler not only utilised sources other than Samuel-Kings, but also sometimes, for reasons known to himself, preferred them to the biblical records. If so, it would appear that he took pains to record what he believed to be historically accurate, even though it occasionally involved alterations to the canonical material.

Thus there is good reason to accept the general reliability and historicity of Chronicles. Why, then, have so few scholars of the last 100 years been willing to concede this? Undoubtedly because of the wealth of cultic detail in Chronicles, which so little accords with generally held views of cultic developments in Israel. Pfeiffer, indeed, complained that Albright's early dating (which has much to commend it) was 'revolutionary in its implications', and added, 'only scholars who reject the Wellhausen theory *in toto* could accept Albright's dating' (op. cit. pp. 811 f.). How much more revolutionary the suggestion, that the Chronicler's cultic data may be viewed as historically accurate! But the only reasonable alternative theory is that he was attempting to bring up to date all cultic description, crediting David and his successors with the cultic organisation of his own post-exilic era. Such methods might be expected and even forgiven in a historian of ancient times. However, the evidence does not really support this view. *Ex Hypothesi*, the Chronicler should have been following P, the latest Pentateuchal code; but this is just what he did not do. To quote Snaith, 'The relation of the Chronicler's writings to the JEDP scheme is confused' (in H. H. Rowley, ed., *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, p. 110). Many attempts have been made to solve this problem, without much success. So great are the difficulties that Pfeiffer came to the conclusion that the cultic detail of Chronicles must be invented—mere propaganda to raise Levite status. Welch's solution is less drastic: for him, the data according with D was from the original Chronicler, and the data according with P from the reviser, who was also responsible for the non-Pentateuchal data, which he introduced in an effort to harmonise conflicting Pentateuchal regulations. This hypothesis means separating

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Ezra-Nehemiah from the original draft of Chronicles, however, and if we may quote Pfeiffer on a different issue, 'To suppose... that two distinct authors... may have used similar "style and diction", is to discard one of the fundamental canons of literary criticism' (op. cit. p. 805).

It is surely a far simpler expedient to suppose that the Chronicler was accurately reporting cultic developments as they had occurred. Why otherwise should he have portrayed Hezekiah's passover celebrations (2 Chron. xxx) as such a highly irregular proceeding? This passover took place in the 'wrong' month, it lasted twice as long as was normal, and the

conduct of both priests and Levites was reprehensible. There seems no adequate reason why the Chronicler should have invented such improbable details. We have already noted the care with which he avoids attributing non-Pentateuchal legislation to Moses; an indication that his interest in historical accuracy extended to cultic matters. When discussing the cultic aspects of Manasseh's reforms, he does not claim (as a historical novelist would have done) that the altars of the host of heaven were done away with; as Ellison points out, Manasseh would not have dared to offend his Assyrian overlords by so doing. Ellison further suggests that in 1 Chronicles xvi. 7 the writer is careful not to name David as the author of the three post-davidic psalms that follow (N.B. the AV rendering obscures this fact by inserting the words 'this psalm' in italics).

In short, there is evidence to suggest that the Chronicler was not heedless of historical accuracy in his description of cultic matters. Moreover, it is highly probable that he had access to temple archives, especially if he himself was a Levite. Indeed, how else would he have come by his registers and genealogies of cultic personnel?

It is high time that the Books of Chronicles were used as a corrective to Pentateuchal criticism. To suggest that the cultic data of Chronicles may be accurate is 'revolutionary in its implications', no doubt. But to anyone who accepts more traditional views of the authorship of the Pentateuch, there is nothing inherently improbable in this view. Even those scholars who accept, more or less, the Wellhausen division of documents are not bound by his dating of JEDP. More recent years have seen many attempts to redate Pentateuchal strata, and there has been a widespread recognition of the presence of early elements in all the strata. There is no real obstacle to holding, for example, E. Robertson's Pentateuchal hypothesis together with an acceptance of the historicity of Chronicles.

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These various considerations suggest that the Chronicler was a serious historian, who sought to give his readers a reliable account of certain aspects of the history of Judah and the dynasty of David. That there are certain difficulties in his account—though their number and importance should not be exaggerated—must be admitted; but an examination of the rest of the evidence, and an assessment of the Chronicler's methods, render it most unlikely that he was prepared to invent material to suit some purpose of theological outlook or propaganda. We may therefore place confidence in the reliability of his information, even when it is unsupported by Samuel-Kings.

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