

EXILE AND BEYOND—5

1 and 2 Chronicles

Chronicles Written After the Exile

While Chronicles covers the same period as the books of Samuel and Kings, it is clear that it was written sometime after the exile to Babylon (597 and 586 to 539 BC): Chronicles speaks of the return from exile (2 Chron. 36:22–23); makes reference to those who returned (1 Chron. 9:2–34); continues the genealogy of the family of David beyond Jeconiah, and Zerubbabel (1 Chron. 3:17–24). Maybe around 430 BC, for a remnant people attempting to reconstruct their lives after a time of violent disruption and displacement, drawing on the lessons they had learned from that experience. We are picking up those lessons by looking at how the accounts in Chronicles differ from those in Samuel and Kings, and seeing how those lessons apply to us as followers of Jesus Christ.

We have seen that exile is a common human experience: currently 80 million displaced persons in the world (refugees, asylum seekers); first nations peoples in Australia over the last two hundred years; the Christian church in Australia now in a kind of cultural exile; all Christians, indeed all humanity, in exile, awaiting their true home (1 Peter 1:1; John 17:14–16; Gen. 3:22–24).

We saw from last time how the genealogies gave God's people a clear sense of identity and possession, and how, although the history focussed on the southern kingdom of Judah, it sought to represent and include the whole of the people of Israel, recognising the importance of more generous inclusion and unity, over against old divisions.

This session we look at how the treatment of David, selective as it is, gives promise of a revived and positive kingship in Israel. Also how mature reflection after the exile results in a more nuanced assessment of various kings, holding out the possibility of repentance even from the worst of scenarios.

David the Once and Future King

The books of Samuel paint the rise and reign of David warts and all—perhaps at David's own insistence. The rise of David is opposed by Saul at every turn, at the risk of David's life, and his throne contested by the family of Saul and the northern tribes in a long war. David's sin against Bathsheba and Uriah is fully exposed, and the troubles that plagued his family afterwards, including the rebellion of Absalom, Sheba's separatist movement, and Adonijah's attempted coup. You wonder if David ever had a moment's peace! None of that is in Chronicles. The abiding impression is given that 'all Israel gathered together to David' (1 Chron. 11:1). David's battles with the Philistines, Moabites, Arameans, Edomites, and Ammonites are given scant coverage compared with the detailed accounts in Samuel, except to make the point that David was victorious.

Is this presentation of David as the ideal uncontested king a whitewash, or is there something more going on here? Remember at the time Chronicles was written, there was no king in Israel, and no descendant of David on the throne. Chronicles takes very seriously God's promise to David, reproduced in **1 Chronicles 17**. This promise is highlighted through the most difficult and precarious days of David's descendants: Jehoram **2 Chronicles 21:4–7**; Joash **2 Chronicles 23:3**. We have already seen that Chronicles traces the family of David well beyond the return from exile. Thus was kept alive the hope that the promised descendant of David would eventually take up his reign, that would be forever. This is taken up in the New Testament particularly in Matthew 1:1–17.

We will see also that David plays a much more significant role in Chronicles' depiction of worship in the temple.

Asa, Jehoshaphat, Manasseh

Where Kings is fairly black-and-white in its character assessment of various kings, Chronicles is much more nuanced and true to life. In Kings, a king either 'did what is right in the sight of the LORD', mainly by maintaining or restoring true worship of God, or 'did what was evil in the sight of the LORD', mainly by worshipping other gods and idols, and that's it. Chronicles largely abandons that scheme, because it has come to see that human kings don't always fit into those watertight categories.

The reign of Asa in Kings is presented as all good: **1 Kings 15:9–15, 23–24** (though it does record Asa selling off the family silver and gold to buy an alliance. Chronicles expands this by reporting on a remarkable victory with the help of God, some prophetic warning and encouragement, a national holy convocation, a prophetic rebuke for not relying on God against Baasha, Asa's angry response, and Asa's refusal to seek help from God in his sickness: **2 Chronicles 14:1–16:14**. Yet maintaining that 'the heart of Asa was true all his days' (15:17), and notes how honoured Asa was in his death. Is this just contradictory, or does it reflect a more nuanced and mature understanding of human nature, which the exiles were free to embrace, because of their experience of the grace and forgiveness of God that had come to them in their worst situation, brought about as a result of their grossest sins?

Asa's son Jehoshaphat in Kings is presented as a wholly good king: **1 Kings 22:41–50**. Yet this follows an account of his alliance with the notorious Ahab (22:1–40). In Chronicles we learn of Jehoshaphat's promotion of God's law throughout the country, and the success this brought. But Jehoshaphat receives a prophetic rebuke for his alliance with Ahab. Then Jehoshaphat sets the Levites in their proper place, and a remarkable and worshipful victory ensues. Chronicles notes that Jehoshaphat was 'doing what was right in the sight of the Lord' (20:32), and 'sought the Lord with all his heart' (23:9). Yet his reign ends with another ill-advised alliance with Ahab's son Ahaziah, resulting in a maritime disaster. **2 Chronicles 17:1–7, 9–10; 18:1–2, 19:1–7; 20:35–37; 22:9**. By setting the good and the bad together in this way, what lessons were being taught to the returned exiles?

Most surprising is Chronicles treatment of Manasseh. In Kings it was the sins of Manasseh that brought Judah to the point of no return and made the exile inevitable, Josiah's later reforms notwithstanding: **2 Kings 21:1–18**. Chronicles, however, holds out hope that there is hope even for a sinner as rotten as Manasseh: **2 Chronicles 33:10–20!**

Was this because the returned exiles had experienced the grace and mercy of God, and wanted people to know that this was available even in the most desperate of situations?

Does not this also point us to our experience of the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus?