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NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS

SAMUEL, KINGS, CHRONICLES

“Oh, for a historian who could dip his pen in thoughts of God, and who, from beginning to end of his history, would not be showing us the crafty policy of kings and cabinets, but the finger of God! We want, nowadays, to have history written in some such style as appears in these Books of Samuel, and Kings, and Chronicles; then might history become almost like a new Bible to us. We should find that, as the book of revelation agrees with the book of creation, so does the book of divine providence in human history agree with both of them, for the same God is the Author of all these works. If we cannot get anybody to write such histories, yet let us continually amend the errata, and add appendices to such records as we have, for God is God, and God is everywhere, and blessed is the man who learns to spy him out.”

C. H. Spurgeon.ⁱ

Few of us would write a history of our own times endeavouring to reveal the “finger of God” in our world’s events. Indeed, those of us who are historians would recoil from the task in an academic publication, although we could be tempted to air an opinion in a sermon now and then. The Biblical authors, of course, were under no such constraints. For them God was the hero of every story and “history” was “his story”. We believe that these books trace the moving finger of God throughout Israel’s troubled and tortuous centuries because we hold to their inspiration as part of the received canon of scripture. Our task as evangelical theologians is to study them while asking what relevance they have in our own times. This is not so easy a task as you might think. As a preacher on the historical books of the Old Testament, there are several issues that force me to tread cautiously: the tension between “past” and “history”, the bias of the biblical authors and modern trends in handling the books.

1. “History” is not “The Past”.

As you thumb through the commentaries on the historical books you will find questions arising on every page concerning the authenticity of details of dates, geographical references, etc. This should not surprise us. Navigating back in time from the text is always going to raise difficulties. We need to be careful in the way we “reconstruct” the past in our sermons. Our version is rarely going to be accurate. Consider this:

- a) What happened at that time was seen from as many viewpoints as there were people. They would all have only a partial view and different interpretations of what they had just witnessed.
- b) The memory of the event was handed down to someone else, in a selectively condensed form, dependent on the way they chose to describe and explain it.
- c) A version of the events eventually found its way into the Bible.
- d) We make our own reconstruction of the event in our minds, and as preachers “retell” the happenings to our listeners.
- e) Our listeners immediately form their own version of it all.

With the best will in the world, the likelihood of the final version being a faithful reconstruction of what happened on the day is slim. Worse still, there is little we can do to guarantee a more accurate rendering of the mighty deeds of God in history. It would be nice to have an historical version of that software which clears up fuzzy closed circuit TV images producing a clear sight of a car number plate and a recognisable picture of the villain. It works on CSI at least, but no equivalent exists that would allow us to create a video of, say, the fall of Jericho. As preachers there is nothing much we can do other than accept the fact. We can spice our sermons up with maps, archaeological tidbits, or sparkling quotes from our favourite interpreters, but ultimately what we have left is a religious proclamation designed to encourage and challenge our listeners' spiritual lives. It is not live video footage of the event. I can only trust that I have done my homework carefully enough and that God, by his grace, will take my limited version of the story and use it. I take the biblical text to be trustworthy, but see little point in meticulously sifting through all the historical doubts and questions in my sermons, and you will not hear me doing it.

2. Recognise the Biblical Authors' Point of View

There is an African proverb: 'Unless the lions learn how to write, the hunters will always write their stories'. We cannot ignore the fact that the history of Israel as it is written has come from a very limited section of the nation. Even Israel's monotheism is questioned by modern-day theologians, the most radical of whom claim that monotheism was a product of Josiah's reform rather than Abraham's legacy. I do not agree with that view, because, for example Manasseh's introduction of an Asherah pole into the temple is seen by the author of Kings to be an outrageous innovation rather than a normal part of national religion (2 Kings 21:7). However the strict monotheists would have been a small minority for much of Israel's history and the official religion was supplemented in practice by a more pluralistic world view.ⁱⁱ The presence of the Asherah poles (generally considered to have been the female goddess equivalent to Yahweh, or "Mrs. Yahweh" as some like to refer to her) is clear indication that worship of other deities was part of popular religion. A hard line monotheist like Isaiah could foresee only a remnant of Israel being saved, and while Elijah must have been comforted to know that there were still 7,000 left who had not "bowed the knee to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18), you have to say that it is quality rather than quantity. Yet it was the monotheists who survived and won the theological battle. And it is they, of course, who wrote the history. We should always be aware of the struggle behind the text.

However, a word of warning. We could well revisit history and look at it through the eyes of other groups in Israel, the women for example, or the marginalized, even the syncretists themselves. They did not get to write the history. Such approaches may well be valid, but they should not preoccupy the preacher in case, as Iain Provan cautions us, "the text becomes a *springboard* (my italics) for interpretation, rather than its foundation."ⁱⁱⁱ

3. How to Handle the Historical Books

By "Historical Books" we mean Joshua, Judges and Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. In the Hebrew canon Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings are "The Former Prophets", while others are part of "The Writings". In the Hebrew text Samuel, Kings and Chronicles were not divided into two books. The suggestion is that when translated into Greek they occupied more physical page space because Greek includes the vowels while Hebrew does not. Hence it was necessary to divide these longer books into two parts. The division is pretty arbitrary. Have a go at dividing the book of Samuel yourself and see how difficult it is. Commonly today theologians group these works together, hence you have, for example, the Tetrateuch (Genesis to numbers plus Deuteronomy 34), the Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy to Kings) and the Chronistic history (Chronicles, Ezra,

Nehemiah). Just how far these books are the product of one author or group of authors and when they were written is a matter of debate which I will not go into here because space does not allow.^{iv}

As far as Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles go, the books were handled as straight-forward religious history for nearly two millennia, until they came under the close scrutiny of the historical-critical method firstly by de Wette (1806) and then Wellhausen. They approached them as a collection of inaccurate, self-contradictory accounts which had to be picked apart to reveal their sources. They were very cautious about finding historical precision in them. This view was challenged by Gressmann (1921) and Rost (1926) who argued that the books are a collection of once independent stories that have been joined to narrate the rise to power of David. Redaction critics have taken a different line, notably Noth's (1943) suggestion that a Deuteronomistic editor has bequeathed us a work of history which flows from Deuteronomy to Kings. He was less a compiler and more an author who has composed a saga from older traditions.

If you have ever ploughed through the tortuous analysis of an historical-critical commentary you will know how soul-destroying it can be, as the Bible is systematically dissected and then largely discarded as being of little historical interest. Over the last thirty years or so, a fresh wind of theological method has been blowing through Old Testament studies: narrative theology. In this, we focus on the texts as literary works, examining how the authors shaped the narrative flow in the books. We might not even get to asking historical questions at all. That uncritical children's talk about Jonah and the whale you delivered last month may be closer to modern theology than you thought. Instead of seeing repetition as a sign that two passages were copied from different sources they are now more likely to be seen as attempts to emphasize a point. Difference in style and language might have a reason apart from being copied from different sources. The advantages for preachers are obvious: we can follow the flow of the Bible story, dialogue with the authors, note how they are being ironic, or playful, or quietly critical.

You might think that the new interest in these books as narratives would reduce the scepticism in their historical value, but not so. At its extreme, such attitudes can produce claims such as: "the reason why many things are told in the biblical literature, and the way they are told, has virtually everything to do with literary artistry and virtually nothing to do with anything that might have happened."^v Some have even suggested that ancient Israel did not exist at all and what we are reading is just ideology.^{vi} It ignores the importance of historical fact to ideology. For example, I live in a country where the modern growth of Welsh nationalism and the movement for full recognition of the Welsh language can be traced back to an historical event: the Tryweryn dam project which flooded a Welsh town by order of Liverpool council in 1965. You can argue that the Welsh nationalists have their own take on the event when they write about it in terms of oppression, invasion, injustice, intolerance and racism, but you cannot separate the event and the ideology. Despite the fact that many in Wales today know little or nothing about the event, it changed and gave a new dynamic to the ideology. If it had not been for the event, the modern political map of Wales would have looked very different. It would be a mistake to study it while denying that Tryweryn ever happened. Of course, this is recent history, so you can go to paddle your feet in the still waters of the lake and even see the old village appear out of the water when it is low, but the principle is clear. Dismissing the history would leave you unable to interpret the ideology.

Not all authors are so extreme, but if the Biblical narrative is riddled with inaccuracies, then we would feel uncomfortable about believing it to be God-breathed Scripture. We want to secure our sermons on the bedrock of history, not on the shifting sands of mythology. That involves examining the difficulties one at a time and comparing them carefully with the archeological evidence. Normally it is possible to unravel the difficulties and move on. This general approach is looked at in detail by Provan, Long and Longman in their book *A Biblical History*.

Samuel

Like all of the historical books this has suffered at the hands of its detractors in the last two hundred years. Certainly its handling of its various sources is clumsy at times, and we have two tales of the ending of the house of Eli (1 sam 2:31ff and 3:11ff), a secret anointing of Saul then two public ceremonies, two introductions of David to Saul, two escapes of David from the court of Saul, two occasions when David spares Saul's life, three different covenants between David and Jonathan, two flights of David to Gath (21 and 27), and even two killings of "Goliath" (1 Sam. 17 and 2 Sam. 21). Criticisms usually fail to acknowledge that similar events can occur more than once or that two people in a family can have the same name. Consulting more conservative commentaries will usually provide explanations that do not dismiss the text as fiction. Harrison is right to complain that "facile critical assertions of discrepancies, incongruities, and the like have frequently been made on very inadequate grounds"^{vii}

The historical-critical writers, notably Wellhausen, found two contradictory sources, pro-monarchy and anti-monarchy behind this book. Certainly if you preach your way through chapters 7 to 12 as I have done you find yourself condemning then commending the monarchy in different sermons. It is quite uncomfortable. However it is pointless getting dragged down into which sources came from where. If we take the narrative flow into account, we assume that the writers were aware of the different streams of opinion but deliberately use them make their point. The contrast between the two viewpoints turns into a prophetic warning about the abandonment of Yahweh while keeping the way open for a prophetic fulfillment of the promise in the Messiah, born of David's line.

It is fairly easy to divide the book into sections: 1 Samuel, 1-7 (Eli and Samuel), 8-15 (Samuel and Saul), 1:16-2:1 (Saul and David), 2 Samuel 2-12 (David and Kingdom), 13-20 David and his succession, 21-24 (additions). Also, the internal layout of the book focuses on Samuel, then Saul, then David reading as a "succession narrative". However, that does not really tell us how the canonical shape of the book gets the author's message across. More helpful is, in my opinion, Brevard Child's observation how the book is sandwiched by Hannah's prayer in chapter 2 and the final four chapters which "offer a highly reflective, theological interpretation of David's whole career, adumbrating the messianic hope, which provides a clear hermeneutical guide for its use as sacred scripture" giving the book a dominant eschatological messianic perspective of the whole.^{viii}

Kings

Described in the LXX as the "third and fourth book of kingdoms", this could not have been an easy book to write. The author has to process a great deal of factual information. Noth observed that he had freedom as an author. He was more than a simple redactor, not just making a collection of previous material as the historical-critical school had claimed, but writing a particular history for his own theological purposes. He is clearly highly selective, and frequently tells us where to find more information if we are curious: the Book of the Acts of Solomon, the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah.. He is not dwelling on the history, then, but using selected events to punch home his message.

He refuses to treat the two kingdoms separately, but treats them as one interlinked story. You will note how the Chronicler, in contrast, chooses to focus on Judah. While the history ends with the loss of the land and exile, the threat of this disaster runs right through book. He consistently offers reasons for impending judgement. "(The Lord) warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and seer." (2 Kings 17:13).

Von Rad highlights that in 12 cases, beginning with Eli, a prophecy is given which is explicitly picked up later as having been fulfilled “according to the word of the Lord”. A prophetic word is a “history-creating force” (Von Rad) unleashed on the world. Ellul comments that “The Second Book of Kings is probably the most political of all books of the Bible. For its reference is to Israel genuinely constituted as a political power and playing its part in the concert of empires. Furthermore, its reference is to an age of crisis. Above all, we see here politics in action and not just in principle.”^{ix}

Reconciling the chronology is challenging. Some feel that it is entirely theoretical. For example 480 years means just 40 x 12, a mystical figure. Others see a mixture of different chronologies mixed up in our account. Others use co-regencies to explain most of it. On the whole I think we just have to do the best we can and accept that possibly in the redaction chronologies have become slightly scrambled. However, such difficulties should not blind us to the theological purpose of the book.

Chronicles

Speaking personally, this is my favourite of the three books, but it can seem rather odd by comparison. It strongly champions the role of the Levites in Israel’s history, linking their involvement to times of success. It also emphasizes the principle of retribution. People, the author believes, get what they deserve, one way or another. Even Josiah is rebuked for failing to recognize Yahweh’s voice (2 Chronicles 35:22). For this and other doubts about, for example, its geographical references, its historical accuracy is frequently dismissed. Indeed, its historicity was doubted as long ago as the Renaissance by Shelomo del Medigo, a Jewish scholar, who thought it unreliable because it had clearly been written long after the events described.^x Some of the supposed inaccuracies of the book have been discounted since the days of historical-critical dominance when de Wette dismissed it as “reworked, altered and falsified”. Von Rad felt that it should be read as how the Chronicler understood history, rather than as history itself. Noth defined it as “historiography”.

The Chronicler’s handling of the sources is clearly highly selective, and his interpretation of the events is so strongly stated that some modern commentators have suggested that he has some secret agenda, such as polemic against the Samaritans, an apology for Judaism or to oppose Persian empire or support a young province of Judah around 350 BC.^{xi} His robust defense of the levitical priesthood would certainly indicate a vested interest. But we should not go down such routes before taking the book at its face value, and as it is written it repeatedly hammers home the lesson that Israel prospered when it was obedient and courted disaster when it did not. From this we can see that he is teaching how the restored post-exilic community should view itself as being in covenant with God, following his promises to David.^{xii} I cannot see why we should look for hidden meanings.

The book’s attraction for me is the manner in which he demonstrates that the covenant duties of the nation involve obedience to the Law, and proper observance of the forms of worship as laid down. Hence he reinterprets the command for kings to “walk before God” in 1 Kings 8:25 into a command to “walk in the Torah” in 2 Chronicles 6:16. This not only illuminates his purposes it also reveals that Kings-Samuel was one of his sources. He supplements it where he feels it does not give sufficient details, for example in describing Hezekiah’s Passover or David’s careful organization of the liturgical services. After the nightmare of the exile, he is making it clear that Israel has a written authoritative code of practice which it will ignore at its peril. If the Deuteronomist in Samuel-Kings marvels at the way the prophetic word came to pass in the history of the nation, Chronicles demonstrates to us how Israel had become the “people of the book”. It is the celebration of the canon of scripture.

Conclusion

If I were invited to change the shape of the Christian canon of the Old Testament, I would follow the Hebrew Bible and finish it with Chronicles. The way that the canon of scripture came together was a complex historical process about which we know very little. The texts were not collected randomly: they each tell their story and have their place in Scripture. All three books I have looked at in this study do their job. As historical books they have set out to do what Spurgeon suggested, “dipping their pens in thoughts of God”. No history book can just resurrect the past, it always reinterprets it in some way. These books make it very clear that they are about God in history, not just history itself. Chronicles seeks to make us understand that these God-thoughts are enshrined in a canon of literature that has been handed down to us. We ignore it at our peril. Chronicles makes a fine closure to the Old Testament canon.

If you listen to me preach on these books you will note that I do not dwell on the historical difficulties thrown up in the text. They are important in their own way, but we should not get diverted away from “thoughts of God” by them. I defend their historicity happily, but we can never be sure what “exactly” happened. For details, I would point you in the direction of good Bible commentaries, and the ones that I appreciate are listed here in the footnotes.^{xiii} For me, the task of a preacher and Christian teacher is to capture the flow of books, and translate their lessons into our modern world. As the great Victorian preacher said: “God is God, and God is everywhere, and blessed is the man who learns to spy him out.”

ⁱ Sermon (No. 2476), August 2nd, 1896, At the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

ⁱⁱ E.g. Bob Becking, Meindert Dijkstra, Marjo C. A. Korpel, Karel J. H. Vriezen, *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ Iain Provan “The Historical Books of the Bible” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, John Barton, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 204. I recommend this article as a good introduction to the subject (pp. 198-211).

^{iv} Reinhrd G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden (London: T & T Clark International, 2005). This is a good book if you want to look closer at the historical-critical method.

^v P. R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) p.29. See also Philip R. Davies *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 204 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) where he claims that someone from outside the faith community can better expose nuances within the text than believers in the Bible as Scripture can.

^{vi} K.W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: the Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

^{vii} R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) pp. 700-709.

^{viii} Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. (London: SCM press, 1979) pp. 245, 248.

^{ix} Jaques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) p. 13.

^x Sara Japhet, “The Historical Reliability of Chronicles: The History of the Problem and its Place in Biblical Research” in *The Historical Books; A Sheffield Reader*; The Biblical Seminar 40, J. Cheryl Exum, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) pp. 258-281.

^{xi} Kratz, *op.cit.*, pp. 43ff.

^{xii} Childs, *op.cit.*, p. 644.

^{xiii} Try Dale Ralph Davies, who combines a good deal of scholarship with superb exposition of the text:

1 Samuel. Looking on the Heart (Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Focus Publications, 2000)

2 Samuel. Out of Every Adversity (Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Focus Publications, 1999)

The Wisdom and the Folly: an Exposition of the Book of First Kings (Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Focus Publications, 2002)

2 Kings. The Power and the Fury (Fearn, Ross-shire, Christian Focus Publications, 2005)

Also the recently reprinted Tyndale Old Testament series:

Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Leicester: IVP, 2008), Donald J. Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings* (Leicester: IVP 2009)

Martin J. Selman, *1 Chronicles* (Leicester: IVP 2008), Martin J. Selman, *2 Chronicles* (Leicester: IVP 2008)