

KYB Introduction to *Kings of Judah: kingdom and covenant*

Hello everyone.

This is an introduction to the KYB study *Kings of Judah*, which focuses on 2Chronicles 10 to 36.

These chapters are certainly not the most popular section of the Bible.

In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion that you would not be reading them if they were not the scheduled study for this term, or, perhaps, part of a 'read the Bible in a year' program.

These chapters are not very 'nice'.

They tend to repel us rather than attract us.

They seem to discourage rather than encourage.

The situations they relate seem to go from bad to worse. And even when something 'good' is going on it is flawed in one way or another.

And, in addition,

Their content seems to repeat what we can also read in 1 and 2 Kings, and in the major prophets and some minor prophets.

So they seem superfluous, unnecessary.

But God in his wisdom, power and grace has included them in his word. So, *somehow, somewhere*, there must be *something* here in these chapters that by that same wisdom, power and grace of God can reveal important truth to us today.

Our confidence in God and in his word causes us to ask:

Why did God include these chapters in the Bible? And,

What does he want to reveal to us through these chapters?

The best starting place to find answers to these questions is to ask other questions, questions about his original readers and the intention of the original writer. Once we have understood that, we will be in the best position to personally get the most out of these chapters, and out of this study.

So let us think about those original readers and their situation, and the writer and his purpose.

Imagine that you were there, that you were one of those Jews living in Jerusalem or in the surrounding countryside some time after 458BC ...

All through your childhood and youth you had heard the same stories. Over and over again your father and grandfather had told you what their fathers and grandfathers had told them:

Stories of a fabulous history.

Stories of a mighty king.

Stories of a powerful nation.

Stories of incredible military victories.

Stories of heroes, bold and courageous.

Stories of a magnificent city – the city of God, the holy city.

Stories of a glorious temple.

But the reality in which you live is nothing at all like these stories.

There is a temple, but it is so inferior, nothing like the grand and glorious temple built by Solomon. That glorious temple had been robbed and destroyed by the Babylonians. Now, the weak, small substitute that had been built to replace it seemed more like something to apologize for, not something to glory in. An unfit dwelling place for the God of glory.

There is a city, but it is broken. It had been violated and ravaged by the Babylonians, and left in ruin for decades. Even years and years of hard work have not restored its magnificence.

Heroes? They seem quite scarce. Just a couple of maybes – Ezra and Nehemiah – but what they are doing does not seem to compare with the military might of the heroes of old.

There are no military victories ... because there is no army.

Your once powerful nation is fragmented. Long ago, the northern tribes had, firstly separated from the Davidic kings in the south, then secondly, been scattered abroad by the Assyrians centuries ago. Then the southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin, had been attacked and a remnant taken into captivity for seventy years. Only a few of you have returned. You are no longer a nation. You are just a small handful of Jews, confused and powerless. Nothing at

all like the powerful nation your fathers and grandfathers described.

There is no king. The throne of David, is empty. Where is the unbroken line of Davidic kings promised by God? Nowhere. There is no kingdom. Leaderless, you are dependent on the good will of your Persian over-lords, and you are being tormented and mocked by the surrounding people.

But there were also other stories told by your fathers and grandfathers. Stories going back deep into history, not just the history of your people, but the history of the human race.

Stories of the God who created the entire universe, and to whom all people are accountable.

Stories of the entrance of sin and God's promise of a Saviour.

Stories of Abraham and the promise that the Saviour would be one of his descendants.

Stories of how God formed the descendants of Abraham into a nation, delivering them from slavery in Egypt, and establishing them in the land promised to Abraham.

Stories of God's purpose for them – that they would be for God 'a treasured possession', 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' [Exodus 19:5,6].

And that was where the stories took on a sombre tone. That was where the sadness entered.

Because, in those stories from the establishment of the nation after the Exodus from Egypt, there were some 'ifs'. There were conditions. And because of those 'ifs', because of those conditions, you are where you are – in a broken city, with an inferior temple, without national identity or autonomy, and without a king.

And remembering those stories, you also remember the 'ifs', you also remember those conditions:

If you will obey me fully and keep my covenant ... [Exodus 19:5].

If you ... become corrupt and make any kind of idol ... [Deuteronomy 4:25f].

'Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever' [Deuteronomy 5:29].

'So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience

to all that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you possess' [Deuteronomy 5:32,33].

'Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you...' [Deuteronomy 6:14,15].

Yes. You remember the 'ifs'. You remember the conditions.

And you look around you and you see the evidence. You see the results of not remembering the 'ifs', of not remembering the conditions.

But you also see something else. Something far worse and far more unsettling than the residual physical evidence of God's wrath.

You look at the people – your brothers and sisters, your fellow Jews – and you see them repeating the sins of their fathers.

They are marrying idol worshippers whose practices the Lord detested.

They are violating the Sabbath.

They are withholding their tithes and offerings.

The Levites have abandoned their duties.

The priests are not faithful in their responsibilities.

The temple service is being neglected.

Yes. There had been a show of faith when Ezra had read the Book of the Law, a temporary joy, a public confession of both sin and faith [Nehemiah 8 and 9].

Yes. There had been a second, similar reform, under Nehemiah.

But now it seems to have evaporated.

And you look at yourself, and wonder if you have any faith in God left.

You feel totally desolate.

Will God who patiently tolerated the violation of his covenant for centuries while he called your ancestors to repentance, be so patient again? Will he be so slow to anger yet again? Can you have any hope that he will not destroy you and your people utterly?

Is there anything to believe in left?

Is there anything left to hope for.

Can any of the covenant promises survive in the repeated failures of the covenant people? In the present failures of the covenant people?

A dull, heavy dread, a hopelessness, a sense of abandonment by God, hangs over you. As far as you can understand it, the answer is 'No'. No. All is lost. There is no hope.

Then someone breaks into your pain and your silence.

'Hey! He's written a book!'

'What? ... Who ...? Who's written a book?'

'Ezra.'

'Ezra ? ... Ezra who?'

'Ezra. You know ... That priest. The one who came from Babylon with a group of Jews ... the second big group to come back. You remember ... the guy who knows the Book of the Law inside out. Well, he's written a book ... more like four books actually. Starts way back ...'

'Starts what way back?'

'He starts with Adam. And he tracks the history of our people right through, right through to now ...'

'But what's the point?' you ask. 'We already have the history. *And* we have the prophets' judgements on our history. We don't need another book describing our historic failures. We have been unfaithful to God. God has acted in judgement. And now we are unfaithful again. There is no hope.'

'But that's the point!' your friend says. 'That's exactly the point. *We* might fail, but God's eternal purpose will *never* fail. *We* might be unfaithful, but *God* is faithful. And because *God* is faithful, there is hope.'

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Now, let's stop imagining we were there, and bring ourselves back to the present, and face a few questions about 2 Chronicles 10 – 36.

The first question: Who wrote 2 Chronicles?

1-2 Chronicles, and Ezra and Nehemiah are generally believed to have been compiled by Ezra. Various scholars debate this with various arguments. But there is no clear reason to doubt the Jewish tradition of Ezra's authorship. One thing that is obvious, is that these four books

contain quite a bit of material that Ezra himself did not personally write, but gathered from other sources and incorporated into his work.

The second question: For whom was 2 Chronicles written?

It is generally believed that *1–2 Chronicles* were written for the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem at various times after the 70 years of exile in Babylon. They faced a very discouraging reality that seemed nothing at all like the glory of Israel experienced by their ancestors and promised as covenant blessings.

As we learned in our imaginary sojourn in Jerusalem:

- The temple was inferior.
- The city, Jerusalem, God's holy city, was broken.
- The throne, the throne of David, was empty.
- Their nation was fragmented.

In addition,

- Their history was full of spiritual failure. Their ancestors had descended into idolatry and/or syncretism, and had incurred devastating divine judgement.

And now, even though Ezra and Nehemiah had presided at meetings of national, public confession and repentance, and even though they had made known the Book of the Law and endeavoured to re-establish the temple worship and rituals, the spoken commitment of the people quickly dissolved, exposing its superficiality.

It was a horrible and hopeless situation. Nothing seemed to be working out in keeping with God's promises.

Where was God in all of this?

Where was the covenant blessedness?

Had their ancestors believed a lie?

Was there any hope?

Or were they no better off than the idolaters after all?

Was there any point in trusting God?

Was there any point in being faithful to God?

And, worst of all, would God's mercy be exhausted, and his judgement fall on them one last time, as finally and as fatally as it had on the northern kingdom?

Ezra wrote the Chronicles to encourage and stimulate his readers to maintain both faith in God and faithfulness to God and to the historic covenants.

The third question: When was 2 Chronicles written?

Chronicles is dated sometime after the Jews' return to Jerusalem (c 538BC) but also after Ezra went to Jerusalem (c 458BC). Some scholars debate this, and date it much later, disputing Ezra's role as compiler. But the mid fifth century BC seems to make the most sense.

The fourth question: what is the purpose of 2Chronicles 10 – 36?

Together, Ezra's four books, *1–2 Chronicles*, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, originally comprised a unit.

The Jews classified the Chronicles as 'writings', not 'history'. They *selectively* recall the history that led to the Babylonian exile and explain God's actions *as they relate to that history*.

As 'writings' their purpose is not to give a comprehensive *record of history* but a *record of the ebb and flow* of Judah's faithfulness and unfaithfulness to God and his covenants (largely typified by her kings), and to address the issue of God's faithfulness to those covenants.

In particular, 1 and 2 Chronicles are interested in the Davidic kings and their faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God. Chronicles is also keenly interested in the temple and the integrity of the worship offered there.

The fifth question: what are the contents of 2 Chronicles 10 – 36?

These chapters report on the various kings of Judah from the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death to the fall of the kingdom to Babylon, with a brief closing statement summarising Cyrus' proclamation permitting the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

Contrary to popular comments about 'ten lost tribes', people from all but three of the ten tribes of Israel are specifically mentioned as joining 'Judah' at one time or another during this period, and general statements are made that appear to be inclusive of people from all the tribes of Israel. Thus, the history reported in these chapters is not focused on the tribe of Judah alone, but on the story of the descendants of Abraham,

who identified with the southern kingdom. Those who continued to identify as part of the renegade northern kingdom are largely considered irrelevant.

The historical period covered by 2 Chronicles 10–36 is the same as covered by 1 Kings 12–22 and all of 2 Kings. Additional historical data can be gleaned from the relevant chapters in those books. It is also the same time period addressed by many of the prophets: Hosea and Amos (who prophesied in Israel, but whose messages were known in Judah), Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Ezekiel. The writings of these prophets give us significant additional insight into both the historical events and the spiritual condition of the people. They also give important insight into God's opinion of Judah's failure to follow him in spirit and in truth, and the horrific impact of that failure. Anyone studying 2 Chronicles would do well to also read each of these prophets.

The sixth question: what is the significance of the covenants in these chapters?

Further understanding of 2 Chronicles 10–36 is facilitated by an understanding of the major covenants of the Old Testament:

The 'covenant' focused on a future 'offspring of the woman' (Genesis 3:15). This promise had worldwide application to all the descendants of Adam and Eve. It was, in its entirety, a covenant of redemptive grace, grounded in God alone. It is unconditional.

The covenant focused on the offspring of Abraham through whom God's blessing would come to every nation (Genesis 12, 15, 22). This also was an unconditional covenant of redemptive grace, dependent on God alone.

The covenant focused on the son of David (numerous references), with its apparent emphasis on the permanency of the throne of David. Some aspects of this covenant are conditional on human behaviour – the promises about the physical/political throne remaining in David's line. Some aspects were unconditional – those promises relating to the coming of Christ, the Son of David, whose reign is eternal, whose kingdom knows no end.

Running in tandem with these covenants, is the Sinai covenant, with its insistence on the holy uniqueness of God, its high ethical standards and its gracious provision of atoning sacrifices and rituals, key elements in the worship in the Tabernacle, and, later, in the Temple.

The Davidic covenant and the Sinai covenant are of particular importance in the Chronicles records, where there is a very evident

three-way tension between formal adherence to Sinai covenant requirements, real faith in God, and the perceived safety-net of the Davidic covenant.

God's judgements fell on the kings, the people and the nation as a whole because of failure to keep the conditions of the Sinai and Davidic covenants. Indeed, the judgements that fell did not contradict or deny these covenants, but were an integral part of these covenants. The restoration to the land was also part of these covenants, and essential for the fulfilment of the promises of the earlier, unconditional, covenants.

In addition to the focus on these covenants, the significance of the temple (and also of Jerusalem) in Jewish national and spiritual life receives very dominant attention. This connects with both the Davidic and Sinai covenants; and it stands in stark opposition to the repeated intrusion of pagan religion which characterises almost every period of Israel's history and which led ultimately to the downfall of both Israel and Judah. It is probably this last issue — the question of which 'god' to worship, and how to worship him — that is the most important of all.

This question that is so dominant in Chronicles is the one overriding focus of both Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the question is: are you worshipping the one true God, or idols? In the New Testament the question is: are you worshipping Jesus Christ as God? Both insist that only *this* God is God, and that any other 'god' is worthless. Secondary to it, both in Chronicles and in both Testaments, is the question: are you worshipping him *from your heart* and in the way he has ordained?

Our final question: What is its message for us?

All of this seems very far removed from our lives as Christians in the twenty-first century.

What are we supposed to do with it?

How are we supposed to respond to it?

What relevance does it have for us today?

We can summarize its relevance in five simple points:

1. *The question:* which God do you believe in and which God are you worshipping? The one true God, or some other, so-called 'god' created by human hands or human imagination?
2. *The question:* are you worshipping the true God in the way that he has ordained or defined? Are you approaching him only through his Son, Jesus Christ, the one, ultimate atoning sacrifice, and the one

eternal High Priest, promised since the beginning of time – the child of the woman, the descendant of Abraham, the Son of David?

3. *The fact:* God is faithful. He keeps his covenant. He will bring his purposes to pass, no matter what. Our unfaithfulness cannot negate his faithfulness.
4. *The fact:* the faithfulness of God of necessity includes his acts of judgement.
5. *The challenge:* maintaining faithfulness to God in a cultural and political environment of unbelief, paganism and syncretism, and the post-modern mindset that there is no absolute truth and no absolute moral standards.

Let us take a stand, even if it is a silent stand, against the godlessness and hopelessness of our culture. And let us take this stand with the confident assurance that God, our God, is faithful. His promises hold. His purpose stands. Therefore we live in quiet, but utterly confident, assurance.

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