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Author(s): Guenther, Allen.

Source: *Direction*, vol. 11, no. 2 (April 1982): 4-15.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/455>

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Kings and Chronicles: Interpreting Historical Interpretations

Allen R. Guenther

For most Western Christians the books of Kings and Chronicles rest at the fringes of what is regarded as divine revelation. Like Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon and III John, these OT historical books share many characteristics of profane literature: the authors use an abundance of literary and historical sources rather than write by divine inspiration, they portray Israel's history with obvious biases, and these writings contain what appear to be irreconcilable conflicts of fact.

As a result, this literature has fallen into disuse within the church or, at best, come to serve only a supportive function for "the revealed Word of God." It is rarely used as a basis for proclamation, even among those who occupy themselves vocationally with Old Testament studies. When it is used it normally becomes the backdrop against which the words and acts of God, given through the prophets, are interpreted. Its primary function in the Western church is in providing children with heroes to emulate and moral pitfalls to avoid.

The church and its scholars have also struggled with the presence of two roughly parallel histories of Israel's monarchy. It has generally responded in either of two ways, both of which treat Kings and Chronicles as though they were given as source books for a "Christian" interpretation of the Israelite monarchy. The first approach is to attempt to determine the historical accuracy of the texts. Until recently the consensus among scholars was that since Kings was composed earlier it contained the more authentic data. The divergences between Kings and Chronicles were usually attributed to a garbled oral tradition or the strong bias and free editorial hand of the writer of Chronicles. So the Biblical expositor was encouraged to decide which version of Israel's history was the more valid with Kings generally receiving the nod.

A second approach to Kings and Chronicles is to reduce them to a single account by harmonization and levelling. The assumption appears to be that the biblical writers were recording revealed (or at least inspired) facts. The facts of Kings and Chronicles, therefore, must agree.

Dr. Allen Guenther is DIRECTION editor and Associate Professor of Old Testament at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California.

Consequently the exegetes occupy themselves with the “apparent discrepancies,” and when those are resolved a single historical text results from the superimposition of the (usually) corrected books of Chronicles on Kings. Where Chronicles cannot be harmonized with Kings, the blame is assigned to the work of a careless scribe so that the autographs remain identical and inerrant. But such conflicts as concern the burial places of Jehoram (2 Kings 8:24; 2 Chron. 21:20), Joash (2 Kings 12:21; 2 Chron. 24:25), Uzziah (2 Kings 15:7; 2 Chron. 26:23), and Ahaz (2 Kings 16:20; 2 Chron. 28:27) cannot be reconciled by normal means, leaving a nagging doubt about the truth claims of the Scriptures.

The thesis of this article is that the books of Kings and Chronicles are written from different perspectives and only when the church affirms both accounts as historical *interpretation* will these books begin to serve as revelation for the nurture and proclamation of the church. The distinctive interpretations of the writer of Kings (hereafter called the Deuteronomist) and Chronicles (hereafter, the Chronicler) may best be illustrated by a comparative study of Asa’s reign after which the shapes of the larger themes of the Deuteronomist and Chronicler can be described and their meaning for the church explored.

A Comparative Study of Asa’s Reign

I Kings 15

⁹In the twentieth year of the reign of King Jeroboam of Israel, Asa became king of Judah, ¹⁰and he ruled forty-one years in Jerusalem. His grandmother was Maacah, the daughter of Absalom. ¹¹Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done. ¹²He expelled from the country all the male and female prostitutes serving at the pagan places of worship, and he removed all the idols his predecessors had made.

2 Chronicles 14, 15, 16

14 King Abijah died and was buried in the royal tombs in David’s City. His son Asa succeeded him as king, and under Asa the land enjoyed peace for ten years. ²Asa pleased the Lord, his God, by doing what was right and good. ³He removed the foreign altars and the pagan places of worship, broke down the sacred stone columns, and cut down the symbols of the goddess Asherah. ⁴He commanded the people of Judah to do the will of the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and to obey his teachings and commands. ⁵Because he abolished the pagan places of worship and the incense altars from all the cities of Judah, the kingdom was at peace under his rule.

There are no parallels in 1 Kings to 2 Chronicles 14:6-15:15. In this text Asa's fortifications and military preparation are described (15:6-8). When a large Sudanese army advances on Asa, the Judean king cries out to God for help. The Lord aids Asa's army in defeating the enemy and the resultant victory brings Judah much spoil.

On Asa's return, the Lord sends a prophet, Azariah, to remind Asa that he should not presume on God's grace (15:1-7). Asa responds to the warning by turning to God. He repairs the altar of the LORD, and as a consequence of his reforms, many people from Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon came over to Asa's side to worship and serve the true God. Together they renew their covenant with the LORD (2 Chron. 15:8-15).

1 Kings 15:13-16

¹³He removed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother, because she had made an obscene idol of the fertility goddess Asherah. Asa cut down the idol and burned it in Kidron Valley. ¹⁴Even though Asa did not destroy all the pagan places of worship, he remained faithful to the Lord all his life.

¹⁵He placed in the Temple all the objects his father had dedicated to God, as well as the gold and silver objects that he himself dedicated.

¹⁶King Asa of Judah and King Baasha of Israel were constantly at war with each other as long as they were in power.

2 Chronicles 15:16-16:1

¹⁶King Asa removed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother, because she had made an obscene idol of the fertility goddess Asherah. Asa cut down the idol, chopped it up, and burned the pieces in Kidron Valley. ¹⁷Even though Asa did not destroy all the pagan places of worship in the land, he remained faithful to the Lord all his life.

¹⁸He placed in the Temple all the objects his father Abijah had dedicated to God, as well as the gold and silver objects that he himself dedicated. ¹⁹There was no more war until the thirty-fifth year of his reign.

¹⁶In the thirty-six year of the reign of King Asa of Judah, King Baasha of Israel invaded Judah and started to fortify Ramah in order to cut off all traffic in and out of Judah.

Both Kings and Chronicles describe, with only minor variations, Asa's alliance with Syria, as a result of which Baasha, king of Israel, was forced to withdraw from Judah to protect his northern border against the Syrians (1 Kings 15:16-22; 2 Chronicles 16:2-6). The Chronicler records this as an act of faithlessness on Asa's part (2 Chron. 16:7-10) and portrays the closing years of his reign as under divine judgment:

1 Kings 15:23-24

²³Everything else that King Asa did, his brave deeds and the towns he fortified, are all recorded in *The History of the Kings of Judah*. But in his old age he was crippled by a foot disease. ²⁴Asa died and was buried in the royal tombs in David's City, and his son Jehoshaphat succeeded him as king.

2 Chron. 16:11-14

¹¹All the events of Asa's reign from beginning to end are recorded in *The History of the Kings of Judah and Israel*. ¹²In the thirty-ninth year that Asa was king, he was crippled by a severe foot disease; but even then he did not turn to the Lord for help, but to doctors. ¹³Two years later he died ¹⁴and was buried in the rock tomb which he had carved out for himself in David's City. They used spices and perfumed oils to prepare his body for burial, and they built a huge bonfire to mourn his death.

The Deuteronomist and Chronicler each develop distinct perspectives and interpretations of the reign of Asa. The Deuteronomist cross-references the reign of Asa with that of Jeroboam I of Israel while the Chronicler has no such cross-referencing. The Chronicler's interest in the northern kingdom focuses on the efforts to unite Judah and Israel (2 Chron. 15:9-10) rather than on the fact of division and conflict, though both record the invasion of Judah by Baasha, king of Israel. The Deuteronomist describes the north-south relationship as one of continuous warfare (1 Kings 15:16) while the Chronicler indicates that there was peace between them for at least 30 of Asa's 41 years (2 Chron. 15:8b,10,19).

The Deuteronomist compares Asa's reign favorably with David's with only one qualification: "he did not destroy all the pagan places of worship" (15:14). The Chronicler records that same summary evaluation but then proceeds to show by examples that Asa's life ended in a state of disobedience to the LORD (2 Chron. 16:9-10) and came under divine judgment (2 Chron. 16:12).

In his unique material, the Chronicler highlights covenant renewal and the restoration of true worship (2 Chron. 15:11-15). He also emphasizes the crucial place of the priests, the law and the temple (2 Chron. 15:3, 8) and attributes importance to peace as a mark of God's blessing (2 Chron. 14:1,5,7; 15:15,17).

The comparison of these two accounts of Asa's reign calls for an explanation. What causes two authors to select their material, generalize or particularize, highlight, and explain events as they do? Further, how does the unique perspective of each writer express itself? Out of the answers of these questions one can develop a better

understanding of how Kings and Chronicles may serve the people of God today.

The Perspective of Kings (The Deuteronomist)

The books of Kings are part of a larger history contained in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which is introduced by Deuteronomy (hence the term Deuteronomist). This version of Israel's past interprets the era between the Sinaitic covenant (Deut. 1:6) and the Babylonian exile (2 Kings 25:21).

The themes and perspectives of Deuteronomy form the heart of this history. The Deuteronomist traces the story of the people under the terms of the Sinaitic covenant, emphasizing Israel's obligation to observe *all* the commandments, to reverence the LORD alone and to worship him only at the central, authorized shrine. Considerable attention is given to the institutions of prophecy, to the judiciary, and to the constraints laid on the monarchy. With the exception of the LORD's demand for exclusive worship, these themes are unique to Deuteronomy within the legislative literature.

Should Israel follow God whole-heartedly and obey all the commandments, the LORD would bless his people (Deut. 28:1-14); but should Israel turn from God or presume on his grace, she would stand under divine curse and punishment (28:15-68), climaxing in exile, dispersion and death. But even if God's people live so as to be punished with exile, God will continue to call them to himself so as to restore them to the land (30:1-10).

The subsequent Deuteronomic history traces the failure of Israel to live up to the LORD's demands and God's persistence in calling his people to repentance and faithfulness. Even when Israel and her leaders renewed their allegiance to God, as under the ministry or administration of Samuel, David, Asa, Jehosphophat, Jehu, Joash and Hezekiah, the partial obedience or expression of failure stood as a black mark against them. With the exception of Josiah, for whom the Deuteronomist has only praise, the lives of even the greatest leaders of the nation were a mixture of godliness and disobedience. It is this failure of Israel and her leaders which led to inevitable exile for both kingdoms.

Even David (I Samuel), in spite of his elect status and his godliness, is characterized in the Deuteronomic history as a man tainted by sin and failure. One need only mention the conflicts with the house of Saul, David's failure to control his generals with the resulting bloodshed among them, the rape of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, David's failure to manage his household affairs with the consequent rebellion of his grown sons, and the sin of taking the census, to recognize the Deuteronomic theme.

Within Kings the Deuteronomist identifies the worship at high places and of other gods at their cult centers as the recurring sin of Israel's leaders.

He follows a literary pattern, with only occasional variations, in describing the kings and their reigns. It includes: accession date and age of king at accession; place and length of rule; name of wife, mother or grandmother; evaluation of the king's reign; international affairs; written sources for the history; the king's death and burial; and the naming of his successor, if it is his son (if not his son, the assassination or untimely death is described), before the statement of literary sources.

In general the most comprehensive section is the elaborate evaluation of the Kings. The issue in the rule of one king after another is: did he promote the worship of the obedience to the LORD or did he practice and encourage the worship of other deities and permit the people to sacrifice in high places? Since the predominant evaluative refrain is, "Guilty!" and only occasionally, "Innocent, but . . .," the account communicates a sense of cumulative guilt which must lead to the judgment. Deuteronomy has warned:

Never forget the LORD your God or turn to other gods to worship and serve them. If you do, then I warn you today that you will certainly be destroyed just like those nations that he is going to destroy as you advance (8:19-20).

And the writer of Kings affirms that the judgment came to both Israel and Judah:

Samaria fell because the Israelites sinned against the LORD their God . . . They worshipped other gods, followed the customs of . . . (the Canaanites) . . . and they burned incense on all the pagan altars (2 Kings 17:7-12).

. . . The LORD's fierce anger had been roused against Judah by what King Manaaseh had done . . . "I will do to Judah what I have done to Israel: I will banish the people of Judah from my sight, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and the temple, the place I said was where I should be worshipped" (2 Kings 23:26-28).

The sins of God's people are numerous and far-reaching. Acceptance of other deities is often the product of close cultural or political ties with pagan nations and treaties led to political marriages (Solomon, Ahab, Jehoram) and the subsequent importation of idolatry.

The theme of judgment interlaces the Deuteronomist's history because he is writing from within the Babylonian exile. The burning questions at the time of composition are: "Why did God bring this calamity upon us? Is there hope for this people or is this the end of the

road? Is the covenant of God ended now that Israel has experienced the curses?"

By interpreting Israel's history through the eyes of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomist can also offer hope. The LORD has assured his people that even if they were exiled for their sins he would not forget them. The terms of the Sinaitic covenant had been violated and its judgments imposed; but the larger, over-arching promise to the patriarchs remained intact as a word of hope (Deut. 30:20). That blessing could be experienced again if Israel repented and turned to the LORD (Deut. 30:1-10). 2 Kings ends with a thin ray of promise to the Babylonian exiles in the remark that Jehoiachin was honored above his fellow captive kings (2 Kings 25:27-30).

Perhaps God was already beginning to respond to Israel's call for release and restoration.

The Perspective of the Chronicler

In contrast with the Deuteronomist, the Chronicler traces the biblical history from Adam to the end of the Babylonian exile. The earlier history from Adam to David is surveyed by means of genealogical lists. The remaining history, unlike the Deuteronomist's, is restricted to the Davidic line and the house of Judah. The scope of this history suggests that the Chronicler is concerned to demonstrate the continuity of God's redemptive activity from creation to the time of the restoration following the Babylonian exile.

The Chronicler incorporates much of the data and interpretation of the history of the monarchy which is also found in Samuel-Kings but excludes the chronological cross-references to mark the accession year of the Judean kings. The Chronicler incorporates different interpretations as well as additional information beyond what appears in Samuel-Kings.

The accounts of David and the description of the temple and its personnel represent a central element in the books of Chronicles. In fact, the account of David is complimentary throughout. Contrary to Samuel-Kings, Chronicles portrays David as an ideal, untarnished by moral lapses or family or administrative squabbles. Even the census is attributed to the work of Satan (I Chron. 21:1) and David's responsibility for it is reduced (21:3b). The census was not completed and no figures were recorded (27:23-24) and God indicated his acceptance of David's repentance by sending fire from heaven to devour the sacrifice David had prepared on the site (I Chron. 21:26-30). The Chronicler uses this occasion to have David identify that as the location of the temple (I Chron. 22:1). Subsequently, the Davidic ideal is promoted

through the line of Judah's kings and, by means of genealogies, to the eventual leadership of Zerubbabel. The Davidic covenant is in focus in Chronicles, ensuring continuity in moral and administrative leadership.

Chronicles also gives pride of place to the temple and the cultic personnel, the Levites. It contains extensive Levitical and priestly genealogies (I Chron. 6) and details the Levitical families which returned from the Babylonian exile (I Chron. 9:10-34). The Chronicler elevates the Levites in their temple ministry by giving them a central role in the worship of Israel. On at least seventeen occasions the Levites are associated with the musical side of the system of worship, transforming their manual temple service (as described in Samuel-Kings which mentions the Levites a total of 3 times) into a significant spiritual role. In addition, their ministry in song is identified as prophesying (I Chron. 25:1,2,3), which represents a significant up-grading of their role.

The Levites are also pictured by the Chronicler as playing a vital role in reforming the nation. Jehoshaphat appointed a "royal commission" of five princes, nine levites and two priests to teach the law in Judah (2 Chron. 17:7-9). He also established a supreme court consisting of civil and religious personnel. Some of the members of this court and its executive officers were Levites. Thus, in various ways, the Levitical role is elevated by the Chronicler.

Similarly, even a cursory comparison of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles reveals the Chronicler's intense concern with the temple and temple-services, most notably in the religious reforms of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29:3-31:31). God's judgment on his people took the form of the destruction of the temple (2 Chron. 36 paralleled in 2 Kings 25), but the Chronicler concludes his history with Cyrus' decree (not paralleled in Kings):

The LORD, the God of Heaven, has made me ruler over the whole world and has given me the responsibility of building a temple for him in Jerusalem in Judah. Now, all of you who are God's people, go there, and may the LORD your God be with you (2 Chron. 36:23).

A considerable portion of the Samuel-Kings histories of the Judean monarchs is also found in Chronicles. This includes much of the evaluation of the moral and cultic purity of the various kings. Yet there is a difference. Whereas the Deuteronomist stresses the cumulative failure of the monarchy, the Chronicler is more concerned with the evaluation of each monarch's life. Also, while the Chronicler incorporates the stereotyped characterization of the Deuteronomist, he consistently draws attention to faith or disobedience of the king at the *end of his reign*, if that differs from his earlier response to God. In contrast with the Deuteronomist, then, the Chronicler highlights repentance and/or

defection from the faith. The only exceptions are David and Solomon, whose lives are uniformly presented as exemplary.

Rehoboam had a good beginning (2 Chron. 11) but turned against the LORD (2 Chron. 12). King Asa, as we noted, was a reformer and a true worshipper, but in his later years failed to trust God and treated the people cruelly (2 Chron. 16:7-10). Two years before his death he developed "a severe foot disease, *but even then* he did not turn to the LORD for help, but to doctors" (2 Chron. 16:12). King Joash's reforms are described by the Deuteronomist as well as the Chronicler (2 Kings 12:1-16; 2 Chron. 24:1-16) but only the Chronicler describes Joash's defection from the LORD, his murder of Jehoiada's son, Zechariah, and the divine judgment which resulted (2 Chron. 24:17-27). Similarly, Uzziah is punished within his own lifetime for his evil deeds, even though his reign is characterized as one pleasing to the LORD (2 Chron. 26:4 and 26:16-23). Most striking is the treatment of Manasseh, a king whose evil exceeded that of the Canaanites (2 Chron. 33:9). But Manasseh, after being taken captive to Assyria, was restored to his throne. That required an explanation and the Chronicler interpreted that act of restoration as due to Manasseh's prayer of repentance and the cultic reforms he initiated (2 Chron. 33:10-19).

According to the Deuteronomist, Josiah was faultless, yet he died in a battle against Pharaoh Necho. The Deuteronomist offers no explanations but the Chronicler does: "Josiah was determined to fight (Necho). He refused to listen to what God was saying through King Necho . . ." (2 Chron. 35:22). Every generation, according to the Chronicler, must experience the appropriate blessings or judgments. Good or evil do not accumulate; instead, each individual or generation is judged for its own guilt. The Chronicler even excises some of the statements concerning the progressive sin of Israel's leaders (cf. 2 Kings 23:35-24:20 and 2 Chron. 36:5-12) in explaining the cause of the Babylonian exile.

The Chronicler displays an interest in reconciliation with the Israelites of the north. Though Chronicles is a history of the Judean kingdom only, in contrast with the Deuteronomist's history of both Judah and Israel, the Chronicler's concern for the reunification of the divided people is evident. His description of the Davidic reign in Hebron contains lists and tallies of northerners who served in David's armed forces (1 Chron. 12). In this way the Davidic rule is shown to be supported by all Israel, even before the formal unification of north and south which occurred only in David's later reign.

As seen above in the Chronicler's description of Asa's reign, Asa's reforms extended to the north and "many people came over to Asa's side from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon, and were living in his kingdom, because they had seen that the LORD was with him." A

similar inclusion or invitation to northerners and settled foreigners to return to the LORD is characteristic of the reforms of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30:1-12,25; 31:1-2) and Josiah (2 Chron. 34:6-7).

How, then, does one account for the Chronicler's distinctive emphases? An important interpretive factor would be the later date of the composition of Chronicles. The genealogy of Jehoiachin (I Chron. 3:17-24) lists eleven generations of his successors. Jehoiachin was eighteen or nineteen years old in the year of his captivity (598/7 B.C.; cf. 2 Chron. 36:9-10). The average length of a generation, using calculations from the Judean kings' dates, is 25.3 years. Using that figure, the Chronicler is writing approximately 320 B.C. If one uses a conservative estimate of 20 years per generation, the date of composition cannot be before 390 B.C. So the issues which the Chronicler is addressing may be the issues which grew out of the era of Ezra and Nehemiah, whose ministry probably ended before 400 B.C.

The concerns of the Israelite community of faith during this later period are different from those of the exiles (Deuteronomist). The temple has been rebuilt, but on a much smaller scale than constructed by Solomon. Many Levites, temple workmen, and priests had returned with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2; Neh. 7) and later with Ezra (Ezra 7:1-10). That raised the question of the continuing role of the Levites and priests. In the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles, the Levites assume an elevated role. They themselves have helpers ("Solomon's servants") and they are given the responsibility of interpreting the law, of justice, and of adherence to the law generally.

This later community was also interested in the relationship between the north and south. The returned exiles were under significant pressure from the civil and religious rulers of the north. The northerners, including Tobias the Ammonite, want an equal share in the temple of Jerusalem. Whereas Ezra and Nehemiah deny them access to Jerusalem, the Chronicler takes a more conciliatory approach in describing religious cooperation through Judah and Israel's history as dependent on a genuine return to the LORD. Perhaps Ezra and Nehemiah's opposition to the Ashdodites, Ammonites and Arabs is also reflected in the relatively frequent references to these three groups in the unique material of Chronicles. So, while Chronicler denies pagans the right to fuse their worship with Judah's he does hold out to the north the hope of reunion with the south on the basis of an exclusive worship of the LORD without physical representation (idols).

The emphasis on the Davidic line may well represent an invitation to the north to acknowledge God's authorized leaders but it may also be a call to faith in the promises of God. Apparently Judah, in the fourth century B.C., did not have rulers of the line of David. Yet God's promises were true and even the failures of many of the kings after Solomon

did not invalidate the promises of God for the Messianic ruler.

A crucial theme in Chronicles is the moral evaluation of each ruler and the immediate judgment or reward received by each. This interpretation of the past places a premium on obedience and repentance. God's action is affected by his people's response. By implication one perceives that the consequences of the exile are ended and each generation will be held accountable for its own sin. If even Manasseh, that idolatrous, violent ruler could be restored through repentance, then, surely, the Judean community would also be accepted through God's gracious forgiveness. The exile was past, yet no one should presume on God's grace. Each generation (and individual) must accept responsibility before God for its own actions and cannot claim covenant promises as a personal guarantee of success without continuous obedience.

Implications

The uniqueness of the Deuteronomist's and Chronicler's histories suggest that we need to read each history for its particular perspective. The histories of Kings and Chronicles are not a series of unrelated facts. The scope, selection, sequence, analysis, and repetition of material which forms each history provides an over-arching message which is as significant as (or more significant than) the message of their individual biographical or historical sketches. Patterns evolve, emphases develop, and the cumulative voice of the texts compiled by the historian needs to be heard.

That large history is the word of God to a particular community of God's people at a given time and place. God's word comes in concrete circumstances to real people to build faith according to specific needs. When we perceive (wherever possible) the circumstances and needs of that faith-community, the texts can then be directed more profitably to specific contemporary faith-communities in our world. The biblical books (or texts) do not speak equally effectively to all people of God today either. We need to permit the Scriptures to address those issues which they were originally intended to address. Chronicles would speak more powerfully to a struggling, leaderless community than would Kings. On the other hand, Kings forces one to look for patterns of life and faith which may be cumulatively destructive or constructive; it provides a more powerful message of a complacent church, relying on the historical elective and redemptive experiences of God.

Finally, viewing each writer as an interpreter of the past and recognizing the means by which that interpretation is developed helps us to cope with such matters as variations in fact, the inclusion/exclusion of data, and the use of numerous sources for each history. If one

acknowledges the freedom each writer has to make use of existing materials — most of which have their own interpretations — the tensions within and between accounts can mostly be accounted for. One can then permit the Deuteronomist's formulae to remain intact: thus, "Joash was buried in the royal tombs in David's city" (2 Kings 12:21). We can also permit the Chronicler to choose to specify the king's burial place as a signal of his judgment on the nature of the king's reign, and especially as an evaluation of the king's devotion to the LORD at the end of his life: "(Joash) was buried in David's city but *not* in the royal tombs" (2 Chron. 24:25). To try to prove that either account is *right* or *wrong* distorts the intention of the Scriptures. When we move beyond the concern to harmonize these histories to a concern for their meaning, we discover more inclusive and richer understandings of the truths of God. And we can then appropriately apply those truths to ourselves today.