

Fact and Fiction in the Ancient Near East: The Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, The Babylonian Chronicles, and the Books of Kings in the Hebrew Bible¹

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Defining Ancient Israelite History Writing

Did the ancient Israelites write history as it happened in ancient Mesopotamia and Greece? This is a question that has marred historians and biblical scholars alike since the dawn of enlightenment – not least during the last decades – and though the textual material has been available for ages and there has been plenty of time to discuss the subject it is probably right to say that there is less agreement now than there has ever been!

One of the obvious problems in understanding the idea of history and the practice of writing history in ancient Israel is, of course, that the author(s) of the main narrative of Genesis through 2 Kings in the Hebrew Bible - unlike the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides and the later Jewish historian Josephus - does not describe the purpose of the account.²

Another complicating factor is that our conception of “genuine” or “true” history writing is based on the standards of ancient Greek history writing. Herodotus (ca. 485-425 B.C.) has become known as the “Father of History” in the sense that his writings preceded those of any other modern Western scholar who recorded historical events. He used recognized structuring techniques in his writing, unifying time, events and analytical interpretation in ways which distinguished him from mere writers of fictional literature or epic poetry. Thucydides (ca. 460-400 B.C.) followed Herodotus by several decades and began to further perfect historical style and content in his accounts of major events, and it is only natural that, in the course of Enlightenment, they were seen as forerunners of the impartial, critical, and rational research favoured by modern historians. Greek historiography became the yardstick against which all history writing was to be measured and it can come as no surprise, therefore, that ancient Israelite history writing fell short in comparison with such Greek standards. Though certain scholars continue to apply such Greek standards in the discussion on the biblical texts,³ there

¹ Revised version of a paper presented to a seminar on Text and History at Copenhagen Lutheran School of Theology June 18th 2003.

² Contrast, e.g., the re-writing of Israel’s history by Josephus, who in his *Jewish Antiquities* tells us about his authorial intent, ἐκδιηγῆσασθαι διὰ τοὺς ἐν τῷ γράφειν λυμαινομένους τὴν ἀλήθειαν, “in order to refute those who in their writings were doing outrage to the truth,” and intended readers, ταύτην δὲ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἐγκεχείπισμαι πραγματείαν νομίζων ἅπασιν φανεῖσθαι τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἀξίαν σπουδῆς; μέλλει γὰρ περιέξειν ἅπασαν τὴν παρ’ ἡμῖν ἀρχαιολογίαν καὶ τὴν διάταξιν τοῦ πολιτεύματος ἐκ τῶν Ἑβραϊκῶν μεθρημηνημένῃ γραμμάτων, “and now I have undertaken this present work in the belief that the whole Greek-speaking world will find it worthy of attention; for it will embrace our entire ancient history and political constitution translated from the Hebrew records” (H. St. J. Thackeray, trans., *Josephus. Jewish Antiquities* (The Loeb Classical Library 4; London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: William Heineman & Harvard University Press, 1957) 1.1–2).

³ E.g. the scholars connected with the so-called Copenhagen School.

has been a growing consensus over the last decades that such a procedure is an anachronistic *interpretatio europeica moderna* and that methodologies need to be developed that treat the texts in their own right.

Attempts to define "history" or "historiography" and to classify the genres of history writing are both helpful and necessary in understanding the character of ancient Near Eastern history writing as long as they function as adjustable working hypotheses in the comparative reading of historical texts. Johan Huizinga's definition of history as "the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past,"⁴ or Marc Bloch's description of historiography as an anthropological analysis including a diachronical perspective⁵ - just to mention two well-known examples - are thus important companions in the historiographical discussion, but in order to understand the conception of history and the practice of writing history in ancient Israel it is paramount to read the biblical narratives in the light of historical texts from other regions and traditions, such as Anatolia (Hittite), Mesopotamia, Egypt, Second Temple Judaism, *together* with classical Greece, not with the latter as the superior standard and everything else as inferior attempts to achieve the same. The histories of Herodotus and Thucydides *may*, as I have argued elsewhere,⁶ be the yardstick to measure what can and cannot be dubbed "historiography," and the label "antiquarianism" may be the best fit for the historical texts of the Hebrew Bible among conventional *Hellenistic* and *Classical* genre designations. But it is a *non sequitur* to argue that, because the historical texts of the Hebrew Bible or texts from other ancient Near Eastern traditions lack the formal characteristics of *Greek* (and Roman) historiography, they also lack what these characteristics betray, namely a genuine historical consciousness and historical intent. Such an argumentation a) arrogantly places Greek historiography as the standard against which all other pieces of history writing in the ancient world must be measured, and b) precludes the possibility *a priori* that other ancient Near Eastern genres exist that deploy different literary conventions and narrative strategies for the same purpose.⁷ Even if we - strictly speaking - cannot talk about Israelite *historiography*, the historical texts in the Hebrew Bible may very well have the same historical intent. Thompson may be correct that the redactional techniques deployed in writing, collecting and editing the historical texts of the Hebrew Bible betray "antiquarian efforts" and that they reveal an intention that "is specifically inimical to that of historiography."⁸ This is primarily an observation on the formal differences between Greek historiography and Israelite history writing, however, and is not an argument against genuine historical consciousness and historical intent in the latter. This is only the case *if* such a consciousness and intent is inimical or at least uninteresting to the subgenre "antiquarianism"

⁴ Johan Huizinga, "A Definition of the Concept of History," in *Philosophy & History. Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, in *Philosophy and History. Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (eds. Raymond Klíbanksky and H.J. Paton Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) 9.

⁵ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954). English translation of *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1949).

⁶ Cf. Jens Bruun Kofoed *Text and History. The Old Testament Texts as a Source for the History of Ancient Israel* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Aarhus, 2002) 227-30.

⁷ Though admittedly being more cautious against too rigid genre designations, the same tendency is found in Bolin, "History, Historiography, and the Use of the Past in the Hebrew Bible." In *The Limits of Historiography: Genre and Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts* (ed. C. S. Kraus. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999) 133, who comments that "in this focus on the connection between the HB and antiquarian writing, the historical context has moved from the milieu of the ancient Near East to that of the Hellenistic Mediterranean. This shift is congruent with other lines of investigation which are beginning to look to the Hellenistic era as the intellectual background to the creation of the HB. It now remains to elaborate on some recurring features in the biblical texts which support the contention that it constitutes an attempt at antiquarian writing rather than historiography, and to examine the lone biblical text which speaks about the HB as a corpus in order to see what light may be shed on this question by what the Bible say about its own composition."

⁸ Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite people from the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Studies in the history of the ancient Near East. Leiden: Brill, 1992) 377.

(as the genre is generally understood) and - especially - *if* applying such a genre designation on the texts of the Hebrew Bible is an adequate way of describing their narrative structure. While the former is probably true (i.e. that the antiquarian did not have as his primary goal to give an accurate and reliable account of the past), Thompson has not, in the present author's opinion, demonstrated why the redactional techniques deployed by the authors/editors of the Hebrew Bible are used to describe "worlds of story and fragmented tradition past" rather than "to give a presentation of what was perceived or traditionally held to be the real world of the past."⁹ We cannot tell from the literary level, whether the text's reference is real or imaginative, and as even "genuine" historiography makes use of sophisticated literary devices it remains an assertion, therefore, that this technique betrays a non-historical or non-referential intent. The historical consciousness may not be explicitly stated and the historical intent may be subordinated to other purposes and interests, but there is nothing on the literary level that precludes in itself the possibility that the biblical authors/editors *did* have such intentions. In that case the designation "antiquarianism" is highly problematic and useless in a description of ancient Israelite history writing.

The purpose of the present paper is *not* to give a comprehensive and exhaustive description of ancient Israelite history writing, but to read a sample text from the Hebrew Bible in the light of comparable texts from Mesopotamia. For this purpose I have chosen the Book of Kings from the Hebrew Bible, a number of North-West Semitic Royal Inscriptions, and from Mesopotamia the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and the Babylonian Chronicles. The purpose is twofold, namely a) to determine the accuracy and reliability of the historical information in the Books of Kings by cross-examining the texts, and b) to discuss the authorial intent and purpose of the texts. The hope is that the differences and similarities found can help illuminate the genre or historiographical character of the biblical text.

The Books of Kings as a Multigenre Product

It is often said that the intricate history of the ancient Israelites recorded in the Hebrew Bible is unique among all the ancient historical works. While this is no doubt true of the text as a whole, it is quite wrong when applied to its parts. The Books of Kings are clearly a composite text or a multigenre product, and when split up in parts it is easy to find fully comparable texts from other quarters in the ancient Near East. Splitting up the composite text we find both plain narratives (political and prophetic), administrative lists, military itineraries, oracles as well as chronicles, and all of these subgenres have their counterparts in the comparative material. The bulk of material from the surrounding regions consists of administrative texts, and from both Egypt, Anatolia and Mesopotamia we have a number of both narrative texts and chronicles. As an analysis of the genre and historical accuracy in material comparable to the parts of the text it may have implications for the text as a whole, we shall discuss briefly three areas of comparative interest, namely the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, the Babylonian Chronicle, and the North-West Semitic Royal Inscriptions.

The Assyrian Royal Inscriptions

The most notable literary form which developed in Assyria was the Assyrian royal inscription. These so-called votive inscriptions, that is, inscriptions recording the dedication of something given to the god or done for the god, followed the pattern of similar inscriptions made by the Sumerians as early as in the third millennium B.C.E. The inscriptions could take various forms, simple or complex, but the essential elements were the identification of the king, the gift or pious work, and the occasion of the dedication. Development in course of time eventually produced the following framework:

⁹ Ibid., 168.

- (a) the king's name, titles, and special relationship with the gods,
- (b) mention of events fixing the point in time,
- (c) an account of the pious work, usually a building operation.

As the idea developed in Assyria that the god Ashur claimed worldwide dominion, the account proper (c) became increasingly appropriate, and from about 1300, the Assyrian kings (though not those of Babylonia) began to develop this section into a description of their undertakings in the military sphere. Once this practice had become accepted, it opened considerable possibilities for the king's self-glorification as evidenced in an inscription from the time of Ashur-nasir-apli II (883-859 B.C.) found on stone slabs in the Ninurta temple at Kalach: "... I am king, I am lord, I am praise-worthy I am exalted, I am important, I am magnificent, I am foremost, I am a hero, I am a warrior, I am a lion, and I am virile; Ashur-nasir-apli, strong king, king of Assyria ..."¹⁰ Or in the well-known inscription of Shalmaneser III's (859-824 B.C.) on the Black Obelisk "(I am) Shalmaneser, King of multitudes of men, prince (and) hero of Assur, the strong King, King of all the four zones of the Sun (and) of multitudes of men, the marcher over the whole world; Son of Assur-natsir-pal, the supreme hero, who his heroism over the gods has made good and has caused all the world to kiss his feet."¹¹ This eventually developed into a form in which the king, speaking in the first person, gave an account of everything military that he had done in his reign to date. The details might be arranged in different ways, either region by region or year by year. The arrangement year by year, which we may properly call annals, first occurred in Assyria in the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1077).

In spite of their immediate appearance as historical texts, the royal Assyrian inscriptions were *dedicatory* inscriptions and, interestingly, not primarily intended for the human eye. Many of them were written on cylinders or prisms and buried in the foundation of the building whose restoration they describe, that is, in places where only the gods could see them. The Assyrian kings were fully aware, however, that later kings, in order to make repairs or extensions, would need to dig down to the foundations once again and thus find and read the inscriptions. There is a regular formula at the end of many royal Assyrian inscriptions, covering this circumstance. One of them can be found on a tablet from Nineveh from the time of Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076 B.C.):

In the future, in the days to come, may a later prince, when that palace, its house of the Step Gate, becomes old and dilapidated, restore its weakened portions. May he see my steles and clay inscriptions, read about the might of my dominion which the gods Ashur and Ninurta gave to me...¹²

Not all royal inscriptions were buried this way. Some of them were inscribed on bas reliefs along the walls of palaces, others carved into the colossal stone bulls and lions which stood guardian at gateways, and some were engraved on royal monuments set up on distant borders to commemorate Assyrians triumphs there. We might suppose that with an inscribed monument set up in a public place, the primary purpose was that it should be read by humans at large. But even with a monument at the centre of a busy Assyrian city, that would not have been possible, since the literate were a small minority. With monuments erected on distant northern or eastern borders, where (except possibly for a few officers amongst scattered Assyrian garrisons) the population would be ignorant of the Akkadian language in which the inscriptions were written, the likelihood of readers would be even less; had the text been

¹⁰ Cf. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (2 vols.; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

intended to remind conquered populations of Assyrian might, the Assyrian king could have written them bilingually in Urartian and Akkadian (as an Urartian king actually did in one case). As to the inscriptions on bas reliefs inside Assyrian palaces, these would only ever have been seen by a small number of palace staff, visiting officials, and foreign dignitaries.

As far as source criticism is concerned the inscriptions must be considered primary sources. A source is generally understood to be primary if it stems directly from an eye- or earwitness or, importantly, a later account that relies on an earlier *non-extant* source. In other words, a primary account is the oldest *extant* source available. The distinction between "primary" and "secondary" has to do, therefore, with the value or *importance* of the witness rather than its contemporaneity with the event it purports to describe. Secondary sources are unimportant as witnesses, since they only repeat what is already known. Primary sources will always be of importance, since they constitute the first *extant* information we have on a given event, person etc. It is crucial, therefore, that the terms "primary" and "secondary" sources are distinguished from the terms "firsthand" and "secondhand" witnesses. A firsthand account will always be a primary source, but the opposite does not apply, since a secondhand account may be the oldest, extant witness and therefore a primary source. In this light it is obvious that the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions are not only primary sources but also firsthand and contemporary sources. In other words: the best we can get.

As the inscriptions span a long period of time there are, expectedly, a great number of inscriptions, but the inscriptions relevant for comparison with the Books of Kings are the following.¹³

- The Kurkh Stele (Shalmaneser III, ca. 853 B.C.) referring to 'Ahab the Israelite' at the Battle of Qarqar (probably following the incident described in 1 Kgs 20:1-34).
- The Mesha Stele (Mesha, ca. 830 B.C.) referring to Ahab and the house of Omri
- The Black Obelisk (Shalmaneser III, ca. 841 B.C.) referring to 'Jehu the Omride'
- The Tell al-Rimah Stele (Adad-nerari III, ca. 796 B.C.) referring to 'Joash the Samaritan'
- The Royal Assyrian Annals (Tiglath-pileser III, ca. 738 B.C.) referring to 'Menahem the Samaritan'
- The Nimrud Slab (Tiglath-pileser III, ca. 732 B.C.) referring to 'Jehoahaz the Judean' the internal coup in Israel: 'they overthrew their king Peqah, and I set Hoshea as king over them'
- The Annals of Sargon II (Sargon II, ca. 720 B.C.) referring to the fall of Samaria
- The Annals and reliefs of Sennacherib (ca. 704-681 B.C.) referring to 'Hezekiah the Judean' in connection with the 701 B.C. campaign against Judah.
- List of Esahaddon (ca. 674 B.C.) referring to 'Manasseh King of Judah'
- Prism C of Ashurbanipal (ca. 668-627 B.C.) mentioning 'Manasseh King of Judah'

Babylonian Chronicles

A "chronicle" is defined by Oxford English Dictionary as a "detailed and continuous register of events" while Webster's 10th Collegiate Dictionary describes it as "a continuous historical account of events arranged in order of time without analysis or interpretation." Dorothea Weltecke, in a discussion on the narratological character of medieval chronicles, writes that "medieval chroniclers seem to have been less interested in understanding mankind in an anthropological manner. Instead, the chronicle seems to have been a historical genre which was occupied with past events *as such*, and what could be known of them," and Weltecke

¹³ For translation see Grayson 1972 or W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger, Jr. (eds.), *The Context of Scripture. Vol. II. Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997).

continues to comment on the difference between ancient chronographers and modern historians that

The chronicler was neither a writer of stories, nor of "*historiae*." For he was a writer of *time*. Hence, he produced *time-writing*, *descriptions of times*, *chronographia*, *maktbônût zabnê*... The main occupation of the chronicler was the measuring of "the past" ... The chronographers measured *memories*. Memories contained time, lived through, and therefore existent, by *others*. And hence, an intersubjectively intelligible conception of time was brought into being. Time might have been created by God, this is not for the historian to decide. "Time" in the way we conceive it, was also created by man, it is a cultural construction.¹⁴

This has some direct bearings on the genre of the Babylonian Chronicles. The title "Babylonian Chronicles" is applied to a number of texts that register events of interest to the Babylonians arranged in chronological order by years of kings' reigns.¹⁵ The main corpus are the so-called Babylonian Chronicle Series which is usually divided into two and termed "The Neo-Babylonian Chronicle Series" and "The Late Babylonian Chronicle Series," respectively. The first part of the Neo-Babylonian Series covers the reign of Nabu-nasir (747-734 B.C.) and the series ends with the Nabonidus Chronicle which narrates events beginning with the accession of Nabonidus in Babylon in 556 B.C. and ending with sometime after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 B.C. The Late Babylonian Chronicle Series seems to pick up where the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle Series left. Grayson remarks that "although the preserved texts do not appear to begin before the reign of Xerxes I (485-465) it is safe to assume that this series picked up where the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle Series came to an end, c. 539 B.C., and continued at least as far as the reign of Seleucus II (245-226 B.C.). Indeed, there is no break in 539 B.C. or any other time."¹⁶ As far as genre is concerned, the chronicles appear to be extracts from running records wherein the compilers entered any noteworthy phenomena. The purpose of such a compilation remains a mystery, but Alan Millard, in a review of Grayson's translation, notes that

Perhaps a clue to the purpose of the first [the running records] is found in Esther 6:1,2 (cf. 2:28) where the sleepless Ahasuerus (Xerxes) has the chronicles of his reign read to him. There is no reason to doubt the story reflects a court custom. The running record was kept so that the king himself might see how he and his country were faring. In that would be an indication of the gods' favour or disapproval, since everything that occurred was under their control. In addition, chronicles of earlier kings would show what they had done, maybe in similar circumstances, thus offering precedents and warnings.¹⁷

Millard, expressing his doubt that the chronicles may have been drawn up in the service of judicial astrology, adds that there is "some evidence does exist to show neo-Babylonian scholars and kings cared about the past. There are ancient objects preserved in the 'museums' at Babylon and Ur, and there are several copies of early inscriptions, some carefully reproducing the archaic signs. Building activities, we know, brought to light the monuments of former kings, and that, we can imagine, may have aroused curiosity, 'What was happening then? Was the New Year Festival celebrated in those days?'"¹⁸

¹⁴ Dorothea Weltecke, "Originality and Function of Formal Structures in the Chronicle of Michael the Great," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3.2 (July 2000). Accessed 13 June at <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol3No2/HV3N2Weltecke.html>

¹⁵ The standard translation is A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1975).

¹⁶ Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 22.

¹⁷ Alan Millard, "Review of *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*. A. K. Grayson," *JAOS* 100.3 (1980) 364.

¹⁸ Millard, "Review," 365.

Due to their continuous updating the chronicles can with some right be described as "editions."¹⁹ The scribes – or *redactors* – edited out earlier material that they did not consider significant in order to make room for new material and sometimes they rewrote entries in order to condense them. Robert Whiting, in a mail posted on the ANE-list comments that

Certain types of chronographic sources tend to be more detailed and more accurate toward the end of the period they cover. This is due not only to the good old Second Law of Thermodynamics but also to a process known as redaction. Redaction comes from *redactio*, a Latin term meaning a reduction or compression. In updating chronographic texts, redactors edit out earlier material that they do not consider significant in order to make room for new material and sometimes they rewrite entries in order to condense them. Sometimes these redactions make the earlier entries seem unreliable because they omit significant details and/or introduce anachronisms into the text. For example, it is fairly easy to tell that the last significant redaction of the Assyrian King list was in the Middle Assyrian period because the use of Karduniash for Babylonia is not the Neo-Assyrian usage. Similarly, the statement that Shamshi-Adad I "went to Karduniash" is anachronistic because Babylonia was not known as Karduniash at the time of Shamshi-Adad I. After the Middle Assyrian redaction, the AKL was apparently simply copied and updated.²⁰

For the same reason the chronicles may not be first hand sources for the events that they record, especially from the most distant past, and this leads to the paradox that the chronicles are first hand sources at one end and second hand sources at the other. At some time each entry *was* a firsthand source, but as time went by and these first hand sources were added to and edited, they became secondhand, source critically speaking.

As far as genre is concerned, the chronicles are not narratives in the ordinary meaning of the word but – in the definition above - a continuous historical account of events arranged in order of time without analysis or interpretation. That does not mean, however, that the material has been arbitrarily collected, with no sense for meaning, as every chronicle - even the extremely meagre ones - do have their own ways of producing historical meaning, hence, of narration, and Grayson is perhaps closer to an adequate description when he defines the Mesopotamian chronicle as "a prose narration of events in chronological order normally written in the third person."²¹

Discussing a number of chronicles not belonging to the main Babylonian Chronicles Series, Grayson tries to penetrate the writers' purpose. Grayson thus notes the interest of the "Akitu Chronicle" (Grayson's no. 16, covering the period 689-626 B.C.) and the "Religious Chronicle" (Grayson's no. 17, narrating event in the reigns of Nabu-shumu-libur and Nabu-mukin-apli in the 11th and 10th centuries), and the purpose of the Weidner Chronicle (Grayson's no. 19, narrating events from as early as the third millennium B.C.) to show how kings who failed to support Marduk's cult were disgraced. It is also interesting how the chronicles, however uninterested they were in "understanding mankind in an anthropological manner," do have their biases and sometimes mix political affairs with religious. This is the case, as have already been mentioned, in the Weidner Chronicle and is also apparent in the "Nabonidus Chronicle" (Grayson's no. 7), which, like the Akitu Chronicle, is also occupied with the keeping or, rather, neglect of the Akitu Festival by Nabonidus. The existence of

¹⁹ As is apparently the case with the Assyrian Annals due to their "updating" on significant occasions in the history of Assyria, cf. Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* (2 vols.; London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 2.474.

²⁰ Robert Whiting 18 April 2003 on the ANE-mailinglist archived at <https://listhost.uchicago.edu/pipermail/ane/> (accessed 13 June 2003). K. A. Kitchen has suggested (in private correspondence), however, that "it is not so much chronicles that successively compress earlier entries in new editions, so much as the annals of individual Assyrian kings in early 1st millennium B.C. that do so. In the 3rd and 2nd millennia, the opposite happens: so in the Old Kingdom and Tuthmosis III in New Kingdom (plus Joshua ...) all retain in each case a full account of their first campaign, and give much briefer summary accounts of subsequent campaigns (which makes Joshua very pre-NeoAssyrian.)"

²¹ Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, ix.

such a mix of military, religious, and political matters in a number of the chronicles is a good example of what was mentioned above, namely that attempts to classify the genre of chronography are both helpful and necessary as they function as adjustable working hypotheses in the comparative reading of historical texts. Or as Millard notes, "this should warn against easy distinctions of source by subject-matter. Distinction by form is not always satisfactory, either."²²

North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions

A area of comparative interest is a group of texts titled North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions. To this group belong – among others - the Mesha Stele, the Zakkur Inscription and the Zinjirli Inscription.

The most interesting point of comparison is a common pattern that can be found in these texts. The pattern itself is well known, but Marcio Redondo has recently demonstrated how the same pattern seem to occur in, e.g., the accounts of Asa and Ahaz in 1 Kgs 15 and 2 Kgs 16.²³

North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions	The Account of Asa of Judah – 1 Kgs 15:9-24
A. Introduction	A. Introduction (vv. 9-11)
B. Assessment	B. Theological assesment (vv. 12-15)
C. Account proper	C. Account (vv. 16-22)
D. Conclusion	D. Conclusion (vv. 23-24)

As far as genre and source critical value is concerned, they are immediately comparable with the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, but there are also important differences. In regard to introduction, we find lengthy and very elaborate introductions in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions while the introduction in the North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions appear to be very brief. As far as assessments are concerned, they are non-existent or hard to come about in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, while we find them as a fixed part of a pattern in the North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions. In the text of the Mesha Stele, e.g., we thus find after the introduction the assessment that "Omri was the king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab for many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land." Redondo also points to a number of other differences. In the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, the account proper is often religious, while in the North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions it is usually non-religious. The North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions are, furthermore, much shorter than the Assyrian ones.

Having reviewed these features in material that is comparable to *parts* of the Books of Kings, we shall now try to draw some tentative conclusions on the question of genre and historical accuracy of the Books of Kings as a whole.

Implications

As far as genre is concerned, we have seen that a number of differences exist between the Assyrian and the North West Semitic Inscriptions, and the accounts of Judean and Israelite kings in the biblical record seem to follow the pattern of the latter. Though the biblical texts do mention events fixing the point in time and contain accounts of pious work as is the case in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, they lack their lengthy and elaborate introductions, and seem altogether to be much closer to the North West Semitic ones.

²² Millard, "Review," 368.

²³ Marcio Redondo, *The portrayal of the King in ancient Semitic texts and the Hebrew Book of Kings* (Ph.Diss.; University of Liverpool, 2001).

In his comparison of North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions with the Books of Kings, Redondo not only found an identical *pattern* in the texts, but also a close resemblance between the other features mentioned above. Redondo, in addition, also noticed a group of high-frequency words and literary devices in the North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions that also occurs in the biblical text. Taken together these similarities suggest, of course, that when we find so many shared features, it is likely that the biblical text was composed by a narrator or an editor who had access to similar Israelite Royal Inscriptions or at least that he structured his information according to the commonly accepted genre of royal inscriptions. It is well known that ancient historians wrote with some measure of prescriptive structure and bias. Stepping over the boundaries of these conventions the authors risked a loss of credibility with their audience—a result which was the last thing the ancient historian desired. This is precisely what Christopher Pelling has in mind, when he speaks of “discursive exchange.” Taking his outset from an episode of *Star Trek*, where the *Starship Enterprise* “boldly came upon a strange new vessel, manned by a people called Tamarians” he explains:

Stories typically (probably indeed universally) fit into a “discursive exchange”: they communicate, and respond to earlier communications. That is true of stories told over the dinner table or in the café; it was true of the stories summoned up by the Tamarians, both as they discussed among themselves how to respond to the overtures and as they tried to communicate with the outsiders; and in a more elaborate way it is true of the narratives of written historiography ... The simplest sort of “discursive exchange” comes when one text continues another, picking up where the first left off. Thus within the Greco-Roman tradition various authors set out to continue Thucydides - Xenophon in *Hellenica*, Theopompus, *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*, Cratippus; later Phylarchus continued Duris of Samos; the phenomenon is as early as Thucydides himself, picking up the narrative of the “Pentecontaetia” at the point where Herodotus finished (at Sestos, 1.89). Continuation was even more frequent on the Roman side ...²⁴

Pelling goes on to demonstrate that such a continuation or “discursive exchange” could be much more subtle and that serial history - as evidenced in the *Hellenicas* - typically was “a contribution to a continuing exchange and debate about how history should be written” and that this “redefinition can go in different directions.”²⁵ Christine Mitchell, in an interesting comparison of the Books of Chronicles and the Books of Kings,²⁶ in a similar way rejects the idea of Chronicles being an example of plagiarism and opts for a model of intertextuality that is both synchronic (accounts for how we experience the texts), and diachronic (accounts for how the ancients experienced the texts). The Chronicler, in this view, was not merely plagiarizing or idealizing a strong precursor author (i.e. the author of the Books of Kings) as is commonly held, but must rather be understood as an example of “Aristotelan intertextuality”:

There are two concepts in the Poetics that may lend themselves to a discussion of intertextuality, although neither is given that sense exactly: mimesis and plot ... Mimesis, imitation, has two senses in the Poetics, the

24. Pelling, “Epilogue.” In *The Limits of Historiography. Genre and Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts* (ed. C. S. Kraus. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 1999) 326. Cf. also Veldhuis, who, in an article on the concept of canon in Mesopotamian literature argues that “canon is a phenomenon of reception as well as production, since new texts may be composed in conscious relation to canonical ones. In this use of the term canon, inclusion and exclusion are matters of degree or perspective, rather than an absolute characteristic of a text. We may distinguish between core and periphery, between canons of different social groups, or we may perceive changes over time in the position that a certain composition has within the canon. In this perception, the character of a canon is not solely defined by the corpus that is included, but at least as much by what is excluded and by the relations maintained between the canonical and the trivial” (“TIN.TIR = Babylon, the Question of Canonization, and the Production of Meaning.” *JCS* 50 (1998) 79).

25. Pelling, “Epilogue,” 327.

²⁶ Christine Mitchell, “Transformation in Meaning: Solomon’s Accession in Chronicles,” *JHS* 4 (2002-2003), accessed online July 7th 2003 at http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_25.doc.

sense of image-making (as in a work of art) and enactment – this is the sense that Aristotle emphasized; it is one of the core concepts in the *Poetics*. For Aristotle, literature, especially tragedy and epic, was mimetic. Whether we can expand this definition of mimesis from the imitation of forms to include the imitation of earlier works of literature is possible, but improbable in Aristotle's context, since there is no explicit reference to such reuse other than in the matter of plot. There is no reference to reuse of figures, themes, motifs, language etc., which we might consider hallmarks of intertextuality.²⁷

Though Aristotle specifically separated out history from poetry as a genre (*Poetics* 51a36-51b8), Mitchell argues that "it seems to me that they might be applied to other ancient literary forms," and that "it is clear, at any rate, that the use and re-use of previous works (specifically the plots of previous works) was a known and accepted phenomenon in Aristotle's day, even though exact relationships perhaps had not been thought out."²⁸ On the basis of these observations, Mitchell defines intertextuality as "the interrelationship of texts, including, but not limited to, the absorption, rewriting, reuse and dialogue of text with text. The text is the work that absorbs, rewrites or reuses; the intertext is the work that is absorbed, rewritten or reused,"²⁹ and argues that "the Chronicler did not plagiarize, but transformed the earlier text, performing creative imitation of the highest order."³⁰ Whatever the degree of creativity may have been, both Mitchell's and Pelling's analyses are suggestive. Regardless of whether the editor of the Books of Kings had direct access to royal inscriptions or he drew his information from chronicles, it is highly unlikely that he would have violated these commonly accepted genres.

In regard to the Babylonian Chronicles we have seen how the chronicles do have their biases and sometimes mix political affairs with religious. They are not, as is often said, completely without analysis or interpretation. The analysis and interpretation is much more subtle, but it is certainly there. This does not mean, however, that we can speak about a *close* resemblance between the Babylonian Chronicles and the "chronicle-like" information in the Books of Kings. In spite of its subtle "analysis and interpretation" the narratological character of the Babylonian Chronicles are quite different from, say, the detailed and "theological" account on king Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18-20). It is highly likely, on the other hand, that running records were kept also at the Israelite and Judean courts "so that the king himself might see how he and his country were faring," and there is no reason to doubt, consequently, that the chronicles referred to by the editor of the Books of Kings existed and that at least some of his information are extracts from such sources.

As far as genre is concerned, the analyses of the North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions and the Babylonian Chronicles supports the view that a number of accounts on Judean and Israelite kings are modelled upon similar (but non-extant) Israelite royal inscriptions or extracts from similar (but likewise non-extant) Israelite and Judean chronicles. For the same reason we must assume that these *parts* of the Books of Kings betray an interest similar to those of the North West Semitic Royal Inscriptions and the Babylonian Chronicles in preserving accounts of the past. One thing is the parts, however, and the question is how far this observation takes in regard to the Books of Kings *as a whole*? Can we induce from the apparent authorial intent in these parts that a similar intent applies to the whole? The answer seems to be both yes and no – or rather, *perhaps!* We have already pointed out that the Books of Kings must be described as a composite text or a multigenre product, and that it as such is best described as a phenomenon *sui generis* in the ancient Near East. We have no possibility of comparing this

²⁷ Christine Mitchell, "Transformation," 2.4.2. Vivienne Gray points out that by the third century B.C., mimesis was being used to describe the desirable attributes of history as well as tragedy; it was a well-known technical term by the first century B.C.; "*Mimesis* in Greek Historical Theory" *AJP* 108 (1987) 467-68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.4.4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.5.1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.1.

particular configuration of generic elements with equals, therefore, and any conclusion on the authorial intent of the composite text must consequently be phrased in the tentative. What we *can* say is, however, that since a considerable number of generic elements *do* have a marked historical interest, it is highly unlikely that the authorial intent of the composite texts should go in the opposite direction. Provided the analyses are correct, it is much more likely that the apparently historical genres (royal inscriptions and chronicles) were deployed precisely because the author had a marked interest in what actually happened. It is obvious that the picture presented of the past first and foremost was used for political and/or religious purposes by the author, but the bulk of evidence suggests that it was an accurate and not distorted or invented picture.

The Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and the Babylonian Chronicles, furthermore, provides us with an indispensable opportunity to crosscheck information and thus determine the historical accuracy of information given in the Books of Kings. The following list makes this clear.³¹

The Books of Kings	Ancient Near Eastern Texts
<p>Ahab</p> <p>Ahab fights the Arameans Assyrians not mentioned Ahab weak</p>	<p><i>Ahab</i> at the Battle of Qarqar (ca. 853 B.C.E.) <i>¹a-ha-ab-bu ^{māi}sir-'i-la-a-a</i> 'Ahab the Israelite' Shalmaneser III (ca. 858-824 B.C.E.), Kurkh Stele, III R 8 ii 92</p> <p>Ahab allied with the Arameans Enemies are the Assyrians Ahab strong</p>
<p>Mesha</p> <p>King of Moab and vassal of Ahab</p>	<p><i>Mesha Inscription</i> (ca. 830 B.C.E.) <i>'nk mš'</i> 'I am Mesha'</p> <p>King of Moab and vassal of Omri and Ahab Mesha rebelled during Ahab's lifetime</p>
<p>Jehu</p> <p>Nothing about the Assyrians</p>	<p><i>Jehu</i> a tributary (ca. 841 B.C.E.) <i>¹ya-ú—a mār ¹hu-um-ri-i</i> 'Jehu the Omride' Shalmaneser III (ca. 858-824 B.C.E.), Black Obelisk</p> <p>Jehu submits to Shalmaneser III</p>
<p>Jehoash/Joash (of Israel)</p>	<p><i>Joash</i> a tributary (ca. 796 B.C.E.) <i>¹ya-'a-su ^{māi}sa-me-ri-na-a-a</i> 'Joash the Samaritan' Adad-nerari III (ca. 810-783 B.C.E.) Tell al-Rimah Stele</p>

³¹ The list has been made on the basis of J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd edition; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources 5; New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1975); Alan Millard, "Israelite and Aramean History in the Light of Inscriptions." *TB* 41.2 (1990) 271-73, Grabbe, "Fellow Creatures - or Different Animals?" Pp. 19-36 in *Can a "History of Israel" be Written?* (ed. L. L. Grabbe. JSOTS 245, ESHM 1. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 25-26; and Long, "How Reliable are Biblical Reports? Repeating Lester Grabbe's Comparative Experiment." *VT* LII, 3 (2002) 369-70. For English translations see the references given in Millard's abovementioned list. Note that *Azariah/Uzziah* has been omitted from Grabbe's and Long's lists since chronological and historical obstacles make the identification of Azariah of Judah with the Azriyau of Ya'udi mentioned in the account of Tiglath-pileser III's 737 campaign unlikely.

No reference to the Assyrians	Pays tribute to Adad-nerari III
Menahem Pays tribute to Pul (Tiglath-pileser III)	<i>Menahem</i> a tributary (ca. 738 B.C.E.) ¹ <i>me-ni-hi-im-me</i> ^{āl} <i>sa-me-ri-na-a-a</i> 'Menahem the Samarian' Tiglath-pileser III (ca. 744-727 B.C.E.), 'Annals' III R 9.3 50 Pays tribute to Tiglath-pileser III
Jehoahaz/Ahaz (of Judah) Becomes Assyrian vassal to gain aid against Isarel and Damascus	<i>Ahaz</i> a tributary (ca. 732 B.C.E.) ¹ <i>ya-ú-ha-zi</i> ^{māt} <i>ya-ú-da-a-a</i> 'Jehoahaz the Judean' Tiglath-pileser III, Nimrud Slab II R 67 r. 11 Pays tribute to Tiglath-pileser III
Pekah and Hoshea Pekah overthrown by Hoshea Hoshea takes throne in internal coup Samaria conquered by Shalmaneser V	<i>Pekah and Hoshea</i> (ca. 732 B.C.E.) [The people of Beth-Omri] <i>pa-qa-ha šarru-šú-nu is-ki-pu-ma</i> ¹ <i>a-ú-si-</i> '[<i>ana šarrūti ina muhhi</i>]-šú-nu <i>áš-kun</i> 'They overthrew their king Peqah, and I set Hoshea as king over them' Tiglath-pileser III, Nimrud Tablet, III R 10.2 28,29 Pekah overthrown by internal revolt Tiglath-pileser III puts Hoshea on throne Samaria conquered by Sargon II according to Sargon's inscriptions. Conquered by Shalmaneser V according to the Babylonian Chronicle. ^{uru} <i>š-ma/ba-ra-</i> '-in <i>ih-te-pi</i> 'he [Shalmaneser V] ravaged Samaria' Shalmaneser V (ca. 726-722 B.C.E.), Babylonian Chronicle I i 28
Hezekiah Pays tribute; Jerusalem delivered miraculously Sennacherib killed (by two sons)	<i>Hezekiah</i> a tributary (ca. 701 B.C.E.) ¹ <i>ha-za-qí-ya-ú</i> ^{māt} <i>ya-ú-da-a-a</i> 'Hezekiah the Judean' Sennacherib (ca. 704-681 B.C.E.), 'annals' iii 37ff and other texts Submits to Sennacherib and pays tribute, but despite a large siege Jerusalem does not fall Sennacherib killed (by one son)
Manasseh	<i>Manasseh</i> a tributary (ca. 674 B.C.E.) ¹ <i>me-na-si-i šar</i> ^{āl} <i>ya-ú-di</i> 'Manasseh King of Judah' Esarhaddon (ca. 680-669 B.C.E.) ¹ <i>mi-in-se-e šar</i> ^{māt} <i>ya-ú-di</i> 'Manasseh King of Judah'

<p>No reference to Assyrians (2 Kgs 21)</p> <p>Taken captive in Babylon (2 Chr 33)</p>	<p>Ashurbanipal (ca. 668-627 B.C.E.) Prism C ii 27</p> <p>Required to send tribute to Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal</p>
<p>Jehoiachin and Zedekiah</p> <p>Jerusalem conquered and Jehoiachin taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar</p>	<p>Jehoiachin and Zedekiah</p> <p>Jerusalem conquered and its king taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar</p> <p><i>āla iC-ca-bat šarra ik-ta-šad</i> 'he captured the city (and) seized (its) king'</p> <p>Nebuchadnezzar (ca. 605-562 B.C.E.), Babylonian Chronicle 5 Reverse 12</p>
<p>Zedekiah</p> <p>Jerusalem conquered by Nebuchadnezzar</p>	<p><i>Zedekiah the puppet king</i></p> <p><i>šarra ša [libbi]-šu ina libbi ip-te-qid</i> 'a king of his own choice he appointed in the city'</p> <p>Nebuchadnezzar (ca. 605-562) Babylonian Chronicle 5 Reverse 13</p> <p>No information after 594 B.C.E.</p>

Being contemporary sources of historical information they provide the first, best, and in many cases also the only extra-biblical attestations of a number of kings and events mentioned in the biblical account. And though Lester Grabbe recently have argued that while "the [biblical] text is reasonably accurate about the framework," we "can have little *prima facie* confidence in the details ... sometimes they seem accurate, but at other times they are demonstrably misleading or wholly inaccurate and perhaps even completely invented,"³² V. Philips Long has demonstrated that it is Grabbe who is "misleading" or "wholly inaccurate" in his comparison, and suggest that he (and other participants in the inaugural meeting of the European Seminar on Methodology in Israel's History) may have "approached the evidence with certain preconceived notions of what would be found."³³ Whether Long is right or not in his "suggestion," it is safe to say, however, that the Royal Assyrian Inscriptions and the Babylonian Chronicle provide contemporary historical information that corroborate information in the Books of Kings on a number of points. Not just as far as "framework" is concerned (i.e. the existence, sequence and approximate chronological period of Israelite or Judean kings from the mid-ninth century onwards) but *also* in regard to the details as the differences between the information given in the Books of Kings and in the extra-biblical texts have other and more likely explanations than the "contradictory" ones suggested by Grabbe. The same critique must be raised against Niels Peter Lemche, another leading proponent of the nowadays so widespread skepticism, when he argues that

the biblical picture of ancient Israel does not fit in but is contrary to any image of ancient Palestinian society that can be established on the basis of ancient sources from Palestine or referring to Palestine. There is no way this image in the Bible can be reconciled with the historical past of the region. And if this is the case, we should give up the hope that we can reconstruct pre-Hellenistic history on the basis of the Old Testament. It is

32. Grabbe, "Fellow Creatures," 24.

33. V. Philips Long, "How Reliable," 382-83.

simply an invented history with only a few referents to things that really happened or existed. From an historian's point of view, ancient Israel is a monstrous creature. It is something sprung out of the fantasy of biblical historiographers and their modern paraphrasers, i.e., the historical-critical scholars of the last two hundred years.³⁴

Though any conclusion on the genre of the Books of Kings as a whole as mentioned must be phrased in the tentative, Lemche goes much too far in his skepticism. By ignoring important insights from comparative studies in the royal inscriptions and the Babylonian Chronicles, his negative conclusions are built on sand. Contrary to Grabbe's, Lemche's and other skeptics' assertions, it is much more likely that the biblical picture of ancient Israel *does* fit and is in concordance with "the image of ancient Palestine that can be established on the basis of ancient sources from Palestine or referring to Palestine." The picture painted of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah may be deployed for religious purposes, but it is highly unlikely that it was invented, and "modern paraphrasers" can safely continue to include the historical information in the Books of Kings in the pool of evidence for a historiographical reconstruction of ancient Israel.

³⁴ Niels Peter Lemche, "On the Problem of Reconstructing Pre-Hellenistic Israelite (Palestinian) History," *JHS* 3 [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_13.pdf] (2000) 10. Accessed 7 July 2004.

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