The Chronistic Historyin Light of Hellenistic Historiography from the Near East

**1. Scientific background**

Despite the multiplicity of opinions concerning the composition of the late biblical historiographical books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles (see the surveys by Knoppers 2004:90–100; Duke 2009:12–16), there is still considerable agreement with regard to the dating of these works. The final redaction of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles – whether they are thought to be a single composition (Zunz 1832:13–36 and more recently Haran 1986; Blenkinsopp 1988) or two separate works (Segal 1943; Japhet 1968; 1993; Williamson 1977; 1985) or, in line with some of the more recent approaches, a single literary complex consisting of two separate blocks (cf. Pakkala 2004; Blenkinsopp 2008: 310–311) – has consistently been assigned to the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third century BCE, i.e., at the beginning of the Hellenistic period (for the dating of Ezra-Nehemiah see: Williamson 1985:xxxv–xxxvi; Farisani 2004:227­–228; for Chronicles see: Japhet 1993:23–28; Knoppers 2004:101–117). In addition, there would also seem to be strong arguments supporting the contention that several later strata can be detected in Chronicles (e.g., 1 Chr 23:3–27:34), dating to even as late as the early second century BCE (Steins 1995; 1997; Finkelstein 2018). And yet, thus far, to the best of my knowledge, this late historiographical complex, which we may call “the Chronistic History,” has not been examined to any significant extent in light of Hellenistic historiographical works from the Near East.

The need for such a study arises due to two main developments that have taken place in recent decades:

(1) Studies of Hellenistic historiography have acknowledged the crucial importance of the period in question – the late fourth and early third centuries BCE. This is the moment at which many ethnographical works written by Greek settlers who came to the East were created, such as the *Aegyptiaca* of Hecataeus of Abdera, the *Indica* of Magesthenes, the *Fabulae Libyacae* of Dionysius Scytobrachion (Mendels 1992:13–54; Sterling 1992:55–102), and “national” histories by easterners such as the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the *Aegyptiaca* of Manetho (Sterling 1992:55–102; Verbrugghe and Wickersham 1996). Following these, in the late third and second centuries BCE, similar works were written by Jewish authors such as Demetrius the chronographer and Eupolemus (Holladay 1983: 51–156; Sterling 1992:227–225; Collins 2000:29–37; Dillery 2015: 357–387). In recent decades there has been significant progress in the study of these texts, which helps us better understand how these historians rewrote their sources (e.g., De Breucker 2003, 2011; Beaulieu 2006, 2021; Moyer 2011:84–140; Haubold 2013; Haubold et al. 2013; Dillery 2015; Stevens 2019). Though written in Greek, these works share some unique features in common with the Chronistic History. Most of these historians relate a lengthy history of their nations’ kings from Creation until the end of the Persian period and beyond. They employ sources from local priests (in the case of Berossus and Manetho they are local priests themselves), rewriting these in order to reshape the past to conform to their own ideologies. It seems reasonable to ask whether the Chronistic literature in the Bible can also be viewed as a part of this cultural and political zeitgeist of the late fourth century BCE and onward.

(2) Historiographic texts were written in the Near East in the Hellenistic period in local languages as well. In recent years many scholarly editions of texts in Akkadian have been published, from the Babylonian period, from the end of the Persian period, and from the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Scholars assert that most of them come from a priestly context and deal with subjects and ideas different from those written in Babylonia in earlier periods (see, e.g., the surveys by Boiy 2004:21–22; Jursa 2013; De Breucker 2015; Waerzeggers 2017; Jursa and Debourse 2020; Ossedrijver 2021). Especially worth discussing in the framework of this project are the short historical narratives that focus on the doings of kings, priests, and the temple elite (e.g. Grayson 1975; Foster 2005; Waerzeggers 2015, 2017; Da Riva 2017; Jursa and Debourse 2019; Jursa and Debourse 2020); chronicles (Glassner 2004; Waerzeggers 2012; Finkel and Van der Spek 2020); and to some extent also pseudepigraphic letters attributed to ancient kings (Frahm 2005; Frazer 2021) and ritual texts (Çağirgan and Lambert 1991; George 2000; Linssen 2004; Da Riva and Galetti 2018, cf. Clancier 2011). Since the Chronistic History in the Bible emphasizes the cult and the Temple and is structured chronologically, it is quite similar to the Hellenistic texts from Babylonia. Moreover, there are a number of parallel literary motifs unique to the two corpora that have yet to be discussed in the scholarly literature. Similar developments occurred in this period in Egypt as well (Moyer 2011:84–140, cf. Quack 2021), but historiographic evidence from the Hellenistic period is more limited; I will deal with it in the study when relevant (as with regard to *COS* 4.5, *The So-Called* *Demotic Chronicle*, e.g., Minas 2000; Quack 2015). In all these cases we need not necessarily describe the influence of this or that culture on biblical literature, but it is certainly reasonable to ask whether these writers of the same place and time may not have some shared ideas or comparable literary responses to changes in the Hellenistic world.

Considering these developments in the field, I believe that the careful study of the proposed question is likely to have an important bearing on our understanding of the Chronistic History and the cultural setting of the Chronistic scribes. By comparing late biblical historiography with Hellenistic historiographical works from the Near East written in Greek as well as with late Babylonian works written in Akkadian, I hope to advance this important discussion.

**2. Research Objectives and Expected Significance**

The goal of the study is to determine the relationship between Chronicles / Ezra-Nehemiah and the literary corpus known to us today from the Hellenistic East, both in Greek and in Akkadian, in order to identify those signals of contemporary historiography that are reflected in the Chronistic History, and to understand the literary and cultural background in which the biblical writers worked. Alongside these sources I will also examine Greek sources from elsewhere in the Hellenistic world that can shed light on the cultures that operated in the East.

A few studies have sought in the past to identify the genre of the Chronistic History, and Chronicles itself in particular, by comparative examination, but they focused on different corpora. Hoglund and Knoppers for example sought to point to the tradition in Greek mythographic and genealogical writing, which began in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, such as the works of Hecataeus of Miletus, Acusilaus of Argos, and Pherecydes of Athens (Hoglund 1997; Knoppers 2003). But in fact, as I have shown in several studies (Darshan 2013; 2018), genealogical writing that is close to this Greek genre appears in biblical writings at an earlier stage and is reflected in earlier historiography, e.g., in the Pentateuch. There is therefore nothing in these materials that specifically marks them as being from the Hellenistic period. In fact, even in Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah it is evident that the genealogical materials are drawn from an earlier source. Schweitzer suggested a completely different angle on the question, comparing Chronicles with the genre of utopian literature (Schweitzer 2007). But since the Chronistic texts are essentially based on historical events and realistic historiographic material, this parallel is less convincing (cf. Ben Zvi 2013). Patricia R. Jelbert (2018) suggested a comparison with the Assyrian Annals and the Babylonian Chronicles, but she dated the Chronistic writings to a much earlier period than is generally accepted, and in any case these Mesopotamian writings are comparable perhaps only with certain texts within Chronicles and not to the Chronistic History as a whole (cf. also Ko 2017).

In the study proposed here, I am seeking to examine the Chronistic History in light of historiographic texts that are closer to it both in content and genre and in time. With regard to genre more broadly, I intend to examine the parallel material in national historiographic works by easterners, such as the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus and the *Aegyptiaca* of Manetho, from the beginning of the Hellenistic period (cf. briefly Mathys 2000: 60–70). A detailed examination of the entirety of the comparative material can tell us about the methods of rewriting, historiographic techniques, and shared ideas that characterize the period. With regard to content, motifs, and shared ideas, I will additionally examine a series of recently published Akkadian texts from the Babylonian Hellenistic world. For example, one of the motifs that has attracted a great deal of attention in late Babylonian historical works is that of “the sinning and repenting king” (De Breucker 2015: 78–85; Waerzeggers 2015; 2017; Jursa and Debourse 2020: 268–269). Several scholars, like De Breucker, have pointed to the resemblance between the description of King Manasseh of Judah in Chronicles (2 Chr 33:1–13), but noted that “It falls outside the remit of this contribution whether this is a coincidental parallel with the Babylonian topic or both are interconnected in that sense that there is question of influence or a common origin” (De Breucker 2015:84).

In fact this motif appears in a number of additional places in Chronicles and in Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period (cf. 2 Chr 12:1–12; 32:24–33; Daniel 4; 1 Macc 6:8–13; 2 Maccabees 9), and a comprehensive study is necessary in order to examine the various incarnations of this motif in extra-biblical literature of the period.

As mentioned earlier, additional Greek sources from the beginning of the Hellenistic period may be relevant to this study. These sources have admittedly been known to the scholarly world for a long time, but their application to Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah and the worldviews reflected in these books has not been discussed, for example with regard to the notion of immediate, personal recompense that is so prominent in Chronicles. In contrast to the book of Kings and other biblical writings, which recognize a principle of collective reward and punishment, Chronicles of course revises the history of the kings in line with its assumption that every success, personal or public, came as a reward for the king’s good deeds, and every failure or other negative situation came as a punishment for the king’s sins (Japhet 1977:145–154; Kalimi 2000:183–189; Rofé 2006:176–177). The Chronicler’s changed approach to reward and punishment is generally explained as an inner-Israelite development (cf. e.g., Brin 1975: 80–105). In opposition to the earlier approach of Kings and of the famous statement in the Decalogue that punishment for sin may be deferred and visited upon future generations (Exod 19:4; cf. Deut 5:8), Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the prophets of the destruction of the Temple, called for a change in approach, according to which everyone would get reward or punishment corresponding to what they themselves had done (Jer 1:28–29; Ezekiel 18, cf. 33:7–20). But it is worth explaining why the Chronicler, who apparently was working more than two centuries after the destruction of the Temple, saw fit to rewrite the historical description so radically to make it correspond to this principle.

It is also interesting to examine this phenomenon in light of the similar development in the Greek world at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Renaud Gagné devoted a detailed monograph to the idea of reward and punishment for ancestral sin in Greek literature (Gagné 2013), asserting that the idea of “ancestral fault” is central to it. The approach reflected (for example) in the works of Solon from the sixth century BCE (*Elegy to the Muses*, 29–32), that even righteous people may be punished — for the sins of their parents — actually appears in many works from the classical world. Gagné showed, however, that at the start of the Hellenistic period a surprising change in this idea began; criticism of this approach began to appear more and more often in Greek sources (52–54, 468–469). These sources, as noted, have not yet been discussed at all in scholarly research. With them in mind, it is also necessary to examine whether other signs of the zeitgeist of the beginning of the Hellenistic period are evident in the work of the Chronicler or the Chronistic History in general.

Revealing additional affinities like those that I have mentioned here between the Chronistic History and other works from the beginning of the Hellenistic period can be expected to open up three new lines of investigation: (1) the cultural background of the Chronistic History and its worldviews; (2) the formation of the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, especially with regard to the long-standing question of whether they constitute two separate books or a single literary complex; and (3) the study of the literary and religious elements shared by Eastern civilizations during the early Hellenistic period.

**3. Detailed Description of the Proposed Study**

**3.1. Working hypothesis**

Two central assumptions stand at the basis of this project that deserve extensive study: The first is that the Chronistic work in the Bible belongs to the beginning of the Hellenistic period and, although it rewrites texts from an earlier period and describes even earlier periods, it most certainly reflects the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of the beginning of the Hellenistic period in place name. The second is that the changes of the Hellenistic period spawned similar responses among the writers and the priestly elite of the Easterners, and these responses are reflected in the texts written in the East in this period, whether in Greek or in the local languages. Identifying affinities, parallels, and differences between the various corpora can illuminate the working methods of the biblical writers and shed new light on the background against which the Chronistic History came into being. By introducing a new body of evidence into the traditional historical and philological analysis of the evolution of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, this project will enable a fresh analysis of the nature, significance, and history of this corpus.

3.2. Research Design and Methods

This study, which is primarily historical-philological and comparative in nature, aims to collate, examine and analyze Late Babylonian and Greek material of the Hellenistic period and compare it to the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. As is well known, while any isolated motif or isolated literary element may occur in different narratives randomly or as a result of similar patterns of thinking, a series of motifs or literary elements that are not self-evidently corollary offers solid ground for a comparative study (for comparative methodologies, see e.g., Malul 1990:13–122; Darshan 2018:29–34). In this study I seek to demonstrate that the presence of numerous unusual elements and unique similarities and divergences from other cultures may point to a common geo-cultural and historical background, in the framework of which diverse cultural groups shared common literary motifs and patterns.

On the basis of a pilot study (in progress), I expect that the project will take four years to complete. During that time, I plan to write several articles and a monograph on the topic. The work schedule is as follows:

October 2022–September 2023: a close study of 1 Chronicles 1–29, along with researching, collating, and examining parallel material in Late Babylonian texts and in Greek literature of the Hellenistic period.

During this first year, I will focus on identifying similarities between the Chronistic work and “national” historiography like that of Berossus and Manetho. Current research on this genre (e.g., De Breucker 2003, 2011; Beaulieu 2006, 2021; Moyer 2011:84–140; Haubold 2013; Haubold et al. 2013; Dillery 2015; Stevens 2019), as noted, enables a fresh discussion on methods of historiographic rewriting and an examination of the relationship to genealogical or chronological writing of earlier periods (Hoglund 1997; Knoppers 2003) and contemporary chronistic writing in the East (Waerzeggers 2012).

October 2023–September 2024: a close study of 2 Chronicles 1–36.

During this time I will focus on investigating the idea of personal, immediate reward and punishment that characterizes Chronicles (e.g., Japhet 1977:145–154; Kalimi 2000:183–189; Rofé 2006:176–177) in light of the Akkadian sources from the Hellenistic period (De Breucker 2015: 78–85; Waerzeggers 2015; 2017; Jursa and Debourse 2020: 268–269) and contemporary Greek sources (Gagné 2013).

October 2024–September 2025: a close study of Ezra 1–10.

During this year I will focus on the implications of the Hellenistic material for understanding the question of the absence or at least the diminished importance of the exodus tradition in Chronicles (for current approaches, see e.g. Amit 1982; Japhet 1992; Hutchison 2021). In this context I will also discuss the treatment of the exodus tradition in Ezra.

October 2025–September 2026: a close study of Nehemiah 1–13.

The book of Nehemiah in particular, and Ezra-Nehemiah in general, have been discussed in studies that compare them to the Egyptian Inscription of Udjahorresnet and to the genre of autobiography (Blenkinsopp 1987, 1994; Janzen 2000, cf. Wasmuth and Creasman 2020). At this stage of my research I intend to deal with other aspects of the book arising from comparison with materials from the end of the Persian period and the beginning of the Hellenistic period, which concern the question of separatism and the opposition to marriage with foreign women (for current approaches, see, e.g., Olyan 2004; Oswald; 2014; Hensel 2018; Berlejung 2019). During this last year of the project I further intend to complete my monograph on the proposed research topic.

**3.3. Preliminary Results**

In a previous study (Darshan 2018) I dealt with the relationship between earlier biblical historiography, reflected in the Pentateuchal sources, and ancient Greek genealogical writing from the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. I explained some of the previously unrecognized similarities between these two literary corpora as the result of ancient Near Eastern influences, especially from the Levant and northern Syria. I was able to demonstrate that these had an impact on both the Israelite and Greek worlds during the second quarter of the first millennium BCE. The proposed project, upon which I hope to embark during the next few years, is aimed at expanding my study of later periods and texts by subjecting the late biblical historiographical writings to a similar comparative study, examining them in light of Hellenistic historiographical works from the Near East.

Some evidence that has arisen in a preliminary study (in preparation) suggests that comparative research may have important implications for long-standing questions in the study of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. First, research into the Hellenistic background of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah illuminates some of the basic genres and perspectives that are prominent in these writings and locates them in a broader historic and cultural context. The following topics, for example, have been studied from an inner-biblical perspective, but my preliminary work has determined that comparative research on the beginning of the Hellenistic period can supply additional data that may suggest new directions for their solution: the attitude toward immediate, personal reward and punishment that I have previously mentioned (e.g. Japhet 1977:145–154; Kalimi 2000:183–189; Rofé 2006:176–177); the question of the absence or diminished importance of the tradition of the exodus from Egypt in Chronicles (e.g., Amit 1982; Japhet 1992; Hutchison 2021); and separatism and the opposition to marriage with foreign women (e.g., Olyan 2004; Oswald; 2014; Hensel 2018; Berlejung 2019). Comparative study can also shed new light on the question of the composition of the Chronistic History, that is, whether Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles were composed by independent authors (Segal 1943; Japhet 1968; 1993; Williamson 1977; 1985) or whether they represent two units that were edited together into a single corpus (cf. Pakkala 2004; Blenkinsopp 2008: 310–311). This question too, though it must certainly be examined through literary, ideological, historical, and philological means, can be illuminated from outside from a comparative perspective. I suspect that the identification of additional parallels between the corpora that I intend to study in this project can explain the development of new ideas in Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah that are distinct from those of earlier biblical writing.

In this next phase of my research, which I hope to embark upon during the next few years, I thus hope to continue the path begun in my previous work, suggesting new answers to long-standing questions in the study of late biblical historiography, as well as attempting to enrich our knowledge of the connections between the various civilizations of the Hellenistic East (for these connections cf., e.g., van der Spek, 2001, 2007, 2009; Strootman 2014; Kosmin 2014).

**3.4. Project Details**

The research team working on this project will comprise the PI and two graduate student research assistants who will write their theses under my supervision. The study requires close familiarity with various languages and literatures. As a biblical scholar proficient in both classical and ancient Near Eastern languages, I have devoted a series of publications to the Bible in the context of early writings from the eastern Mediterranean (e.g., Darshan 2013, 2014, 2014a, 2016, 2016a, 2018, 2018a). My acquaintance with the relevant classical and ancient Near Eastern languages and my previous studies of biblical, classical, and ancient Near Eastern texts and their interrelation will give the project direct access to the primary and secondary sources. The first assistant, a Ph.D. student proficient both in biblical Hebrew and in Akkadian (or Egyptian), will help search and collate the relevant ancient Near Eastern material. The second, an advanced-level MA student, will help gather and analyze the relevant secondary literature. Since the number of publications pertaining to Hellenistic historiography of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East has expanded exponentially in recent decades, this assistance is essential for on-time completion of the project. Through this project the research assistants will acquire a broad comparative perspective of late historiographical works early on in their career; their work is expected to form the basis of their MA theses and doctoral dissertations.

The majority of the work will be carried out in the libraries and infrastructure of Tel Aviv University, which are fully adequate for pursuing the proposed research. New studies and text editions, as they appear, will be purchased as needed. Increasingly, primary and secondary source materials are accessible on-line. The fields of biblical studies, classics, and ancient Near Eastern Studies and Archaeology at Tel Aviv University will provide a forum for fruitful dialogue and discussion. Through the involvement of student research assistants, I expect that the project will contribute to the education of a new generation of scholars in areas that need to be further developed: late biblical historiography and the comparative approach to the Bible.

**3.5. Expected results and pitfalls**

The obstacles I anticipate are those that face any study of ancient texts. Thus, for example, in this kind of project, which is based on textual evidence, the data is dynamic, as new findings from the ancient Mesopotamian, Greek, or Israelite worlds may alter the conclusions of this study. However, historical and philological scholars are usually grateful for such obstacles, as new findings can improve and enrich preliminary conclusions. In addition, the fragmentary state of many of the sources requires a high degree of meticulous and expert analysis. However, large fragments of the primary texts upon which this study is based (see section 3.2. above) have survived in good shape. Together with the biblical evidence that reaches us through manuscripts, these serve as a promising starting point for discussion.

The resultant monograph is expected to make three principal contributions to the existing literature: (1) It will comprehensively elucidate the literary and cultural background of the Chronistic History in its Hellenistic context, providing new data for understanding the ideology and worldviews of the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. (2) It will provide new data for reviewing the long-standing question of the formation and composition of the Chronistic History. (3) The results will also be of relevance for related disciplines beyond the boundaries of biblical studies, enriching our knowledge of Mesopotamian and Greek literature of the beginning of Hellenistic period, a period to which biblical scholars have not yet devoted sufficient attention.