**[Ezra](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Ezra),** [**Nehemiah**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Nehemiah)**, and** [**Chronicles**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/books-of-the-Chronicles)

The final books of the [Hebrew Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hebrew-Bible) are the books of [Chronicles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/books-of-the-Chronicles) and [Ezra–Nehemiah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Ezra), which once formed a unitary history of Israel from [Adam](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Adam-and-Eve-biblical-literary-figures) to the 4th century bce, written by an anonymous Chronicler. That these books [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) a single work—referred to as the Chronicler’s history, in distinction to the Deuteronomic history and the elements of history from the priestly code of the [Torah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Torah)—appears evident because the same language, style, and fundamental ideas are found throughout and because the concluding verses of II Chronicles are repeated at the beginning of Ezra. The purpose of this history seems to have been to trace the origin of the Temple and to show the antiquity and authenticity of its cult and of the formal, legalistic type of [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion) that dominated later Judaism.

The history that these books record has already been treated in the historical section of this article and is found in greater detail in [Judaism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism). The concern in this section will be chiefly with the literary and theological aspects of the books, but their contents can be summarized. In I and II Chronicles the author repeats much of the material from earlier historical books, concentrating upon the history of the kingdom of Judah. The First Book of the Chronicles begins with an extensive genealogy of Israel from Adam to the restoration but is primarily a biography of David that adds further facts to the story as given in [Samuel](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Books-of-Samuel). The Second Book of the Chronicles begins with Solomon and goes through the division of the kingdom to the reign of [Zedekiah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zedekiah); once again the Chronicler had access to materials that supplemented the account in [I and II Kings](https://www.britannica.com/topic/books-of-Kings). In the [Book of Ezra](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Ezra) he describes the return of the Jews from the [Babylonian Exile](https://www.britannica.com/event/Babylonian-Captivity) and the reconstruction of the Temple. He includes lists of the families who returned and the texts of the decrees under which they returned. In the Book of [Nehemiah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nehemiah) the reconstruction of the city walls of Jerusalem becomes the basis for a meditation upon the relation between God and his people. This book, too, contains lists of those who participated in the reconstruction, but much of it concentrates upon the description of Nehemiah and his persistence in performing his assignment.

The fourfold division of the books derives from the [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-language) and [Latin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin) versions; the more basic twofold division into Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah is more complex. This original division apparently resulted from the inclusion of the material known as Ezra–Nehemiah in the Hebrew canon before that known as Chronicles because it contained fresh information not found in any other [canonical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/canonical) book. When Chronicles was later admitted to the canon, it was placed in order after Ezra–Nehemiah; although the book has retained this position in the Hebrew Bible, the Greek version restored it to its proper sequence. That Chronicles was thus “left aside” may account for the choice of *Paraleipomena* (“Things Omitted”) as the Greek title of the book, but the usual and perhaps correct explanation is that Chronicles contains stories, speeches, and observations that were omitted from the parallel accounts in earlier books.

Jewish tradition has identified [Ezra](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ezra-Hebrew-religious-leader) as the author of these books, and some modern scholars [concur](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concur). According to many critics, however, the Chronicler was a Levite [cantor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/cantor) in Jerusalem. This position is supported by the author’s concern with the Levites and cultic musicians. The date of the work is more difficult to pinpoint. In its final form it has to be later than Ezra, who came to Judah about 400 bce. An indication of the latest date at which the entire work could have been completed is its silence about the Hellenizing of Judaism that took place after [Alexander the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-the-Great). This, together with language considerations that point to the late Persian period, has led the majority of commentators to postulate a 4th-century date. Some scholars, however, claim that a time before 300 bce would be too short to account for the genealogy at the beginning of I Chronicles, which is carried down to the eighth generation after [Zerubbabel](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zerubbabel), one of the leaders of the band that returned from Babylon. Thus, they push the final date to about 200 bce or even slightly later. It is possible that the 4th-century work of the Chronicler went through a series of minor additions and [adaptations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptations) until sometime early in the 2nd century, when it reached its final form.

The Chronicler had numerous historical sources—both biblical and extrabiblical—at his disposal. He was closely dependent on the books of Samuel and Kings for all of Chronicles except the first nine chapters. Sometimes he even repeated the actual words of his model, though slight textual variations suggest to some that the Hebrew copy he had before him differed a little from that of the canon and corresponded to that which lay behind the [Septuagint](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Septuagint). But he was also able to consult the final version of the [Torah](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Torah) and the whole of the Deuteronomic history. His use of the personal memoirs of Nehemiah is undisputed; the nature of his Ezra source is less clear, but some have regarded a portion of narrative written in the first person as an autobiographical source. He included many lists, genealogies, census reports, and other official documents that may have been preserved as Temple records. The text refers by name to certain documents representing royal histories and prophetic writings about which, as they have not survived, only speculation is possible.

The Chronicler used all these sources, but was not shackled by them. Although his work has won increasing respect as a historical document, especially as an indispensable source for the restoration period, his purpose was chiefly theological. He was convinced of the definitiveness of the divine [covenant](https://www.britannica.com/topic/covenant-religion) with [David](https://www.britannica.com/biography/David). The holy [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) that was brought into existence by this [covenant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/covenant), maintained by God through the [vicissitudes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vicissitudes) of history and having its worship centred on the [Temple in Jerusalem](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Temple-of-Jerusalem), is the true kingdom of God. It is the true Israel and is the Chronicler’s only concern. Thus, he mentions the northern kingdom and the kings of Israel only to the extent that they figure in the events of Judah. Loyalty to the Davidic line of succession, to Jerusalem, and to the Temple worship were the central elements in the life of God’s people according to this writer. All success and failure were the result of such loyalty or disloyalty. Thus, if a king’s reign was long and successful, the Chronicler saw it as the reward of God for a life led in obedience to his will; conversely, a king suffered misfortune only if he had sinned. Significantly, the Chronicler devotes much attention to David’s part in the development of the liturgy, especially the organization and functions of the Levites, and omits important but uncomplimentary stories about the King that are found in the Deuteronomic history.

In short, the Chronicler traced the reformed liturgy of his day back to David and laid a solid foundation for the acceptance and conservation of the religious community that he envisioned—a devout community that worshipped joyfully in the Temple with sacrifice and praise and obeyed the Law of Moses. He knew well that the realization of that community in his day was not perfect and that the future had something better in store, but he seems to have been content to accept the existing Davidic leaders in order not to abandon the dynastic hope because of their shortcomings. These books thus provided an apologia for orthodox Judaism (perhaps in the face of opposition from the [Samaritans](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samaritan), the inhabitants of the former northern kingdom), and they offer to the modern [reader](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lector) some insight into the post-exilic community in Jerusalem, withdrawn into itself and trying to justify, explain, and preserve its existence and its spirituality.

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