Story and History

The Kings of Israel and Judah in Context

edited by

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1. Introduction: The Interplay between History and Interpretation

History and interpretation are not two different things. History is everything that has happened, but no one can perceive everything that has happened the way it happened.[1] Why is that so? The answer is not difficult to give: history is far too complex. Therefore, even the most descriptive approach to history imaginable includes interpretation: interpretation by means of selection, of perception, of categorizing, and so on.

Nevertheless, there are of course great differences as to the amount of interpretation that flows into a construction or re-construction of a past reality. Modern historians usually aim at minimizing the amount of interpretation when reconstructing the past.[2] They try to adduce all possible sources and to evaluate them critically and carefully. In other words, they are interested in the past *as past*. Historians in antiquity, if we are allowed to call them that,[3] did not possess such a critical consciousness. Rather, they related the past in a way that was most illuminating *for the present*. Their construction or reconstruction of the past was guided by the past's impact on the present. In other words, historians in antiquity were interested in the past insofar it was relevant to the present.

We should be cautious of too quickly dismissing such an approach. It is deeply rooted in the intellectual history of mankind, and, to a certain extent and for certain questions, is also still operative in modern societies.[4] One of the best examples might be the question of a biography. Even today, narrating one's biography is the most precise way to answer the question "who am I?" Physical data like height, weight, blood group, blood pressure, would provide some precise data, but would not be very informative. And if someone narrates his or her biography, he or she will exactly adapt his or her own history by

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[1] Cf. among many others Knauf 1991, 26–64. Cf. also Tadmor and Weinfeld 1983; Becking and Grabbe 2011; Kratz 2013; idem 2015.

[2] Cf. the methodological discussions in Hardmeier 2001.

[3] Cf. Van Seters 1997.

[4] Cf. e. g. White 1973; Rüsen 1986; for the books of Kings see Schmitz 2008.

selecting and presenting those events from it that became important for his or her identity.

The following considerations will deal with ancient reconstructions of history. Its focus is the presentation of the capture and fall of Jerusalem in the years 597 and 587 BCE, as it is narrated in 2 Kings 24–25.[5] This article will try to analyze whether, how, and why these historical narratives are related to the present times of their authors.[6] Thus, this analysis will differentiate between the world of the narrative playing out at the beginning of the 6th century BCE, in the time of the Neo-Babylonian conquest of Judah and Jerusalem and the world of the narrator, situated, as we shall see, at least in part in significantly later periods.[7] The books of Kings, as recognized since the very beginnings of critical scholarship in the 18th century, are neither just an eyewitness report of the events reported in them, nor a literarily unified work; instead, they are a multi-layered text including older and younger elements that are in part close, in part distant, even very distant to what they present as historical events of the past.[8]

2. The Destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE according to 2 Kings 25

As is well known, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians twice, first in 597 and then in 587 BCE.[9] For reasons that shall become clear later in this discussion, I will begin with the *second* conquest that also included the city's and the temple's destruction by fire in 587 BCE. The historicity of this event cannot be doubted.[10] Although we do not have any extra-biblical reference to this event and the archaeology of the temple in Jerusalem is a black box,[11] this event is so well attested to and reflected in different biblical texts that are independent from each other that we can safely infer its basic historicity from these texts.[12]

There are some Neo-Babylonian sources pertaining to the end of the kingdom of Judah, but unfortunately, they do not cover the events of 587 BCE. The so-called Neo-Babylonian Chronicles 2–5 report the military actions of the

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[5] For a text critical discussion of the different versions cf. Person 1997. Recent treatments of these chapters include Wöhrle 2008, 213–38; Levin 2010, 61–89.

[6] Hardmeier 1990a, 165–84; and Levin 2008, 129–68, 131–38.

[7] On this distinction see Schmid 2015b, 331–46.

[8] For the literary growth of the books of Kings cf. Knoppers, 2010, 69–88; for a contextualization of the books of Kings' historiography in ancient near eastern historiography cf. Liverani 2010, 163–84.

[9] Cf. Frevel 2012, 789–800.

[10] Cf. Albertz 2002, 23–39; cf. also Mayer 2002, 1–22.

[11] Cf. Finkelstein et al. 2011.

[12] Cf. the seminal methodological principles of Troeltsch 1913, 728–53 (ET available at: http://faculty.tcu.edu/grant/hhit/). Troeltsch basically claimed that three methodological steps are required for historically assessing biblical texts, i.e. "critique," "analogy," and "correlation."

Babylonian kings up to the year 594/593 BCE including the conquest of Jerusalem in 597:

> He [sc. the king of Akkad, i. e. Nebuchadnezzar] encamped against the city of Judah [sc. Jerusalem] and on the second day of the month Adar he captured the city (and) seized (its) king. A king of his own choice he appointed in the city (and) taking the vast tribute he brought it into Babylon.[13]

Thus, no Neo-Babylonian sources are available for the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, but king Jehoiachin is mentioned again in a few lists explaining the food rations (including sesame oil and bread) for several persons at the Babylonian court.[14]

The text reporting the events of 587 BCE in 2 Kings 25 has a prelude starting in 2 Kings 24:18–20 and then includes all of 2 Kings 25 except for the last four verses that speak of King Jehoiachin's parole in Babylon. 2 Kings 24:18 starts with the description of Zedekiah's reign, which lasted for 11 years. The preceding verse makes it clear that Zedekiah was not a sovereign king, but a puppet of the king of Babylon who had appointed him as king and even re-named him from his original name Mattaniah to Zedekiah, a clear sign of domination.[15]

Verses 19–20 add a negative theological evaluation of Zedekiah, but offer only an implicit connection between the "evil doing" of Zedekiah and the "anger of YHWH"[16] that follows.[17] There is no explicit causal link between them established by textual means, but v. 20b eventually mentions a mundane explanation for the catastrophe: Zedekiah "rebelled" against the king of Babylon, meaning in historical terms that he stopped paying taxes.

2 Kings 25:1–2 then jump forward to the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign and describe the two-year siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. The date in 25:3 has to be restored according to the information in the parallel account Jeremiah 52:6, which reads בחדש הרביעי בתשעה לחדש "on the ninth day of the fourth month." After the city wall was breached, the king and his soldiers fled the city,[18] but they are eventually captured. Zedekiah is brought to the headquarter of Nebuchadnezzar in Ribla in northern Syria where he is blinded and his sons are slaughtered, and is then deported to Babylon.

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[13] Chronicle 5, 12–13, see Grayson 2000, 102.

[14] Cf. Weippert 2010, 425–30; Becking 2008, 183–202, 186; see also Sweeney 2007, 459 n. 4.

[15] Cf. on naming as an element of domination Schellenberg 2011, 304–05.

[16] Cf. on this notion Kratz 2008, 92–121.

[17] Cf. Schmid 2000, 129–49.

[18] Levin, 2010, 74, expresses doubt as to the historicity of this event: "The fact that this account of events is fictitious can be deduced from the extremely precise topographical information: "by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden," "in the direction of the Arabah," "in the plains of Jericho." The original Annals were not interested in details of this kind. The very way in which the writer suggests historical exactness betrays that this exactness did not exist."

After that Nebuzaradan, a high officer of Nebuchadnezzar, orders the destruction of the temple, the palace and of all the great houses (25:9).

In addition, the city walls were torn down (25:10). The city's population, except for some poor farmers, were all deported to Babylon (25:12). The pillars and vessels of the temple were also brought to Babylon, as is described in great detail (25:13–17). The priests were brought to Riblah and killed there (25:18–21). 25:22–26 recounts the episode about Gedaliah and his murder, whereas 25:27–30 deals with the last days of king Jehoiachin in exile and the fact that he was even allowed to dine at the table of the king of Babylon.

If we just consider 2 Kings 25 for a moment, then it is apparent that this chapter offers no theology, at least no explicit theological interpretation at all.[19] The tetragrammaton YHWH only occurs three times in 2 Kings 25 in the expression "house of YHWH," denoting the temple in Jerusalem. But the text is silent about any possible acts of God during the events of the destruction of Jerusalem. The chapter only reports what the Babylonians are doing, but does not mention any divine agency, such as God's stirring up the mind of Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem or the like (as in 2 Chr 36). The theological dimension of the events must be added by the reader. The long passage about the looting of the temple especially seems to implicitly stress that this event is of special importance: God's own temple is deprived of its vessels and is thus no longer able to operate in terms of a possible ongoing cult.

The implicit theological significance of 2 Kings 25:27–30 has been much discussed. These verses move forward to the 37th year of the exile of king Jehoiachin, that is 562 BCE (37 years after 597 BCE) and report remarkably about Jehoiachin's release from prison in Babylon. Of course, there has been a long standing discussion concerning the significance of these last four verses of 2 Kings 25: Does the chapter merely report what happened up to the author's own present, as Martin Noth held?[20] Or is king Jehoiachin's release from prison a silver lining on the horizon foreshadowing the hope for future restoration and salvation, as Gerhard von Rad argued?[21] At any rate, it also needs to be affirmed that in the last four verses, no mention of God is made and the evidence for a perspective of hope remains slim.[22]

For the following sections of this contribution, it is important to note that according to 25:11 the land is emptied in the course of the events of 587 BCE, and only a few poor farmers remain. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that according to 2 Kings 25:13–17 the treasuries from the temple were brought to Babylon in 587 BCE.

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[19] Cf. Schmid 2015a.
[20] Cf. Noth 1957.
[21] Cf. von Rad 1958, 189–204.
[22] Cf. Becking 1990, 283–93. See also the overall discussion in Wöhrle 2008, 213f, Anm. 2, which provides an extensive bibliography.

3. The Perspective of 2 Kings 24

Looking from 2 Kings 25 to the preceding chapter, which depicts the events of the first conquest of Jerusalem ten years earlier in 597 BCE, there are some astonishing observations to be made. First, according to 2 Kings 24:14, already in 597, *all* of Jerusalem went into exile:

והגלה את־כל־ירושלם ואת־כל־השרים ואת כל־גבורי החיל עשרה אלפים גולה וכל־החרש והמסגר
לא נשאר זולת דלת עם־הארץ

He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand captives, all the artisans and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.

In light of this statement, it is difficult to understand how 2 Kings 25:11 can report a similar deportation ten years later, as nearly everyone had already been deported earlier. Who would be left in Jerusalem to be deported after 597 BCE, if we take 2 Kings 24:14 at par value?

Secondly, the precious vessels of the temple that according to 2 Kings 25:13–17 were brought to Babylon after the events of 587, had already been carried off ten years earlier according to 2 Kings 24:13:

ויוצא משם את־כל־אוצרות בית יהוה ואוצרות בית המלך ויקצץ את־כל־כלי הזהב אשר עשה שלמה
מלך־ישראל בהיכל יהוה כאשר דבר יהוה

He carried off all the treasures of the house of YHWH, and the treasures of the king's house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold, which Solomon, king of Israel, had made in the temple of YHWH, all this as YHWH had foretold. (The remark about YHWH's foretelling might be referring to 2 Kings 20:17, but it is also possible that it has no specific scriptural reference in mind.)[23]

The possible explanation that in 597 only some and in 587 the rest of the vessels were brought to Babylon is not feasible, at least not in terms of the narrative logic, as 2 Kings 24:13 explicitly says "all the treasures of the house of YHWH." We have a blunt contradiction here showing that there are two competing views on when the temple vessels were carried away from the temple in Jerusalem: 2 Kings 24:13 holds that this happened in 597 BCE, whereas 2 Kings 25:13–17 dates this event a decade later.

Up to this point, two peculiarities need to be affirmed. First, the depictions of the conquests of Jerusalem in 597 BCE and 587 BCE in 2 Kings 24 and 2 Kings 25 each involve an account of how the population and the temple vessels were brought to Babylon. Secondly, there are obviously other driving factors involved in the account of 2 Kings 24 and 25 than just the depiction of historical realities.

Thus, the following questions arise: a) Which account – 2 Kings 24 or 25 – is closer to the historical truth and how can this be determined? b) What is the motivation behind the literary production of these contradictions? Why is the

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[23] Cf. Würthwein 1984, 473.

carrying away of the population and the temple vessels connected with two events that lie ten years apart from each other?

4. The Historical Reality behind 2 Kings 24 and 25

It is advisable first to deal with 2 Kings 24 and the events of 597 BCE because both biblical and extra-biblical accounts are available for the first conquest of Jerusalem. Of course, the difference between biblical and extra-biblical source is not that the first ones are ideological and the second ones are trustworthy, as some minimalist scholars tend to assume, but both sources need critical evaluation and the information in one source needs to be balanced against that in other sources.[24] Let us first have a look at the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle 5 again:

He [sc. the king of Akkad, i. e. Nebuchadnezzar] encamped against the city of Judah [sc. Jerusalem] and on the second day of the month Adar he captured the city (and) seized (its) king. A king of his own choice he appointed in the city (and) taking the vast tribute he brought it into Babylon.

This account can be compared to other military campaigns of Nebuchadnezzar in the same chronicle. "Seizing" a king is also reported regarding the conquest of Ashqelon in 604 BCE, "appointing" a new king is mentioned only here. The deportation of Jehoiachin is not mentioned here, but it is taken for granted historically, as Jehoiachin shows up in Babylonian texts presupposing his sojourn in Babylon later. Taking a "vast" tribute is the most common element in the Neo-Babylonian Chronicles: apparently, economic benefit was one of the important driving factors of these campaigns.

Thus we may infer that 2 Kings 24 provides correct historical information for the siege and capture of Jerusalem of which only the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle provides an exact date, whereas the biblical text does not. Then the seizing of king Jehoiachin and his replacement by Mattaniah / Zedekiah is accurate as well. And finally, we can infer from the common praxis of the Neo-Babylonian military and the mention both in Chronicles 5 and in 2 Kings 24 that a "vast tribute" had been carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon. However, this tribute arguably did not include "all" treasures from the temple, as e. g. Jeremiah 27:19–21 refers three times to the "vessels" that remained in the temple and the palace.[25]

Regarding a possible deportation in 597 BCE, there is no information available from Chronicles 5. As mentioned, the deportation of king Jehoiachin is to be considered a historical fact given the later mention of him in Babylon. But regarding a possible deportation of the population in 597 BCE, we must critically examine the text of 2 Kings 24. The relevant passage is to be found in vv. 14–16:

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[24] Cf. e. g. Becking 2000, 123–41; Holloway 2013, 90–118.
[25] Lipschits 2005, 301 n. 122.

והגלה את־כל־ירושלם ואת־כל־השרים ואת | כל־גבורי החיל עשרה אלפים גולה וכל־החרש והמסגר
לא נשאר זולת דלת עם־הארץ:

ויגל את־יהויכין בבלה ואת־אם המלך ואת־נשי המלך ואת־סריסיו ואת [אולי הארץ הוליך גולה
מירושלם בבלה:

ואת כל־אנשי החיל שבעת אלפים והחרש והמסגר אלף הכל גבורים עשי מלחמה ויביאם מלך־בבל
גולה בבלה:

He carried away all Jerusalem,
all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand deportees,
all the artisans and the smiths;
no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.
He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon;
the king's mother, the king's wives,
his officials and the elite of the land,
he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon.
And all warriors, seven thousand,
the artisans and the smiths, one thousand,
all of them strong and fit for war,
the king of Babylon brought them captive to Babylon.

This text betrays clear signs of literary disunity and redactional reworking. It first mentions the carrying away of "all Jerusalem," "all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand deportees, all the armorers and the smiths," only the poor remained in the land (v. 14). Then the deportation of the king is reported including his household and the elite of the land (v. 15). Finally, we are again told that "all the warriors," but now seven thousand, and additionally one thousand "artisans and smiths" were carried away to Babylon (v. 16).

Verse 15 is the least suspicious verse, because it contains historically accurate information, as we have seen. But v. 14 and v. 16 present conflicting views. It seems as though v. 14 takes up v. 16 which mentions the king and entourage, and is plausibly placed after v. 15, and expands and generalizes the information contained therein: It is 10,000 captives who were deported to Babylon, not 8,000, and it was "all Jerusalem" that was carried away.

Therefore, one may assume that vv. 15–16 belong to the basic layer of 2 Kings 24, mentioning what probably is historically accurate: the deportation of the king and his officials and of the persons responsible for Judah's military industry.

Verse 14 is (together with v. 13) the result of a secondary expansion that tries to have Jerusalem already emptied in 597 BCE, which is both in conflict with the following verses and also with other biblical texts that presuppose a significant population in Jerusalem after 597 BCE (e. g. in Jer 27–29 or 37–44). In addition, one might also point to the literary continuity between v. 12 and 15, if vv. 13–14 are bracketed in as an addition.[26]

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[26] Cf. Lipschits 2005, 300 n. 16; Levin 2010, 67.

But why is 2 Kings 24 interested in already having a total deportation in the wake of the events of 597 BCE? What kind of theological interest is connected to that position?

Before addressing these questions, let us first ask about the historicity of what 2 Kings 25 narrates. There are no sources other than the biblical ones for the fall of Jerusalem. Besides 2 Kings 25 we have the parallel in Jeremiah 52 (with some relevant variants in the ancient versions, especially the LXX) and some additional material in Jeremiah 39–43 plus some scattered words in the former part of the book of Jeremiah. First, we are not told why the Babylonian army started a new campaign against Judah probably in 589 or 588.[27] One can assume that it is because Zedekiah stopped paying taxes to the Babylonians. As the Egyptians helped Judah in 588 BCE during the siege of Jerusalem (cf. Jer 37:5), it may well be that Zedekiah had shifted alliances in the wake of a campaign of Psammetich II to Syria in 592 or 591.[28] The anti-Babylonian coalition that Jeremiah 27:2–11 reports for 594 BCE, including Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyrus and Sidon, might also have played a role, although it arguably did not yield any results.

2 Kings 25:1 presumes Nebuchadnezzar himself leading the campaign against Jerusalem,[29] whereas according to 2 Kings 25:6 he is stationed in Riblah in northern Syria later on, which leaves the question open whether he was in Jerusalem in person or not.

The Babylonians eventually break the city walls, which is also confirmed by Jeremiah 39:1–6, an account which is a little more elaborate than 2 Kings 25. However, Jeremiah 39:1–6 might be literarily dependent upon 2 Kings 25, as some passages are identical, but seem to have been expanded in Jeremiah 39 (cf. 2 Kgs 25:7/Jer 39:6).

It remains difficult to decide whether or not 2 Kings 25:7 is historically accurate about slaughtering Zedekiah's sons and blinding him. Zedekiah's blinding seems to be in contradiction to Jeremiah 32:4–5:[30]

וצדקיהו מלך יהודה לא ימלט מיד הכשדים כי הנתן ינתן ביד מלך־בבל ודבר־פיו עם־פיו ועיניו את־
עינו תראינה:

ובבל יולך את־צדקיהו ושם יהיה עד־פקדי אתו נאם־יהוה כי תלחמו את־הכשדים לא תצליחו:

King Zedekiah of Judah shall not escape out of the hands of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him face to face and see him eye to eye; and he shall take Zedekiah to Babylon, and there he shall remain until I attend to him, says YHWH; though you fight against the Chaldeans, you shall not succeed.

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[27] See the discussion in Donner 2007, 410.
[28] Cf. Yoyotte 1951, 140–44.
[29] Würthwein 1977, 475 n. 6.
[30] Cf. Pakkala 2006, 443–52; Levin 2010, 72.

Blinding does not correspond to Babylonian practice, and seems to reflect rather a literary productive reflection on texts like Jeremiah 22:28–30. In addition, the verbs in 2 Kings 25:7 are not narratives, but perfects, and thus are not smoothly integrated into their context. It may thus well be that the blinding of king Zedekiah and maybe also the slaughtering of his sons is a literary invention in order to further highlight the judgment on Zedekiah and his offspring.

Regarding the deportations recounted in 2 Kings 25:11–12, most recent research has suggested that the Babylonians did indeed carry away a significant amount of the population.[31] Traditional scholarship in the 20th century believed that the biblical reports about the numbers of deportees were highly exaggerated and preferred to trust in the kind of information that can be found in Jeremiah 52:28–30:

זה העם אשר הגלה נבוכדראצר בשנת־שבע יהודים שלשת אלפים ועשרים ושלשה:
בשנת שמונה עשרה לנבוכדראצר מירושלם נפש שמנה מאות שלשים ושנים:
בשנת שלש ועשרים לנבוכדראצר הגלה נבוזראדן רב־טבחים יהודים נפש שבע מאות ארבעים
וחמשה כל־נפש ארבעת אלפים ושש מאות:

This is the number of the people whom Nebuchadrezzar took into exile: in the seventh year, three thousand twenty-three Judeans; in the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar he took into exile from Jerusalem eight hundred thirty-two persons; in the twenty-third year of Nebuchadrezzar, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard took into exile of the Judeans seven hundred forty-five persons; all the persons were four thousand six hundred.

But the textual situation for Jeremiah 52:28–30 is not very trustworthy, as these verses are absent from the LXX. In addition, archaeological data seem to support a decisive amount of deportations during the exile.[32]

Nevertheless, there are clear signs of ideological reworking in 2 Kings 25. The information in 2 Kings 25:12 especially is driven by ideology ("But some of the poorest people of the land left the captain of the guard to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.") and seems to reflect the convictions of the exiled community in Babylon, not the historical givens. We know from Jeremiah 40f, but also from 2 Kings 25:22, that there was a "remnant" which was left in the land by "Nebuchadnezzar," not "Nebusaradan," not only for economic purposes (as "vinedressers and tillers of the soil"), but also as a politically structured entity under the rule of Gedaliah.

The specific accuracy of 2 Kings 25:13–17 is difficult to determine. In narrative terms, this passage about the carrying away of the temple vessels comes somewhat belatedly, as the destruction of the temple had already been reported in 2 Kings 25:9a. In addition, 2 Kings 25:13–17 "interrupts the account about

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[31] Cf. Lipschits 2005, 149–54.
[32] Cf. Lipschits 2003, 323–76; idem 2004, 99–107; cf. also Finkelstein 2010, 39–54, cf. the discussion in Ben Zvi 2010, 155–68.

the population and tears it apart."[33] It is however, more than likely that precious metal goods from the temple were abducted to Babylon. Surprisingly, the ark is not mentioned; it could be that it was not considered as precious by the Babylonians, or that it had been rescued beforehand, but was then lost and/or forgotten.

Verses 18–21 offer some information about the deportation of some high officials to Riblah and their death sentence or penalty. Again, there is no way to verify this information historically; on the other hand, there is also no indication to doubt its accuracy.

Verses 22–26 report the commissioning of Gedaliah in Mizpah as a Babylonian vassal,[34] and his death by the hands of Ishmael and his men who subsequently fled to Egypt. This episode is corroborated by the Jeremian parallel in Jeremiah 39–41.

Finally, after a narrative time gap of about 30 years, we learn in 2 Kings 25:27–30 about Jehoiachin's fate in Babylon. Although the text shows some reworking in light of the biblical Joseph story, we can trust its historical substance in light of the aforementioned Neo-Babylonian documents. Apparently, 2 Kings 25:27–30 depicted Jehoiachin in the colors of the biblical Joseph who ascended from prison to one of the highest offices in Egypt: Jehoiaichin is "released from prison," he "put aside his prison clothes," and he dined in the "king's presence." But this specific depiction does not affect the basic historicity of the events narrated at the end of the books of Kings.

5. History and Interpretation in 2 Kings 24 and 25

As noted by many scholars, it is surprising that the main body of theological interpretation at the end of the books of Kings is provided in 2 Kings 24 instead of 2 Kings 25.[35] That is, the somewhat less decisive elements in 597 BCE seemed to have attracted more interpretive weight than those of 587 BCE.

The most explicit interpretive passage is found at the start of 2 Kings 24, in vv. 2–3:

וישלח יהוה בו את־גדודי כשדים ואת־גדודי ארם ואת גדודי מואב ואת גדודי בני־עמון וישלחם ביהודה
להאבידו כדבר יהוה אשר דבר ביד עבדיו הנביאים:
אך על־פי יהוה היתה ביהודה להסיר מעל פניו בחטאת מנשה ככל אשר עשה:

YHWH sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, bands of the Arameans,[36] bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites; he sent them against Judah to destroy it, according

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[33] Levin 2010, 77.
[34] Cf. Levin 2010, 82–85.
[35] Cf. among many others Seitz 1991; see also the discussion in Wöhrle 2008.
[36] Some scholars suggest replacing "Arameans" with "Edomites," but cf. Lipschits 2005, 52 f.

to the word of YHWH that he spoke by his servants the prophets. Surely this came upon Judah at the command of YHWH, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and YHWH was not willing to pardon.

There is a text-critical issue at the beginning of v. 2. YHWH is named in the Hebrew text as the explicit subject of the sending of Babylonian auxiliary troops against Juda (וישלח יהוה בו) whereas the Greek text provides no explicit subject, but refers back to Nebuchadnezzar as subject in v. 1 (καὶ ἀπέστειλεν αὐτῷ). Ernst Würthwein thinks that the Greek version is original, and that "YHWH" as subject intruded from the statement in v. 2b: "according to the word of YHWH that he spoke by his servants the prophets," because nowhere else in the basic layer of the Deuteronomistic History ("DtrG")[37] does YHWH intervene so directly in the course of historical events.[38] However, we will see in a moment that 2 Kings 24:2–4 is not really "Deuteronomistic" in its theology.

The most important theological elements are presented in vv. 3–4:

אך על־פי יהוה היתה ביהודה להסיר מעל פניו בחטאת מנשה ככל אשר עשה:
וגם דם־הנקי אשר שפך וימלא את־ירושלם דם נקי ולא־אבה יהוה לסלח:

Surely this came upon Judah at the command of YHWH, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, [4] and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and YHWH was not willing to pardon.

First, we need to determine what "this came upon Judah" means. Does this just refer to the sending of the different bands in the days of Jehoiakim (vv. 2–3)? This is not very likely, as the end of v. 2b explicitly holds "he sent them against Judah to destroy it" (וישלחם ביהודה להאבידו). Verse 2b is thus an elliptic formulation that already anticipates the destruction of Judah in 597 and 587 BCE. Furthermore, the wording of v. 2b (וישלחם ביהודה להאבידו) is a strong argument against Würthwein's suggestion that 24:1–2 originally had "Nebuchadnezzar" as subject instead of "YHWH:"[39] With reference to Judah, אבד hi. ("to destroy") always has God as subject (cf. Deut 28:53, 61, cf. Jer 1:10; 18:7; 31:28).

The most astonishing interpretive device in 2 Kings 24 is the prominent and exclusive blaming of Manasseh for the destruction of Judah: "for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, [4] and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and YHWH was not willing to pardon." This statement is very much at odds what we know from elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic History: The kings, at least the "bad" ones,

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[37] Cf. the discussion in Römer 2007; Knoppers 2010.
[38] Würthwein 1984, 468 n. 2.
[39] Würthwein 1977, 468.

or the people are seen as responsible, but not just one single king, Manasseh, such as in 2 Kings 24:3–4.[40]

Obviously, 2 Kings 24:3–4 provides a peculiar perspective on the fall of Jerusalem and its theological rationale. Manasseh is the villain who is responsible for all the evil that came upon Judah and Jerusalem. But why? Why Manasseh?

In order to approach this question, we need to have a look at the Manasseh passage in 2 Kings 21:1–10 which, besides the summary note in 2 Kings 23:26, is the only text in Deuteronomy-Kings which holds a similar view (cf. Jer 15:4).

2 Kings 21 holds not only a singular position in blaming Manasseh alone, but also in how it evaluates king Manasseh:

First, 2 Kings 21:3 mentions that Manasseh rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah had destroyed previously. No king other than Manasseh "rebuilt" high places, which seems to be seen as a peculiar cultic crime.

Second, worshipping all the host of heaven is only reported of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:5). 2 Kings 17:16 mentions such a worship by the Northern kingdom Israel, but Manasseh is the only king in Israel and Judah who failed in this respect.

Third, his practices of soothsaying, augury and dealing with the dead, as reported by v. 6, are also singular.

Fourth, it is quite often the case with kings of the Northern kingdom, that they are said to have "provoked" (כעס[41] hi.) YHWH (1 Kgs 14:9; 15:30: Jeroboam, 1 Kgs 16:7: Baasha, 1 Kgs 16:26: Omri, 1 Kgs 16:33: Ahab, 1 Kgs 22:54: Ahazia, 2 Kgs 23:19: in general of Israel's kings, 1 Kgs 16:2, 13; 2 Kgs 17:11, 17: of the people of Israel). But Manasseh is the only king of Judah who is blamed for having "provoked" YHWH (2 Kgs 21:6).

Fifth, the reproach against Manasseh of having "caused Israel to sin" (חטא hi. 2 Kgs 21:11, 16) is also singular for a Judean king. It is very common for Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:16; 15:26, 30, 34; 16:2, 19, 26; 22:53; 2 Kgs 3:3; 10:29, 31; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 28; 17:21; 23:15), but also for a few other kings of the Northern kingdom (1 Kgs 16:13: Baasha and Ela; 1 Kgs 21:22: Ahab).

Taken together, two main motives need to be highlighted in the Manasseh passage in 2 Kings 21. First, Manasseh is guilty of especially serious sacrileges and offences, and second, some of these iniquities are portrayed as a sum of the misdeeds of the Northern kings. In other words, the "sins of Manasseh" (2 Kgs 21:17; 24:3) responsible for the fall of Judah seem to be paralleled by the "sin of Jeroboam" that ultimately caused the downfall of the Northern kingdom.

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[40] For a historical reconstruction of the time of Manasseh see Knauf 2005, 164–88; Stavrakopoulou 2005, 248–63.

[41] Cf. Stolz 1971, 838–42, 840 f.

But again: Why does 2 Kings 21 together with 2 Kings 23:26 and 2 Kings 24:2–4 develop this peculiar perspective, a perspective that is at odds with the mainstream theology of the Deuteronomistic History that accuses the bad kings (all of the Northern kingdom and about half of the Southern kingdom) and the people, but clearly refrains from singling out just one person responsible for the fall of Jerusalem?

The key for the answer to this question lies in the specific theological profile of 2 Kings 24. The most important interpretive piece is to be found in 2 Kings 24:13–14, two verses that almost certainly are an addition to the chapter.

ויוצא משם את־כל־אוצרות בית יהוה ואוצרות בית המלך ויקצץ את־כל־כלי הזהב אשר עשה שלמה מלך־ישראל בהיכל יהוה כאשר דבר יהוה:

והגלה את־כל־ירושלם ואת־כל־השרים ואת כל־גבורי החיל עשרה אלפים גולה וכל־החרש והמסגר לא נשאר זולת דלת עם־הארץ:

He carried off all the treasures of the house of YHWH, and the treasures of the king's house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold, which Solomon, king of Israel, had made in the temple of YHWH, all this as YHWH had foretold. He carried away all Jerusalem, all the officials, all the warriors, ten thousand deportees, all the armorers and the smiths; no one remained, except the poorest people of the land.

The secondary nature of these verses is obvious for two reasons I have already mentioned: First, they produce a contradiction with the following chapter 2 Kings 25 in that they say that "all" treasures of the temple and "all" Jerusalem had already been carried away ten years before 587 BCE, in 597 BCE, leaving nothing behind for the events of 2 Kings 25. Second, v. 15 smoothly links up with v. 12.

There must be a specific reason why this addition in 2 Kings 24:13–14 twists the historical reality in an obvious manner. Apparently, these verses strive to predate the decisive elements of Jerusalem's and Judah's catastrophe to 597 BCE, and to minimize the significance of the events of 587 BCE.

Why is this so? The answer can be found in the historical information included in vv. 15–16 (which belongs to the older stratum in 2 Kings 24):

ויגל את־יהויכין בבלה ואת־אם המלך ואת־נשי המלך ואת־סריסיו ואת אולי הארץ הוליך גולה מירושלם בבלה:

ואת כל־אנשי החיל שבעת אלפים והחרש והמסגר אלף הכל גבורים עשי מלחמה ויביאם מלך־בבל גולה בבלה:

He carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon; the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials and the elite of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. And all the warriors, seven thousand, the armorers and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war, the king of Babylon brought them captive to Babylon.

These verses explain that in 597 the king and his entourage, including the elite of the land, were deported to Babylon. Here lies the main root of the conflict between those who were exiled in Babylon and returned to the land in the wake

of Cyrus' edict, and those who had remained in Judah during the exile. This conflict is documented in several passages in a number of post-exilic texts of the Hebrew Bible.

Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann[42] is to be especially credited for pointing out the existence of what he had called a "golaorientierte Redaktion" ("golah-oriented redaction, that is a redaction maintaining and expressing the political and theological interests of those who were exiled 597 BCE with king Jehoiachin to Babylon). Maybe the best example of a text illustrating what this redaction has in mind can be found in Jeremiah 24.[43]

Jeremiah 24 includes a vision located after the events of 597 BCE. The vision presents two baskets of figs, one basket with good, the other one with bad figs. The good figs represent the group around king Jehoiachin that was deported in 597 BCE to Babylon, the bad figs stand for those who remained in the land. The good figs will have a future, the bad ones will not, they will be dispersed and become extinct.

It is obvious that Jeremiah 24 makes a sharp distinction within the people of Israel: the legitimate group is the first *golah* deported under Jehoiachin. The promise they get is the following (Jer 24:6–7):

ושמתי עיני עליהם לטובה והשבתים על־הארץ הזאת ובניתים ולא אהרס ונטעתים ולא אתוש:
ונתתי להם לב לדעת אתי כי אני יהוה והיו־לי לעם ואנכי אהיה להם לאלהים כי־ישבו אלי בכל־לבם:

I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am YHWH; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

This program is crystal clear, but it certainly does not stem from the historical prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 27–28, but also in Jeremiah 32 and 37–38 we can see what Jeremiah thought about the situation between 597 and 587 BCE. By no means was he of the opinion that the legitimate part of Israel had been carried away to Babylon and whoever remained in the land was now doomed to perish. Rather he held that it was necessary to bow one's neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, because this was the only way to have a chance to survive.

Jeremiah 24 with its perspective of judgment on the Zedekiah generation argues differently. There is no possibility of survival at all after 597 BCE. In fact, according to this position the land was emptied during the exile. It is quite obvious that this perspective reflects the interests of the exiled community that originated in the 597 BCE deportation: This community wanted to evoke the impression that they are the only legitimate representatives of monarchic Judah after the downfall of Jerusalem.

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[42] Pohlmann 1978.
[43] Cf. Schmid 1996, 253–69; somewhat differently Stipp 2015, 349–79.

The same theological program in Jeremiah 24 can be found in the book of Ezekiel.[44] The dating system in Ezekiel which is aligned with the reign of Jehoiachin (Ezek 1:2; 8:1; 20:2; 26:1; 29:1,17; 30:20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:21; 40:1) already shows that the Ezekiel tradition is closely linked with the community of the deportees from 597 to which also Ezekiel himself belonged. In addition, the book of Ezekiel concurs with the position of Jeremiah 24 that there is no possibility for a future life in the land for those who had remained there after 597 bce, cf. Ezek 12:19; 14:21–23; 15:8 and 33:21–29.

Given the archaeological realities of the exilic period, it can be asserted that the population of the land was indeed significantly diminished at that time, but the land was by no means empty. In other words, this perspective is historically inaccurate, but rather driven by ideology and probably presupposes some historical distance to the events it describes, as Pohlmann has pointed out.

If one is acquainted with this clear-cut program in Jeremiah 24 (including some satellite texts in Jeremiah as well, e.g. Jer 29:16–20) and in Ezekiel, it becomes obvious that the passages in 2 Kings 24:2–4 and 13–14 belong to the same ideological movement. Possibly, they were even written by the same hand.[45]

2 Kings 24 has been re-interpreted in order to accommodate the end of the books of Kings to the theological program of the golah-oriented redaction: The decisive event at the end of the monarchy was the deportation of king Jehoiachin and his entourage in 597 bce, and not the destruction of the temple in 587 bce and the abduction of king Zedekiah to Riblah.

All this explains why 2 Kings 24 is so heavily loaded in theological terms. But the question remains open why 2 Kings 25 seems to be so unpretentious in theological regards. Why is there hardly any explicit interpretive perspective regarding the theological significance of these events? This is especially noteworthy as several texts, such as Lam 1:7–8; Jer 13:20–22; or Isa 40:1–2 from the period of the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile develop very strong interpretations regarding the events of 587 bce:

זכרה ירושלם ימי עניה ומרודיה כל מחמדיה אשר היו מימי קדם בנפל עמה ביד־צר ואין עוזר לה ראוה צרים שחקו על משבתה:
חטא חטאה ירושלם על־כן לנידה היתה כל־מכבדיה הזילוה כי־ראו ערותה גם־היא נאנחה ותשב אחור:

Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers in days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was no one to help her, the foe looked on mocking over her downfall. Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away (Lam 1:7–8).

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[44] Cf. Pohlmann 1996; idem 2001. Cf. also Konkel 2002, 357–83.
[45] In more detail cf. Schmid 1997, 87–99.

שאי עיניכם וראי הבאים מצפון איה העדר נתן־לך צאן תפארתך:
מה־תאמרי כי־יפקד עליך ואת למדת אתם עליך אלפים לראש הלוא חבלים יאחזוך כמו אשת לדה:
וכי תאמרי בלבבך מדוע קראני אלה ברב עונך נגלו שוליך נחמסו עקביך:

Lift up your eyes [addressed is the personified city of Jerusalem] and see those who come from the north. Where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock? What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you have trained to be your allies? Will not pangs take hold of you, like those of a woman in labor? And if you say in your heart, 'Why have these things come upon me?' it is for the greatness of your iniquity that your skirts are lifted up, and you are violated (Jer 13:20–22).

נחמו נחמו עמי יאמר אלהיכם:
דברו על־לב ירושלם וקראו אליה כי מלאה צבאה כי נרצה עונה כי לקחה מיד יהוה כפלים בכל־חטאתיה:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from YHWH's hand double for all her sins (Isa 40:1–2).

All this makes the question of why there is so little explicit theology in 2 Kings 25 even more pressing. Several possible answers come to mind:

First, if 2 Kings 25 is rather close to the events depicted in that chapter, it may well be that a lot of theological interpretation which could have been employed by the chapter's author had not yet been developed.

Second, if Frank Moore Cross' theory on the composition of the Deuteronomistic History is correct in some of its basic tenets, especially with regard to the first edition of the Deuteronomistic History pertaining to Josiah's reform in 2 Kings 23,[46] then the allocation of the main interpretive elements in 2 Kings 17 (i.e., the fall of Samaria and the wicked Northern kingdom; the evaluation of Israel and Judah's kings) is done plausibly, with no natural incentive to add a major interpretive perspective in 2 Kings 25.

Third, it needs to be kept in mind that 2 Kings 25 and the books of Kings were probably never transmitted and read alone. There was also the prophetic tradition, which included Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos and Micah at least and maybe others and these prophetic writings were probably already interpreted in some way and looked both back into the possible reasons for the catastrophe, and at least partially forward into the future. So the main theological interpretation was provided by the prophetic and not the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible, that were, to a certain extent, read and perceived together.

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[46] Cross 1973, 274–89; also e. g., Nelson 1981; Knoppers 1993/1994, I, 51–52; see the reports on the history of scholarship: Römer and de Pury 1996, 47–50; Avioz 2005, 11–55, 14–16. Wellhausen was already sympathetic with this view, cf. Wellhausen 1899. Cf. Schmid 2006, 23–47.

6. History, Historicity and Interpretation

Would the Bible be more true if its historical texts simply reflected the historicity of the events depicted? Is 2 Kings 24 less true than 2 Kings 25 because it is to a lesser degree historically accurate? These are, of course, difficult questions that are not easy to answer. Nevertheless, some suggestions are in order. First, a lot of cities and temples were destroyed in the ancient Near East. The fate of Jerusalem is not an exceptional one, and within the framework of ancient Near Eastern literature reports on such destructions are not confined to the Bible. But what only the Bible provides is a series of subsequent interpretations ("Fortschreibungen") of one and the same event that try to establish a meta-historical significance for what happened.[47] Of course, these interpretations often blur the historical accuracy of the narrated events. But one may safely assume that a non-interpreted account of the fall of Jerusalem never would have attracted the attention the current version of the books of Kings did, let alone that it would have become a canonical or sacred text. Only as an interpretively saturated text, the Bible has imposed itself as an authority to its readers.

In addition, it needs to be highlighted that the process of adding literary comments to an already existing text is a different thing to completely rewriting a given text. By adding to a text, a certain multi-perspectivity arises and even the older tradition elements remain visible and discernible. Therefore, the new interpretive elements in a biblical text were not just added in order to veil the pre-existing perspective, but rather to transform it while still granting it, to a certain extent, its own validity.

In both ancient and modern cultures, history-writing has a strong link to the concept of remembering:[48] What is historically significant is what a culture deems worth remembering. And apparently, the biblical tradition was not willing to unify its heritage of the past. Rather, it presented different perspectives on its past that were not always logically aligned, but that, like a cathedral that grew over many centuries and includes different architectural styles, have formed an interpretive building. Its beauty does not lie in tearing down the building to its original structure, but in ascertaining its complex quality.

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[47] On this cf. Schmid 2011.
[48] Hendel 2005; Assmann 1992; idem 2010, 3–18.