

Putting Judah's Downfall in Perspective

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS DEPICT THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM FROM MULTIPLE ANGLES

GREG TRULL

Some readers think of biblical narratives like injection molds. The Bible shows stories exactly and comprehensively—every detail simply pressed from facts. Others think of biblical narratives as expressionist paintings, with history flowing out of author creativity. The first approach assumes unshaped reality, while the second presumes manufactured history. Neither is an accurate view of the Bible's historical literature.

The art of photography lends a better analogy. Photographers tell a story through their presentation of reality. They show us what something looks like from a certain vantage point and through a particular lens. Photographers use distance, framing, depth of field and other techniques to tell a story. Similarly, history writers employ literary techniques to show us history through their lenses.

The four accounts of the Babylonian exile provide examples of vantage points. The writers of Kings, Chronicles, and Jeremiah (two accounts) lend us their lenses to view this tragedy.

Depth of field

A photographer utilizes depth of field to control the focus. A narrow depth of field concentrates on a small part of the photo. A wide depth of field shows many elements in equal focus. For the historiographer, a narrow depth of field highlights one or two subjects while others remain blurred.

The books of 1–2 Kings center on three intertwined themes. First is a catalog of covenant violations; second, the climactic punishment for these sins. These themes explained the reason for the exile and warned readers to avoid repeating Judah's failures. The third theme highlights fulfilled prophecies. Most of these were warnings fulfilled in judgment (one example is 2 Kgs 24:2). However, the prophets also offered hope that God would keep his promises of future restoration.

The 2 Kings portrait of the exile captures the culmination of sinful centuries. The details highlight the devastation. The account begins with a summary statement: "It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened" (24:20). Complete devastation dominates the portrait:

- Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem "with his whole army" (25:1).
- The Babylonians built siege works "all around" the city (25:1).

- “The famine in the city became so severe that there was no food” (25:3).
- “The whole army” of Judah fled the city (25:4).
- Babylonian forces burned “every important building” (25:9).
- The Babylonian commander captured “the people who remained in the city” (25:11).
- The Babylonians carried away “all that were made of pure gold or silver” (25:15).
- The commander executed all priestly, civic and military leaders (25:18-21).
- All who remained in Jerusalem fled to Egypt in fear (25:26).

This sharp focus draws our eyes to the widespread disaster. Every detail punctuates the devastating consequences of Judah’s sin.

The Chronicler’s depth of field draws attention to the temple and the palace. While the account in Kings includes more military and political events, Chronicles tightens focus to the temple and whether Judah’s kings were faithful to it. This explains, for example, why David’s sin with Bathsheba isn’t mentioned in Chronicles, but his sin of counting the Israelites *is*

included. While most people would consider the sins of adultery and murder to be more significant, the sin of David’s census led to the purchase of land for the temple (1 Chr 21; 2 Chr 3).

The temple/palace theme carries directly into the exile account. Second Chronicles

The Chronicler adds a Sabbath-oriented explanation for the exile. “The land enjoyed its sabbath rests” until the required captivity was fulfilled (36:21). Moses had warned that God would scatter his people among the nations in order to give the land its needed rest (Lev 26:33–35). In other words, the exile restored what Judah’s disobedience had robbed.

Jeremiah 39 provides a personal focus to the exile. It contrasts the faithfulness of Jeremiah and Ebed-Melech with the faithlessness of Zedekiah. In fear, Zedekiah attempts to escape the Babylonian attack (39:4–5). He is captured and blinded. The last thing he sees is the slaughter of his sons (39:6–7). Jeremiah, on the other hand, receives mercy from the Babylonians (39:12). Similarly, Ebed-Melech is rescued because he has trusted the Lord (39:17–18).

Point of view

A photographer may choose a bird’s-eye view to give a distant perspective. Or the photographer can drop viewers into the action with a worm’s-eye view. Biblical history writers normally give a bird’s-eye view, using what’s called a “third-person omniscient” narrator. This means the narrator stands outside the action and knows the characters’ thoughts. Sometimes though, we see history from the ground.

Chronicles presents the exile in the widest bird’s-eye view. The Chronicler describes the exile from the period when the Jews were returning to Judah, 70 years later than the account in Kings. He writes to a people going home rather than to those despairing in captivity. This explains why Chronicles highlights themes like Judah, the Davidic kings, and the temple. The northern kingdom of Israel had long ago been scattered by the Assyrians, with no hope of return. All the northern royal lines had perished; only the southern kingdom of Judah remained, and only the Davidic line of kings had an heir. Further, one of the main tasks of the returning Jews was to rebuild the temple. The Chronicler helped readers see the fall of Judah from the hopeful peak of the return and the rebuilding of the temple.

As the reader views the exile from this distance, two elements stand out. First, the exile came because God’s people had rejected his word. The Lord had mercifully sent prophets again and again, but his people had refused them (2 Chr 36:15–16). Now prophets like Haggai and Zechariah were challenging the returning exiles to recommit to Yahweh. Second, recommitment meant rebuilding the temple. Chronicles notes that young leaders were slaughtered in the sanctuary (36:17), that all the temple treasures had been plundered (36:18), and that the temple was the first thing the Babylonians burned (36:19). Compared to

Who is the Chronicler?

The book of Chronicles doesn’t identify its author, so biblical scholars often refer to this writer simply as “the Chronicler.” Some scholars have suggested possible options—such as Ezra, Haggai, Malachi, and Zechariah—but these ideas are purely speculative.

36 hurriedly rehearses the final four kings of Judah. All four fit the same pattern. All four reigns degrade the temple, through using its vessels to pay tribute to Babylon or through defiling the temple’s worship practices. All four kings are taken into exile, foreshadowing the captivity of the nation.

The Chronicles account doesn’t provide details of the attack that are found in 2 Kings—such as the list of plunder, the list of Jewish deportees, and the account of Gedeliah’s governorship. Instead, 2 Chronicles reports the attack in a single verse (36:17), then focuses on the plundering of the temple (36:18). Chronicles also describes the burning of Jerusalem as starting at the temple, then moving to the palace and the rest of the city (36:19).

2 Kings, this longer look back in 2 Chronicles revealed the necessity of obedience and the centrality of temple worship.

Jeremiah 52 and 2 Kings 25, which deal with politics and battles, picture history from a lower altitude. We see a fuller history of the northern kingdom of Israel and its chaotic relationship with the southern kingdom of Judah. Unlike 2 Chronicles, 2 Kings brings our viewpoint closer to the action. This narrative depicts the fall of Jerusalem with details of Zedekiah's failed escape (25:4–7), the smashing of the temple's bronze pillars and stands (25:13–17), and the capture of the city's leaders (25:18–21). Similarly, Jeremiah 52 records much about the attack. Both the Jeremiah and 2 Kings accounts serve as final images in portfolios of spiritual failure. Needing little explanation, the pictures speak a thousand words.

Among the four exile accounts, Jeremiah 39 gives us the worm's-eye view. It has no omniscient narrator comments and includes insider quotes. This puts the reader on the ground as it quakes. Jeremiah's personal account reveals many exile elements he had predicted. God told Jeremiah that the enemy would sit in Jerusalem's gates (1:15; 39:3). He also foretold that Babylon would destroy Jerusalem by fire (21:10; 39:8). Jeremiah warned that Zedekiah would be caught if he attempted escape (38:18; 39:5). Zedekiah's prophesied fate was seeing Nebuchadnezzar face to face, then being carried captive to Babylon (34:3; 39:6-7). Jeremiah assured Ebed-Melech of divine protection because of his kindness toward the prophet (38:7-13; 39:15-18). This worm's-eye view exhibits a personal version of nationwide destruction.

Framing

To draw our eyes into a photograph and toward the subject, a photographer employs framing elements like doorways, tree branches, or arches. History writers accomplish the same effect using components like events, speeches, or phrases to frame their subjects.

Second Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52 frame the exile with the release of Jehoiachin (2 Kgs 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34). Like a tiny shaft of sunlight penetrating a deep shadow, the protection of King Jehoiachin offers readers the slightest hope. God had worked to preserve the royal line; he had not revoked his promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. The nation of Judah was not dead yet.

The Chronicler took the devastation of the exile and framed it with a brighter hope. At the conclusion of 2 Chronicles, the story ends with a beginning. King Cyrus of Persia decrees that the temple should be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and any Jew could return home to help reconstruct the house of God (36:22–23). This frame would have encouraged ancient readers: not only was Judah not dead yet; the exiles were going home!

In each of the four narratives of the exile, the literary lens and angle serve to teach multifaceted lessons from a single event.

Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

