

To Sync or Not To Sync? That Is the Question

Synoptic books is a name for a set of books that offers two or more views of the same biblical event, often in very similar language. There are two main groups of synoptic books in the Bible:

- 1) The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, provide parallel views of many of the events in Jesus' life. Some of these events are described in all three synoptic gospels.

Some events are described in only two or even in only one of these three gospels. Sometimes the wording of the parallel accounts is very similar. Sometimes the parallel accounts offer different information about the same event. (Different, of course, does not mean contradictory.)

(In the New Testament Ephesians and Colossians could be called synoptic epistles since they parallel each other quite closely in subject matter.)

- 2) In the Old Testament the historical accounts from 1 Samuel to 2 Chronicles provide a synoptic view of the history of the Israelite monarchy.

1 and 2 Samuel provide one view of the beginning of the Israelite monarchy during the reigns of Saul and David. The second half of 1 Chronicles provides a second view of the same history.

1 and 2 Kings provide one view of the rest of the history of the Israelite monarchy. A second view of the same history is provided by 2 Chronicles.

These two parallel accounts of the history of the Israelite monarchy select different material to include in their respective accounts. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel give a more complete account of David's rule. 1 Chronicles does not report the more negative aspects of David's rule, such as David and Bathsheba, David and Absalom, etc.

1 and 2 Kings focus on the way in which Israel's unfaithfulness led to the downfall of both Judah and Israel. These books provide a lot of information about events in the northern kingdom of Israel. In contrast 2 Chronicles focuses on the history of Judah, with very little attention to the history of the northern kingdom of Israel. It focuses on the grace of God, which is displayed in his actions to preserve and restore the priesthood and the monarchy, which would both be fulfilled in Christ. In addition 2 Chronicles provides much information about certain kings of Judah which is not presented in Kings.

The first part of 1 Chronicles parallels some of the genealogies from Genesis and other early books. Both Kings and Chronicles also have parallels to Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Some events that are reported in one of the two parallel views of the history of Israel are completely absent from the other account. Sometimes both versions of the history contain reports of the same event, but the accounts are quite different in the points they choose to report and in the language they use to report it. But there are some events that are described in both accounts by very similar words. The Hebrew is nearly (but not quite) identical in both accounts. It may be that the author of Chronicles had the text of Kings in front of him and was using it as his main resource or that both authors were using one of the sources for Israel's history that are named in the books, such as the annals of the kings.

Syncing Chronicles to Kings

It is this third class of parallel passages that is our main concern here. When the Hebrew of a passage in Chronicles is a very close match with the Hebrew of a passage in Samuel or Kings, should we try to make the English of the translation in Chronicles a verbatim match with the English of the translation of Samuel or Kings?

The EHV already has a number of general rubrics that have a bearing on this issue.

1. Try to be consistent in the translation of technical terms.
2. Though “one Hebrew/Greek word = one English word” is not a viable standard for a translator to apply consistently, the translator should strive to be consistent rather than casual in his renderings of specific words and word groups.
3. When a person has two or more personal names, preserve distinctions like *Jehoiachin/ Jeconiah/ Coniah*. In general, keep the distinct names as they appear in the Hebrew text. Alternate names of important figures can be footnoted. If the main text has *Coniah*,^b the footnote would have: ^bAlso called *Jehoiachin*.
4. Harmonize minor spelling changes of familiar names and the different pre- and post-exilic spellings of the names of individuals like Hezekiah (*Hizkiyahu* and *Hizkiyah* both = *Hezekiah*).
5. A special problem case is *Joash/Jehoash* and *Joram/Jehoram* because there are kings with the same two names in each kingdom (see 2 Kings 12). As a general rule use whichever name the text has, with a footnote when necessary.
6. The various Hebrew spellings of *Nebuchadnezzar* can be harmonized to this one English spelling.

Like all of our rubrics, none of these rubrics can be practiced as rigid rules. Language and its nuances are simply too complex. Translation is more of an art than a science. We don't want a translation that sounds like it was made by a computer or people who talk like books.

Looking for the consistency behind our inconsistency we can say this: We try to balance a concern for what will be easiest for the reader (usually that would be uniformity and homogenizing of names) with a respect for the original authors' preference for diversity of spelling, diversity of names, etc. The author's preference receives the higher priority of the two concerns.

So What Should We Do?

A point in favor of trying to make the parallel translations as close in English as the original texts are in Hebrew is that this practice will alert the reader to the fact that the Chronicler may be using Samuel or Kings as his source. This same effect could, of course, also be accomplished by headings that correlate the two passages or by a footnote that said: *In this account Chronicles follows the text of Kings very closely*. So the question we must ask is whether an effort to make the two parallel English translations identical in wording is useful to the reader and faithful to the intent of the authors.

Some of the points that make an attempt at a total sync questionable include the following:

- 1) When one compares the texts of Kings with their parallels in Chronicles, one sees that there are no passages of any length in which Chronicles gives a verbatim rendering of Kings. (There are a few that are fairly close.)
- 2) If Samuel was written in about 900 BC, shortly after the reign of David, and Chronicles was written in the 400s at the time of Ezra, the distance between the two accounts was as great as the distance between the original King James Version and the EHV, so we would expect some differences and updating in grammar, spelling, and vocabulary.
- 3) It does not seem that the author of Chronicles was concerned to produce a verbatim reproduction of a source. Even the closely parallel accounts are not exact reproductions. It seems that even when the ancient authors had a specific source in front of them, their idea of “quoting” something was different than ours. They were more “using a source” than “quoting.” Translators should be guided by the concerns of the authors, not with squeezing them into our preferences or conventions. Translators are not editors.
- 4) The Chronicler updates grammar, spelling, and vocabulary:

- a. The Tetragrammaton *LORD* is sometimes changed to *God*.
 - b. The pre-exilic spelling of names like *Hizkiyahu* may be updated to *Hizkiyah*.
 - c. The pre-exilic spelling of David *dvd* may be updated to *dvyd*.
 - d. The account in Chronicles substitutes different names. *Araunah* in Samuel is *Ornan* in Chronicles. (We follow Luther's example in preserving this distinction.)
 - e. The term *cohen*, usually translated *priest*, refers to a *government minister* in 2 Samuel 8:31. By the time of Chronicles this use of the term *cohen* was apparently no longer current. In 1 Chronicles 18: 17 these officials are called *chief advisors at the side of the king*.
- 5) There are many textual variants in the texts, especially in texts like the lists of David's elite warriors. This makes it more difficult to establish the original reading or spelling in every case. In some cases, these variants can be evaluated only by comparing the texts in the archaic Hebrew alphabet. Even within the Hebrew and Greek textual traditions there is not a consistency of readings.
 - 6) In some cases there are three parallel versions, including one from Isaiah or Jeremiah, so a one-for-one sync is not possible.
 - 7) The spelling in Kings may be the original and the spelling in Chronicles may be a new spelling, but apparently the writer of Chronicles did not want to use the original spelling.
 - 8) The different scribes of the two parallel accounts do not always divide and punctuate the two parallel texts the same way in both accounts. Different additions and omissions to the text mean that identical words do not have the exact same context in both versions.
 - 9) There are no really reliable sources to help do exact syncing. A book like Abba Ben David's *Maqbilot ba Miqra (Parallels in Scripture)* makes side-by-side comparisons of parallel texts, in which spelling variants are marked in red letters, but it does not always mark omissions of words. Its Hebrew text does not seem to match BHS in all cases. English harmonies like Armstrong (*Samuel, Kings, Chronicles: A Harmony*, Randolph W. Armstrong, c. 2004, ldolphin.org/harmony.pdf) in closely parallel passages produce one composite translation rather than two accurate parallel translations.
 - 10) Simply importing one translation into the other book, even in cases of near quotation, would produce false harmonizations.
 - 11) Trying to produce an exact sync, which also preserves all the differences between the parallel texts, is therefore very time-consuming and costly, and it would produce only a sync of one particular manuscript, not a sync of the Hebrew text as it appears in different manuscripts.
 - 12) The most important consideration for us is that the author of Chronicles does not seem to be concerned to produce a sync with Samuel or Kings. On the contrary, he often was interested in preserving spellings and data different from those in the parallel account, even when the contrast is quite jarring.
 - 13) It is important for a translator to preserve these distinctions which the author wanted to make. If the distinctions raise a translation issue, a translator's footnote is appropriate. Further explanation of the difference is the assignment of a study Bible.
 - 14) Another important consideration is that an exact sync is not useful to readers. Will a pastor who is producing a Bible class on an event in David's life benefit more from reading two identical translations of the text or from reading two different translations of the text by two translators who worked independently? Even when the translations are being used to work with the Hebrew text, two views are more useful than one.
 - 15) People who want to compare the texts of the two versions of the story are better served by parallels like Ben David or harmonies like Armstrong, than by flipping back and forth between two translations on different pages of a Bible.
 - 16) The EHV base translations of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were made by different translators who worked independently. Where two translators gave slightly different shadings to a translation of the same account, it does not seem like good stewardship to discard one of the translations or to relegate all the variations to footnotes. The reader will benefit more from seeing that there may

be more than one good way to translate a phrase and that each rendering gives insight into the meaning of the text.

(In reality, the difficulties that stand in the way of syncing are more complicated than indicated in the above study, which gives only a sample of the issues.)

So Where Does That Leave Us?

Our rubric, based on our study so far, is: In synoptic passages such as the parallel accounts in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the translations will be coordinated for key terms and expressions, but the translations do not have to be made 100% identical, even when the Hebrew texts are almost exactly alike. Throughout the Old Testament, we do not insist that a Hebrew phrases must always be translated exactly the same way, so our practice in regard to syncing is no different than our normal practice. (The authors of Kings and Chronicles give us a good precedent for variety since they sometimes spell the same name two different ways in the same paragraph. They also use data from different chronological systems without trying to sync them.)

The name, therefore, which best describes our process is not *syncing* but *coordinating*.

While the two translations have already been drawn closer together, the efforts of the independent translators may in some cases be preserved in the parallel translations to give readers two views of the passage. The two translations will be close enough to each other that it should be clear to the reader when the two Hebrew texts are very close to each other.

Since the goal of the Chronicler (who may have been Ezra) is to produce a second view of the events recorded in Samuel or Kings, it seems wise that his goal should be our goal also.

A lot of the work of coordination has already been done, but we will probably be working on this for another month or two. If you have any thoughts on the matter, submit them through our response form or to the editor's email wpbrugj@gmail.com.

In developing our rubrics we ask two basic questions:

- 1) What is true to the intent of the authors?
- 2) What best serves our readers?

Neither of these considerations favors trying to producing translations that are synced in all points. If you have made it to the end of this exhausting (but not exhaustive) study, though the details may be unimportant to you, the principle behind it is important. It illustrates the lengths the EHV goes to try to develop and practice rubrics of translation which will honor the intents of the authors and the needs of the readers.

Important Note: Differences between two accounts of the same event are not contradictions unless they are mutually exclusive. If I tell one friend, "I went to Washington last week," and I tell another friend, "I went to New York last week," there is no contradiction. Both were true. For our purposes here we will give just one example from Kings/Chronicles. 2 Samuel 24 reports that David purchased Araunah's threshing floor and oxen for fifty shekels of silver. 1 Chronicles 21 reports that David weighed out six hundred shekels of gold to Ornan for the site. Neither text offers any explanation for the difference, but it seems that Kings chooses to describe the purchase of the threshing floor to erect an altar to halt the plague and Chronicles chooses to report the purchase of the whole site to build the temple.