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The Meaning of the Phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* in Biblical Historiography

1. Introduction

This article concerns biblical royal summaries, that is, the corpus of concise notes concerning the rulers of Israel and Judah as preserved in the Books of Kings. The fundamental question of this study concerns the supposed existence and character of the hypothetical court chronicles (*sēper dibrê hayyāmîm*) of the Israelite and Judahite monarchs who are regularly mentioned by the biblical authors as the main point of reference for the royal summaries (the well-known question: “the rest of the acts of king x, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah / Israel?”). However, it is unclear whether these references should be interpreted as stemming from authentic sources or as examples of pseudoepigrapha. Any decision in this area of research is significant to studies on the provenance and redaction of Kings or controversies concerning the historical reliability of the references. Presenting the arguments for the existence of an archival collection which could have been used by the biblical compilers may be a constructive counterweight to the widely accepted hypothesis that the biblical royal summaries are the mere product of the biblical author’s imagination.

2. Current State of the Question

Since the times of J. Wellhausen¹, most of the scholars assume that the biblical royal summaries, both in terms of their structure and their content, can be interpreted as the work of a single editor, who is usually identified as the so-called Deuteronomist² according to M. Noth’s hypothesis. Many researchers accept this

¹ J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, Berlin 1905.

² M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien I. Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament*, Halle 1943.

paradigm but do not explore the issues of the supposed sources used by the biblical authors for writing the royal summaries. They assume that it would be impossible to reconstruct their original form and content based on the strictly theological orientation of biblical historiography³.

Over the years many archaeological discoveries have provided comparative material which has led to the emergence of alternative hypotheses. According to these scholars, the biblical authors could have used more or less coherent archival materials in their works. Subsequent scholars supposed the use of votive or thanksgiving inscriptions prepared at the request of the kings of Israel or Judah⁴, being analogous to the stele of Mesha, king of Moab, the Tel Dan stele commissioned by Hazael, king of Damascus, or the stele of Zakkur, king of Hamat.

However, as there is no conclusive archaeological evidence, (only a few fragments of various steles from the areas of Samaria and Judah), some researchers suggest that even if the biblical authors had access to some coherent sources, those materials should have been identified as the chronological list of kings and contained concise data about the date of accession, the length of the respective reigns, and the dates of death for the successive rulers⁵.

At the same time, scholars are cautious with regard to the biblical suggestions concerning the existence of the royal chronicles. For example, some researchers recognize stylistic and ideological similarities between the biblical royal summaries and the chronicles of the Babylonian kings⁶, but these analogies are usually seen as a secondary literary staffage inspired by the realities of the Babylonian captivity and as the influence of the Mesopotamian scribal culture. Even if some comparative studies suggest the existence of the royal chronicles of Israel and Judah⁷, their authors usually confine themselves to general suggestions,

³ For example, J.T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Collegeville, 1996, p. xii; p. 611; W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, Peabody 1995, p. 4.

⁴ J.A. Montgomery, *Archival Data in the Book of Kings*, "Journal of Biblical Literature" 53 (1934), p. 46-52; D.B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton 1992; J. Van Seters, *Solomon's Temple: Fact and Ideology in Biblical and Near Eastern Historiography*, "Catholic Biblical Quarterly" 59(1997), p. 45-57.

⁵ Sh.R. Bin-Nun, *Formulas from Royal Records of Israel and of Judah*, "Vetus Testamentum" 18(1968), p. 414-432; A.R. Green, *Regnal Formulas in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of the Books of Kings*, "Journal of Near Eastern Studies" 42(1983), p. 167-180; M. Haran, *The Books of the Chronicles 'Of the Kings of Judah' and 'Of the Kings of Israel': What Sort of Books Were They?*, "Vetus Testamentum" 49(1999), p. 156-164; S.B. Parker, *Did the Authors of the Books of Kings Make Use of Royal Inscriptions?*, "Vetus Testamentum" 50(2000), p. 357-378; M. Dijkstra, *'As for the other events...' Annals and Chronicles in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, in: R.P. Gordon, J.C. de Moor (ed.), *The Old Testament in Its World*, Leiden 2005, p. 14-44.

⁶ M. Liverani, *The Book of Kings and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, in: A. Lemaire, B. Halpern (ed.), *The books of Kings: sources, composition, historiography and reception*, Leiden 2010, p. 163-184.

⁷ A.R. Millard, *Books and Writing in the Kings*, in: A. Lemaire, B. Halpern (ed.), *The books of Kings*, Leiden 2010, p. 155-160.

without presenting any comprehensive argumentation based on detailed analysis of the biblical material. Such a strategy significantly reduces the substantive value of these hypotheses.

In the examples discussed above, one can observe the cautious approach to the problem of sources, which could be used by the author or authors of *Kings*. The question of archival materials is regarded as an open question at best, if not simply as the example of the biblical pseudo-epigraphy and one more argument for the poor value of the biblical historiography⁸.

Several uncertainties and understatements discernible in the present state of research indicate the need for further investigations, which can help answer the questions concerning the existence, or alternatively, the fictional character of the royal chronicles presupposed by biblical authors more clearly, as well as analyze their specificity and potential relationship to the biblical narrations of the kings of Israel and Judah.

3. The Meaning of the Phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm*

The biblical phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* is usually understood and translated as “chronicles” or “annals”⁹. The adjectival expression *dibrê hayyāmîm*, which qualifies the noun *sēper*, is usually understood as a term describing official royal annals or chronicles. This article will provide some suggestions concerning the more precise meaning of this phrase.

The noun *sēper* can designate any written record such as an administrative document, epistolary text, or ritual prescription¹⁰. In Biblical Hebrew the term *sēper* is not a designation of a literary work as such (as “a thing” separate from the scroll) but refers usually to the particular scroll on which the work was

⁸ N.P. Lemche, *On the Problems of Reconstructing Pre-Hellenistic Israelite (Palestinian) History*, “Journal of Hebrew Scriptures” 3(2000), <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/jhs/article/view/5972/5025> [accessed 4.05.2014].

⁹ Some examples: “Chronicles” (C.F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings*, Oxford 1903, p. xix); “annals” (M. Cogan, H. Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Garden City 1988; “The Book of the Chronicles” (S.J. DeVries, *I Kings*, Waco 1985, p. xlvi); “Annals” or “Book of the Chronicles” (Q. Gray, *I & II Kings*, Westminster 1976, p. 26); “record of the daily deeds” (T.K. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Waco 1985, p. 2) or simply “records” (p. 298); “Book of the Chronicles” (G.H. Jones, *I and 2 Kings*, vol. 1, p. 47); “Chronicles”, Q.A. Montgomery, H.S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, Edinburgh 1951, p. 33); “Buch der laufenden Angelegenheiten” (M. Noth, *Könige, Neukirchen-Vluyn* 1968) and “annals” or “book/record of the affairs of the days” (D.J. Wiseman, *I and 2 Kings*, Leicester 1993, p. 43).

¹⁰ The Semitic term *sēper* can designate any written document, such as an enumeration, list or an epistle (J. Hoftijzer, K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, Leiden 1995, p. 798-801).

recorded. A person sending out multiple copies of a letter would be said to be writing and dispatching *sepārîm* (1 Kgs 21:8-9,11; 2 Kgs 10:1; Est 1:22; 3:13), meaning that he is dispatching several copies of the same text.

In the archival context, the term *sēper* seems to refer to a single collection of records. This is supported by the fact, that the plural construct *sip^lrê* is unattested in the Hebrew Bible. When *sēper* is qualified, it is usually followed by another word in the plural or by a collective singular¹¹. This seems to indicate that the noun *sēper* in *status constructus* should be understood as a collection of writings. In such a context the qualification *l^e malkê yiśra'el / yehûdā^h* would highlight the fact that this “book” was in fact a “record of (important) deeds of the kings of Israel/Judah”.

The fact that biblical authors used the expression *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* and not the periphrastic phrase *sēper l^e dibrê hayyāmîm* suggests the existence of only one “collection of the current events”¹². It seems to be confirmed by the relation of the Chronicler, who indicates that some accounts written by or under the supervision of different prophets¹³, constitute the part of the one *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* and thus reinforcing the idea of the single collection. In such a context, two passages are especially important: 2 Chr 20:34 and 2 Chr 32:32. The information provided in both passages is that the events of Jehoshaphat’s and Hezekiah’s reigns were recorded in the accounts of Jehu and Isaiah and that such accounts were part of *sēper malkê yiśra'el* and *sēper malkê yehûdā^h*. The fact that the Chronicler was able to indicate who had written a particular account reveals that the authors of prophetic accounts could still be identified even if only a part of a single *sēper*.

¹¹ Compare, *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* (Neh 12:23; Est 2:23); *sēper hazzikrônôt*, (Est 6:1); *sēper hayyaḥās* (Neh 7:5); *sēper zikkārôn*, (Mal 3:16); *sēper ḥazôn naḥûm ḥā'elqōšf* (Nah 1:1).

¹² R.K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, London 1970, p. 726) understands *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* as a technical designation for official records concerning significant events. Such an idea is interesting because it implies the usage of the term *sēper* as a collective noun. However, there is an objection concerning Harrison’s definition of *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* as a “technical” phrase, for the biblical authors are not consistent in the use of this expression and refer to the *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* in five different ways: *sēper dibrê šelōmō^h* (1 Kgs 11:41); *sēper hamm^elākîm* (2 Chr 24:27); *sēper malkê yiśra'el* (2 Chr 20:34), the reference is to a Judaeen and not an Israelite king; *sēper malkê yehûdā^h w^e yiśra'el* (2 Chr 25:26; 27:7; 28:26; 32:32; 35:27; 36:8); *sēper hamm^elākîm l^e yehûdā^h w^e yiśra'el* (2 Chr 16:11). The consistency seen in biblical sources is not determined by the usage of a particular “technical” expression, but results from the standard formula of conclusion.

¹³ According to Chronicler, prophet Isaiah recorded “the acts of Uzziah, first and last” (2 Chr 26:22). The adjectival clause *ḥāri'šōnîm w^e ḥā'āḥārōnîm* “the first and the last”, suggests that the prophet recorded all the relevant events of Uzziah’s reign. In a similar way the prophet Jehu, recorded the events of Jehoshaphat’s reign also “from the beginning to the end” (2 Chr 20:34). Compare also the references to writings of Nathan (2 Chr 9:29), Ahijah (2 Chr 9:29), Iddo (2 Chr 9:29; 12:15; 13:22), Shemaiah (2 Chr 12:15), and Jehu (2 Chr 20:34).

In Est 2:23 one finds the term *sēper* accompanied by the expression *dibrê hayyāmîm* without any other qualifications. In Est 2:23 it refers to important official issues which were recorded in the presence of the Persian king (dictating or approving the text). It is further mentioned in Est 10:2 as *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm l'malkê māday ûpārās* "the record of the daily affairs the kings of Media and Persia". This same document seems to be referred to in Est 6:1 as *sēper hazzikrônôt dibrê hayyāmîm*, "the book of records, the daily affairs". The term *zikrônôt* means "remembrance, memorial". The article preceding *zikrônôt* makes clear that *dibrê hayyāmîm* should be understood as synonymous to *hazzikrônôt*. Consequently, *dibrê hayyāmîm* and *hazzikrônôt* can be interpreted as parallel expressions. The *sēper hazzikrônôt* was a written record of events which the king deemed important to be remembered.

In Neh 12:23 the phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* indicates a document in which the names of the chiefs of the Levite clans were recorded. The lack of further qualification in the Book of Nehemiah may point to a well-known "book" in which censuses and other important archival data were kept. The presence of many genealogies in the Bible stresses the importance with the biblical authors gave to counting and naming the leaders of the local clans. Consequently, it was a matter which deserved to be recorded. Both passages cited above seem to be important for the proper understanding of the phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm*, which occurs in the Books of Kings.

By analogy with the Assyrian annals and Babylonian chronicles, the adjectival clause *dibrê hayyāmîm*, which qualifies *sēper* in Kings and in Chronicles, is usually understood as indicating official royal annals or chronicles. However, the varied content ascribed to the *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* not only points to annals or chronicles, but also to other types of records, including genealogies and prophetic narratives (for example, the Elijah-Elisha Cycle).

Consequently, the phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* seems to denote a collection of very variegated records. Care must be taken in equating the *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* with official "royal archives". Such a concept can be misleading because it not only suggests a collection of documents, but also a certain system of organizing them. It is possible that such a system existed, but there is no evidence for it; thus, it is safer to interpret it as something such as a rudimentary archive.

It is worth considering the existence of the running records or haphazard scribal notes. The practice of making such sketches and notes before preparing the official record or inscription seems to be well attested in the written sources and iconographic material from the area of the Syro-Canaan and Mesopotamia¹⁴.

¹⁴ There are some instances of the independent third person singular pronoun in biblical royal summaries (2 Kgs 14:7, 22, 25; 15:35; 18:4,8), when one would expect only a verb with the third person singular suffix. See, J.A. Montgomery, *Archival Data in the Book of Kings*, "Journal of Biblical Literature" 53, No. 1 (1934), p. 50. Based on the resemblance with extra-biblical monu-

Compare the figure of scribe depicted on the stele of Bar Rakkāb, king of Sam'al, with the writing-board in hand¹⁵, standing before the king or the fragment of an Assyrian relief from the palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh, depicting two scribes preparing their notes directly on the battlefield¹⁶. The term *sēper* is quite broad semantically and cannot only mean a finite and consistent corpus of chronicles, but also a provisional collection of archival materials of various provenance¹⁷. Consequently, it seems to quite possible that the expression *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* simply means a collection of documents, namely, “the record of the daily affairs”.

4. Conclusions

There is no need to doubt the existence of the sources mentioned by the biblical authors. However, they do not refer to court chronicles, but rather to the collection of royal and prophetic records about the kings of Israel and Judah. Moreover, instead of being something static, the *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* seems to be “an open text”, as new documents could have been and were added to the collection¹⁸.

Prophetic texts constituted a large part of *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm*, but due to their variegated and religious nature, it is not necessary to suppose that such texts were part of this collection from its very beginning. It is possible that they were incorporated later. It seems slightly odd that the *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm l' malkê yiśra'el* contains mainly or even exclusively prophetic texts. However, with the

mental inscriptions, one can suggest that these emphatic pronouns point to the original first person narration (analogically to “I'm Mesha, king of Moab...”). Consequently, it is possible that the redactor of Kings had access to some documents concerning Israelite or Judahite monarchs which were written in the first person singular (votive inscriptions, stelas).

¹⁵ See, the reproduction of this stele in: E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans. Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion*, Leuven 2000, p. 2.

¹⁶ See D.J. Wiseman, *Assyrian Writing Boards*, “Iraq” (1955), plate III. 2.

¹⁷ The word “chronicle” indicates a formal account of a succession of events in the order they happened. The word “record”, even though suggesting some formality, only implies the account of an event, there being no necessary links between different events. The phrase *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* seems to indicate not one record, but the whole collection of texts. In this case the further qualification *malkê yehūdāh / yiśra'el* would be pointing to the fact that this “book” (*sēper*) was in fact the “record of important deeds of the kings of Judah / Israel”.

¹⁸ Sometimes the term *sēper* has been interpreted by scholars as a designation of a complete and finished work. However, such an interpretation can be questioned. For example, when Joshua made a covenant for the people, the biblical text says “And Joshua wrote these words in the book (*sēper*) of the law of God” (Josh 24:26). The context makes it clear that Joshua added new material to that book; thus, it cannot be a finished text. See also Josh 1:8; 8:31, 34; 23:6. All these passages refer to the same “book” (*sēper*).

fall of Samaria, the prophetic circles became even more important, and the large use of prophetic texts in the narratives about the kings of Israel seems to confirm this hypothesis. On the one hand, it would solve the problem of how the biblical authors had access to information about Israel, without appealing to a hypothetical salvaging of administrative materials from Samaria after Assyrian conquest¹⁹. On the other hand, the prophetic provenance of the summaries concerning the Israelite monarchs should be seen as a precaution against any attempts of equating *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* with the content of the authentic royal archives. It seems that it was a much broader and far less structured corpus. However, among other materials, it could include some fragments derived precisely from such official sources²⁰.

Znaczenie frazy *sēper dibrê hayyāmîm* w historiografii biblijnej

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy biblijnych summariów królewskich – korpusu związanych notatek o panowaniu kolejnych władców Izraela i Judy, stanowiącego trzon Ksiąg Królewskich. Istotą problemu badawczego podjętego w ramach niniejszych rozważań jest kwestia istnienia ich hipotetycznych pierwowzorów, tj. diaruszy (*sēper dibrê hayyāmîm*) królów Izraela i Judy, na które autor biblijny regularnie się powołuje. Ewentualne rozstrzygnięcia w tej dziedzinie mogą mieć znaczenie dla badań nad genezą i okolicznościami powstania Ksiąg Królewskich, a także dla kontrowersji związanych z ich wiarygodnością historyczną.

Słowa kluczowe

historiografia biblijna, summaria królewskie, historia starożytnego Bliskiego Wschodu

Keywords

biblical historiography, royal summaries, the history of the ancient Near East

¹⁹ Prophets play an active role in ten out of the nineteen stories about the kings of Israel (see – accounts of Jeroboam, Nadab, Basha, Elah, Ahab, Ahaziah, Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoash, and Jeroboam II). In contrast, they are mentioned only four times in the accounts of the Judahite monarchs (see accounts of Hezekiah, Manasseh, Josiah and Jehoiakim). At the same time, Israelite summaries focus strictly on religious issues, which may suggest that the material contained in them has passed through the hands of the prophetic circles. Such a hypothesis would explain how these sources were preserved after the fall of the Israelite kingdom.

²⁰ The spelling of the names of Assyrian kings in royal summaries reflects the Neo-Assyrian pronunciation and not the Babylonian. It seems to indicate that the biblical author cites in quite accurate manner some archival sources written presumably before the Exile. Compare, A.R. Millard, *Assyrian Royal Names in Biblical Hebrew*, “Journal of Semitic Studies” 21(1976), p. 1-14.