IS THE SHORTER READING BETTER?
HAPLOGRAPHY IN THE FIRST BOOK OF CHRONICLES

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It has been said that the worst kind of error is an error of omission. In the handwritten duplication of manuscripts, this type of error is extremely common, and, unfortunately, the Bible has not been immune to it. The ancient scribes were human. Even the most disciplined and diligent mind is susceptible to wandering, and copying becomes automatic after a time. What the eye sees, the hand writes. It would have been very easy for a copyist, in the midst of his exacting task and under the pressure of time, unintentionally to skip a word, a phrase, an entire line, or even an entire paragraph without giving it a second thought. The phenomenon is known as parablepsis, and parablepsis is most often caused by the repetition of similar elements in a text. The result is haplography, which may be broadly defined as the act, in the process of copying, of writing only once something that occurs two or more times in the source text.\(^1\) Parablepsis, therefore, refers to what the eye does, and haplography refers to what the hand does.\(^2\) Haplography is encouraged by homoeogrammaton, when two or more letters of similar appearance are in the same context, homoeologon, when two or more whole words of similar appearance are in the same context, homoeoarcton, when two words have a similar beginning, and homoeoteleuton, when two words have a similar ending. The more alike two elements in close proximity are, the greater the chance of parablepsis.\(^3\)

A handful of biblical text critics have given due consideration to this manner of error in the history of manuscript transmission, highlighting its frequency among the variants, but most of these have


\(^{2}\) We use these terms somewhat differently than does Tov.

been New Testament scholars. Accidental omission in the text of the Hebrew Bible deserves greater study. The phenomenon is more widespread than a great number of scholars seem to appreciate. We find it strange that, although haplography is recognized conceptually by all textual critics, when it comes to the analysis of specific passages, it is largely dismissed. Many prefer to find other explanations for the differences between manuscripts, primarily guided by longstanding (and relatively unchallenged) principles of text criticism. One such principle, that is still adhered to by many, states that when two manuscripts, or parallel passages in the same manuscript, offer different readings, the shorter and more difficult reading is to be preferred \((\text{lectio brevior et difficilior praeferenda est})\). The basis for this reasoning is that words or phrases were probably added by scribes to clarify the meaning of the text, so the shorter and more difficult reading is likely to be closer to the original. This principle, however, relies on the assumption that scribes actively engaged in free composition while they were copying manuscripts. We acknowledge that in the process of translation, the scribes may have been inclined to add or subtract minor elements to improve the sense of a reading, and in the case of the Targums, we have ample evidence of the addition of expository notes and commentary directly into sacred texts. However, we do not know how common this practice was, and there is far less evidence of such activity in the duplication of manuscripts in the same language. Should we view scribes as composers or simply as paid secretaries with little on their mind except accurate duplication and the completion of their assignment in a reasonable amount of time? Because of the prevalence of mistakes in every known manuscript, we feel that due consideration should be given to the likelihood of scribal oversight when explaining a variant \textit{before} resorting to any theory based on intentional alteration. Given the innumerable times the Bible has been copied and recopied,

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