

Chronicles and its Genealogies

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(a) Endless Genealogies?

The modern reader, if he approaches biblical genealogies at all, does so with some bewilderment. If he is accustomed to think of the Bible as "profitable for teaching" (2 Tim. 3:16), they may leave him feeling untaught. Despite their formidable character, however, the genealogies afford important insights into the character of biblical religion. Their function, broadly speaking, is to show that the promises and purposes of God continue. Those of Gen. 5, for example, convey at once the ideas of the filling of the earth which belongs to the original commission to mankind (Gen. 1:28), and of the entry of death (in the refrain "and he died") following the first rebellion against God (Gen. 3). Those of Matt. 1 place the birth of Jesus in succession to the promise to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1-3) and to the Israelite royal line. In these places, as in Chr., genealogies are much more than a succession of dry "begats". They affirm a divine plan for creation. Within which mankind enjoys a special place (Gen. 1:26ff.). They show at once how Israel's present arises out of its past, and how God's initial purposes for mankind are fulfilled in her. They show how God's plans for Israel are ultimately brought to fruition by Jesus Christ.

It follows that genealogies are highly selective. None of them attempts to name every individual who ever lived (though it may seem like that when we read them), nor even to represent every generation within a given line (hence the uselessness of genealogies for attempting to establish the age of humanity). It is possible that Chr. drew the names from official records, including military census lists. The form in which we have the genealogies now has probably been determined partly by the availability of material, and partly by the balance which the Chronicler wished to achieve. Be that as it may, the individuals whose names appear in succession before our eyes have little historical significance. About the great majority of them we know practically nothing. Thus in a curious way the greatness and the littleness of humanity are conveyed together, intimately bound up: the greatness, because each individual belongs to the march of mankind towards a glorious destiny, and the littleness because he is nevertheless but a small link in the huge chain. (Notice in this connection the brief record of the name of Moses, 1 Chr. 6:3 — not a case of "How are the mighty fallen!" so much as a putting in perspective of human greatness.) It matters little to the modern reader that the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul (1 Chr. 2:5). What does matter is the total picture, whose chief impact is to demonstrate God's care for people, not in any generalised way, but in a distinguishing and comprehensive way. It matters to God that the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul, even if they are mentioned in a context which draws the reader's attention to goals which transcend the lives of individuals.

(b) The Line of Promise

We have noted above that genealogies are highly selective. It will be immediately apparent that much the greater part of 1 Chr. 1-9 is devoted to the ancestry of Israel as opposed to other nations (chs. 2-9). Even within Israel an apparently disproportionate amount of space is devoted

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to the tribes of Judah (2:3-4:23), Levi (6:1-81) and little Benjamin (7:6-12; 8:1-40). Contrast the few verses allotted to mighty Ephraim (7:20-29). This unevenness can be accounted for largely by the idea of a line of promise. It is present in the first two words of the book, "Adam Seth, . . .". Chr. is here at its most laconic, assuming the reader's knowledge of the early chapters of Genesis, and in particular the story of Cain's murder of Abel, his own disgrace and God's replacement of Abel by a third son Seth, through whom the line continued of those for whom God appeared to have a special purpose, especially Noah and Abraham (Gen. 4:1-16, 25f.; 6:8; 12:1-3). Chr. goes on to show its interest in such a line in the way in which it deals with groups of sons. Thus while Noah's sons are first mentioned in the order Shem, Ham and Japheth (v. 4), that order is reversed when their separate lines are elaborated, allowing the author to deal with Shem, through whom the line will continue, last of the three, leading naturally into that of Abraham (1:4-27).

Within the tribes of Israel, Judah is given precedence because it was from this tribe that the Davidic royal dynasty later emerged, which was not only to dominate 1 and 2 Chr., but also to become the major focus of messianic hope in Israel (cf. e.g. Isa. 11:1). 1 Chr. 5:1f. explains the dislodging of the first-born Reuben from his natural precedence ("because he polluted his father's couch"; see Gen. 35:22). The line of promise is thus continued from the pre-Israelite generations into those of Israel. One thing that emerges from these general observations is that *natural* precedence counts for little in biblical theology. The principle of divine election makes few concessions to greatness or even merit (cf. Deut. 7:6ff.). Only that greatness which is bestowed by God is true.

It is in place here to notice that the genealogies say something about God's government of the universe not only in terms of the election of Israel but also in terms of moral order. Even a casual perusal reveals that the lists of names are occasionally spiced with a comment about this or that group or individual. Jabez, for example, of whom we know only that he was handicapped by a name related to a word meaning "pain" — in a day when names were felt to have an effect upon the character and experience of

their bearers — prays that he might be delivered from such effects. (The word "hurt" in 4:10 is closely related to that translated "pain", v. 9.) His prayer is heard and blessing ensues. In 5:18ff. Chr. reports a war involving a number of the tribes, in which they sought God and were granted victory. (About the date of this war it is impossible to say more than it must have occurred before the fall of the northern kingdom, to which the words "the exile", v. 22, refer.) Conversely, vv. 23ff. show that, on another occasion, idolatry on the part of the Manassites resulted in their deportation to Assyria by Tiglath-Pileser, a few years before the final fall of the north.

These themes of expansion as a result of faithfulness to the Lord and devastation as a consequence of its opposite will play a major role in the unfolding of the Chronicler's tale. The genealogies serve to prepare the reader for them, and show that the principles which he wishes to teach have always obtained. If this seems a simplistic theology it should be noted that a further theme of Chr., that of the Lord's willingness to start afresh with his errant people, is also tucked away almost unnoticed in the genealogies. If the line of promise stretches from the patriarch Judah to David, 1 Chr. 2:5 makes no attempt to disguise the fact that it had its beginnings in Judah's illicit relationship with his daughter-in-law Tamar. (The story is told in Gen. 38.) Fresh starts like this do not in fact occur without suitable contrition on the part of the offender, as Chr. will labour to show. Nevertheless the motif of the readiness of God to forgive and continue with his people is thus introduced.

(c) Context

The point at which the genealogies end is as important for our interpretation of them as the point at which they begin. While 1 Chr. chapters 2-8 cover generations from the twelve patriarchs into the later monarchy period, ch. 9 rounds off the genealogical introduction to Chr. with lists drawn from the post-exilic period. The exile itself is mentioned briefly in v. 1. It is not recorded for its own sake, however. No stress is laid upon its magnitude as a disaster for Judah. Rather it serves merely as a prelude to the record of those who returned from exile, following the decree of Cyrus (cf. 2 Chr. 36:2f.), to "dwell again in their possessions".

The reason for the Chronicler's interest in this period is that, to all intents and purposes, it is that of the restoration community to which he himself belonged (even if the precise date of his work is obscure. His vital interest in this period emerges from the fact that not only the genealogies but the Books of Chronicles as a whole end there. Notice also close similarities between 1 Chr. 9:2-17 and Neh. 11:3-19, another book of the restoration community. It is this perspective of Chr. which has determined the form of the genealogies. The restoration community, being the successor of the southern kingdom, consisted, broadly speaking, of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. There were also a number of priests and Levites, i.e. members of the tribe of Levi, since they had always been scattered throughout the historic territory of Israel (cf. Josh. 21). Some of these will always have been resident in Judah and Benjamin. Others migrated there at the fall of the northern kingdom (2 Chr. 11:13). It is for this reason that so much attention is devoted to these three tribes in the genealogies. Chr. primarily wishes to address them since for practical purposes they now constitute "Israel."

Having observed that the genealogies are written for the restored community, it remains to ask what Chr. wished to say to it through them. The answer is indicated by 9:1f. The brief record there of the Babylonian exile serves not

only to determine the historical period in question, but also to make a theological statement. The exile was not the end of the history of Israel. Rather, with it behind, Israelites came again to "dwell in their cities", to repossess the territory, or part of it at any rate, which the Lord had procured for them centuries before, and of which the exile had seemed to deprive them for ever (cf. Deut. 28:47ff.). In this respect the genealogies make the point which is subsequently made, more elaborately, at the end of 2 Chr. There too the Babylonian exile is recorded as something which is now in the past. The book ends, 2 Chr. 36:22f., with the decree of the Persian Emperor Cyrus that the exiles might return to their homeland. The genealogies stand in parallel with the remainder of the Book of Chronicles in leading the reader through the history of Israel up to this point.

The reason is not far to seek. The post-exilic community of Judah must have looked very little like the Israel of its forefathers. Not much is actually known about the period of Persian rule in Judah which immediately followed the Babylonian exile and lasted for over two hundred years. What is clear is that the community merely had the status of a small imperial province. In its early days it suffered because of the jealousies of neighbouring provinces (Neh. 2:19; ch. 4), and this may have become habitual. It is possible, indeed there are indications, that there were periods of repression at the hands of the imperial government itself, which may not always have been cast in the mould of the benevolent Cyrus. These adverse factors, the more intolerable because of the great hopes of a glorious future which the return from exile must have encouraged (in the light of prophecies such as Ezek. chs. 34, 37-39), may have produced despondency from time to time. To such defeatism the Chronicler answers that his small community is in reality the successor of Israel at its greatest, and that all God's commitments to their forefathers still stand, and are now focused on them. The function of ch. 9 is to show that God's plans, which are plans for the whole world (hence the scope of ch. 1), were centred upon Israel throughout its history (chs. 2-8) and are now being taken forward in the unlikely-looking remnant that clustered around Persian Jerusalem. Before that people are set great possibilities. There can yet be a glorious future. This is why David and Solomon, under whom ancient Israel was at its greatest, ranking with the Empires of the day, are held up as the outstanding examples of what faithfulness to God can bring. This is also why Chr., though concentrating on Judah, retains throughout the idea of a whole-Israel, consisting of the full twelve tribes, as something which may in principle be realised again. (This is mainly embodied in the genealogies themselves, but cf. 2 Chr. 28:12ff.; 30:10f., 18).

Do Chr.'s genealogies speak, therefore, to Christians today? Wherever the Church in the twentieth century feels itself to be of little account in the world, to have a precarious existence, despised and without real hope, its situation is in all essential respects like that of the Chronicler's Judah. And in all essential respects God's word to her is as it was then. There is yet a glorious future for the people of God. An abundance of blessing, strength and influence (properly and spiritually understood) is available to them, to the extent that they truly seek their God. And at the end stands the heavenly kingdom of Jesus Christ, an end which the Chronicler in his day could only dimly intuit through the special grandeur which he saw in David, and the Davidic shape which he gave to the hope he offered to his contemporaries. We in our day, with an advantage even over the angels (1 Pet. 1:12), have seen that end more clearly, and it will obtain a greater clarity yet (1 Cor. 13:12).