EXPOSITION

Chronicles and its Genealogies

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We are pleased to be able to publish this extract from Dr Gordon McConville’s latest book, the volume on Chronicles in the Old Testament Daily Study Bible Series, published by the St Andrew Press in Edinburgh.

(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 untutored. 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 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 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 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 Elyaphim (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, 25ff.; 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. 36:22ff.), 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 restored 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 that part of the Lord's possession which he saw in David and Solomon, for 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).