

Chapter 20
The Singer of Strange Songs:
The Chronicler of Israel

Compared with the lasting impact upon subsequent religious history made by the Deuteronomic and Priestly theological constructions, the work of the Chronicler of Israel seems much less significant: but it had its own effects. Writing no earlier than 400 B.C. he brought up to date the history of Judah after the exile, pled the cause of the Levites, and in the figure of Ezra, sculpted a model that later Jewish rabbis were to adopt as they worked through the implications of their office. We need therefore to examine his work to see what the Chronicler was saying about God's activity in the world and how this related to the earlier theological systems we have described.

I.

The work of the Chronicler was originally inscribed upon one long scroll or two short ones, and it was later divided into its present form for purposes of convenience for reference and storage. In the present Old Testament, it consists of four books which bear the imprint of a single hand: First and Second Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. The Chronicler built upon work already completed. Having before him the section of the Old Testament from Genesis through Second Kings, he added to it the events of the return of the people of Judah from exile and simultaneously he made some revisions of the earlier work.

His additions add to our knowledge of what happened when the exile community began to return to Judah. He told how during the first days of the movement, the exiles under Zerubbabel started to construct their new community in the environs of Jerusalem by rebuilding the walls of the city and of the Temple. He related how 75 years later Nehemiah learned that Temple and city had fallen into disrepair and went back to Jerusalem with the monarch's blessing to do the task over again; of the coming of Ezra and the reading of the new law to the people and its acceptance by them. His account is the only one available for what happened in and around Jerusalem in this period from, roughly, 540 to 400 B.C., and hence it is extremely important to us.

The revisions he made to the material he received reveal some of the concerns that caused him to write his book.

Like his model, the books of Genesis through Kings, he began his account with Adam but, instead of repeating the stories told in the earlier writings, his account contained only a genealogy of the people of Israel from Adam through David. Apparently, he was satisfied

that nothing in that early account needed revision, so he accepted it as it was.

From the time of David to the time of the exile he dealt exclusively with the history of the southern kingdom. On the rare occasions when he mentioned events in the northern kingdom he did so because they affected what was happening in the southern kingdom. So far as he was concerned, the northern kingdom was apostate; it had turned its back on Jerusalem and the Temple, and its history was not worth telling. It was in the southern kingdom, according to his point of view, that the true history of the people of God had been worked out, for in that kingdom the Temple and its worship was centered.

This led to his third major revision. In dealing with Judah, the Chronicler stressed the development of the worship in the Temple. The priestly writers had prepared the way for this by accenting the cultic life of Israel during the time from Adam through David. The Chronicler finished the task; he emphasized the continued development of the cult from the time of David through the time of Ezra and repeatedly made the point that the most important things happening in that period were matters affecting Temple and worship.

So, the Chronicler rewrote Judah's history to fit his pre-conceived patterns. To him, David was not a political figure; he was the one who had established the people of Israel as a worshipping people, made Jerusalem his religious capital, planned the building of the Temple, organized its music, and assigned the Levites their tasks. He insisted that David's dying words were a prayer enshrining his dream of a Temple still to come. Anything that detracted from the picture of David as a man of the Temple the Chronicler did not mention at all; his David had established Israel's worship in Israel's holy city. From the time of Solomon to the time of exile, it was, again, Israel as a worshipping community that he stressed. Even Israel's battles were seen from that point of view. Prayers to Yahweh were the turning point in the battles and, in the war between Judah and the Moabites and Ammonites, King Jehoshaphat went to meet the enemy not leading an army but the church choir -- and when the enemy heard them sing, they immediately fell to butchering one another! (II Chronicles 20:14-30). When Judah returned from exile, it also came back as a worshipping community, and the important things that occurred were all to that purpose: Zerubbabel rebuilt the Temple, Ezra proclaimed the law to the people, and Nehemiah built the walls so that holy city and Temple could be protected from their enemies. It is impossible to read the work of the Chronicler adequately unless we understand this major interest. In his eyes, Judah was no longer a nation: it was a church.

The Chronicler also outlined an almost point by point correspondence between what has happened in Israel's early life and what was happening in his own day. God had given God's people a law through Moses; now through Ezra God gave them a new law; and as in the wilderness of old, so today the people pledged their allegiance to the law. God through Joshua had battled into the land of Canaan and had driven out the enemies of God's people; now, as the exiles were returning from Babylon, once more God claimed the

land for them. As David had given the people the Temple and its worship, so this little group of pilgrims coming home from Jerusalem were to re-establish the Temple and its worship as the central factor in their lives. Underneath was the Chronicler's fundamental point: Judah had become not a nation but a religious community, and this had been God's plan for her from the beginning, a plan which God was working out as these people were returning to their homeland.

II.

The Chronicler had other interests as well and, in examining two of them, we will see more clearly why he wrote what he did.

The Chronicler had an extremely anti-Samaritan bias; he considered the Samaritans to be rivals to the claims he was making for himself and his group, and he felt threatened by them.

As it had developed after the Assyrian invasion, the Samaritan religion was a hybrid of Judaism and paganism. By the time of the writing of Chronicles, the Samaritans were in process of accepting the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, as their Holy Scripture and they were building a temple on Mount Gerizim to rival its counterpart in Jerusalem. This religion, so similar to and yet so unlike that of the returning Judahite exiles, was the most serious adversary the exile community faced in their attempt to restore the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. Here was the challenge as the Chronicler saw it: this group of people, only part Israelite, were adversaries of the religion of those who were the true people of God.

At significant points in his narrative, therefore, the Chronicler gave vent to his polemic against the Samaritans. When a priest of Judah married the daughter of Sanballat, governor of Samaria, Nehemiah begged God to punish him for his act (Nehemiah 13:28-29). In a sermon attributed to Abijah (II Chronicles 13:4-12), the Chronicler summed up the contrast between the Lord's own church in Judah and the heretical practices of the Samaritans: the northerners employed the wrong priests, they had dismissed the Levites, and they had defiled their sanctuaries with their abominable sacrifices. Throughout, the Samaritans were treated as a semi-heathen alien rabble, a God-forsaken mob upon whom the divine wrath rested because of their abominations. The final separation of Jews and Samaritans came when Ezra drove out from the holy people the foreign wives and children of true Jewish spouses. The Chronicler recognized that the challenge of Samaritan religion was a serious one, and he tried to combat it at every point.

At the same time, he had a decidedly pro-Levite bias. The Levites, remnants of the tribe of Levi, one of the original twelve tribes, had lost their patrimony in Israel and had resorted to priestly activities as their chief means of economic support. From the holdings of other tribes they even had been given some cities to live in and, when they were not performing priestly duties at various shrines, they went to these so-called "Levitical cities" to live. Josiah's reform in 621 brought a crisis upon the Levites. Since Josiah had decreed that all

places of worship except the one in Jerusalem was apostate and must be destroyed, the Levites were shorn of their duties at the outlying shrines; this meant they had lost what little status they had retained in Judah. They fought to regain it but with little success. A few Levites may have been admitted to the Jerusalem priesthood, but most were greatly reduced in service. They could still come to the Temple to work but not as priests. Instead, they came as "hewers of wood and drawers of water"; in other words, they returned to the Temple as its janitors, its caretakers. They who had once had the status of priest could only collect the wood for the sacrifices or bring water to the animals awaiting slaughter. Their reduction in status must have been exceedingly difficult to accept.

Then Judah was taken into exile, and old relationships went up for grabs once more. Among the interesting things occurring in this struggle was the attempt of the Jerusalemite priests to trace their ancestry beyond the time of David; they insisted that their true ancestor was Aaron, and their father was Eleazar, son of Aaron; and since they considered Aaron to be the brother of Moses, this was designed to increase the status of the Jerusalem priesthood in the eyes of the people. So, the Levites took a counter-step; they also traced their ancestry to Aaron and claimed that they were descendants of Ithmar, the other son of Aaron. They also sought an additional function for themselves beyond the janitorial one: they became the choir that sang during the worship of the people. We have no exact history of the contest between the priesthood of Zadok and the sons of the Levites in the exile, but these indications alone point out it must have been a bitter struggle indeed.

When the exile was over, the priests of Zadok rushed home to Jerusalem to resume their office and to renew their prerogatives. The Levites were not so happy to return. By the Chronicler's own inflated figures, he listed among the returnees nearly ten times as many priests as there were Levites; in fact, Ezra himself had to beg some Levites to accompany him on his journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. Clearly the situation in Jerusalem favored the priests rather than the Levites in this centuries' long struggle for preeminence and power.

So, the Chronicler stepped forward to champion the Levitical cause by portraying their outstanding role in the ancient history of Israel. It was Levites, not priests, he asserted, who brought the ark to Jerusalem. It was David who appointed twenty-four thousand of them to administer the work of the Temple. When the kingdoms divided, it was the Levites who left their homes in the north to come south to live. Jehoshaphat appointed Levites to be teachers of the Law. They played an important part in the coronation of Joash, the overthrow of Athaliah, the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. He was making a case for the Levites, that much is certain; whether any of his claims were historically certifiable was beyond the point. According to his propaganda, the intervention of the Levites was decisive at key points in the history of this holy people.

Some good may have come from his appeal for the restoration of the Levitical fortunes because, from the years 400 B.C. to 250 B.C., guilds of singers and gatekeepers were

established within the Temple precincts. We also know that by the time of Jesus the Levites had won one point: they were permitted to wear linen garments just as the priests did. But by A.D. 70, the argument had become academic. With the destruction of the Temple, both priest and Levite lost their function as officers in the kingdom of God and from their demise came the rise of the rabbi as the chief interpreter of Jewish tradition and chief administrator of the Jewish community.

III

Before we can summarize the Chronicler's work, we need to inquire into the sources he had at his disposal as he went about this writing.

We can be confident that he had the work of the priestly writers before him; in places he quoted from it word for word. This means he had ready access to the historical sections of our present Old Testament.

He also possessed the excellent "Memoirs of Nehemiah," the most trustworthy source for Jewish history to come from the Persian period. He apparently made few if any editorial changes in it. He may have had a similar source from Ezra or else he constructed a diary purporting to come from Ezra which was a reasonable facsimile of the one he had from Nehemiah.

He himself leads us to believe that he had other sources as well: genealogies (almost a quarter of his work is composed of genealogies!), histories of the Levitical movement, books about kings and prophets, prayers and sermons; throughout his books he was constantly referring to source material such as "The Chronicles of Shemaiah the Prophet and of Iddo the Seer" (II Chronicles 12:15) and the Chronicles of Jehu (II Chronicles 20:34). How much he received from others and how much he constructed to suit his own purposes, we are not able to tell.

Whether his sources were genuine or not, he used them in a far different manner than did the earlier writers; he employed them solely to suit his own purposes. Since his purpose included seeing Judahites as the true and holy people of God, the Samaritans as their enemies, and the Levites as God's chief instrument for bringing his purpose into being, what he has written needs to be examined from that apologetic point of view.

IV.

As such, then, the Chronicler has not left us a work of theological construction to rank beside the other two. His self-interest was so great that it colored his understanding of God; his historical sense was so small that it did not deal with reality as much as with ideology. Yet he did reveal something of importance: he tried to relate his own time and

place to the will and intention of God and to affirm that, difficult as the situation was in his own day, God was still at work within it.

For, if I am correct in my analysis of his work and the group he represented, this writer was in an exceedingly difficult position. He himself was a Levite residing in Jerusalem, writing sometime after Nehemiah and Ezra had completed their work in 400 B.C, beset with the challenge from the Samaritans and with the loss of his own status in Judahite society. In the midst of this he affirmed his faith that the purpose of God is unswerving: God will bring a holy people out of the crucible of trial as God intended to do from the beginning; God will use the Levites to attain God's purposes; and God's holy people will glorify the name of God before all the people of the earth. Is this picture of God too small? Yes, it is. For when Christ came it was clear that the holy people were not to be those who sing even the songs of the Temple but those to whom doing the will of the Father is their food and drink; who hear the good news, revamp their lives to accord with it, and live in response to that good news forever. But Chronicles is important because it reveals one trend that Judaism was taking and might have continued to take, had not God acted decisively in human life by sending Jesus Christ to effect God's permanent revolution in our lives.