

# Situating Chronicles (1 Chr 9.1-2)

## Building a House for God's Name: Studies in 1 & 2 Chronicles

### I. INTRODUCTION

<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3.16)

<sup>3</sup>that [God] might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8.3)

<sup>18</sup>Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps 119.18)

- A. The books of 1 & 2 Chronicles are an important and essential part of the Old Testament canon. Within these two books we find a remarkably rich theological telling of Israel's history with a particular focus on the Davidic royal dynasty and the centrality of the Temple in the life of Israel's worship.
- B. Yet, many people are unaware of the riches found within these books. This is because much of the material found in the books is either considered to be boring (the genealogies, the organization of the temple ministry, or the administration of David's kingdom) or to be a retelling of things found in the books of Samuel and Kings.
- C. However, these books provide a necessary perspective on Israel's story and are a needed supplement to Biblical theology. To rightly understand these books, it is important to understand the situation in which they were written, their purpose, and some of the basic and general themes contained within the book. This will help us discern what God is speaking through these books.

### II. ISRAEL'S STORY: THE SITUATION OF CHRONICLES

<sup>1</sup>So all Israel was recorded in genealogies, and these are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel. And Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their breach of faith. <sup>2</sup>Now the first to dwell again in their possessions in their cities were Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the temple servants. (1 Chr 9.1-2)

- A. Understanding the purpose, the themes, and the theology of the books of Chronicles in some ways is built on understanding the situation into which the books of Chronicles were written.
- B. Although the books themselves do not contain a note about authorship (who wrote or compiled these books) or a specific telling of the situation (i.e., where they were writing from or who they were writing to), there are keys and hints within the text to illuminate the time and situation the Chronicles were written.
- C. In these verses, we are given several pieces of information that would situate the timing of the writing of Chronicles as after the *Babylonian exile* when the people of Israel were beginning to *return to the land* in order to possess it.
- D. To the first readers of Chronicles, these verses would have situated them within a story tracing back all the way to the beginning of creation itself (why the Chronicler's genealogy begins with Adam!). However, for us, we often must do some work to understand the nature of the story to understand these books' situation.
- E. *The Babylonian Exile*
  - 1. To understand the situation of the Chronicles, we must understand the importance of the Babylonian exile in the life and thought of Israel.

2. After the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings, the people of Israel were brought into the land of Canaan (promised to Abraham by God) under the leadership of Joshua. Prior to the entry into the land, Moses told again the law and the covenant to the children of Israel (Deuteronomy).
3. In his retelling, Moses outlined the covenant blessings tied to Israel's obedience and the covenant curses tied to their disobedience once they entered the land. These curses would ultimately conclude with God sending Israel into captivity by a people whose language they did not know.

<sup>49</sup>The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, <sup>50</sup>a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. (Deut 28.49-50)

4. After entering the land under the leadership of Joshua, the children of Israel spent many years seeking to drive out the people who dwelt in the land. After becoming established in Canaan next several centuries were marked by a continued cycle of disobedience, discipline, repentance, and deliverance (outlined in the book of Judges).
5. Around 1000 BC, the monarchy was established in Israel under the leadership of Saul (1 Sam 8-10). The nation of Israel would be unified under one king under the leadership of David and his son Solomon. However, after Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two parts at the time of Rehoboam (1 Kings 12).
6. From this point forward, the people of Israel would be divided into two kingdoms. The **Northern Kingdom** (10 of the 12 tribes known in the Scripture as mostly as Israel or Ephraim) and the **Southern Kingdom** (2 of the 12 tribes known primarily as Judah).
7. The Northern Kingdom immediately separated themselves from the rightly ordered worship of Yahweh at the temple when Jeroboam set up a false religion with worship sites at Bethel and Dan (cf. 1 Kings 12.25-33). The separation from the rightly ordered worship of the Lord led the Northern Kingdom to persist in disobedience that led to their destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BC (cf. 2 Kings 17.6-41).
8. The Southern Kingdom remained attached to the worship of the Lord and therefore experienced times of reprieve and return in their path of disobedience. However, the continued rebellion and disobedience led ultimately to their destruction and deportation to Babylon. In his invasions, Nebuchadnezzar (the Babylonian King) deported the people of Israel to Babylon in three waves, and ultimately destroyed the city and the temple in 586 BC.
9. The exile is an essential piece of history that stands behind much of the writing of the Old Testament. Many of the books deal with the potential, the reality, or the response to the discipline of the Lord experienced in the exile.

#### F. ***The Return to the Land***

1. After seventy years in Babylonian captivity (as promised by the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah — Jer 25.11-12; cf. Dan 9.2), the Persian King Cyrus decreed for the people of Israel to return to their land and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1.1; 2 Chr 36.22-23).
2. The narrative of the struggles and successes of Israel in this time are recounted in Ezra and Nehemiah, and the prophetic ministry of Haggai and Nehemiah are during this period. These prophets are sent to Israel with a specific purpose to strengthen them in the task of rebuilding the Lord's house.
3. It is in this situation that the books of Chronicles are also written. The author highlights that the exile had happened because of Israel's treachery ("breaking faith"), but that the firstfruits of people had come to resettle into the land and Jerusalem.

### III. A CALL TO SEEK: THE PURPOSE OF CHRONICLES

- A. Understanding the situation of Chronicles (along with the content of the book) helps us to begin to understand the purpose for these books.
- B. It can be difficult to understand why there is a second telling of Israel's history within the Old Testament — recounting much of the same time frame as the books of Samuel and Kings.
- C. However, when we begin to look at the situation along with the differences in content, we begin to see the distinct message of the Chronicler and the way he is seeking to encourage, edify, and elicit a response from those returning from the exile.
- D. In the history of the books of Samuel and Kings, we are given a political and national portrait of Israel's life from the establishment of the monarchy, through its separation, and ultimately to its destruction. Within these books there is a large emphasis on what happened in the Northern Kingdom (see the extended ministry of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 16.15—2 Kings 10).
- E. However, in the books of Chronicles, there is little mention of the Northern Kingdom (apart from the reference to the separation at the time of Rehoboam).
- F. There is also very little discussion about the *personalities* of the different kings (specifically David or Solomon). Rather, the focus of the books is almost entirely centered around relationship to the Temple and the worship of the Lord.
- G. After the extended introduction in the genealogies (1 Chr 1-9), the narrative focuses for an extended period of time on David and Solomon as they seek to establish and order the proper worship of Yahweh at the temple (1 Chr 10-2 Chr 9). Little is mentioned of their failures, but they are set up as the type of a faithful king who used their power and resources to establish worship to the Lord at the heart of God's people and God's kingdom. The remainder of the book (2 Chr 10-36) simply looks at the Davidic kings and assesses them each on the basis of whether or not they were faithful to keep the worship of the Lord at the center of the kingdom.
- H. This leads us to see that the author's primary purpose in writing the Chronicles is to remind the people of God that their distinction is rightly ordered worship to the Lord. As they return to the land (without a Davidic king on the throne) they might be tempted to believe that God has failed his promises to them. However, the author of Chronicles wants the people of God to see that the land, the temple, and even the throne were not the *primary things* that gave shape to their identity, purpose, and successes as a nation. Rather, it was the extravagant and wholehearted worship of the Lord at the center of their national life that gave meaning, purpose, and success to them.
- I. Because of this, as they returned to the land to rebuild the Temple and establish worship once again at the heart of their identity — the people of Israel were reminded through these books that God was *looking for something*: namely, for worshipers who would seek his face in a posture of humble obedience and call upon his name in trust. They did not need national sovereignty, they did not need full possession of the land, and they did not need the glory of the former temple. Rather, they needed (like always) a humble heart of extravagant devotion to the Lord — seeking his presence and his power continually.

### IV. READING CHRONICLES: OVERVIEW OF MAIN THEMES

#### A. *The Temple and Worship*

- 1. At the heart of the books of Chronicles is the preparation for, the building of, and the maintenance of Temple worship. As mentioned before, David and Solomon are seen as the model of godly kings in their commitment to establish worship for the Lord at the heart of Israel's national life.

2. The importance of this theme can be seen even from the beginning of the work in the genealogies themselves. In the retelling of Israel's national history, the Chronicler places the Levites and the service to the Lord in music and song at the heart of Israel's story (cf. Lev 6). Israel rightly understands its place at the "center of the world", but at the center of Israel is a faithful stewardship of rightly ordered worship toward their God as the way in which his presence and purposes are experienced within their lives.
3. The monarchy therefore is only successful inasmuch as it is utilized to order and establish the worship of the Lord at the center. Great pains must be taken to secure a place, order the people, and administrate the tasks required to offer the Lord the worship that he is due. When a king understands this glorious task and orders his life (and the lives of the nation) around it, God blesses his people.

#### B. *A Theology of Pursuit*

1. One of the primary concepts found in the Chronicles is the concept of *seeking* the Lord. This is closely tied to the concept of the temple, but it is clear throughout the books that it is not merely an outward reality, but one that defines the heart posture of God's people.
2. On the other hand, Israel is brought into judgment for their "breach of faith" (1 Chr 9.2), which is an act of treachery when they pursue the worship of other gods, or fail to seek Yahweh in the manner he desires.
3. The concept of pursuing the face of the Lord is placed front and center to the Chronicler at important times in his narrative. Closely related to the establishing of God's house is a call to seek him.

<sup>13</sup>Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually (1 Chr 16.11)

4. The episodic retelling of each Davidic king as its own story of whether Israel sought the Lord or broke faith with him also leads us to see that the Chronicler understands that each generation is responsible to seek the face of the Lord anew (and also, that each generation is given the opportunity to repent and return to him and receive blessing from his hand).

<sup>14</sup>if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chr 7.14)

5. In establishing this theme throughout the books (specifically in the portrait of David and Solomon, and then the evaluation of each king beyond), the author is seeking to provoke a self-assessment of his readers as to the nature of their own pursuit of the Lord as expressed in rightly ordered worship toward him.

#### C. *A Theology of Hope*

1. One of the gifts of the books of Chronicles is a God-focused presentation of history. One cannot walk away from these books without seeing that God himself presides over human history to order and establish his purposes and fulfill his covenant *despite* the continued failings of humanity again and again.
2. From the beginning (with the genealogies) we see the hand of the sovereign God leading and guiding his purposes toward their ultimate completion. He does not need people to fulfill his plans — but rather, he desires that people would seek after him with hearts of humble trust and hope-filled confidence.
3. These books are designed to combat the despair, discouragement, and malaise of self-oriented pursuits in our lives. They do so by again and again reminding the people of God to take their eyes off themselves and turn their gaze toward the God of heaven, who longs to show his strength toward those whose hearts are toward him in faith.

<sup>9</sup>For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. (2 Chr 16.9)