

1 and 2 Chronicles

by Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Dedicated to my parents with much gratitude.

This commentary has resulted from the efforts of a team with many members. My secretary, Diana Soule, has once again labored faithfully and expertly. Chuck Jacobs, Rick Harper, and Adam Roberts deserve much thanks for their highly skilled research and assistance. Moreover, several classes of students have proofread this material and have offered many helpful suggestions.

I thank God for each of you. Your partnership on this project has been indispensable.

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30 June 97

INTRODUCTION

The book of Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles) is one of the most neglected portions of Scripture. Many students of the Bible find its complex history unfamiliar and assume that it is irrelevant for contemporary life. Despite these widespread assessments, Chronicles offers much to the Church today by providing perspectives on our Faith that we seldom consider.

To grasp the significance of Chronicles for our times, we must first understand its original meaning, the meaning intended for its first Israelite readers. Legitimate Christian applications must accord with the purposes for which the Holy Spirit first inspired this book. In this introduction, we sketch the contours of the original meaning of Chronicles by focusing on five issues: *Authorship and Date, Historical and Theological Purposes, Outline Major Themes, and Translation and Transmission*. Two appendices follow these topics.

AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The Holy Spirit inspired the book of Chronicles, but he spoke through the personality and purposes of a human writer. Chronicles does not explicitly identify this human instrument, but clues appear that help us limit possibilities.

Early Jewish traditions designated the scribe Ezra as the primary author of Chronicles (as well as Ezra and Nehemiah). At least two considerations support this view: 1) The book was composed after Israel's return from exile to Babylon, near the time of Ezra's ministry. 2) Many passages in Chronicles have theological affinities with the focus of Ezra's ministry (see *Major Themes* below).

Other considerations, however, cast doubt on this traditional viewpoint: 1) The date of Chronicles' composition cannot be limited to Ezra's lifetime. 2) Chronicles ties kingship and temple worship together in ways that do not appear in the teachings of Ezra. 3) Chronicles largely avoids a central issue in Ezra's ministry, intermarriage between Israelites and foreign women (Ezra 9:10-12; see Deut 7:2-4; Neh 10:30; 13:23-31).

For these reasons, most contemporary scholars remain unconvinced of the traditional outlook on the identity of Chronicles' human author. Ezra's ministry was certainly in harmony with this book. Moreover, he may have contributed to its composition or transmission in some unknown manner. Nevertheless, neither historical nor Scriptural evidences demonstrate that Ezra wrote Chronicles. As a result, we will follow the custom of most contemporary interpreters and simply refer to the inspired human author as "the Chronicler."

When did the Chronicler write? It is not possible to establish a precise date, but upon reflection a limited range of possibilities emerges.

The final verses of Chronicles provide us with the *earliest possible date* for final composition (2 Chr 36:21-23; see Ezra 1:1-4). These verses record the edict of the Persian emperor, Cyrus, in which he ordered the return of Israelite exiles from Babylon. These events occurred in c. 539/8 B.C.

The *latest possible date* for Chronicles is less certain. One important clue is that the style of Hebrew in the book gives no indication of influence from the Greek language. This evidence suggests that the book was written before Alexander the Great took control of Palestine in c. 330 B.C.

The specific circumstances of Chronicles' composition become clearer in the light of the major events which took place in Palestine between these earliest and latest possible dates of composition (c. 538 B.C. – c. 330 B.C.). We will summarize several crucial events which took place in this period (see Figure 1).

<i>Composition of Chronicles</i>					
539/8	536	520	515	458-430	330
Return from Exile	Altar and Foundation of Temple	Haggai and Zechariah	Completion of Temple	Ezra and Nehemiah	Alexander the Great
<i>Major Post Exilic Events (Figure 1)</i>					

A number of Israelites returned from exile to Jerusalem following the Cyrus Edict (Ezra 2:1-64). A descendent of king David named Zerubbabel led the people in erecting an altar and a foundation for the new temple (Ezra 2:2; 3:2-3,8-10). Nevertheless, disappointment, economic hardships, and trouble from foreigners quickly halted the reconstruction effort (Ezra 4:1-24).

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah preached in Jerusalem during this time (Ezra 5:1-2). They exhorted Zerubbabel and the people to continue the work on the temple. The returnees eventually complied with the prophetic word and completed the temple with great celebration in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:14-15).

A generation later, however, the number of returnees remained few. Moreover, many men had intermarried with foreign women who served other gods (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-31; Mal 2:11). These intermarriages led to widespread religious apostasy (Deut 7:3; 1 Kgs 11:1-13). Ezra (c. 458 B.C.) and Nehemiah (c. 445 B.C.) came to Jerusalem to call the people to repent of their failures and to conform to the Law of God.

Sadly, the reforms under Ezra and Nehemiah had only temporary effects. The sins of the people grew so great that Israel fell into centuries of spiritual darkness. This period of extended trouble we now call the Intertestamental Period (c. 425 B.C. - c. 4 B.C.). Most of God's people remained scattered among the nations. The Israelites in Palestine first suffered under the rule of the Persians and Medes, then beneath Greek

dominion, and finally under the iron fist of Rome. Intertestamental darkness continued until the inauguration of the Kingdom of God through the work of Christ and his apostles.

Where did the Chronicler and his book fit within this series of events? Two answers have come to the foreground in recent research. First, some interpreters have proposed that the Chronicler wrote as early as the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah (c. 520-515). At least three evidences support this view: 1) The book consistently presents the temple and its personnel in close partnership with the royal line of David (see *Major Themes* below). This dual emphasis on king and temple suggests that final composition took place near the days of Zerubbabel when expectations of Davidic and priestly partnership were still high (see Zech 3:1-4:14; Hag 1:14-2:10,20-23). By the next generation, there is little evidence for hope of an imminent rise of the Davidic line to the throne of Jerusalem. 2) The Chronicler gave much attention to the details of priestly and Levitical duties (see *Major Themes* below). This concern also suggests a date of composition during the time when Zerubbabel and his priestly partner Joshua (Jeshua) were establishing the new temple order (see Zech 3:1-4:14). 3) The striking omission of Solomon's downfall due to intermarriage (see 1 Kgs 11:1-40 and commentary on 2 Chr 1:1-9:31; 9:29-31) stands in sharp contrast with Nehemiah's appeal to the terrible results of Solomon's foreign marriages (see Neh 13:26). This omission suggests that the Chronicler may have written in the generation before intermarriage had become a major problem in the post-exilic community.

Second, the majority of recent interpreters have argued that final composition took place during or just after the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah (c. 450-390 B.C.). The main evidence in favor of this view appears in the genealogy of 1 Chr 3:17-24. This list extends to a number of generations after Zerubbabel. Some difficulties with interpretation make this evidence less than conclusive, but it would appear certain that the genealogy extends to at least two generations after Zerubbabel (see commentary on 1 Chr 3:1-24).

In light of the ambiguity of the evidence, a specific date cannot be fixed for the final composition of Chronicles. It seems best to remain satisfied with a range of possibilities from sometime near the days of Zerubbabel to sometime soon after the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah (c. 515-390 B.C.). As our commentary will show, the emphases of the book fit well within these limits.

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PURPOSES

The Chronicler wrote to give his readers a true historical record of Israel's past. The historical nature of his book has been noted in the titles which have been attached to it. The traditional Hebrew title may be translated "The Events of the Times," pointing to its historical quality. Some manuscripts of the Septuagint (ancient Greek versions of the Old Testament) entitled the book "The Things Omitted," to suggest that it supplements the history of Samuel and Kings. Our English title, "Chronicles" derives from Jerome and Luther who called the book "The Chronicle of the Entire Sacred History." These various titles indicate that even a cursory reading of Chronicles reveals its historical focus.

The Chronicler's careful handling of numerous written sources also points to his concern for historical veracity. 1) As he wrote of Israel's history, he relied primarily on the canonical books of Samuel and Kings for his information. The vast majority of materials in Chronicles comes from these authoritative Scriptures. 2) The Chronicler also referred to the Scriptures of the Pentateuch (e.g. 1 Chr 1:1-2; [see Gen 5:1-20]; 1 Chr 4:24; [see Exod 6:15; Num 26:12-14]; 1 Chr 5:1,2; [see Gen 35:22; 49:3-4]; 1 Chr 24:2 [see Lev 10:1-2]), and the books of Joshua (e.g. 1 Chr 2:7; [see Josh 7:1]), Judges (1 Chr 11:4; [see Judg 1:21]), Ruth (1 Chr 2:10-17; [see Ruth 4:18-22]), Psalms (1 Chr 16:8-22; [see Ps 105:1-15]), Isaiah (2 Chr 32; [see Isa 36:1-39:8]), and Jeremiah (2 Chr 36:11-21; [see Jer 52:1-30]). 3) Beyond this, he cited several unknown royal annals: "the book of the annals of King David" (1 Chr 27:24), "the book of the Kings" (2 Chr 24:27), "the book of the kings of Israel" (1 Chr 9:1; 2 Chr 20:34), and "the book of the kings of Judah and Israel" (2 Chr 16:11; 25:26; 28:26; 32:32), "the book of the kings of Israel and Judah" (2 Chr 27:7; 35:27; 36:8). 4) In addition, the Chronicler referred to prophetic writings which have since disappeared: the writings of Samuel (1 Chr 29:29), Nathan (1 Chr 29:29; 2 Chr 9:29), Gad (1 Chr 29:29), Ahijah (2 Chr 9:29), Iddo (2 Chr 9:29; 12:15; 13:22), Shemaiah (2 Chr 12:15), and anonymous "seers" (2 Chr 33:19). 5) The content and style of many passages also suggest that the Chronicler used other unidentifiable sources (see 2 Chr 9:29-31; 12:15-16; 16:11-17:1; 21:18-20; 24:23-27; 26:22-23; 28:26-27; 32:32-33; 35:20-27; 36:8). The Chronicler's use of these many sources indicates his strong desire to convey a true account of Israel's past.

As a book of history, Chronicles covers a wide range of events. It begins with Adam (1 Chr 1:1) and traces the history of Israel to the period after return from exile in Babylon (1 Chr 3:1-24). This historical record is fascinating in itself for it reveals much about the God of Israel whom we serve today.

In addition to informing his readers of the past, the Chronicler also wrote to convey theological perspectives. These purposes become especially evident when Chronicles is compared with the earlier records of Samuel and Kings. As our commentary will show, the Chronicler handled Samuel and Kings in different ways to focus his readers' attention on particular issues. He sometimes quoted long passages with little or no change, but at other times he made modifications, additions and omissions. These variations indicate that the Chronicler composed his history to convey theological lessons as well as historical information .

This commentary will concern itself primarily with the theological purposes of Chronicles. We will occasionally comment on historical issues, but our chief interest will be to discern the guidance Chronicles gave to its first readers. Only when we understand this theological focus will we correctly discern how the book also speaks to us today.

How may we summarize the Chronicler's theological concerns? What were the chief elements of his message? It helps to think of Chronicles' theology in terms of its message for the *Original Israelite Readers* as well as its application for *Contemporary Christian Readers*.

Original Israelite Readers:

In general terms, the Chronicler originally wrote his history *to direct the restoration of the Kingdom during the early post-exilic period*. The people who had returned from exile faced many challenges. Although the prophets had predicted that return to the land would be a time of grand blessings (e.g. Am 9:11-15; Joel 3:18-21; Ezek 34:26), the restoration had not brought about the blessings for which Israel hoped. Instead, the returnees endured discouraging economic hardship, foreign opposition, and domestic conflicts. The Chronicler wrote his history to offer guidance to this struggling community. He provided them practical directions for attaining a greater realization of the blessings of the Kingdom of God in their time.

Contemporary Christian Readers:

The Chronicler's desire to direct the restoration of the Kingdom of God in his day connects the theology of his book to the concerns of the Christian Church today. Although post-exilic Israel's continuing sins brought failure in their day, the Kingdom of God did not fail utterly. As the New Testament teaches, the Chronicler's hopes were realized in Christ.

Christ brings to fulfillment and exceeds all of the Chronicler's desires for God's people.

The New Testament also teaches, however, that Jesus did not accomplish this goal all at once. Instead, the restoration of the Kingdom of God comes in three stages. First, the *inauguration* of the Kingdom came through Christ's earthly ministry and the work of his apostles (see Mk 1:14-15; Lk 4:43; 10:11; Acts 1:3). Second, after the ministry of the apostles the *continuation* of the Kingdom of God extends to all the world through the ministry of the Church (see Acts 28:23; Rev 1:6; 5:10). Third, in the future Jesus will bring the Kingdom to its *consummation* in the New Heavens and New Earth (see Rev 21:1-22:21).

Christians may rightly apply the Chronicler's perspectives by asking how his message applies to these three phases of Christ's Kingdom. Chronicles presents theological themes which anticipate Christ's first coming, the continuing ministry of the church, and the return of Christ. In the next section we will illustrate how particular themes in Chronicles apply to both post-exilic Israel and to the three phases of Christ's Kingdom.

OUTLINE

The book of Chronicles displays a well-conceived structure. The following outline provides an overview of the large patterns of the book (see figure 2). More detailed patterns are noted at the beginning of each section of the commentary.

Part One: The Identity, Privileges and Responsibilities of God's People (1 Chr 1:1-9:34)

Part Two: The Ideal United Kingdom (1 Chr 9:35-2 Chr 9:31)

David's Reign (1 Chr 9:35-29:30)

Solomon's Reign (2 Chr 1:1-9:31)

Part Three: Judah During the Divided Kingdom (2 Chr 10:1-28:27)

Judgments and Increasing Blessings in Judah (10:1-21:3)

Rehoboam (10:1-12:16)

Abijah (13:1-14:1)

Asa (14:2-16:14)

Jehoshaphat (17:1-21:3)

Northern Corruption in Judah (21:4-24:27)

Jehoram (21:4-21:20)

Ahaziah (22:1-9)

Athaliah (22:10-23:21)

Joash (24:1-27)

Half-Hearted Obedience in Judah (25:1-28:27)

Amaziah (25:1-28)

Uzziah (26:1-23)

Jotham (27:1-9)

Ahaz (28:1-27)

Part Four: The Reunited Kingdom (2 Chr 29:1-36:23)

Hezekiah (29:1-32:33)

Manasseh (33:1-20)

Amon (33:21-25)

Josiah (34:1-35:27)

Final Events (36:2-23)

Outline of Chronicles (figure 2)