

## **November 27, 2005**

### **The Second Sunday of Advent**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is not possible to identify the Chronicler with assurance, nor to pin down with certainty the date of his work. Some historians, taking their cue from the Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 15a), identify him as the great Ezra, but these same scholars also disagree--by as much as sixty years--about the date of Ezra's own mission.

However, I do not think the reasons for identifying the Chronicler as Ezra himself, or even as the author of Ezra/Nehemiah, are convincing, nor do they explain why some of the dominant theological and liturgical themes in the Books of Chronicles are largely absent in the pages of Ezra/Nehemiah. I am disposed to say that there appears to be *some* sort of literary relationship between Ezra/Nehemiah and the Books of Chronicles, and leave it at that.

So when did the Chronicler write? If it is implausible--and a consensus says that it is--to place him earlier than the mid-fifth century when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, the earliest possible time of composition would be the late fifth or early fourth century.

What, then, is the latest possible time of the Chronicler's work? Well, inasmuch as the priestly genealogy in 1 Chronicles 3:19-24 seems to extend to six generations after Zerubbabel in the late sixth century, we would not be much off if we suggest some time close to 400 B.C. Thus, it is reasonable to think that the Chronicler wrote during the second half of the Persian period, before the rise of Alexander and its ensuing trauma.

Let me also I suggest that this loose dating is sufficient to help the reader understand what the Chronicler had in mind to say.

After the edict of Cyrus in 538, the exiles returning from Babylon carried many questions in their minds. One of these questions had to do with the covenant promises made to the House of David. The Davidic monarchy had been abolished, and, although some still hoped for its eventual restoration, that restoration did not seem likely, certainly not while the Persians held sway.

The Persian Empire, the new power in the Fertile Crescent, did not intend to encourage underling kings, an institution tolerated by the Assyrians and Babylonians that preceded them. Persian rule would be structured on geographical districts known as satrapies, with all satraps and other

officials appointed by the emperor. Thus, when Cyrus assigned Zerubbabel to oversee the return of the exiles in 538, this royal descendent of David did not come to Jerusalem as a king but only an appointed governor.

Moreover, the Persians had no intention to leave Zerubbabel in Judah very long after the initial settling of the returning exiles. Indeed, given the messianic aspirations to be found among some of these latter (cf. Haggai 2:21-22; Zechariah 4:6-7), it would be too risky for the Persians to leave a son of David in charge at Jerusalem. It is not clear when Zerubbabel returned to Babylon, but we observe that his name is not found among those present at the new temple's completion in 515 (Ezra 6:14), nor is there any record of another governor from the Davidic family appointed to Jerusalem.

As time went on, then, and the citizens of Judah became ever more accustomed to living under Persian rule and without a Davidic king, those given to reflection on their history were obliged to think anew on the meaning of the House of David. In view of the obvious fact that the covenanted monarchy at Jerusalem was now gone, what was to be made of the divine promise that David's throne would last forever? In the light of all the recent events, what was to be said about the monarchical house of David? What was the true historical significance of that institution? Among those who pondered these questions in depth was the writer we call the Chronicler.

In this respect any Bible-reader can see that the Chronicler's perspective was very different from the historical interest in Samuel/Kings, a narrative finished much earlier, probably during the Babylonian Captivity. Although the author of Samuel/Kings had a great deal to say of the House of David, it is clear his historical interest was much broader. He did not appear to be arguing some thesis dominated by the Davidic monarchy.

A simple example makes this clear. Recording the two centuries during which the kingdoms of Israel and Judah co-existed (922-722), the Books of Kings (or "Kingdoms," as they are known in the Septuagint) devoted more space to the schismatic Kingdom of Israel than it did to the covenanted reign of Judah. In Kings we learn more about Jeroboam than Rehoboam, far more about Ahab than about Jehoshaphat. It is obvious that the complex of Samuel/Kings is not "built around" the Davidic covenant and throne as a thematic center.

When we turn to the Books of Chronicles, on the other hand, the significance of the Davidic throne is impossible to exaggerate. This author mentions the schismatic Northern Kingdom only when he absolutely

must. In Chronicles the very name "Samaria" is found only eight times, and always in connection with wars against Judah. Clearly the author would rather not mention the Northern Kingdom at all. His interest has entirely to do, rather, with Judah and Jerusalem, and his mind is engrossed with one question: "What was the real and lasting significance of David and his house?"

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
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