

December 18, 2005
Fifth Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In spite of the Chronicler's dominating interest in David, and notwithstanding the basing of his narrative structure on the sequence of the Davidic kings, the theological perspective in the Books of Chronicles is not that of the royal tribe of Judah. The writer is not simply a traditional apologist of the Davidic throne.

To virtually all Bible-readers it is obvious that the Chronicler crafts his history, rather, from the perspective of a clergyman, a minister of the Temple. His viewpoint may be described as "clerical" rather than "royal." He has vastly more to say about the ministry of the Temple than about the other concerns of the king's palace.

In fact, we may describe the Chronicler's perspective even more closely. He writes, not simply as a minister of the Temple, but specifically as a Levite, this term meaning a male member of the house of Levi that is not a descendent of Aaron. This would explain the Chronicler's truly singular interest in the Levitical ministries of the Temple.

A simple word count will demonstrate this interest. The term "Levite," which is found only five times, and in only one chapter, of the Book of Leviticus (!), appears in Chronicles ninety-nine times. If we add in the instances of "Levites" in Ezra-Nehemiah, it comes to a total of 158 times, more than all the other books of the Bible combined. Moreover, it is the Chronicler alone who provides such detailed genealogies of the various Levitical families, containing the sort of information normally associated with family records.

These Levites not only assisted the priests, the sons of Aaron, in the preparations of the sacrifices, they also cared for other aspects of the Temple. Some served as doorkeepers, for instance, some as singers and musicians, and, at certain periods of history, some served as teachers of the Law. The Chronicler shows a pointed interest in all of these ministries.

Can we further narrow the focus of the Chronicler? Perhaps we can. Among the various ministries that the Levites performed in the prescribed worship, the Chronicler reveals a particular regard for the liturgical music.

This regard is manifest if we simply compare the Chronicler's stories with those in Kings, where the verb "to sing," *shir*, is found only one time (1 Kings 10:12). For example, unlike the parallel account in 2 Kings 11, the Chronicler tells of the activity of the Temple singers and musicians in the deposition of the usurper Athaliah (2 Chronicles 23:13). Again, the Chronicler alone speaks of the music sung and played during the transference of the Ark to the newly constructed Temple (5:12-13). More than one reader, impressed by this evidence, has found it easy to believe that the Chronicler sprang from one of the "singing families" among the Levites, perhaps the house of Asaph, whom David placed over the Temple's musical ministries and whose name appears so frequently in the titles of various psalms.

Without pressing the case further, we may at least conclude that the Chronicler represents the perspective of the ministerial tribe of Levi rather than the royal tribe of Judah. Furthermore, as we shall see in the commentary, he directs a great deal of his attention to the relationship between these two tribes.

The two tribes were closely linked. The ministerial tribe of Levi were the born of Jacob's third son, while the tribe of Judah was sired of his fourth. Furthermore, Israel had a priesthood both long before and long after it had a monarchy. Thus, from the very beginning the priesthood of Israel enjoyed an ascendancy of sorts over the royalty.

The relationship between these two Israelite tribes invites comparisons with similar examples from the history of religions. One thinks, for instance, of ancient India, where the *raja* (from the same root as the Latin *rex*, meaning "king") belonged to the ruling caste of the Kshatryas, the caste immediately below that of the priests, or Brahmins. Occasional religious frictions between the two groups, in fact, eventually spawned two new religions, when Mahavira and Siddartha Gautama, both of them from the Kshatryas, broke with the Brahmins and became the "founders" of Jainism and Buddhism. It is exceedingly curious that these things happened in the sixth century, about the time that Israel lost its monarchy but kept its priesthood.

The Bible narrates no crisis similar to that in Hinduism. With very few exceptions, such as Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:16-20), the kings of Judah did not encroach on the prerogatives of the clergy. In those instances where David or Solomon is said to "offer sacrifice," the meaning is very much the same as saying that David or Solomon built a bridge or constructed a wall--that is to say, they caused the thing to be done.

Nor, on the other hand, did Israel's priesthood attempt to usurp the duties and privileges of the throne, at least not until the Hasmonean period. There is no reason to question the Chronicler's overall portrait of the two institutions working together in harmony.

As we shall see in the commentary, in fact, the Temple's priesthood was effective in saving the Davidic throne in its hour of greatest danger--the six years during which the sons of David were replaced by the infidel daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. The story of the restoration of young Joash to the Davidic throne by the high priest Jehoiada (2 Chronicles 23) is among the most memorable narratives in Holy Scripture.

Still, the Chronicler's perspective on these matters was that of the clergy, not the royalty. He evaluates the kings of Judah largely on the basis of their attention to and care for the worship. By that standard, such as David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah received very good marks. Some of the others did not, and perhaps the worst of them all turned out to be Joash, who "did not remember the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to him, but killed his son" (24:22).

©2005 Patrick Henry Reardon

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

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php