

# THE BOOK OF FIRST CHRONICLES

## I. THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD (IN BRIEF) (I CHRONICLES 1:1—9:44)

### ► Overview

The genealogical record in Chronicles is long, detailed, and somewhat confusing. It has led many people to ignore Chronicles entirely. The genealogies seem at many points even to be repetitive. Those brave enough to devote close attention to them have often found themselves frustrated with the constant intertwining of the lines that fed into ancient Israel. This frustration may cause such persons to wind up, like those who ignored Chronicles in the first place, no less knowledgeable but worse for wear, having been defeated by the difficult material confronting them in 1 Chr 1—9.

However, the difficulty readers may have with this material should not lead them to ignore it. Close attention, by contrast, to the details reveals some interesting results. At the end of the day, the genealogies of Chronicles are part of inspired Scripture. That they were included in Scripture, of course, makes a big difference for their interpretation. Even if that were not the case, however, the fact that a historian decided they were worth mentioning is significant, since they were, after all, a key part of the story. One may, then, recall what was said above about theological history in studying this section.

Perhaps more famous to most readers among biblical genealogies are those included by Matthew and Luke. Both of these serve a particular purpose, namely to show how Jesus Christ fit within the stream of Jewish history. Matthew 1 goes back to Abraham, the father of the faith. From there, the first Gospel puts together a stylized account of fourteen generations between Abraham and the exile and between the exile and Jesus' birth.

Taking a different approach, Luke 3:23-38 tells the genealogical story in reverse order. Not concerned as much for style as Matthew apparently was, Luke's "orderly" account is actually closer to that found in Chronicles. While not calling Adam "the son of God" as Luke does, the Chroniclers go all the way back to the beginning to show how this version of the history fits within the overall story of God's people.

Aside from this theological interpretation, reading Chronicles as a historical document yields a different kind of importance for the genealogies. Inclusion of a genealogical record in a historical document is not surprising at all. By contrast, that the Deuteronomistic History does not have at least some kind of genealogy—beyond the patrimony of the various kings—makes it seem quite unusual among historical writings. The way in which the story is told gives particular insight into the standpoint of the historian. In this way, the genealogies of Genesis, with their descriptions of the very long life spans of the ancestors, appear quite different from those one finds in Chronicles. The genealogies are, perhaps, more interesting for what they leave out than what they include.

The genealogies in 1 Chronicles may also reveal something significant about the way in which the Chroniclers wrote. This is particularly so with regard to the use of source material. James T. Sparks comments, "If it is determined that the Chronicler had before him a particular written document while he completed his work, then this may help determine the origin of some of the Chronicler's material which, although not a direct quote, has certain affinities with other Biblical material" (2008, 294).

In addition to this, the way in which the Chroniclers present the genealogies gives great insight into the historical methodology being employed.

Put very simply, the Chroniclers give what is most important for their own purposes, and this often leads them to present information somewhat out of order. Sometimes, the “most important” father is presented last, as is the case with the three sons of Noah (1:4). However, at other times the most important father is presented first, as in the sons of Hezron, Ram and Jerahmeel (2:9). In addition, a great many of the names one encounters in this genealogical prologue serve as the progenitors of the inhabitants of cities, nations, and even large portions of the world. These eponymous ancestors whom the Chroniclers name thus stand in as fulfillments of the command to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28; see 9:1).

## A. Adam to the Sons of Israel (1:1—2:2)

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The Chroniclers begin, as it were, at the beginning. The history goes all the way back to Adam, the first human. Doing so gives an insight into philology, the relationship between language and culture. The Hebrew word *’adam* means both the proper name “Adam” and “humanity.” This situates the story being told within the overarching story not just of Israel but also of humanity in general. As such, it yields an important insight for what the Chroniclers are trying to achieve. As has been repeatedly said, this is theological history, and in the genealogies the historical dimension is probably more in focus. However, even if this is the case, the theological dimension is by no means excluded.

1:1—2:2

Sparks notes, “The Genealogies contained in 1 Chr 1 have numerous parallels to those contained in the book of Genesis, with most of the genealogies contained in Genesis making an appearance in the Chronicler’s opening chapter” (2008, 296). As will be seen, the Chroniclers put these genealogies to a specific purpose, and the way in which 1 Chr 1 reports the genealogical record contributes significantly to that purpose. Sparks ultimately concludes, “It is evident that copying of the Genesis material by the Chronicler took place” (2008, 297). He demonstrates this conclusion through charts detailing the extensive amount of parallel passages between Genesis and 1 Chr 1, including some lengthy consecutive sequences of copying of exact words. Even with a few minor spelling differences, the copying is remarkable.

Sparks’s ultimate conclusion is that “the Chronicler had the text of Genesis before him as he wrote, and he copied much of the data contained in 1 Chr 1 from it. Although at times the Chronicler slightly modified his source, he did not substantially change any of the content which he found within Genesis” (2008, 319). This conclusion appears essentially correct, with respect to the genealogies. However, Genesis also includes a great deal of narrative that

accompanies the genealogical record. The Chroniclers omit this for the most part. By presenting the genealogies the way they do, without the accompanying narratives, the Chroniclers give evidence of changing the source material in Genesis by way of summarizing a great deal of material. In the commentary that follows, when divergences are noted from the text of Genesis, for the most part attention is being paid to these summaries of the accompanying historical narratives.

Brief mention may be made of spelling variations between the genealogies in 1 Chronicles and the source material in Genesis. There are far too many of these to make mention of each one in the course of the commentary, but a few basic items can be noted. The Hebrew letters *dalet* and *resh*, transliterated by the English *d* and *r*, look quite similar to one another. Often, a name appears spelled with a *resh* in Genesis and a *dalet* in Chronicles, or vice versa. In addition, the letters *vav* and *yodh*, transliterated as *v* and *y*, also look similar. The only difference between them is that the *vav* is slightly longer. The commentary that follows assumes that these spelling differences do not in any respect indicate different persons.

## IN THE TEXT

■ In v 1 one notices a difference from the history reported in Genesis. Following the stories of the first family, including all of the events in the garden of Eden and the first murder, Gen 5:1-32 gives the genealogical record from Adam to Noah, with additional details of the ages at which the fathers had the sons. In a way, Gen 5 tells Adam's story again, but without many of the details. Chronicles, by contrast, does not include any stories of Adam and his descendants, mentioning only their successive names until the founding of the monarchy under Saul (ch 9).

Also left out is the story of the first murder. Thus the story of the first two sins—the eating of the fruit by the parents and the killing of the son by his brother—are not included. On the one hand, one might expect the line to continue through Seth—Abel being killed and Cain having moved to “the land of Nod” (Gen 4:16). This is in line with the genealogy given in Gen 5. On the other hand, leaving out the reason why it was the third son and not either of the other two is interesting. As an aside, Seth's name is spelled in Hebrew *Sheth*. Such a change happens frequently when Hebrew names are translated to English, most notably with Solomon (Heb. *šēlomoh*) later on in the narrative. The change is most likely due to Greek (the language of the Septuagint) not having a letter representing a *sh* sound. The Greek OT most often uses a simple *s* in such cases.

The reader should also notice in this verse the names of both Adam and his grandson Enosh are words for “human.” Whereas Adam’s name is also the common Hebrew word for humanity, Enosh’s name is the common Aramaic word for humanity. This word occurs with a slight spelling variation in Dan 7:13, a verse famous for its messianic implications (one of Jesus’ titles is Son of Man; see, e.g., Luke 9:58).

■ **2-4** The six generations (see below) represented in these two verses also diverge somewhat from Gen 4. The descendants of murderous Cain, according to Gen 4:17-22, were Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methushael, and Lamech. To Lamech were born Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain. These names are similar to the descendants of Adam in 1 Chr 1, yet, as has already been seen, Cain is excluded from the genealogy. The names are spelled differently in Hebrew. On this basis, Claus Westermann suggests that the two genealogies should be distinguished (1984, 348). This is in contrast to James Sparks, who believes that the differences between Chronicles and Genesis are only made for specific rhetorical purposes (2008, 319).

In the attempt to achieve greater clarity, the NIV makes a couple of additions to vv 3-4. First, **Noah** is added to the end of v 3. Second, the phrase **The sons of** is added to the beginning of v 4. The latter change follows the Septuagint. These additions are not necessary, however. One may, instead, see this first part of the genealogy as a kind of flowchart. Once the generations get down to the children of Noah, the line splits into three branches. This is in contrast to the formulaic genealogy in Gen 5, which indicates that the various fathers had other sons and daughters aside from those through whom the genealogy continued. Having only the relevant sons listed in 1 Chr 1 in no way indicates that these are the only sons born to the fathers. The point is rather that the Chroniclers are using the genealogical record for a particular point, just as the writers of Genesis, Matthew, and Luke do.

With 1 Chr 1:4, the simple presentation of names comes to an end. The remainder of the genealogy grows increasingly complex. In addition, many of the names in the genealogical record are also names of cities and territories. This indicates that something more is going on in these genealogies than a list of names.

■ **5-7** While the sons of Noah are listed in their birth order in v 4—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—their descendants are listed in reverse order. Verses 5, 8, and 13, therefore, form something of a ring structure with v 4. In addition, the sons of Noah become the patriarchs of three main divisions of the world. This makes it likely that the Chroniclers had Genesis ready to hand when composing the genealogies of ch 1. As James T. Sparks correctly notes, “The Genealogies contained in 1 Chr 1 have numerous parallels to those contained in the

book of Genesis, with most of the genealogies contained in Genesis making an appearance in the Chronicler's opening chapter" (2008, 296).

As has been noted, the Chroniclers also used the genealogies of Genesis for a specific purpose, namely to show where Israel fit in the history of the world. By waiting to list the descendants of Shem (or the Semites) until last, even though Shem was Noah's firstborn according to Genesis, the Chroniclers saved what was most important until last. On the last being first, Jewish medieval commentator David Kimchi (also known by the abbreviation "Radak") notes, "The reason that the text begins by presenting the progeny of the youngest is that the only important part of the account concerns Abraham, and it is in connection with him that it will present the genealogies at length" (2008, 30).

■ **8** Here the reader sees the first of many names used throughout the Chroniclers' genealogies that are also the names of regions, cities, nations, or ethnic groups. The name of Noah's second son, **Ham**, is also given to the region of the world basically identical with the region bordering the Mediterranean Sea on the southeast. It is even used in a synonymous parallel chain in Ps 105:23, "Then Israel entered Egypt; Jacob resided as a foreigner in the land of Ham." With one exception, the names of Ham's children cement this assertion. First, **Cush** generally refers to Ethiopia (see Gen 2:13; Num 12:1; 2 Chr 16:8 [paired with Libya]). Second, **Mizraim** is the exact spelling of the Hebrew word for **Egypt** (thus NIV's translation is justified, if somewhat misleading; see also Gen 10:6). Third, **Put** is not credited with any descendants in either 1 Chr 1 or the source material in Gen 10. Fourth, **Canaan** becomes the father of those inhabiting the most important land in the Bible.

■ **9-16** The grandsons of Ham, like their fathers, become the patriarchs of people groups important for subsequent biblical history. What is important to note about this information is the suggestion of common ancestry for all the peoples of the world, as the Hebrews understood it. This certainly says something important about how the Chroniclers viewed the world and Israel's place in it. Specifically, the entire history of the world, as told through the genealogy, is preparing for the coming of Israel, which first appears in 1 Chr 2:1. The theology being proclaimed here is one of election: Israel is God's chosen people and, coming at the right time, their lives (and especially the life of the nation) bring about a new chapter in God's relationship with the world.

Many of the names appearing here, people groups growing out of the patriarchy of Canaan, figure in earlier OT stories. So, for example, in 1:13-15 the **Hittites**, the **Jebusites**, **Amorites**, **Girgashites**, and **Hivites** are some of the people whom Israel, according to the tradition, was destined by God to replace (see, among others, Exod 3:8 and Deut 7:1). The **Arkites** will appear later on

in the story of David, with one of their number, “Hushai the Arkite” being called “the king’s confidant” (1 Chr 27:33).

■ **17-26** Next, and last, come the sons of Shem, the firstborn of Noah. This collection of descendants will lead to one of the most important men for Israel’s history, Abraham the father of the faith. Abraham is given his own verse in v 27, indicating his particular importance as the grandfather of the twelve patriarchs. Interesting in this text before Abraham is the first person whose name is explained. **Peleg** (v 19), one of the sons of Eber, was so named **because in his time the earth was divided**. It is unclear what is meant by this phrase, though it does indicate something of a regular practice. Children were often named for significant events occurring just before or simultaneously with their births, and, at least according to the Chroniclers, this Peleg is the first to have been so named. It may not be the case that Peleg was the first, but at least he was the first about whom the Chroniclers commented.

■ **27** Coming around to Abraham, the Chroniclers once again very quickly pass over a large portion of the narrative from Genesis. From Gen 12:1 to 17:4, the father of the faith is called “Abram,” which means something like “exalted father.” In a dramatic experience recorded in Gen 17:5, God changes his name to “Abraham,” which means something like “father of a multitude.” Here, however, the Chroniclers indicate merely that **Abram** and **Abraham** are the same person, without any mention of the change effected and what it might have meant in Abraham’s life. This is again within the Chroniclers’ intent throughout the genealogies—to tell the “backstory,” as it were, of Israel and Judah under the Davidic monarchy. Radak also noted the connection with Gen 17: “The text says ‘Abram’ in keeping with the way [one presents] genealogical lines; and ‘that is Abraham’—the famous one, whom God loved and whose name He aggrandized (Gen 12:2), making him the father of many nations (Gen 17:5)” (Kimchi 2008, 33).

■ **28-54** The two sons of Abraham and their descendants, as is well known from Genesis, have always existed in tension with one another (see especially Gen 16). The text presents the sons of Abraham in a chiasmic or ring structure. First, 1 Chr 1:28 tells us that the sons of Abraham were **Isaac and Ishmael**, though, of course, Ishmael was the firstborn. Radak does not delay much on this, stating merely that “in the course of presenting the lines of Abraham, the text provides the lines of his son Ishmael and the sons of Keturah, and after that states ‘Abraham fathered Isaac’ (1 Chr 1:34), since he is the essential one” (Kimchi 2008, 33-34). In this way, the presentation of the descendants of Abraham is similar to that regarding the descendants of Noah earlier in vv 4-27. Radak’s recognition of Ishmael as Abraham’s son is a key point, however, for according to law 170 of the Code of Hammurabi, the official recognition

by a father of sons born to a maidservant or a concubine was sufficient to allow those sons to claim a share of the inheritance (see Deut 21:15-17).

## Wives and Concubines in Ancient Near Eastern Law

A significant number of Hammurabi's laws deal with the relations between sons born to a man's multiple wives and/or a maidservant given by the wife to the husband as a surrogate mother. Two of these laws, numbered 170-171, seem to have direct relevance to the story of Abraham. Law 170 reads, in part: "If . . . the father during his lifetime then declares to (or: concerning) the children whom the slave woman bore to him, 'My children . . .,' after the father goes to his fate the children of the first-ranking wife and the children of the slave woman shall equally divide the property" (Roth 1997, 113-14). Law 171 addresses the opposite situation: "But if the father during his lifetime should not declare . . . 'My children . . .,' the children of the slave woman will not divide the property of the paternal estate with the children of the first-ranking wife" (Roth 1997, 114).

Other law collections from the ANE could be cited here as well. Samuel Greengus, for example, cites the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar (especially Laws 25-26). Greengus writes:

These cases establish the principles that a son of a slave woman could become a member of his father's family or an heir to his father's estate in two ways. One was if he was formally "legitimized" by the father even if his mother was not ranked as a wife; the second was if his father took his mother in marriage. (2011, 78)

1:28-54

The issue with regard to Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac turns, therefore, on whether Abraham recognized Ishmael as his son. On the one hand, the Genesis text seems to suggest that he did not do so; instead, he apparently left the decision entirely up to Sarah (Gen 16:6). However, Gen 16:3 ("wife") and 16:15 (named "the son") and "his son" in 17:23-27 and 21:11—all suggest Abraham's recognition of Ishmael as his legal son, though Sarah sees him as the son of her slave girl!

This ring structure is not quite correct, however. This is because the sons of the concubine Keturah are inserted in between the lines of Ishmael and Isaac. Nevertheless, Radak is correct that the most important line of descent from Abraham for the Chroniclers is the line of Isaac, and the best is left for last. Interestingly, the headings of the NIV call these sections, respectively, the descendants of Hagar, Keturah, and Sarah. On the one hand, this usage might have been unfamiliar to the original hearers/readers of Chronicles, aside from the note that **all these were *the sons* of Keturah** (v 33). On the other hand, it does perhaps help modern readers keep the story a bit straighter. Finally, the second mention that Abraham was the father of Isaac, as Radak noted, also forms an inclusion with v 28.

A couple of the descendants of Esau are interesting in other contexts. **Eliphaz** and his firstborn son **Teman** (v 36) remind the reader of one of Job's



three friends/accusers, Eliphaz the Temanite. Inscriptional evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Negev desert links Yahweh with the city of Teman (see also Hab 3:3). In addition, a distant descendant of Esau also has relevance for Job. First Chronicles 1:42 states that **Uz** was a son of **Dishan**. Uz is the land from which Job came, said only to be somewhere in “the East” (Job 1:1, 3).

Following the descendants of Esau and his connection with Edom and Mount Seir, the Chroniclers then turn to a discussion of kings who ruled **in Edom before any Israelite king reigned** (1 Chr 1:43). Radak notes that after the Israelites established a monarchy the Edomites “did not have kings . . . because they were under the control of David—until the sins of the Judean kings facilitated their rebellion against [Judean] rule (2 Chr 21:8-11)” (Kimchi 2008, 35). Again, however, the Chroniclers’ main purpose is not to make all the cited details align with historical reality, but instead to pave the way for the emergence of Israel. This emergence is saved for ch 2, when the descendants of Abraham’s grandson Israel come into focus.

■ **2:1-2** As noted above, the Chroniclers save the best for last. Everything has been building up to the point at which Israel emerged on the world scene. At the same time, however, the Chroniclers once again omit a significant piece of backstory. For here there is no selling into slavery of the favored son Joseph, no famine driving the patriarch and his family down into Egypt, no oppression, and no crossing of the Red Sea. On top of that, the sons of Israel are not given in the order of their birth (see Gen 30 for the correct order). The six sons of Leah are given first, like the other sixteen lists of the sons of Jacob (Sparks 2008, 286). Then 1 Chr 2:2 lists the sons of Rachel bracketed by those of her servant Bilhah. Finally, the sons of Leah’s servant Zilpah are given. Scholars are generally at a loss to explain why the Chroniclers did what they did. For example, Sparks comments only that this ordering of Jacob’s sons is “unique within the Hebrew Bible” (Sparks 2008, 270). Moreover, “the Chronicler’s order in his genealogical section has been based upon criteria other than birth order, or whether the son descended from a wife or a concubine” (Sparks 2008, 287).

## FROM THE TEXT

Chronicles, like the rest of the OT, has no “doctrine of original sin,” at least in the way this term is understood in the NT. Though there are hints here and there of such a doctrine (see, for example, Ps 51:5, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me”), no OT writing builds its hamartiology upon reflection on what happened in the garden of Eden. This was left for Paul to do in Rom 5, though it is consistent with the trajectory of meaning in Gen 3.

The reader might perhaps wonder why such an “important” piece of history should be left out. To find an explanation for this, one needs to carefully consider the overall structure of Chronicles. The Chroniclers treat the related ideas of sin, punishment, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration—themes encountered again and again throughout the Bible—in their own way. In other words, they knew that sin existed; telling the story of how sin began lay outside of their goals. They wanted to present the history of the world in such a way as to prove God’s ultimate direction of history. This was an important note to sound in their postexilic context, when it seemed as if all of the important theological anchors of Jewish life had been taken away, even as “Jewish life” as such (for it is only after the exile that the Israelites may properly be referred to as “Jews”) was beginning.

However, one should be cautious about comparing the Chroniclers with other, earlier bodies of literature in the OT. One temptation here, naturally, is to suggest the older ones are better and the newer ones deficient. The Chroniclers and the writers of Genesis have very different motivations. Genesis was perhaps concerned to be more theological, and this is why it includes more historical details alongside the genealogies. Chronicles, by contrast, was excited to get to the “important stuff” and used the genealogies merely as a device to get to Israel. Yet even this is not quite an accurate statement, for the Chroniclers could well have begun with David and ignored everything else. At the end of the day, the interpreter must acknowledge that the genealogies serve more than just background, though their details somewhat defy precise explanation.

## **B. The Israelite Tribes (2:3—9:1)**

### **►Overview**

The majority of the genealogical record, as is perhaps to be expected, is devoted to the tribes of Israel. As will be seen, some tribes receive far more coverage than others. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the Chroniclers’ interests lie with particular tribes, especially the tribe of Judah, to which attention turns first. Structurally, it is interesting that the two tribes that receive the longest treatment—Judah at one hundred verses and Levi at eighty-one—in fact get more than all of the others following them in the text. Moreover, the advantage Judah has over the ones following it is greater than that of Levi over the ones following it. The shorter genealogies after Judah receive a total of forty-four verses after Judah’s one hundred. This is in contrast to the shorter genealogies after Levi, which at a total of seventy-nine verses are only two verses shorter than the priestly tribe’s eighty-one.