

November 20, 2005
The First Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

If it is the case--and likely it is--that the Books of Chronicles are among the most neglected parts of the Bible, the reason is simple. These books are not easy. Indeed, many brave souls, summoning their inner resources and mounting an effort at the task, have found even the opening chapter of the Chronicler overly daunting.

For one thing, nothing much seems to be happening. Literally, nothing. In the Hebrew and Greek texts, in fact, the author does not get around to his first verb ("begot," naturally) until verse 10. Until that mildly exciting moment the first page of Chronicles is a bare list of names.

The beginning reader, looking for some plot in the story, is disconcerted. Aware that the page in front of him is the Word of God, he is understandably hesitant to call it boring. Nonetheless, what is he to make of all these interminable names with no discernible narrative? He finds himself plowing through a primitive phone book, as it were, published in a period long before the telephone was invented. This view would at least explain why the numbers are missing.

Most readers, after all, are prone to associate good story telling with at least an occasional recourse to verbs. It is the function of verbs to make things *happen*, and if nothing *happens*, there isn't much of a story. This, I suppose, is an assumption we picked up early. For example, among our very first literary adventures there was "See Spot run," a sound, robust imperative with a hearty ratio of two verbs to one noun. Prose seldom gets much livelier. Perhaps our literary expectations were unduly raised by that enduring vision of Spot on the run.

By any standard, nonetheless, the first chapter of the Chronicler is extraordinarily short on verbs. "Begot" appears six times, and "reigned" twice or so. That just about does it. Well, the verb "died" does come seven times toward the end of the chapter, but by then the reader may feel like doing the same.

Moreover, the problem is not confined to the first chapter. If the reader gets this far, he must still trek through another eight chapters before he arrives, as though with a trumpet flair, at that glorious oasis opening on

chapter ten, "Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell slain on Mount Gilboa." Aha, he says to himself, some real action at last. Spot is finally on the run.

He quickly discovers, nonetheless, that chapter ten has only fourteen verses, and most of the next two chapters go right back to more lists of names. Perhaps by the time he reaches chapter 21 the reader is completely in sympathy with the Lord's punishment of David for taking a census!

To gain some perspective on this dilemma, I think it useful to recall the Greek name for the Books of Chronicles, *Paralipomena*, which means "stuff left out." Although this name does not do justice to the Chronicler's intention, it does indicate what he did *not* intend to do. He did not intend to give us the whole story. Consequently, the Chronicler omitted a great deal. Indeed, at many points (all of chapter one, for instance) he manifestly presumed his readers already knew the story.

The Chronicler's intention was, rather, to tell the story from a perspective different from the other biblical historians. Like the authors of Genesis, Samuel, and Kings, the Chronicler had in mind to grasp the meaning of Israel's history, not simply to relate the facts, and readers owe him the effort to discern what he thought that historical meaning to be. Because of the difficulties already noted, this effort may have to be considerable, and it is true that relatively few Christian readers have bothered with it.

In fact, much reading of Chronicles, perhaps overly impressed by the Greek title used among Christians until fairly recent times, have treated these books as merely *paralipomena*, just "stuff left out" of the racier, more exciting, See-Spot-run pages of Samuel and Kings. The work of the Chronicler is often pursued as though it offered only a dull supplement to these other books.

In the standard Hebrew text, indeed, this impression is strengthened by the Chronicler's place at the very end of the Bible, where the final editors of the Massoretic text unfortunately set it. The traditional Greek Bible, in contrast, at least has the merit of putting the Books of Chronicles in front of Ezra and Nehemiah, which are the proper continuation of the Chronicler's narrative.

Unless the reader grasps the Chronicler's historical perspective and literary intention, these books will continue to be obscure. In short, the Books of Chronicles require an introduction.

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