



First Chronicles - Chapter Twenty Three

II 1 Chronicles 10:1-2 Chronicles 9:31 - The United Kingdom of David and Solomon (continues)

II.e 1 Chronicles 21:1-29:30 - David's Census and Preparation for the Temple (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

The aging David appoints Solomon as his coregent so that he can start to prepare for the task of ruling the country after David's death. The Levites are then enumerated in family groups in order to allocate them the various tasks they are to undertake once the temple is built. David organises the Levites according to their traditional clans: the Gershonites (vv.7-11), the Kohathites (vv.12-20), and the Merarites (vv.21-23).

II.e.vi 1 Chronicles 23:1-32 - Families of the Levites and Their Functions

Chapters 23-27 detail David's further preparations for Solomon's rule, in the provision of religious, military, and political leadership. These chapters consist mainly of lists of temple personnel and royal officials, interspersed with narrative and descriptive notes. The primary interest lies in David's organisation of the Levites in this chapter and in 1 Chronicles 24:20-26:28, and the Aaronic priests for temple worship and administration in 1 Chronicles 24:1-19. David's reorganisation of the Levites' work was a necessary consequence of the construction of the temple and the central place it would have in the nation's life. The structures of the temple ritual are shown to rest on royal authority.

¹ When David was old and full of days, he made his son Solomon king over Israel.

1 Chronicles 23:1

When David was old and full of days, he made his son Solomon king over Israel.

David had other sons who might also claim the throne of Israel after his death especially Adonijah. First Kings 1:31-40 describes in greater detail how David made sure that Solomon and not Adonijah took the throne after his death.

² David assembled all the leaders of Israel and the priests and the Levites.

1 Chronicles 23:2

David assembled all the leaders of Israel and the priests and the Levites. David gathered these for the purpose of organising them to help Solomon with the work of building the temple and administering the affairs of the kingdom.

³ The Levites, thirty years old and upwards, were counted, and the total was thirty-eight thousand. ⁴ ‘Twenty-four thousand of these’, David said, ‘shall have charge of the work in the house of the Lord, six thousand shall be officers and judges, ⁵ four thousand gatekeepers, and four thousand shall offer praises to the Lord with the instruments that I have made for praise.’ ⁶ And David organised them in divisions corresponding to the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari.

1 Chronicles 23:3-6

The Levites, thirty years old and upwards, were counted. This was a legitimate census of the Levites, as in Numbers 4:1-3. The age of commencing service, i.e. thirty years old and upwards was later lowered to twenty years of age (v.24 and v.27).

The total was thirty-eight thousand. The Hebrew word here for thousand may denote ‘groups’ or ‘units’ of indeterminate size; refer to the comment made on 1 Chronicles 12:23-37. These thirty eight thousand qualified Levites were divided into different duties.

‘Twenty-four thousand of these’, David said, ‘shall have charge of the work in the house of the Lord. The temple was a busy place constantly flowing with worshippers, sacrifice, and service unto God. It took many skilled people to take care of all the practical matters behind this activity.

Six thousand shall be officers and judges. The Levites were also the civil servants for the kingdom of Israel. Governmental records, decisions, and administration were all in the hands of the Levites.

Four thousand gatekeepers. These had the responsibility for security, both in a practical and spiritual sense. They made sure that only those who were ready to serve and worship God could come to the temple and its associated building.

Four thousand shall offer praises to the Lord with the instruments that I have made for praise. These Levites had the job of worshipping God both with their voices and musical instruments. They did this both to honour God directly and also to encourage others to worship God.

And David organised them in divisions corresponding to the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. These family groupings within the tribe of Levi were described hundreds of years before in Numbers Chapters 3 and 4.

⁷ The sons of Gershon were Ladan and Shimei. ⁸ The sons of Ladan: Jehiel the chief, Zetham, and Joel, three. ⁹ The sons of Shimei: Shelomoth, Haziël, and Haran, three. These were the heads of families of Ladan. ¹⁰ And the sons of Shimei: Jahath, Zina, Jeush, and Beriah. These four were the sons of Shimei. ¹¹ Jahath was the chief, and Zizah the second; but Jeush and Beriah did not have many sons, so they were enrolled as a single family.

1 Chronicles 23:7-11

The sons of Gershon were originally instructed to take care of the skins that covered the tabernacle itself.

¹² The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel, four. ¹³ The sons of Amram: Aaron and Moses. Aaron was set apart to consecrate the most holy things, so that he and his sons for ever should make offerings before the Lord, and minister to him and pronounce blessings in his name for ever; ¹⁴ but as for Moses the man of God, his sons were to be reckoned among the tribe of Levi. ¹⁵ The sons of Moses: Gershom and Eliezer. ¹⁶ The sons of Gershom: Shebuel the chief. ¹⁷ The sons of Eliezer: Rehabiah the chief; Eliezer had no other sons, but the sons of Rehabiah were very numerous. ¹⁸ The sons of Izhar: Shelomith the chief. ¹⁹ The sons of Hebron: Jeriah the chief, Amariah the second, Jahaziel the third, and Jekameam the fourth. ²⁰ The sons of Uzziel: Micah the chief and Isshiah the second.

1 Chronicles 23:12-20

The sons of Kohath were originally instructed to take care of the furniture of the tabernacle including the Ark of the Covenant, the table of showbread, and so forth, under the direction of Eleazar the priest, son of Aaron.

Aaron was set apart to consecrate the most holy things. Among the Levites, the descendants of Aaron were chosen for the priestly duties described in these verses. Being a member of the tribe of Levi was not enough to be a priest; one had to be a direct descendant of this particular family of Aaron. This summarises the specific duties of the priesthood.

So that he and his sons for ever should make offerings before the Lord, and minister to him and pronounce blessings in his name for ever. This is a brief but powerful description of the duties of the priests of Israel. The priest was to have an active concern for holiness, and to be able to discern between what was holy and what was not. This means that holiness had to touch the life of the priest; he had to represent God before the people.

Make offerings before the Lord. This is not so much a reference to the animal and food offerings but to the burning of incense. Incense is a picture of intercessory prayer. The priest had to represent the people before the Lord.

And minister to him. The priest was busy with people and the work of ministry, but he must never forget his ministry to God himself. He was to spend time in personal devotion, worship, and attention given to God in the secret place.

And pronounce blessings in his name for ever. The priest was blessed so that he could bless others.

²¹ The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi. The sons of Mahli: Eleazar and Kish. ²² Eleazar died having no sons, but only daughters; their kindred, the sons of Kish, married them. ²³ The sons of Mushi: Mahli, Eder, and Jeremoth, three.

1 Chronicles 23:21-23

The sons of Merari were originally instructed to take care of the structural aspects of the tabernacle including the pillars, the boards, and so forth.

²⁴ These were the sons of Levi by their ancestral houses, the heads of families as they were enrolled according to the number of the names of the individuals from twenty years old and upwards who were to do the work for the service of the house of the Lord. ²⁵ For David said, 'The Lord, the God of Israel, has given rest to his people; and he resides in Jerusalem for ever. ²⁶ And so the Levites no longer need to carry the tabernacle or any of the things for its service' — ²⁷ for according to the last words of David these were the number of the Levites from twenty years old and upwards — ²⁸ 'but their duty shall be to assist the descendants of Aaron for the service of the house of the

Lord, having the care of the courts and the chambers, the cleansing of all that is holy, and any work for the service of the house of God; ²⁹ to assist also with the rows of bread, the choice flour for the grain-offering, the wafers of unleavened bread, the baked-offering, the offering mixed with oil, and all measures of quantity or size. ³⁰ And they shall stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening, ³¹ and whenever burnt-offerings are offered to the Lord on sabbaths, new moons, and appointed festivals, according to the number required of them, regularly before the Lord. ³² Thus they shall keep charge of the tent of meeting and the sanctuary, and shall attend the descendants of Aaron, their kindred, for the service of the house of the Lord.'

1 Chronicles 23:24-32

The names of the individuals from twenty years old and upwards. David first changed the year when service began for the Levites from thirty years old to twenty. One reason he did this was because the new temple would require more workers, and he needed the Levites to undertake this work. Temple service will certainly have brought increased work, even though the occasional duty of transporting the ark was now to be abolished. In fact, the Levites and their duties had suffered from long-standing neglect.

For David said. David appears as the successor to Moses in redefining the Levites' duties for the new age of the temple; refer to Numbers Chapter 4. As assistants of the priests, the Levites had responsibility for the temple precincts and vessels, preparing food for the offerings, and the service of music and praise that accompanies the times of sacrifice.

The Lord, the God of Israel, has given rest to his people. Now that the tabernacle and its furnishings would rest permanently at the temple David planned and Solomon would build, there could and should be a change in the duties of the Levites.

He resides in Jerusalem for ever. It can be certain that the Lord would have remained with his people for all time if only they had been faithful to him, but they were not, the temple would be lost and the Lord would not remain in his temple through the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. However, even during periods of exile or foreign rule, it does not follow that the Lord has ever abandoned his chosen people. In fact, he has promised that a remnant will remain until the end: *<<For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord – the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make*

them afraid>> (Zephaniah 3:12-13), <<Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the Lord>> (Haggai 1:12), <<And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved>> (Romans 9:27).

For according to the last words of David these were the number of the Levites from twenty years old and upwards. Never was the true kingliness of David more manifest, than when he sought to make these arrangements for the consolidation around the throne of God of that kingdom which he was so soon to leave. In 2 Chronicles 29:25 it is stated that David commanded this arrangement as he worked together with Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet. It also reveals that these arrangements were the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. This was Holy Spirit guided organisation and administration. Guided by the prophets and the Holy Spirit, the king exercised his administrative genius to establish a system of procedures that helped maintain legitimate worship under his successors.

But their duty shall be to assist the descendants of Aaron for the service of the house of the Lord. Since the tabernacle and its service was now to come to a place of permanent rest, the Levites who once had the responsibility to manage and move the mobile structure could now become the helpers of the priests, the sons of Aaron.

And they shall stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening. The Chronicler mentioned many specific duties of the Levites, such as the cleansing of all that is holy; to assist also with the rows of bread, i.e. the showbread; the baked-offering, etc. As assistants, they were active in side-rooms and courtyards rather than the main building, preparing food and offerings rather than actually offering sacrifices - a role reserved for priests. Yet he included among them this most important duty: to stand every morning to thank and praise the Lord. This was essential among the duties of the Levites and the priests, and could never be neglected.

The specific work of the Levites is beautifully described by the Chronicler in the closing verses of the chapter. They were the servants of the priest and of the temple. They were also to stand at morning and evening to praise the Lord. Theirs was a high calling indeed.