

The Genealogical Record of the Tribe of Levi

1 Chronicles 6

1 Chronicles 6:1-2 – *“The sons of Levi were Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. ² The sons of Kohath were Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel. ³ The children of Amram were Aaron, Moses, and Miriam. And the sons of Aaron were Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar...”*

Verses 4-15 trace the family line of the high priest of the tribe of Levi to the time of the Babylonian captivity. Verse 14: *“Azariah begot Seraiah, and Seraiah begot Jehozadak. ¹⁵ Jehozadak went into captivity when the Lord carried Judah and Jerusalem into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.”*

The high priestly line from Aaron to Zadok is given in verses 49-53. *“But Aaron and his sons offered sacrifices on the altar of burnt offering and on the altar of incense, for all the work of the Most Holy Place, and to make atonement for Israel, according to all that Moses the servant of God had commanded. ⁵⁰ Now these are the sons of Aaron: Eleazar his son, Phinehas his son, Abishua his son, ⁵¹ Bukki his son, Uzzi his son, Zerahiah his son, ⁵² Meraioth his son, Amariah his son, Ahitub his son, ⁵³ Zadok his son, and Ahimaaz his son.”*

Background Notes

1 Chronicles 1-9 contains the largest collection of biblical genealogies in the Bible. For that reason, these chapters aren't the most exciting chapters to read, and many Christians skip over them in their devotional reading of the Bible. But in our previous Talks we've seen that these biblical genealogies are important - and not just for the general reason of showing that the Old Testament accounts are dealing with real people, in real time, and real history - even though some critics of the Bible dismiss them as “just Jewish legends.”

These biblical genealogies are also important because they establish that the dynasty of King David came from the tribe of Judah - the kingly line from which the Messiah would come.

The genealogical records of the other tribes are also included in 1 Chronicles, and they are important for the nation of Israel. But clearly the emphasis is on the line Judah and David, because the rest of 1 Chronicles will cover the life of David. And the family tree of David is the genealogical line of the Messiah.

Chapter 6 is the genealogical record of the tribe of Levi. As you can see from the 81 verses of this chapter, the amount of genealogical material for Levi is second only to Judah and the line of David. Why this emphasis on the tribe of Levi? The priests and Temple servants who ministered before the Lord on behalf of the nation were from the tribe of Levi. Thus the Levites played a very important role in the nation of Israel.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Levites were the tribe of the Temple priests.

1 Chronicles 6 gives us the line of the high priests in Israel, from Aaron to the time of the Babylonian captivity. This would cover a period of about 900 years.

Remember, all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. Only descendants of **Aaron** the Levite could be priests. That's why Moses is not listed here. Moses was a Levite, and he was a leader of God's people, but the priestly line descended only through **Moses' brother, Aaron**.

At any given time, one of the priests would be the High Priest. Aaron was the first High Priest. Aaron had four sons – Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord because they offered “strange fire” at the Tabernacle. *“Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:1-2).* They departed from the way of worship that God had ordained. It's a powerful lesson in the importance of worshiping the Lord in the way He has given us in Scripture, and not coming up with our own ideas of the way God should be worshiped.

After the death of Aaron, his son Eleazar became the High Priest. The succeeding generations of priests and high priests all trace their lineage through either Eleazar or Ithamar.

The list of high priests in 1 Chronicles 6 is somewhat abbreviated because some notable high priests are not listed, such as Eli at the time of Samuel, Abiathar at the time of David, and Jehoiada at the time of King Joash. Zadok replaced Abiathar as high priest when King Solomon began his reign, because Abiathar supported Adonijah's attempt to take over the throne after David died (v8).

Zadok's line continues to be important into the future. In the future millennial kingdom of Christ on earth (described in Ezekiel 40-48), we read of priests in the line of Zadok serving in the Temple of the Lord.

Ezekiel 40:45-46: *“Then he said to me, “This chamber which faces south is for the priests who have charge of the temple. The chamber which faces north is for the priests who have charge of the altar; these are the sons of Zadok, from the sons of Levi, who come near the Lord to minister to Him.”*

And Ezekiel 44:15-16: *“But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok, [who faithfully continued to minister when Israel abandoned Me for idols], they shall come near Me to minister to Me; and they shall stand before Me to offer to Me the fat, and they shall come near My table to minister to Me, and they shall keep My charge.”*

And Ezekiel 48:9-11: *“The district that you shall set apart for the Lord shall be twenty-five thousand cubits in length and ten thousand in width. ¹⁰ To the priests the holy district shall belong: on the north twenty-five thousand cubits in length, on the west ten thousand in width, on the east ten thousand in width, and on the south twenty-five thousand in length. The sanctuary of the Lord shall be in the center. ¹¹ It shall be for the priests of the sons of Zadok, who are sanctified, who have kept My charge, who did not go astray when the children of Israel went astray, as the Levites went astray.”*

In 2 Kings 25:18 we learn that the high priest Azariah (who is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 6:14), was the father of both Jehozadak and Ezra (Ezra 7:1). Furthermore, this Jehozadak was the father of Jeshua, who was the high priest when Israel returned from their Babylonian captivity (Ezra 3 & Nehemiah 12).

So the Levites were the tribe that provided the Temple priests.

2. The Levites were the tribe of the Temple singers.

1 Chronicles 6:14-48 tells us about the Levites who were Temple singers. In verse 16, the three sons of Levi are given: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. And in verses 17-30, the descendants of all three lines are given.

Back in Exodus 3-4, we read of the various responsibilities of the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites in the worship of the Lord at the Tabernacle. Moses and Aaron and the priests were Kohathites, through the family line of their father, Amram. *“The children of Amram: Aaron, Moses and Miriam” (v3).*

Notice that Samuel and his sons were Kohathites (v27-28). Is this a mistake? Is it a contradiction to 1 Samuel 1:1, that Samuel’s father Elkanah was from the hill country of Ephraim? No. Remember, by the Lord’s command, the Levites did not have their own tribal territory, but lived amongst all the various tribes of Israel. So Samuel’s father, a Levite, lived in the tribal territory of Ephraim.

Verses 31-48 tell us about the Levites who were appointed by King David as musicians for the Tabernacle, and later the Temple. *“Now these are the men whom David appointed over the service of song in the house of the Lord, after the ark came to rest. They were ministering with music before the dwelling place of the tabernacle of meeting, until Solomon had built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they served in their office according to their order” (v31-31).*

Musicians in the line of Kohath are given in verses 33-38. Musicians in the line of Gershon are given in verses 39-42, and in verses 40-48, musicians in the line of Merari are given.

According to the titles of the psalms that bear their names, three of these musicians apparently wrote psalms that are included in our book of Psalms. Heman the Kohathite (v33) was the author of Psalm 88. Asaph the Gershonite (v39) wrote Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83. Ethan the Merarite (v44) authored Psalm 89. Many of the psalms were sung in Temple worship.

The Levites were the tribe of The Temple singers.

Practical Application

In “God’s Plan B,” the B stands for “Best”!

Verses 54-81 describe the land areas designated for the Levites. *“These are their dwelling places throughout their settlements in their territory, for they were given by lot to the sons of Aaron, of the family of the Kohathites: They gave them Hebron in the land of Judah, with its surrounding common-lands. But the fields of the city and its villages they gave to Caleb the son of Jephunneh” (v54-56).*

Verses 57-60 list the rest of the cities and pasture lands that were given to the priests, the descendants of Aaron. Verses 61-81 describe the cities and pasture lands given to the rest of the Levites. Joshua 21 tells us that a total of 48 cities scattered throughout the land were given to the Levites, including the six “Cities of Refuge.”

I have called this application “God’s Plan B.” Why? Where do we see a “Plan B”? The tribes of Levi and Simeon were given no tribal territory in the Land because their forefathers, Levi and Simeon, participated in the massacre at Shechem (Genesis 34). However, the Levites redeemed themselves when they stood with Moses at Mount Sinai, in opposition to Israel’s golden calf idolatry. *“Moses stood at the entrance to the camp and shouted, “All of you who are on the Lord’s side, come here and join me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him” (Exodus 32:26).*

So in “Plan B,” the Lord made Levi the priestly tribe. They were assigned to maintain the priesthood, the Tabernacle and the Temple, and to minister to the people. And because the Levites were scattered in cities throughout the nation, they could teach the people God’s Word and the way of worship that was ordained by the Lord.

God is always ready and willing to “pick up the pieces.” He did it then, and He’ll do it today - if we let Him. And His “Plan B” is always better than we could ever imagine! In “God’s Plan B,” the B stands for “Best.”