

The Change of Levites's Social Status through the Additional Inscription in the Chronicles

Xiaozhe Li

National Centre for Archaeology, Beijing, China

Abstract: This study examines the elevation of the Levites' social and cultic status in book 2 Chronicles 35's Passover narrative compared to earlier biblical texts (e.g., Numbers, Deuteronomy, Kings). The Chronicler significantly expands the Levites' roles-assigning them tasks like slaughtering Passover lambs, skinning offerings, and guarding the Temple-while minimizing priestly duties. This contrasts sharply with the Levites' limited or ambiguous positions in prior traditions. The article argues that this enhancement reflects socio-theological shifts during the late Persian/early Hellenistic period (late 4th century BCE). Under Persian rule, the Chronicler reinterprets Israel's history to bridge the gap between past traditions and post-exilic realities, emphasizing the Jerusalem Temple's centrality and divine justice. By elevating the Levites-a non-priestly group with ancient legitimacy but no contemporary power-the Chronicler revitalizes religious continuity, balances institutional authority, and reinforces Judah's exclusive cultic identity. This transformation underscores Chronicles' role in reshaping Second Temple Judean society and theology.

Keywords: Levites; Chronicles; Passover; Social Status; Cultic Roles

1. Introduction

As one of the chronology books in the Bible, it is obviously that most of the content in the Chronicles is quite similar with what was described in last two books: 1 & 2 Kings. Except the main content from the Kings, we may also find some other similarly names or stories from the Deuteronomy, Ezra, Nehemiah, etc. Even so, according to most scholars' view, the Chronicles was written by the Chronicler independently [11]. As for the 2 Chronicles 35, basically it includes two parts: the Passover of Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:1-19) and the death of Josiah (2

Chr. 35:20-25). Two parts can find its root from the 2 Kings but in a different writing way of describing.

The opening and ending expanded the Kings' related content rather than replace it with an alternative account; but the Chronicler added more detailed information on the two historical events. In general, there are three points that the Chronicler expands or omits when comparing between 2 Kings 22-23:

1) The Chronicler omits the details about the repairing the Temple.

2) The Chronicler expands the preparation for celebrating the *Passover*, including the sacrificial animals, the mode of preparing, the specific roles of the priests and the Levites, etc.; and the lesser role for the feast of the Unleavened Bread, the lack of mention of unpurified people or foreigners, the lack of inappropriate celebrants, and so on [6].

3) The Chronicler expands the details of the battle between the King Josiah and Pharaoh Neco, especially the death of Josiah.

(More detailed comparison please see the Appendix. 1)

In the first part of this chapter, the Chronicler made a lot of effort on describing the preparation and the celebration of the Passover, and during this process, he made a clear division on the priests' and the Levites' job, for example, the Levites are responsible for killing the Passover lamb and flaying (2 Chr. 35:11). However, in other chapters, the Levites' job was quite limited. In Numbers, the Levites oversee the tabernacle of the Testimony, carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings (Numbers 1: 50); move, set up and guard the tabernacle (Num. 1:51). In Deuteronomy and Joshua, the Levites are thought to do the priestly service (Deu. 27:9, Jos. 18:7). While in the Kings there is almost no mention of the Levites, in Chronicles, the portion of Levites was highly added. The Levites should be in charge of the gatekeeping (1 Chr. 9:18), keeping keys, articles, spices, flour, wine, oil, baking the offering bread (1 Chr. 9:26-29); some are

musicians while worshiping the God (1 Chr. 9:33, 2 Chr. 5:12), some are responsible for carrying the ark (2 Chr. 5:4), and some are serving in the Temple with the priests (2 Chr. 13:10), and they should also help to purify the Temple (2 Chr. 29:16, 25). While in 2 Chr. 35: 1-19, the Levites are in charge of: instructing all Israel, putting the sacred ark in the Temple, standing in the holy place with the priests, slaughtering the Passover lambs, skinning the animals, setting aside the burnt offerings to give them to the LORD, roasting the Passover animals, being musicians and gatekeepers during the celebration. As we can see, the description of the Levites' job is basically a combination of the former depictions. From a hierodule (carrying the ark) and a gatekeeper to an important "priest" during the celebration, I would say the Chronicler enhanced the status of the Levites when he re-interpreted the related events.

Why the Chronicler emphasized the Levites' role during the preparation and the celebration of the Passover? What is the Chronicler's attitude towards this kind of so-called "enhancement"? What could be the related social condition regarding on this sort of attitude transformation? In this paper, I intend to find the possible reason for the attitude change and the social/theology transformation behind the simple sentences describing the "labour division".

2. Social Background

2.1 The Author and His Time

Modern suggestions about the date and provenance of Chronicles have ranged from the first half of the sixth century, parallel to Ezekiel, and the Deuteronomistic history [15] to the second century, sometime in the Maccabean period [9]. On the whole, the most common view accepts placing this book in some time in the fourth century or towards its end [2]. As for Sarah herself, after analyzing the content, language and the related time features, she believes that this chapter should be completed at the end of the Persian, or the beginning of the Hellenistic period, at the end of the fourth century B.C.E.

Written in the Persian or the Hellenistic time, it is obviously that the Chronicler was influenced by the social conditions when rewriting the chronology of Israel history. According to the writing system and tradition, many scholars have assumed that the Chronicler was a follower of

either Deuteronomistic or the Priestly tradition on the issue of cultic practice [7]. Even though the Chronicler wrote this chapter, yet like every historical work, the Chronicles do depend on other sources.

2.2 The Sources

It is being confirmed that the chronicler's major sources are the historical compositions that preceded him: the Pentateuch, the Former Prophets, and Ezra-Nehemiah. These constitute not only a source of extracts, cited in full or in a reworked form, but also the basis and framework of his own work. In addition, the Book of Kings is the most important of the chronicler's biblical sources; it forms the basic frame of the history of Judah, when the Chronicler tried to pay more attention of the kingdom of Judah.

One major political concern in Chronicles scholarship has been the portrayal of the Northern Kingdom in the book. While the book of Kings provides an account of both kingdoms of the Divided Monarchy, the narrative of Chronicles focuses on the Davidic line. There is no doubt that the Davidic monarch has a cultic significance in Chronicles, but there is also no indication that the Chronicles advocates or even awaits its restoration. The temple, built under the Persian Empire, is the essential element for societal stability in Chronicles. Chronicles is a work deeply concerned with the temple cult, typified by the priestly and Levitical organizations and duties.

As for the aim of this book, some scholars consider this book's aim to be to establish the exclusive legitimacy of the Jerusalem cultic institutions and of Judah as the only community of God [1]. Freedman thinks that this book was written to provide a basis for the legitimate claims of the house of David to rule in Israel, and the authority over the Temple and the cultic in the time of Zerubbabel. According to Sarah's view, for the Chronicler, 'the history of Israel' is the arena in which the God's providence and rule of his people are enacted. The Chronicler presents a picture of undisturbed continuity of settlement stretching from the 'the children of Israel'. The undisturbed continuity of settlement is also expressed in the Chronicler's attitude towards the issues of 'destruction' and 'exile' [11] In her point of view, the Chronicler's history of Israel also reflects their social and political existence in which the most prominent feature is the institution of kingship. In the

Chronicler's view, 'kingship' is a self-evident political order, and he is trying to put all 'kingship' into the LORD's administration, and the Davidic line that was doing under the LORD's law.

As for the theology situations, one of the Chronicler's theology views is the justice view, and all he does is characterized by the attribute of absolute justice [11]. The Chronicler's well-known theory of 'reward' and 'punishment', which has been designated in various way in the history of scholarship, is in fact his way of portraying history as a concrete manifestation of divine justice. According to her view, the Chronicler's view of divine justice seems to develop from that of Ezekiel. And in this book, the human side of the mutual relationship is expressed by worship, while the Chronicler advances the religious life of Israel as a major topic of his historical account. We could see a systematic history of Israel's worship from the Chronicler's depiction, and of the Temple personnel, special attention is paid to the non-priestly classes: the Levites-singers, gatekeepers. It is obviously that the Chronicles is one of the most important reflections of the changes which affected the structure and functions of the clerical orders during the Second Temple period. The scholarly criticism presents different points on the changes of the Levites, especially the difference between the priests and Levites [7]. Only a few of scholars have sketched mediating positions, while both view Chronicles as an important component in tracing the history of the priesthood in Jerusalem. Both hold that the differences between priests and Levites in Chronicles cannot be reconciled; both groups view the Chroniclers as following in a particular tradition-either Deuteronomic or Priestly.

3. Possible Solutions

According to the social and theology conditions, I would suggest that the change of the Levites' status basically resulted from the social change and the related theology conditions.

Under the ruling of Persian empire, the society was relatively stable, and the culture practices were re-established in Jerusalem with the development of the political, and history, there appears a constant process of elevating the past, since the past events are too far away, some details can be easily rewrite for some certain purposes.

Together with the increasing sanctification of the

past by the later generations, there developed a gap between their own complex reality and the reality they found described in the Bible. Firstly, the early story becomes incomprehensible to the present generation, and the norms of the formative period are in fact no longer appropriate to contemporary needs and aspirations. Secondly, the present-day institutions, religious tenets and ritual observance are served from their origins and lose their authoritative source of legitimation.

Therefore, the way that the chronicler described the history of Israel actually narrowed down this sort of gap. On one hand, the Chronicler's description gives new significance to the two components of Israelite life, the past is explained so the institutions and religious principle become relevant to the present; on the other hand, it renewed the authority of the LORD.

In terms of the Chronicler, living in a post-exile age under the Persian Empire, they had to accept the fact about the destruction of Jerusalem and their descents' exile, but a new history about the past is needed, no matter for the whole society or for the Chronicler himself. People need the confidence to live in a new world, and he need a chance to enhance himself. Under this general trend, the Chronicler rewrite the chronology of the history of Israel, made an 'ideal' past by himself. For example, the Great David and Solomon King are always right, while the other kings got punished even though they also did under the LORD's law, but once they sinned, they got punished. The LORD's justice view could be drawn from this chapter everywhere. Just as the detailed description of the preparation and the celebration of the Passover, only elaborate inscriptions could show that the King Josiah is doing according to the LORD's law, while after that the was attacked by Egypt was also because he obeyed the LORD's willingness. To be more specific on the first part of our chapter 35, it is a little confused when the former books describing the different jobs between the priests and the Levites (sometimes they even consider the priests=Levites). It is quite clear about the division in this chapter, so as the enhancement. During the preparation and celebration part, the Levites took most of the important work, from slaughtering the Passover lamb to purifying the Temple, when there is only few sentences about what the priests should do during the two parts.

As one of the original tribes of Israel, the Levites

kept a long history participating from the beginning of the story, but they did not get enough attention, and they stayed in a non-priestly position for a long time. In this book, when Chronicler want to enhance the past and make everything seems justice, he needs to make some change on some key person, that could be the possible reason why they chose the Levites. He needs an original group to convince people, but a group that do not have so much beneficial limitations with the contemporary forces. He makes this seemed-irrelevant group a new power to balance the old forces and make a new situation for the new world, in this process he not only gained his own position, but the change of the theology view as well.

In a word, the Chronicles is a comprehensive expression of the perpetual need and revitalize the faith of Israel, it strengthens the bond between past and present and proclaims the continuity of Israel's faith and history.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the Chronicler's expansion of the Levites' roles in the Passover narrative of 2 Chronicles 35 represents a deliberate and theologically significant departure from earlier biblical traditions. By assigning the Levites duties previously reserved for priests-such as slaughtering the Passover lambs, skinning offerings, and overseeing key aspects of temple worship-the Chronicler not only elevates their cultic status but also redefines the religious hierarchy of post-exilic Judah. This transformation reflects broader socio-political and theological shifts during the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, a time when the Jewish community sought to reconstruct its identity around the Jerusalem Temple and its institutions. The elevation of the Levites can be understood as part of the Chronicler's broader historiographical project: to bridge the gap between Israel's authoritative past and the contemporary needs of his audience. By enhancing the role of a traditionally subordinate but historically legitimate group, the Chronicler reinforces the continuity of Israel's religious heritage while subtly reconfiguring power structures within the temple personnel. This move not only legitimizes the Levites' growing influence in Second Temple society but also serves to balance the authority of the priesthood, ensuring a more inclusive and stable cultic order. Moreover, the Chronicler's portrayal of the

Levites aligns with his theological emphasis on divine justice, communal purity, and centralized worship. In this light, the Passover narrative becomes more than a historical account-it functions as a model of ideal religious practice, where proper order, participation, and devotion reflect the community's covenant relationship with God. The detailed attention to the Levites' duties underscores their integral role in maintaining that order.

Ultimately, the enhanced status of the Levites in Chronicles not only illuminates the evolving dynamics of temple leadership in the Second Temple period but also reveals how biblical texts were shaped to address the religious and social aspirations of their time. Through this reimagining of the past, the Chronicler provided his contemporaries-and future generations-with a vision of continuity, legitimacy, and hope rooted in faithful worship and divinely ordained institutions.

References

- [1] Curtis, E.L. and Madsen, A.A. 1910. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Chronicles. Edinburgh.
- [2] Driver, S.R., 1913, Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament, Edinburgh: 315.
- [3] Japhet, S. 1985. The Historical Reliability of Chronicles: The History of the Problem and its Place in Biblical Research. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 33: 83-107.
- [4] Japhet, S. 2013. The Supposed Common Authorship of Chronicles and Ezre-Nehemia nvestigated Anew. *Vetus Testamentum*, 63 (10): 36-76.
- [5] John, S. 1921. 1 and 2 Chronicles, Grand Rapids, Mich..
- [6] Klein, R.W and Hanson, P.D. 2012. 2 Chronicles: A Commentary. Minneapolis, Minn..
- [7] Knoppers, G.N. 1999. Hierodules, Priests, or Janitor? The Levites in Chronicles and the History of the Israelite Priesthood. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 118(1): 49-72.
- [8] Laato, A. 1994. The Levitical Genealogies in 1 Chronicles 5-6 And the Formation of Levitical Ideology in Post-Exilic Judah. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testment* 62(1994): 77-99.
- [9] Lods, A. 1932, Israel, London: 14
- [10] Richardson, H.N. 1958. The Historical Reliability of Chronicles. *Journal of Bible*

- and Religion, 26(1): 9-12.
- [11] Sara, J. 1993. I & II Chronicles: A Commentary, London.
- [12] Vries, S.J. 1989. First and Second Chronicles. Grand Rapids, Mich...
- [13] Werman, C. 1997. Levi and Levites in the Second Temple Period. Dead Sea Discoveries, 4 (2): 211-225.
- [14] Williamson, H.G.M. 1982. New Century Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Chronicles. UK.
- [15] Welch, A.C. The Work of the Chronicler, 1939: 155, London

Appendix 1. Comparison between the Book of Chronicles and Kings

2 Chronicles 35	2 Kings 22-23
35:1 Josiah celebrated the Passover to the Lord in Jerusalem, and the Passover lamb was slaughtered on the fourteenth day of the first month.	23:21 The King gave this order to all the people: "Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this BOOK of the Covenant."
35:2 He appointed the priests to their duties and encouraged them in the service of the LORD's temple.	
35:3 He said to the Levites, who instructed all Israel and who had been consecrated to the Lord: "Put the sacred ark in the temple that Solomon son of David king of Israel built. It is not to be carried about on your shoulders. Now serve the Lord your God and his people Israel.	
35:4 Prepare yourselves by families in your divisions, according to the instructions written by David king of Israel and by his son Solomon.	
35:5 "Stand in the holy place with a group of Levites for each subdivision of the families of your fellow Israelites, the lay people.	
35:6 Slaughter the Passover lambs, consecrate yourselves and prepare the lambs for your fellow Israelites, doing what the Lord commanded through Moses."	
35:7 Josiah provided for all the lay people who were there a total of thirty thousand lambs and goats for the Passover offerings, and also three thousand cattle-all from the king's own possessions.	
35:8 His officials also contributed voluntarily to the people and the priests and Levites. Hilkiyah, Zechariah and Jehiel, the officials in charge of God's temple, gave the priests twenty-six hundred Passover offerings and three hundred cattle.	
35:9 Also Konaniah along with Shemaiah and Nethanel, his brothers, and Hashabiah, Jeiel and Jozabad, the chieftain of the Levites, provided five thousand Passover offerings and five hundred head of cattle for the Levites.	
35:10 The service was arranged and the priests stood in their places with the Levites in their divisions as the king had ordered.	
35:11 The Passover lambs were slaughtered, and the priests splashed against the altar the blood handed to them, while the Levites skinned the animals.	
35:12 They set aside the burnt offerings to give them to the subdivisions of the families of the people to offer to the Lord, as it is written in the Book of Moses. They did the same with the cattle.	
35:13 They roasted the Passover animals over the fire as prescribed, and boiled the holy offerings in pots, caldrons and pans and served them quickly to all the people.	
35:14 After this, they made preparations for themselves and for the priests, because the priests, the descendants of Aaron, were sacrificing the burnt offerings and the fat portions until nightfall. So the Levites made preparations for themselves and for the Aaronic priests.	
35:15 The musicians, the descendants of Asaph, were in the	

places prescribed by David, Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun the king's seer. The gatekeepers at each gate did not need to leave their posts, because their fellow Levites made the preparations for them.	
35:16 So at that time the entire service of the Lord was carried out for the celebration of the Passover and the offering of burnt offerings on the altar of the Lord, as King Josiah had ordered.	
35:17 The Israelites who were present celebrated the Passover at that time and observed the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days.	
35:18 The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel; and none of the kings of Israel had ever celebrated such a Passover as did Josiah, with the priests, the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were there with the people of Jerusalem.	23: 22 Not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed.
35:19 This Passover was celebrated in the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign.	23: 23 But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to Lord in Jerusalem.
35:20 After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Necho king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah marched out to meet him in battle.	22:3 In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent the secretary, Shaphan son of Azaliah, the son of Mushullam, to the temple of the Lord.
35:21 But Necho sent messengers to him, saying, "What quarrel is there, king of Judah, between you and me? It is not you I am attacking at this time, but the house with which I am at war. God has told me to hurry; so stop opposing God, who is with me, or he will destroy you."	23: 29 While Josiah was king, Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the Euphrates River to help the king of Assyria. King Josiah marched out to meet him in the battle, but Neco faced him and killed him at Megiddo.
35:22 Josiah, however, would not turn away from him, but disguised himself to engage him in battle. He would not listen to what Necho had said at God's command but went to fight him on the plain of Megiddo.	
35:23 Archers shot King Josiah, and he told his officers, "Take me away; I am badly wounded."	
35:24 So they took him out of his chariot, put him in his other chariot and brought him to Jerusalem, where he died. He was buried in the tombs of his ancestors, and all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for him.	23:30 Josiah's servants brought his body in a chariot from Megiddo to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb. And the people of the land took Jehoahaz son of Josiah and anointed him and made him king in place of his father.
35:25 Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah, and to this day all the male and female singers commemorate Josiah in the laments. These became a tradition in Israel and are written in the Laments.	
35:26 The other events of Josiah's reign and his acts of devotion in accordance with what is written in the Law of the Lord.	22:2 He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and was walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left.
35:27 All the events, from beginning to end, are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah.	