

HE NAMED THE GATEKEEPERS

NORM REED · 1 CHRONICLES 15-17

I

I read 1 Chronicles 15 this morning with 2 Samuel 6 open beside it. I'd meant to read one and found myself checking the other, the way you do when a friend tells you a story you're fairly sure you've heard before.

It is the same story. David brings the ark up to Jerusalem. In Samuel it takes twelve verses. There is dancing, and a wife at a window, and it is over almost before you have settled into it.

In Chronicles it takes eighty-six. And somewhere around the second list I noticed I had stopped reading and started skimming — my eye moving down the page at the speed of scenery. Uriel. Asaiah. Joel. Shemaiah. Eliel. Amminadab. Names I was not so much reading as getting past.

II

Chronicles is the last book in the Hebrew Bible. Not the last written, but the last one placed — the closing word of the whole collection, which is an odd position for a book most of us treat as a set of leftovers.

It was written for people who had come home. The exile was over, Jerusalem was resettled, and there was a temple standing again — smaller than the one their grandparents had described, built by people who had grown up somewhere else. The generation reading this book had inherited a story with a gap in the middle.

So the Chronicler went back over the same ground Samuel and Kings had covered and told it again. Not a sequel. A retelling, for a different generation.

We don't know his name. Tradition offered Ezra; the book itself says nothing. He is called the Chronicler because that is all we can call him — a man known only by what he chose to keep.

III

In Samuel, the ark comes up like this. David goes down to the house of Obed-Edom, and they bring it up with gladness. There are sacrifices every six paces. David dances before the Lord with all his might, wearing a linen ephod, and the house of Israel brings the ark up with shouting and the sound of the trumpet. Michal looks out of a window and despises him in her heart.

Four people. David, Obed-Edom, Michal, Saul — and Saul only as Michal's father, a man already dead being used to explain a look.

In Chronicles the same journey takes two chapters, and before the ark moves at all David calls people together and starts naming them. Uriel, Asaiah, Joel, Shemaiah, Eliel, Amminadab — the chiefs of the Levites, each with the number of his brethren. Zadok and Abiathar the priests. Then the singers: Heman, Asaph, Ethan, with Zechariah, Ben, Jaaziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Unni, Eliab, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattithiah, Eliphelehu, Mikneiah — and Obed-Edom and Jeiel, the doorkeepers. Chenaniah, chief of the Levites, was over the song, because he was skilled. Berechiah and Elkanah were doorkeepers for the ark. Shebaniah, Joshaphat, Nethaneel, Amasai, Zechariah, Benaiah and Eliezer the priests blew the trumpets.

More than forty men, most of whom do nothing the story requires. The ark would have arrived without them.

David still dances. Michal still despises him — one verse, and the window closes. But it is no longer a scene about a king and his wife. It is a scene about a procession, and the procession has a staff list.

I V

The obvious explanation is that the Chronicler was simply a wordier man. Some writers cannot leave a thing alone.

Then you come to the next chapter.

David sits in his house and tells Nathan he is living in cedar while the ark of God stays behind curtains. That night the word comes to Nathan, and God answers — I took you from the sheepfold, I have been with you wherever you went, I will build you a house. Your son will build mine. David goes in and sits before the Lord and says, who am I, and what is my house.

In 2 Samuel 7 that runs twenty-nine verses. In 1 Chronicles 17 it runs twenty-seven. The wording is close enough that you can read them in parallel and lose your place. And the named cast is the same in both — David, Nathan, Solomon by implication, Israel.

Four names, and Chronicles adds none.

So he was not a wordier man. He had eighty-six verses in him for a procession and he spent twenty-seven on the covenant, the same as Samuel, and left it almost exactly as he found it. Whatever made him expand the chapter before, it was not a habit. It was a decision, and he made it once and not the other.

Once you start looking for it, the pattern holds across the books.

NARRATIVE LENGTH AND NAMED PERSONS, SAMUEL BESIDE CHRONICLES

EPISODE	SAMUEL	CHRONICLES	VERSES	NAMED PERSONS
The ark, first attempt	2 Sam 6:1–11	1 Chr 13	11 → 14	six → six
The ark, brought up	2 Sam 6:12–23	1 Chr 15–16	12 → 86	four → more than forty
The covenant	2 Sam 7	1 Chr 17	29 → 27	four → four
The mighty men	2 Sam 23:8–39	1 Chr 11:10–47	32 → 38	thirty-seven → fifty-three
The census	2 Sam 24	1 Chr 21	25 → 30	four → five
Bathsheba, Amnon, Absalom, Sheba	2 Sam 11–20	—	330 → 0	many → none

The last row is not a printing error. Ten chapters of Samuel — the affair, the murder arranged by letter, the dead child, the rape of Tamar, Absalom in the oak, the long ruinous years of a family coming apart — are not in Chronicles at all. He knew them. His readers knew them. He left them out.

V I

Three things are happening.

Where the material is one man's private ruin, Chronicles contracts. Not just David's — the whole domestic wreckage goes. What is left is a king doing public work: moving the ark, organising the singers, preparing for a temple he would not live to see.

Where the material is God speaking, Chronicles preserves. The covenant chapter is handed on nearly untouched. There was nothing to add, and he added nothing. It is worth noticing how rare that restraint is in a man who elsewhere cannot stop listing.

And where the material is work done by hands, Chronicles expands — and fills the expansion with names. Every place the book swells, it swells with people doing something. Carrying. Singing. Blowing trumpets. Standing at a door.

Contract the private. Preserve the divine. Expand the corporate, and name it.

That is not a man padding a story. That is a man deciding what the story is about.

V I I

My son-in-law is a lawyer. He reads the local paper and he reads the Economist, and my granddaughter tells me he gets upset if the Economist goes missing.

The two papers are not doing the same job. The local paper is full of people — who won the pumpkin section, whose funeral is on Thursday, the full team list including the reserve. The Economist is careful and long and dense, and it names almost nobody. Voters in the south. The finance ministry. Its precision is bought by turning people into groups.

I had assumed Chronicles was the local paper. All those names. But that is not right either, because Chronicles has the density of the other one — twenty-four courses of priests, weights of gold by the talent, who stood at which gate on which day. It reads like a briefing document. Nobody picks it up for pleasure.

So Chronicles does both. It is as careful and as detailed as the serious paper, but it spends that care on people instead of numbers. Most writers, telling you that two hundred and eighty-eight men were trained singers, would stop there. The Chronicler tells you that, and then tells you their names.

He counted them, and then he refused to leave it at a count.

My son-in-law would have got on well with him.

V I I I

At the end of 2 Samuel there is a list of David's mighty men. The three who broke through the Philistine lines to fetch him water from the well at Bethlehem, and he would not drink it. Abishai. Benaiah, who killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day. Then the rest, name after name, down to Uriah the Hittite,¹ whose name meant nothing yet — and Samuel closes the list the way you close a ledger. *Thirty and seven in all.*

That is a finished number. It has been counted and totalled and set down, and there is nothing more to say about it.

Chronicles gives the same list. The water from the well, the lion in the pit, the names in the same order. And then, where Samuel stopped, it keeps going. Zabad. Adina. Hanan. Joshaphat. Uzzia. Shama. Jeiel. Jediael. Joha. Eliel. Jeribai. Joshaviah. Ithmah. Eliel. Obed. Jaasiel.

Sixteen more men, added past the total.

Somebody had kept those names. For centuries, through the fall of the city and the years in Babylon and the walk back, somebody held sixteen names that the official count had already left out — and when the chance came to write the list again, they went in.

I X

I have never read the first nine chapters of Chronicles.

That is not quite true. My eyes have been over them. But there are nine chapters of genealogy at the front of this book — names and fathers and sons and the sons of sons, page after page — and I have always treated them as the packaging the book came in. Something to get past on the way to the story. If I am reading aloud I mumble them. If I am reading alone I barely slow down.

I have thought them irrelevant. They are not.

He counted them, and then he refused to leave it at a count.

The people who first read this book had come home from Babylon. Some of them were born there. They had grown up on stories of a city they had never seen and a temple that no longer stood, told by grandparents who had watched it burn. Then the empire changed hands, and they walked back to a place they had only ever been told about.

What do you need, coming home to a country you have never lived in? You need to know you belong to it. Not as a feeling — as a fact, written down, that you can point at.

That is what the nine chapters are. A man reading them in Jerusalem was not reading history. He was looking for his own family, and finding it. Three names down, his grandfather. Further up, a line running back through the exile and the kings and the tribes to the beginning. The deportation had not erased him. Here was the proof, in a list.

Which means the lists were never a failure of storytelling. They are the argument. A people who could be counted and named were a people who had survived.

X

There is one man you can follow through both books.

In Samuel, when the ark first moves, a man reaches out to steady it and is struck down. David is angry, and then afraid, and he will not take the ark any further. So he leaves it at the house of a man called Obed-Edom the Gittite, and there it stays for three months, and the Lord blesses Obed-Edom and all his house. That is all we are told. A man with a house, in the wrong place at the right moment, who did nothing but have room.

Word gets back to David that the house is prospering, and he comes and takes the ark on to Jerusalem. Obed-Edom does not appear again.

In Chronicles he is everywhere. He is at the ark's second attempt, carrying it. He is among the singers with harps. He is a doorkeeper for the ark. When the procession ends and everyone goes home, David leaves Obed-Edom and his brothers there to minister before the ark continually, as every day's work

required. Later there is a list of gatekeepers, and there he is again, with eight sons named after him and sixty-two of his household, because God had blessed him.

Same man. In one book, a house that got blessed. In the other, a man with a job, and a family, and a door that was his to stand at.

Nothing was added to him. The Chronicler did not invent a life for Obed-Edom. He had one — sons, brothers, a post, a rota. Samuel simply had no reason to mention it, and Chronicles did.

X I

For thirty years I have worked in the Tasmanian correctional and justice system, and for a good part of that I have sat with men in prison.

A prison counts people. It counts them in the morning and it counts them at night, and the day does not move until the number is right. A man is a number on a door and a line on a muster. Nothing in the system is designed to be cruel about it. It simply has no use for anything more.

On the thirteenth of February my heart stopped, and three people knelt down and worked on my chest until it started again.

Since then I have been noticing the men I sit with differently. Not more kindly — I hope I was kind before. What I notice now is how much of a life is going on behind a man who has been reduced to a number: a mother still alive, a daughter who writes, a brother who has not written in years. It was all there before I noticed it. Society has decided the man does not count, and it has been wrong the whole time, and its being wrong changed nothing about the facts.

That is what the Chronicler knew. The names in his lists were not conferred by him. They were held — by families, by households, by people who had carried them through Babylon and back. He did not give anyone a name. He wrote down the ones that were already being kept. Every man I sit with is in somebody's list, and all of them are in God's.

Perhaps somebody has to be the one to say so out loud.

SELAH

I do not travel by train often — Sydney, or on the way to somewhere overseas. They used to have ticket collectors who managed the exit gates at the station. His job was to collect the tickets of people leaving the train.

I remember asking Mum if I could hand him ours. And then, in the throng of people leaving the station, reaching up and handing him our tickets.

He was an important man in a uniform.

But I never got to learn his name.

NOTES

1. **Uriah the Hittite.** One of David's best soldiers. Later, David slept with Uriah's wife while Uriah was away fighting, and when she fell pregnant David arranged for him to be killed — sent to the front line and left there. That story takes up several chapters of 2 Samuel. Chronicles leaves all of it out. But it keeps Uriah's name here, on the list of the men who served the king faithfully.
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These reflections did not begin with artificial intelligence. They began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this manuscript, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.