

The Reunited Kingdom, part 6 (2 Chronicles 29:1–36:23)

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The Reign of Hezekiah, part 6: Hezekiah's Enduring Provisions for Temple Service (2 Chronicles 31:2-21)

Hezekiah's Enduring Provisions for Temple Services (31:2-21)

Having described how Hezekiah reestablished the temple for all Israel (29:1-36) and then reunified the nation in Passover celebration at the temple (30:1-31:1), the Chronicler turned next to Hezekiah's enduring provisions for the temple (31:2-21). In this passage he completed his portrait of Hezekiah as the son of David who brought the people of God together around the temple in Jerusalem.

Comparison of 31:2-21 with Kings

With the exception of the possibility that 31:20-21 paraphrases 2 Kgs 18:5-7, nothing of this portion of Hezekiah's reign appears in Kings. The account appears only in Chronicles and emphasizes the importance of temple service and personnel.

Structure of 31:2-21

This portion of the Chronicler's record divides into two parallel episodes. Each episode falls into the pattern of four symmetrical steps (see figure 53). As the outline indicates, this material has two main concerns. First, Hezekiah established the priests and Levites in their proper roles and provided for their needs (31:2-8). Second, the king established a distribution system of provisions made for the priests and Levites (31:9-21). These episodes parallel each other in several ways. Hezekiah initiated each action (31:2-3,9-10) and he ordered others to work toward the goal (31:4,11a). Hezekiah's commands were thoroughly obeyed (31:5-7,11b-19) and the king was blessed by God (31:8,20-21).

Hezekiah Permanently Establishes Temple Personnel (31:2-8)

The first episode of this material focuses on the king's efforts to establish the **priests and Levites** in a permanent fashion (31:2). The Chronicler had already noted that Hezekiah's temple restoration involved both priests and Levites (see 29:4,12-17,21-24,25-26,30,34; 30:3,15-17,21-22,23-25,27), but these previous efforts were only temporary arrangements. Here the Chronicler showed how Hezekiah set the temple personnel in their proper order for the ongoing work of the temple.

Structure of 31:2-8

The record of these events presents a four-step symmetry (see figure 53). The king makes preliminary arrangements for the priest and Levites (31:2-3). In the end, he rejoices that provisions have been made so well (31:8). The middle of this episode divides into the king's order for contributions (31:4) and the fulfillment of that order (31:5-7).

Hezekiah Arranges for Priests and Levites (31:2-3)

The first step in this episode gives notice that the king **assigned the priests and Levites to divisions** (31:2). The duties of various divisions of temple personnel were diverse. In this passage, the Chronicler focused on how Hezekiah established these divisions so that **burnt offerings** and **fellowship offerings** could be offered (31:2).

Moreover, the Levites were to **minister** to or "serve" the Lord (see 1 Chr 15:2). The term **minister** applied to the many tasks performed in and around the temple because they were performed for the pleasure and honor of God. Yet, the Chronicler quickly specified that much of this ministering to God also involved the music of worship (31:2). Hezekiah insisted that these temple personnel were to **give thanks** and **sing praises** (31:2) just as David had in his day (see 1 Chr 16:9,23,33). Various positions are noted for singers throughout the book of Chronicles (see 1 Chr 15:16,27; 2 Chr 5:13; 23:13; 29:28; 35:25;). Regular daily singing was performed **at the gates** (31:2).

Beyond this, Hezekiah gave **from his own possessions** for the sacrifices of the temple (31:3). A number of passages suggest that it was considered the king's responsibility to provide for these regularly occurring offerings. The examples of David and Solomon established this precedent (see 1 Chr 16:37-40; 29:1-5; 2 Chr 2:4; 8:12-13; 9:10-11). Moreover, Ezekiel the prophet gave such instructions for the post-exilic temple (see Ezk 45:17,22; 46:2). These royal provisions made it possible for the priests and Levites to fulfill their responsibilities every **morning and evening** (see Num 28:1-8), every **Sabbath** (see Num 28:9-10), at monthly **New Moons** (see Num 28:11-15), as well as during the annual feasts (see Num 28:26-31).

Chronicles ties Hezekiah to David and Solomon once again to establish that Hezekiah's efforts were in the spirit of these great kings of Israel. After the tragic fall of the northern kingdom and the apostasy of the South (see 28:5-9,22-25), Hezekiah brought the temple back toward its ideal order.

Up to this point, Hezekiah had merely reopened the temple (see 29:3) and held Passover (see 30:1-31:1). The king also demonstrated a commitment to the permanent arrangement of temple services. This focus spoke directly to the needs of his post-exilic readers. Their concern with the temple was not to be temporary; they also had to be committed to the permanent functioning of the temple.

Hezekiah Orders Contributions (31:4)

Having arranged and provided for the temple services to be performed by priests and Levites, Hezekiah sought popular support for the temple personnel. **He ordered** the citizens of Jerusalem **to give the portion due** (31:4). The Chronicler frequently touched on the importance of temple contributions (see *Introduction: 9) Temple Contributions*). He focused on a particular reason for these gifts. The priests and Levites received their livelihood from contributions made through tithes, first fruits, and by sharing in some sacrifices (see Lev 6:14-7:36; Num 18:8-32; Dt 14:27-29; 18:1-8; 26:1-15). In all likelihood, these offerings were neglected during Ahaz's apostasy (see 28:24-25).

In much the same way, support for the temple had suffered during the exile. Moreover, even the post-exilic community neglected these offerings (see Neh 13:10-13; Mal 3:8-12). Through Hezekiah's example, the Chronicler insisted that the system of support for priests and Levites be maintained in his day.

The text gives special attention to the purpose of these offerings. They were necessary so that temple personnel **could devote themselves to the Law of the Lord** (31:4). Hezekiah was deeply concerned that after the apostasy of Ahaz's reign the temple personnel should learn the ways of the Law once again. The priests and Levites could support themselves by working the lands devoted to them among the tribes. (For the Chronicler's concern with Levitical lands see comments on 1 Chr 6:64.) Yet, to do so would distract them from the more important task of studying and applying the Law. For this reason, Hezekiah hoped that the people of Jerusalem would relieve the temple personnel from all responsibilities except temple service and the Law.

Hezekiah's command to the citizens of Jerusalem touched on a subject that would certainly have been problematic for the post-exilic community. They lived after a period in which the temple personnel needed to learn the Law of Moses once again (see Ezra 7:6). Hezekiah's actions addressed these concerns. Although supporting the temple personnel was a heavy responsibility, it was necessary so that they could learn the ways of the Law (see *Introduction: 14) Standards*).

Hezekiah's Orders Enthusiastically Obeyed (31:5-7)

The Chronicler followed Hezekiah's orders with an extraordinary account of the response of the people. He described the event as a sudden dramatic response: **as soon as the order went out** (31:5). The term **went out** is usually translated "broke out", or "broke through." The Chronicler chose this unusual way of depicting the event to indicate how these events were unexpected. Hezekiah had only

ordered **the people living in Jerusalem** (31:4). Now, however, **Israelites** representing the entire nation responded (31:5). Moreover, their response was immediate and they gave **generously** (31:5).

To further heighten the drama of the event, the Chronicler listed the offerings brought to the temple. Those who lived in the outlying agricultural regions brought **the firstfruits** of different items (31:5). These offerings were an acknowledgment that the land and all it produced were expressions of God's love and provision. The firstfruits of **grain, new wine, and oil** were given to the priests (31:5; see Num 18:12-13). The tithe was normally given to the Levites (see Nu 18:21). Here, however, the Chronicler noted that their contributions amounted to **a tithe of everything** (31:5). In other words, much more than was required of the Law was given to the temple. Those people of **Israel and Judah who lived in the towns of Judah** contributed **a tithe** of their livestock (31:6) as well as **a tithe of the holy things to be dedicated** (see Lev 27:1-34). Once again, the Chronicler focused on the extraordinary amount given. In fact, the people of Israel were so enthusiastic that they had to put their offerings **in heaps** (31:6) as the process continued for five months (31:7).

The Chronicler emphasized the tremendous enthusiasm of the people for at least three reasons. First, he drew another connection between Hezekiah and David. The people contributed generously in David's day as well (see 1 Chr 29:6-9). Second, he encouraged all of the population of post-exilic Israel to give generously to the temple. Just as all the people contributed in Hezekiah's reign, they should do so again after the exile. Third, the Chronicler's portrait encouraged his Jerusalem readers. In Hezekiah's day, the example of the citizens of Jerusalem encouraged others to give. The response of post-exilic Jerusalem could serve as encouragement to the entire nation once again (see *Introduction: 9) Temple Contributions*).

Hezekiah Rejoices in Provisions (31:8)

Hezekiah's establishment of the priests and Levites closes with a brief scene of the king **and his officials** (see 2 Chr 29:20,30; 30:2,12) noticing **the heaps** of contributions (31:8). As a result, Hezekiah and his officials were filled with joy. They **praised the Lord** and **blessed his people Israel** (31:8). This scene parallels the prosperity coming to Hezekiah at the end of this chapter (see 31:20-21; see figure 53). The nation's devotion to the temple brought delight to the king. In this manner, the Chronicler alluded again to David and Solomon's similar situations (see 1 Chr 16:2; 2 Chr 6:3). They too praised God and blessed the people in response to temple activities. The post-exilic readers of Chronicles could hope for the same joy and celebration only as they imitated Hezekiah's actions (see *Introduction: 27) Disappointment and Celebration*).

Hezekiah Establishes Permanent Distribution (31:9-21)

With widespread enthusiastic support for the temple personnel, Hezekiah turned to establishing a stable system of distribution for the priests and Levites. The continuation of the temple as the center of his Reunited Kingdom depended on his ability to provide ongoing support.

Structure of 31:9-21

The Chronicler reported this event in four major steps which reflect the pattern of the preceding episode (see figure 53). The king takes notes the need for storehouses (31:9-10) and is blessed for his efforts in the end (31:20-21). In the middle portion of the episode, he orders that storehouses be prepared (31:11a) and his orders are obeyed (31:11b-19).

Hezekiah Evaluates Provisions (31:9-10)

This episode begins where the previous section ended. Hezekiah noticed the heaps of offerings brought to the temple, and inquired **about the heaps** (31:9). The focus of his inquiry becomes clear from the answer he received. Apparently, the king asked if the heaps of contributions were adequate. **Azariah the chief priest**, who had responsibility for all the priests and Levites, told the king that the contributions of the people provided them **enough to eat and plenty to spare** (31:10). In fact, **a great amount** was **left over** (31:10).

The surplus of contributions brought by the people of Israel was certainly exemplary for the Chronicler's readers. They were not to be satisfied with merely meeting the minimal needs of the temple personnel. In imitation of Hezekiah's day, they too were expected to supply the temple in abundance.

Hezekiah Orders Storehouse Preparation (31:11a)

The surplus of offerings created a need which Hezekiah immediately met. As he had previously ordered the collection of offerings (see 31:4), he now ordered the priests and Levites **to prepare storerooms in the temple** (31:11a). The expression "**to prepare**" does not specify whether new buildings were erected or existing structures were simply renovated. In all events, these storerooms were part of the outer structure of the temple and were used to store foods, equipment, weapons and to house temple personnel (see 2 Kgs 20:13; 1 Chr 9:26; 23:28; 26:22; 28:12; 2 Chr 31:11,14).

Hezekiah's Orders Enthusiastically Obeyed (31:11b-19)

The text first simply notes that Hezekiah's order was obeyed (31:11b). The scene is one of unhindered speedy accomplishment. No one raised objections or made the project difficult. No doubt the Chronicler presented these actions to guide his readers.

Next, he described how the storerooms of the temple were used. The record focuses first on collection of goods (31:12-13), and then on their distribution (31:14-19).

Offerings were brought to Hezekiah's storerooms (31:12-13). The Chronicler described the collection of **contributions, tithes and dedicated gifts** (31:12). These categories of offerings have appeared earlier in this chapter (see 31:5,6).

Special notice is given to **Conaniah and his brother Shemei** who were in charge of the collections (31:12b-13). **Hezekiah and Azariah**, the high priest (see 31:10), placed this responsibility in their hands and ten men were under their command. The Chronicler mentioned these names to instruct the post-exilic readers that Levites, especially Conaniah's descendants, were to be responsible for these kinds of duties in the post-exilic temple.

With offerings filling the temple storerooms, attention turned to the distribution of the goods (31:14-19). **Kore ... the Levite** was in control of **distributing** the goods as was necessary (31:14). Once again, the Chronicler pointed out that Levites instead of priests had this responsibility. Many of the goods which Kore distributed were from **freewill offerings** which the people gave above the required tithe (see Ex 35:29; 36:3; Lev 7:16; Num 29:39; Ezr 1:4,6; Ps 54:6). They also came from **contributions made to the Lord** as well as **the consecrated gifts** (31:12,14). Although the focus of this passage is on distributions to the priests, Kore was also in charge of goods for the Levites (see 31:17).

Six men assisted Kore in the distribution effort (31:15). They took care of the needs of those who lived **in the towns of the priests**, cities outside Jerusalem allotted to the priesthood (see Jos 21:9-19). Chronicles makes reference to the geographical holdings of the priests and Levites on several occasions (see *Introduction: 1) All Israel*). The Chronicler was concerned that these cities return to their rightful owners in the post-exilic period. Hezekiah's example also made it clear that the post-exilic temple was to supply the inhabitants of these cities.

Kore was also responsible for distributing to those **who would enter the temple ... to perform the daily duties** (31:16). In other words, those priests and Levites living in Jerusalem and serving directly in the temple were not ignored. These distributions included **the males three years old or more** (31:16). The families of priests and Levites **twenty years old or more** also received distributions (31:17). Moreover, the **little ones, ... wives, ... sons and daughters of the whole community** were all counted (31:18).

The distribution of goods to those who **lived on the farm lands around their towns or in any of their towns** (31:19) was slightly different. Other **men were designated** to deal with these matters (31:19). The standard for those outside Jerusalem was different because they could provide more of their own sustenance than the priests and Levites in Jerusalem. Outside of Jerusalem, provision was made for **every male ... recorded in the genealogies** (31:19).

Four times in these passages, the Chronicler mentioned that **genealogical records** were instrumental in guiding these distributions (31:16,17,18,19). There can be little doubt that the Chronicler gave this detail to provide practical guidance for his own day. This aspect of his record explains some of his motivation for concentrating on priestly and Levitical genealogies in the opening chapters of his work (1 Chr 6:1-30).

Hezekiah Blessed for His Provisions (31:20-21)

The account of Hezekiah's enduring provisions closes with a very positive assessment of his efforts. In some respects, these verses may be seen as a paraphrase of 2 Kgs 18:5-7, but the resemblance is not extensive. The Chronicler believed that Hezekiah had done **what was good and right and faithful** (31:20). Hezekiah's fidelity was perhaps the most important feature of the Chronicler's initial assessment. The theme of fidelity appears again in 32:1. To be **faithful** was to be one who did not forsake or prove disloyal to God or his Law (see *Introduction: 21 Unfaithfulness*). As the Chronicler noted, Hezekiah had reestablished the temple and its services **in obedience to the law and the commands** (31:21). As on several other occasions, the Chronicler pointed out that Hezekiah was careful to do things in accordance with the Law (see 30:16; 31:3; see also *Introduction: 14 Standards*).

Beyond this, the Chronicler employed two more of his favorite expressions to describe the king in 31:21. He **sought** the Lord (see *Introduction: 19 Seeking*) and worked **wholeheartedly** (see *Introduction: 16 Motivations*). This piling up of positive descriptions indicated the Chronicler's enthusiasm for Hezekiah. He added these chapters on Hezekiah's reestablishment of the temple because they exemplified the kind of obedience he highly admired.

In line with his outlook on divine judgment and blessing, the Chronicler closed this material with the notice that Hezekiah **prospered** because of his wholehearted obedience (31:21). Prosperity often appears in Chronicles as a demonstration of divine blessing (see *Introduction: 26 Prosperity and Poverty*). Hezekiah's devotion to the temple and its personnel brought divine favor to his kingdom. The post-exilic readers longed for prosperity in their day. Hezekiah's example demonstrated the only way to see this longing fulfilled.