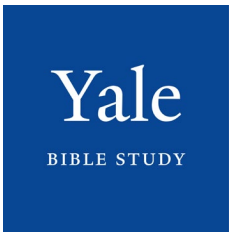

The Books of Samuel

David and the Kingship

The rise of David reaches its climax in 2 Samuel 5, when he is proclaimed king over all Israel at Hebron. He quickly moves to capture the city of Jerusalem, which was still in the hands of the Jebusites. Jerusalem was built on a hill. The Jebusites boasted that even the blind and the lame could defend it. David sent men up the water shaft to penetrate the defenses. Jerusalem was an ideal capital for David, since it was easy to defend, and it was not previously associated with any Israelite tribe. It now became known as the City of David.

David proceeds to link Jerusalem with Israelite tradition by bringing up the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was the traditional symbol of the presence of Yahweh. Its presence in Jerusalem made the old Jebusite city the focus of Israelite worship. David dances ecstatically before the ark, in an ostentatious display of his piety. His wife Michal, daughter of Saul, rebukes him for exposing himself in the presence of his servants, and David promptly rejects her. He had married Michal to form an alliance with the house of Saul, but Saul and his family had lost their political relevance. David did not lack for marital company. He had taken more concubines and wives after his acclamation as king at Hebron.

The Promise to David

2 Samuel 7 is a key passage, not only in the Deuteronomistic History but in the whole Hebrew Bible. In this chapter, David receives a promise from the Lord that will serve as the foundation charter of his dynasty and will ultimately become the basis of messianic hope in both Judaism and Christianity.

David was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from his enemies. The Lord, however, had no temple, but only a tent-shrine. Accordingly, David worried that his own house of cedar was grander than the shrine of the Lord. Kings in the ancient Near East often boasted of founding temples. It is an anomaly that David failed to do so. This story provides an explanation, and implicitly an apology for David. David, we are told, wanted to build a temple, but the Lord, through the prophet Nathan, let him know that he did not want one: “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought the people of Israel up from Egypt.” Instead, the Lord offers to build David a house, in the sense of a dynasty. His son will reign after him. While his descendants will be punished for their iniquities, the kingdom will not be taken away from

them as it was from Saul: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; you throne shall be established forever” (7:16).

The play on the double sense of “house” is central to this oracle. David may not build a house, or temple, for Yahweh, but God will build a house, or dynasty, for David. It was not unusual in the ancient Near East for the founder of a dynasty to build a temple for his patron god. The anomaly here is that God rejects the offer. One might suppose that the passage is written to explain why it is Solomon, rather than David, who builds the temple. But 7:13a, which says of David’s son that “he shall build a house for my name,” is widely recognized as a secondary insertion. Not only does it interrupt a passage about the future kingdom, but it is marked as an insertion by a technique called “repetitive resumption,” – the phrase that immediately precedes the insertion is essentially repeated after it: “I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” The idea that the temple is a house for Yahweh’s name is a trademark of Deuteronomistic theology. It would seem, then, that a Deuteronomistic editor inserted the reference to Solomon building the temple, and that the basic oracle was older. It should also be noted that the Deuteronomist provides a different explanation for David’s failure to build the temple in 1 Kgs 5:3-4: “David could not build a house for the name of the Lord his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him.” The premise of the oracle in 2 Samuel 7 is that the Lord had given David rest from his enemies.

The oracle is a virtual charter document for the Davidic dynasty, and it was presumably promulgated and transmitted by the royal court. Some scholars have argued for a date in the time of David, before Solomon built the temple, on the grounds that the oracle rejects the proposal to build a temple. Such an early date is not strictly necessary. The oracle does not reject the idea of a temple in perpetuity. There had already been a “house of God” at Shiloh, but it either was or contained a tent shrine. The temple proposed by David, and eventually built by Solomon, was of a different order. In fact, it made practical sense for David to refrain from building a new, elaborate, temple. He had just conquered Jerusalem, a traditional Canaanite (Jebusite) city. He had moved the tent- shrine to his new capital, but had not altered the shrine itself. David needed to maintain continuity with the traditional cult of the tribes. A temple could be built a generation later, when the Israelites had gotten used to the monarchy and its new capital in Jerusalem.

The role of the Deuteronomistic editors in the composition of 2 Samuel 7 is controversial. On the one hand, the promise to David is certainly important for the Deuteronomistic view of Israel’s history. Also, despite the tension with 1 Kings 5, the notion of “rest” is typically Deuteronomistic. Compare Deut 12:10 (“When you cross over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and when he gives you rest from your enemies all around . . .”). So is the statement that God “brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt” (7:6), and the reference to the period of the Judges. Accordingly, some scholars argue that 2 Samuel 7 is simply a Deuteronomistic composition, although it may have been composed in stages, or had secondary insertions. The idea that the kingdom would last forever cannot have originated after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, but it could have been part of a composition in the time of King Josiah, a few decades earlier. On the other hand, it is unlikely

that the Deuteronomists would have invented an unconditional promise that the kingdom would last forever. In Deuteronomistic theology, covenants are conditional. The success of the king depends on his observance of the Law. The idea that God had promised David an everlasting dynasty by the oracle of Nathan was probably an established tradition in Jerusalem long before the time of the Deuteronomists. The formulation of the promise in 2 Samuel 7, however, has been edited by the Deuteronomists, possibly in more than one stage.

The Davidic Covenant

While 2 Samuel 7 is often called the Davidic covenant, the word covenant is not actually used in this chapter. (God's promise to David is called a promise in Ps 89:3). The oracle is more accurately described as a divine promise. The nearest biblical analogy is provided by the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, which also has the form of an unconditional grant. God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars, and that he would give them the land between Nile and the Euphrates. All that was required of Abraham was that he believe, or trust, in the promise. David is not given any specific commandments either. Nathan's oracle provides for punishment if the king misbehaves: "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love away from him as I took it from Saul (7:14-15). Punishment for transgression is in line with Deuteronomic theology, but we find similar provisions in ancient Near Eastern treaties, which sometimes provide that even if a king is executed his son might be allowed to succeed him.

The relationship between God and the king is defined in 2 Samuel 7 as that of father and son: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sam 7:14). There is no suggestion that the king does not have a human father. The relationship is presumably one of adoption. Egyptian royal ideology made a stronger claim that the king was begotten by a god, and was in fact the incarnation of the god Horus. The king of Judah is said to be begotten by God in Psalm 2:7, and is even addressed as "god" (elohim) in Psalm 45. The Deuteronomistic formulation in 2 Samuel 7 acknowledges the tradition of divine sonship, but demythologizes it somewhat by suggesting that the king could be chastised. The idea that sons should be chastised is a favorite theme of the Book of Proverbs.

Messianic Hope

The Davidic dynasty lasted for some 400 years, but it did not last forever. It was ended by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. For a time, there was hope that a king from the line of David would be restored, but that hope gradually faded. This gave rise to a situation of cognitive dissonance, a discrepancy between how things actually were and how they were supposed to be. As a result, the hope arose that God would redress the situation, at some indefinite time. "The days are surely coming," says Jeremiah, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely" (Jer 23:5). A later addition to the Book of Jeremiah reflects the

frustration caused by the fact that this oracle was not fulfilled. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David . . .” (Jer 33:14- 15). And what time is that? God’s good time, which is not known to humanity. The Branch of David who would eventually arise is called the messiah, or anointed one. In Jewish expectation, his primary role would be to restore the kingdom of Judah or Israel.

There is very little messianic expectation in the later books of the Hebrew Bible. It was not at all a factor in the Maccabean revolt. The early apocalyptic writings, in the books of Daniel and Enoch, place their hopes in a heavenly deliverer, such as the archangel Michael. There was a resurgence of messianic belief in the first century BCE. This was partly in reaction to the Hasmoneans, the descendants of the Maccabees, who had set themselves up as kings although they were not descended from David. It was partly in reaction to the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BCE. The hope was for a messiah who would be a warrior king and drive the Romans out of Judea. The renewed messianic expectation is attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls and some other non-canonical Jewish writings, such as the Psalms of Solomon. It is impossible to say how widespread this expectation was. It was probably variable, in the sense that it rose in some situations and subsided in others. The followers of Jesus claimed that the promise to David was fulfilled in him. Jesus did not, however, restore the kingdom of Israel as the messiah was supposed to do, and so his followers came to believe that he would come again to complete his work.

The Davidic king could be called “messiah,” or anointed one, as he is in Psalm 2:2, and could also be regarded as the Son of God. He was not, however, a messianic figure in the eschatological sense, and he was clearly a human being, even if he was exalted above other human beings. These titles took on new significance in early Christianity. The messiah came to be regarded as a unique individual, rather than as someone who would restore the kingship, and Son of God took on an ontological connation, and was also taken to refer uniquely to one figure. Nonetheless, the title “Christ” is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew mashiach, or anointed one, and the idea that Jesus was Son of God was entailed by the belief that he was the messiah.

David himself is not transformed by the promise. He remains a fallible, sinful, human being, but he also remains an engaging and sympathetic figure. It is the merit of 2 Samuel that it depicts David not just as a figurehead for the kingship but as a creature of flesh and blood.