



A House for God and a House for David

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Yahweh's pledge to establish an eternal "house" for David stands tall on the horizon of the Hebrew Bible, reflecting the heart of Israel's theological and political self-understanding. From the time of its composition, the story has been a source of hope for Judaism. In time, it also became foundational for the Christian church. Second Samuel 7 consists of a narrative surrounding Nathan's dynastic oracle (vv. 1–17) and David's consequent prayer of gratitude (vv. 18–29). The text probably has a multilayered literary history, culminating in a narrative that reflects both pro- and anti-temple sentiment.

YAHWEH'S PROMISE (2 SAM 7:1–17)

The key motif is the dual use of the word "house" (בַּיִת),¹ which is introduced immediately: "Now when the king was settled *in his house*...." Aware that he lived in

¹Second Samuel 7 utilizes a play on the word "house" (בַּיִת), which, in addition to its basic meaning as a simple dwelling (for example, Judg 11:31), may also refer to a palace (2 Sam 5:11; Jer 39:8), or a temple (1 Sam 5:2 [of Dagon]; 1 Kings 6:5 [of Yahweh]). In a familial sense, the same word may refer to a household (Gen 7:1; 2 Sam 6:20), a tribal group (2 Sam 2:10–11), a nation (2 Sam 6:5), or a royal dynasty (1 Kings 12:26). For more on the house motif in 1–2 Samuel and the relationship between kings, gods, and temples in the ancient Near East, see Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) 448. This article is largely based on the discussion of 2 Sam 7 in that work.

God's pledge to establish an eternal "house" for David represents a new emphasis on grace and becomes foundational for Israel's self-understanding. The shift from a relationship based on human obedience to the divine promise of an unconditional bond resonates through the remainder of the Bible.

a “house of cedar,” David was troubled that the ark of God remained in a tent, literally, “in a curtain.”² David expressed his concern to the prophet Nathan, whose initial response was positive: “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you” (v. 3). Nathan’s pro-temple affirmation is quickly reversed in vv. 4–7. The reader is led to assume that Nathan voiced his own desire prior to consulting Yahweh, who spoke to the prophet that very night, presumably in a dream. “The word of the Lord came to...” (v. 4) is a typical prophetic formula, as is the related phrase “thus says Yahweh” (v. 5). The narrator’s use of the standard prophetic phrases, along with the divine command, “Go, say...” (compare Isa 6:9; 38:5; Jer 1:7; 2:2; 3:12) underscores Nathan’s status as a true prophet to whom Yahweh speaks.

The question in v. 5 may imply that Yahweh does not oppose the idea of a house, only that David should build it: “Are *you* the one to build me a house to live in?” This approach fits uncomfortably with vv. 6–7, which declare that Yahweh has no desire for a house at all, no matter who the sponsor. If David is understood as a representative human, v. 5 can be read as entirely opposed to the idea that any mortal should build a house for Yahweh: “Are *you* (a human being) going to build a house for *me* (God) to dwell in?”

The divine claim in v. 6 that Yahweh (in the form of the ark as a representative symbol) had not dwelt in a house from the exodus period until David’s day stands at odds with the larger tradition. Though v. 6 says that Yahweh had always moved freely in a tabernacle or tent, there was a strong tradition of a temple in Shiloh (Judg 18:31; 1 Sam 1:7, 9, 24; 3:15) where the Elide priests had custody of the ark. That temple was called the “house (בַּיִת) of the Lord” (1 Sam 1:7), where Eli sat by the “doorpost” (1 Sam 1:9) and lay down in his “room” (1 Sam 3:2). Samuel is said to have slept “in the temple (בְּבֵית־יְהוָה), where the ark of God was” (1 Sam 3:3). The same tradition, however, says that Eli’s worthless sons “lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (1 Sam 2:22), but the texts implying a solid structure are more prevalent. Jeremiah claimed that the ruins of the Shiloh temple remained as a mute testimony in his own day (Jer 7:12, 14). Traditions also report that the ark was sheltered in the houses of Abinadab (1 Sam 7:1) and of Obed-Edom (2 Sam 6:11). These temporary resting places may have been considered insignificant.

With v. 7, the issue shifts from God’s movement to God’s desire, insisting that Yahweh had never *asked* for a house from any previous leader of Israel. Yahweh’s assertion that he never asked for a house of cedar connects the oracle to David’s initial concern about living in a cedar house while Yahweh dwelt behind a curtain. The underlying issue in vv. 6–7 is divine freedom. Yahweh will be free, not bound to a permanent house. In the exodus traditions, the ark went at the head of the caravan. “Wherever I have moved about” (v. 7a) emphasizes divine initiative

²The normal term for “tent” is אֹהֶל, but the word used here is יְרֵיעָה, the singular form of the word meaning “curtain.” Presumably, it is used in a collective sense. First Chronicles 17:1 uses the plural form. According to Exod 26:1 and 36:8, the wilderness tabernacle was made from ten curtains made of goatskin.

and leadership. The Shilonites' ill-fated attempt to sway a battle with the Philistines by using the ark as a battle palladium (1 Sam 4) and Uzzah's death during David's first attempt at bringing the ark into Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:1–10) illustrate the danger of attempting to manipulate Yahweh. Although David ultimately succeeded in bringing the ark into his own city, he ran the danger of assuming that Yahweh could be restricted, controlled, or manipulated by means of the ark.

The anti-temple tenor of vv. 6–7 is so strong that many scholars regard it as the work of a prophetic redactor working during the exilic period, when the temple's destruction led some religious leaders to presume that Yahweh had never wanted a temple to begin with. In the canonical text, however, the ambiguity of v. 6, along with the promise of v. 13a (endorsing David's son as the temple builder), moderates the anti-temple sentiment.

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In the second part of the oracle, Nathan moves from David's proposed gift for Yahweh to a review of Yahweh's past blessings upon David and a promise of greater favors yet to come. David is reminded that he can offer Yahweh a house only because of what Yahweh has already done for him. Verses 8–9 reiterate how Yahweh brought David from ruling sheep to ruling people, emphatically combining personal pronouns and first person verbs. “I took you from the pasture (1 Sam 16:1–13) to become prince over my people...I have been with you wherever you went (1 Sam 16:18; 17:37; 18:14, 28; 2 Sam 5:10)...I have cut off your enemies from before you (2 Sam 5:6–9, 17–25)...I will make for you a great name....I will appoint a place for my people Israel...[I] will plant them...I will give you rest from all your enemies” (vv. 8–11a).

David owed his position to Yahweh's presence and his prominence to Yahweh's preferential treatment, even as Israel owed its present security to Yahweh's favor. In David, Yahweh had brought Israel to a time in which “evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel” (vv. 10–11a). The natural movement of the text shifts from past blessings to future promises, but some scholars argue that all the verbal forms should be interpreted as past tense. Indeed, all of the promises had been fulfilled to some extent. David's reputation was already extensive (1 Sam 18:7; 21:11; 29:5), Israel's borders were secure (2 Sam 5:17–25), and Yahweh had granted David rest from all of his enemies (7:1). The second appearance of “rest” (v. 11a) acts as an inclusio (see v. 1), bracketing Yahweh's past blessings to David and looking toward a new promise that picks up the theme of David dwelling in his house (also from v. 1), carrying it forward.

The narrator marks the new thing God is doing through an artistic play on words. While David had offered to build a house for God, Nathan proclaimed, “Moreover Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh will make *you* a house” (v. 11b). The dual use of “Yahweh” emphasizes God's unexpected extravagance in building

a house for David. It is not a home of wood and stone that Yahweh promises, but sons who will sit upon the throne (v. 12). Saul's dynasty lasted only one generation, but David's house would extend into perpetuity (v. 13b). The phrase "who shall come forth from your body" does not necessarily exclude the sons whom David had already conceived, but hints that the divinely favored scion is yet to be born.

"He shall build a house for my name" (v. 13a) seems intrusive, as the promise flows most naturally from v. 12 to v. 13b. Some propose that v. 13a was added by a later hand to soften Yahweh's opposition to temple building in vv. 6–7, suggesting only that the time was not right. The Chronicler preserved a tradition that David was not allowed to build the temple because he was too defiled by bloodshed (1 Chr 22:8–9). Solomon, however, was to be known as a man of peace ("Solomon" [שלמה] derives from the word שלום, which can mean "peace"). Questions about who would build a house for God, however, detract from the central focus: that Yahweh intends to build a dynastic house for David. While David was called a man after God's own heart, his descendant will be like God's own child: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (v. 14). The expression distantly reflects the common ancient Near Eastern concept that kings achieve a measure of divinity with their position. In Israel, the king was not deified, but thought to be adopted as a son of God,³ as expressed in coronation hymns such as Psalm 2. "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: he said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession'" (Ps 2:7–8, compare Pss 89:26–27).

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The most surprising aspect of Yahweh's promise is that David's dynasty will rule "forever." Expressions indicating the permanence of David's house occur eight times in ch. 7, three times in Nathan's oracle (vv. 13, 16 [twice]), and five times in David's prayer (vv. 24, 25, 26, 29 [twice]). Saul had initially known Yahweh's favor, but lost it when he disobeyed. With David's descendants, however, Yahweh would punish them for insubordination, but would not abandon them (vv. 14b–15) or withdraw his steadfast love. Israel's later defeat and exile at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians were thus interpreted as Yahweh's well-deserved punishment "with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings" (v. 14), not as divine desertion. Therefore, the Davidic ideology could survive the exile on the presumption that David's descendants were down, but not out, for Yahweh's promised kingdom was perpetual (v. 16). In proclaiming God's eternal promise to David, however, the narrator—knowingly or not—undermines

³A similar tradition is found among Aramaean royalty of Damascus, Israel's neighbor. In the ninth century B.C.E., shortly after Solomon's reign, kings of Damascus routinely bore the name "Son of Hadad" (Hadad was the Syrians' chief god).

the works-based Deuteronomistic theology on which the larger history is based.

As time passed, some of Israel's prophets transformed the promise into an eschatological hope of a new Davidic messiah who would arise to rule with justice and restore the glory of Israel (Isa 9:7; 16:5; 22:22; Jer 23:5; 33:15, 17, 26; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24). Building on the same foundation, the Christian community saw Jesus Christ as the final fulfillment of Yahweh's promise, a descendant of David who offered grace to all and who rules over a spiritual Israel forever (Matt 1:1; Luke 1:32; Acts 13:22–23; 2 Cor 6:16–18; Heb 1:5).

DAVID'S PRAYER OF THANKS (2 SAM 7:18–29)

David's response to Yahweh's unexpected promise is a prayer of deep gratitude—and a not-so-subtle reminder that Yahweh is bound to his promises. The literary history of the prayer is widely debated. It expresses a clearly Deuteronomistic ideology in its final form,⁴ and the repetitive insistence that Yahweh must honor his promises may reflect the exilic hope for a return to the glory days of David.

The prayer is set in the privacy of the tent shrine where the ark was housed. There the king prayed “before the LORD.” Instead of kneeling or prostrating himself, however, the text says David “went in and sat.” The verb *שָׁבַט*, usually means “to dwell”; it is the word Yahweh uses to derisively ask, “Are *you* the one to build me a house *to live in?*” (v. 5). The common translation “sat” (NRSV, NIV, KJV) suggests only that David remained in the shrine as he prayed, but may intentionally play on the earlier idea of Yahweh dwelling in the tent.

The prayer includes several intriguing motifs. The term “Lord GOD” appears seven times in the prayer, but nowhere else in the books of Samuel. The self-deprecating “your servant” (compare to “my servant” in vv. 5, 8) appears ten times, and there are seven references to the “house” that Yahweh has promised to build for David. Significantly, there is no reference to the house (temple) that David had sought to build for Yahweh. And, it is curious that all of David's petitions are for things that Yahweh has already promised. This odd combination of characteristics has led Kyle McCarter to propose that the earliest form of the prayer was associated with the ark narrative in ch. 6, rather than the dynastic oracle of ch. 7.⁵

As it appears, the prayer offers a human response to divine grace. Yahweh has made a promise to David, and through David to Israel. The ordinary trappings of a covenant ceremony are absent, but David's prayer effectively serves as an official acceptance of Yahweh's beneficent offer. The prayer expresses amazement that Yahweh had chosen David to become not only the king of Israel, but the founder of a perpetual dynasty (vv. 18–21). “Who am I?” was a standard expression of humility (compare 1 Sam 18:18; 1 Chr 29:14). “That you have brought me thus far” refers

⁴Walter Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel* [Louisville: John Knox, 1990]) has suggested a helpful and artfully alliterated outline to highlight the structure of David's prayer, showing that David moves from humble deference (vv. 18–21) to glad doxology (vv. 22–24) to persistent demand (vv. 25–29).

⁵Kyle McCarter, *2 Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 240.

back to the review of Yahweh's activity in bringing David to the throne (vv. 8–9). David's personal success dimmed, however, before Yahweh's promise that his house would become an everlasting dynasty (v. 19). "May this be instruction for the people..." could be an editorial reminder directing readers to respect Yahweh's choice of David's house. "And what more can David say to you?" (v. 20) implies that God's generosity has left David speechless, but he does not cease speaking.

The vocabulary of vv. 22–24 has a strongly Deuteronomistic flair. In context, it is David's doxology to a God like no other who has chosen and established a people like no other (compare Deut 3:24; 4:35; Ps 86:8; 89:6; 113:5). Yahweh had promised to make for David a great name (v. 9), but David exults in the name Yahweh has made for himself (Yahweh) through mighty works in Israel's behalf. David, Israel, and Yahweh are glorified together: the developing name and reputation of David and Israel magnifies the name of Yahweh, who is responsible for David/Israel's advancement and who has promised their permanent establishment (v. 24).

David's humble words of acceptance and praise are followed by a series of piously wrought reminders that Yahweh should not forget his promises. The adverbial conjunction "and now" typically introduces a present or future expectation based on the previous actions or conversation. It appears no less than three times in five verses (vv. 25, 28, 29). "And now, as for the word you have spoken...confirm it forever, do as you have promised!" (v. 25). Perhaps no one other than David could get away with using such imperative verbs in a prayer of deference and thanksgiving, but he successfully adopts a posture of both humility and demand. The call for Yahweh to make good on the promise is followed by an appeal to the divine ego. With a secure dynasty in place, Israel would perpetually magnify Yahweh's name in the byword "Yahweh of hosts is God over Israel" (v. 26).

While David's prayer seems almost impudent, the bold words had their genesis in Yahweh's promises (v. 27). The text implies that David would not have dared to ask for such things on his own, but once Yahweh made the offer, David expected him to keep it. Yahweh is the true God who speaks true words (v. 28) that cannot be broken (implied by v. 29). Yahweh has pledged "this good thing," and David (who repeatedly refers to himself as "your servant") expects it to happen.

APPLICATION

Second Samuel 7 portrays one of the great literary reversals of all time. What began as an act of personal piety and royal strategy was transformed into a promise of divine and unconditional grace—a human urge for temple building gave way to the promise of a divinely constructed dynasty. In the process, Nathan's dynastic oracle in 2 Sam 7 becomes the turning point,⁶ not only of the Deuteronomistic his-

⁶Echoes of 2 Samuel 7 reverberate throughout the Old Testament, early Judaism, and Christianity in ways that can hardly be overstated. Thus, Brueggemann declares, "I judge this oracle with its unconditional promise to David to be the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament" (*1–2 Samuel*, 259). For further discussion, see Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 458.

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“Nathan’s dynastic oracle in 2 Sam 7 becomes the turning point, not only of the Deuteronomistic history but of the entire Old Testament: it is the foundation of a theological bridge that leads from law to grace”

God’s relationship with Israel had long been one of master and servant, with God’s blessings fully conditioned on Israel’s obedience. Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel tell the same story in different ways: God blessed Israel when obedient, but withdrew when the people rebelled. The divine/human relationship turned on the word “if.” But with 2 Sam 7, a new element of grace enters the picture. God makes a promise that does not depend on David’s obedience or the obedience of his children. Rather, it is an unconditional promise that Yahweh will bless David’s house and establish his dynasty upon the throne. If David’s descendants prove to be disobedient, Yahweh will allow them to experience “punishment with the rods of men,” but will never withdraw his steadfast covenant love. When Saul’s recalcitrance became too great, God withdrew his empowering spirit. For David, however, God promises an everlasting house, a perpetual relationship. The operative conjunction is no longer “if,” but “nevertheless.”

Israel’s history records that, about 587 B.C.E., Jerusalem was burned to the ground and the last descendant of David holding rights to the throne was carried in chains to Babylon. That did not violate the promise, however. The Davidic leader and his people were chastised with human rods as Nathan had predicted. The chastisers just happened to be Babylonians. But, the biblical testimony is that God never left his people, never forgot them. The destruction of the temple and the loss of the ark did not eliminate the divine presence. Yahweh went with his people into exile. Through the prophetic voices of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah, God offered hope. Through Cyrus the Persian’s defeat of Babylon, God engineered the possibility of a return to Jerusalem. Some Hebrews returned, others did not—yet God remained with all of them.

The New Testament portrays Jesus—a descendant of David—as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise in 2 Sam 7. Jesus was not the military messiah some longed for, but a spiritual messiah through whom God completed the work of amazing grace that began in the Hebrew Bible and runs into the Christian Bible. The life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus introduced a concept of salvation that is not predicated on perfect obedience, but on the grace of God. Therefore, the believer’s hope in God is no longer based on a human “if,” but on a divine “nevertheless.” Humans are not expected to build a house for God, but invited to accept the house God has built for them. Sinful choices may still bring unhappy consequences, but the door to forgiveness remains open.

God's promise to David in 2 Sam 7 contains a surprising emphasis on the permanence of the relationship. So, Christians believe that God in Christ rules forever, and that his promises extend for all time. God has built not only a spiritual house, but an eternal home (John 14:1–3). Like David, today's believers are confronted by the amazing truth that pleasing God does not grow from building a house of good works, but through humbly accepting the house of grace and promise that God has built for his people. ⊕

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