

THE ETERNAL DAVIDIC COVENANT IN II SAMUEL CHAPTER 7 AND ITS LATER MANIFESTATIONS IN THE BIBLE

HAYYIM ANGEL

SAMUEL VS. KINGS

After informing King David that he would not build the Temple, Nathan prophesied God's eternal covenant with the Davidic kingdom:

When your days are done and you lie with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will chastise him with the rod of men and the affliction of mortals; but I will never withdraw My favor from him as I withdrew it from Saul, whom I removed to make room for you. Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever (II Sam. 7:12-16).

If future kings sin, God will punish them but eternally preserve the Davidic throne. Although the Davidic kings impressively reigned for over four centuries, the second-longest dynasty in ancient Near Eastern history,¹ it came to an end in 586 BCE with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the exile of Zedekiah.

In addition to the conflict with historical events, Nathan's prophecy also conflicts with a series of passages in the Book of Kings. On his deathbed, David exhorted Solomon to be faithful to the Torah, and quoted God as saying that faithfulness is a necessary prerequisite for the existence of the Davidic monarchy: *Then the Lord will fulfill the promise that He made concerning me: If your descendants are scrupulous in their conduct, and walk before Me faithfully, with all their heart and soul, your line on the throne of Israel shall never end!*' (I Kgs. 2:4). This prophecy appears to contradict

Rabbi Hayyim Angel teaches advanced Tanakh courses to undergraduates and rabbinical students at Yeshiva University, and lectures widely. He has published over eighty scholarly articles, primarily in Tanakh, and is author or editor of ten books.

Nathan's original prophecy, where later kings would suffer punishment if they sin but the Davidic kingship will endure eternally.

At the Temple dedication ceremony, Solomon refers to the prophecy that David had told him (I Kgs. 8:25). God then responds to Solomon's prayer and corroborates David's formulation: *As for you, if you walk before Me as your father David walked before Me, wholeheartedly and with uprightness, doing all that I have commanded you [and] keeping My laws and My rules, then I will establish your throne of kingship over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying, 'Your line on the throne of Israel shall never end' (I Kgs. 9:4-5).*² Of course, this formulation of the prophecy was fulfilled, since the monarchy ended after Zedekiah.

To summarize, there are two questions confronting Nathan's original formulation of God's covenant with the Davidic kingdom: It conflicts with several passages in Kings, and it conflicts with history.

Before addressing these questions, it must be noted that even within Kings, God's eternal covenant with the Davidic monarchy is repeatedly stressed. When the prophet Ahijah told Jeroboam that he would inaugurate a new kingdom, he emphasized that God would preserve the Davidic dynasty over the Southern Kingdom as a result of the covenant (I Kgs. 11:32). We find similar formulations with Abijam (I Kgs. 15:4) and Joram (II Kgs 8:19). Thus, it appears even in Kings that some aspect of the covenant is permanent.

Addressing the apparent conflict between Nathan's prophecy of eternal reign and the conditional formulations in Kings, Michael Avioz maintains that Nathan's original covenant was conditional as well.³ Nathan also calls for faithfulness to God, and therefore there is less disparity between the prophecies than is commonly held. Although faithfulness to the Torah is central to both prophecies, however, it is specifically regarding the consequences of unfaithfulness where there is a discrepancy. Nathan predicts punishment but an eternal dynasty, whereas David and the related prophecies in Kings proclaim the monarchy to be conditional on righteous behavior. Therefore, Avioz's argument is unconvincing.

Proposing a more persuasive alternative, Antti Laato suggests that the prophecies in Kings teach that Davidic reign over *all* Israel is conditional on the kings' righteous behavior, but Davidic reign over Judah is unconditional.⁴ He also suggests that the release of Jehoiachin from prison at the end of

Kings (II Kgs. 25:27-30) expresses hope for the continuation of the Davidic dynasty following the destruction of the Temple. Laato's interpretation is consistent with Nathan's prophecy, and also with the passages in Kings that reflect God's permanent covenant with David and his dynasty.

Laato's resolution appears to be the most faithful to the prophecies in Samuel and Kings, but we are left with the problem of history: With the exile of Zedekiah, Davidic kingship ended over the Southern Kingdom, as well. Psalm 89 and Jeremiah 33 take up this problem directly, offering strikingly different responses.

PSALM 89 AND JEREMIAH 33: RESPONSES TO THE CESSATION OF THE DAVIDIC MONARCHY

Psalm 89 is one of the most jarring of the psalms. For 38 verses, the psalmist speaks elatedly of God's eternal covenant with the Davidic monarchy. God swore that it would endure forever, like the sun, moon, and heavens. The psalmist repeatedly reflects formulations in Nathan's prophecy regarding God's promise of an eternal monarchy to David, and also regarding the consequences of sin – that God would punish sinful kings but still preserve the monarchy eternally (89:30-34).⁵

The psalm then turns abruptly in verses 39–52, as the psalmist explodes at the abrogation of the covenant when the monarchy ended: *Yet You have rejected, spurned, and become enraged at Your anointed. You have repudiated the covenant with Your servant; You have dragged his dignity in the dust. You have breached all his defenses, shattered his strongholds* (Ps. 89:39–41). It appears that the psalmist is directly accusing God of violating His oath.

Ibn Ezra (on Ps. 89:2) mentions a Spanish sage who considered this psalm blasphemous and therefore censored it: "In Spain, there was a great and pious sage, and this psalm was difficult for him. He would not read it, nor was he able to listen to it since the psalmist speaks sharply against God." Ibn Ezra agrees that those verses are blasphemous, but he is unwilling to entertain the possibility that an inspired biblical psalmist would speak inappropriately. Therefore, he asserts that the psalmist is quoting the words of the enemies of God who blaspheme.

Radak, in turn, censures the anonymous sage and Ibn Ezra: "Many have expressed astonishment over how this psalmist could speak these words

against God . . . I am astonished by their astonishment, for the psalms were written through divine inspiration, and it is unthinkable that something in them is untrue!” (Radak on Ps. 89:39).

Rabbi Isaiah of Trani and Amos Hakham likewise consider these words to be of the psalmist. Hakham quotes talmudic passages stating that the righteous do not flatter God. Rather, they stand honestly before their Creator, pouring out all their emotions.⁶

Thus, Psalm 89 is in sync with Nathan’s prophecy, but it does not take into account the conditional passages in Kings. No doubt many Judeans had similar thoughts at the time of the destruction, and were shocked that God had broken His eternal covenant with the Davidic dynasty. The sense of betrayal in this psalm is palpable.

At the brink of the destruction, the prophet Jeremiah recognized the despair of the people who thought that God’s covenant with the Davidic monarchy was coming to an end. In one of his prophecies of restoration, Jeremiah states:

Thus said the Lord: If you could break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that day and night should not come at their proper time, only then could My covenant with My servant David be broken – so that he would not have a descendant reigning upon his throne – or with My ministrants, the levitical priests. Like the host of heaven which cannot be counted, and the sand of the sea which cannot be measured, so will I multiply the offspring of My servant David, and of the Levites who minister to Me (Jer. 33:20-22).

Jeremiah appears to offer a new interpretation to Nathan’s prophecy. Psalm 89, and many people in Jeremiah’s generation, understood Nathan’s prophecy that the Davidic kingdom would last “forever” to mean “always.” However, Jeremiah prophetically explains that no other dynasty ever will supplant the Davidic kingship, even if there is no king on the throne. Additionally, the Davidic dynasty will be restored. Therefore, God’s covenant with the Davidic dynasty is forever, as per Nathan’s prophecy. The actual continuation of the monarchy, however, is conditional on faithfulness to the covenant, as per the prophecies in Kings. This prophecy thus addresses the conflicting prophecies in Samuel and Kings, and also responds to the concerns of Psalm 89.

In the same prophecy, Jeremiah predicts the future coming of a “branch, *tzemah*” from David (Jer. 33:15). The Second Temple prophet Zechariah adopted this imagery, holding out hopes that Zerubbabel could be that branch (Zech. 3:8; 6:12).⁷ It also is significant that the Book of Chronicles, written in the Second Temple period, continues to stress God’s eternal covenant with the Davidic dynasty despite the lapse that had occurred at the time of the first destruction. Nathan’s prophecy is repeated (I Chron. 17:11-14), and the Davidic kingdom is associated with God’s kingdom (I Chron. 28:5; 29:11; II Chron. 13:8). God’s relationship to the Davidic dynasty is a permanent *covenant of salt* (II Chron. 13:5; cf. II Chron. 21:7).⁸ Jeremiah’s prophetic interpretation emerged victorious. God’s covenant with the Davidic dynasty was eternal, even though there presently was no king on the throne.⁹

JACOB’S PROMISE OF KINGSHIP TO JUDAH

We find the roots of the divergent views of understanding Nathan’s prophecy by Psalm 89 and Jeremiah 33 in the Torah. On his deathbed, Jacob prophetically gave the kingship to the Tribe of Judah: *The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet; so that tribute shall come to him and the homage of peoples be his* (Gen. 49:10).

In a syntactical discussion of the possible meanings of this verse, Richard Steiner explores whether the main break should be after *raglav*, as per the *te’amim*; or whether it should go after *ad*.¹⁰ In the first reading, *ad* means “until,” yielding the meaning, The scepter shall not depart from Judah . . . , until

Alternatively, if the break comes after *ad*, then *ad* would mean *la-ad*, to eternity, forever. This latter reading yields two distinct possibilities: (1) The scepter shall not depart from Judah . . . ever (2) The scepter shall not depart from Judah . . . forever . . . , that is, if the scepter departs from Judah, it shall not do so forever

We may apply Steiner’s analysis to Psalm 89 and Jeremiah 33. Psalm 89 understands Nathan’s prophecy like the first reading with the break after *ad*: The scepter shall not depart from Judah . . . ever Since the scepter *did* depart after Zedekiah, the psalmist viewed the abrogation of the Davidic monarchy as a violation of God’s covenant. In contrast, Jeremiah adopts the second reading with the break after *ad*: The scepter shall not depart from

Judah . . . forever . . . , that is, if the scepter departs from Judah, it shall not do so forever . . . This reading accepts the possibility of a temporary cessation of the Davidic monarchy, while stressing that in the future the monarchy will return because of God's eternal covenant with David.

HUMAN AND DIVINE PERSPECTIVES ON THE LOSS OF THE MONARCHY

Another way of understanding the contrast between the perspectives of Psalm 89 and Jeremiah 33 is that Psalm 89 expresses an immediate, human reaction to the shocking cessation of the monarchy. In contrast, Jeremiah adopts a prophetic perspective that transcends the moment of the destruction to build a long-term vision. In this vein, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch contextualizes the tone of protest against God in Psalm 89 to the time close to the destruction, when all seemed lost:

"But in the early days of the dark centuries of exile, the experience of the collapse of everything that had been created for man's elevation, and the sight of the descent of all national life to ever more abject nothingness, might well have given rise to questions concerning the fulfillment of God's promises and to a search for the resolution of such doubts. The verses that follow express this questioning and seeking" (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Ps. 89:39).¹¹

To cite a parallel example from the time of the destruction: Many exiled Judeans harbored feelings of revenge against their vicious Babylonian captors: *Fair Babylon, you predator, a blessing on him who repays you in kind what you have inflicted on us; a blessing on him who seizes your babies and dashes them against the rocks!* (Ps. 137:8-9).

Contrast that immediate, violent reaction with Jeremiah's prophetic perspective: *And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper* (Jer. 29:7).

Looking beyond the present moment, Jeremiah understood that, despite the hostility Judeans harbored toward Babylonia, the stability of Babylonia would ultimately make conditions better for the Judean exiles to build a future for their nation while in captivity.¹²

CONCLUSION

There appears to be a tension between Nathan's prophecy of eternal reign to the Davidic dynasty, and the conditional formulations in Kings. Within the

context of Samuel and Kings, the various passages appear best explained by positing that God promised eternal monarchy to the Davidic dynasty over at least their own tribe of Judah, but their reign over all Israel was conditional on faithfulness to the Torah.

However, the cessation of the monarchy at the time of the destruction of the First Temple undermined that assumption and led to two responses. Psalm 89 focuses on Nathan's prophecy of eternity and therefore accuses God of breaking His oath. In contrast, Jeremiah prophetically interprets Nathan's prophecy to mean that God's covenant with the Davidic dynasty is eternal, even if there is a cessation in the monarchy. In addition to providing a viable understanding of the prophecies in Samuel and Kings, Jeremiah's prophecy also paved the way for Zechariah and Chronicles, who likewise understood that God's covenant with the Davidic dynasty endures even though there was no Davidic king.

Additionally, the Bible creates a distinction between the human response of Psalm 89, and the prophetic, long-term response of Jeremiah. Both perspectives are necessary to reflect the multifaceted relationship between God and the Davidic dynasty.

NOTES

1. C. Gordon and G. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 223.
2. Psalm 132 also reflects this conditional aspect of the monarchy: *The Lord swore to David a firm oath that He will not renounce, "One of your own issue I will set upon your throne. If your sons keep My covenant and My decrees that I teach them, then their sons also, to the end of time, shall sit upon your throne* (vv. 11-12).
3. M. Avioz, "The Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7: Conditional or Unconditional?" in *The Ancient Near East in the 12th-10th Centuries BCE: Culture and History*, ed. G. Galil et al. (Ugarit-Verlag: Munster, 2012), pp. 43-51.
4. A. Laato, "Psalm 132 and the Development of the Jerusalemite/Israelite Royal Ideology," *CBQ* 54, 1992, pp. 49-66.
5. See, for example, N. Sarna, "Psalm 89: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis," in Sarna, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), pp. 377-394; M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 465-467; J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), pp. 209-216.
6. A. Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 2 (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1979) pp. 156-157. See, for example, J.T. *Berakhot* 7:4 (11c); B.T. *Yoma* 69b. See further discussion in H. Angel, "God Insists on Truth: Rabbinic Evaluations of Two Audacious Biblical Prayers," *JBQ*

38 (2010), pp. 3-9; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 154-162.

7. When that failed to occur, Jewish tradition incorporated this prophetic formulation in expressing messianic hopes for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy into the Amidah, "May the offshoot of Your servant David soon flower, *Et tzemah David avdekha meherah tatzmi'ah*."

8. See further references and discussion in G. N. Knoppers, "David's Relation to Moses," in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. J. Day (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 91-118; G. N. Knoppers, "Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?" *JAOS* 116 (1996), pp. 670-696.

9. For a similar analysis and conclusion, see A. Bazak, *Shemuel Bet: Malkhut David* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, Maggid, 2014), pp. 99-104.

10. R. C. Steiner, "Four Inner-Biblical Interpretations of Genesis 49:10: On the Lexical and Syntactic Ambiguities of π as Reflected in the Prophecies of Nathan, Ahijah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah," *JBL* 132 (2013), pp. 33-60.

11. Translation from *The Hirsch Tehillim*, trans. G. Hirschler, revised edition (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 2014), pp. 754-755.

12. It is noteworthy that when Jeremiah speaks personally against his enemies, rather than through prophetic revelation, he exhibits similar human feelings for revenge and justice as Psalm 137. See, for example, Jer. 11:20; 12:3; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:11-12.



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