

2 Samuel 7

A Temple for Yahweh

This passage consists of a divine oracle (vv. 1–17) and a responding prayer (vv. 18–29). It occupies the dramatic and theological center of the entire Samuel corpus. Indeed, this is one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament for evangelical faith . It is clear from chapters 5 and 6 that David is on the way to new forms of power and new claims of legitimacy. He has gotten himself a new city (5:6–10), and he has been able to claim the old ark as a legitimation of his new city (6:1–19). David's capacity to make use of the ark is surely marked by the ambiguity we have noted elsewhere and is at the same time a judicious use and a grateful yielding.

The impressiveness of David is in his capacity to make good use of such symbols without being excessively cynical. David is poised, in his faith with Yahweh, just at the balance point of glad yielding and manipulative utility. The central questions of royal legitimacy remain to be resolved, however. According to Flanagan's analysis, chapter 7 balances the ark story of chapter 6. Chapter 6 concerns the utilization of an old symbol, whereas in chapter 7 we encounter the bold articulation of a new theological claim surpass-

ing anything yet known in Israel. The problem for David is to legitimate a dynastic order that is no longer jeopardized by or responsive to every stir of the spirit. The old theological assumptions in Israel did not easily apply to David's new urban foundation. Thus a different expression of legitimacy was required.

The obvious answer to the problem of legitimacy characteristic of every ruler in the ancient world is to build a temple. Give God a permanent residence that will solidify the regime. In principle a temple lives in tension with the ark. Whereas the ark articulates God's freedom and mobility, the temple removes the danger and possibility that God might depart.

2 Samuel 7:1–17

7:1–7. David proposes to build a temple. Temple building is undoubtedly a mixed act of genuine piety and self-serving legitimation. These verses reflect what must have been an honest dispute in Israel concerning the tension between God's freedom and God's presence. The temple guarantees God's presence but at the same time militates against God's freedom.

Nathan (who now appears for the first time) authorizes a temple (v. 3). Nathan senses no contradiction between Yah-

weh's character and the requirements of the royal regime. The initial building permit is not the end of the question, however. In verse 3 Nathan's permit is in his own voice. In verses 5–7 the voice is that of Yahweh, who speaks directly to Nathan and withdraws the permit. Yahweh argues that a permanent residence is unacceptable because it violates Yahweh's freedom. Indeed, a permanent dwelling will prevent Yahweh from "coming and going." This is a God who will not be held in place by any religious arrangement. "Cedar" is a commodity kings like and value (vv. 2, 7; cf. 5:11; Jer. 22:14–15). The plushness of the proposed temple contradicts Yahweh's self-understanding. Yahweh will not be bought off, controlled, or domesticated by such luxury. Yahweh has been a free God and will continue to be. The royal apparatus is not able to make Yahweh its patron.

7:8–11. But what then? Is Yahweh not available to legitimate David? On the contrary, Yahweh is prepared to authorize and benefit David far beyond the state symbol of the temple. In order for David to understand Yahweh's offer, Nathan reviews Yahweh's long, gracious history with David. The review begins with the events of 1 Samuel 16:1–13, "I took you." David is given no credit and assigned no

merit in this recital. David's preeminence and power are all Yahweh's doing (cf. 5:12). David is the creation of Yahweh's powerful, relentless graciousness. That is true of the past (vv. 8–9a); it will be true in the future (vv. 9b–11):

I will make for you a great name (v. 9)

I will appoint a place (v. 10)

I will give you rest (v. 11)

By the power of Yahweh, David will have great renown and a safe place.

This extraordinary promise culminates in verse 11: "I, Yahweh, will make you a house." This oracle is built around a play on the word "house," which can mean either temple or dynasty. Roles are now reversed. David will not build Yahweh a house (temple), but Yahweh will build David a house (dynasty). The subject has been changed. The discussion is no longer about a temple, for Yahweh does not want or permit a temple. The oracle of Yahweh introduces the concept of a dynasty. Until now it has been only David's rule that needed legitimation. The oracle takes a great leap into the future and asserts for the foreseeable future a Davidic dynastic claim. The dynasty is not unrelated to the temple, but it is a very different social reality now brought into purview. Yahweh has done for David "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph.

3:20).

7:12–17. In these verses the oracle moves to its most extravagant claim. Verse 12 seems to allude to Solomon, who will have the kingdom and who will build a temple. In verse 13 the word “house” refers back to temple. This verse is regarded by many scholars as a later legitimation of Solomon and his temple, because this verse seems to envision the very “house” (temple) precluded in verses 5–7.

The main claim of the oracle is found in verses 14–16. First there is a reference to the son who is to come. This son may be punished, but he will never, never be rejected (vv. 14–15). David (and Solomon) are thus contrasted with Saul. Saul could lose Yahweh’s *hesed*, but David, David’s son, and David’s line can never lose Yahweh’s loyalty. Yahweh has made an unconditional promise. Verse 16 seems to move beyond Solomon to a dynastic principle that the Davidic house will be sure “for ever.” The adverb “for ever” is used twice in verse 16. (Notice that this language has already been utilized by the narrator in the mouth of Abigail in 1 Sam. 25:28.) The shape of David’s future is settled by the divine oracle. In 6:20–23, David’s future was still “liminal,” the future of the monarchy undetermined

(cf. Flanagan). After the oracle of 2 Samuel 7, there is no longer need for the ark or any of the furniture of the old order. David’s own anticipation that he will be “honored” (6:22) has come to fruition.

Chapter 7 is of peculiar interest because it indicates how the requirements and prospects of David change the subject of the theological conversation in Israel. The old discussion spoke with considerable anxiety about Yahweh’s presence and how to secure it. The ark is a response to the question of presence. Now, however, the issue is not God’s presence in the community but solidarity with this man and this man’s family. The sociohistorical character of Israel’s faith is powerfully evident here.