

2 Samuel 7:1-17

This essay provides an exegesis of 2 Samuel 7:1-17 and its contribution to understanding the book of Samuel.¹ The passage is critical to ancient readers' understanding of what was happening to them and is conveyed through a narrative that links past and future. The setting for the story's dynamic is the future establishment of the House of David for the people of Israel. However, it can be understood as a historical reflection by readers from before or during the Babylonian exile. This work will briefly address its dating and relevance in the historical context before surveying the dynamics within the oracle's chiasmic structure and how these contribute to understanding Samuel.

Dating for the book of Samuel is best understood as occurring in the period before or during the Babylonian exile by unknown authorship. McKenzie views traditional authorship by the prophet Samuel as problematic because he plays only a principal role in the early chapters of 1 Samuel and dies in 1 Samuel 25:1. Some commentators place the book after Solomon's death because 1 Samuel 27:6 refers to the divided monarchy.² Anderson suggests that 2 Samuel 7:4-7 sets a date in the early exile after the temple's destruction and looks forward to the temple's reconstruction and the restoration of the House of David.³ Collins ascribes Samuel to multiple authors, with the earliest version dating to the reign of Josiah and a later version to the exile.⁴ However, Jones states that while the Deuteronomistic History represents an interpretation of Jewish history, Noth's single-author concept or a double redaction before and after exile is too simplistic.⁵ In summary, authorship is uncertain, and 2 Samuel 7:1-17 should be appreciated within the historical context of readers trying to understand a declining and failed kingdom and the future of the temple and Davidic throne.

This historical retrospective reminds the ancient reader that all is not lost and, despite the current circumstances, God will remain faithful to the promise made to David. It uses language that guides the reader from the past and into the future to help achieve this. Breaking down the structure helps create a framework for how this functions. There are two main scenes: first, the introductory dialogue between David and Nathan (2 Sam 7:1-3); then, the oracle God delivers to Nathan (2 Sam 7:4-16). Anderson divides the oracle into three parts: David will not build the temple (2 Sam 7:5-7), a review of David's rise (2 Sam 7:8-11a), and the prophecy of an eternal house and kingdom (2 Sam 7:11b-16).⁶ However, this essay will join the latter two together. The overall dynamic for the ancient reader is evident by comparing verses one and sixteen. The passage opens: "Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him" (2

¹ General reference to 'Samuel' means the scroll of 1 and 2 Samuel.

² David F. Payne, "1 and 2 Samuel Introduction," in *New Bible Commentary*, ed. D.A. Carson et al. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Olive Tree e-book.

³ A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel, Word Biblical Commentary; V. 11* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 115.

⁴ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 231-32.

⁵ Gwilym Jones, "1 and 2 Samuel," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 199.

⁶ Anderson, 112-13.

Sam 7:1 NRSV). Here, the reader is reminded of David's ascension into power and great success. David is at 'rest' (*nūah*) from his enemies, and God's people live in their land.⁷ The reader would understand that 'rest' is a feature of God's "divine approval and blessing".⁸ This contrasts with the Judah of the readers' time, which is no longer at *nūah*, in either a literal or a figurative sense. This opening makes the reader despair because that time of glory has gone. The reader will naturally ask about what will happen. This is answered with "Your house, and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." (2 Sam 7:16). This looks forward to the future. The word 'forever' (*'ōlām*) reaffirms the promise to David.⁹ Therefore, it becomes apparent to the reader that all is not lost and the restoration of their home and kingdom is in the hands of God, who will be faithful to the promise made to David.

God's announcement to Nathan that David will not be the one to build a house reminds the reader that God's presence is not reliant on an earthly human construction. Morrison divides God's speech to Nathan into two broad sections, with 2 Samuel 7:5-7 forming the first, a chiasmic pattern of three layers surrounding a central statement about the tent and tabernacle.¹⁰ The outer layers speak to the reader of a 'house' (*bayit*) for God (2 Sam 7:5; 7:7). At no time before David had God ever asked for a physical house. The following two layers encompass the people of Israel (2 Sam 7:6a, 7:7b) and God moving freely about (2 Sam 7:6b, 7:7a). This is symbolic for a reader present during the time of the destroyed temple, as it explains it was not required from the beginning.¹¹ Gilmour states that this gives the reader a theological reason why David was not to build the temple.¹² Brueggemann writes that this section clearly says, "Yahweh has been a free God and will continue to be."¹³ In summary, the reader is made to understand that a permanent human-made place does not bind God. This raises the question for the reader in a failed kingdom: what will become of David's dynasty?

The second and prominent section of the oracle contains the all-important promise that, despite the present circumstances, something incredible is yet to happen because God will make David a great house and kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:8-17). Morrison describes a four-layered chiasmic pattern around a central statement that "the Lord will make you a house" (2 Sam 7:11c).¹⁴ Collins notes the dual meaning of the word 'house' (*bayit*), where "David may not build a house (= temple) for YHWH, but the Deity will build a house (= dynasty) for

⁷ Anderson, 112.

⁸ Johanna Van Wijk-Bos, *The Road to Kingship: 1-2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 257.

⁹ Craig E. Morrison, "2 Samuel," in *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, ed. Jerome T. Walsh (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 3.5.2.

¹⁰ Morrison, in *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, 3.5.2. Recall Anderson's division of the oracle into three parts.

¹¹ Anderson, 115.

¹² Rachele Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 73.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 254.

¹⁴ Morrison, in *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, 3.5.2.2.

David.”¹⁵ Around this central statement are layers of declarations about what God has done and will do. This is important for the original readers who witnessed the fall of David’s kingdom and the Babylonian exile, as it helps them understand that God’s promise endures. As Collins states: “If there was no king in the present, then God’s promise must be fulfilled in the future by the restoration of the Davidic line.”¹⁶ This links in with Samuel's overall theme, which records the establishment of kingship in Israel. There is a progression from the wrong type of King, “appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Sam 8:5). In 2 Samuel, David has risen to kingship. God chose him, and he initially fulfilled what God promised his people. Jones states that the oracle speaks of David's choice, protection, and a successor's promise; God is concerned about the people of Israel (2 Sam 7:10-11), the infinity of David's realm (2 Sam 7:13,16) and the dissimilarity between Saul and David.¹⁷ Brueggeman correctly asserts that for the ancient reader, David’s ascension was the “resolve and work” of God that would endure.¹⁸ Thus, this oracle is a centrepiece of Samuel, with intrinsic meaning for the people of the future and a reason for optimism.

In conclusion, 2 Samuel 7:1-17 contributes to understanding the book of Samuel. It is critical to the ancient readers’ comprehension of what was happening to them before or during the Babylonian exile. Reading the passage within this historical context gives meaning to the temple's and the Davidic kingdom's future. God will remain faithful to the promise made to David. Restoration is in the hands of God. That does not rely on an earthly temple, as God is unconstrained and free to move. The oracle contains the all-important promise that, despite the present circumstances, something incredible is yet to happen because God will always make David a great house with a kingdom that lasts forever. Indeed, this was a source of comfort for those who first read these words and those in the present day.

¹⁵ Collins, 247.

¹⁶ Collins, 249.

¹⁷ Jones, in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 219.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, 256.

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