

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: February 11: Promises to David and his successors: Some Notes

The Davidic promises are striking in their “for ever” content. It is worth setting the scene by glancing at the realities of David’s reign, just to provide a context. The sources used are Samuel and Kings. Those who did English history at school probably touched on the War of the Roses. At primary school level, that English War is necessarily simplified to the Houses of York and Lancaster taking turns to rule. If you went on to A level history, you will have picked up that the reality was far more complicated, and that at times it was very unclear who was in charge, that it wasn’t the titular Monarch, and that some parts of the country were not under central control, and perhaps not under control at all. David’s Holy Land was much the same, only more so – because there were different nationalities involved, and the Israelites themselves were divided into different tribes AND different factions.

In brief (!), Samuel anointed David as King when David was probably in his teens, and Saul was very much alive and in control – though beginning to go off the rails. The sequence of events is unclear, but the boy David was signed up as Saul’s armour bearer and harpist, fought Goliath successfully. David and Saul’s son Jonathan became bosom friends. The relationship between David and Saul went up and down like a yoyo. Married to Saul’s younger daughter, Michal, thrown out or ran away from court, reconciled, exiled, reconciled, exiled, reconciled, exiled. Often, it was a matter of David proving useful to Saul as a military leader, but even success in this role fed into Saul’s paranoia. “David has killed more people than I have, so I’ll have another go at killing David!”

We think of Solomon as being the womaniser, but David acquired two other named wives, one at least of whom had been someone else’s wife. To celebrate victories, he acquired more wives and concubines. To complete the story of women in David’s life: he obtained Bathsheba via voyeurism, adultery and murder; and in his extreme old age was provided with a young female companion to comfort him. His numerous liaisons produced children who hated each others’ guts; and his reign was scarred by incest, fratricide, and treachery among his extended family – on top of the on-going conflict with Saul’s survivors.

The death of Saul and Jonathan in battle might have been thought to leave the way clear for David as the already anointed king – despite the death of Samuel. But Israel sided with a Saul candidate, and David was anointed (again!) as King of Judah, or part of it. It was some time before there was further anointing as king of the “united” kingdom, and then on the basis of best interests (their best interests) by the power brokers. The whole story is further complicated by the strife between Abner and Joab, the rival military leaders and would-be-king-makers. Joab, Abner, and David himself, were prone to Mafia-style revenge killings: including those who did the wrong things for the right reasons or the right things for the wrong reasons. If Saul’s Achilles heel was his son Jonathan’s friendship with David, David’s Achilles heel was his love of his wayward and disloyal son Absalom. No wonder David is quoted as saying: “I am weak, though an anointed King!”

Going on at the same time, wars with the Philistines and the Syrians, and lengthy periods of famine and/or “pestilence”. The war, famine and pestilence are commonly attributed to God being angry with David and his people. Hard to see this as a golden age for ordinary people! The scene-setting comment on the background to the Bathsheba incident: “In the spring, when kings go to war”, says it all.

While David was dying, and no longer really in control (if he ever had been) Adonijah tried to seize control of the “family inheritance”, and Bathsheba had to intervene to protect the interests of her son Solomon. And so began another story of inter-woven glamour and failure.

Against this background, you can see why the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews chose to include something about Melchizedek in her/his collection of Messianic quotes. We know almost nothing about Melchizedek and his ancestors and descendants (if any), whereas we know too much about David and his family tree.

2 Samuel 7 says, inter alia, *“Your family and your kingdom are permanently secured. I’m keeping my eye on them. And your royal throne will always be there, rock solid.”* 1 Chronicles 17 says, inter alia, *“I will guarantee his kingdom rule for ever. I’ll be a father to him, and he’ll be a son to me. I will never remove my gracious love from him.. I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will always be there, rock solid.”* (See Hebrews 1.) 2 Chronicles 7 says, inter alia, *“I’ll back your kingly rule over Israel – make it a sure thing on a sure foundation... You can count on always having a descendant on Israel’s throne”.* (This is a promise to Solomon. The previous two promises were made to David. It is accompanied by a warning, *“But, if your sons betray me....”* Psalm 89 says, inter alia, *“I pledged my word to my servant David, saying, Everyone descending from you is guaranteed life. I’ll make your rule as solid and lasting as rock.”* And, *“I’m setting him apart as the first of the Royal line: High King over all earth’s kings”...“I’ll guarantee his family tree and underwrite his rule.”*

We do tend to condemn the Jews of Jesus’ time for missing the point. But you can understand a people living under foreign puppet kings, put in place by the Roman invaders, looking optimistically for someone more “powerful” than a village carpenter, apparently only linked to David’s line via his step father (also a carpenter) who chose a cross instead of a throne and a sceptre. Fortunately, “My Kingdom is not of this world”; and, fortunately, Christ’s Kingdom is eternal, not temporal.