

## STUDY 6

# The Agenda for History

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### THE CHARTER FOR HUMANITY

David the king received a revelation from God, which elicited from David a remarkable response:

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, ‘Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD you have spoken also of your servant’s house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD! (2 Sam. 7:18–19).<sup>1</sup>

This last phrase in verse 19 receives a variety of translations:

NRSV: May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD!

RSV: and hast shown me future generations, O Lord GOD! [Heb. This is the law for man]

KJV: And is this the manner of man, O Lord GOD?

NASB: And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD.

NIV: Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign LORD?

NKJV: Is this the manner of man, O Lord GOD?

Why are there so many different translations? It could be that David is saying something here that is so vast that scholars either cannot see it, or cannot believe that David would be saying it, and so they make the best sense of it they can, within the limits of their understanding.

Those who are limited by having a political mindset, and interpret everything accordingly, see this whole chapter as a piece of Davidic propaganda, necessary to establish David’s kingship in the place of Saul’s (see 2 Sam. 7:15). David’s patient loyalty to Saul and refusal to make himself king in Saul’s lifetime does not fit with this explanation. David was a man after God’s own heart (see 1 Sam. 13:14), and here

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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God is showing David, and David is seeing, a picture much bigger than time-bound local politics.

What is the literal or actual meaning of this phrase? The words ‘instruction’, ‘manner’, ‘custom’, ‘usual way of dealing’ all translate the Hebrew word *torah*, meaning ‘law’. The words ‘people’, ‘man’, ‘generations’ are all translations of the Hebrew *hā’ādām*, which means humanity, humankind. So the most literal translation is: ‘This is the law for humanity’. Some translate it as a question, others as a statement. Walter Kaiser, after a careful examination,<sup>2</sup> comes to the conclusion that it is an exclamation—of a staggering truth:

So this is the law [*or* charter] for humanity, O Lord God!

### GOD’S PROMISE

What is the ‘this’ that David is so excited about? To see what David is responding to, we need to go back to the beginning of the chapter. It begins with David wanting to have a dwelling place for God. David realises that he is living in a fine house, but the ark of God stays in a tent. David wants to provide a dwelling place fit for God:

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, ‘See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.’ Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you’ (2 Sam. 7:1–3).

Psalm 132 sees this as one of David’s prime motivations:

O LORD, remember in David’s favor  
all the hardships he endured;  
how he swore to the LORD  
and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,  
I will not enter my house  
or get into my bed;  
I will not give sleep to my eyes  
or slumber to my eyelids,  
until I find a place for the LORD,  
a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob (Ps. 132:1–5).

This desire on the part of David is but a reflection of the Lord’s own heart to have a dwelling place:

For the LORD has chosen Zion;  
he has desired it for his habitation:  
‘This is my resting place forever;  
here I will reside, for I have desired it’ (Ps. 132:13–14).

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<sup>2</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, ‘The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity’, in John H. Skilton, ed., *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., USA, 1974, pp. 298–318. Also in Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1978), pp. 154f.

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The Lord's plan, however, was rather different from what David had in mind. For David it meant building a temple; but the Lord was going to set up his dwelling place in a way that far surpassed anything that David could imagine or accomplish:

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? (2 Sam. 7:4–5).

The question, literally, is: 'Will *you* build *Me*—a *house*?' Put that way, it seems a foolish proposition. Solomon was later to admit: 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!' (1 Kings 8:27).

So David will not build a house for God. God then says it will be the other way round:

Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house (2 Sam. 7:11).

God will satisfy His desire for a dwelling place amongst His people by raising up the 'house' of David—not in the sense of a literal building but of a family, a line of succession:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12–13).

Solomon later claimed that his building of the literal temple in Jerusalem was a fulfilment of this promise (see 1 Kings 8:24), and that is partially true. But the prophecy is much more far-reaching than that. Solomon went on immediately to acknowledge the limitations of what he had done (see 1 Kings 8:27, above), and prayed for the ongoing confirmation of the promise to David in his successors (see 1 Kings 8:25–26). There are aspects of the prophecy that were not fulfilled in Solomon's reign, or in the reign of any of David's physical descendants. Neither Solomon, nor any of his successors, reigned 'forever'—they all died. And after the deposition of Zechariah in 586 BC (see 2 Kings 24:18–25:12; lamented in Ezek. 19), it could not be said that David's kingdom, in the sense of his literal throne in Jerusalem, was established 'forever'. The fulfilment of God's promise to David would need to come in some other much greater way.

### THE SON OF THE FATHER

'Offspring', while it can have a plural sense, is a singular word (see e.g. Gal. 3:16, where Abraham's 'offspring' to whom the promises were made are identified as the 'one person, who is Christ'). The promise to David speaks of the 'offspring' very much in terms that apply to a particular person. This person will be in a special relationship with God:

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me (2 Sam. 7:14).

The bearing of punishment for iniquity is spoken of in connection with this person, along with the steadfast love of God:

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When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you (2 Sam. 7:14–15).

The constancy of God's steadfast love, despite the prevalence of iniquity (which in David's descendants sank even to the fire-pits of human child sacrifice) shows that something will be done, despite all these things, to secure that steadfast love for David's offspring, sin and evil notwithstanding. That is quite a revelation! It is further hinted that this one would overcome even the limitations and judgement of death:

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever (2 Sam. 7:16).

Little wonder, then, that in Jesus' day there was still an expectation, as yet unfulfilled by any of the previous descendants of David, of an anointed Messiah/Christ, who would be 'Son of David' and 'Son of God' (see Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 16:16; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15; 22:42; 26:63; 27:54). On the basis of what Jesus himself had indicated by word and deed (see Matt. 16:16–20; 21:1–11; 22:41–46; 28:16–20), and the divine testimony to him (Luke 1:31–35; 3:21–22, 38; 9:35), the apostles and the gospel-writers claimed that Jesus was this one (Matt. 1:1; Mark 1:1; John 20:31; Acts 2:25–36; 9:20–22; 13:22–23).

Mindful that this promise to David began with the quest for a dwelling place for God, we do well to note what Jesus had to say in this regard. After cleansing the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus was asked:

'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken (John 2:18–22).

Jesus himself, as Messiah, Son of God, in his death and resurrection, is the location where the Father dwells and is rightly worshipped:

the Father is in me and I am in the Father (John 10:38; compare 14:10).

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him (John 8:28–30).

In the prophetic promise to David, seen as fulfilled in Jesus, both kingship and temple/priesthood coalesce.

### DAVID'S PRAYER

If this is what came to David in this prophetic revelation from God, we can understand why David then burst into the prayer that follows. What God had already done with David was amazing enough:

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I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth (2 Sam. 7:8–9).

What God was going to do in David's reign would take this even further:

And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies (2 Sam. 7:10–11).

All of this is small in comparison with what God has now shown David:

Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come (2 Kings 7:18–19).

God making a dwelling place amongst His people, God defeating death, God doing something that secures His steadfast love against all that is sinful and evil, God doing something to bring about living for ever—this is more than just a special promise to a particular dynasty in history—‘This is your charter for the whole of humanity, Lord God!’ And God will carry it out through David's own household and family. No wonder David was blown away by it all, almost to the point of speechlessness:

And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD! (2 Sam. 7:20).

None of this is of David's deserving. All of this is the action of God:

Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it (2 Sam. 7:21).

David is wrought upon to extol the uniqueness of God and the wonder of his actions:

Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears (2 Sam. 7:22).

Further, if this is what God is going to do with His people, that must mean also that there are no people like God's people:

Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them . . . ? (2 Sam. 7:23).

At this revelation of God's kingdom purpose and its manner, David prays, in effect, ‘Your kingdom come!’:

And now, O LORD God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised . . . may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever (2 Sam. 7:25, 29).

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### BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS

Six times in this prayer, David uses the address, ‘O Lord GOD’ (*Adonai: YAHWEH*). Nowhere else in Samuel is that address used. Where does it come from? Twice in Genesis 15 Abraham, receiving the covenant from God, addresses Him, ‘O Lord God’ (Gen. 15:2, 8). There we find God promising to Abraham an offspring, who will become a family of nations (See Gen. 15:3–6; 17:16). God’s promise to David has echoes of God’s promise to Abraham (see 2 Sam. 7:9: ‘great name’; v. 10: ‘a place for my people Israel’; v. 12: ‘your offspring’; v. 29: ‘bless . . . blessing . . . blessed’; compare Gen. 12:2–3, 7; 15:18; 17:7). There are echoes also from the later time of Moses (see 2 Sam. 7:14: ‘son’; v. 24: ‘your people forever . . . their God’; compare Exod. 4:22; 6:7). God’s promise to David encapsulates and extends all of God’s promises to Israel, in fulfilment of God’s covenant with Abraham for the blessing of all the families of the earth, and David responds accordingly.

We know that it goes back further than Abraham. It goes right back to the first man and woman made in the image of God, when ‘God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion”’ (Gen. 1:28). When they refused to do that with God, God said that the offspring of the woman would strike the serpent’s head, as the serpent would strike the offspring’s heel (see Gen. 3:15). The promise to David concerning this one is indeed the charter for the whole of humanity, the linchpin of God’s whole plan.

David was to say later:

For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,  
ordered in all things and secure (2 Sam 23:5; compare Gen. 17:7; Ezek. 16:60).

This is later taken up in the person of the servant in Isaiah:

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David (Isa. 55:3).

I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations (Isa. 42:6).

This is the ‘new’ covenant, for the forgiveness of sins, spoken of in Jeremiah 31:31, which is shown there (31:35–36) and in Jeremiah 33:17–26 to be rooted in the whole fabric of creation—that is, from before the foundation of the world:

If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne . . . Just as the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will increase the offspring of my servant David (Jer. 33:20–22).

### DAVID CALLS HIM LORD

David was shown an eternal King, with an eternal reign, over an eternal people, where death will be no more. Indeed he was shown ‘new heavens and a new earth, where

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righteousness is at home' (2 Pet. 3:13), which would come into effect at the general resurrection:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

Mindful of this, David wrote concerning this one:

The LORD says to my lord,  
    'Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies your footstool'  
(Ps. 110:1; see further Mark 12:35–37; Rev. 22:16).<sup>3</sup>

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).

My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;  
    and in my name his horn shall be exalted . . .  
He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,  
    my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'  
I will make him the firstborn,  
    the highest of the kings of the earth.  
Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,  
    and my covenant with him will stand firm (Ps. 89:24, 26–28).

Doubtless it was this promise that sustained the house of David through such a reversal as occurs at the end of Psalm 89:

But now you have spurned and rejected him;  
    you are full of wrath against your anointed.  
You have renounced the covenant with your servant;  
    you have defiled his crown in the dust.  
You have broken through all his walls;  
    you have laid his strongholds in ruins.  
All who pass by plunder him;  
    he has become the scorn of his neighbors.  
You have exalted the right hand of his foes;  
    you have made all his enemies rejoice.  
Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword,  
    and you have not supported him in battle.  
You have removed the scepter from his hand,  
    and hurled his throne to the ground.  
You have cut short the days of his youth;  
    you have covered him with shame.  
How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?  
    How long will your wrath burn like fire?  
Remember how short my time is—  
    for what vanity you have created all mortals!  
Who can live and never see death?

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<sup>3</sup> Ps. 110:4 again conflates kingship with priesthood in this one.

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Who can escape the power of Sheol?  
Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,  
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?  
Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted;  
how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples,  
with which your enemies taunt, O LORD,  
with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed (Ps. 89:38–51).

How would the promise sustain the house of David through such a reversal? Not just by holding out the promise of a better time to come, in spite of it all. If, in the promised offspring, God's steadfast love is to be maintained, in the face of human iniquity and its just punishment, to establish forever the kingdom of God's people, then this one must somehow undergo and bear in himself just such a reversal, for us all. It is this very action that qualifies him to be called 'Lord' (see Phil. 2:5–11; compare Mark 10:42–45). David's dying pronouncement, from the very mouth of God, concerning true kingship, spoke of it being of this same spirit: exercised not for one's own advantage, but in the service of others—like the sun coming up in the morning, and like the rain on the grass—for the banishment of evil (see 2 Sam. 23:1–7). That was inherent in the revelation that David received from God, and was sufficient to sustain him and his household through every reversal. That alone is what will sustain us also in holiness and godliness, unto that day.

Some say that verse 52 does not properly belong at the end of Psalm 89, but was inserted later as a doxology to close off Book III of the Psalms. However that may be, those words, taken rightly, are no contradiction, but well and truly belong there:

Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and Amen (Ps. 89:52).