

The Juxtaposition of Conditionality and Unconditionality in the Davidic Covenant

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At six years old, a pink promise is a big deal. No six-year-old makes a pinky promise without considering the sheer gravity of the situation. If that promise is broken, all trust is lost, but why? Why is it that from such a young age, people become consumed with promises, deals, contracts, and anything else that ensures an agreement that must be upheld? Well, it's simple, really – it's all about control. In this world, people have so little control over what happens to them, so we make laws, contracts, and even pinky promises. Now, imagine making a pinky promise with the god of the universe – the only being that is truly in control of anything and everything. That would be a pretty serious commitment. It would test the Christian's faith, as well as test the faithfulness of God.

Well, that truly is the reality of Christians, and believers in God, are living in. Scattered throughout scripture, there are covenants made between God and man. Some of these covenants are conditional, some unconditional, some still in effect, and some that ended when man fell short to meet the conditions. Understanding the covenants of the Bible is crucial to the Christian believer, because how can one believe in God if He can't keep His promises? The Davidic covenant found in 2 Samuel 7 is a covenant in particular that puzzles many readers, and even many scholars. This covenant, however, can be used as a key to understanding how to interpret all covenants of the Bible. The juxtaposition of conditionality and unconditionality, as well as the ultimate promise of the Messiah, are two of the biggest ways that the Davidic covenant is specifically unique and makes this promise specifically crucial to understand.

Before exploring the promise made between God and the Davidic monarchy, it is first important to understand who exactly David was, and why his monarchy was so significant. David was a great king of Israel, a protagonist in many stories, but maybe an antagonist in some. He worshiped God from a young age, led sheep during his early years, fought a lion, fought a

giant, and then was hand picked by God to lead the kingdom of Israel and take the place of Saul as king.<sup>1</sup> After Saul took his life in a battle against the Philistines and Absalom was killed after trying to rebel against the anointed of David as king, David took his place as king of Israel and led a very eventful reign. It almost sounds like fiction, but we can see throughout history that these kinds of events are common amongst kingdoms. The reality of King David as a historical figure has been debated by scholars for many years, but recent evidence found by archaeologists has helped prove David as real. In 1993, at Tel Dan, an Aramaic stele inscription was discovered. It dated back to the time of King David, and referenced the house of David.<sup>2</sup> This discovery, as well as several since then, provides the public with a more concrete foundation for the belief that David was just as real as any historical figure found in a high-school textbook.

So, if David was indeed a real person, then there is much to discuss. The Davidic covenant – what is it? In 2 Samuel 7, 1 Kings 2, 8, and 9, and 1 Chronicles 17, the basis for the Davidic covenant is found. Specifically, 2 Samuel 7:13, which reads “He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever,” and verse 16, which reads “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever”. These verses seem pretty straightforward – David’s monarchy would endure forever. We can see, however, that this didn’t happen. So, the question is, how do followers of and believers in God make sense of this seemingly broken covenant?

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<sup>1</sup> White, Ellen. *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Biran, Avraham, and Joseph Naveh. "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment." *Israel Exploration Journal* 45, no. 1 (1995): 1-18. Accessed February 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27926361>.

To begin this process of understanding, it is important to first understand the context of covenants. There are eight covenants made in the Bible between God and man. These covenants are as follows: the Edenic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Adamic Covenant, the Noachic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Palestinian Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant. Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum wrote a Messianic Bible study from Ariel Ministries entitled “The Eight Covenants of the Bible” and in his article, he explains the difference between conditional and unconditional covenants in the Bible, as well as placing each covenant in its respective category.<sup>3</sup> It seems pretty self-explanatory, but is still important to understand. Conditional covenants are those in which there are certain conditions involved. “Thus one’s response to the covenant agreement brings either blessings or cursings. The blessings are secured by obedience and man must meet his conditions before God will meet his”<sup>4</sup>. Dr. Fruchtenbaum allocated two of the eight biblical covenants to the category of conditionality: The Adamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant. In contrast, Dr. Fruchtenbaum describes an unconditional covenant as “a unilateral covenant” and “a sovereign act of God whereby He unconditionally obligates Himself to pass definite blessings and conditions for covenanted people”. Dr. Fruchtenbaum places the remaining six of the eight biblical covenants in the category of unconditionality.<sup>5</sup>

The reason that these principles are so important to understand when studying the Davidic covenant is that this covenant is especially unique in its conditionality or lack thereof.

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<sup>3</sup> Fruchtenbaum, Arnold G. *The Eight Covenants of the Bible: Radio Sermons*. San Antonio, TX: Christian Jew Foundation, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The account of the covenant in 2 Samuel seems very much unconditional, but the account of the covenant in 1 Kings has a very different tone and expresses conditionality. Several parts of this covenant were fulfilled, like Solomon taking the throne after David's reign, even though two of David's other sons tried to usurp power in 2 Samuel 7:12 and Solomon building a temple in 2 Samuel 7:13. Other provisions of the covenant are a little bit more difficult to dissect, like the enduring of David's kingdom forever in 2 Samuel 7:13, and the Messiah coming through the line of David in 1 Chronicles 17:11.<sup>6</sup>

These two provisions are what need to be addressed the most because they are where the most criticism stems from. First of all, the Davidic covenant seemed to have been brought to an end when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 24:10-15). The kingdom of Israel was convinced that God had broken His covenant with His people. The frustrations of the Israeli people is seen in scripture, and in Psalm 89, the psalmist expresses his frustrations and accuses God of breaking the Davidic covenant and abandoning his people. There are tensions between the covenant that God relayed to the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel and the conditions that were expressed in the book of 1 Kings. Hayyim Angel described in his article "The Eternal Davidic Covenant in II Samuel Chapter 7 and Its Later Manifestation in the Bible" the way that the Davidic Covenant is both conditional and unconditional and the ways that this covenant can be reconciled with the Bible, as well as with history.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hwang, Sunwoo. "Coexistence of Unconditionality and Conditionality of the Davidic Covenant in Chronicles." *Heythrop journal* 58, no. 2 (2017): 239–246.

<sup>7</sup> Bullock, C. Hassell, "COVENANT RENEWAL AND THE FORMULA OF GRACE IN THE PSALTER." *The Bibliotheca sacra* 176, no. 704, 2011.

Jeremiah 33:20-22 is Jeremiah's response to the downfall of the Davidic monarchy. Jeremiah seems to suggest a new interpretation of the covenant. The Davidic reign over all of Israel is indeed conditional, but Davidic reign over Judah is unconditional. This interpretation would reconcile the covenant with the Bible, but it still doesn't match up with the historical account. Nebuchadnezzar still brought the Davidic monarchy to a physical end at the time, but what if the unconditional portion of the covenant wasn't referring to the earthly monarchy of David? What if instead, this covenant fits hand and hand with the New Covenant, and the promise of the Messiah that is also found within the Davidic Covenant? According to prophecy and covenant, Jesus' kingdom will indeed be restored, and Jesus came from the line of David, so doesn't that mean that the Davidic monarchy will indeed endure forever?<sup>8</sup>

It is sometimes easy to take the word "forever" and "always" in scripture and run with it, but oftentimes scripture speaks in much greater ways than what one might first think. After all, it was said in Jude 1:7 that the Sodom and Gomorrah would burn in fire forever. Indeed Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, but are they still burning today? No, of course not. The judgment that was passed upon them, however, will endure forever, because their future will forever be affected by their rejection of the truth. In the same way, when God promised to David that his line would endure forever, it was an unconditional promise that is currently being fulfilled and was already partially fulfilled by the life of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fruchtenbaum, Arnold G. *The Eight Covenants of the Bible: Radio Sermons*. San Antonio, TX: Christian Jew Foundation, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Bertolet, Timothy. "Hebrews 5:7 as the Cry of the Davidic Sufferer." vol 51, no. 1, 2017.

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