

A Note on 2 Sam 7

In Jerusalem, in the capital he chose for his kingdom, David wanted to build a temple for his God. The word of God concerning the matter, spoken through the mouth of Nathan and recorded in 2 Sam 7, has been a puzzle to many biblical scholars, and innumerable attempts at its explanation have been made.¹ Whether of the opinion to see there an expression of absolute denial of a temple in the religion of Israel,² or to find there the tension between the Ark and the tent,³ or to feel David's attitude toward the temple building problematic,⁴ or to try to explain it from a political viewpoint,⁵ or whatever else,⁶ none of those numerous attempts seems really to offer the solution of the puzzle.

The Old Testament itself offers two explanations outside the text of 2 Sam 7: that David shed too much blood, and the temple building should not be undertaken by such a hand;⁷ and that he was too busy because of the wars he had to fight.⁸ In the first we have a glimpse into the current temple theology,⁹ and in the second we find the simple historical fact: David just could not do it. It seems, from the above, that it did occur to the people of the Old Testament to wonder why David, of all their kings, did not build the temple. It does not seem, however, to have occurred to them to wonder why the temple was built at all.¹⁰

The purpose of this paper is very modest. It is not another attempt to solve the difficult literary and historical problems that are involved in 2 Sam 7. It will try only to put the biblical text in the wider context of ancient Near Eastern religious thought. It might very well be—as we hope—that this very shift of perspective will shed no little light on the text and show that some of the problems that have been found in it are automatically solved.

In the world of ancient Mesopotamia, the relationship god-king-temple was clear. A king was a mediator between the divine and the human worlds and, as such, he carried an immense load of responsibilities in two directions: heavenward to assure the gods of the devotion of the people, and earthward to confirm the fertility thus resulting from the gods' pleasure. One of the most important of the royal duties was to build, rebuild, and repair the gods' earthly abodes—the temples—and to keep them and their functions in good condition.¹¹ None of those activities, however, could be undertaken at a king's own will or whim. The sole authorizing power rested with gods. That it was no casual matter for a king to undertake one of those activities, especially the (re)building of a temple, can be seen in many Mesopotamian inscriptions. The classical examples are Gudea, Esarhaddon, and Nabonidus. Esarhaddon states quite simply:

For the renewal of that temple I was agitated and was struck with awe, and was quite at a loss. But through the X (some divination utensil) of the divination Shamash and Adad answered me with a reliable affirmative, and concerning the building of that temple and renewal of its cells they caused a liver-omen to be written (to show their will).¹²

Discovery of the foundation inscription of any former kings being considered a favorable omen for an affirmative divine will for the renewal of that temple, Nabonidus had the foundation of the ruined temple excavated thoroughly until such was found. Upon coming across one, he says:

The inscription of Hammurapi, an ancient king, who, 700 years before Burnaburiash, had built Ebarra and the ziggurat for Shamash upon the ancient foundation, I found therein, and was struck with awe, agitated with fear, and was troubled. Thus I said to myself: the wise king Burnaburiash built the temple and had Shamash the great lord dwell within it. [.] me that temple, in its place [.] I raised my hand and prayed to the lord of lords: "O, Lord, foremost of the gods, Prince Marduk, without you no dwelling is founded, no foundation is laid; without you who can do anything! Lord, by your exalted command let me do what is pleasing to you!"¹³

But by far the most elaborate is the account concerning the renewal of the temple of Ningirsu by Gudea, preserved for us by the famous *Gudea Cylinder A*. Ningirsu reveals to Gudea in a dream his wishes for the renewal of his temple. Though the dream seems rather clear to modern readers, Gudea insists that he does not understand the meaning. How he confirms and reconfirms that will by many and repeated means, how he is worried and then overjoyed, at one and the same time, at the revelation of that divine will—all these are told in the somewhat exaggerated literary composition

of the first twenty columns of the *Cylinder*, followed by the detailed description of how he then set out for the undertaking.¹⁴

We sense in the above examples those kings' feeling of agitation at the revelation of the divine will concerning the renewal of the temples. They made repeated efforts to confirm the divine will and to assure themselves of their own capacities to engage in the task. Not only were the physical and spiritual preparations made with utmost care, but the tension and excitement during the construction work seem to have been nationwide. It certainly presupposed an historical moment when a king felt assured of his people's united attention as well as favorable physical conditions.

As to who should be nominated for the task, the gods reserved the right of the decision to themselves. For a king to be chosen for such a task or to have secured the divine permission for it no doubt meant his uncontested position and power over his kingdom, and he seldom failed to boast of it. We may quote, as an example, some passages from the inscription of Nebukadnezar written at his renewal of the temple of Shamash:

At that time, Ebarra, the temple of Shamash, which was in Sippar, which since long before me had been in ruins, was like a flat land. Shamash, my great lord, had not showed favor toward any of the former kings nor had he commanded (any of them) to build; he desired me, his servant, the devout one, reverent of his divinity, for the building of the shrine. I waited for the sun, raised my hand, and prayed to the sun. I prayed for the building of the temple Ebarra¹⁵

It must have happened, as we may deduce from the above, that there were cases when a king was denied the task. Relevant records usually being the so-called building inscriptions, it is difficult to find a text explicitly mentioning such a denial. We may still be able to see in the following examples that such did happen once in a while. In the famous Sumerian poem "The Curse of Akkad," Naram-Sin seeks permission from Enlil to renew his temple Ekur. It is denied him, and, according to the poem, the denial caused very serious consequences.

Concerning the temple he sought for an oracle—

To build the temple, there was no oracle.

Again concerning the temple he sought for an oracle—

To build the temple, there was no oracle.¹⁶

Among the Mari Letters we may find a similar example, though the letter in question is broken, and, not knowing the circumstances of the correspondence too clearly, we must admit that the rendering of the word *bitu* presents some problems:

He saw the following (dream): "You (pl.) shall not (re)build this *deserted* house. If the house is (re)built, I will make it collapse into the river." The day he saw this dream, he said nothing to anyone. The next day he again saw the following dream: "It was a god. 'You (pl.) shall not (re)build this house. If you (re)build it, I will make it collapse into the river.'" ¹⁷

From these few passages, though presented neither systematically nor exhaustively, it will have become clear that a positive divine command and a divine appointment of a specific person were absolute requirements for the building (rebuilding or repairing) of a temple. If we now return to 2 Sam 7, we will see that similar religious ideas underlie Nathan's prophecy concerning the building of the temple in Jerusalem. There is no question in our text of a denial of temple building. Nor is there any hint at theological streams in Israel that were opposed to the building of any temple for Yahweh. The real issue is that both the initiative to build a temple and the choice of the person for the task must come from God and not from an individual king. The prophecy stresses these two points. First, God has not commanded the building of a temple either to any of the past leaders or to David himself (vss 6–7). Second, the choice of the person is God's affair. God's denial—put in the interrogative form (vs 5)—concerns the person of David and not the temple itself. The emphatic position of the pronoun (*h'lh*) makes this point more than clear. Moreover, this denial of David results in the positive choice of his successor in vs 13, where the emphatic *hw' ybnh* is to be noted as a counterpart of the emphatic denial in vs 5.

There still remain many problems, both literary and historical, in the text. But we hope that the similar texts presented here have made it clear that 2 Sam 7 falls into the category of divine revelations concerning temple building, which is so common in the ancient Near East, and that, like those similar texts, Nathan's prophecy is positive in tone—that is, it does not imply any criticisms of temple building as such but, on the contrary, expresses the positive choice of one person for the task of building a temple for Yahweh.¹⁸

NOTES

¹ The main suggestions and discussions were summarized by J. Schreiner, *Sion-Jerusalem. Jahwes Königssitz (SANT 7)*, München, 1963, pp. 80–89; cf R. E. Clements, *God and Temple*, Oxford, 1965, pp. 56–60.

² R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, London, 1961, pp. 329 f; idem, "Jerusalem et les Prophètes," *RB* 73 (1966), 485.

³ G. von Rad, "The Tent and the Ark," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, Edinburgh and London, 1966, p. 119.

⁴ J. Schreiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–94, maintains that divine refusal was caused because David used the verb *yšb* but not *škn*, which is supposed to show the misconception of what a temple should be; cf H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, London, 1964, pp. 284 f; A. Weiser, "Die Tempelbaukrise unter David," *ZAW* 77 (1965), 158–60.

⁵ According to G. W. Ahlström, "Der Prophet Nathan und der Tempelbau," *VT* 11 (1961), 113–27, the real cause of Nathan's rejection of David's wish is to be found in the politico-religious conflict between the Jebusite and Israelite parties in Jerusalem.

⁶ According to M. Simon, "La Prophétie de Nathan et le Temple," *RHPR* 32 (1952), 41–58, enmity against the temple at Jerusalem; according to J. Dus, "Der Brauch der Ladewanderung im Alten Israel," *TZ* 17 (1961), 1–5, the text was originally against the temple at Shiloh and was utilized in this context as against that in Jerusalem.

⁷ 1 Chron 22: 8; 28: 3.

⁸ 1 Kings 5: 17.

⁹ Cf J. M. Myers, *I Chronicles (AB, vol. 12)*, New York, 1965, p. 154.

¹⁰ It seems problematic to suppose the existence of the anti-temple trend in ancient Israel from the very few and difficult passages: 2 Sam 7: 5–7; Is 66: 1; and the story of the Rekabites in Jer 35; cf R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, p. 330. The total rejection of the temple in the New Testament (Mk 14: 58; Jn 4: 21; Acts 7: 48; 17: 24) may be considered as a late sectarian development.

¹¹ Cf H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago, 1948, pp. 267–74.

¹² R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons Königs von Assyrien (AfO Bh 9)*, Osnabrück, 1967², p. 3, Col. III 42–IV 6.

¹³ S. H. Langdon, *Die Neubabylonischen Königsinschriften (VAB 4)*, Leipzig, 1911, p. 238, Col. II 20–40.

¹⁴ F. Thureau-Dangin, *Les Cylindres de Gudéa (TCL VIII)*, Paris, 1925; for translation in German, see A. Falkenstein and W. von Soden, *Sumerische und Akkadische Hymnen und Gebete (BAW)*, Zürich and Stuttgart, 1953, pp. 137–57.

¹⁵ S. H. Langdon, *op. cit.*, p. 100, Col. I 25–II 10.

¹⁶ A. Falkenstein, "Fluch über Akkad," *ZA NF* 23 (1965), 43–124; the relevant passages are on p. 55, lines 96–99.

¹⁷ *ARMT XIII*, No. 113, rev. 1–14; English trans. by W. L. Moran, "Divine Revelations," *ANET*³, pp. 623 f (the passages quoted are on p. 624, rev. 1'–14').

¹⁸ For the detailed discussion on the prophecy of Nathan in the light of the texts from Mesopotamia, see the forthcoming doctoral dissertation, "The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel," by Tomoo Ishida, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.