Lecture 12: 2 Samuel
History-telling in the Bible

Last time we began looking at the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and their account of Israel’s life under the monarchy. At the end of the hour we considered the inter-relationship between the two “bookend” chapters of 1 Sam 8 & 12.

Not only does chapter 8 show a complex makeup – with a basic layer in which the elders request a king to oversee justice, upon which is built a subsequent layer characterizing the people’s demand as an inappropriate request to supplant the LORD’s role as their king – but chapter 12 (which seems to have been the source from which the negative cast was retrojected into chapter 8) has Samuel object to the people relying on a king as their deliverer (rather than the LORD) and warn that the real threat comes from the king and the people refusing to listen to the divine command through the prophets. In fact, throughout Samuel-Kings, the contest between Kings and prophets is to the fore.

Nowhere is this contest clearer than in the story of Saul, who is a catastrophic failure in the eyes of the narrator – even though, as Campbell notes, 1 Samuel retains vestiges of a different story, as in 14:47-48, verses that speak in glowing terms of Saul's successes in battle, and even 28:9, part of the story of Saul seeking information about his fate in battle the next day from a medium. When he asks her to bring up the shade of Samuel, she responds, “Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?” – Whatever else is going on in this passage, the remarkable thing is that Saul is said to have rid the land of mediums and wizards, in compliance with Deuteronomy 18; this medium, at least, doesn't feel comfortable coming out of the closet. However, never elsewhere is Saul given credit for such an action. Rather, he is castigated as rebellious against prophets.

These reports make sense only as vestiges of an earlier narrative in which Saul was shown in a more positive light than he appears in what we have before us in 1 Samuel, which stresses instead Saul's failure to obey the divine commands mediated by prophets. E.g., chapter 13 finds Saul in the following predicament:

5 The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude.… 6 When the Israelites saw that they were in distress (for the troops were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns.… 7 Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. 8 He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul. 9 So Saul said, “Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the offerings of well-being.” And he offered the
burnt offering. \textsuperscript{10} As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel arrived; and Saul went out to meet him and salute him. \textsuperscript{11} Samuel said, “What have you done?” Saul replied, “When I saw that the people were slipping away from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines were mustering at Michmash, \textsuperscript{12} I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down upon me at Gilgal, and I have not entreated the favor of the LORD’; so I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering.” \textsuperscript{13} Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which he commanded you. The LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, \textsuperscript{14} but now your kingdom will not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”

Much of this story is sketchy. Only late in reading it do we understand what the issue is with Saul waiting around seven days at Gilgal, while the Philistines mustered for battle at Michmash. The supposition is that Samuel had told Saul that within a set time he would come to Gilgal to offer a sacrifice before Israel engaged the Philistines in battle (a command never explicitly related anywhere earlier in the story). But in the meantime the Philistine threat had intensified, and Israelite militiamen were leaving the ranks.

Samuel, however, did not consider Saul’s action a prudent response to volatile circumstances: it was a violation of a divinely given directive: “the commandment of the LORD.” These are not the commandments of the Torah, but Samuel’s commandments. And on those grounds, without offering a second chance, Samuel declares that Saul’s kingdom will not endure. Already the LORD has found a replacement.

That theme is reinforced in chapter 15, which reports Saul’s campaign against the Amalekites at the LORD’s command through Samuel: “\textsuperscript{1} Samuel said to Saul, “The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. \textsuperscript{2} Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. \textsuperscript{3} Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’” \textsuperscript{4} So Saul summoned the people, and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers, and ten thousand soldiers of Judah. \textsuperscript{5} Saul came to the city of the Amalekites and lay in wait in the valley. \textsuperscript{7} Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. \textsuperscript{8} He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. \textsuperscript{9} Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.
The word of the LORD came to Samuel: "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands." Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the LORD all night. Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and Samuel was told, "Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself, and on returning he passed on down to Gilgal."

When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, "May you be blessed by the LORD; I have carried out the command of the LORD." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed."

Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me last night." He replied, "Speak." Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?"

Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal."

And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king."

On the one hand, this infraction seems far less egregious than that of chapter 13, where Saul presumptively offered the sacrifice Samuel had said he would offer. In fact, Saul claims that he has obeyed the LORD’s voice, having wiped out the Amalekites and having brought the Amalekite king with him, while the people had simply preserved the best of the sheep and cattle to offer as a sacrifice to the LORD at Gilgal. Saul isn’t resorting to excuses, as he did in chapter 13; and Samuel doesn’t question Saul’s sincerity.

On the other hand, the problem in the eyes of Samuel (and the LORD) is that Saul’s compliance has not been thoroughgoing enough. Sacrifice might be a good thing, but there is a superior standard for "obeying the voice of the LORD." What Saul has done – as well-intentioned as he claims it to have been – Samuel labels “rebellion” and “stubbornness.” Moreover, he asserts such disobedience is comparable to divination and idolatry – two of the sins inveighed against stridently in Deuteronomy.
And in fact, Saul is forced to admit that he showed greater loyalty to the people than the LORD: “24Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. 25Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the LORD.” 26Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.”

Nothing less than exacting obedience to the LORD’s commands will be tolerated, even as Samuel warned in chapter 12: “14If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; 15but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.”

Failure to heed the “voice of the LORD” resulted in Saul’s rejection. But again, this has nothing to do with disobedience to the law code of Deuteronomy, which doesn’t even come in for discussion here, even though it mandates destroying the cities of foreigners. It is a matter of obedience to the divine voice through a prophet.

Now, this is part-and-parcel of the author’s goal of establishing the priority of prophets over kings, which he highlights again in a sequel to this story, in which the LORD’s earlier declaration that he has begun looking for a replacement for Saul is made good: “1The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.”

At this point Samuel raises a valid concern: if Saul learns he is traveling to Bethlehem to anoint a new king, chances are, he will consider it an act of treason. The LORD responds by offering a pretext: Samuel is to invite Jesse, David’s father, to bring his sons to a specially arranged sacrifice. The narrator reports, “6When they came, he (Samuel) looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.” 7But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

Jesse introduces each of his sons to Samuel but, to Samuel’s dismay, none of them receives divine endorsement. And so Samuel asks Jesse if this is the whole family, to which Jesse replies, “11“There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” 12He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and
had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”  

13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.”

Two things are emphasized in this narrative. The first is that the initiative in choosing the king remains with the LORD even as stated in Deuteronomy 17:  

“15 You may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose.” –  The inability to predict the LORD’s choice is stressed in the LORD’s rebuff of Samuel’s assumption that the tall and handsome Eliab must be the one – even though the LORD’s choice turns out, in any case, to be ruddy and handsome. The choice can be made only by the LORD, who sees the heart – although that raises the interesting question of why, then, the LORD selected Saul. (Indeed, the narrator tells us at a couple of points that the LORD regretted having made Saul king.)

The second emphasis in this story has to do with the inferior standing of kings over against prophets. Throughout the ANE kings were considered the deity's “metaphorical offspring.” Thus in Psalm 2 a king recalls these words spoken at his coronation, perhaps through a prophet:  

“7 I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” –  Such an adoption of the king as the son of the LORD implied a close connection between the deity and the king, as expressed in Psalm 18:  

“50 Great triumphs he [the LORD] gives to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.” –  The common view throughout the ANE was that the king served as the deity’s vice-regent.

The relationship between prophet and king unfolded in Samuel, on the other hand, undercuts that assumption; the prophet stands between the king and his god, so that a prophet like Samuel can instigate something of a coup d’etat by anointing a new king even as one sits on the throne. The prophet stands closer to the deity than the king (at variance with the pattern elsewhere in the ancient Near East).

This superiority of the prophet is strikingly portrayed in a story we looked at earlier this term in which Saul pursues David to his place of refuge with Samuel:  

“18 Now David fled and escaped; he came to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. He and Samuel went and settled at Naioth. 19 Saul was told, “David is at Naioth in Ramah.” 20 Then Saul sent messengers to take David. When they saw the company of the prophets in a frenzy, with Samuel standing in charge of them, the spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also fell into a prophetic frenzy. 21 When Saul was told, he sent other messengers, and they also fell into a frenzy. Saul sent messengers again the third time, and they also fell into a frenzy. 22 Then he himself went to Ramah. He came to the great well that is in Secu; he asked, “Where are Samuel and David?” And someone said, “They are at Naioth in Ramah.” 23 He went there, toward Naioth in Ramah; and the spirit of God
came upon him. As he was going, he fell into a prophetic frenzy, until he came to Naioth in Ramah. 24 He too stripped off his clothes, and he too fell into a frenzy before Samuel. He lay naked all that day and all that night.”

This is certainly a bizarre story, and it relies on prophets' proclivity to fall into ecstatic states, referred to here as their being in a frenzy. What’s striking is that all of Saul’s messengers and Saul himself fall prey to this frenzy as they approach the encampment. The prophetic aura functions almost like a force field to keep Saul and his servants at bay. I.e., prophetic power trumps royal power.

Thus, the story of Samuel and Saul drives home the idea that the prophet is superior to the king. It embodies misgivings about kings and their tendencies – above all, their tendency to ignore the word of the prophet. And at each step it shows the prophet Samuel in charge of the flow of events, anointing kings, limiting their powers, and dismissing them from office when they prove obdurate to the divine word.

A question that naturally arises, however, is what this story dominated by prophets and their concerns about the role of kings has to do with a history written from the standpoint of the book of Deuteronomy. While the image of a prophet is accorded Moses in Deuteronomy – so much so that he becomes its model for what a legitimate prophet is like – Deuteronomy stresses not obedience to words uttered by prophets, but to the commandments written in the book of the Law of Moses. And most strikingly, the report of Samuel’s objection to kings never mentions their relationship to that “book of the Law.”

The dominance of the prophetic critique of kings led Campbell to conclude (back in 1986) that underlying 1 Sam is what amounted to a “prophetic history” of the early years of the monarchy – a history written from a prophetic point of view (not just a “rewrite” from a prophetic perspective, as I have argued and will again). According to Campbell, the Deuteronomistic historian took over this “prophetic history,” making a few modifications, such as the note about Samuel serving as a judge for all Israel. Nevertheless, he is right to note a strong emphasis on prophets that is distinct from the emphasis elsewhere on following the "book of the Torah."

A prophetic emphasis is readily detectable even into the book of 2 Samuel, as in the story of the prophet Nathan taking David to task for arranging Uriah’s death in battle as part of his cover-up of his affair with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba: “1 And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 3 but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the
wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” 5 Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; 6 he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” 7 Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

In the ensuing verses, Nathan condemns David’s house to fall victim to the sword and foretells David being disgraced by some within his own house. After reminding David of the advantages he had been given, he asks him, “9 Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?” – Notice that David’s misdeed is characterized as “despising the word of the LORD.” However, let's notice that "despising the word of the LORD" here is not as direct a reference to a prophetic oracle as we have seen previously. Indeed, what David is guilty of comes closer to the sort of excesses Samuel warned were characteristic of kings; kings are takers, and they will appropriate what you cherish. Neither is the relationship between Nathan and David as hard-edged as the portrayal of Samuel's condemnations of Saul. David may be taken to task for doing a wrong deed, but he is not stripped of his throne or any royal prerogatives by Nathan.

What this suggests is that the relationship between kings and prophets is not always portrayed in such contrastive colors as in the narratives about Samuel and Saul. Those narratives betray a distinctive perspective that sees kings entirely as negative and prophets as the vigilant propounders and guards of the LORD's will.

Accordingly, the question to be raised is whether the prophetic critique is so integral to the narrative as to require us to agree with Campbell that a prophetic history underlies the Deuteronomistic History as one of its sources. This is a major debate in scholarship on the Deuteronomistic History: is this portrayal of prophets a building block used by the historian or is it a subsequent layer/veneer placed upon the historian's story? Indeed, we've already seen that the prophetic critique of the monarch in 1 Sam 8 and 12 is a later layer, overriding a narrative originally taking a positive view of kings as those who promote justice. We’ve also seen that the prophetic critique of Saul has overridden strains of a more positive assessment of his reign, including hints that Saul was thought to have followed Deuteronomy's demands in the elimination of wizards and mediums.

Consequently, it is more likely, in my view (and that of others), that the Deuteronomistic History received a rewrite from a perspective that elevated prophets. What I will contend is that the "original" version/editition of the Deuteronomistic History took a much more positive view of Israel's life and the origins of the monarchy (including its first king, Saul) than the edition we're familiar with in Samuel–Kings, with its heavy-handed role for prophets.

It's not that the Deuteronomistic History had no role for prophets prior to the rewrite from the prophetic perspective. Undoubtedly prophets figured in the story
from the outset; narratives about prophets, including their interactions with kings, were among the elements that the Deuteronomistic historian used in constructing his narratives. But the relationship between prophets and kings was likely not of the purely oppositional type established in the story of Saul, nor was the monarchy looked at with such disdain as it is in 1 Sam 8-12. These are characteristics infused into the story by a later editor who accented the role of prophets.

This doesn't mean that this writer lacked concern for the book of the law. In fact 2 Kings 17:13 gives this intriguing report: "Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.” – Keeping "the law" is the concern, but notice that those who deliver the law are "my servants the prophets."

As we'll see in a couple sessions, as we near the end of our consideration of the Deuteronomistic History, there is evidence that this statement (and five more like it in 2 Kings) were part of the final rewriting by an editor living during the time of the exile. It is that author who views prophets as the opponents not only of kings, but the people as a whole. And that is most likely the editor responsible for transforming the narrative about the establishment of the monarchy in 1 Sam 7 into a castigation of the monarchy and who made the reign of Saul such a dismal failure by virtue of his refusal to listen to the prophet, Samuel.

Another way to say this is that the Deuteronomistic History, while the product of people very much concerned with the standards of Deuteronomy, is not written by a single set of people who have in view the same elements of Deuteronomy as their touchstone. There are plenty of passages that view Deuteronomy's demand for centralization of worship as the standard for evaluating kings. Other voices, however, are more insistent on the role of prophets as mediators of the divine word (à la Deuteronomy 18) and set such figures in opposition to kings to explain why, in the end, both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom succumbed to their enemies.

That's the large picture. For the moment, I want to key in on evidence for this multi-layered fabric of the Deuteronomistic History by raising a question having to do with the role of prophets: How did these writers deal with the fact that the dynasty established by David subsumed, in a sense, prophetic power to royal power?

Of course, as you know from reading Tov’s article, the story of David’s rise is an amalgam of several stories about how David gained prominence. And yet the lead story, as in the case of Saul, has to do with Samuel anointing David to be the next king. The prophet’s role is again crucial. But how does the Deuteronomistic historian accommodate the fact that after David, that prophetic role for setting up
and rejecting kings no longer exists, due to dynastic succession? It is via a prophet, although the story (in 2 Sam 7) is notably minus the sort of heavy-handed handed prophetic critique of kings that we’ve witnessed in the relationship between Samuel and Saul. And that points to this story having been inherited by the earliest Deuteronomistic historian and integrated into his (positive) story.

The passage opens with a proposal by David to the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 7: “1Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2the 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.” 3Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.” 4But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: 5Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” 8Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9and 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. 10And 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, 11from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 12When 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. 13He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”

This oracle divides rather easily into two sections: vv. 1-7 concern David’s proposal to build a temple and the LORD’s rejection of that proposal. Vv. 8-17 are introduced with a new command to speak to David (“Now therefore, thus you say to my servant David…”) and have to do with his rule and a guarantee regarding his successor.

Let’s first notice the nature of the interchange in vv. 1-7, which David initiates
with his proposal to build a house (viz. temple) for the LORD. First, notice that the prophet's role in this dialogue is not to upbraid the king (as was the case in Samuel's relationship to Saul). In fact, the prophet initially endorses David's proposal and, even when he reverses his position after hearing from the LORD, his stance towards David is not antagonistic.

David's reason for proposing that he build a "house for the LORD" (i.e., a temple) is based on observing the disparity between his dwelling and that for the ark of the LORD, which is portrayed in 1 Sam 5-7 as the portable throne of the deity. Whereas he now has a house of cedar to live in, the LORD has an inferior dwelling. The LORD’s rejection of this proposal addresses David’s concern that the LORD have adequate housing, and the way it is worded implies that David is concerned with the LORD being miffed. Thus, after the LORD notes his previous practice – never has he dwelt in anything but tent and tabernacle – he points out that never did he call previous leaders on the carpet for not building him a house of cedar – the implication being that he won’t hold David culpable for not doing so.

With that in mind, I suggest that the NRSV gives a misleading translation of the question in the last half of v. 5, which it renders, “Are you the one to build me a house to live in?” They correctly translate it as a question, and they are quite right to stress the pronoun “you,” which is emphasized in the Hebrew word order, as those of you who know Hebrew can see. Where they are mistaken, in my opinion (and that of others) is in understanding the issue to be whether David is the right one to build the temple. The issue, rather, is whether the offer is appropriate. That is the brunt of the argument in what follows: “I’ve always dwelt in a tent, and that’s been fine. Never did I take to task anyone for failing to build me a house of cedar, so what makes you think I’ll do so if you don’t build one?” In keeping with that, a better translation of the question would be, “Will you build me a house to live in?” That is justified not only of the argument that ensues, but also by the position of the preposition + pronoun translated “for me.” In effect, the LORD characterizes David’s desire to build him a house as patronizing: he has no need of anything David can provide him. If the emphasis were on who should build the temple, we could expect the ensuing explanation to be about why David is not fit to do so, rather than the proposal itself being without precedent.

Indeed, later on the Deuteronomistic historian makes an excuse for David not building the temple in 1 Kings 5.3, where Solomon addresses the Phoenecian king, Hiram, with whom he is placing an order for cedar for the temple: “You know that my father David could not build a house for the name of the LORD his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until the LORD put them under the soles of his feet.” (1 Chronicles 22:8 transforms this into the notion that David's hands were too soiled with blood for him to build the temple.) However, the rationale of 1 Kings 5 stands at variance with the statement at the
beginning of 2 Samuel 7 that “the LORD had given David rest from all his enemies around him.” And yet the reason given in 2 Sam 7 – that the LORD simply negated David’s proposal of the temple – rests oddly with the Deuteronomic conviction that a central worship site has been mandated. I.e., the rebuff has a non-Deuteronomic character. There is no indication that the building of a temple is desirable; the LORD says he doesn't need it.

The non-Deuteronomistic nature of this rebuff is also evident in the way Nathan’s oracle describes the temple as a place for the LORD to live in. As you might recall from Weinfeld's article, “Deuteronomy's Theological Revolution,” Deuteronomy stresses that the LORD dwells in heaven, so that the central worship site is not his habitation, but “the place he will cause his name to dwell.” Not only does this passage speak of building a house for the LORD to inhabit, but the LORD doesn’t object to that conception of his abode, noting only that his dwelling has characteristically been tent and tabernacle. This is a very non-Deuteronomistic idea of the temple, which we'll see modified shortly as the Deuteronimistic historian stretches out this scene.

In any case, the LORD’s rejection of David’s proposal is aimed at the suggestion that David might be the LORD’s patron. In fact, the use of pronouns in the Hebrew of the verses that follow stresses the LORD’s role as David’s patron: “Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: 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.”

Corresponding to the contrasting pronouns in the question, “Will you make me a house to dwell in?” the pronoun “I” receives emphasis here. Over against David’s proposal to serve as beneficiary for the LORD, the LORD asserts his role as beneficiary to David: “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel.” And the ensuing verses continue to stress the LORD’s patronage of David and Israel.

The LORD’s role as patron is again emphasized in vv. 11-12: “Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. 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.” Here again the word order in Hebrew is significant, since it stresses the word “house.” Thus, we could translate this well, “the LORD declares that a house will the LORD make for you.” Whereas it was commonplace in the ANE for kings to build temples for their deity, this story restricts the king from making the deity indebted to him. Indeed, David will become even more indebted to the LORD.

Thus far, then, the story of David's proposal to build the temple has proceeded
on very non-Deuteronomistic grounds, suggesting that this was a story inherited by the Deuteronomistic historian that he pressed into service.

At this point, however, we encounter a remarkable reversal of the objection to David’s earlier proposal: “13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” – Recall that the objection was not to David building a house for the LORD, but to the assumption that such a house was needed: “6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.” – The LORD has no concern for such a facility.

As we saw, 1 Kings 5 provides a different explanation for David’s not having built the temple, suggesting that the author of that passage found it necessary to explain why David had not done so; he feels the need to provide an excuse for David not having built what is so essential to Deuteronomy’s view of Israel’s life. Now let’s notice that what David had not had opportunity to build, according to that passage, was “a house for the name of the LORD his God,” just as v. 13 of 2 Samuel 7 predicts that David’s heir will build a house “for my name.” Both of these texts voice the perspective of the Deuteronomistic historian, using Deuteronomy’s understanding of what the temple constitutes: a house for the LORD’s name. And now it is something that should be built.

Accordingly, 2 Samuel 7:13 embodies a perspective at variance with the earlier rejection of David’s proposal. This prediction that David’s son will be the one to build the temple has been inserted secondarily, creating the illusion that the refusal of David’s offer earlier simply concerned who would build the temple. Indeed, the Deuteronomistic historian provides the same adjustment of this language in Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the temple, in 1 Kings 8, where he uses the language of 2 Sam 7: “17 My father David had it in mind to build a house for the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. 18 But the LORD said to my father David, ‘You did well to consider building a house for my name; 19 nevertheless you shall not build the house, but your son who shall be born to you shall build the house for my name.’” The Deuteronomistic historian has removed the tension created by the LORD’s argument about the temple as not essential and has transformed the LORD’s objection into approval of David’s intent, while assigning the task to his son.

But equally a part of the Deuteronomistic adjustment of 2 Samuel 7 is the expansion of the LORD’s vow that he would establish the kingdom of David’s son into a promise to establish “the throne of his kingdom forever.” The establishment of the kingdom spoken of in v. 12 means simply the confirmation of David’s son’s rule. With that fits the description of the LORD’s policy towards him in vv. 14-15: “14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul,
whom I put away from before you.” Accordingly, the promise of the establishment of Solomon’s rule means that it will remain stable, even if disciplinary action proves necessary. David’s son will not suffer Saul’s fate.

By comparison, the expansion of that into an assertion of the establishment of “the throne of his kingdom… forever” – which stands alongside the Deuteronomistic language of "a house for my name" – creates the promise of a dynasty, something stated even more clearly in v. 16, which again speaks of the enduring throne of the kingdom: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” I.e. the story the Deuteronomist historian used contained an interaction between prophet and king much like the interactions we have seen previously: the king’s prerogatives are curtailed through the word of a prophet. To this the Deuteronomistic historian supplied a modification by asserting that while David would not build a house for the LORD, his son would. Moreover, he inserted a promise that took the original oracle beyond an assurance the David’s kingdom would remain stable through the reign of his son, by promising the throne to David’s descendants in perpetuity.

So what does the Deuteronomistic historian do with the line of kings descended from David? That is the question we'll pick up on next time.