

# DOWNPLAYING THE DAVIDIC DYNASTY

## DAVID J. ZUCKER, MOSHE REISS

### INTRODUCTION

A continuing issue in the books of the later biblical period (the Exilic, and post-Exilic eras) is the gradual downplaying of the concept of the necessity for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. The focus instead becomes the repatriation of the Exiles to Judea and the rebuilding of the Temple with the reestablishment of its cults. The meaning given to the figure of Cyrus the Great is representative of these matters. Cyrus' role is to insure those goals (repatriation, rebuilding, and reestablishment), thereby functionally bringing about the redemption of the Israelites. This reflects a shrewd calculation by the biblical leadership of the realpolitik of the Persian and later Hellenistic eras. In this article we trace the trajectory of the Davidic dynasty issue from the very late pre-Exilic period through the Exilic/post-Exilic eras. We focus primarily on the books of Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra/Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Daniel.

### JEREMIAH AND EZEKIEL

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak of the return of the Davidic dynasty. In the post-Exilic period, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah discuss this issue. By contrast, in the Exilic and post-Exilic eras, (Second) Isaiah, Ezra/Nehemiah (c. fifth century BCE), the Chronicler (c. fifth/fourth century BCE), and Daniel (written c. second century BCE) all downplay a Davidic figure.

Late in the pre-Exilic period, Jeremiah sees at some indeterminate point that there will be major changes in Judean society. The future will be an improvement on the present. Jeremiah assumes that the monarchy will be restored.

*Moshe Reiss, a resident of Israel and Oxford, England is a rabbi, and a PhD from Oxford University. He has lectured at Columbia University and the Catholic University of Leuven and was assistant rabbi at Yale University. He has been widely published in numerous journals on the Bible. [www.MosheReiss.org](http://www.MosheReiss.org) David J. Zucker, PhD, BCC, served as Rabbi/Chaplain and Director of Chaplaincy Care at Shalom Park in Aurora, Colorado. He is the author of Israel's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 1994); American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction (Jason Aronson/Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), and The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Paulist, 2005). [www.DavidJZucker.org](http://www.DavidJZucker.org).*

He specifically prophesizes, that the *days are coming . . . when I will restore the fortunes of my people . . . and I will bring them back to the land that I gave their ancestors . . . they shall serve the Lord their God and David, the king whom I will raise up for them* (Jer. 30:3, 9). He also says, the *days are coming . . . [when] I will raise up a true branch of David's line . . . there shall never be an end to men of David's line who sit upon the throne of the House of Israel* (Jer. 33:14-17. Cf. Jer. 7:5-7; 29:1, 10-14.) Jeremiah's younger contemporary, the Exilic prophet Ezekiel prophesied the return of the people, and further that the former northern kingdom would reunite with the south, creating a new house of Israel (Ezek. 37:1-14; 15-28). *My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them . . . my servant David as their prince for all time* (Ezek. 37:24-25).

However, when Ezekiel describes the future rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 40-48) he refers not to a Davidic king, but rather uses the more generic phrase – *nasi / n'siei* – prince / princes of Israel (Ezek. 45:7; 46:4; 45:9). Ezekiel, living in Exile, expresses a certain caution when referring to a future Davidic ruler, terming him not a king, but rather as a *nasi*, a leader. To speak of an Israelite king could have been seen as seditious, and Ezekiel chooses his words carefully to avoid this perception.

## SECOND ISAIAH

The subdued approach to the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy finds its full voice in the teachings of Second Isaiah, and especially with his terming Cyrus as God's anointed.<sup>1</sup> The figure referred to by Bible scholars as Second Isaiah prophesied circa 550-539 BCE. He is aware of the changing political landscape. He understands that there are world powers, earlier the Assyrians, and in his day, the Babylonians and the Persians, who could become tools of God's will.

Second Isaiah describes Cyrus as having a very benevolent role. He is to end the period of the Exile. Isaiah designates Cyrus as God's "anointed" (Isa. 45:1). Cyrus is to see that God's will is to be accomplished: repatriation, rebuilding, reestablishment. Isaiah uses the word *mashiah*, but this simply means anointed/appointed, not anointed-as-Messiah, a usage would not come about for at least another five hundred years. Cyrus is designated God's shepherd, God's appointed, and as someone that God loves (cf. Isa. 44:28;

45:1; 48:14). By using these terms, Isaiah puts Cyrus into a unique category, a benevolent ruler of a foreign empire, chosen by God to play a positive role in the destiny of the Israelites. "[F]or the prophet [Isaiah], Yahweh is the power behind the conquests of Cyrus; he grants Cyrus world supremacy in order that he may restore Israel . . . the work of Cyrus is a manifestation of the power of Yahweh, which the whole world can see."<sup>2</sup> His "historic mission is to put an end to the Babylonian Empire (43:14; 48:14-15), liberate prisoners and deportees, especially the descendants of Judeans who were deported by the Babylonians (42:6-7; 43:5-7; 45:13), restore Jerusalem to its former state, and rebuild its temple, and the cities of Judah devastated during the Babylonian conquest (44:26-28, 45:13)."<sup>3</sup>

Second Isaiah mentions David once, but not in a dynastic sense (Isa. 55:3). He refers to a restored Jerusalem several times. Yet, it is noteworthy that the prophet fails to mention a Davidic dynasty.<sup>4</sup> With the fundamental goals of redemption fulfilled by Cyrus, there is no need to raise the politically touchy subject of a future Jewish king.

Terming Cyrus as the anointed of the Lord is an honorific title. Isaiah does not expect Cyrus to embrace Judaism, nor does he prophesy world dominion for Cyrus. "In fact, the prophet speaks only of the victories of Cyrus and not of his empire. He says nothing about Persia and Media . . . There is a purpose for the victories of Cyrus, to wit, the punishment of Babylon and the restoration of Jerusalem."<sup>5</sup>

#### HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

Haggai prophesies in the late sixth century, about the year 520-518 BCE, along with his contemporary Zechariah. According to the biblical book of Ezra written more than a century later, the two men worked together in common purpose (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). Haggai and Zechariah support and encourage the official Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel and the High Priest Joshua in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel is a grandson of exiled King Jehoiachin, thus part of the Davidic line. Joshua son of Jehozadak (cf. Jeshua son of Jozadak, Ezra 3:2), is a priest of the Zadokite lineage. Zerubbabel and Joshua hold commissions under Cyrus's successors Cambyses (530/529-522 B.C.E.) and Darius (522-486 B.C.E.), (cf. Ezra 3:2 ff.; Hag. 1:12).

Haggai states that there will be a restored Davidic monarchy (Hag. 2:20-23). *I will take you, Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make of you a signet ring; for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of Hosts* (Hag. 2:23). Yet, it is important to note that Haggai does not explicitly identify Zerubbabel as a Davidic descendant.

In Zechariah, the prophet speaks specifically of God designating a successor for the Davidic line. Presumably this is Zerubbabel, although this is not explicitly mentioned by the prophet. In Zechariah's fourth vision, he sees the high priest Joshua standing with the angel of the Lord. Joshua is told that God is going to bring *My servant the Branch* (Zech. 3:8; cf. Jer. 33:15). The next verse addresses Joshua in the present. The Branch seems to be a person that will only appear in the future, seemingly referring to a prediction for a future restoration of the Davidic dynasty. In the interim the High Priest will rule.<sup>6</sup>

In Zechariah's fifth vision, an angel shows the prophet a lamp stand of gold with a bowl, and two olive trees. The olive trees signify two consecrated figures, presumably, but not explicitly stated, Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest (Zech. 4:1-14). A subdivision of this may feature God's message for Zerubbabel. This passage may be eschatological. In Zechariah's eighth vision, comprised of chapter 6, God tells Zechariah to make crowns of silver and gold. He is to place a crown on the High Priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak. Mention is made of a man, again named the Branch. At some undesignated, presumably future time, he will build the Temple. The crowns shall remain at the Temple (Zech. 6:9-15). Zechariah states that *harmonious understanding shall prevail between the Branch and the priest* (Zech. 6:13).

Haggai and Zechariah support the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, but are cautious about explicitly identifying Zerubbabel as a potential king figure due to the prevailing political climate. Historically, "[f]ollowing the accounts of the completion of the temple, Zerubbabel disappears from the [Hebrew] biblical record . . . What happened to him is unknown. Some scholars have proposed that Zerubbabel fell into disfavor with Persian authorities and was then either deposed, taken to Persia, imprisoned, and/or put to death."<sup>7</sup> It is possible that having become the object of prophecies that suggest a return of the monarchy, Zerubbabel was removed by the Persians as a preemptive act to quash any thoughts of a political restoration. No doubt the Persian authori-

ties were displeased at the thought of a reconstituted Davidic dynasty, seeing this as a move to disconnect from Persian rule. In any case there was no actual restoration of the monarchy at that time.

#### EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

The book of Ezra is set some time later in the fifth century BCE. Artaxerxes king of Persia sends Ezra to Judah with enormous powers. His role is to teach and to enforce the laws of Moses. Technically, Ezra's position is *a scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given* (Ezra 7:6).

"Ezra-Nehemiah is not only vague about leaders in general but about Zerubbabel's specific position in the community in particular . . . Zerubbabel's Davidic origin, which Chronicles establishes and Haggai and Zechariah imply, is never mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah,"<sup>8</sup> thereby downplaying any notions of succession. It is "astonishing that this Davidic lineage is never mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah! . . . nothing hints that Zerubbabel continues the Davidic line."<sup>9</sup> Only in Chronicles (I Chr. 3:16-19) is Zerubbabel listed as the grandson of Jehoiachin, the second to last king of Judah.

In the prayer by the Levite leaders found in Nehemiah there is no mention of a restored monarchy in the near future (Neh. 9:36-37). The kings referred to in this passage are clearly not Davidic, but Persian. There is no call here for a restored Davidic presence; the people understand that they are subservient to Persian authority. "The minimal amount of attention given to the Davidic monarch . . . suggest that here too the monarchy is viewed as having attained its goal in the erection of the temple."<sup>10</sup>

In the political milieu of the time, it was not prudent to discuss a restored monarchy. This is seen very clearly when Sanballat accuses Nehemiah of encouraging *prophets to proclaim about you in Jerusalem saying, "There is a king in Judah!"* (Neh. 6:7), indicating that *you and the Jews plan to rebel* (Neh. 6:6). Nehemiah counters that this is a pure fabrication and he never made any such proclamations (Neh. 6:8-9).

#### CHRONICLES

While Chronicles features David's name well over 250 times, the Chronicler stresses David's importance not as the founder of the dynasty, but as a kind of second founder of the cult, following Moses. David also secures Jeru-

salem and makes plans for the building of the Temple, although that task falls to his son Solomon. "As Moses had once received plans for the tabernacle, so David now received plans for the temple from the Lord (I Chron. 22:1, 28:19); and the place was designated by the angel of the Lord (I Chron. 21:18 ff.)." While personnel arrangements such as the Levites carrying the ark, and positions of the priests and Levites are connected to Moses (I Chron. 15:15; II Chron. 30:16), "most of the priestly, Levitical, and other personnel appointments in connection with the temple cultus are attributed to David, *who was virtually a second Moses*" (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

As noted before, the Judeans living under Persian suzerainty understood that a call for the reestablishment of a Davidic dynasty would be regarded as seditious. With a focus on Cyrus' repatriation of the Judean community, rebuilding the Temple, and reestablishment of the cultus, but with no suggestion for the reconstitution of the Davidic dynasty, Chronicles takes a politically prudent position.

#### DANIEL

There is no attempt in Daniel to explicitly discuss the Davidic dynasty. Indeed, the call for an independent state under Davidic rule would have been foolhardy, and regarded as seditious by the Persians or the Hellenists. Yet, there are references to Jerusalem throughout the book, primarily in chapter 9, and other cultic issues such as the Temple vessels are noted. The book of Daniel freely discusses ritual and theological issues, and even Messianic figures, particularly in chapter 7, but Daniel is careful to avoid direct mention of a future Davidic king.

#### CONCLUSION

Traditional Judaism believes that eventually there will be a return of the exiles, restoration of the Temple along with the reestablishment of the cultus in Jerusalem, and the restoration of the Davidic line. These ideas are explicitly stated in Jeremiah's prophecies (for example, Jer. 7:5-7; 29:1, 10-14; 30:1-3, 8-9; 33:14-18), and in those of Ezekiel (chapter 37). By the late sixth century, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah advocate for the restored Davidic dynasty, but in a less direct way. Zechariah speaks specifically of God designating a successor for the Davidic line (presumably Zerubbabel, a grandson

of exiled King Jehoiachin) terming this person, "*My servant the Branch*" (Zech. 3:8). Zechariah suggests that the Branch will rebuild the Temple (Zech. 6:12 ff.), a prophecy not yet realized.

By the time of Second Isaiah, and later Ezra/Nehemiah, and then the Chronicler and Daniel, the role of a Davidic monarch is downplayed. There may even be a realization that it is unlikely that there will be kings from the Davidic dynasty ruling from Jerusalem in their near future. These figures speak of Cyrus the Great as the figure who determines and guarantees the repatriation of the Jews, and the rebuilding and reestablishment of the Temple, roles previously associated with a Davidic king.

The traditional Jewish view is that the Davidic line would continue, eventually appearing as the Messiah. In the times of the Mishna and Talmud, the Jewish communities in Babylonia and Palestine both had leaders of Davidic lineage, the Resh Galuta and Nassi.<sup>12</sup> But to openly speak of an actual king from the lineage of King David was considered politically problematic from the Persian era of Biblical history until the close of the Tanakh.

#### NOTES

1. See M. Reiss, "Cyrus as Messiah," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 40:3 (July-September 2012): 159-162.
2. J. L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, (AB 20; Doubleday, Garden City, 1968), p. 78; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) pp. 158-160.
3. J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, (AB 19A; Doubleday, New York, 2002), p. 92.
4. B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament, Second Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 426. In a similar manner, Baltzer states that Isaiah's "theme is not the renewal of the dynasty and kingdom of David." K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary of Isaiah 40-55* (Hermeneia, trans. M. Kohl, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 30.
5. Y. Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity and Deutero-Isaiah*, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1970), p. 116.
6. A. Laato, *Josiah and David Redivivus: The Historical Josiah and the Messianic Expectations of Exilic and Postexilic Times*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1992), pp. 243-44. See also Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, "Haggai, Book of", in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *Vol. 3: The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 20.
7. B.E. Beyer, Zerubbabel (Person) in D.N. Freedman, ed. *Vol. 6 Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) pp. 1085-1086.
8. T. C. Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, The Society of Biblical Literature, Monograph Series No. 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 50.
9. Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose*, p. 23.
10. R. L. Braun, "Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah: Theology and Literary History," in J.A. Emerton, ed. *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament*, (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p. 61

11. J. M. Myers, *I Chronicles* (AB 12; Garden City: Doubleday 1965), pp. lxviii, lxix.

12. See Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) to Zechariah 12:7 where he speaks of the scions of the Davidic lineage at his time living in Baghdad.