

15. The Aftermath of Desolation - Exile and Symbolic Restoration

With the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. the Davidic kingdom had come to its decreed end. Not only was David's *theocratic* house in ruins – expressed most powerfully in the demolition of Yahweh's sanctuary, the Lord had severed his *dynastic* house. Even if the Israelite nation could possibly be restored to Canaan and the temple rebuilt, without the continuance of David's royal line there could be no true recovery of David's kingdom.

And yet the Lord's prophets were emphatic that He would never renounce His covenant with David or depart from His faithfulness to him. This central theme in the prophetic proclamation is significant given the fact that the writing prophets emerged following the fracturing of David's kingdom under Rehoboam. The mere existence of Israel in the north and Judah in the south testified to the continuing presence of Yahweh's sword in David's house, and both sub-kingdoms were moving inexorably toward destruction and captivity. Moses' warning to the sons of Israel on the plains of Moab was coming to realization and neither house of Israel would be spared.

Division, decline and impending destruction characterized the Israelite kingdom at the time the writing prophets (Major and Minor Prophets) came on the scene and their message reflected that state of affairs. Each of the pre-exile prophets brought the same double proclamation to their respective audience: On the one hand, Yahweh's day of patience and petition had ended; both houses of Israel would indeed go into captivity. On the other hand, this complete desolation of David's kingdom would not spell the end of the promises contained in the Davidic Covenant. The God of unrelenting *hesed* would not forsake his mercies to David; His covenant promises would not go unrealized.

This was the uniform witness of the prophets preceding the exile, but in Jeremiah's case the dilemma was worsened (and the corresponding need for faith heightened). For Jeremiah revealed that, not only was the house of David – then localized in the southern kingdom of Judah – to follow its northern sister into destruction and exile, the Lord had also determined to cut off David's dynasty forever (ref. again Jeremiah 22:24-30). If the complete physical destruction of the Israelite kingdom seemed to make the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant difficult, the severing of David's royal line appeared to make it utterly impossible. How could Yahweh fulfill His promise to forever establish David's throne and kingdom in his son when his royal line had been severed?

- The only apparent resolution was that the son promised in the covenant would not come from the line of Davidic kings, but from an entirely different line of descent originating with David. This was certainly possible since David had other sons.
- But if this were God's intention, then He had misstated His promise to David. For under this circumstance it simply wasn't true that *David's* throne and kingdom – which had been initiated in himself and perpetuated through his royal line descending from Solomon – were to be established forever. The actual truth was that a *different* Davidic kingdom was to emerge in the future grounded in a *different* Davidic dynasty.

- a. Despite appearances, God's word to David was sure; in keeping with it, He promised a Judean remnant would return to Canaan. Moreover, the temple would be rebuilt and Jerusalem restored (Isaiah 44:24-28; cf. also 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Jeremiah 25:1-12, 29:10). Taken alone, the Jews could have construed these promises as indicating the restoration of David's kingdom after seventy years of Babylonian captivity. The implication would then be that, though Yahweh's sword had desolated David's house, it hadn't destroyed it. But in order to leave no doubt that the pre-exile kingdom was not going to be revived, the Lord cut off David's royal line. Without a Davidic king there could be no Davidic kingdom.

Thus, when the exiles returned to Jerusalem under Cyrus as Yahweh promised and began to rebuild the temple, the post-exile prophets (Haggai and Zechariah) were emphatic that that work didn't signal an impending restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Both indicated that the temple rebuilding process was only another prefiguration of what the Lord had promised David (Haggai 2:1-9). The Davidic Covenant specified that David's seed would build Yahweh's house; *no such seed existed at the time of the rebuilding of the temple and, based on the Lord's pronouncement to Jehoiachin, it seemed no such seed could arise in the future*. Nevertheless, Zechariah insisted that the Davidic son ("Branch") would indeed come and that He would build the Lord's house as a priest-king – the priest according to the order of Melchizedek (cf. Zechariah 6:9-15; Psalm 110).

A half-century later, a second and then a third group of Judean exiles returned to Jerusalem during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes I (Esther's step-son). These episodes, recorded in the second half of Ezra (7:1ff) and the book of Nehemiah, focused on the restoration of the Jerusalem community and the city itself, epitomized in the reconstruction of the city walls. As with the rebuilding of the temple, the restoration of David's subjects and the seat of his (and Yahweh's) throne held out hope for the recovery of his kingdom, but still there was no Davidic king ruling over his house. The temple and city had been rebuilt as prophesied, but Israel existed as a powerless vassal state under Gentile dominion.

- b. Further indication that the above restorative events didn't portend the revival of David's former kingdom is the fact of *Israel's continuing exile*. David's kingdom had consisted of both houses of Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-5), and yet God had decreed that only a remnant of Judah would return to Canaan. Like the true temple and the kingdom itself, the restoration of the northern ten tribes awaited the coming of the Davidic seed (cf. Isaiah 11:1-13; Jeremiah 30-33; Hosea 1-3).

The partial restoration promised by Isaiah and Jeremiah was realized, but the prophets of the post-exile period were adamant that that recovery didn't fulfill God's promise to David. In this way they were affirming the prophets who preceded them. For, long before the exile of Israel and Judah, the prophets were proclaiming that the coming kingdom, while *portrayed* by the Israelite theocracy, would introduce an entirely new order of things: a comprehensive renewal of the whole created order by means of the redeeming work of the Davidic Branch.

- c. Another important, but often overlooked, indication that the Davidic theocracy was gone forever was the conspicuous absence of Yahweh's *Shekinah* from the second temple (ref. Ezra 6:13-18). Despite the fact that the temple was rebuilt and refurnished, there is notably no mention of the ark subsequent to the Babylonian desolation of Jerusalem. The text's silence regarding the ark is consistent with its silence regarding the restoration of Yahweh's presence to the second temple.

The descent of Yahweh's glory-cloud had culminated Israel's construction of the tabernacle. By this visible manifestation the Lord was attesting His fulfillment of His promises to the patriarchs and their seed (Israel). For at the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant – first fulfilled in relation to Abraham's physical seed in connection with the Sinai Covenant – was Yahweh's promise to be the God of Abraham and His descendants. He promised to take them to Himself and dwell with them by bringing them to the place of His own habitation (cf. Genesis 17:1-8 with Exodus 15:17 and 25:1-9). All of Canaan was Yahweh's holy habitation, but His presence was localized in His sanctuary above the wings of the cherubim.

This same phenomenon was repeated later when the promise of a permanent central sanctuary was fulfilled in the Jerusalem temple. After the priests placed the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies and departed, the glory-cloud of the Lord's presence again descended and filled the temple (1 Kings 8:1-11).

The Scripture makes much of the Lord's glory-presence in His sanctuary, and the reason is that it represented Yahweh's intimacy with His covenant son and therefore His faithfulness to His promise to Abraham. The Lord's *Shekinah* in the Holy of Holies signified that He had kept His promise to dwell with Abraham's seed as a Father. Beyond that, it testified that He had not forgotten or forsaken His ancient oath in Eden to overcome His estrangement from Adam's seed.

The covenantal/relational significance of the *Shekinah* explains why the Lord used a vision of His glory departing from the temple to communicate to His priest Ezekiel (who, along with many others, was already in exile in Babylon) the gravity of Judah's impending desolation and captivity (Ezekiel 10:1-11:23). The vision indicated that the city where Yahweh had put His name was now empty of His presence and His sanctuary had been reduced to a meaningless religious relic. David's kingdom was *ichabod*: the glory had departed from Israel.

Thus the irony of Judah's conviction that Jerusalem would not fall by virtue of God's presence there. The temple still stood, but the people couldn't see what Ezekiel did: Yahweh had already departed His sanctuary; Jerusalem with its focal point in the temple had become an unclean place and would be destroyed (Ezekiel 24:1-27). The holiness of Jerusalem and its temple was due to the Lord's presence there; without it they were no more holy than Sodom or Babylon. The returning exiles rebuilt the temple on Mount Zion, but the Lord didn't restore His presence to it. *The divine glory would return to the sanctuary when Yahweh **Himself** – not His glory-cloud – came to it* (Malachi 3:1-4; cf. Isaiah 4:2-6; Jeremiah 3:12-18).