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Judah and the House of David

by Megan Bishop Moore

According to the **Hebrew Bible**, David and his house—his descendants—were appointed by God to rule all Israel (2Sam 7:1-17). The term “Israel” here encompasses a united kingdom that included both the tribe of Judah in the south, David’s home territory where he first came to power, and the ten **northern tribes** of Israel, where Saul ruled before David took over his kingdom. After the death of David’s son and heir Solomon, the tribes of Israel split from the united kingdom, and thus, beginning with David’s grandson Rehoboam, the house of David ruled only Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem. The **Babylonian** destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and the **exile** of the last Davidic kings, Jehoiakin and Zedekiah, ended the Davidic **monarchy**.

In several places, the **Hebrew Bible** ties the health and fate of the kingdom of Judah to the religious conduct of its leaders, David’s descendants. Kings who tolerated the worship of foreign gods brought on disastrous consequences. The secession of the **Israelite** tribes after Solomon’s death is attributed to this problem (**1Kgs 11:1-13**), and Manasseh’s **idolatry** is offered as the primary reason why Jerusalem was destroyed by the **Babylonians** (**2Kgs 21:10-15**). In contrast, when Jerusalem survives **Assyria**’s violent march through Judah in 701 B.C.E., the Hebrew Bible credits King Hezekiah and his great devotion to God (**2Kgs 19**).

The biblical use of the term “house of David” draws attention to God’s choice of David and his descendants as an enduring **dynasty**, but in the wider **ancient Near East**, “house of David” would also have had a geopolitical meaning. It was common for a kingdom to be called the “house of” a king, with the king named being a prominent or ancestral king. For instance, the **Assyrians** called the kingdom of Israel the “house of Omri,” after the founder of one of its early dynasties. The ninth-century B.C.E. **Tel Dan Stela**, in which an Aramean king boasts of defeating the house of David, shows that the Arameans knew of the kingdom of Judah as the house of David and provides the only mention of the house of David outside of the Bible.

The tradition that the legitimate ruler of greater Israel is always a descendant of David is one of the most prominent and enduring in the Bible. Along these lines, the Hebrew Bible makes sure that it is clear that all the kings of the kingdom of Judah were, in fact, descendants of David. For instance, though at one point all the descendants of David had apparently been slaughtered, the **narrative** recounts that a legitimate Davidic child, Joash, was hidden by the priests and later emerged to restore the throne to the Davidic line (**2Kgs 11:1-12**). Other biblical and apocryphal texts take care to note whether Jewish rulers in late **antiquity** were of David’s house. For instance, Zerubbabel, who leads the community of exiles returning to Jerusalem in the early Persian period (late sixth century B.C.E.), was a descendant of David (**1Chr 3:17**), but the **Hasmoneans**, who set up a Jewish monarchy during Hellenistic times (circa 140 to 63 B.C.E.), were not (**1Macc 2:1**, where Joarib is a priest, **1Chr 9:10**). In the **New Testament**, both Matthew and Luke trace Jesus’ lineage to David (**Matt 1:6**, **Luke 3:31**).

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