

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series
The Mystery of Israel and the Church

Spring 2014 – Series 13
Creation and Covenant

Talk #11
The Davidic Covenant



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Note: *This document contains the unedited text of Dr. Feingold's talk. It will eventually undergo final editing for inclusion in the series of books being published by The Miriam Press under the series title: "The Mystery of Israel and the Church". If you find errors of any type, please send your observations to lfeingold@hebrewcatholic.org*

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The Davidic Covenant

Four centuries after the Exodus and the Mosaic covenant, God made a different kind of covenant with David and his house. This was not a covenant that determined the way of life of the people as the Mosaic covenant did, for the Mosaic covenant remained in force in that regard and David was praised for his fidelity to it. Rather, the Davidic covenant was a covenant of promise made to David like that given to Abraham. In fact, the Davidic covenant continues and specifies the Abrahamic covenant by determining the lineage of the one in whom all nations would be blessed.

Prophecy of Jacob

The lineage of the blessing is partially indicated in the history of the patriarchs in Genesis. The blessing was in Isaac rather than in Ishmael. Likewise, it passed through Jacob rather than Esau. But Jacob had twelve sons. Before he dies, the patriarch Jacob prophetically blesses each one, and we see from the blessing that the promised Messiah will be born from Judah, the fourth son, whose mother was Leah. This is surprising, for we might have thought that the Messianic blessing would be given to Joseph, the hero among the sons of Jacob, and the first son of his beloved Rachel; or to Benjamin, the youngest and most humble; or to Reuben, the first of all his sons; but certainly not to the man who sold Joseph into slavery, and begot out of wedlock the child who was to be a forefather of David. Nevertheless, God willed the Messianic blessing to pass through Judah, and revealed this through Jacob's blessing. This text, as is so often the case, is not without obscurity. Now in Egypt, and nearing death, Jacob assembles his sons: "Gather yourselves together that I may tell you the things that shall befall you in the last days" (Gen 49:1).

When he gets to Judah, in Genesis 49:8–11, Jacob says:

Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp. . . . The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes *to whom it belongs*; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. . . . He washes his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes.

According to this prophecy, the kingship in Israel shall be in the tribe of Judah, as shall the Messiah, who is the one to whom the scepter belongs by right. In other words, the Messiah is to be the true king of Israel, from the line of Judah. Furthermore, this text is of great interest with regard to the time of the coming of the Messiah: it states that sovereignty will not be completely lost to Judah before the Messiah comes. This sovereignty of Judah, progressively diminished in the centuries before Christ,

was finally lost just a few years after Jesus was born, when the Roman procurators began to rule in Palestine after the death of King Herod and the exile of his son Archelaus, about the year 6 AD.¹

It is also interesting to note an indirect reference to the Passion of Christ at the end of this prophecy: "He washes his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes." Although one could read the text as referring to the blood of enemies at the time of David and Solomon, its deeper meaning refers to the blood of Christ, with which He washed His garments in His Passion.

Finally, it should be noticed that, like the final promise to Abraham, the coming of the Messiah is vested with a universal significance, for "to him shall be the obedience of the *peoples*," and not just of Israel.

Covenant with David

Eight centuries after the prophecy of Jacob, another prophecy is made regarding the lineage of the son of Abraham, the promised blessing to all nations. David receives the promise that one of his sons will be anointed with an eternal and universal kingship. Like Abraham and Isaac, David with his son Solomon is both the recipient of this prophecy of kingship, and a figure or type of the one in whom it will be ultimately fulfilled. This covenant thus combines messianic prophecy and messianic typology.

God communicates this covenant of promise among significant circumstances. King David has defeated Saul, subdued Israel's enemies, and completed the conquest of the Promised Land begun by Joshua. He has established his capital in Jerusalem, and built himself a palace, but there is not yet a Temple in Jerusalem. David therefore proposes to the prophet Nathan his plan of building a "house"—the Temple—in Jerusalem to house the Tabernacle of the Lord. Nathan at first says: "Go, do all that is in thy heart, because the Lord is with thee" (2 Sam 7:3). However, that night, the word of the Lord came to Nathan telling him to say to David that it would not be for him to build the house of the Lord, but for his son, Solomon. God, however, promises to build David's house into an eternal kingship:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.

¹ A more grievous expression of that loss of sovereignty occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in the year 70 AD. This loss was carried even further in 132–135 AD with the repression of the second Jewish revolt under a false Messiah, Bar Kochba, after which the Jews were dispersed among the peoples for over eighteen centuries. Therefore, the Messiah must certainly have come before that time.

He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.²

This prophecy could be understood to refer partly to King Solomon, who built the glorious Temple of the Lord and established a magnificent earthly kingdom, and whose iniquity (and that of his descendants) could be punished by God. However, the throne of Solomon was not eternal, nor was his kingdom established forever. This text must therefore refer also to another son to be born of the seed of David, who will *reign forever over Jacob*: the Messiah. What earthly throne can be firm *forever*?³

The promise that the Messiah will be a son of David continued to be proclaimed in other prophecies through the centuries. Jeremiah, four centuries later, wrote: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a just branch, and a king shall reign and be wise, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell confidently, and this is the name that they shall call him: The Lord our just one” (Jer 23:5).

The Davidic prophecy is found also in two Messianic psalms (89 and 132), in which the promise is repeated of an everlasting throne for the seed of David, confirmed forever by God’s own oath. Psalm 89:3–4, 35–37 says:

Thou hast said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: ‘I will establish your descendants for ever, and build your throne for all generations.’” . . . Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall endure for ever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established for ever; it shall stand firm while the skies endure.”

In Psalm 132:11–12 the promise and divine oath is given again:

The Lord swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:
“One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and my testimonies which I shall teach them,
their sons also for ever
shall sit upon your throne.”

² 2 Sam 7:12–16.

³ The mention of “committing iniquity” in 2 Sam 7:14, in addition to Solomon, can also be understood as referring to the members of Christ’s Mystical Body.

For the Lord has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation:
“This is my resting place for ever;
here I will dwell, for I have desired it.
I will abundantly bless her provisions;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.
Her priests I will clothe with salvation,
and her saints will shout for joy.
There I will make a horn to sprout for David;
I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.
His enemies I will clothe with shame,
but upon himself his crown will shed its luster.”

King David lived a millennium before Jesus Christ. It is quite remarkable that his lineage was preserved through so many centuries despite many attempts to eliminate it by usurpers to the throne, and despite the loss of sovereignty in the Exile. The last attempt to cut off the line of David was made by King Herod himself after the birth of Jesus, in the massacre of the innocents.

Elements of the Davidic Covenant

Divine Sonship

The prophecies given to David enable us to get an initial picture of their future fulfillment. First of all, the expected Messiah from the line of David is spoken of as one who will have a unique filial relationship with God. We see this in 2 Samuel 7:14: “I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” It also appears in Psalm 89:26–27:

He shall cry to me, ‘Thou art my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation.’
²⁷ And I will make him the first-born,
the highest of the kings of the earth.

Psalm 2:7 gives the same promise. The psalm begins with the nations conspiring against the Lord and “his anointed” and seeking to cast away the yoke of the divine rule. God’s response centers on one who will be his Son in a unique way:

Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
“I have set my king
on Zion, my holy hill.”
I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, “You are my son,
today I have begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,

and the ends of the earth your possession.

Everlasting Universal Kingdom; Just Kingship

Divine sonship goes together in these texts with the promise of inheriting the ends of the earth. As Israel is God's inheritance, all nations will be the Son's inheritance. This indicates an enlargement of the privileges of the Davidic covenant to include all nations.

In Psalm 72, the future Davidic king is spoken of as having "dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!" His universal kingship is graphically described:

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations serve him! (Ps 72: 10–11)

As David ruled over a united Israel, so the future Davidic king will rule over a united kingdom. Ezekiel 34:22–24 promises:

I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Similarly, in Ezekiel 37:24–28, God says:

"My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall dwell in the land where your fathers dwelt that I gave to my servant Jacob; they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there for ever; and David my servant shall be their prince for ever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is in the midst of them for evermore."

Building of the Temple

As we have seen, David was given the covenant on the occasion of his promise to build a house—in the sense of Temple—for the Lord. The Lord in return promised to build a house—in the sense of a dynasty and a kingdom—for David. Part of the prophecy is that the promised son of David would build that Temple.

Now this promise was literally and materially fulfilled in Solomon. Christ tells us, however, that the material Temple

is a type of His own body. This prophecy of building the Temple is directed beyond Solomon to the humanity of the Son of God who is the new and eternal Temple, the place of God's maximum indwelling with man. John 2:19–22 shows that Christ's body is the true realization of 2 Samuel 7:14. After purifying the Temple, Jesus said:

Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken

Prince of Peace

Another aspect of the promised Davidic king is that he will be a prince of peace. This is given in 1 Chronicles 22:9–10:

Behold, a son shall be born to you; he shall be a man of peace. I will give him peace from all his enemies round about; for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days. He shall build a house for my name. He shall be my son, and I will be his father, and I will establish his royal throne in Israel for ever.

Solomon was a type of Christ in this regard, for in his reign united Israel enjoyed a unique peace and temporal prosperity. His very name means peace (שְׁלוֹמִי). However, Solomon is clearly not the entire fulfillment of this covenanted promise of a king of peace, for the ten northern tribes were lost in the time of his son, and war and division continued to plague Israel, and the kingdom of Judah was lost in the Babylonian Exile.

Hence the prophets, such as Isaiah, continue to speak of the future realization of this promised prince of peace. The most famous prophecy is that of Isaiah 9:6–7:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Another image of the messianic king of peace is in Psalm 72: "In his days may righteousness flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more!"

Conditional Nature of the Davidic Covenant

The Davidic covenant carries a condition of fidelity, like the previous covenants. However, it is unlike other covenants in that it is expressly stated that although infidelity will be punished, it will not annul the covenant or the promise. This unique condition is given in 2 Samuel 7:14–15: "When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him

with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.”

The condition of the covenant is also given in Psalm 89:30–36:

If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,
if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
Once for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
His line shall endure for ever,
his throne as long as the sun before me.

How should we understand this condition? It seems it is implying that infidelity among David’s descendants will be punished in ways indicated in the curses of Deuteronomy 28. However, those curses will not prevent the coming of the promised son of David who will realize the prophecies. Thus it is further specifying the parallel text from Deuteronomy 30, discussed earlier. In Jeremiah 33:17–26, God promises that nothing can block the fulfillment of His promises:

“For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn cereal offerings, and to make sacrifices for ever.” The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me.” The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: “Have you not observed what these people are saying, ‘The Lord has rejected the two families which he chose’? Thus they have despised my people so that they are no longer a nation in their sight. Thus says the Lord: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his descendants to rule over the seed of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them.”

Prophetic Expectation of the Restoration of the Davidic Kingship

Restoration of the Davidic Kingdom and the Ingathering

The restoration of the Davidic Kingdom and the ingathering of Israel after the Exile is a key part of the prophetic promise of the great prophets of Israel. The Exile will not block the realization of the Davidic covenant. However, this restoration of the Davidic kingdom has a larger significance than merely the gathering of the Israelites. It will involve a restoration of the international character of the Davidic empire. Thus it will include the gentiles.

The book of Amos, after prophesying the loss of the ten northern tribes, concludes with this promise:

In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name.”

In Acts 15:16–17, James quotes this prophecy and speaks of its realization through the missionary voyages of Paul and the beginning of the conversion of the Gentiles.

The suffering servant prophecies in Isaiah also make this promise of an ingathering that extends beyond Israel to include the Gentiles. In Isaiah 49:5–9, we read:

And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— he says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” Thus says the Lord: “In a time of favor I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, ‘Come forth,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’”⁴

4 See also Is 55:3–5: “Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call nations that you know not, and nations that knew you not shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”

New Exodus

The prophetic message of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom is also presented as the realization of a New Exodus out of the diaspora. The typology of the new Exodus is especially presented in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Isaiah 43:16–20 speaks of a future time in which the events of the Exodus will be fulfilled in a higher way:

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people.”

Isaiah 52:11–12 also makes reference to a new going forth, as a new Exodus. However, its character will be different, for it will not be “in haste” nor “in flight.” Like the first Exodus, it “will be accompanied by the presence of the Lord going before and behind as in the pillar of cloud and fire:

Depart, depart, go out thence, touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Jeremiah also prophesies the new Exodus. In Jeremiah 23:7–8 he says:

Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when men shall no longer say, “As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,” but “As the Lord lives who brought up and led the descendants of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.” Then they shall dwell in their own land.⁵

The return from the Exile through the decree of Cyrus, as realized in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, partially fulfilled this promise. However, the diaspora continued throughout the following centuries, and so that ingathering failed to live up to, let alone eclipse, the Mosaic Exodus. The true fulfillment of the New Exodus is through the Paschal mystery of Christ and the ingathering into the Church.

Forgiveness of Sins and Interior Illumination

Some of the messianic prophecies of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom add the prophecy of moral purification and the forgiveness of sins. Ezekiel speaks of the moral

⁵ See also Jer 16:14–15: “Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ but ‘As the Lord lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.’ For I will bring them back to their own land which I gave to their fathers.”

nature of the messianic ingathering in the great prophecy of 36:24–27:

For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you, and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in the midst of you, and I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them.

Here the new Exodus or ingathering does not involve a passage through the Red Sea, but a sprinkling of “clean water,” which clearly prefigures Baptism. The Church is gathered together by passing through the waters of Baptism. Not surprisingly, this text is read in the baptismal liturgy of the Easter vigil.

Jeremiah 31:31–33 also speaks of the future forgiveness of sins that will be the fruit of a New Covenant to be established:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

This key prophecy of a New Covenant adds the expectation of an interior teaching about the Lord in the heart.⁶ The kingdom of the New Covenant will involve an interior anointing that imprints a certain knowledge of the things of God.

1 John 2:27 speaks of the realization of this prophecy in the Church through a sacramental anointing (Baptism and Confirmation): “But the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true.”

⁶ This prophecy is related to that given in Joel 2:28–29: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” See also Isaiah 11:1–2.

The Davidic Covenant and the Annunciation

The promise of the Davidic covenant is fulfilled in the Incarnation, as we see in the message of Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation:

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end (Lk 1:31–33).