

THE ROYAL PROMISE IN GENESIS:
THE OFTEN UNDERESTIMATED IMPORTANCE
OF GENESIS 17:6, 17:16 AND 35:11

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Summary

There are three specific instances in which a royal promise is made to an individual in the book of Genesis. Scholarship has largely viewed these as incidental within the larger framework of the major themes found in the book of Genesis. This short note seeks to correct this misunderstanding by demonstrating that the promise that kings will come from Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob is integrally linked with the themes of fruitfulness, seed (offspring), and land. Thus, the theme of kingship is a much more important theme than is often held.

1. Introduction

There are three explicit references to the royal promise in the book of Genesis: 17:6, 17:16, and 35:11. In each of these passages the person being referred to (either Abraham, Sarah, or Jacob) is promised that ‘kings will come from’ him or her. Since there are only three such references it could easily be assumed that these passages form a minor or even superficial theme that should not garner a lot of attention. Even from those commentators who do consider the promise of kings to be somewhat significant, there is a tendency to either generalise or gloss over the meaning of the royal promise. This is usually done by listing these passages with a few other passages from Genesis that deal with kingship like 36:31 or 49:10. Even T. D. Alexander, who has written widely on this subject, glosses over these verses. This can be seen most evidently in his work *The Servant King* where none of these verses are considered key texts in his chapter on Genesis 3–50 entitled

‘Intimations of the Royal Line’. These verses are dealt with briefly with several other verses in the span of only two paragraphs.¹

This short note is by no means comprehensive. The intention of this note is to bring these passages into more prominent discussion and to highlight a few aspects of these passages which have been overlooked by the majority. The promises of kings found in Genesis 17:6, 17:16, and 35:11 are much more than minor coincidences, they are an integral part of the promise to Abraham, Sarah and then subsequently to Jacob. These three ‘royal promise’ narratives share two common features: 1) each of these promises occurs within the context of a narrative in which the character is given a new name; 2) within each of these narratives the promise of kings is intertwined with the themes of fruitfulness, seed and land. These promises were not made generically to the patriarchs with the vague hope that sometime, somewhere, one of their descendents would be a king. Rather, the contexts of these passages are similar in that the promise of kingship is linked specifically to the promised seed; in Genesis 17 this is Isaac and in Genesis 35 it is Judah. Consequently, there is also a rejection of other seed within the context of the kingship promises. The interconnectivity of these aspects will be briefly discussed below.

2. Renaming and the Promise of Kings

Genesis 17 and 35 have several points of similarity. In each of these passages the persons involved receive a new name from God Almighty.² Abram’s name is changed to Abraham, Sarai’s name is

¹ T. D. Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible’s Portrait of the Messiah* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1998): 30-31. See also T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002): 109; ‘Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings: Their Importance for Biblical Theology’, *TynBul* 49 (1998): 200-201; ‘Messianic Ideology in the Book of Genesis’ in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995): 26; ‘From Adam to Judah: The Significance of the Family Tree in Genesis’, *The Evangelical Quarterly* 61 (1989): 17; ‘Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis’, *TynBul* 44 (1993): 267; and *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008): 83. In each of these works Alexander briefly treats these verses. This is by no means meant to diminish Alexander’s work, but rather to complement what he has put forth.

² This title is used of God only five times in the book of Genesis, two of which occur in the passages at hand. Each of these occurrences are found in direct speech. In Genesis 17:1 and 35:11 the name is proclaimed by God himself. These are the only

changed to Sarah and Jacob's name is changed to Israel. Each is then promised fruitfulness, land, and that his or her seed (offspring) would be royal. In 17:6 Abraham is told by God that he will be very fruitful. While not exactly the same wording is used of Sarah it is clear that fruitfulness is in mind through the repeated promise of a son. In 35:11 Israel is told to be fruitful and to multiply. This fruitfulness will manifest itself in nationhood and more specifically kingdom. Genesis 17:6 goes on to say that nations and kings shall come from Abraham. Sarah, in 17:16 is likewise promised that nations and kings will come from her. Israel is also told that 'a nation and an assembly of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your own loins'. Genesis 17:8 and 35:6 link all of these themes to the promise of the land of Canaan.

The intertwining and repetition of these themes in parallel narratives reveals that every aspect of the promise is an integral part of the whole. The promise of kings is no less important than fruitfulness or land in these passages. All three coalesce into one and the same promise that is given to each of the characters at his or her renaming. These promises of fruitfulness, kingdom and land are not intended for just any offspring though. The context of each of the narratives reveals that the promise of kingship was intended for a specific child's lineage. The context also reveals that there were offspring that were rejected or excluded from this promise.

3. The Royal and the Rejected Seed

Within each of these narratives there is a specific child highlighted and given the promise of a kingly lineage. Each of these narratives also comes within the context of another seed being rejected. Genesis 17 serves as a divine corrective of the events that transpired in Genesis 16. Abraham had been promised a son in Genesis 15:4. In Genesis 16 Ishmael is born to Hagar. Abraham must have thought that this was the promised heir. Genesis 17 reveals that the heir is not Ishmael, but rather Sarah will have a son and his name will be Isaac. It will be this

two times in Genesis that God refers to himself as God Almighty. Furthermore, four of the five times this name is used it is in the direct context of fruitfulness (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11 and 48:3). There is one instance in Genesis where the title Almighty is used (Gen. 49:25), this too is in the context of procreative activity and blessing.

son (seed) in whom the promise of fruitfulness, nationhood, and royalty will be realised. Abraham is then given the covenant sign of circumcision as a promise that he will have another son. Ishmael is rejected and the birth of Isaac is promised with the expectation that kings will come from Sarah and thus from Isaac.

Genesis 35 occurs directly after turmoil in Jacob's family. Simeon and Levi have slain an entire town after bringing them into the covenant by means of circumcision. Jacob then goes to Bethel, in the land, and is given a new name. Directly after this renaming Israel leaves Bethel and goes to Ephrath (35:16). Rachel then goes into labour and dies. It is, however, repeated again in the narrative that where she is buried is in Ephrath, which is given an explanatory note that reads 'which is Bethlehem' (35:18). The narrative then takes an interesting turn and notes in 35:22 that Reuben sleeps with one of his father's concubines. This is then followed by a listing of Jacob's twelve sons. The first sons to be listed are the sons of Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issacar, and Zebulun. It does not seem to be a coincidence that Reuben, who, the narrative makes clear, is the firstborn (35:23) was wicked. So too were Simeon and Levi for their actions against Shechem and Hamor in chapter 34. Each of these actions is directly condemned in Jacob's blessing in chapter 49. The end result seems to be that Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are disqualified as the heir to the promise of kingship. This coupled with repeated mention of Ephrath, which by the way is Bethlehem (aka David's home town), and the royal blessing of Judah in 49:8-11 seem to be clear indicators that Judah is the promised heir through whom fruitfulness, land and royalty will come.

Genesis 17:6, 17:16 and 35:11 appear to be interested in presenting the concepts of fruitfulness, kingship, and offspring as an inseparable combination. This has great implications for several other passages in Genesis: 1:26-28; 3:15; 36:31 and 49:8-11. These passages along with the characterisation of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedek, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Judah show that the concept of kingship is much more than a passing idea within the Genesis narrative. Instead it appears to be a central feature to the patriarchal promises.