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BY ATAPANA PATE
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*THE BLESSINGS FOR THE HOUSE OF ASOMUA AND THE BLESSINGS OF
DAVID "A CROSS-CULTURAL CRITIQUE".*

A Thesis Presented to the
Faculty of Malua Theological College
Malua

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a cross-cultural reading *O le fale o Asomua na si'i i le mauga* and the biblical account of David's house in 2 Samuel 7.1–17. Given the fairly limited sources for the story *O le fale o Asomua na si'i i le mauga*, it is argued that analogies with the biblical account of David's house may fill in the needed details. For instance, what is the nature of the "houses" in the two stories? Are the "houses" a matter inheritance or the result of landlessness and exile? The close reading of 2 Sam 7.1–17 will show that the two "houses" is a call to an exilic lifestyle of stable fluidity.

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May God bless you all.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition *O le Fale o Asomua na Si'i i le Mauga* tells of the bestowal of blessing upon our village. Reflection upon this tradition, with its focus on *fale* (house) and its exaltation (*si'i*) draws close analogies with the biblical account of David's desire to build a house for the LORD. My argument is that a cross-cultural reading of the two traditions will clarify the details of both stories, and make them much more meaningful.

To carry out my task, I begin by defining the cross-cultural method of reading biblical texts in relation to our local cultural traditions. This opening chapter will look at risks and opportunities to such a reading strategy. Chapter 2 then seeks to reconstruct the Asomua tradition according to the meagre sources there are. There is an attempt to judge between alternative versions of the tradition. The task is not only to reconstruct the tradition but to highlight dominant issues and concerns. Chapter 3 then picks up these concerns as it deals with the biblical account of David's desire to build a house of God. Chapter 4 then brings together the two accounts so that the biblical account can enlighten my local tradition, and vice versa.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a cross-cultural reading *O le fale o Asomua na si'i i le mauga* and the biblical account of David's house in 2 Samuel 7.1–17. Given the fairly limited sources for the story *O le fale o Asomua na si'i i le mauga*, it is argued that analogies with the biblical account of David's house may fill in the needed details. For instance, what is the nature of the "houses" in the two stories? Are the "houses" a matter inheritance or the result of landlessness and exile? The close reading of 2 Sam 7.1–17 will show that the two "houses" is a call to an exilic lifestyle of stable fluidity.

A CROSS-CULTURAL READING OF
O LE FALE O ASOMUA NA SI'I LE MAUGA
AND THE HOUSE OF DAVID (2 SAMUEL 7.1-17)

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THE CROSS-CULTURAL METHOD

The cross-cultural method studies how one's culture communicates and interacts with another culture. It entails looking at how one's cultural values are shared and transmitted with others outside of that culture. The method began with the "cultural evolution" in the 19th century world of colonialism.¹ It claimed that all societies progressed through an identical series of distinct evolutionary stages. This period therefore saw the emergence of extensive cross-cultural studies by Western anthropologists.²

1.1 The Beginnings

The informal beginnings of cross-cultural studies, however, can be traced back to Herodotus (484-425 BCE).³ Herodotus compared the customs of the Egyptians, the Persians and others, with those of his own Greek culture.⁴ There is also evidence of cross-cultural studies in the non-Western world before the 19th century. For instance, Abu Rayhan Biruni of India recorded cross-cultural findings on religion, peoples and culture of Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Indian societies.⁵

¹ Cultural evolution refers to the changing body of non-genetic information that human beings possess. See B.P. Leftheris, A.C. Sapounaki (eds), *Computational Mechanics for Heritage Structure: High Performance Structures and Materials*, (Vol.9), (Southampton: WIT Press, 2002), p. 2.

² The founder of anthropology as a scientific discipline, Edward Brunett Tylor was the first Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University in 1896-1909, whose broad definition of culture is still used by scholars. For Tylor, human cultures change over time to become more complex, see Edward Brunett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University, 1871), 1. Lewis H. Morgan studied the Iroquoian tribes (Indian Tribes) and discovered that the customs of the Iroquois differed from those in society. For example, they called father's brother 'father' and mother's sister 'mother'. See Lewis H. Morgan, *The Indian Journals: 1859 - 1862* (Toronto: General Publishing Company Ltd, 1993), p. 1.

³ Credited as the father of history, Herodotus wrote that the development of civilisation is presented as moving inexorably towards a great confrontation between Persia and Greece, which was regarded as the centres of Eastern and Western Culture. See Felix M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology: The Science of Customs*, (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1990), p. 10.

⁴ Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 10.

⁵ Abu Rayhan Biruni lived during the most intense period of scientific work in the Islamic civilization. His work included astronomy, mathematics, geography, anthropology, and many more. See Moahini Mohamed, *Great Muslim Mathematicians* (Malaysia: University Teknologi Malaysia Press, 2000), p. 63.

2. Culture Defined

To appreciate what cross-cultural study is requires clarifying what the concept of "culture" means. Culture consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, art works, rituals, ceremonies and symbols. It has played a crucial role in human evolution, allowing human beings to adapt the environment to their own purposes rather than depend solely on natural selection to achieve adaptive success. Every human society has its own particular culture, or socio-cultural system.⁶

The term was firstly defined by Tylor as a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.⁷ Culture refers to a society's shared and socially transmitted ideas, values and perceptions which are used to make sense of experience and which generate behavior and reflected in that behavior. These standards are socially learned, rather than acquired through biological inheritance.⁸ The term was further defined as everything that people have, think and do as members of a society. This definition can be instructive because of the three verbs (have, think and do) correspond to the three major components of culture. That is everything that people have refers to their material possessions, everything that people think refers to the things that they carry around into their head, such as ideas, values and attitudes, and everything that people do refers to their behavioral patterns.⁹ Culture expresses a way of living with each member of society proud of the norms and guidance of their culture.

⁶ Socio-cultural system is an organization of a diversity of individuals who construct their cultural identity. They can be considered as part of the social system and hierarchically equal to economic, political and legal systems. Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), p. 339.

⁷ Gary Ferraro, *Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective*, 7th Ed., (Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth, 2006), p. 27.

⁸ William A. Haviland, Herald E.L. Prins and Berry McBride (eds), *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth Learning, 2008), p. 9.

⁹ Ferraro, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 28.

The cross-cultural method is important in biblical studies since the Bible comes from a different culture. However, we can also read and understand the biblical accounts when we read them from our own cultural perspective. The biblical stories become meaningful when read from our Samoan cultural perspective.

3. The Cross-Cultural Method and Biblical Studies

The use of the cross-cultural method in biblical studies began from as early as the 1970s. It began as a method of studying the biblical text through the contact of the interpreter with the text, its author and original readers. It acknowledged how the social and cultural background of the readers, consequently influences the reading and interpretation of the Bible. In other words, for interpretation to be valid, the interpreter is required to realize the significance of his or her own cultural situation which serves as a vehicle to enter the sphere of the original author and original reader's own culture and social dimensions.¹⁰

This method was of course controversial for the historical critics. The reader or interpreter was more than likely to read too much of their context into the text rather than attempting to understand the mind of the author in his or her own context.

Despite such arguments, supporters of the cross-cultural method fully acknowledge the influence of their cultural context on the process of interpretation. The counter argument is that "all exegesis is ultimately eisegesis."¹¹ There is no such thing as pure exegesis, thus we can never separate ourselves from our interpretation. Furthermore, all readers need to be honest and up front in their reading by acknowledging their social and cultural contexts as

¹⁰ James Earl Massey, "Reading the Bible from Particular Social Location" Eds. Leander E. Keck et.al, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Vol. 1*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994), 150 and Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert "Toward a Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement." *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p 16. See also Gerald West, *Contextual Bible Study in South Africa: A Resource for Reclaiming and Regaining Land, Dignity and Identity, in the Bible in Africa: Transaction, Trajectories and Trends*. Ed. Gerald West and Musa W. Dube (Pietermaritzberg: Cluster Publication, 1993), 15.

¹¹ Fernando F. Segovia, Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse, in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading From This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 16.

well as their preconceived presuppositions. All interpretation of scripture is cross-cultural to the degree that the culture of the Bible is no longer identical with that of its interpreters.¹²

Cross-cultural biblical interpretation approaches the resulting hermeneutical challenge by focusing on interpretive resources uniquely afforded by the interpreter's particular cultural location. This is how the western culture, in the persons of biblical scholars, has used western thought-forms and norms to make sense of the ancient world(s) of the Bible. It is a method of analyzing the biblical text through genuine interactions of the interpreter with the text, its author and original readers. It is an activity in which the cultural-self of the interpreter interacts with the text in and through the author's original reader's culture. Thus, it is the interactions of two (or more) cultural identities with the purpose of discerning what the text means to each of the parties.¹³

Nowadays, it is more recognized that every interpreter is socially located within a culture, and that location shapes the perspective from which scriptures are interpreted and understood. Cross-cultural biblical interpretation acknowledges this reality and intentionally employs culturally indigenous resources such as myths and legends, texts, concepts, worldviews, and so forth as hermeneutical keys to shed light on their biblical interpretations.¹⁴

This theory is widely adopted and employed by the non-westerners (such as the Asians, Indians, Africans, South Americans and even Pacific Islanders), since most of biblical criticism takes place in the western world and employs western critical perspectives, in the interpretation of the scripture.

¹² Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism: Cross-Cultural Biblical Criticism* (3rd Ed.), (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 42.

¹³ Soulen and Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 42.

¹⁴ Soulen and Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 42.

To this end, I begin by clarifying our Samoan proverb "*O le Fale o Asomua na Si'i i le Mauga*" (The House of *Asomua* lifted to the Mountain) as it has analogies with the House of David in 2 Samuel 7.1–17. Based on an informed reading of 2 Samuel 7.1–17, I explore analogies between *Le Fale o Asomua* (The House of *Asomua*) and the House of David. The aim is to enable a dialogue or conversation between them, in which the biblical House of David interacts and enlightens the House of *Asomua*. The expectation is that the House of *Asomua* may be enriched by the conversation, and perhaps even enraptured by it. From this point of view, responsible interpretation requires existence in two worlds at once, the world of the past, and the world of the present, the culture of the subject and the culture of the interpreter.

Chapter 2

O LE FALE O ASOMUA NA SI'I I LE MAUGA

THE HOUSE OF ASOMUA LIFTED ONTO THE MOUNTAIN

The story of *Asomua*¹⁵ *ma lona fale na sii i le mauga* or The house of Asomua that was lifted onto the mountain, like many oral traditions of Samoa, has different versions dependent upon the perspective of the storyteller. Though this story is situated in the village of Siumu, on the South coast of Upolu, even in Siumu itself there are many different versions of this story. I interviewed many *matai* of Siumu, each had a different version. In the end I chose the following *matai*'s stories—Mano Siupolu and Utaileuo Kirisimasi¹⁶, as these two had stories with similar themes and they are two of the most senior *tulafale* or speaking chiefs of Siumu. It is their respective versions that I will be basing this thesis upon.

1. The Story of Asomua from a Siumu perspective

All the *matai* I interviewed agreed that the words *fale* (house) and *mauga* (mountain) are used as metaphors in this proverb. *Fale* (house) in Samoa has different meanings. Its common use refers to a physical building. Not only that but *fale* symbolizes, defines and expresses the family (*aiga*). It bespeaks to the order, character and confines of the world of *aiga*. The existence of *fale* on specific locations recalls the status and rank, history and meaning of a certain unit, ranging from deity/deities that inherit the locality, the name and the story of the place. It also refers to the family title related to it, together with the account of living components that mark and define boundaries of settlements (like trees, stones, rivers, mountains, etc).

¹⁵ "According to Tuuu Mautofiga, Asomua is the actual founder of the Saasomua in Siumu. He had ten wives and ten children. His real parents were Fofaivaoese and Tauatamainiulaita. His sisters were Taufau and Sina. He was adopted by Alofainuu and Aatasilogogoa as a brother of their daughter named Tapusalaia".

¹⁶ Mano ma Utai : Mano Siupolu is a senior orator-speaking chief of Siumu. He is a lecturer for the Samoan Language in Falealili High School (Date of interview 22 April 2011 4pm). Utaileuo Kirisimasi is also a senior orator-speaking chief of Siumu (Date of interview 23 April 2011 4pm).

All the *matai* agreed that the *fale* (house) mentioned in this saying was not a physical *fale* or house. The word *fale* (house) is referring to the descendants and the household (*aiga*) of Asomua. Moreover, the phrase *mauga* (mountain) symbolises the blessings received by Asomua and his house.

The *mauga* (mountain) is a high place. There is a Samoan saying 'E afua mai *mauga manuia o le nuu*' ('the blessings for the village comes or starts from the mountains'), it means the elders of the village and families are the sources of blessings.¹⁷ According to Utai and Mano and other *matai* I talked to, the word *mauga* used in this saying refers to the blessings received by Asomua.

2.2 O le Fale o Asomua according to Mano Siupolu

Mano's version begins with the genealogy of Asomua. Asomua came from the line of Tuiaana Tamalelagi. Tamalelagi had a daughter named Salamasina. Salamasina gave birth to Fofoaivaoese and Fofoaivaoese had three children – two daughters Taufau, Sina and one son Asomua¹⁸. When Fofoaivaoese was about to die, she made a "mavaega"¹⁹ or in other words a will, in which she directed that Taufau was to receive the title Tuiaana and Tuiatua.

When Taufau was about to die she wished to have the Tuiaana title passed onto her son Tupuivao. However, Tupuivao refused his mother's request and from his refusal comes a famous proverb *Ua tafea le utu o Taufau*²⁰. As a result of Tupuivao's refusal, Sina received the Faumuina title. Asomua did not receive any title or benefits from Fofoaivaoese.

¹⁷ This is similar to the belief of the Hebrew. They believe in their God staying on the mountains (Ps 68:16). The Psalmist also proof that in Psalm 121:1.

¹⁸ Augustin Kramer, *The Samoa Islands Vol 1*, (Auckland: Pasifika Press, 1994), p 224.

¹⁹ Mavaega refers to the 'legacy' or 'will'. All the *matai* of name, title and issue and official decree when they feel their end is near, i.e. they officially state who is to be their successor in name and title and what privileges the other children will inherit. This also applies to the kings.

²⁰ 'Tafea le utu a Taufau' means 'Taufau's descendants and their line are to be terminated'. When king Taufau was sick she wanted her son Tupuivao to be the next king. Taufau was very sick and became weak but Tupuivao was away from home. He was catching pigeons inland of Falealili and Safata. The messenger went

Asomua and his siblings were descended from Tuiaana Tamalelagi on one side, but they were also descendants of Malietoa on their other side. As Asomua did not receive any benefits on his Tuiaana side, he then sought benefits from his Malietoa family²¹. He went to Malietoa, who told him to go to the South of the Tuamasaga District to establish a village for Asomua and his descendants²². This led to establishment of the village of Siumu.

Mano Siupolu then says that it is from this gifting of land from Malietoa to Asomua, establishing the village of Siumu, that Asomua then proclaimed "O ai na manatu o le a e sii le fale o Asomua I le mauga?" "Who would have thought that you would place the house of Asomua on the top of the mountain?"²³ Asomua is giving thanks to Malietoa for the honour bestowed upon him, of the land given. This is an analogy that likens the land given to Asomua to the honour of being placed on the summit of the mountain. The land that was given to Asomua was an *igagato*.

The *igagato* refers to a gift given to a family or certain chief as reward for faithful service. This gift is often in the form of a *matai* title, though it can take other forms. The *igagato* is usually given in perpetuity and therefore the original owner of the title has no power over the gift.

The opposite of the *igagato* is the *matupalapala*, which is gifted for loyal and faithful service, but ends at the person it was gifted to. An example being a title given to a chief, the title will not continue to his children and descendants. This is the explanation given by

to Tupuivao to come for his mother is asking for him she is weak and very sick but he refused. The messenger was sent for three times but Tupuivao still refused to come. He said Taufau's sickness is not great as his desire to catch pigeons. At last, Taufau told her families that her descendants and their line are to be terminated and her sister Sina's line is to take its place.

²¹ Refers to the genealogy of Asomua and connection to the Malietoa family.

²² Tuamasaga District is located in Central Upolu. It is referred to as the District of the Malietoa as most of the villages in this District are founded by descendants of the Malietoa.

²³ This is my translation of the Samoan proverb (*alagaupu*) into English.

Utaileuo. Thus the land was given to be held in the possession of Asomua and his descendants forever.

2.3 O le Fale o Asomua according to Utaileuo Kerisimasi

Utaileuo Kerisimasi's version begins with a reference to a famous event in Samoan oral tradition *saesaega laufa'i a Tumua*. The *saesaega faufa'i* refers to the counting of things, in this case banana leaves. *Laufa'i* (banana leaf) is one of the objects used for counting things. Its lines or marks on it were tore out one by one and used to count the number of things. That method was used by the Samoan people at the past for counting and it was also used by the *Tumua* districts of Samoa (Lufilufi and Leulumoega) to see the families of Fuiavailili when Muagututia announced Fuiavailili as his successor.

Utaileuo's version illustrates that Asomua and Fuiavailili²⁴ are related. When Asomua heard of the 'Saesaega laufa'i a Tumua' and Fuiavailili was going to sit on the throne and the title conferred upon him, he wanted to show respect loyal for his nephew. Therefore he visited his sisters Sina and Taufau, asking for a fine mat or an *ietoga*.

The *ietoga* is a 'fine mat' of great importance in Samoan culture. It is valuable and even today is still a well established barter item. It becomes collectors' item if it is a state mat, once owned by kings or famous chiefs such as the 'fine mat' known as *Pepeve'a*. The preparation and weaving of the *ietoga* is completed by the women and girls of the village – also known as *auluma*. *Ietoga* are used by the paramount chiefs to repay their electors, the orator chiefs for titles conferred upon them. Also it is used as a gift in special events such as passing away of a high chief, receiving of a matai title, wedding, opening of a new building, and other solemn occasions.

²⁴ Fuiavailili also known as Tupua Fuiavailili was another King of Samoa and 'Tamaaiga'.

So a fine mat was to be given to Tu'u'u²⁵ to take with him to the "Saesaega Lau Fai". His sisters granted Asomua his request and gave him a fine mat. This is when Asomua thanked his sisters by saying *O ai na manatu o le a e si'i le fale o Asomua i le mauga?* "Who would have thought that you would place the house of Asomua on the top of the mountain?"

Utaileuo stated that the evidence to confirm his version is the honorific given to Tu'u'u. When the Atua District²⁶ meets, Tu'u'u honorific or formal title is *E itu e fa ai Atua*. This means that Tu'u'u can attend the formal debate or *faatau* of speaking chiefs in the Atua District, on the meeting ground (*malae fonu*) Lalogafuaafua²⁷ despite coming from the Tuamasaga District.

2.4 A Comparison of the Two Versions

According to Utaileuo, at the time of the event *saesaega laufai*, Asomua was alive. But upon research based on Kramer's records²⁸ and tracing the genealogy, Asomua died well before Tupua Fuiavailiili was born.

There is a gap of four generations between Asomua and Tupua Fuiavailiili. Also it is noted that at the time of a Paramount Chief's death, or when he realised his death is imminent, the Paramount Chief would call his family together and make a *mavaega* – will. This indicates that only upon death would such a decision be made and therefore the gap of four generations would indicate a period in which no person could have lived from the first generation until the fourth generation.

²⁵ Tu'u'u is a senior orator speaking chief title in Siumu. He is the orator for Asomua, and it is he who resides at Asomua's residence in Siumu.

²⁶ Atua is the most easterly of the three areas of Upolu and is divided into three sub-districts, namely the *itu* Anoama'a 'the rocky side' so called because of its rugged coast, with its capital Lufilufi which is also the seat of government over all of Atua and where the big *malae* Lalogafuaafua is located. The easterly part of Atua is Aleipata, with its meeting ground located in the village of Saleaamua. The South side is located in Lepa and called the 'itu o Salefao' (Kramer, *The Samoa Islands*, p. 350).

²⁷ Lalogafuaafua is the meeting ground for the Atua District. It is situated in the village of Lufilufi and is the home of the Saofaiga o le Toaono – the leading orators-speaking chiefs of the Atua District.

²⁸ Kramer, *The Samoa Islands*, pp. 224-227.

In regards to the *saesaega laufai* itself, Utaileuo's version is the only version in which the derivation of Tu'u'u's status as explained in connection with the *saesaega laufa'i*. All other versions do not explain the derivation of Tu'u'u's title *na itu fa ai Atua*²⁹.

Mano's version supports the gifting of Siumu to Asomua by the Malietoa of the time as a *igagato* – a gift given in perpetuity. Tu'u'u Mautofiga³⁰ of Siumu agrees with Mano's version. Tu'u'u says "Siumu District is different from other District, because Asomua alone made the division of the land for his ten children." The proof is that even to this day, the allocation of land and residences of various chiefs of Siumu follow the division of Asomua.

2.5 The Stability and Security for the House of Asomua

In regards to the two versions, I support Mano's version. Unlike Utaileuo's version, which is focused upon the derivation of Tu'u'u's title as the fourth speaker of the Atua district, Mano's version is focused upon the locality, and the physical presence of Siumu with its connection to the genealogy and bloodline of Asomua. This is a combination of the physical and the spiritual in that for Samoans, the connection to the land is both spiritual and physical in nature and effect. The connection between genealogies and land is to show the continuity between life and death, to link past and the present³¹. It is this which gives not only life but meaning to Samoan people, and in particular the people of Siumu, within the context of their local identity.

The issue addressed in this thesis is the status of the *igagato* (inheritance) conferred on Asomua and his house. As the story goes, Asomua's house is secure and this is his

²⁹ Kramer, *The Samoa Islands*, p. 352

³⁰ Tu'u'u Mautofiga is the 'Tuua' of Siumu, meaning he is the senior ranking orator in Siumu. He is a retired school teacher and well known for his knowledge of Samoan custom and usage (Date of interview 16 August 2011 12pm).

³¹ Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese in his book 'Suesue Manogi: Search for Fragrance' talks of this in regards to residence and Samoan custom. Residence in this case refers to the physical boundaries, possession of land and links with the spiritual nature of land. Much like the link between Siumu and the land as gifted by Malietoa to Asomua.

unconditional inheritance forever. But what does such an unconditional inheritance mean? Are there conditions to be met in order to secure the exalted status of Asomua's house forever? Or are there no preconditions whatsoever? Given the analogies of the House of Asomua and the House of David in 2 Samuel 7.1-17, my argument is that the biblical account of God's establishment of David's house may enlighten these issues surrounding Asomua's house. For instance, when the LORD promised to establish David's son Solomon on the throne, the LORD says to David in 2 Sam 7.14-16,

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. (NRSV)

God's steadfast love is unconditional but this doesn't prevent divine punishment on the iniquities of David and his descendents. Likewise, the *igagato* of unconditional inheritance doesn't do away with but calls for a high standard of moral integrity from Asomua and his descendents. Thus cross-cultural comparison of David's house in 2 Samuel 7 helps to enlighten sketchy details to the house of Asomua.

Chapter 3

THE HOUSE OF DAVID IN 2 SAMUEL 7.1-17

2 Samuel 7.1-17 is perhaps the most important theological text in the books of Samuel and even the so-called Deuteronomistic History (DH: Joshua-2 Kings). With the kingdom secure and his own house built, David expresses a desire to build a house for the LORD. At first the prophet Nathan approves the king's plan (vv 1-3). But that night, God's word comes to Nathan with an oracle in response to David's desire (vv 4-16). The LORD doesn't need or desire a house (vv 4-7). Instead, The LORD has chosen and cared for David (vv 8-11a), and will establish a house (dynasty) for David (v 11b). A son will come after David and be established on the throne. He will build a house (temple) for the LORD (vv 12-13). As this throne will be established forever, the LORD will relate to these descendants of David as father to son. They may be chastised for their sin, but, unlike Saul, God's steadfast love will be with forever (vv 14-16). So Nathan conveys this oracle to David (v 17).

A prominent theme of 2 Sam 7.1-17 focuses on the word play around the various meanings of the Hebrew term *בית* (house). Depending on its context, *בית* can mean "house," "dwelling," "palace," "temple," or "dynasty." All of these meanings play a role in 2 Sam 7.1-17, but the crucial theological focus is between temple and dynasty.

Most modern critics agree that the text of 2 Sam 7.1-17 underwent a complex history of development. As it now stands, 2 Sam 7.1-17 reflects the development and usages of many Israelite generations, with its final form shaped by the deuteronomistic historian.³² The most agreed upon view is that 2 Sam 7.1-17 developed in three stages, each reflecting

³² B.C. Birch, *The First and Second Books of Samuel* (NIB Vol 2; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 1254. See also Omer Sergi, "The Composition of Nathan's Oracles to David (2 Samuel 7.1-17) as a Reflection of Royal Judahite Ideology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129/2 (2010), pp. 261-279.

differing interests and emphases.³³ Here, the earliest form of Nathan's oracle was a promise of dynasty to David corresponding to his declared intention to build a temple for the Yahweh. This ancient document was expanded by a writer with a less favourable view towards the temple and towards David himself. This stage reflects a prophetic theology of kingship struggling to come to terms with the excesses of the Davidic dynasty.³⁴ The final form of the passage was the work of a Deuteronomistic editor who further amended it to express his own point of view.

The progression of theological perspective through these stages is as follows.³⁵ The earliest level is found in vv 1a, 2-3, 11b-12, 13b-15a. The dynastic promise was initially understood as a divine response to David's intention to build God a temple. A prophetic editing of the text is found in vv 4-9a, 15a. It argues that a temple was not needed and that the gift of dynastic promise was not a response to David's plan to build a temple but a free act of divine grace. The final version for the deuteronomistic historian, present in vv 1b, 9b-11a, 13a, 16, softens the negative attitude of the prophetic version toward the temple. It makes God's refusal to David only temporary and allows for a positive attitude toward Solomon's building of the temple.

3.1 Stability and Instability

Since 2 Samuel 7.1-17 was edited during the exile in light of the exilic community's experiences, it addressed the anxieties, needs, and concerns of that community, with particular reference to both its identity and its theology as a community. According to Mark George, the exile raised concerns about stability and instability, and reinterpreting David and

³³ P. K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB Vol 9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 209-231.

³⁴ McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 229.

³⁵ McCarter, *II Samuel*, pp. 224-230.

2 Samuel 7.1–17 allowed the exilic editor to address those concerns.³⁶ I follow closely the analysis of George who highlights the number of ways 2 Samuel 7.1–17 shows a concern for stability. Firstly, according to George the concern for stability is evident in the repetition of the term “house” (בית). The בית as “house” are physical buildings that imply stability, durability and permanence. This is what David was implying in v 2 when he contrasts his own living situation with that of the ark of God. “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” David’s house of cedar is fixed, stable, and permanent, while the “tent” in which the ark dwells is not. “House” (בית) also implies “temple” and “dynasty,” which generally convey stability.³⁷

Secondly, concern for stability is evident in the phrase “forever” (לעולם and עד-עולם), repeated in v 13 and 16 (twice).³⁸ This phrase is used in reference to houses, kingdoms, and thrones to be established, made sure, or blessed forever (vv 13, 16). The use of “forever” pushes stable houses, thrones, and kingdoms, to more permanent structures.

Thirdly, David’s desire to build a house for the LORD is also an attempt to make the LORD more stable. If David builds a house for the LORD to dwell, then he and the people will always know where to find their God, who becomes more predictable and stable.³⁹ The problem, of course, is that the LORD is not willing to be stabilized. The LORD will not be tied to a particular location. In response, the LORD recalls his practice of moving about among the people. The divine preference is for the mobility of tent and tabernacle (v 6) over the fixity of a house of cedar (vv 6–7). In short, the LORD prefers instability and impermanence over stability and permanence.

³⁶ Mark K. George, “Fluid Stability in Second Samuel 7,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002), p. 19.

³⁷ George, “Fluid Stability,” p. 20.

³⁸ George, “Fluid Stability,” p. 20.

³⁹ This idea, that the LORD could be found in the temple because that is where God dwelt on earth, contributed to the exiles’ anxiety because they feared, among other things, that the temple’s destruction resulted in the death or destruction of the LORD. Such a belief may have prompted Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot (Ezekiel 1) and his vision of the glory of the LORD leaving the temple and moving east (Ezekiel 10).

It is arguable that the LORD's preference for instability and impermanence enabled the author of 2 Samuel 7 to address the concerns of the exilic community. For a stable community in its own land, the desire to have its god in a fixed location fits the circumstances, needs, and concerns of such a community. But once it was out of the land, in an impermanent situation, the exilic community may have found the LORD's rejection of fixed houses comforting. Here, the LORD could be moving about among them while they were in exile (cf. Ezekiel 1). The LORD was, and preferred to be a mobile presence among the people, and not fixed in the now ruined temple.

Concern about the LORD's instability is also evident in the statement that he will punish David's seed when it commits iniquity (v 14). As with the reference to Saul, this comment can be interpreted as a promise and reassurance to David. Despite punishing David's offspring for committing iniquity, the LORD will not take away his steadfast love from him (v 15).⁴⁰

At the same time, however, this statement reveals a concern that the LORD may take away his steadfast love from David's seed. The punishment in view here could be interpreted as due, in fact, to the withdrawal of the LORD's steadfast love from David's seed, a feeling expressed by at least some in the exilic community (e.g., Lam 2:5, 8, 17, 21).

3.2 Unstable Houses

The anxieties about instability in 2 Samuel 7 are typified by the indeterminate meaning of the term בית. In vv 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 term בית is interpreted as some type of physical building (a "palace" or "temple"). In vv 11, 13, 16 it is interpreted as "dynasty." However,

⁴⁰ The positive interpretation of this statement has resulted in much scholarly discussion of the unconditional Davidic covenant. See L. Eslinger, *House of God or House of David: The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 7* (JSOTSup 164; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 1-4, 11, 40, 59, 89.

in v 13, there is a play being made on בית as "temple" and "dynasty."⁴¹ It may be precisely the fluidity of meaning of בית that enabled the exilic editor to interpret 2 Samuel 7 as a dynastic promise for the circumstances of the exile, when the temple of Jerusalem lay in ruins.⁴²

A detail in v 13 that suggests the editor did play on the fluidity of בית is that the LORD says that "He [Solomon] will build a בית *for my name* (לשמי)." A person's "name" was perpetuated through offspring or descent. Given the indefiniteness of בית, the oracle's reference to "a בית *for my name* (לשמי)" does not necessarily refer to a "temple" for the LORD's name, but can be interpreted as a "dynasty for his name." The divine name or memorial will be created in society through the בית, meaning the dynasty or offspring.⁴³ This interpretation of בית makes sense in view of the LORD's rejection of temples expressed vv 6-7.

In the crisis of exile, the community was required to reinterpret 2 Sam 7. Playing on the fluid meaning of בית in v 13, the exilic editor transformed the meaning of this passage as a promise to David about his dynasty and the building of the temple. Instead, the promise attains a broader focus. Rather than being the divine promise of a dynasty for David, it describes how the LORD is constructing his own descendants and dynasty.

The בית being promised in v 13 was the people themselves, independent of any particular place or family.⁴⁴ The בית of the LORD in v 13 was not a fixed physical structure constructed by one of David's biological sons. Instead, it was a dynasty or descendants that

⁴¹ W. Schniedewind argues that the Deuteronomistic editor added 2 Sam 7:13a because of the play on "temple" and "dynasty," and that this play enabled two distinct oracles to be linked together. W. M. Schniedewind, *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception History of 2 Samuel 7:1-17* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 35.

⁴² George, "Fluid Stability," p. 26.

⁴³ George, "Fluid Stability," p. 27.

⁴⁴ Cf. Second Isaiah's interpretation of the "servant" as Israel (Isa 49:3).

included more than just David's biological heirs. It included the people as a whole. In this interpretation, the LORD had not abandoned the people when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Nor had the removal of the people from the land nullified the divine promises to their ancestors. Nor were the people without an identity. The people were themselves means of the LORD's living on and being memorialized. They were his sons, his *בית*, his dynasty and descendants.

3.3 National Dynasties

It is when the divine oracle addresses David as the king rather than as an individual that it forms the statement of an exilic editor addressing the concerns of the exilic community. For the exilic editor, David's *בית* and "seed" are no longer simply refers to his own biological descendants.⁴⁵ Rather, they can refer to the people and the nation, whom David embodies in his role as king. This oracle is no longer for David as an individual, but for the people.

Indeed, the oracle refers to the people three times.⁴⁶ The first occasion is when the LORD states his preference for the tent and tabernacle rather than for a house of cedar (vv 6-7). The LORD expresses a preference for mobility, and one of the purposes this mobility serves is to allow him to be with his people. A second reference to the people is in v 8 when David is reminded that he was taken from following the sheep – an activity of previous leaders (cf. v 7). Here the people are the reason for the divine action. Finally, the LORD speaks specifically of what he will do for "my people Israel" (vv 10-11). A place will be appointed for them, and they will be planted there, so they may have their own place in which to live. They will no longer be disturbed or afflicted by evildoers as before, when there were judges over them.

⁴⁵ George, "Fluid Stability," p. 29.

⁴⁶ George, "Fluid Stability," pp. 31-32.

These references to the people raise the question whether the addressee of 2 Samuel 7 is David or the people. Add to these the reference to David as king, the embodiment of the people, vv 5-17 can be understood as addressing the people. Indeed, the social context of the exile, when David was long dead and gone, strengthens the suggestion that the people are the ones that this text addressed.

3.4 Fluid Stability as Hope for the Exiles

Taking advantage of the fluid meanings of the language in 2 Samuel 7, the exilic editor addressed the concerns of the people in exile in several ways. Firstly, David's identity, as an individual and as king, the embodiment of the people, allowed God's words to address the people and not just David. Thus, when the LORD states that he will build a *בית* for David (v 11b); the dynasty is not simply David's own descendants but the people and nation.⁴⁷

Secondly, the dynasty that will be raised up for David is not simply David's dynasty but also the dynasty of the LORD. Using the instabilities in 2 Samuel 7, the exilic editor suggested to the people in exile that the LORD could not have abandoned them. Indeed, they were his sons since the LORD had a father-son relationship with the king, the embodiment of the people and nation. There was stability for the people in their identity as the LORD's *בית*. This was a fluid stability established by divine kinship instead of being fixed in a particular place.⁴⁸ The people of one's "kinship group" are mobile: they are born, live, propagate, and die. In this sense, kinship is fluid. At the same time, however, "kinship groups" provide stability because they are a means by which people know who they are and what their identity is. As for the exilic community, it did not have to be in the land or worry about the temple lying in ruins, because its stability derived from the people's identity as members of the LORD's kinship group.

⁴⁷ George, "Fluid Stability," p. 33.

⁴⁸ George, "Fluid Stability," p. 34.

Thirdly, the son's chastisement in vv 14-15 also remains. The text says that the son "will" commit iniquity (v 14), so he can expect punishments that will undermine the stability implied by the dynastic promise.⁴⁹ The exilic editor could have interpreted the exile as the fulfilment of this provision, but punishment is ever before the "son" as an unsettling prospect. In this regard, it mentions Saul, from whom the God's steadfast love had been taken away (v 15), which is an inherent instability for the people. This reference to Saul destabilizes the promise that the same "steadfast love" would not be taken away from David. Merely the reference to what had been done with Saul allows for the possibility that the same thing might be done to the LORD's "son," Israel. They can be disinherited, after all.

2 Samuel 7 is encouragement to the exilic community to understand itself as the people of God, living in a stable if fluid relationship with him, their father, in spite of their geographic displacement. 2 Samuel 7 suggests that the community continued to have certain concerns about its God and its relationship with him. The stability that is possible to read in this chapter is, at best, a fluid stability.

3.5 Conclusion

The above analysis has attempted to interpret 2 Samuel 7.1-17 in its progressive contexts, particularly its exilic setting. From pre-exilic to exilic setting, the *בית* changed from "house" to "temple" to "dynasty" to "kinship group" as these stable structures fell away. Landless and without a temple, seeks to provide hope for the exilic community. David is no longer the recipient of God's word, but all God's people. Rather than seeking to regain a permanent and stable place, the challenge of 2 Samuel 7.1-17 is to seek a fluid stability in which God's steadfast love abounds.

⁴⁹ George, "Fluid Stability," p. 34.

The themes of 2 Samuel 7.1–17, such as landlessness, exile, instability, unconditional inheritance, and kinship provide points of contact with the story of Asomua. Is there landlessness in the story of Asomua? Was Asomua in exile that he was without inheritance? Was he looking for stability or a fluid stability?

In the next and final chapter, I look at how notions of landlessness, exile, instability, unconditional inheritance and kinship from 2 Samuel 7.1–17 inform the *Le Fale o Asomua na Si'i i le Mauga*.

Chapter 4

THE HOUSE OF DAVID AND THE HOUSE OF ASOMUA

There are numerous comparisons between the House of David and the House of Asomua. In both cases, the houses are not only physical buildings but dynasties, people, and kinship. Both David and Asomua are similarly trying to establish the identity of their group, or family, or nation. In this way, they face similar issues such as stability versus mobility, centralization versus decentralization.

At face value, the stories of David and Asomua are very different. Asomua is a person without inheritance. He is landless and trying to secure for himself and his family a piece of land in order to survive. Attaining nothing from his Tuiaana and Tuiatua line he turned to Malietoa and served him. David on the other hand was at the peak of his career, having built for himself a palace and had gained rest from his enemies.

In fact, David sought to consolidate his socio-economic and political position by building a temple for the LORD. As shown in chapter 3, he sought stability and permanence. The history of the text, as summarized in chapter 3, shows that the second stage or prophetic editor rejected David's plans. This was the result of the abuses of the monarchy and the temple as indicated by the preaching of the pre-exilic prophets. This editor would have placed conditions on God's steadfast love. If the king didn't obey the divine laws, like any other member of the community, he would be deposed as was Saul at the beginning.

As noted in chapter 3, the exile was the point of critical reinterpretation of 2 Samuel 7.1-17. Without land, king, and temple, and without any socio-political standing, the exilic community preferred a stable identity that was more fluid. I argue that this is the point at which the house of David and the house of Asomua converge. Like the house of Asomua, David's house is not so much a palace or a physical structure but people. While the *igagato*

that Matlietua gifted to Asomua included land, it was essentially an inheritance for the descendents of Asomua.

As the story goes, Asomua's family (*aiga*) became secure in his inheritance forever. But as indicated earlier, the *igagato* of unconditional inheritance doesn't do away with, but calls for a high standard of moral integrity from Asomua and his descendents. As in 2 Sam 7.14-16, God's steadfast love is unconditional but this doesn't prevent divine punishment on the iniquities of David and his descendents.

The stories of the house of David and the house of Asomua pose a challenge to the lifestyle of God's people. It is a way of living in which people are more important than physical structures. It is radical lifestyle that seeks a home in exile for the sake of others.

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