

2 Kings 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 04 November 2020

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[0 : 00] 2 Kings chapter 18 In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem.

His mother's name was Abai, the daughter of Zechariah, and he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it.

It was called Nehushtan. He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord.

He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him. Wherever he went out, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

He struck down the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory, from watchtower to fortified city. In the fourth year of King Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria and besieged it.

[1 : 17] And at the end of three years he took it. In the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria and put them in Hallah and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes, because they did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded.

They neither listened nor obeyed. In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. And Hezekiah king of Judah sent the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, I have done wrong, withdraw from me, whatever you impose on me I will bear.

And the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house.

At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord and from the doorpost that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rabsaris, and the Rabshakeh, with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem.

And they went up and came to Jerusalem. When they arrived they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the washer's field. And when they called for the king, there came out to them Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder.

[2 : 50] And the Rabshakeh said to them, Say to Hezekiah, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war?

In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting now in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it, such as Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him.

But if you say to me, We trust in the Lord our God, is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem?

Come now, make a wager with my master, the king of Assyria. I will give you two thousand horses if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen?

Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it. Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah and Shebna and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it.

[4 : 05] Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall. But the Rabshakeh said to them, Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine?

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand.

Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria, Make your peace with me and come out to me.

Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live and not die.

And do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, The Lord will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad?

[5 : 23] Where are the gods of the Sepharvim, Hina and Ivar? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?

But the people were silent, and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, Do not answer him. Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

In 2 Kings chapter 18, the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria, and the southern kingdom is on the brink of joining them. The chapter begins with Hezekiah the son of Ahaz coming to the throne.

The dates of the reign of Hezekiah present us with an immediate problem. In verse 13, we read of events that we know occurred in 701 BC, but if this was in the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign, then he would have come to the throne in 715 BC, some years after the fall of the northern kingdom. However, in verse 1, we are told that he came to the throne in the third year of Hoshea son of Elah. The numbers of the books of Kings and Chronicles are frequently confusing, not because they are impossible, but because they are greatly complicated by co-regencies and the like.

[6 : 41] Various suggestions have been advanced for resolving the tensions at this particular point, including a co-regency with Ahaz, followed by a 29-year sole regency, Hezekiah being designated king without yet having acceded to the throne.

Others have suggested that the synchronisations are off by 12 years, others that there is an error in verse 13, which should read 24 instead of 14. Hezekiah is a faithful king.

He is distinguished in his rooting out of idolatry. In particular, Hezekiah removes the high places and breaks down the pillars. A repeated accusation against the kings of Judah is their failure to remove these high places, and now Hezekiah finally does this.

The bronze serpent is also broken in pieces. The bronze serpent was made during Israel's time in the wilderness. In response to the fiery serpents that were released by the Lord among the people. Nehoshtan is a play on the words for copper and serpent. In Numbers chapter 21 verses 8-9, we read of the event of the bronze serpent. And the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.

[7 : 50] So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if the serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. The fiery serpent had an appropriate use.

Indeed, it had been made according to the Lord's own instruction, but it had clearly subsequently become an object of idolatry. Hezekiah was committed to the Lord, trusting in him, and the Lord strengthened him.

He rebelled against the Assyrians at this time, and also defeated the Philistines. The defeat of the Philistines was probably designed to open up a path to Egypt, in whom Hezekiah placed some trust as an ally against the Assyrians.

The Lord warned against dependence upon the Egyptians through the prophet Isaiah, and later on the Rabshakeh, in his speech to the people in Jerusalem, will make the same point. Egypt is not the power that it once was, and it is not sufficient to fight against the military might of Assyria.

The northern kingdom of Israel falls in the fourth year of the reign of Hezekiah. This largely repeats the events recorded in the previous chapter, but now it ties them to the reign of Hezekiah.

[8 : 52] It also has the effect of setting up a parallel, because in verse 13 there is a close parallel with verses 9-10. Verses 9-10 describe the downfall of the northern kingdom, and now Israel's fate and Judah's fate are held side by side with each other.

Israel has been destroyed by the Assyrians. Will Judah suffer the same fate? There is, of course, a key difference, in that Hezekiah is a righteous king, unlike Hoshea and the Israelite kings that preceded him.

Will this make any difference for Judah? And signs don't initially look good. Sennacherib captures all of the fortified cities of Judah, and Hezekiah has to ask for mercy from him.

Hezekiah sends messengers to Sennacherib at Lachish, a heavily fortified city that is the second city of Judah to Jerusalem. At this point it might seem that Sennacherib is well underway to completely overrunning the nation.

However, he has offered mercy in exchange for a grand tribute. Sennacherib's successful siege of Lachish and Hezekiah's payment of tribute are recorded in Assyrian annals from the time.

[9 : 55] Several of Hezekiah's predecessors had raided the treasuries of the house of the Lord to pay tribute to a foreign king. Rehoboam had done it for Shishak, king of Egypt. Asa had given money to Ben-Hadad of Syria to get him on his side against Baasha.

Jehoash had given money to Haziel of Syria. During Amaziah's reign, Jehoash of Israel had broken down the walls of Jerusalem and taken away much of the treasure of the temple. Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had also raided the treasuries of the temple to give money to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria.

Hezekiah now does the same thing to Sennacherib. He gives the silver of the house to the Lord and all of the gold from the doorposts. Not only is Judah standing in the very greatest jeopardy, Hezekiah's action in response is a troubling one.

He is taking tribute that had been given to the Lord and he is handing it over to a foreign invader.

The hearer of the text might wonder where he is actually placing his hope. Hezekiah sends an envoy to Jerusalem.

The Tartan, the highest official after the king, the Rabsaris, who is the chief eunuch, and the Rabshakeh, who is the chief cupbearer or the butler. We should be wary of putting too much weight upon the literal interpretation of these roles.

[11 : 05] The chief eunuch may not have been a eunuch at all, but rather a name for a high office within the administration. Likewise, the Rabshakeh, as the chief cupbearer or the butler, may have been primarily a man responsible for overseeing the affairs of the court of the king, whether back home in Assyria or out on some military campaign.

Here the Rabshakeh acts as the mouthpiece of his master Sennacherib. He is a high official with the ability to speak in the Judean tongue, which is helpful in this particular situation, as we will see.

He and those who gave him his message also seem to have deep insight into the state of Judah and the nature of its religious beliefs, among other things. From what we learn from Assyrian annals, a great number of soldiers from Judah had either surrendered or defected at this point.

The Assyrians could have gained much intelligence about the internal affairs of the nation of Judah from such persons. The Rabshakeh's speech is perfectly designed to demoralise the people.

Speaking to Eliakim, who is over the household, Shebna the secretary and Joah the recorder, the Rabshakeh presents them with the big question, in whom do you trust? Given Hezekiah's actions and Philistia, it may seem that he's trusting in Egypt, yet Egypt is far from powerful enough to act as an effective ally, even if it were reliable, which it isn't.

[12 : 23] Leaning on Egypt would actually hurt Judah rather than helping them. The Lord also warns Judah against such an alliance within the book of Isaiah. As the Assyrians have conquered

cities through Judah, they have probably noticed the signs of a recent revolution in the religious life of the nation.

They've seen the ruins of former shrines. They've seen pillars that have been torn down. Recognising that something significant has occurred, they probably gained intelligence from Judean defectors, discovering that Hezekiah had broken down all of the high places in the pillars. This presents the Rabshakeh with a very effective demoralising argument that he can present to the people in Judah. They have clearly offended their god, the Lord, and He has now turned upon them.

He mocks them for their inability to assemble an effective military force. Even if He were to give them 2,000 horses, they would not be able to put riders upon them. Why then would they look to Egypt for horses and chariots, when they lack the men to use them?

The Rabshakeh goes even further in his argument. Not only has the Lord abandoned His people Judah, turning against them because they have abandoned His proper worship, The king of Assyria has been commissioned by the Lord himself against them.

[13 : 31] It is by His word that He has gone up to attack Jerusalem. The officials of Hezekiah are greatly dismayed by these words, even more so because they are spoken in the hearing of the regular soldiers on the wall, in a language that they can understand.

The Rabshakeh is speaking, presumably, in the Judean dialect. They've requested that he speaks in Aramaic, but he refuses. The Rabshakeh's speech is not merely for Hezekiah and his officials. It is also for the more general population and the soldiers on the wall. It's designed to demoralise them. The Rabshakeh moves on to develop further arguments. They should not trust in Hezekiah, nor should they trust in the Lord, allowing Hezekiah to persuade them that the Lord would deliver them.

Neither Hezekiah nor the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the king of Assyria. Along with this demoralising message, the Rabshakeh gives a different piece of propaganda, the message that there is hope if they would only surrender to the king of Assyria.

If they surrender, then each one of them will eat of his own vine and each of his own fig tree, and each one of them would drink the water of his own cistern. This language is usually associated with very positive visions of the Lord giving rest to the people in the land, so that they all enjoy their own property and have untroubled relations with their own wives.

[14 : 44] Here, however, in an almost satanic fashion, it's taken up by the mouthpiece of a foreign king. He presents this promise, and he presents it with the promise of bringing them into a new land.

I will come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live and not die.

This parodies the sort of language that we find in Deuteronomy 8, verses 7-9. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

The king of Assyria is the one that they should look to, not the Lord. Indeed, the gods of the other nations have not helped them. Why should the God of Judah help it? Once again, there is a parody here of the words of the Lord.

Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? This very closely mirrors the language of Deuteronomy 4, verse 34.

[15 : 58] Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

In this very carefully targeted message, the king of Assyria is attacking the faith of Judah at its very base. He is sowing doubt and fear and demoralisation. Judah can't trust its king. Judah can't trust its God.

The God of Judah is either on the side of Assyria, or is a helpless bystander, unable to intervene to save his people. On the other hand, if the people do surrender, the king of Assyria will bring them

