

2 Kings 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Kings chapter 20 In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, came to him and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.

Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, saying, Now, O Lord, please remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart and have done what is good in your sight.

And Hezekiah wept bitterly. And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him, Turn back and say to Hezekiah, the leader of my people, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears, behold I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord, and I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake.

And Isaiah said, Bring a cake of figs and let them take and lay it on the bed that he may recover. And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day?

[1 : 14] And Isaiah said, This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised. Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps?

And Hezekiah answered, It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps, rather let the shadow go back ten steps. And Isaiah the prophet called to the Lord, and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz.

At that time Merodach Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick.

And Hezekiah welcomed them, and he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armoury, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

Then Isaiah the prophet came to king Hezekiah and said to him, What did these men say, and from where did they come to you? And Hezekiah said, They have come from a far country, from Babylon.

[2 : 17] He said, What have they seen in your house? And Hezekiah answered, They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them. Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord.

Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good. For he thought, Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days? The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made the pool and the conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?

And Hezekiah slept with his fathers, and Manasseh his son reigned in his place. 2 Kings chapter 20 concludes the account of the life of Hezekiah within the books of the kings.

As a sort of addendum to the story of Hezekiah's life, it tells of two particular events that are connected together. The two events occur around the time of the Syrian threat, as we see in verse 6.

[3 : 33] The city is under threat, but the king is also seriously ill. He is at the point of death. And if the severity of his illness was not enough, the Lord sends Isaiah to confirm the fact of his forthcoming death to him.

He will not recover. With the nation being on the brink of being overrun by the Assyrians, the king is on his deathbed. He is about to die. At one of the most critical times in the nation's history, he would have to leave the reins of the nation in the hands of his son Manasseh, and help him to establish a new regime under these circumstances.

The symbolic relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic has been much explored by writers and poets, and theorised by theologians and political thinkers, perhaps most notably in the work of Shakespeare, and also in the work of someone like Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote on the subject in the king's two bodies.

The illness of King Hezekiah is a symbol of the ailing of the kingdom. The kingdom is near to death. Can the kingdom be delivered from its fate, from the exile that seemingly awaits it?

Hezekiah's response to the Lord's announcement is to turn his face to the wall and to seek the Lord's reprieve. He calls upon the Lord to consider the way that he has walked before him faithfully. [4 : 47] Like David, he has walked before the Lord with a whole heart. He has sought to do what is good in the sight of the Lord. After the idolatry of the reign of Ahaz, he has sought to re-establish true worship in the land, and to root out all the idolatry and false worship that had become entrenched there.

Even before Isaiah has left the courts of the palace, the word of the Lord comes to him, sending him back to Hezekiah with the message that his prayer has been heard. God addresses Hezekiah as the God of David his father.

He will be healed and restored, and on the third day he will be raised up to go into the house of the Lord. And this won't merely be a reprieve of a short duration. The Lord will add 15 years to his life. And as the king symbolizes the nation, this deliverance is not just for Hezekiah as a private person. It's also for Hezekiah as the representative of the nation and the city. The city will also be delivered, delivered from the hand of the king of Assyria.

God's commitment to the city is for the sake of David, his servant, and also for his own namesake. He has placed his name there in the temple, and he is jealous for its holiness. Isaiah instructs them to bring a cake of figs, and to take it and lay it on the boil, and that would be the means by which he would recover.

[6 : 00] It is not entirely clear what is meant by a boil here. However, the application of figs was a known form of treatment. We need not presume that it is some strange prophetic sign.

Hezekiah requests a further sign, and Isaiah doesn't rebuke him here. He offers Hezekiah the choice of two alternatives. On the one hand, the shadow could go forward 10 steps, or it could go back 10 steps.

The location of this sign, as we see in Isaiah chapter 38 verse 8, is the steps of Ahaz. It is not entirely clear what these were. Some suggest that this is a reference to a sundial.

Others suggest that these are literal steps, maybe steps that go up to the altar, or perhaps they are steps that go up to some part of the palace. Hezekiah chooses the harder of the two signs, and the Lord brings it to pass, demonstrating that he will indeed be saved from his illness.

In the book of Isaiah chapter 38 verses 10 to 20, we have a writing from Hezekiah around this time, concerning his illness. I said,

[8 : 27] The second event from the reign of Hezekiah recorded in this chapter is a visit from Meridak Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon.

He sends envoys to Hezekiah, and Hezekiah shows them around all of his treasures. He shows them the riches of his house, the riches of his armory, and all of the wealth of his storehouses.

This probably occurs in the second period of Meridak Baladan's reign, around 703 to 702 BC. Hezekiah presumably seeks to form an alliance with Meridak Baladan, in order that they can both fight against Assyria together.

With such a northern ally, he would be much more confident in fighting against the Assyrians. He also looks, of course, to the south, to Egypt, as another potential ally. Neither of these two potential allies would prove to be of true aid to Judah.

The Lord sends the prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to give him a dismaying message about the Babylonians. He has shown them all around his house, and all that he has shown them will one day

