

2 Kings 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Kings chapter 21 Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah, and he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshipped all the hosts of heaven and served them.

And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, In Jerusalem will I put my name. And he built altars for all the hosts of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

And he burned his son as an offering, and used fortune-telling and omens, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger.

And the carved image of Asherah that he had made, he set in the house of which the Lord said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.

[1 : 08] And I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their fathers. If only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them.

But they did not listen, and Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel. And the Lord said by his servants the prophets, Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations, and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, therefore thus says the Lord the God of Israel, Behold I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster, that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.

And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab. And I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies. And they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day.

Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin, so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

[2 : 32] Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, and all that he did, and the sin that he committed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And Manasseh slept with his fathers, and was buried in the garden of his house, in the garden of Uzzah.

And Ammon his son reigned in his place. Ammon was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Meshulamoth, the daughter of Haraz of Jotba.

And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done. He walked in all the way in which his father walked, and served the idols that his father served, and worshipped them.

He abandoned the Lord, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the Lord. And the servants of Ammon conspired against him, and put the king to death in his house. But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against King Ammon.

And the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his place. Now the rest of the acts of Ammon that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And he was buried in his tomb in the garden of Uzzah, and Josiah his son reigned in his place.

[3 : 40] 2 Kings chapter 21 recounts the reign of Manasseh, although it does not mention the repentance and restoration that we read of in 2 Chronicles chapter 33. The account that we have in this chapter is very selective, especially when we consider the source material that the writer probably had to hand.

He doesn't really tell us about relations between Judah and Assyria during the period. From what we know of other sources, during the reigns of the Assyrian kings Esauhaddon and Ashurbanipal, Judah was mostly a loyal vassal nation of the Assyrian Empire.

Judean troops were among those used to suppress the rebellion of Terhaka in Egypt. Judah also contributed to the rebuilding of Sidon. The hero of this passage, which was familiar with the text of 2 Chronicles, will likely be very surprised not to see any reference to the captivity and exile of Manasseh, and even more surprised not to read anything of his repentance.

The presentation of Manasseh in this chapter is unremittingly negative. There are no details mitigating this portrayal, or presenting us with some account of the reversal that Manasseh underwent. The selectivity of the account, then, invites our attention, and also calls for some sort of explanation.

Why would the author of the books of the kings not include such details? When considering this question, we should keep in mind that the account of 2 Chronicles chapter 33 has the same tenor to it as this one.

[5 : 00] Manasseh is presented in the most negative of terms, as one who had a lasting impact through his wickedness. The account of his repentance, though important, does not change the general character of his reign, or fundamentally alter the course of the nation.

Manasseh reigns for 55 years, the longest reign of any king in either Judah or Israel. Over the course of this period, he exerts an immense impact upon the spiritual character of the nation, and even though he may seek to repair that impact towards the end of his life, the damage had already been done.

Manasseh's father Hezekiah had engaged in a great reformation project, seeking to restore the true worship of God. Manasseh, however, seeks to reverse all of these things. His motives for doing so are not entirely clear.

Perhaps he is seeking to curry favour with the Assyrians and others by engaging in certain sorts of syncretism. Perhaps the decision is motivated in part by domestic politics. Hezekiah's reformation of the worship of the land might have faced considerable resistance.

People would not want their local shrine to be torn down. They would not like to see the disruption of their worship of Baal and Asherah. To such people, Manasseh might have come across as far more religiously tolerant.

[6 : 12] He is also far more cosmopolitan than Hezekiah. He does not oppose pagan practices and the worship of the gods of neighbouring peoples. He is far more relaxed to the idea of a larger pantheon of gods, of which the Lord may be just one.

And by abandoning the centralising religious project of his father, he gives power back to different regions. They can worship as they want. They don't have to worship in the temple in Jerusalem or according to the ways of the temple in Jerusalem.

They can enjoy a much greater religious autonomy. Religious pluralism seems far better for a nation that's facing all these sorts of internal and external pressures. It seems far more expedient in such a situation to worship many different gods, gods that represent all the different groups within the nation.

Maintaining pure worship of just one god creates unnecessary tensions both within the nation and with other nations. Political expediency alone would suggest a more polytheistic approach is far more reasonable.

Manasseh engages in all sorts of religious practices. He builds altars for the host of heaven and places them in the courts of the house of the Lord. He burns his son as an offering. He uses fortune-telling, omens, deals with mediums and necromancers.

[7 : 24] He goes so far as to place a carved image of Asherah within the house of the Lord. The temple of Solomon, a symbol of exclusive worship to the Lord, is now opened up to other sorts of worship.

It becomes a far more inclusive place. As Judah is weak and needs to look to other nations round about as Assyria spreads its power, it seems only appropriate that it should express that openness in the relaxing of the exclusivity of its own religious cult.

It shouldn't be that hard to see some of the ways that Manasseh might have rationalised his religious policies. A less divisive, centralising and exclusive religious approach would relax some of the tensions that the nation experienced.

However, in taking this approach, Manasseh was abandoning the Lord, the Lord who had delivered them from Egypt and brought them into the promised land. He was defiling the Lord's place of worship. He was filling the land that the Lord had promised to his people with violence.

By putting his trust in the nations and their gods, and in human wisdom over the word of the Lord, Manasseh doomed himself to judgment. Over the decades of his reign, the Lord sent his servants the prophets with messages of warning to Judah and Manasseh.

[8 : 32] The warnings were based upon Manasseh's own sins, but also upon the sins of the nation more generally. Manasseh led the people in wickedness and idolatry, but the people very willingly followed.

The Lord declares that he will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria and the plumb line of the house of Ahab. The same judgment that the northern kingdom of Israel had faced would fall upon the southern kingdom of Judah.

The language of the measuring line and the plumb line can also be found in places like Isaiah chapter 28 verse 17, And I will make justice the line and righteousness the plumb line and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies and waters will overwhelm the shelter.

Or in Isaiah chapter 34 verse 11, But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it, he shall stretch the line of confusion over it and the plumb line of emptiness. Like Samaria, Jerusalem will suffer a sort of decreation on account of their sins. The Lord will wipe Jerusalem clean, cleaning off of it all its rebellious people. He will forsake his rebellious people, abandoning them to the fate that they have chosen for themselves.

[9 : 40] Beyond all his sins of idolatry, Manasseh is also a violent king. He sheds a lot of innocent blood, filling Jerusalem from one end to another. This all calls God's judgment down upon the city.

The nation had already been doomed to exile, but on account of Manasseh's long and wicked reign, that judgment can't come soon enough. Manasseh dies and he's succeeded by his son Ammon, who only rules for a couple of years.

After he is killed by conspirators, Josiah his son is set up as king in his place. Peter Lighthouse writes of Manasseh, Judah's ultimate end came through forgetfulness, under a king whose name means forgetfulness.

The original Manasseh was so named because his birth comforted Joseph in exile, causing him to forget his suffering. Significantly, the name Manasseh is used 12 times in 1st and 2nd Kings, 11 times of the son of Hezekiah, whose 55-year reign sealed Judah's doom.

He is appropriately named, not because he caused Israel to forget its troubles, but because he forgot the Lord, his deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and his commandments. Each time the Bible says that Judah is condemned to exile because of Manasseh, the original readers would have recognized they are condemned because of forgetfulness.

[10 : 56] Forgetfulness seduced them to do evil. Because of forgetfulness, the land became full of innocent blood. And even after Josiah, the Lord did not turn from his wrath because of all the provocations with which forgetfulness had provoked him.

Finally, the Lord sent bands of raiders because of the sins of forgetfulness. The story of the consequences of forgetfulness was a stimulus to remind exilic Israel never to forget again.

A question to consider. How might Manasseh's religious policies serve as a cautionary example for us today?

