

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 46 – Part 2

Assyria and Judah

Hezekiah and Manassah

Have you seen the movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much*? It is a classic Hitchcock suspense film from 1956 starring James Stewart and Doris Day. The film contains a plot line of foreign intrigue, exotic locations (Morocco and London), and all of the camera angles that added to Hitchcock's fame. Of course the acting was superb, but it was not acting that won an Academy Award for this film. The film won the Academy Award for Best Song for "Whatever Will Be, Will Be (Que Sera, Sera).

Doris Day sang the song in the film but was not its writer. Jay Livingston and Ray Evans wrote the song the year earlier and won their third Oscar with it. Day's recording took the song to number two on the Billboard Hot 100, and it became her signature song for her radio show over a decade later.

The song is written in ungrammatical Spanish (which many wrongly assume to be French). The verses concern the questions of youth about the future (Will I be pretty? Will I be rich? What days lie ahead for young sweethearts in love?). The chorus has the famous lyric:



Que Sera, Sera

Whatever will be, will be

The Future's not ours to see

Que Sera, Sera

What will be, will be.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt the die was cast? Sometimes, does it seem that life has dealt you a hand that you are stuck with, and no matter what you do, you cannot change what you have before you? Whatever will be, will be, regardless of your decisions and actions?

This futility is not found in the stories we study today. In fact, we see the opposite as we consider part two in the life of Hezekiah and his son, Manasseh.

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HEZEKIAH'S ILLNESS

As we began to explore last week, and as we will consider in much greater detail in the next lesson, the story of Hezekiah is closely knit together in passages from Kings, Chronicles, and Isaiah. It is a biography brought to life in Scripture, with history and archaeology providing details that heighten our appreciation of the Bible's account, and giving us a greater depth of insight into the narrative. The same is true as we explore the continuing saga of Hezekiah and his son Manasseh.

Kings, Chronicles, and Isaiah each contribute pieces of history that help us unfold the events surrounding two major, as yet uncovered, events in Hezekiah's life. In Kings, the narrative unfolds in 2 Kings 20. The story is not long, so we reproduce it here:

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 boil, 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?" 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 (2 Kings 20:1-11).

While some scholars debate *when* these events happened in Hezekiah's life, the story clearly conveys the idea that it happened while Hezekiah was dealing with issues related to his rebellion against the Assyrians as overlords to Judah. The storyline starts with the phrase "In those days..." This story follows the storyline of Sennacherib, covered last lesson. Sennacherib successfully conquered much of

Judah but was thwarted in his efforts to take Jerusalem and Hezekiah. The Sennacherib story concluded with Kings noting his death at the hands of his sons, as prophesied by Isaiah. We should add that this death ultimately came over a decade after Sennacherib returned home from his Judean warring, but that does not matter in the Prophet Historian's account in Kings. The Prophet Historian's point was that the prophetic curse over Sennacherib came true: his sons killed him.

The Hezekiah storyline is set then in contrast to Sennacherib's. It shows the difference between the two kings and the resulting different way God treated them. In the eyes of the world, Sennacherib had unparalleled success. Yet before God, it was Hezekiah who was honored and successful.

Hezekiah's problem in this plot line was not the warring Assyrians. Hezekiah had some illness, evidenced by the presence of boils. These boils (as we will see later in our consideration of Hezekiah's prayer found in the Isaiah write-up) seem to have been of a type or placement that hindered Hezekiah's walking. Isaiah went before Hezekiah and told him the bad news: he needed to get his house in order¹ because he was not going to recover from his illness. Weeping bitterly, Hezekiah turned to God² and pleaded, recounting his own faithfulness to God. The actions moved God. Almost immediately, God instructed Isaiah to turn around and tell Hezekiah the good news. God had heard the prayer and seen the tears and was going to change the course of human events. God would heal Hezekiah and give him fifteen more years on the throne.³

As part of Hezekiah's recovery, Isaiah instructs that a poultice of figs was to be placed on the boils. While we have no way of knowing for certain the typical medicinal usage of figs, the translation of tablets found in nearby Ras Shamra in the mid-twentieth century provides an interesting glimpse at practices half a millennium earlier. In a group of writings on cures and treatment for ailing horses we read that if a horse:

¹ Gray translates the passage as, "Give last injunctions to your family for you shall die..." citing an Arabic usage of the Hebrew verb translated. Either way the effect is the same: designate your successor, make your dispositions, you will not be alive much longer! See Gray, John, *I & II Kings A Commentary*, (Westminster 1970), 2d ed., at 697.

² Literally Hezekiah, "turned his face to the wall and prayed to Yahweh." Hezekiah turned away from everybody and everything, seeking out God alone. In this sense, Hezekiah was living his name's meaning, "Yahweh is my strength."

³ 2 Kings 18:2 introduces Hezekiah as a king who reigned for twenty-nine years. 2 Kings 18:13 then dates Sennacherib's invasion to the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign. This is another place where the story clearly gives the illness events as occurring during the beginning of the invasion. (14 years into the reign Hezekiah is sick and gets 15 more years to live for a total of a 29-year reign.)

suffers in the head and is utterly prostrate, [one should tie] an aged bunch of figs, aged raisins, and flour of groats together and administer it [through the nostrils].⁴

Given the choice, I would certainly opt for the poultice on the boil rather than in the nose!

Hezekiah sought for a sign, which, as explained by Isaiah, the Lord was quick to give. Rather than simply take the sun's shadows accelerating on the steps (signifying time moving forward), Hezekiah opted for the more seemingly improbable event of the sun's shadow moving back in time! (Scholars bounce around on what exactly happened here. Some simply leave it as a miraculous sign. Others date the account to a later date when there was an eclipse (Jan. 11, 689 BC). Still others consider this a fictional addition).⁵

The Chronicler does not spend much time with this story. He gives the Reader's Digest version simply stating:

In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the LORD, and he answered him and gave him a sign.

As we consider the input of Isaiah, we should remember that Isaiah was not simply a prophet during this time. Isaiah was the voice piece of God that Hezekiah went to time after time both when beseeching the LORD's favor, and when trying to decide right from wrong. Isaiah was involved in this story and had firsthand awareness of how the events occurred. Isaiah reiterates the 2 Kings account but then adds something missing. Isaiah gives details about a "writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness" (Is. 38:9).

In the prayer, Hezekiah writes in a form reminiscent of the Psalms of Thanksgiving (e.g., Ps. 118).⁶ Hezekiah begins reciting the crisis he faced:

⁴ Bordreuil, Pierre and Pardee, Dennis, *A Manual of Ugaritic*, (Eisenbrauns 2009), at 224.

⁵ See, generally, discussion at Gray 699ff.

⁶ As we noted in our lesson on the Psalms, so many of the "forms" modern scholars ascribe to Hebrew poetry, including Psalms of Thanksgiving, are more modern inventions than established and rigid rules of composition from Old Testament times. So scholars will argue over whether this is a "Thanksgiving Psalm" or a "Lament" or something else altogether. We do best just to note many of the parts are reminiscent of Psalms typical for the age of Hezekiah. See generally discussion of scholars' views at Clendenen, E. R., *New American Commentary: Isaiah 1-39* (B & H Publishing 2007), at 643.

I said, In the middle of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years.

I said, I shall not see the LORD, the Lord in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world.

My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent; like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom; from day to night you bring me to an end;

I calmed myself until morning; like a lion he breaks all my bones; from day to night you bring me to an end (Is. 38:10-13).

Hezekiah then wrote of his lament or petition before the LORD:

Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety!

What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

O Lord, by these things men live, and in all of these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore to me health and make me live! (Is. 38:14-16).

Hezekiah's prayer ends with a proclamation of God's faithfulness expressed in saving Hezekiah:

Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back.

For Sheol does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness.

The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness.

The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD (Is. 38:17-20).

In praise, Hezekiah explains that he will also let his children know of God's faithfulness. This prayer takes on special significance as we consider the life of Manasseh, Hezekiah's son. As we discuss more fully later, Manasseh took the throne, likely as a co-regent, at the age of 12, probably during this time of Hezekiah's infirmity and pending death. What Manasseh took out of these events is an interesting idea to consider.

POINT FOR HOME

“I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you”
(2 Ki. 20:5).

Hezekiah was not a “Que Sera, Sera” kind of guy. Suffering with a disease, and hearing that his life was over, did not sit well with him. We see no evidence of the five stages of grief set out by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross!⁷ Hezekiah does not express “Denial” (“This can’t *really* be happening!”), nor does he express “Anger” (“This really makes me rage!”). Stage three “Bargaining” does not really occur either. Hezekiah is not trying to cut a deal with God! (“I’ll give you fifteen years of service for fifteen years of life!”). “Depression” may be part of Hezekiah’s reaction; he certainly weeps and cries out to God. We can be certain that Hezekiah did not phase into the fifth stage of “Acceptance.” (“I can’t fight it, I might as well get ready for it... Que Sera, Sera!”).

Hezekiah went straight to the Lord after hearing the news. He turned his back and sought God in earnestness, baring his soul. Scripture teaches that the actions of Hezekiah *changed world events*. God specifically changed the course of Hezekiah’s life, and the world, because of what God “heard” and “saw” in Hezekiah.

What is the point for home here? How often do we simply fall into the trap of accepting the ways things are instead of openly and honestly pleading with God for what things should be? For some, the answer lies in between: they do not accept how things are, nor do they plead for God’s intervention. Many just work themselves to death trying to bring about change through their own strength and wisdom, an option that never brings about the best conclusion!

James speaks of those who “do not have” because they “do not ask” (James 4:2). Jesus instructed his followers,

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? (Matt. 7:7-11).

We must never confuse God with Satan who gave Jesus a stone and told him to make his own bread!

⁷ Kubler-Ross, E., *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (Simon & Schuster 2005).

That does not, obviously, mean that God will give us all our requests or desires, any more than as parents we do so for our children. God gives us what is best. Our role, however, remains the same: to ask, seek, and knock. We can learn from Hezekiah to be open, honest, and unashamed as we seek Yahweh to be our strength!

HEZEKIAH'S PRIDE

As we consider the next part of Hezekiah's unfolding saga in Kings, we might first consider the Reader's Digest version given to us by the Chronicler:

[After referencing the illness and recovery] But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem. But Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32:25-26).

The Chronicler was brief, but the Prophet Historian composing and compiling Kings is much more thorough. As Kings explained, Merodach-baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys and letters to Hezekiah. Hezekiah welcomed the envoys and showed them great hospitality. One wonders if Hezekiah were not filled up with pride over the idea that the great land of Babylon had not only heard of him, but had also deemed him worthy of an official visit complete with gifts! Hezekiah decided to show the Babylonians how "rich" he was. He was trying to live up to some perceived notion of him as a big shot!



Merodach-Baladan

Kings records that Hezekiah showed the Babylonian officials all of his treasure house including the gold, silver, spices, oil, weapons, and more (2 Ki. 20:13). We might note that aside from the perils of pride (which does come before the fall!), this was politically naïve, if not outright stupid. One should never show a foreign power how much one has, especially when that foreign power possesses the ability to come retrieve such goodies for itself!

Isaiah went before King Hezekiah to quiz him over the visitors:

What did these men say? And from where did they come to you? (2 Ki. 20:14).

You can almost hear the pride in Hezekiah’s voice as he answers. Rather than simply saying, “Babylon,” Hezekiah proclaims,

They have come from a far country, from Babylon” (2 Ki. 20:15).

No doubt the great distance elevated not only the stature of the envoys, but in Hezekiah’s mind, his own importance! He was important enough that these big time officials would come all that way just to see him!

Isaiah then follows up with the big question:

What have they seen in your house?

Hezekiah responds that he showed them everything. At this point, Isaiah proclaims the judgment: everything will get carted off to Babylon, including Hezekiah’s lineage. This was not going to happen in Hezekiah’s lifetime, but it would happen.

We should note that the Babylonians at this time were wonderful record keepers. Even as they were vassals to the Assyrians, the Babylonians kept track of events in foreign lands. Mordechai Cogan has selected a broad swath of Babylonian inscriptions from this period and later where the records are precise on important events in other lands.⁸ It is not surprising that Babylonia would have good reason to seek vassalage from Judah a few generations later when Babylon became the world Superpower!

To better understand the story, we can add some political history of Babylon. As we unfold the story, there are three kingdoms and four kings in play:

JUDAH’S KING	Hezekiah 715-686	
ASSYRIAN KINGS	Sargon II 722-705	Sennacherib 705-681
BABYLON’S KING	Merodach-Baladan 721-710 703-700	

Merodach-Baladan took over the throne of Babylon during the confusion that always accompanied the ascension of a new king. As Sargon began his rule over Assyria and its empire (including Babylon), M-B asserted himself on the throne in Babylon as its only king. It was slightly over a decade before Sargon could take the throne back over. Sargon did not successfully capture or kill M-B though. M-

⁸ Cogan, Mordechai, *The Raging Torrent, Historical Inscriptions From Assyria and Babylonia Relating to Ancient Israel*, (Carta 2008), at 177ff.

B slipped into exile and awaited his chance to retake the Babylonian throne. That opportunity came in the aftermath of Sennacherib taking the throne.⁹ Likely at this time Hezekiah also began his rebellion against Assyria, ceasing to pay his annual tax. Hezekiah had his illness, and M-B sent envoys looking for assistance in his rebellion against Assyria.

While M-B did not last long on his throne in his second stint as king, the word of Hezekiah's treasures did not disappear with M-B. More will come of this story very soon, just as Isaiah prophesied!

POINT FOR HOME

"...his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem" (2 Chron. 32:25).

How many times do we read this story in the Bible? The names change, the locations vary, but the story is the same repeatedly. Pride, arrogance, haughtiness, self-importance, and self-aggrandizement bring down people, families, and kingdoms. This is not surprising. The only man who can be proud of his accomplishments is the man that is not mindful of God. God is the reason anything good happens. God is the Supreme Good and the only one worthy of praise honor and glory. For someone to glory in himself or herself is for someone to not see God! Seeing God brings the Isaiah 6 reaction of falling to one's face in fearful awe, exclaiming, "I am not worthy!"

The tendency sneaks in on us. It happens in circumstances like our reading of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Two men go to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee beat his chest praying, "Thank you God [sounds pious so far...] that I am not like other men...like this tax collector! I fast, tithe, etc.!" The tax collector stood far off, and wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven. His prayer was contrite: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" My first reaction reading that parable is always the same, "Lord, please don't ever let me read that parable and think, 'I'm glad I'm not like the Pharisee!'" That temptation is always lurking!

Let us make time daily to seek a vision of God that will keep us humble!

⁹ See generally, Boardman, John, ed., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, (Cambridge 1991), 2d ed., Vol. III, Part 2, at 98ff, 106f.

MANASSEH'S REVERSALS

At some point, perhaps when Hezekiah was ill, Manasseh, his son, took over as co-regent (at the young age of twelve). Subsequent to Hezekiah, Manasseh reigned alone. During his reign, Manasseh reversed the policies of Hezekiah. Manasseh took Judah to its deepest depths of depravity and sin. Manasseh rebuilt the high places, erected altars to worship Baal, carved poles in worship of Asherah, and built altars to other gods in the Temple. Manasseh used fortune-telling omens, worked with mediums and necromancers, and even burned a son in sacrifice (2 Ki. 21:1-7).

Unnamed prophets came to Manasseh proclaiming the coming disaster over Judah in judgment over the atrocities of Manasseh:

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 (2 Ki. 21:12-13).

Scholars are quick to note that the prophets carrying this message are not named in Kings. I would suggest that this stands in stark contrast to the story of Manasseh's father in the preceding verses and chapters where over and over Isaiah the prophet is named. The absence of a name provokes the question, "Who?" This seems to fit well with the rabbinic memories that it was Manasseh as king who had Isaiah killed. In this same vein, the Kings narrative adds that,

Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another (2 Ki. 21:16).¹⁰

¹⁰ There are a number of traditions preserved in the rabbi's teachings about Manasseh and Isaiah. The Jewish tradition from those living in Babylon (post-captivity) interpreted this passage in Kings "as meaning that he [Manasseh] slew Isaiah." Epstein, Rabbi Dr. I., ed., *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin* (Soncino Press 1987), at 103b. In another early rabbinical writing, we read of a rabbi who "found a roll of genealogical records in Jerusalem" where the following story was written:

He [Manasseh] brought him [Isaiah] to trial and then slew him. He [Manasseh] said to him [Isaiah]: Your teacher Moses said, "For men shall not see me and live" and you said, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up". Your teacher Moses said, "For what [great nation is there, that hath God so nigh unto them], as the Lord our God is whensoever we call upon him", and you said, "Seek the Lord when he may be found". Your teacher Moses said, "The number of your days I will fulfill" but you said, "And I will add unto your days fifteen years."

While the Prophet Historian writing Kings stays on topic with the mourning over the actions of Manasseh and points to the coming judgment, the Chronicler gives more information about Manasseh's life. Chronicles gives much the same data as Kings, and even adds a further statement about Manasseh's obtuse refusal to listen to God:

The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention. Therefore the LORD brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon (2 Chron. 33:10-11).

Reading through the Assyrian records, the entries on Manasseh are not complete. The Assyrian king Esarhaddon (who reigned from 681-669, succeeding Sennacherib) twice mentions Manasseh as a vassal king who provided troops and military support for two Assyrian thrusts into Egypt. In one passage, there is an uprising against Esarhaddon by some of his vassals, and the text is corrupted. Some scholars suggest this text may reference the actions that resulted in Manasseh's imprisonment.¹¹

In an interesting twist of Manasseh's life, while in bondage and distress, he had a turn of heart:

And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God (2 Chron. 33:12-13).

The Chronicler gives the final end of Manasseh as one who found out, finally, that his father was right (and was rightly named!): Yahweh is strength! Manasseh's turn of heart was genuine. Upon return to Jerusalem,

... he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. He also restored the altar of the LORD and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and he commanded Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. (2 Chron. 33:15-16).

Epstein, Rabbi Dr. I., ed., *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth* (Soncino Press 1984), at 49b. If there be any truth to the story, for Manasseh to use the sustaining of his father's life 15 years as a cause for blasphemy by Isaiah, it is safe to say the man had some serious father issues!

¹¹ Cogan, at 142.

What an amazing turn!

POINT FOR HOME

“...when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly... He prayed to him, and God was moved” (2 Chron. 33:12).

This amazing turn is not unlike a number of similar stories in the Bible. Consider the apostle Paul. Before becoming a Christian, Paul participated in the stoning of Stephen, a prophet of God and Christ, and worked violently to stop God’s people in the church. Confronted by the truth of Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul’s life turn 180 degrees.

Truth can have that effect, but it can also fall on deaf ears, as it had for Manasseh for years. What made the difference? Certainly the distress made a difference, but it was likely more than that. The distress was an attention getter, but we are told also of Manasseh’s newfound humility. Manasseh with “great” humility “entreated the favor of the Lord.” He prayed, and God was moved! Here, we end where we started: there is no *Que Sera, Sera* in Scripture. No one need give up, nor reckon anything as a *fait accompli*. God is watching, listening, and *acting*. Our role, then, is to seek his will, seek his direction, stay tucked into our role as his people, doing his good works on earth. As we do so, we express our contrition over sin. We seek in humility to serve. We run from the dangers of pride. We appreciate his blessings over our lives with thankful hearts.

Amen!

WANT MORE?

If you are at a crisis place where you could use prayer, please email me at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com. I will keep your email confidential and be honored to pray for you.