

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 28

2 Kings – Part Three

HEZEKIAH TO THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Chapters 18 - 25

I. BACKGROUND.

We have taken the books 1 and 2 Kings apart and examined the history and information about the Northern Kingdom (called “Israel”) and the Southern Kingdom (called “Judah”) one at a time. In 722 B.C., the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were conquered once and for all and disbursed throughout the Middle East. The two tribes that composed Judah, the Southern Kingdom, still remained as a country.

We have followed the kings that ruled in Judah up until King Hezekiah. Hezekiah began his reign in 729 B.C., co-reigning with his father King Ahaz for 14 years until 715 B.C. Hezekiah was the 13th king of Israel (if we count the reigning Queen Athaliah as a king!).

The historical time of Hezekiah is reported not only in 2 Kings, but also in other parts of the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah was a contemporary of Hezekiah (although somewhat older, for Isaiah had been prophesying for sometime before Hezekiah took the throne). Isaiah 36 – 39 contains much of the same information (sometimes word for word) as that in 2 Kings. Of course, Chronicles also contains a good bit of information about the same events and time period.

II. JUDAH’S FINAL KINGS.

A. Hezekiah.

Hezekiah began reigning as a co-regent with his father King Ahaz at the ripe young age of 11. From 729 B.C. until 715 B.C., Hezekiah was co-regent. At the age of 25 in 715 B.C., Hezekiah began reigning as the sole monarch over Judah.

Archaeology has found two “seals” of Hezekiah in just the last ten years. The seals were made of clay. A photo of one is produced here followed by a penciled reproduction of the seal to better show its features:



The words on the seal translate into “Hezekiah (son of) Ahaz, King of Judah.” The drawing on the seal is of a scarab beetle.

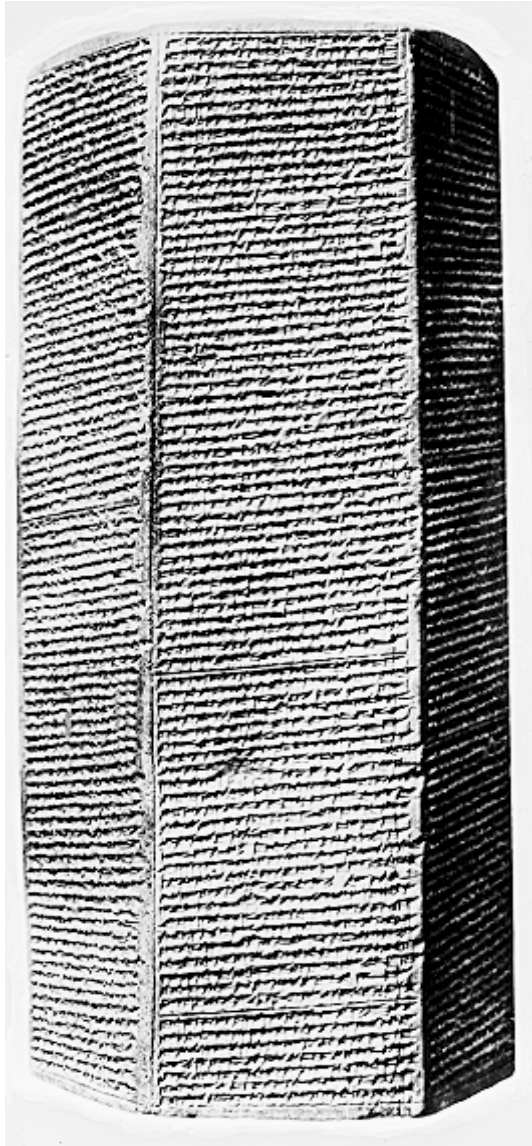
Hezekiah was Judah’s best king since the division of Israel. He “trusted in Yahweh” and “There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before or after him.” Furthermore, “He held fast to Yahweh, and did not cease to follow him.” (2 Ki. 18:5 - 6). Accordingly, scripture notes that God was with Hezekiah and granted him success in his endeavors.

Hezekiah’s reigned during a turbulent time in history. The Assyrian army had totally devastated the Northern kingdom while Hezekiah was co-regent with his father King Ahaz in 722 B.C. The Assyrian threat did not stop there. While Ahaz had paid vassal money in tribute to Assyria, Hezekiah reversed Ahaz’s policy and asserted independence from Assyria. Assyria’s king did not receive this move well.

King Sennacherib made various forays into the Judean kingdom in an effort to quell Hezekiah’s rebellion. These forays led to the capture of a number of Judean cities. Much to Sennacherib’s dismay, however, Hezekiah refused to surrender Jerusalem. Hezekiah redeemed some of the lands with a large payment of gold and silver to Sennacherib. (Historical notes show an agreement on the amount of gold paid. Sennacherib seemed to exaggerate the amount of silver paid.)

The Assyrian account of Sennacherib's Judean campaign is contained in a prism that archaeologists uncovered at the palace excavations in the Assyrian capital of Nineveh.

The prism is on display at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute:



The scrawling on it is Assyrian writing in the 700's B.C. The relevant part to Hezekiah reads in part, "As for Hezekiah, the Jew, who had not submitted to my yoke, 46 of his strong, walled cities and the cities of their environs, which were numberless, I besieged, I captured, I plundered, as booty I counted them. Him, like a caged bird, in Jerusalem, his royal city, I shut up." (Pritchard, ANET, 288).

Like today, politics in 700 B.C. was not without spin. Notice what Sennacherib's story says by omission? Namely, it says that Sennacherib FAILED to conquer Hezekiah or Jerusalem. Other historical sources tell us why. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that Sennacherib's army was over run with rats infested with the bubonic plague killing many (book 2, para. 141). The Egyptian

sources also recount the Assyrian camp overrun with rats carrying the bubonic plague. Scripture provides us the most complete answer.

In 2 Kings 18, we read that after conquering a number of the outlying towns, Sennacherib sends an envoy to Hezekiah demanding surrender. The envoy uses incredible intimidation and psychological warfare in the process. The envoys list their threats and demands in the hearing of the people of Jerusalem. The negotiations are conducted in the every day dialect of the Jews. When Hezekiah heard the bad news of the threats of Sennacherib, he was distraught.

Let's put this in clear every day language – The King of Assyria has messengers explain to the people of Jerusalem that they will all die horrid drawn out deaths because of the actions of Hezekiah. Hezekiah not only hears that his people are being seduced to revolt against him, but he also hears that the major superpower of the world is going to throw the weight of its army to destroy him. Now that is pretty grim news!

How does Hezekiah handle this news? Does he start scheming of an exit plan? Does he frighten into submission? Does he get drunk and check out of the world??? No. This man of God's reaction is to tear his clothes (a sign of humility, mourning, and personal concern) and go into Yahweh's temple and fall before the Lord. Hezekiah also sends his messengers to Isaiah, one of God's prophets, in an effort to get Yahweh's counsel on what to do. Hezekiah asks Isaiah to pray.

Isaiah sends the messengers back to Hezekiah assuring him that Sennacherib would not be invading Jerusalem, but would be headed home, where he would meet his own demise. Sennacherib doesn't leave immediately. Sennacherib sends word to Hezekiah that Jerusalem would fall, and any reliance on Yahweh was fruitless. Sennacherib explained that the local gods of all the other towns and kingdoms that Assyria had faced had all fallen before Assyria. Why should Jerusalem and its god be any different?

Hezekiah knew why. Hezekiah prayed to Yahweh, not as a local god, but as the God over all the kingdoms of the earth. Indeed, Hezekiah's faith does not waiver out of fear that the Assyrian gods were more powerful. Hezekiah understood that all the gods of Assyria and all the local gods Assyria had faced were merely wooden or engraved images made by hand, not true gods in any sense of the word.

Isaiah sends a fuller prophesy of Hezekiah and Judah's prevailing over Sennacherib and then, in the night, a great deal of Sennacherib's army was killed. In the morning when the army awoke, there was death all around. At that point, Sennacherib returned home to Nineveh. Hezekiah and Judah were saved.

A more personal story to Hezekiah is also contained in 2 Kings. Hezekiah becomes acutely ill to the point of death. His symptoms include the boils which can be indicative of the bubonic plague. Isaiah goes to see Hezekiah and tells him to put his house in order because Hezekiah is going to die. Upon hearing this, Hezekiah prays to Yahweh, weeping bitterly. Before Isaiah can make it out the building, Yahweh sends Isaiah back in to say that Yahweh has heard Hezekiah's prayer and Hezekiah will be walking to the temple within 3 days and will live another 15 years.

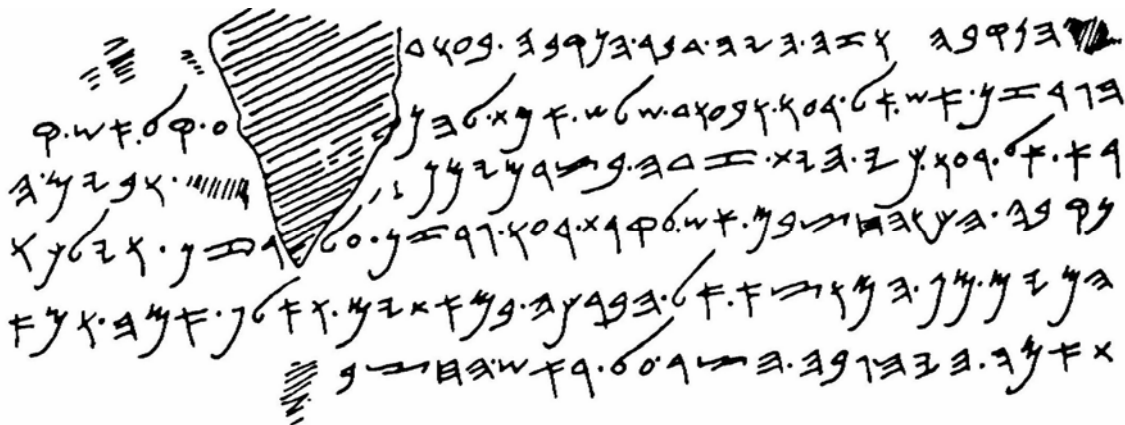
Hezekiah seeks a sign and is given one, as the sun changes its shadow on the "steps of Ahaz" in a backwards fashion. (While we have no means of knowing in what fashion this was a miracle, we do know that an eclipse occurred at this time period which of course can have an effect on how light is cast).

Some time after Hezekiah's recovery, the king of Babylon sends envoys to Hezekiah. Hezekiah shows off all the national treasures which serve as a springboard to Isaiah's prophecy that after Hezekiah, Babylon will lead Israel into captivity.

Before 2 Kings ends its Hezekiah's accounts, it references Hezekiah making a pool and a tunnel to bring water into Jerusalem's walls. Archaeology found an interesting confirmation of this account in 1880 with the discovery of the Siloam Inscription. The inscription is now in the Istanbul Museum.



A drawn rendering of the inscription shows:



The inscription reads (in English!):

[. . .] the tunneling; and this was how the tunneling was completed: As [the laborers employed] their picks, each crew toward the other, and while there were still three cubits remaining, the voices of the men calling out to each other [could be heard], since it got louder on the right [and left]. The day the opening was made, the stonecutters hacked toward each other, pick against pick. And the water flowed from the source to the pool [twelve hundred cubits, despite the fact that] the height of the rock above the stonecutters' heads was one hundred cubits.

B. Manasseh.

After Hezekiah's illness, he had a son named Manasseh. Manasseh co-reigned with his father for ten years (697-686 B.C.) until the death of Hezekiah. Following Hezekiah's death, Manasseh ruled Judah for 45 years, until 642 B.C.

Manasseh was an evil king before Yahweh. Manasseh restored Ba'al worship, Asherah worship, even building shrines to various gods within Solomon's temple built for Yahweh. Manasseh sacrificed his own son in fire, practiced sorcery and divination. In fact, Manasseh did more evil before Yahweh than the nations Yahweh destroyed while giving Israel the Promised Land.

It was because of Manasseh that Yahweh had a prophesy of coming destruction of Jerusalem: "I will wipe out Jerusalem as one wipes out a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down." (2 Ki. 21:13).

Interestingly, 2 Chronicles contains the account that in the last two years of Manasseh's life, Manasseh is carted off to Babylon with a ring in his nose. In Babylon, Manasseh has a conversion experience and seeks Yahweh. Yahweh hears the prayers of this wicked king and restores him.

C. Amon.

Upon Manasseh's death in 642 B.C., his son Amon took the throne. Amon did not share his father's conversion at the end of Manasseh's reign. Instead, Amon carries on the wicked practices and idolatry that marked most of Manasseh's reign. Amon's reign is cut short when court officials assassinate him in 640 B.C.

D. Josiah.

After seeing to Amon's death, the officials put his son Josiah on the throne. Josiah is only eight years old. He reigns 31 years from 640 to 609 B.C. Josiah is Judah's last godly king before exile. Jeremiah is a prophet during this reign and speaks highly of Josiah. Zephaniah also prophesied early in Josiah's reign.

When Josiah was 26, he sent his secretary to the temple to instruct the priests on paying for work being done. While digging around for the money, the High Priest makes a remarkable find – the Book of the Law! The High Priest gives this to the secretary who reads it. The secretary then takes it to King Josiah and reads it to the king.

When Josiah hears the Book of the Law, he quickly recognizes that Judah was FAR astray. Josiah tears his robes and seeks a word from the Lord because of the people's decadence and sin. Josiah is told that the

people's unfaithfulness will result in bad consequences, but that because of Josiah's heart, those will not take place during his lifetime.

Josiah calls all the priests and prophets together and has the book read in their presence. Josiah then commits himself to following the law and all the others join in that commitment. The temple is purified of its idols, the pagan priests were done away with, and the pagan shrines throughout Israel were destroyed, even the altar built by Jeroboam at Bethel, as prophesied.

Josiah then gave an order to the people to celebrate the Passover, as detailed in the Book of Law. Josiah turned to Yahweh "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength." (2 Ki. 23:25).
(*cf.* Deut. 6:5)

At the age of 39, Josiah dies in battle against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. Josiah is succeeded by his son Jehoahaz.

E. Jehoahaz.

Jehoahaz reigns three months in 609 B.C. He is led away in chains by Pharaoh Neco who then changes Eliakim's name (Eliakim is brother to Jehoahaz and another son to Josiah) to Jehoiakim, making Jehoiakim king.

F. Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim is 25 when he begins reigning. He was king for eleven years (from 609-598 B.C.). Jehoiakim was an evil king. Jeremiah characterized his reign as dishonest, oppressive and unjust. During Jehoiakim's reign, Babylon becomes the superpower and begins to take Judah apart.

G. Jehoichin.

After Jehoiakim dies, his 18 year old son, Jehoiachin, gets a three month run at king (598 – 597 B.C.). King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon lays siege to Jerusalem and carts Jehoichin off a prisoner. All the treasures from the temple, all the officers and fighting men, all the craftsmen and artisans are deported as well. "Only the poor people were left." (2 Ki. 24:14).

H. Zedekiah.

After carting off most every one who was anyone, Nebuchadnezzar makes Jehoiachin's uncle Mattaniah king, changing his name to Zedekiah. Zedekiah is an evil king before Yahweh. He reigns eleven years from 597 – 586 B.C.

The last two years of Zedekiah's reign were spent under siege from Nebuchadnezzar. At that point, the lack of food was so severe that the city fell. Zedekiah's sons were killed before him. Zedekiah's eyes were then put out. The walls of Jerusalem were destroyed as was the temple built by Solomon. The nation of Judah went into exile. And 2 Kings draws to a close.

III. POINTS FOR HOME.

- A. God answers prayer.
- B. God honors a heart that seeks him.
- C. God wants our faithfulness.
- D. God is not mocked or fooled.
- E. Find God's commands and let them change your life.