

Hezekiah

The Life & Times of Hezekiah

Hezekiah, son of Ahaz was born during the reign of his grandfather Jotham in 741 BC. Scripture tells us little about Jotham's reign, except that he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. After him came Ahaz, who abandoned the worship of the Lord in favour of the Ba'al (2 Kings 16:2-4; 2 Chron. 28:2-4), even going so far as to sacrifice at least one of Hezekiah's brothers in the fire (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 28:3). Threatened by attacks from Aramean, Israelite, Edomite and Philistine (28:17-18) forces which resulted in the death of another of Hezekiah's brothers (28:7) Ahaz made a decision that was to have far-reaching consequences for his descendants: he made himself a vassal of the king of Assyria (2 Kings 16:7-9). His action solved his short-term problem, according to the writers of Kings at least (cf. 2 Chron. 28:20-21), but further undermined the worship of the Lord. While he was visiting his new suzerain at Damascus he saw an altar there that fascinated him. On returning to Jerusalem he had a duplicate made and set up in the Temple and set aside the traditional furniture in its favour (2 Kings 16:10-16). Ahaz also removed some of the symbols of his power from the Temple (16:18) (Noth, 1996: 266). In many ways the life of Hezekiah stands in stark contrast to that of his father, but at times (as we shall see) his father's political practices influenced his own decisions.

Hezekiah came to the throne nine years after Assyria swept away the Northern Kingdom (Thiele, 1983: 174-175). Hezekiah was implicated in a rebellion against Assyria in 712 BC, but may just have been an innocent bystander. In any event Judah did not share the fate of the Philistine city of Ashdod which fell to army sent by Sargon II to put down the uprising (Isa. 20:1) (Noth, 1996: 265). Following the advice of Isaiah and did not trust in Egypt for help (Isa. 20:2-6). The king bore the rule of Assyria until 705 until the accession of Sennacherib to the Assyrian throne sparked a widespread revolt (2 Kings 18:7). Sennacherib worked systematically through his Empire putting down the insurrection. Merodach-Baladan, expelled by Sargon in 709 from Babylon returned to re-claim his sovereignty. The prophet Isaiah had again warned Hezekiah not to listen to Egypt (Isa. 30:1-5; 31:1-3), but this time the pro-Egyptian lobby at court was too influential and the prophet's warnings went unheeded. The Kings of Tyre, Ashkelon, Moab, Ammon and Judah all withheld tribute. Padi the king of Ekron refused to do so and was handed by his own people to Hezekiah for safekeeping in Jerusalem (Pritchard, 1955: 287-288).

An anti-Assyrian policy allowed Hezekiah to purify the National worship from Assyrian cultic elements, a process that he had begun when he ascended to the throne (2 Chron. 29:3). He called the Levites to purify the temple and made a covenant with the Lord to serve him only (29:3-11). Things primarily used for idol worship were burned by the Brook Kidron and the Temple vessels desecrated by his father Ahaz were rededicated. In sixteen days the Temple was ready for worship (29:16-36). Hezekiah invited the Israelites from the provinces of Samaria and Megiddo to join Judah in celebrating at the Passover at Jerusalem. Many ridiculed the king's messengers, but a few responded, coming from Asher, Manasseh, Ephraim and Issachar as well as from Judah to celebrate the festival. He planned the celebration one month later than prescribed so as to allow adequate time for consecration

(30:1-12). In most other respects the Law of Moses was carefully observed (cf. 30:18-20) so it is reasonable to conclude the month's postponement was, most likely, a conciliatory measure to gain the participation of the Northern tribes, who had been following the observance date instituted by Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12:32). It was during this celebration that the King destroyed the bronze serpent Nehushtan, and the people, inspired by his actions went out to demolish pillars, Asherim, high places and altars throughout the land (2 Chron. 31:1). Tithing was reinstated to support the newly organised Priests and Levites (31:4-19) and feasts and seasons were once again observed in accordance with the law.

Following the practice of his grandfather Jotham Hezekiah reinforced his defences (2 Chron. 27:4). Most significant amongst these was the construction of a tunnel from the Gihon Spring to the upper pool of Siloam in the Southeast quarter of the city (32:3-5, 30). This was an impressive feat of engineering, carrying fresh water through 533 m [1 748 ft] of solid rock (Hoerth, 1998: 344-346). The wall of Jerusalem was extended to include this vital source of water in the city limits; production of shields and weapons was increased and combat forces organised (32:5). Having done all he could from a human standpoint Hezekiah put his trust in the Lord (32:8). It was not long before long Assyria came.

In 702 Merodach-Baladan was forced by Sennacherib to retreat from Babylon, leaving his throne to Bel-ibni, a native Chaldean. Marching south Sennacherib received the submission of Acco, Joppa, Ashkelon and Ekron - after a battle with its Egyptian allies at Eltekeh in the Judean foothills. Padi, King of Ekron was returned from Jerusalem and the mutineers were executed (Hoerth, 1998: 347). Forty-six fortified places in Judea were taken and Jerusalem besieged - the land was ravaged by war (Isa. 1:8). Sennacherib claims to have shut Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage" and taken 200 150 Judean captives (Pritchard, 1955: 288). He imposed a crushing tribute on the city, which forced Hezekiah to strip the temple of its silver and gold (2 Kings 18:14-16) and gave parts of his territory to the King of Ekron and faithful vassals on the Philistine seaboard (Noth, 1996: 269). For some reason the Assyrian king broke the normal rules that governed such circumstances. He accepted the payment, but continued to press his attack home (Provan, 1995: 255). In order to become a vassal of Assyria Hezekiah would have sworn loyalty in the name of Yahweh, consequently in breaking his oath he was guilty of sin. However, Sennacherib's actions in not keeping his word mean that he too broke the covenant. For this he would shortly face the judgement of the Lord..

Apparently it was at this point (c.701) that Hezekiah became seriously ill (2 Kings 20:1; 2 Chron. 31:24; Isa. 38:1-21). Although Isaiah told Hezekiah to prepare for death the King sought the Lord and received a twofold promise: a fifteen year extension of his life and deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat (2 Kings 20:2-6; Isa. 38:4-6), a promise confirmed by a miracle (2 Kings 20:9-11). Merodach-Baladan sent envoys to Hezekiah, ostensibly to congratulate him on his recovery from a serious illness, but more likely to assess what help he could give against Assyria. Hezekiah was so flattered by his overtures that he showed his visitors everything in his palace (2 Kings 20:12-13; Isa. 39:2). Chronicles records that the Lord left him at this point to test him (2 Chron. 32:31) and it appears from Isaiah's rebuke that he failed that test (2 Kings 20:14-18; Isa. 39:3-8).

In the meantime Sennacherib was besieging Lachish and, perhaps aware that Hezekiah had placed his trust in the Lord, the King sent messengers to the city. They claimed that

Sennacherib had been commissioned by God and cited an impressive list of conquests over other nations who had trusted in their gods (2 Kings 18:17-35; Isa. 36:1-22). Hezekiah's response was to tear his clothes, put on sackcloth and go into the Temple. Having sent to Isaiah to inquire of the Lord the king received reassurance that Jerusalem would not fall (2 Kings 19:1-7; Isa. 37:1-7).

Sennacherib then despatched a letter to Hezekiah with an ultimatum to surrender. This time Hezekiah does not seem to have been disturbed by the letter and confidently took it into the Temple before the Lord and prayed himself, rather than having Isaiah pray for him (2 Kings 19:14-19; Isa. 37:9-20). The Assyrian force sent to Jerusalem was diverted to the Egyptian border on the report of an Egyptian army approaching (Isa. 37:9). Here they were wiped out by "an Angel of the Lord". Operations against Judah were broken off and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh where he met his death at the hands of his sons (2 Kings 19:35-37; Isa. 7:36-38). After mocking the Lord's ability to protect his people it is ironic that Sennacherib lost his own life in the place where his own god should have been best able to protect him.

Apparently Manasseh was made coregent with his father on the throne of David at the age of 12 in 696 (Thiele, 1983: 68, 173-174, 176-177). Peace and prosperity - the result of the reformation lasted for a further 15 years until Hezekiah died in 686.

Hezekiah's Significance in Israel's History

Hezekiah plays an important part in the thought of the biblical writers. His story receives more space in Kings and Chronicles than any king since Solomon and also forms a central theme amongst the prophecies of Isaiah. He is presented as a second David - in contrast to those who preceded him (1 Kings 14:3; 16:2). During his reign Judah regained for the last time something of the prestige and power it enjoyed during the reign of Solomon (2 Chron. 30:26; 32:27-29). Under him there was again one king, one people and one Temple for he sought to reunite Judah with the remnant of Israel around the worship at Jerusalem (30:1 - 31:1). It was he who removed the "high places", something that no king before him had done (1 Kings 15:14; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:4, 35) (Provan, 1996: 703). Only David and Hezekiah succeeded in defeating the Philistines (2 Kings 18:8; cf. 2 Sam. 18:27; 19:8) and the narrators of Kings and Chronicles use the phrase "The Lord was with him" only of Kings David (1 Sam. 16:18; 18:12, 14, 28; 2 Sam. 5:10), Solomon (2 Chron. 1:1) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:7), indicating that they placed all three in a special category.

The miraculous deliverance from the hands of the Assyrians and the prophecies made by Isaiah concerning Jerusalem (Isa. 37:33-35) led to the popular belief that the city would never fall because it housed the Temple (cf. Jer. 7:1-14). However, even within the account of Hezekiah the readers are told that the promise of deliverance is conditional on the king's faithfulness. While they would be secure during Hezekiah's lifetime, his descendants would one day face defeat and exile (2 Kings 20:16-18).

Although it is not stated by the text, it is often argued that Israel would have been spared the long and evil rule of Manasseh if he had not prayed that his life would be spared (2 Kings 20:2-3). Manasseh was born three years after that event (cf. 21:1) and his activities are

highlighted as one of the reasons why Judah went into exile (24:2).

Hezekiah as an Example for Christians

Scripture demonstrates that all the human characters in Old Testament history are flawed and sinful. It should be of no surprise that Hezekiah too had his faults. At times Hezekiah trusted in riches to solve his troubles with Assyria (2 Kings 18:13-16) as his father had done (16:8). When flattered by the envoys of Merodach-Baladan of Babylon his pride got the better of him and he failed the Lord's test (20:12-19; 2 Chron. 32:24-31) as David had before him (1 Chron. 21:1, 8; cf. 2 Sam. 24:1, 10). However, when confronted with his sins his response was invariably to repent (2 Kings 20:2-3; 2 Chron. 32:26). The writer of Kings is unreserved in his praise of this man who trusted in the Lord and won great victories as a result (2 Kings 18:5-8). He sets an example to Christians on a man who was listened to the Word of the Lord (revealed through the prophet Isaiah) and encourages them not only to hold fast to the revelation preserved in the Scripture, but also to have the courage to live by its precepts. Although not mentioned in Hebrews 11 those things said about "...Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel and the prophets..." are also true of him (11:32, 39).

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