

2 Kings 18:1-8; 21:1-9; 22:1-11; 23:1-3, 26-27

18In the third year of King Hoshea son of Elah of Israel, Hezekiah son of King Ahaz of Judah began to reign. ²He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned for twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi daughter of Zechariah. ³He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. ⁴He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. ⁵He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. ⁶For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. ⁷The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him. ⁸He attacked the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory, from watch-tower to fortified city.

21Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign; he reigned for fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah. ²He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, following the abominable practices of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. ³For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done, worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them. ⁴He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, 'In Jerusalem I will put my name.' ⁵He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶He made his son pass through fire; he practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. ⁷The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, 'In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name for ever; ⁸I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their ancestors, 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.' ⁹But they did not listen; Manasseh misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.

22Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath. ²He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

3 In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, 4'Go up to the high priest Hilkiah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; 5let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the LORD; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house, 6that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house. 7But no account shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly.'

8 The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, 'I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.' When Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. 9Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, 'Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the LORD.' 10Shaphan the secretary informed the king, 'The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.' Shaphan then read it aloud to the king.

11 When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes.

23Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. 2The king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. 3The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

26 Still the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. 27The LORD said, 'I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel; and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.'

SERMON

For our final foray into the history of the kings and queens of Israel today, we come to the end, or at least the virtual end of the kingship in Israel, the line of David. There were later kings, but they are widely considered to be puppets of foreign conquerors. The Davidic line, which had ruled over Israel by way of the Kingdom of Judah after the split, has finally come to an end in Josiah. But I'm skipping ahead! We're going to hear the stories of three kings today: King Hezekiah, he's a good guy. King Manasseh, he's a really,

really bad guy. And King Josiah, he was a good guy, but just not a good enough guy, as we'll come to see. So, let's jump into their story.

[Read the story of Hoshea]

So King Hezekiah, he did a great job! He listened to God! He destroyed the altars and palaces of the foreign idols which had infested Israel like a pox. And God honored him appropriately: he won battles, defended the territory against the powerful King of Assyria, and he fortified cities and cared for the people. King Hezekiah was great king, and his story, like that of so many of the "good" kings, is familiar: follow God, get rewards.

But then came Manasseh:

[read his story]

Again, his story is familiar to us: an evil king does only what is right in his own eyes. He establishes idolatrous places of worship, going so far as to place an idol in the middle of the temple built to the Lord!, he inflicts cruelty on his people, and even his own children, he seeks advice not from the prophets or the priests, but the wizards and soothsayers. And, for the record, he's not talking about Harry Potter here. Manasseh is almost boring it's such a repetitive story: you don't listen to God, you don't follow the commands, and God's going to take it all away, and that's just what God tells him.

But then, one day, he dies, and Josiah, at the ripe old age of 8, takes over. That's Enoch's age, for reference. And here's where the story gets interesting:

[read Josiah]

And this is why you'll find Indiana Jones on your bulletin today. Because I think Josiah's story would make even old Indy jealous. Josiah and his high priest Hilkiyah decide to undertake a building project of sorts. They're going to update, remodel, and spruce up the temple. Remove the idols and Asherah poles of Manasseh, and restore the temple to the glory of the Lord.

And while the construction is under way the carpenters take down a wall one day, probably some particleboard monstrosity put there by former temple leaders who decided the fellowship hall should be two rooms instead of one. When they smash down the false wall what do they discover but a book. That may not sound super exciting to some of you all, but to the Jewish king and priest, a book is just about the best treasure you could find. They're not called "people of the book" for nothing. And the secretary reads it, he takes it to King Josiah who reads it, and then King Josiah proclaims that this new book, the secret book of the law discovered behind some old wall in the temple, it's going to be the very first community read ever noted.

King Josiah calls together all the elders and they stand there, in front of the temple, as Josiah himself reads out this book of the law, which we might know today as the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. That's a long time to stand there.

And when he comes to the end, King Josiah pauses, calls the people in, and declares a new day in Israel. The people, under his rule, would reestablish the covenant of this secret book of the law. They would once again worship the Lord in the way God asked them to worship. And all would be good. Except, it wasn't enough.

The story continues:

[read the rest]

Manasseh's evil had been too substantial, and Judah would indeed fall. King Josiah would be killed in a battle at the valley of Megiddo by the King of Egypt, Necho the second. And with his death the rule of the line of King David would come to an end. Kings would continue to rule, but never again would Israel or Judah be more than a vassal state of Assyria, and then Babylon, Persia, and then the Greeks and Romans, and then it was part of the Byzantine Empire, the Rashidun, Umayyad, and Abbasid Islamic Caliphates with their occasional European incursions in the Crusades, the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate, and finally the division into modern day Israel and Palestine.

The end times, in a sense, would in fact come from the great battle of Armageddon, or the Battle at Megiddo, where King Josiah was lost, along with the independence of the Kingdom God had loved.

And if you're like me, it's hard to square this explanation with any actual sense of history and conquest. Do I really think that God was punishing the kingdom of Israel for all their evil and idolatry with thousands of years of disenfranchisement? Do I believe God has allowed the Jewish people to wander the globe in a vast and exhausting diaspora for all this time, because of the sins of people who lived thousands of years ago? No. While I do believe God is jealous, and demands our wholehearted worship and devotion, I also do not think God works quite this way.

But I do think this is the way of people. I do think it's the way of history. Even with a fantastic king, there's no way a tiny little nation like Judah could have stood up to the vast might of Assyria. They were too big, too ruthless, too powerful. I don't think it was God, I think it was Assyria. And then Babylon, and Persia, and all the rest.

And sure, people need an explanation, and as ever, God is ready to absorb that shock. But more than psychology, the reason I don't buy the abandonment of God theory is this—God never actually leaves. The people are utterly devastated. They're sent off to foreign lands, they're scattered around the globe, their temple is razed, and for the rest of history the chosen people of God have lived an unsettled life. But God is always there. In the voices of the prophets and the secret dreams sent to foreign kings, in the reading of the sacred words and the prayers and songs passed down mother to daughter, father to son. In the

quiet of the synagogue and the scratches of Hebrew on the scroll paper. God is always present. The stories are still told. The word is still taught. God is still present.

God's chosen people, even after their great kingdom was lost, they're still the chosen ones. And I think this is the note I'd like us to leave the kings on. The stories of the kings might be big and bold, full of drama and romance and ups and downs and intrigue and humor and all the rest. But they are, like the rest of the story of the chosen people of God, stories of God's faithfulness and continuing presence—through all seasons and governance and places and times of God's beloved. Thanks be to God.