

2 Kings 21 ~ Manasseh, and some thoughts on the 'why' question

Notes for 26 Sep

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Read: [2 Kings 21](#) and make sure you also read [2 Chronicles 33](#)

I'm late with the notes! I had a birthday and what with one thing and another here we are on Friday afternoon and I'm typing up some complicated and confusing thoughts about Manasseh and the *why* question. With good luck and a following wind, I hope that you might find them useful.

Frankly, this chapter is more of the same - bad people doing bad things.

Interestingly, it's almost like Hezekiah run backwards. Hezekiah took down the pagan temples and Manasseh put them back up. Hezekiah trusted God and Manasseh trusted himself. Hezekiah was a good king and Manasseh was a bad king. And so on...

What are we to make of all this?

I'm going to have a small 'go' at an explanation that I can live with. I've no idea if it'll work for you? As the Americans might say, your mileage may vary...

For a modern Christian audience, and I must add for me in particular, steeped in the New Testament, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles cannot surely be read as simple morality tales or merely ancient history. Instead, maybe, they are sustained theological reflections on God, power, covenant, kingship, worship, judgment and hope - and, crucially, they provide much of background in which the NT speaks about Jesus.

Samuel to Kings is fundamentally a tragedy. Israel wants a king; David receives an extraordinary promise; Solomon builds the temple; for a moment land, king, temple and divine presence seem securely established. Then everything unravels. The kingdom divides, kings fail, Israel falls to Assyria, Judah falls to Babylon, Jerusalem is destroyed and the temple burns.

The underlying theological question is:

If God made promises to Israel and David, how did we end up here?

Kings answers partly in terms of Israel's unfaithfulness and divine judgment. Yet hope never quite disappears. I'm jumping ahead a bit here but note that, at the very end of 2

Kings, the imprisoned Davidic king Jehoiachin is released and given a place at the Babylonian king's table. The monarchy has collapsed - *but David's line is still alive*.

That helps explain why the NT begins talking about Jesus as "Son of David," "Messiah" and king. These aren't generic religious titles; they belong to the unresolved story of Samuel and Kings.

But the NT also radically reworks kingship. 1 Samuel 8 warns that kings characteristically *take* - sons, daughters, land, labour and wealth. The subsequent narrative repeatedly bears that out. David takes Bathsheba; Solomon's splendour involves taxation and forced labour; Rehoboam promises even heavier burdens.

Against that history stands Jesus' teaching:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them... But not so with you.
Luke 22:25–26

Christianity ultimately presents us with the astonishing paradox of a king enthroned on a cross. Samuel-Kings supplies the long theological education that makes that claim meaningful.

Something similar happens with the temple. Kings asks where God dwells. Solomon builds the temple but acknowledges that even heaven cannot contain God. Eventually the temple itself is destroyed. The NT inherits that unresolved question and relocates temple language around Christ, the Spirit and the community of believers.

Chronicles adds another dimension because it is itself a rereading of Israel's history. It retells Samuel-Kings from a later perspective, emphasizing temple, worship, repentance and restoration. Manasseh is a striking example: *Kings remembers the disastrous apostate; Chronicles also remembers a humbled king who repents*.

So, Scripture *itself* contains theological *rereading* of Scripture. That prepares us for the creative ways the NT later rereads Israel's story in relation to Christ.

For me, and I would guess for most people (Christians and non-Christians alike), the hardest issue is **the endless relentless mind- and soul-crushing violence**. Samuel and Kings contain warfare, executions and episodes in which terrible violence is associated with divine command or judgment.

A Christian reading surely can't simply pretend that these difficulties disappear?

Christians have variously understood them through progressive revelation, divine accommodation, canonical interpretation centred on Christ, or the distinction between exceptional divine judgment and ordinary human behaviour. But whatever approach we take, *Jesus prevents Christians from simply treating David, Elijah or Jehu as models for Christian conduct*.

[Luke 9](#) provides a fascinating example. James and John want to call down fire on a Samaritan village - an unmistakably Elijah-like response - and Jesus rebukes them. The NT itself therefore demonstrates that an *OT precedent doesn't automatically determine Christian behaviour*.

I've been hanging on to that last statement by the very tips of my fingernails over the past months of reading from Samuel to Kings.

So, to return to my persistent nagging question - *what are we to make of all this?*

I don't have a simple answer.

I don't think there is one.

But I do think that the books themselves are asking us to wrestle with the big questions they raise.

So rather than extracting a "lesson" from every episode, I'd let these books ask *their* own questions:

- Can political power remain innocent?
- Does prosperity prove divine approval?
- Can God's chosen people presume upon being chosen?
- What happens when religious and political power become intertwined?
- Can repentance remove the consequences of history?
- Where is God when institutions supposedly guaranteed by God collapse?

And ultimately:

- What kind of king would actually be worthy of God's kingdom?

Samuel-Kings tries Saul, David, Solomon and generations of successors. Even its best kings cannot rescue the project.

The NT's answer is profoundly unexpected: the Son of David is a king who refuses coercive power, washes feet, loves enemies and receives a crown of thorns.

Read from that perspective, these books aren't awkward preliminaries to Christianity. They are much of the theological journey that makes the crucified Messiah intelligible.

I hope...

A postscript: why do think Kings paints Manasseh as simply evil from beginning to end, whereas Chronicles 33:12-16 has a completely different ending?