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Manasseh's religious policies and their consequences. The resurrection of Peter.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings chapter 21. Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah, and he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and Madanasherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshipped all the hosts of heaven and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, In Jerusalem will I put my name. And he built altars for all the hosts of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

And he burned his son as an offering, and used fortune-telling and omens, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. And the carved image of Ahasuerus that he had made, he set in the house

of which the Lord said to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name for ever.

And I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their fathers. 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. But they did not listen, and Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.

And the Lord said by his servants the prophets, Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations, and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols. Therefore thus says the Lord the God of Israel, 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. And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies. And they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day.

Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin, so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, and all that he did, and the sin that he committed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And Manasseh slept with his fathers, and was buried in the garden of his house, in the garden of Uzzah. And Ammon his son reigned in his place.

Ammon was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Meshulamoth, the daughter of Haraz of Jatba. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done.

He walked in all the way in which his father walked, and served the idols that his father served, and worshipped them. He abandoned the Lord, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the Lord. And the servants of Ammon conspired against him, and put the king to death in his house.

But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against king Ammon. And the people of the land made Jeziah his son king in his place. Now the rest of the acts of Ammon that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? And he was buried in his tomb, in the garden of Uzzah.

And Jeziah his son reigned in his place. 2nd Kings chapter 21 recounts the reign of

Manasseh, although it does not mention the repentance and restoration that we read of in 2nd Chronicles chapter 33. The account that we have in this chapter is very selective, especially when we consider the source material that the writer probably had to hand.

He doesn't really tell us about relations between Judah and Assyria during the period. From what we know of other sources, during the reigns of the Assyrian kings Esauhaddon and Ashurbanipal, Judah was mostly a loyal vassal nation of the Assyrian empire. Judean troops were among those used to suppress the rebellion of Ter-Hakar in Egypt.

Judah also contributed to the rebuilding of Sidon. The hero of this passage who is familiar with the text of 2nd Chronicles, will likely be very surprised not to see any reference to the captivity and exile of Manasseh. And even more surprised not to read anything of his repentance.

The presentation of Manasseh in this chapter is unremittingly negative. There are no details mitigating this portrayal, or presenting us with some account of the reversal that Manasseh underwent. The selectivity of the account then invites our attention, and also calls for some sort of explanation.

Why would the author of the books of the kings not include such details? When considering this question we should keep in mind that the account of 2nd Chronicles chapter 33 has the same tenor to it as this one. Manasseh is presented in the most negative of terms, as one who had a lasting impact through his wickedness. The account of his repentance, though important, does not change the general character of his reign, or fundamentally alter the course of the nation.

Manasseh reigns for 55 years, the longest reign of any king in either Judah or Israel. Over the course of this period he exerts an immense impact upon the spiritual character of the nation, and even though he may seek to repair that impact towards the end of his life, the damage had already been done. Manasseh's father Hezekiah had engaged in a great reformation project, seeking to restore the true worship of God.

Manasseh, however, seeks to reverse all of these things. His motives for doing so are not entirely clear. Perhaps he is seeking to curry favour with the Assyrians and others by engaging in certain sorts of syncretism.

Perhaps the decision is motivated in part by domestic politics. Hezekiah's reformation of the worship of the land might have faced considerable resistance, people would not want their local shrine to be torn down, they would not like to see the disruption of their worship of Baal and Asherah. To such people Manasseh might have come across as far more religiously tolerant.

He is also far more cosmopolitan than Hezekiah. He does not oppose pagan practices

and the worship of the gods of neighbouring peoples. He is far more relaxed to the idea of a larger pantheon of gods, of which the Lord may be just one, and by abandoning the centralising religious project of his father, he gives power back to different regions.

They can worship as they want, they don't have to worship in the temple in Jerusalem, or according to the ways of the temple in Jerusalem. They can enjoy a much greater religious autonomy. Religious pluralism seems far better for a nation that's facing all these sorts of internal and external pressures.

It seems far more expedient in such a situation to worship many different gods, gods that represent all the different groups within the nation. Maintaining pure worship of just one god creates unnecessary tensions both within the nation and with other nations. Political expediency alone would suggest a more polytheistic approach is far more reasonable.

Manasseh engages in all sorts of religious practices. He builds altars for the host of heaven and places them in the courts of the house of the Lord. He burns his son as an offering.

He uses fortune telling, omens, deals with mediums and necromancers. He goes so far as to place a carved image of Asherah within the house of the Lord. The Temple of Solomon, a symbol of exclusive worship to the Lord, is now opened up to other sorts of worship.

It becomes a far more inclusive place. As Judah is weak and needs to look to other nations round about as Assyria spreads its power, it seems only appropriate that it should express that openness in the relaxing of the exclusivity of its own religious cult. It shouldn't be that hard to see some of the ways that Manasseh might have rationalised his religious policies.

A less divisive, centralising and exclusive religious approach would relax some of the tensions that the nation experienced. However, in taking this approach, Manasseh was abandoning the Lord. The Lord who had delivered them from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land.

He was defiling the Lord's place of worship. He was filling the land that the Lord had promised to his people with violence. By putting his trust in the nations and their gods and in human wisdom over the word of the Lord, Manasseh doomed himself to judgement.

Over the decades of his reign, the Lord sent his servants the prophets with messages of warning to Judah and Manasseh. The warnings were based upon Manasseh's own sins but also upon the sins of the nation more generally. Manasseh led the people in wickedness and idolatry, but the people very willingly followed.

The Lord declares that he will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria and the plumb line of the house of Ahab. The same judgement that the northern kingdom of Israel had faced would fall upon the southern kingdom of Judah. The language of the measuring line and the plumb line can also be found in places like Isaiah 28, verse 17.

And I will make justice the line and righteousness the plumb line and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Or in Isaiah chapter 34, verse 11. Like Samaria, Jerusalem will suffer a sort of decreation on account of their sins.

Beyond all his sins of idolatry, Manasseh is also a violent king. He sheds a lot of innocent blood, filling Jerusalem from one end to another. This all calls God's judgement down upon the city.

The nation had already been doomed to exile. But on account of Manasseh's long and wicked reign, that judgement can't come soon enough. Manasseh dies and he's succeeded by his son Ammon, who only rules for a couple of years.

After he is killed by conspirators, Josiah his son is set up as king in his place. Peter Lighthouse writes of Manasseh, He is appropriately named, not because he caused Israel to forget its troubles, but because he forgot the Lord, his deliverance of Israel from Egypt and his commandments. Each time the Bible says that Judah is condemned to exile because of Manasseh, the original readers would have recognized they are condemned because of forgetfulness.

Forgetfulness seduced them to do evil. Because of forgetfulness the land became full of innocent blood. And even after Josiah, the Lord did not turn from his wrath because of all the provocations with which forgetfulness had provoked him.

Finally the Lord sent bands of raiders because of the sins of forgetfulness. The story of the consequences of forgetfulness was a stimulus to remind exilic Israel never to forget again. A question to consider, how might Manasseh's religious policies serve as a cautionary example for us today? Acts chapter 12 verses 1 to 24 Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, Get up quickly. And the chains fell off his hands.

And the angel said to him, Dress yourself and put on your sandals. And he did so. And he said to him, Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.

And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city.

It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel, and rescued me from the hand of Herod, and from all that the Jewish people were expecting. When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Broda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice in her joy, she did not open the gate, but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, You are out of your mind.

But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened they saw him, and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.

And he said, Tell these things to James and to the brothers. Then he departed and went to another place. Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

On an appointed day, Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, The voice of a god and not of a man. Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

But the word of God increased and multiplied. Acts chapter 12 tells of further persecution of the church at the hands of Herod. The Herod here is Herod Agrippa, who follows after Herod Antipas, who is the one who is involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

Herod the Great was involved in the slaughter of the innocents at the beginning of the book of Matthew. There is a further Herod later on in the book of Acts, Herod Agrippa II, who is the son of this Agrippa. Paul will speak before him later on in the book.

Herod kills James, the brother of John, with the sword. And seeing that this action pleases the Jews, he proceeds to arrest Peter. Both the Jewish and the Roman leaders seem to rule in large part by crowd pleasing, rather than actually out of a concern for justice.

The timing of the arrest of Peter is significant. He is arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Herod intends to bring him out after the time of the Passover,

presumably when the large crowd of the worshippers from other parts of Judea and the Diaspora have departed, as the greatest opposition to Peter and the early church is probably found among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

On the very night before he is about to be brought out, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers. He is bound with two chains, and he has sentries guarding the door. Reading this account of Peter, we might recall the story of Christ.

Like the story of Christ's crucifixion, this occurs around the time of the Passover. Like Christ, Peter is between two men. Christ was between two criminals on his cross, and Peter is between two soldiers.

Like Jesus in his tomb, Peter is in a sealed prison, a prison guarded by people outside. As an angel of the Lord descends and rolls back the stone of Christ's tomb, so an angel of the Lord comes to Peter, removes the chains from his hand, opens up the gate of the prison, and leads him out into freedom. The story then is a sort of resurrection for Peter, and this theme continues as we go further on in the narrative.

Having been delivered by the angel, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where he knows that people will be praying for him. This would be the house of some well-to-do people. They have a servant girl, they have a gate.

Mary was most likely a widow and a host of the early church. While many of the people in Jerusalem had sold their property and their possessions, there were certain people who still had considerable riches, and would use those to support the wider community. She is the mother of John Mark, a character in the narrative in his own right later on in the story of Acts.

Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, as we see in Colossians 4, verse 10. It is possible that Mary and John Mark were also Levites, as Barnabas was a Levite. Mark was a Latin personal name, most commonly encountered in people with Roman citizenship.

Like John, a Jewish name, it was an extremely common name. It is likely that this is the same Mark as wrote the Gospel, and Peter going to his house suggests some association between the two, something that the tradition has generally recognised, Peter being regarded as a particularly important source for Mark's account in his Gospel. Many early church meetings would occur in private houses for prayer, worship and study of scripture.

The earlier stage of the church's life involved this meeting from house to house, private associations, meeting in domestic contexts, and without the same formal institutional and leadership structures, which would often develop later. Such house churches would have been very small for the most part. Craig Keener suggests that the sort of number we should expect to have been there would have been over a dozen, but not more than

50.

When Peter arrives at the gate, Rhoda the servant girl hears and recognises his voice, and she runs to tell the people who are praying, but they don't believe her. While they are praying for the protection and deliverance of Peter, they cannot imagine that their prayers will be answered in such dramatic fashion. This is the second of three deliverances from jails or prisons, the Lord demonstrating his power to open up prison doors, just as he has opened up the prison doors of the grave itself.

Reading the story of the resurrection in the light of this parallel, we can also see the way in which the resurrection is a breaking open of a prison. The sealed entrance, the armed guards, all of these are features of a prison. Christ opened up the prison of the tomb, and now his disciples are opening up the prisons of the tyrants of this age.

Peter appears to a woman, who brings the news to the disciples, and yet they fail to believe. The exact same pattern can be seen in Luke chapter 24 verses 10-11. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

One of the initial responses of the disciples to the appearance of Christ was to think that he must be a ghost, Luke chapter 24 verse 37, but they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. Here they presume that the person who has appeared must be Peter's ghost. When they finally let him in, and there's a certain comedy to the way that this plays out, underlining something of the playfulness and unpredictability of the spirit, Peter then reports the miracle that had occurred.

He instructs them to pass on the news to James and the brothers. James here is almost certainly the brother of Jesus, who plays a prominent role in the leadership of the early church in Jerusalem. Peter's commissioning them as witnesses to his deliverance, tell these things to James and to the brothers, also reminds us of the story of Christ's resurrection, where those who witnessed the empty tomb are instructed to go and tell his disciples and Peter, in Mark chapter 16 verse 7. Peter goes on at this point to another place.

Presumably this is because a large house associated with the disciples, in the eyes of the authorities, would be the first place where he would be sought. Peter's experience is similar to that of Christ. He's released from prison during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Christ was delivered from the grave. He appears to a woman, much as Christ appeared to women, but her report is not believed, as the report of the women was not believed in the story of the Gospels. He appears to the disciples and then he disappears from the scene.

From this point in the story of Acts, Peter is no longer the center of attention. The narrative gaze switches from Jerusalem and from Peter, to Paul and his missionary companions. Much as Christ's resurrection was followed by his departure, so Peter's resurrection-like deliverance is followed by his departure from the scene.

Besides a parallel with Christ, there's a juxtaposition with Herod. Peter has gone up from Caesarea to Judea, and Herod goes down from Judea to Caesarea. Peter goes to the Gentiles and eats with them.

Herod has hostility with the Gentiles and refuses to share food with them. Peter refuses worship in Caesarea in Acts 10, 25-26. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him.

But Peter lifted him up, saying, Stand up, I too am a man. While Peter had refused worship there, Herod accepts worship in the city of Caesarea. And both of them are struck.

Peter is struck by the angel to wake him up and lift him up, and Herod is struck by an angel to bring him down. All of these things happening around the time of the Passover might also help us to think in terms of themes of Exodus. Peter is like the Jews instructed to dress for departure at midnight, and then being brought out through this passage, while Herod is like the pursuing pharaoh, and he is struck down by the angel of death.

One firstborn son is delivered at midnight, and another firstborn son is destroyed. Josephus, in his Antiquities of the Jews, Book 19, also recalls the death of Agrippa. He writes, Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Stratos Tower, and there he exhibited shows in honour of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety.

At which festival a great multitude was gotten together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province, on the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning, at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread in horror over those that looked intently upon him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, though not for his good, that he was a god. And they added, Be thou merciful to us, for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery, but as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once

been the messenger of good tidings to him, and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life.

The passage ends by describing the word of God increasing and multiplying. This language recalls the language of Genesis. It is being fruitful and multiplying.

This was part of the fundamental human blessing and calling, and now it is being fulfilled as the word of God is spreading out. It is also the language of growth, similar to that which we have at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, and of the young Jesus and John the Baptist in the book of Luke. A question to consider.

The experience of Peter in this chapter is closely modelled upon the experience of Christ in his resurrection. What are some other examples in the story of the book of Acts where the experience of the disciples is modelled upon the experience of Christ?