

Good King *and* Bad King: Traditions about Manasseh in the Bible and Late Second Temple Judaism

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The differences between the account of Manasseh in 2 Kings and in 2 Chronicles have led to a number of traditions and interpretations with regard to this infamous king. Historically, many have held to a 2 Kings view of a wicked king, while an equal number have held to a 2 Chronicles view of a repentant king. This article will examine these varied traditions in not only the biblical literature, but also the writings of the second temple period and rabbinic literature.

Manasseh reigned as king of Judah from approximately 697–642 BC. Politically, Manasseh's 55-year reign was the longest of all the kings of the divided monarchy. Religiously, the Deuteronomist (the reputed author of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) did not hold Manasseh in high regard because, although he was the son of Hezekiah, he did not persist with the reforms of his father. Rather, he reverted to the cultic practices of his grandfather Ahaz. Some scholars regard Manasseh's actions as a reform movement in their own right. They suggest that Manasseh may have viewed Hezekiah's religious policies as doing nothing to protect Judah from Assyria and therefore began a counterreformation, winning the support of the people.¹

There has been much discussion as to whether the actions of Manasseh were the result of coercion by Assyria upon the vassal state of Judah or whether Manasseh acted voluntarily.² Regardless, whether done out of imitation or imposition, the

¹ See Siegfried H. Horn (rev. by P. Kyle McCarter, Jr.), "The Divided Monarchy: The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel," in *Ancient Israel*, Hershel Shanks, ed. (rev. ed.; Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999) 185; and also Carl D. Evans, "Manasseh, King of Judah" *ABD*, 4:496-499.

² Regarding voluntary assimilation, see especially Mordechai Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Israel and Judah in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries BCE* (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974), and also his article "Judah under Assyrian Hegemony: A Reexamination of Imperialism and Religion," *JBL* 112/3 (1993) 403-414. Regarding cultic coercion by the Assyrians see

Deuteronomistic leaders of the day were opposed to his actions, as is made clear in the biblical text (2 Kgs 21:1-18). Rather striking, however, is the fact that the description and analysis of Manasseh in the Chronicler (the reputed author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah) differs substantially from that of the Deuteronomist (2 Chr 33:1-20). That is, the two primary narratives about Manasseh describe Manasseh in very different ways. For the Deuteronomist, Manasseh had no redemptive qualities and thus does not refer to any penitential act. However, within the account of the Chronicler, specific reference to Manasseh's penitence is found.

Some have argued that the biblical text is entirely uniform with regard to its contents, its perspectives on historical personages, and its doctrines. However, I would argue that although presentation and perspective is often uniform, at times the biblical text also reflects diversity, variation, and development. The biblical traditions about Manasseh are a sterling example of this: they reflect varied assessments of Manasseh and his piety.³ Significantly, postbiblical Jewish traditions regarding Manasseh and his reign are somewhat varied, due in part to the various traditions within the biblical text itself. This study will look specifically at traditions about Manasseh from three different sources: the biblical text, apocryphal literature, and rabbinic literature. It is my hope that this short survey of the history of interpretations concerning the biblical account of Manasseh will offer insight towards our own contemporary understanding of the text. After all, the presence of different voices in the text is friend, not foe.

MANASSEH IN THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The biblical account of Manasseh's reign is found in 2 Kgs 21:1-18 and 2 Chr 33:1-20. Initially, the Chronicler follows closely the account of the Deuteronomist. Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, began his 55-year reign at the age of 12. It has been put forth that the first ten years of his reign were a coregency with his father Hezekiah (who was ill).⁴ Both texts go on to say that Manasseh followed the practices of the people who YHWH had driven out of the land for the Israelites. These practices included rebuilding the high places his father had destroyed, erecting altars for Baal, erecting an Asherah pole and altars for the worship of the host of

Hermann Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (FRLANT 129; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982).

³Jo Ann Hackett has explored this issue regarding the Balaam traditions in the biblical text. See Hackett's "Balaam," *ABD*, 1:569-572, and also her book *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984). On the development of doctrine in the biblical text, see Chris Rollston, "The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 6 (2003) 95-115.

⁴Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; Garden City: Doubleday, 1988) 266.

heaven in the house of YHWH, making "his son pass through the fire" (2 Kgs 21:6, but note also "sons" in the parallel account of 2 Chr 33:6), and also consulting mediums. The comment regarding his son is probably a reference to child sacrifice, but, according to Cogan and Tadmor, may be a less extreme act.⁵ Both texts conclude that, through his actions, Manasseh led the people of Judah astray, so that they did more evil than any nation YHWH had destroyed before them. At this point, the two texts begin to deviate from one another.

In 2 Kings, YHWH pronounces judgment on Judah because of Manasseh's actions. Judah will be destroyed, wiped out "as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down" (2 Kgs 21:13). All blame for the future destruction of the southern kingdom is placed fully upon the shoulders of Manasseh. As if to reinforce Manasseh's guilt, the charges are repeated in 2 Kgs 23:26; 24:3; and again in Jer 15:4. Manasseh is then accused of shedding innocent blood, enough to fill Jerusalem. This may be a reference to the martyrdom of loyalists to YHWH, but it is important to remember that in prophetic material from the late monarchic period the concept of shedding blood or shedding innocent blood is often tied to the oppression of the poor or underprivileged (Jer 7:6; 22:3,17; Ezek 22:6-7). The 2 Kings text concludes with the usual formula, referring to other works and the location of Manasseh's burial tomb.

The Chronicler, on the other hand, offers a very different summary of the conclusion of the reign of Manasseh. Beginning in 2 Chr 33:10, YHWH spoke to Manasseh and Israel, but they did not listen. Assyria then invades Judah, capturing Manasseh and taking him to Babylon. While in captivity, Manasseh prays to God and is restored to his kingdom. Manasseh spends the rest of his reign restoring the reform movement of his father Hezekiah and also in building and in military activity. The 2 Chronicles text concludes much like the 2 Kings text, referring to other works and the location of his tomb. It should be noted that in 2 Chronicles, not only does it mention that his evil deeds are recorded in other annals, but so also are his prayer to God and God's acceptance of Manasseh's repentance (2 Chr 33:18-19).

With the two primary sources for the reign of Manasseh offering such different perspectives, assessing his reign is a difficult task. At first glance, the reader has two options. First, what we have is simply two different, but truthful perspectives. This approach is similar to how many approach the Gospels. For example, in Matthew and Mark, while Jesus is on the cross, he says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Luke records Jesus saying at one point, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). John, among other things, tells of Jesus making plans for the care of his mother (John 19:26-27). Is each of the Gospels incomplete? They are incomplete only in the sense that they may speak only of what they witnessed. Their writing reflects their

⁵Ibid., 267.

perspective, and the same could be said of the two accounts of Manasseh. Still, the two accounts of Manasseh are drastically different. For one author to tell of Manasseh's complete change of heart and also his complete change of religious policy while the other author left this out and spoke only of his evil deeds would be more akin to one of the Gospels leaving out the resurrection.

The second option is twofold. Either the author of 2 Kings made a conscious decision to leave out the story of Manasseh's repentance, or the author of 2 Chronicles felt it necessary to supplement the original story with a tale of Manasseh's repentance. Each view has its proponents.

It is generally held that 2 Kings began as a late-monarchic composition, perhaps during the reign of Josiah, but was finalized during the exile following the fall of the southern kingdom.⁶ A history of disobedience, the books of Kings repeatedly level charges against the past actions of Israel and Judah, thus explaining to the reader their exilic condition. First and foremost, the Deuteronomist leveled charges against Manasseh. Three times Manasseh is held responsible for the fall of Judah (2 Kgs 21:11-15; 23:26-27; 24:3-4). The Deuteronomist is determined to remind the children of Israel why they are in exile, and it seems there is no room for Manasseh's repentance in that agenda.

But what of the historical reliability of 2 Chr 33:11-17? Some have proposed that the story was added with the intention of explaining why such a wicked king would reign for so long.⁷ Ackroyd believed the story of Manasseh's wickedness and repentance was a metaphor for the people of Judah.⁸ Others doubt any of Manasseh's reform efforts on the basis of the need for Josiah's reforms shortly thereafter.⁹ In truth, however, Manasseh's reforms were on a much smaller scale than the sweeping reforms of Josiah, and probably not long-lasting, when one notes the actions of his son Amon in 2 Chr 33:21-23. As far as his lengthy reign, the kings of the divided monarchy viewed as evil in the biblical record often enjoyed extended reigns (Baasha, 24 years; Ahab, 22 years; Jeroboam II, 41 years).

⁶The composition of the Deuteronomistic History (that is, Deuteronomy–Kings) has been studied extensively since the publication of Martin Noth's *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament* (3rd ed.; Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1963), first appearing in a monograph published in 1945. Important contributions to the discussion include Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 274–289, and more recently, much of the work of Steven McKenzie. For a short review of the development of the theory of the Deuteronomistic History, see McKenzie's *The Trouble with Kings: The Composition of the Book of Kings in the Deuteronomistic History* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991) 1–19. For further discussion and bibliography, see Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

⁷Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles* (AB 13; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964) 199.

⁸Peter Ackroyd, *1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (London: SCM Press, 1973) 198.

⁹John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 313, n. 7.

Critics of the historical reliability of the Chronicler's account have also noted the unlikelihood of an Assyrian king exiling Manasseh to Babylon. Dillard points out, however, that the revolt of Shamash-shum-ukin in Babylon (652–648 BC) against his brother Ashurbanipal may have led to unrest in other regions of the Assyrian empire, and it is possible that Manasseh may have formed an alliance with the Babylonians, as his father Hezekiah had also done (Isaiah 39). Dillard also notes that it is at least possible that the Chronicler is broadly using the term "Babylon" as a generalized reference to Mesopotamia, thereby drawing a parallel between Manasseh's experience and that of Israel.¹⁰

Sara Japhet believes there are many reasons to trust the historical data regarding the captivity of Manasseh:

The first point is their unconventional character. Manasseh's exile and return is an exceptional event, for which the Chronicler had no biblical model, and hardly any contemporary one. If regarded as unhistorical, it would have to be an absolutely "pure" invention—a procedure which is not supported by the Chronicler's historiographical methods. The historical likelihood of the Chronicler's information is supported also by the example—mentioned often—of the exile and return of the Egyptian Necho, who was brought to Assur by Assurbanipal as a prisoner and then restored to his kingship (*ANET*, 295), an example which presents the story of Manasseh as a possibility, especially in this period and in this very historical context. Moreover, Manasseh's exile does not really represent an adequate solution for the Chronicler's theological problem. In view of the gross transgression of both Manasseh and his people, the exile of the king alone seems a rather mild divine response, which may be explained only on the assumption of its historicity.¹¹

Further discussion of the historical reliability of the Chronicler's account of Manasseh will occur later when the archaeological data is addressed.

The two primary texts found in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles are not the only time Manasseh is mentioned in the Bible. A few other texts may help in understanding how other biblical authors viewed Manasseh. The actions of Manasseh were important to Jeremiah's theology concerning the downfall of Judah. In Jer 15:4, YHWH tells Jeremiah that he will make Judah "a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth." The reason is simple: "because of what King Manasseh son of Hezekiah of Judah did in Jerusalem." The 2 Kings account of Manasseh immediately comes to mind.

Some might suggest that Judg 18:30 is relevant for a discussion of Manasseh. After all, the Masoretic Text contains a reading stating that "Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Manasseh" was responsible for the "heterodox" religious activi-

¹⁰ Raymond B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (WBC 15; Waco: Word, 1987) 265.

¹¹ Sara Japhet, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 1003.

ties at the site of Dan. However, “Manasseh” in this text is one of four instances in the Masoretic Text in which a word includes what the Masoretes called a “suspended” letter.¹² Namely, in Judg 18:30 the Masoretic text has the reading מְנַשֶּׁה (*Mⁿnašeh*, “Manasseh”), with the *nun* written supralinear. The original reading of this text was מֹשֶׁה (*Mōšeh*, “Moses”), not מְנַשֶּׁה (*Mⁿnašeh*, “Manasseh”). This reading reflects the fact that Moses’ grandson was a participant in the heterodox cult at Dan, something the Masoretes found to be troublesome. Therefore, at some point, some Masorite(s) desired to disassociate Moses from the cult at Dan and so added the *nun*, and in so doing they changed the personal name of Judg 18:30 from Moses to Manasseh. (Although these names seem very different in English, there is just one letter difference in Hebrew, namely, the *nun*.) After this change, the Masoretic copyist was able to connect this Danite cult with the wicked King Manasseh rather than Moses. However, to signal the fact that this was a theological change, the Masorite(s) wrote the *nun* as a suspended letter. Note that Emmanuel Tov is representative of the consensus of the field in affirming that this is indeed a deliberate change.¹³

It may be easier to consider this in English. What was originally *MSH* in the Hebrew text became *M^NSH*. Both forms are also reflected in the Greek tradition. That is, one ancient manuscript of the Septuagint, Codex Alexandrinus, reads “Moses” while another manuscript, Codex Vaticanus, reads “Manasseh.” In any event, it seems from this example and the Jeremiah passage above that Manasseh’s reputation in 2 Kings preceded him.¹⁴

Archaeology may also play a role in sorting out the story of Manasseh in the biblical text, perhaps giving weight to the Chronicler’s account. Two Assyrian royal records make reference to him as a loyal vassal. Prism B of Esarhaddon (ca. 680-669 BC) mentions Manasseh as one of twenty-two western kings called to transport building materials to Nineveh for a special project:

¹² Other instances include Ps 80:14, Job 38:13, and Job 38:15, all of which, as Emmanuel Tov suggests, appear to be the suspended insertion of Hebrew gutturals which were probably wrongly omitted by earlier scribes. See Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 57.

¹³ Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 57. Also, in agreement with Tov, see P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *Textual Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 59; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999) 512; and Christian D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: KTAV, 1966) 335-338. Compare to Willard H. Winter, *Studies in Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1969) 538-539, who holds that the better reading is “Manasseh,” and that Jonathan is a Manassite. Note that Winter does not mention that the *nun* is suspended, rather that there are simply alternate readings in the manuscripts.

¹⁴ It is also possible that the Masoretic copyist is making a connection to the ancestor of the tribe of Manasseh, rather than the king. However, I believe that the scribe intended to connect the Danite cult with the notorious, “heretical” King Manasseh, disregarding any chronological problems which might ensue.

I called upon the kings of the country Hatti and (of the region) on the other side of the river (Euphrates) (to wit): Ba'lu of Tyre, Manasseh, king of Judah, Qaushgabri, king of Edom . . . 12 kings from the seacoast . . . 10 kings from Cyprus amidst the sea, together 22 kings of Hatti, the seashore and the islands; all these I sent out and made them transport under terrible difficulties, to Ninevah, the town (where I exercise) my rulership, as building material for my palace.¹⁵

The Prism C inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (ca. 668–635 BC) include Manasseh in a nearly identical list of twenty-two rulers who offered gifts to the king and also helped him defeat Egypt.¹⁶ It is important to note that there is also a fragmentary inscription of Esarhaddon, the so-called “Dog River Stele,” that appears to report of Esarhaddon’s victory over twenty-two western kings who joined with Egypt in an anti-Assyrian conspiracy. Unfortunately, the tablet is broken where the names of the kings were probably listed.¹⁷ Although it is not possible to reach a conclusion with any degree of certainty, if the missing list of twenty-two kings follows the two previously mentioned inscriptions, this display of insubordination could have led to Manasseh’s subsequent captivity, giving some legitimacy to the Chronicler’s account.

In 2 Chr 33:14, Manasseh is credited with fortifying Jerusalem with an outer wall. Though most of the archaeological evidence of refortification in the late seventh century should be associated with Josiah, there may be evidence of Manasseh’s wall.¹⁸ Dan Bahat has suggested that Kathleen Kenyon’s wall “of substantial appearance” that she dates to the eighth century BC fits nicely with the biblical description and could actually be the seventh-century outer wall built by Manasseh.¹⁹

Certainly, archaeology may never complete the picture. Yet if there is evidence of Manasseh’s outer wall and also inscriptional evidence that suggests periods when Judah served as an Assyrian vassal but rebelled at some point too, it would seem that the Chronicler could be accurate. This may add credence to the entire account of Manasseh’s captivity, repentance, restoration, and reformation.²⁰

¹⁵ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East, Vol. 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958) 201-202.

¹⁶ Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 339.

¹⁷ See Riekele Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons Königs von Assyrien* (Archiv für Orientforschung Beiheft, 9: Graz, 1956) 102; Carl D. Evans, “Judah’s Foreign Policy from Hezekiah to Josiah,” in *Scripture in Context: Essays on Comparative Method*, Carl D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White, eds. (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980) 167-168; Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 69.

¹⁸ Horn, *Ancient Israel*, 188.

¹⁹ Dan Bahat, “The Wall of Manasseh in Jerusalem,” *IEJ* 31 (1981) 235-236.

²⁰ For further study on the historical accuracy of the Chronicler with regard to archaeology, particularly during the reign of Hezekiah, see Andrew J. Vaughn, *Theology, History, and Archaeology in the Chronicler’s Account of Hezekiah* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999).

MANASSEH IN SECOND TEMPLE JEWISH LITERATURE

Manasseh is a recurring figure in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.²¹ Four sources are important for evaluating traditions about Manasseh from this literature, dating from the second century BC to as late as the second century AD. In 2 Baruch 64 and 65, the wickedness from the time of Manasseh is represented in a vision by "the ninth black waters." Manasseh is the recipient of the usual allegations: acting wickedly, killing the righteous, perverting judgment, shedding innocent blood, general upheaval in the house of YHWH, and also with the violent polluting of married woman as an additional charge. A detailed description is given of a statue he built, and mention is made of the glory of the Most High leaving the sanctuary. Though the author does refer to his prayer, it seems to be considered inconsequential, concluding that Manasseh sinned because he had no fear of being held accountable in his time for his actions.²²

In *The Lives of the Prophets* 1, Manasseh is charged with being responsible for the death of the prophet Isaiah. According to the text, Isaiah was cut in half with a saw.²³ This of course brings to mind Heb 11:37, which tells of those who "were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword." Manasseh is also tied to the death of Isaiah in *The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*. Although much of the text is of Christian origin or includes later Christian additions, the actual martyrdom of Isaiah (1:1-3:12 and 5:1-16) is thought to be a Jewish composition.²⁴ A fascinating work, *The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* begins with Hezekiah passing on to Manasseh all the instructions he had received from the prophets. Isaiah, in the presence of Manasseh, told Hezekiah that Manasseh would not heed his words and that he had already been handed over to the devil. It then appears that Hezekiah wished to formulate a plan to kill Manasseh, but Isaiah told him his plans would fail. Upon taking the throne, Manasseh's wicked reign began. In chapter five, Manasseh executes Isaiah because of his visions, sawing him in half with a wood saw.²⁵

But like the biblical texts, the pseudepigrapha does not only focus on the wickedness of Manasseh. *The Prayer of Manasseh*, dating perhaps to the last two centuries BC, was probably intended as an addition to *Chronicles* much like the addi-

²¹ Although the books making up the OT Pseudepigrapha frequently deal with historical figures, the narratives themselves are often not historically reliable. Nevertheless, they are an important literary tradition and can offer insight into the subject matter of this paper.

²² James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 1:615-620, 643.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2:379-386.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:143-164.

tions to Daniel. Only fifteen verses long, the text was once thought to be Christian in origin. Although clearly composed long after Manasseh, Charlesworth holds that the prayer was not only eventually, but perhaps originally attributed to Manasseh. He believes the author was a Jew who wrote the prayer with 2 Chronicles in mind. He notes several striking parallels between the prayer and 2 Chronicles 33.²⁶

2 Chronicles 33	Prayer of Manasseh
6—[Manasseh] . . . provoking his [YHWH's] anger	10—I provoked your fury
7—[Manasseh] . . . placed . . . the idol . . . in the temple	10—I set up idols
11—Manasseh with hooks, . . . in chains . . . led . . . away	9b—I am ensnared 10—I am bent by a multitude of iron chains
12—humbling himself deeply before the God of his ancestors	11—I am bending the knees of my heart before you 1—God of our father

Even though there is no evidence of this prayer in the rest of Jewish traditions, it did seem to enjoy a somewhat heavy usage in Christian tradition, from about the third century AD and continuing to the present age. Its earliest appearance is in the *Didascalia*, a set of pseudo-apostolic church laws from the third century AD and also in the Apostolic Constitutions from the fourth century AD. It was included in biblical manuscripts from the Middle Ages on and is still included in most editions of the Apocrypha. Though unable to prove a direct link to Manasseh's actual prayer, its penitent quality attracts readers still today: "And now behold I am bending the knees of my heart before you . . ." (v 11).²⁷

Although not pseudepigraphal, it may be good chronologically to note here that the Jewish historian Josephus also includes material on Manasseh, as does the Targum on Chronicles.²⁸ Josephus follows much the same approach as the Chronicler, expounding on the wickedness of Manasseh, then reporting his captivity and subsequent repentance. Like 2 Chronicles, a prayer is mentioned, but the actual prayer is not recorded. Josephus goes on to tell of the religious reforms and building programs that followed Manasseh's restoration. Josephus does offer an interesting conclusion to the story of Manasseh: "And indeed, when he had changed his former course, he so led his life for the time to come, that from the time of his return to piety towards God, he was deemed a happy man, and a pattern for imitation."²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 2:628-629.

²⁷ Ibid., 2:625-637.

²⁸ The term *targum* refers to the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible which arose in the Second Temple period.

²⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (trans. W. Whiston; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987) 268-269.

Suggesting there were those who deemed Manasseh worthy of emulating in his latter days is certainly not a tradition that could have developed from the Deuteronomist's account, but rather reinforces the account of 2 Chronicles.

The Targum of Chronicles is less flattering, again with no account of the actual prayer, but rather telling how the angels attempted to close all the windows of Heaven in order to keep the prayer from reaching God.³⁰

MANASSEH IN RABBINIC LITERATURE³¹

Ambivalence towards Manasseh continues in the rabbinic literature. In *m. Sanh.* 10:2, it says, "Three kings and four ordinary folk have no portion in the world to come. Three kings: Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh."³² However, in the very same portion of the Talmud, Rabbi Judah did not agree, pointing out that God brought him back to Jerusalem, his kingdom. The other rabbis contend that while he was brought back to his earthly kingdom, he could not be permitted to enter the life in the world to come.

In the Babylonian Talmud, *b. Sanh.* 102b, Manasseh is once again connected to Jeroboam and Ahab. The three are collectively referred to as the "three wicked kings." But shortly after this reference a story occurs about Rabbi Ashi lecturing his students:

He closed his lecture and said to his disciples: "Tomorrow, we will open our studies with our colleagues—the three wicked kings," implying that they were nonetheless Torah scholars, too. That night, Manasseh, the King of Judah, came and appeared to Rabbi Ashi in his dream. Manasseh said to Rab Ashi in anger: "Did you refer to us as your colleagues, and the colleagues of your father? How do you compare yourself to us? You probably cannot even answer the question: Where on the loaf should a person break his bread before reciting the *Hamotzi* blessing, the blessing recited before partaking of bread?" Rabbi Ashi said to him: "I do not know the answer."³³

Manasseh then reprimands Rabbi Ashi for calling him a colleague when he does not even know where on the loaf the bread should be broken. Later, after Manasseh explains to him where to break the bread, Rabbi Ashi is amazed at his

³⁰ J. Stanley McIvor, trans., *Targum of Chronicles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1994) 231. See also n. 19 on 231.

³¹ The term "Rabbinic Literature" refers to the sayings of the rabbis, especially those that are included in the Mishnah and the Talmud.

³² Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel* (Vol. 31; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 334-337.

³³ Adin Steinsaltz, trans., *The Talmud: the Steinsaltz Edition* (Vol. 21; New York: Random House, 1989) 70.

wisdom. The text continues: "Rabbi Ashi said to him: 'If you were so smart, why then did you worship idols?' Manasseh said to him: 'Had you been around in the early generations, you would have taken up the trail of your cloak and run after me to worship the idols.'" ³⁴

With Manasseh's comment that Rabbi Ashi would have joined in the idol worship had he been "around in the early generations," the Talmud seems to be offering a rationale for Manasseh's behavior. It is interesting to note that the next day the Rabbi began his lecture, "Let us open our studies with our *masters*—the three wicked kings, *who were greater Torah scholars than we*." So it seems well into the fourth–fifth centuries AD, views on Manasseh were still divided.

CONCLUSION

The various traditions and opinions regarding Manasseh begin with the biblical accounts and continue, no doubt, with sermons today. It seems that the narrative of choice is dependent on one's agenda. In 2 Kings, YHWH and the Deuteronomist were speaking to a fallen, exiled people. Readers should know how they found themselves in this hopeless state. Years later, YHWH and the Chronicler were speaking to a people returning home. They were a people with a vibrant history and a limitless future, and it was important to instill a sense of hope in the people. John Mark Hicks says simply that the author of 2 Kings "uses his reign to justify the exile, but the Chronicler uses it to encourage his postexilic community." ³⁵

No doubt sermons are delivered today on Manasseh that choose their account based on whether the essence of the message is concerning humanity and its fallen state or repentance and restoration. Perhaps we should bear in mind, however, that unlike the exiled people to whom the Deuteronomist wrote, we may have a more complete picture of the life of Manasseh, and it's worth remembering both sides of the story. ³⁶

Some have argued that there is no diversity, no variation, no development within the biblical text. However, the fact of the matter is that there is variation and development attested in the biblical text. The data regarding Manasseh constitutes a fine example of this. For some the presence of variation and development in the biblical text might be troubling. However, it should not be. Rather, the presence of this in the biblical text should be discussed and embraced, as it demonstrates that the biblical texts are divine, but they also reflect the varied voices of God's people through the centuries. ^{Scj}

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁵ John Mark Hicks, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2001) 497.

³⁶ Dr. Christopher Rollston and Dr. Jason Bembry of Emmanuel School of Religion read early drafts of this article, and I am grateful for their comments and suggestions.