Chapter 15

MANASSEH THE BORING: LACK OF CHARACTER IN 2 KINGS 21

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In the book of Kings, Manasseh is held responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah, because he “did...[more] evil than all that the Amorites who were before him did and also caused Judah to sin with his idols” (2 Kgs 21). The ramifications of the fall of Judah and the end of the Judean monarchy—with a Davidic king on the throne—are immense. Among other effects, the event calls into question the entire theology that the biblical books leading up to Kings have established: the promise of the land, the importance of centralized worship in the Jerusalem temple, and the eternal dynastic promise to David. Given the momentous consequences attributed to Manasseh’s actions, the reader might well expect an extraordinary literary presentation of this king’s reign. The reader, however, would not find it. Instead, Manasseh is portrayed as an ordinary bad king about whom we do not know much more than we do about many thoroughly inconsequential kings.

The account of Manasseh’s reign is brief: a mere eighteen verses long,¹ of which likely nine or ten are secondary additions. It consists of the standard regnal formula (vv. 1-2) evaluating his cultic behavior,² a list of

1. Compare this to the 208 verses of Ahab’s account (1 Kgs 16:29–22:40) or 95 verses devoted to Manasseh’s father, Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18–20). Solomon features in eleven chapters.

2. The regnal formula is a primary organizing feature of the book of Kings. Almost every reign begins with a notice that X became king and reigned for Y years over either Israel or Judah, contextualizing this king with the contemporaneous king of the other kingdom, and finishes with a judgment that the king did what was

his transgressions (vv. 3-7), and then the pronouncement of the impending doom of Judah (vv. 8-15). Manasseh's reign ends with the notice that he slept with his fathers and that his son succeeded him—i.e., the usual closing death and burial formula (vv. 17-18).³

The account is also strikingly bare of detail and color. Manasseh becomes king after the death of his father Hezekiah. He reinstitutes the cultic sites and symbols that Hezekiah destroyed and then inaugurates and/or restores a host of other cultic practices, including the worship of Baal, Asherah, and the host of heaven, and a variety of divination practices. He also embarks on building projects to support those practices. But Manasseh does not speak to or interact with prophets, foreign nations, or even the people. There are no specific events mentioned at all.

Scholars have noticed this puzzling flatness⁴ of character; they have described Manasseh as a “cardboard” cutout⁵ and a “faceless portrait... set against a blank background.”⁶ The account is “dull” and “lacking” in narrative interest; Manasseh has no emotions or backstory as some of the other kings do.⁷ Of course, in the book of Kings, the narrative in general evinces little interest in the kings as people, in their lives, or personalities. Manasseh is not the only king in the book who functions solely as an

right or evil in YHWH's eyes. Style varies a little, but the regnal formula is used to synchronize the narrative about the kings of Israel and Judah, to make the chronology of events and reigns clear, to create segues and uniformity in the presentation of the information about each king, and to judge each king by the standards of deuteronomistic theology. See Alison L. Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings: The Davidic Prototype in Deuteronomistic Poetics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 79–83. For full bibliography on regnal formulae, see *ibid.*, 80 n. 6.

3. Baruch Halpern and David S. Vanderhooft, “The Editions of Kings in the 7th–6th Centuries BCE,” *HUCA* 62 (1991): 179–244.

4. In literary studies, characters are sometimes described as flat: “flat characters, or types, are built around a single quality or trait. They do not stand out as individuals”—or round: “round characters...are much more complex, manifesting a multitude of traits, and appearing as ‘real people’” (Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994], 23).

5. Richard D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 164.

6. Stuart Lasine, “Manasseh as Villain and Scapegoat,” in *New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, edited by J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 164.

7. Klaas A. D. Smelik, “The Portrayal of King Manasseh: A Literary Analysis of II Kings Xxi and II Chronicles Xxiii,” in *Converting the Past: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Moabite Historiography*, Oudtestamentische Studiën (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 132.

agent of the plot, who, in other words, is someone “about whom nothing is known except for what is necessary for the plot.”⁸ But he is by far the most important of them to receive this kind of literary treatment. Francesca Stavrakopoulou has clearly articulated our confusion: “Given the fact that Manasseh plays what is arguably the most crucial role within Kings in causing the destruction of Judah and the exile of her people, this brief and flimsy characterization is surprising, presenting Manasseh as little more than a man of straw.”⁹

To repeat, given the Deuteronomistic Historian’s (Dtr) penchant for developing his important royal characters proleptically, the portrayal of Manasseh is baffling. The narrative explicitly blames Manasseh for the fate of Judah (2 Kgs 21:11-15) and yet makes no attempt to develop or enhance his characterization so as to parallel the accounts of the other important kings. Why *is* Manasseh so boring? I suggest below that this was done in order to reduce the impact of the king’s responsibility and that this strategy may adumbrate a theological shift: no longer will the king’s behavior serve to determine the fate of the people, as was the case for the narratives of Solomon, Jeroboam, and Ahab. Instead, the behavior of the people will determine their fate. This shift reflects a theological difference between the preexilic and exilic editions of Kings.

Characterization of the Kings

The history of the monarchy in the books of Samuel and Kings is organized roughly chronologically; it tells the stories of the kings who ruled Israel and Judah for the greater part of 450 years, beginning around the tenth century BCE. Some of these kings were important, others less so. Some kings were good, but more frequently they were bad. Some kings did what was right in YHWH’s eyes, some did what was evil in YHWH’s eyes, and most did what was bad in the eyes of the Deuteronomist. What ties them all—over forty of them—together is the continuity of the position; until the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE by the Assyrians and the destruction of the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, Israel and Judah were ruled by a native monarch.

8. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 32.

9. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, “The Blackballing of Manasseh,” in *Good Kings and Bad Kings: The Kingdom of Judah in the Seventh Century BCE*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 22.

While the book of Kings purports to be about the kings themselves (hence the title of the book), the accounts of their reigns serve primarily to promote the theology of the Deuteronomistic School. Much of this theology is built around the ideal of fidelity to the covenant, which will guarantee prosperity and continued habitation in the land of Israel.¹⁰ Continuous infidelity by the kings and the people leads to the destructions of both Israel and Judah. Proffering this theologically grounded view of the world, Dtr strategically deploys his literary skill to paint portraits of the kings that promote his theology. Each king offers an instructive example: good kings are like David—at least they are like David as he was re-imagined as one who adhered faithfully to the covenant—and bad kings are like the anti-David, Jeroboam.¹¹

A significant feature of deuteronomistic historiography is thus the attribution of theological cause to historico-political events. It is the lens through which Dtr tells the story of the monarchy.¹² As such, the kingdom split not (just) because of Rehoboam's unfair demand for increased corvée labor, as in 1 Kings 12, but, more significantly for Dtr, as punishment for Solomon's apostasy in 1 Kings 11. This didactic purpose shapes Dtr's literary choices as well; the royal characters who are fleshed out in the narrative receive this treatment in order to promote deuteronomistic theology and to explain *why* what happens to the kingdoms happens. For example, the portrait of Jeroboam functions in order to elevate David, depict a royal anti-type, and explain much of the fate of the Northern Kingdom, yet, unlike Manasseh, the character of Jeroboam is fully developed. He has ups and downs, finds opportunities to interact with the people and with prophets, and has a family: a wife who inquires of the prophet and a sick son who dies. Initially, he has the prophet's and YHWH's favor, but then is viewed as unfaithful to the covenant, and will be harshly punished. While his triumphs and trials are largely explained through theological values in promotion of deuteronomistic ideals, he is more like a "real" person.

10. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 1–9.

11. See my explication of the model of the Davidic prototype and its application in the portraits of Solomon, Jeroboam, Josiah, and Manasseh in *Portrait of the Kings*.

12. Ibid., 50–3; Yairah Amit, "The Dual Causality Principle and Its Effects on Biblical Literature," *VT* 37 (1987): 385–400; Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1957), vol. 1; *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 1:334–6.

Similar to Jeroboam, Ahab is also a round character and gets full treatment; his reign runs over six chapters (1 Kgs 16:29–22:40). Ahab is seen as having done what is evil in YHWH's eyes, "more than all who preceded him" (2 Kgs 16:30). He and the rest of the Omrides have the inimitable ability to cause YHWH to anger (*hip'il* of בעם), beyond the sins of the other kings of Israel. Ahab's punishment for introducing Baal worship, persecuting Yahwistic prophets, listening to his Phoenician wife, and abusing his power is the annihilation of his house (1 Kgs 21:20-24; 2 Kgs 9:8-9). Despite all the evil, Ahab is given an opportunity for repentance and his punishment is delayed (1 Kgs 21:27-29). He is a complex character and the reader even feels something close to sympathy for him at times.

While portrayed as either flat or round, deuteronomistic theology sets up the potential for king characters as agents. As many scholars have noted, the fates of the kingdoms are dependent on their behavior, specifically their cultic obedience.¹³ The kings lead the people to sin and destruction. Bad things happen when the kings are bad. For example, YHWH will forsake Israel because of the sins of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:15-16); also, David's census taking brings a seven-year famine on the people (2 Sam. 24:10-17).

Characterization in Redaction

The lack of events in the narrative is one of the factors that makes the portrait of Manasseh's reign like that of the other ordinary bad kings. (It may have originally only included five to six verses.) In those accounts, the ordinary bad kings ascend to the throne, are evaluated as having done what is evil in YHWH's eyes, commit a number of sins, and then die and are buried. The remainder of the things that presumably must have happened during their reigns is relegated to the annals of the kings (as in the accounts of Joash of Israel, 2 Kgs 13:10-13; and Jotham of Judah, 2 Kgs 15:32-38). The account of Manasseh began as one of an ordinary bad king with the regnal formula that he did evil in the eyes of YHWH,

13. In my survey of the literature, it seems almost as if this tendency is taken for granted, without much discussion of the evidence, as in the brief mention by Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation*, AB 11 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 206–7. For ancient Near Eastern parallels of this phenomenon, see Isabel Craz, "Royal Illness in Dynastic and National Crises: The Illness of Abijah and Hezekiah in Light of Israelite and Judean History," in *Sick Kings: Royal Illness in the Hebrew Bible*, forthcoming.

like other bad kings. Only the additions of an exilic Dtr make Manasseh particularly noteworthy as a bad king.

I read the compositional history of the book of Kings as a double redaction. A preexilic Dtr compiled existing sources, writing them together and adding original composition, so that his interpretation of history reflected his deuteronomistic, theological outlook. This version of the history is largely optimistic, written during the reign of Josiah (640–609) and builds to his cultic reform in 2 Kings 22–23. A secondary, exilic update is made to the history to allow historical reality (the destruction of Judah and exile) to be fitted into the theological perspective. The rewriting of the history makes its focus largely pessimistic.¹⁴

It is worthwhile to consider the characterization of Manasseh separately in the preexilic and exilic editions. Some of the redactional seams in 2 Kings 21 are apparent.¹⁵ While we will never definitively know which verses are from the preexilic edition and which from the exilic, I am confident identifying as preexilic vv. 1, 2a, 3a, and 17–18. These verses roughly correspond to the typical regnal formulae found in DtrH.

14. Frank Moore Cross, “The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomic History,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 274–89.

15. Early on, Driver, Kuenen, and Wellhausen all identified vv. 10–15 as intrusive (Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 270). There is a lack of agreement on the extent of that intrusion and on further additions. Some of the major positions include the following—Cross, vv. 7–9 and 10–15: exilic (Cross, “Themes,” 285–6); Cogan and Tadmor, vv. 10–15: exilic, vv. 7–9: preexilic (*II Kings*, 270); John Gray, vv. 8–15: a late deuteronomistic addition (*I & II Kings: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970], 644–5); Richard Friedman, vv. 8–15: exilic (*The Exile and Biblical Narrative: The Formation of the Deuteronomistic and Priestly Works* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 11); Erik Eynikel, vv. 4, 6, 7b–16: exilic (“The Portrait of Manasseh and the Deuteronomistic History,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic Literature* [Louvain: Peeters, 1997], 241); Nelson, vv. 3–7 and 8–15: exilic, but also incorporate several predeuteronomistic annalistic notices (vv. 4a, 6a, and perhaps 7a) “floating somewhere in between” the exilic composition (*Double Redaction*, 43, 65–7). It is interesting to note that even those who do not subscribe to the double redaction model see multiple hands at work in these verses. For example, Ehud Ben Zvi similarly breaks up the sections and identifies vv. 4, 7b, 8–9 (DtrN) and 10–14 (DtrP) as secondary additions to DtrH(G) (“The Account of the Reign of Manasseh in II Reg 21:1–18 and the Redactional History of the Book of Kings,” *ZAW* 103 [1991]: 365, 370, 373). A major difference is that the Göttingen school views all three of these redactions as exilic.

Verse 16 is also probably preexilic.¹⁶ Many scholars are convinced that the doom oracle blaming Manasseh in vv. 10-15 is definitely exilic. Blaming the exile on Manasseh extends beyond these verses. It appears also in vv. 3, 6, and 9. Therefore, if blame of Manasseh is exilic, these verses need to be reconsidered. I would thus attribute 3b, 6c, and 7b-9 to an exilic redaction. Verse 5 is probably exilic as well. The host of heaven is mentioned only five times in DtrH; all of these are likely secondary.¹⁷ For its heuristic value, I present the following as my best guess at the original, preexilic account of the reign of Manasseh in 2 Kings 21:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king. And he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hephzibah. ^(2a) He did what was evil in the eyes of YHWH. ^(3a) He rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed. ⁽⁴⁾ And he built altars in the house of Yahweh of which Yahweh said, "In Jerusalem I will set my name" ...⁽¹⁶⁾ the innocent blood Manasseh spilled was very great until it filled Jerusalem

16. While some scholars see the sin of spilling innocent blood in v. 16 as a later addition, (Volkmart Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Anselm Hagedorn, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 392; Eynikel, "Portrait of Manasseh," 241), it is quite out of place in the exilic version of the narrative. Manasseh is evaluated as doing what is evil in YHWH's eyes. His sins are enumerated in the first verses (vv. 2-7) of the account; they are then followed by the oracle against Judah. The sin of spilling innocent blood is not mentioned until after the verdict of Judah and just before the concluding formula of the regnal account. The strange placement of this accusation points to the verse being separated from its original context in the list of sins in the preexilic account. Verse 16 seems to continue the list of the sins from the beginning of the chapter, and the oracle is inserted in the middle of the list. Also, this verse appears more closely related to the preexilic use of Jeroboam as the prototype of the evil king, rather than Ahab in the exilic addition, using the sinning verb, *hip 'il* of חטא. In the preexilic version, this verse functions as the close of the regnal formula and connects Manasseh's sins with those of Jeroboam. This is in contrast with the exilic account, which breaks the regnal formula in order to expand the narrative. Just as Jeroboam caused Israel to sin (החטא), so too does Manasseh. In the close of this verse, Manasseh is like Jeroboam (not Ahab). Causing Judah to sin has as its consequence the destruction of Judah, but the causation is not made here as in v. 11. This is because v. 16 was composed by the preexilic Dtr, who, while viewing Manasseh as an evil king, does not blame him for the exile. Also, the verse begins with וג, which functions as a redactional juncture, connecting two redactional levels of the text, showing the seams of redaction.

17. Deut. 4:19; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3, 5; 23:4, 5; also in Jer. 8:2; 19:13; Zeph. 1:5. Nelson, *Double Redaction*, 65.

from end to end, apart from his sin which he caused Judah to sin, doing evil in the eyes of YHWH. ⁽¹⁷⁾ The rest of the deeds of Manasseh and all that he did and the sin he committed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? ⁽¹⁸⁾ And Manasseh slept with his fathers and was buried in the garden of his house, in the garden of Uzzah; and Amon his son became king in his place.

Beyond the sin of spilling innocent blood in 2 Kgs 21:16, there is nothing noteworthy about Manasseh. In overturning the progress of his father's reform, he is in some ways reestablishing the status quo, in which the *bāmôt*, high places, since the reign of Jeroboam I almost 300 years prior, feature prominently in the evaluations of the bad kings. This behavior, while not positive, is commonplace and does not seem to justify the great punishment of Judah.

One might say that the preexilic Manasseh looks much like the other bad kings, except that his reign is so long. Manasseh has the longest reign of any king of Israel or Judah, an unprecedented fifty-five years. For Dtr, length of reign and prosperity are a reward for fidelity (as in 1 Kgs 3:14), but he must deal with the realities of history.¹⁸ Historically, Manasseh may in fact have been one of Judah's most successful monarchs. Beginning his reign in the late seventh century BCE, he recovered from the Assyrian siege of 701 BCE, and during his long, peaceful reign, the kingdom flourished.¹⁹

In the exilic revision of the history of the monarchy, this relatively unremarkable reign is rewritten. Its significance is transformed, the account is provided with more details, and the list of transgressions expands from three verses to seven (vv. 2-7, 16). The sins of every king are attributed to him. In addition to the high places, Manasseh erects altars to Baal, makes an Asherah, worships all the host of heaven, builds altars to the host of heaven in the temple, passes his son through fire, seeks omens and conjures spirits, and puts an Asherah in the temple. And yet, strikingly, the character of Manasseh is left just as flat as before. Nothing is added to the account that would make him more three dimensional, no additional characterization, no mention of specific events or any personal interactions.

18. The Chronicler offers an exegetical solution to the problem of the long reign by including a picture of a repentant Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:18-19).

19. Stavrakopoulou, "The Blackballing of Manasseh," 248.

On the other hand, the enhanced list of sins creates a caricature of a villain, an unreal scapegoat.²⁰ Like Josiah, the best of kings, who surpasses the good deeds of the few good kings, Manasseh exceeds the bad kings in wickedness, committing all the sins of the bad kings and more, making him the one “who did [more] evil than all...who were before him” (2 Kgs 21:11).²¹ Scholars have frequently speculated on why Manasseh is given this exceptional (dis)honor. Perhaps it was his name, shared with the northern tribe, that allowed the historian to equate Manasseh with both the sinful Northern Kingdom of Israel and Israel’s sin of worshiping at the *bāmôt*, high places.²²

Perhaps, however, it was his “spilling of innocent blood.” No other king is accused of this. Other notably evil kings, namely, Jeroboam and Ahab, have their own “transgression-innovations.” Jeroboam establishes the countercult at Dan and Bethel, while Ahab, “thinking it light” to follow the sins of Jeroboam, adds Baal worship to Israelite practice. In contrast, ordinary bad kings do not commit “new” sins. They tend to commit the same sins as (primarily) Jeroboam and (some) Ahab. But Manasseh does contribute a new sin to the repertoire of Judah’s transgressions: the spilling of innocent blood.²³ Perhaps the exilic Dtr picked up on this sin and expanded the narrative because of it.²⁴

Why does any king need to be blamed for the destruction of the temple and the exile? Alternative options are presented in Chronicles, where it is not the king’s cultic behavior, but his inability to humble himself (2 Chron. 36:12), and the ongoing transgressions of the people of Judah that cause YHWH to bring Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:14-19). But the historical reality of the destruction of Judah must be explained in a way that conforms to Dtr’s system of attribution of theological meaning to historico-political events.

20. Lasine, “Manasseh as Villain and Scapegoat,” 163.

21. Smelik, “The Portrayal of King Manasseh,” 139–40; Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings*, 187–223.

22. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 63–7; Stavrakopoulou, “The Blackballing of Manasseh,” 253.

23. The term *דָּם נָקִי* is often used in prophetic lists of Judah’s sins (see Isa. 59:7; Jer. 7:6; 19:4; 22:3, 17; 26:15). It is related to a prohibition in Deut. 19:10: “Don’t spill innocent blood (*דָּם נָקִי*) within your land.” The term is also used twice more during the reign of Jehoiakim in the report of the exile, referring to Manasseh and the reminder that he is to blame for the destruction of Judah (2 Kgs 24:4).

24. Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings*, 217.

It is Dtr's literary *modus operandi* to choose one figure to highlight as a didactic exemplar to convey his theological beliefs. This is done with the portrayals of David, Solomon, and Jeroboam.²⁵ The preexilic Dtr portrays David as the paradigm of the good king, comparing other kings to the Davidic standard and depicting Jeroboam and Josiah in ways that illustrate the importance of obedience (and the consequences of disobedience) to the deuteronomic law, including the stipulations for centralized and nonsyncretistic worship. Similarly, the exilic Dtr chooses the figure of Manasseh as a counter-example to convey his warnings against idolatry, especially Baal worship and the practices of the other nations, and the severe consequences of disobedience.

Martin Noth has argued convincingly that Dtr "inevitably concluded that the monarchy had led the Israelite nations to destruction."²⁶ Solomon, Jeroboam, and subsequent kings lead the people to their demise. In this way, Dtr represents "the monarchy, responsible only to itself, as a burden on the people (vv. 9-18), even if the people have yet to recognize it as such."²⁷ The text illustrates over and over the role of the king in determining the fate of the people; the bad kings continue the sin of Jeroboam, worshiping at his shrines and causing Israel to sin (the *hip 'il* of אטק).²⁸ In the regnal formulae of fifteen of the nineteen kings of Israel, they are said to have done what is evil in YHWH's eyes. Only Jehu is said to "do what is right" (2 Kgs 10:30 [and not even in the regnal formula, but in the narrative proper]), and the other three, whose reigns are particularly brief, do not have a regnal formula.²⁹ In almost every instance, the report of having done evil in YHWH's eyes continues with a qualifying statement that the king "follows the way of Jeroboam and his sin, which he caused Israel to sin." Jeroboam "caused" the people to sin by establishing his countercult in Dan and Bethel, and subsequent kings follow this model.

Borrowing the style of the preexilic judgments on the kings of Israel, Manasseh is similarly blamed for leading the people to ruin. 2 Kings 21:9 charges that the people "did not listen [to the torah commanded by

25. Ibid., especially Chapters 2–3.

26. Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 77; *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien. Die Sammelnden und Bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1957).

27. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 80.

28. See Nadab (1 Kgs 15:26); Baasha (1 Kgs 15:34); Omri (1 Kgs 16:25-26); Ahaziah (1 Kgs 22:53); Jehoash (2 Kgs 13:11); Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:24); Zechariah (2 Kgs 15:9); Menahem (2 Kgs 15:18); Pekahiah (2 Kgs 15:24); Pekah (2 Kgs 15:28); Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 13:2).

29. Elah (1 Kgs 16:8-14), Tibni (1 Kgs 16:21-22), and Shallum (2 Kgs 15:13-15).

Moses] and Manasseh caused them to err doing the evil of the nations...”³⁰ It is made utterly clear that it is because of Manasseh’s sin that Judah is destroyed: “Because of what Manasseh king of Judah did, these transgressions, he did [more] evil than all that the Amorites who were before him did and also caused Judah to sin with his idols. Therefore, thus said YHWH God of Israel: ‘Behold I am bringing evil on Jerusalem and Judah...’” (2 Kgs 21:11-12).

It is not evident precisely why the account of Manasseh is rewritten for him to take the blame. For Stavrakopoulou, it is because Manasseh as a scapegoat distances Judah from direct responsibility for exile, shifting blame from Judah to the king. Manasseh is like the foreign nations, like the northern kings.³¹ Similarly, Lasine argues, as “a royal scapegoat-villain [Manasseh] provides a more comforting explanation for their plight than one based on the assumption that they and their ancestors are fundamentally corrupt.”³² Shifting the blame from the people to the king leaves room for the potential of the continuing promise and maintaining the covenant. In this view, Dtr is theologically comfortable with attributing responsibility to the king over the people. Another possibility, Halpern suggests, is that Manasseh’s sin explains Josiah’s premature death by casting his reform as futile. “Manasseh’s irreversible provocation of Yhwh precipitated the failure of Josiah’s reform to save a Judah and Samaria now wholly purified of cultic pollution.”³³ Manasseh’s sin explains “why Josiah was killed by Necho rather than dying a natural death, an ideal to which Kings repeatedly adverts.”³⁴ In this way, Manasseh fore-dooms Josiah.³⁵

But it is important to notice how poorly integrated vv. 8-15 are in the already sparse characterization of Manasseh, causing us to wonder whether the text is entirely committed to shifting the blame to this king? Elsewhere, I have argued that the reason the Manasseh account seems halfhearted or ineffective is because it is not the literary production of the preexilic Dtr who uses the Davidic prototype strategy to fill out the

30. It is noticeable that while here Manasseh causes the people to do wrong, again the *hip ‘il*, the verb is וַיַּעַם, rather than the וַיַּחַט of Jeroboam and in v. 11.

31. Stavrakopoulou, “The Blackballing of Manasseh,” 252.

32. Lasine, “Manasseh as Villain and Scapegoat,” 166–7.

33. Baruch Halpern, “Why Manasseh Is Blamed for the Babylonian Exile: The Evolution of a Biblical Tradition,” *VT* 48 (1998): 492.

34. *Ibid.*, 493.

35. Halpern argues that this also allows Huldah’s oracle in 2 Kgs 22:16-17 to stand. The scapegoating of Manasseh “rescues the prophetess’s prediction of a ‘peaceful’ death, almost surgically, without overt reference to the rest of the oracle” (*ibid.*, 510).

portraits of the kings who are theologically meaningful to him. Instead, it is the exilic Dtr who tries, with limited success, to apply preexilic poetics.³⁶ The final version of the Manasseh account looks somewhat like the preexilic style, but it uses Ahab as the model for the evil king, rather than Jeroboam. Ahab is not used elsewhere as a comparative, except for three kings who are directly related to his house.³⁷ Manasseh outdoes the sins of Ahab, much as Josiah outdoes the good deeds of David (2 Kgs 21:2, 7).

Yet another complication is that Manasseh is not himself punished; instead punishment is meted out on Judah as a whole, some ninety years after the end of Manasseh's reign. Unlike in the case of Solomon, whose punishment—that the kingdoms will split—is delayed until after his death, for the sake of his father David (1 Kgs 11:11-12), no explanation for the delay is mentioned here. Even in the case of Ahab, whose punishment—the destruction of his house—is also delayed, an excuse is made: Ahab is said to humble himself in the face of disaster (1 Kgs 21:29).

Excuses like these, even if somewhat transparent, are necessary to maintaining the historical accuracy of the history, despite its theological cast. The historian, whether he likes it or not, feels beholden to historical fact.³⁸ The readers of the book of Kings may well have known that the united monarchy did not split during the reign of Solomon, but only after his death, that the House of Ahab was destroyed later, and that Judah was destroyed decades after the reign of Manasseh. Much as he might have wanted to, Dtr may have considered himself free to take liberties only with historical causation, not with the historical reality that was his framework. As Noth has commented, and I would agree, Dtr was an “honest broker,” one who “had no intention of fabricating the history of the Israelite people. He wished to...base it upon the material to which he had access.”³⁹

I would like to suggest that the spectacularly boring portrayal of Manasseh is an intentional strategy in the promotion of deuteronomistic theology. The colorless portrait of Manasseh taken together with his

36. Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings*, 187–233.

37. Other comparisons to Ahab are only made in the cases of relatives, both kings of Israel and Judah. Ahaziah, son of Ahab and Jezebel, followed in the “way of his father and mother” (1 Kgs 22:53). Joram, son of Jehoshaphat of Judah, who marries Ahab's daughter Athaliah, “followed in the ways of all the kings of Israel, like the house of Ahab did...” (2 Kgs 8:18). Their son, Ahaziah, son of Joram of Judah (Ahab's grandson), “followed the ways of the House of Ahab” (2 Kgs 8:27-29).

38. Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 76–99.

39. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 128.

important role in “history” both highlight and undermine what appears to be the prevailing view—that the fates of Israel and Judah are determined by the behaviors of the kings. In this case, the fate of the nation is explicitly said to be determined by the king’s behavior, but he is so poorly developed as a character and so bland and dull, even as a bad king, the result is to undercut the apparent message. The shift in focus away from the king may even suggest that it is really the actions of the people that determine their fate, by leaving the reader with the sense that one should not pin the immense importance of the exile on a character this unconvincing.⁴⁰

This intentional undermining through the sparse portrayal of Manasseh to shift the focus of the text is similar to the text’s approach to the equally sparse reign of Athaliah (2 Kgs 11). Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, seizes the throne of Judah when her son Ahaziah dies. Her parentage and actions tell us everything we need to know about her character and her reign. Upon taking the throne, she murders any competitors to her reign, namely her sons and grandsons (2 Kgs 11:1). Jehoash escapes, hidden in the temple, until he appears dramatically six years later, when the priest Jehoiada installs him on the throne. While Athaliah is certainly more colorful than Manasseh, her characterization is intentionally flat and sparse; the text refuses to fully recognize her reign (she has no regnal formula) and shifts the focus from Athaliah to the priest Jehoiada, his investiture of Jehoash, his affirmation of the covenant, and subsequent reform, parallel to the future covenant and reform of Josiah (2 Kgs 22–23). The goal is to highlight deuteronomistic theology.

The People’s Control of their Fate

The underlying shift in blame from the king to the people is not unique to Manasseh’s account. In contrast to widespread understanding, from the very beginning of the monarchy, the view that the people control their own fate is implicit in the narrative. In 1 Samuel 12, the people share the blame for the actions of the kings, because they requested the king in the first place. Samuel responds to the people’s request for a king and warns

40. Similarly, the characterization of Josiah, one of the best kings, is also strikingly thin. While his reign is covered in two chapters (2 Kgs 22–23), and many things happen, the narrative does not focus on Josiah himself. In this case, despite Josiah’s best efforts at reform, Judah is still destroyed, and the people are still exiled. Here, the lack of characterization shifts the focus to his acts; the book of instruction becomes the main character, rather than the king himself, in line with the deuteronomistic focus on the law.

them how they must behave. After briefly outlining the history of the Judges, Samuel makes clear that YHWH's favor is conditional:

Now here is the king whom you have chosen, whom you have requested; see, YHWH has set a king over you. If you will fear YHWH and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of YHWH, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow YHWH your God, then he will rescue you; but if you will not heed the voice of YHWH and rebel against YHWH's command, then the hand of YHWH will be upon you and your king. (1 Sam. 12:13-15)

Here, the condition of prosperity requires that both the king and the people be obedient to YHWH. Continuing, Samuel further warns the people:

Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn away from YHWH, but serve YHWH with all your heart; and do not turn towards nothingness, which cannot help or save, for they are nothing. For YHWH will not abandon his people... Yet fear YHWH and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for you have seen the great things he has done for you. But if you act wickedly, both you and your king will be swept away. (1 Sam. 12:20-25)

These are deuteronomistic words, similar to the injunction of Deut. 6:5 and the positive judgments on David (2 Kgs 2:3-4) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:25) in Kings. Like many of the kings of Israel who do not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam,⁴¹ in 1 Samuel 12, the people's behavior is not only the condition for success, but also determines the fate of the king, as in v. 25. This text makes clear that the fate of the people is determined by their own actions. The people will always ultimately be responsible, even when the king is nominally blamed, as they are the ones who demanded a king.

The doom pronouncement against Israel demonstrates this same tendency. Throughout the history leading up to the destruction of the North, Jeroboam is blamed for the fate of the people. He is held responsible for Israel's bad cultic behavior, its eventual fate, and the evil deeds of the subsequent kings, and yet, the final doom oracle in 2 Kgs 17:7-23 is largely focused on the role of the people themselves in determining their fate:

41. "He did not turn from (all) the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat which he caused Israel to sin" is repeated in the regnal formulae of six of the kings: Jehoash (2 Kgs 13:11); Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:24); Zechariah (2 Kgs 15:9); Menahem (2 Kgs 15:18); Pekahiah (2 Kgs 15:24); Pekah (2 Kgs 15:28). See Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings*, 128.

And it was because the children of Israel sinned against YHWH their God, who brought them up from the land of Egypt... And they followed the statutes of the nations... And the children of Israel ascribed things that were not so upon YHWH... And they installed *massebot*... And they made offerings there, at all the high places like the nations, which YHWH exiled before them: and they did evil things, causing YHWH to anger. And they worshipped the idols... (2 Kgs 17:7-12)

The point is very clear: Israel's evil deeds are the reason they will be destroyed. When they are charged with making and worshipping the two calves, it is their own action that incurs YHWH's wrath: "And they abandoned all the commandments of YHWH their God and they made for themselves molten images—two calves; and they made an Asherah..." (2 Kgs 17:16). The rest of Kings blames Jeroboam and Ahab for the fact that the people worship the calves and Asherah and Baal, but here the sins are cast as the actions of the people alone.⁴²

While the blame on Jeroboam for the downfall of the kingdom is consistent throughout Kings, in 2 Kings 17, Jeroboam is not even mentioned until v. 21, and there the charge is against Israel—they made Jeroboam king over them, rejecting the house of David. Furthermore, the sins that Jeroboam "caused them to sin" are generic, and not connected to the calf shrines: because "they made Jeroboam son of Nebat king and Jeroboam led Israel away from following YHWH and he caused them to sin greatly. And the children of Israel followed in every sin of Jeroboam that he did and they did not stray from it" (2 Kgs 17:21-22).⁴³

Scholars have long seen the indictment against Israel as two discrete units. Verses 21-23 reflect the theology of most of Kings, focusing more on Jeroboam and his role as king in the fate of the people. The beginning of the homily against Judah, vv. 7-18, is concerned with the sins of the people.⁴⁴ Verses 21-23, which pick up the phraseology of the preexilic regnal formulae, as discussed above, are the product of the preexilic Dtr, while vv. 7-18, assigning the blame to the people themselves, appear to

42. Marvin A. Sweeney, "King Manasseh of Judah and the Problem of Theodicy in the Deuteronomistic History," in Grabbe, ed., *Good Kings and Bad Kings*, 268.

43. Responsibility for the split of the kingdom is ambiguous in the text, but Israel's role in setting Jeroboam as king over them is clear. 2 Kgs 17:21 begins, *בִּי קָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַל בֵּית דָּוִד*, "For *he* tore Israel from the House of David." The masculine, singular verb does not have an explicit subject. It is possible to read the charge both with Israel as subject, as do NJPS and LXX, or YHWH as subject and Israel as the direct object, as do NRSV, KJV, NJB, Gray (*I & II Kings*, 592), and Cogan and Tadmor (*II Kings*, 206), similar to 1 Kgs 11:11, 31; 14:8.

44. Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 206–7.

be exilic. (Verses 19-20 are not the continuation of the previous verses and probably derive from a third, also exilic, source, unimportant to our discussion here.⁴⁵) In the doom proclamation against Israel in 2 Kings 17, we see two types of blame. The first part—the later, exilic addition—blames the people and holds them responsible for determining their fate. The second, which is akin to the preexilic version of Kings, blames Jeroboam for the downfall of Israel. The theological tension reflected in this passage can be read as reflecting the different stages of redaction.

The same tension is present in the account of Manasseh, but here it can be seen in the stark difference between Manasseh's responsibility for the downfall of the temple, Jerusalem, Judah, the entire institution of kingship, and exile and his thin characterization. Manasseh is but a shadow of a character and the thin characterization of Manasseh is, I would suggest, a subversive transfiguration of the preexilic reflex of blaming the king for the fate of the people. Like 2 Kgs 21:7-18, the narrative is instead blaming the people. The dissonance is a result of the competing perspectives of the preexilic and exilic historians.

45. Ibid., 207 n. 1.

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CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERIZATION IN THE BOOK OF KINGS

Edited by

Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson

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50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2020

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-0-5676-8090-7
ePDF: 978-0-5676-8091-4

Series: Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, ISSN 2513-8758, volume 670

Typeset by: Forthcoming Publications Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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