

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #25: Chapter 21 -
King Menashe – An Idolatrous Kingdom

In the entire book of *Melakhim*, the period of King Menashe and his son Amon is singled out for particular ignominy and divine denunciation. During these years the country becomes awash with idolatry and an assortment of deviant religious worship, divination and magic. This is the religious low point of the First Temple era. The manifestations of Menashe's idolatry overwhelm in brazenness and scope:

"... altars for Baal ... Ashera ... he bowed to all the hosts of the heaven and worshipped them and he built altars for them in the House of God ... in both courts of the House of God. He passed his son in fire, he practiced soothsaying and divination and consulted the Ov and spirits... and placed the image of the Ashera in the House [of God]. (21:3-7)¹

What stimulated this sudden eruption of idolatry? Why would the son of a loyal king such as Chizkiyahu turn so radically to paganism? The answer lies with Menashe's strategic affiliations. Menashe's long reign coincides with the peak of Assyrian power, wealth and prestige. He wholly embraced his role as an Assyrian vassal, resulting in an unprecedented fifty-five years of international calm and domestic prosperity. However, there was a poisonous spiritual corollary; Israel was incapable of withstanding the deep cultural implications of the association with Assyria. Biblical archaeologist W.F. Albright noted:

No other period of cuneiform records has yielded any remotely comparable mass of tablets relating to magic and divination, and that the royal Assyrian letters of the time contain numerable references to astrology and magic. It was practically impossible for a small vassal state to keep from being flooded with such idolatrous and superstitious practices which were under royal Assyrian protection. (*The Biblical Period From Abraham to Ezra*, p. 79)²

¹ 23:4-14 gives further details of the wide range of idolatry and the depth of their dissemination in Jerusalem and its environs: "houses of the ritual prostitutes ... women who wove coverings for the Ashera ... priests from the towns of Yehuda ... the altars ... from Geva to Beer Sheva ... horses that the kings of Yehuda had dedicated to the sun ... chariots of the sun." The book of *Tzefania* dates to this period as well. See its apocalyptic warnings in chapter 1 and 3, and the depictions of "those who prostrate on the roofs to the hosts of the heavens... those who enrobe in the clothing of heathens" (1:5-8).

² Interestingly, a Talmudic passage corroborates Albright's sentiment that it was "practically impossible" not to be swept up in the idolatrous momentum. Rav Ashi encounters King

The religious reader of *Sefer Melakhim* is frequently puzzled. How can a single king sway the entire national religious orientation? Was state religion so powerful? It is important to understand that in ancient times, religion and society were far from separate. Religion and science were synonymous; people explained their world through religion. Religion permeated all life cycle events, all national ceremony, farming and commerce. Thus, a national alliance with a superpower, even if motivated by military protection and openness to its economy and culture, could precipitate a huge shift in religious orientation.

This may be difficult to appreciate from a modern perspective, but even in our times we find examples of politics influencing culture. For instance, an affiliation with NATO frequently indicates an openness to western norms; during the Cold War, an affiliation with the Soviet bloc influenced the economy, religion, freedom and culture as much as the military did. Similarly, Menashe's acceptance of Assyrian governance dictated a wider cultural transformation that permeated every walk of life.

We should not imagine that Menashe's religious and political reforms were adopted without opposition. Our chapter informs us that "Menashe put so many innocent people to death that he filled Jerusalem with blood from end to end" (21:16). His victims were probably not only political opponents, but also religious insurgents who challenged the king's odious spiritual orientation and fought to uphold the national monotheistic tradition.³

In a lengthy exhortation, *Sefer Melakhim* delivers a severe indictment of Menashe's practices. The text ominously equates Menashe to Achav (21:3) and to the Amorites who resided in Canaan before the arrival of Israel in the land (21:2, 13), predecessors whose sinful record led to their demise. Repeatedly the Temple is referenced as:

The House of the God, of which God had said, **"I will establish My name in Jerusalem... In this house and in Jerusalem I will establish My name forever and I will not again cause the feet of Israel to wander from the land that I gave to their fathers if they faithfully observe all I have commanded..."**

Menashe in a dream. He asks Menashe: "Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols?" Menashe replies: "If you were there, you would have caught up the skirt of your robe and sped after me" (*Sanhedrin* 102b).

³ Chazal record a tradition that Menashe murdered the prophet Yeshayahu (*Yevamot* 49b, *Sanhedrin* 103b). The assumption that his murderous policy was directed at his religious opponents is proposed by Y. Kaufman (*History of the Religion of Israel*, 8th edition, vol. 4, 234-235) and also by *Da'at Mikra* and *Olam Ha-Tanakh*. Kaufman calls Menashe "the 'Jezebel' of the Southern kingdom" due to his ardent idolatry and the murder of the adherents of God. Prof. Yehuda Elitzur brings archaeological evidence suggesting that due to the idolatry in the Temple in this era, alternative monotheistic sacrificial sites were established west of Jerusalem by adherents of monotheism. See his book of collected essays, *Israel and the Bible*, pp. 164-173 and 230-234.

These associated references form a foreboding motif, indicating that abuse of the Temple is a direct displacement of God, a desecration of His name, and that the corruption of the Temple will invite its destruction.

Both the prophecies of *Yirmiyahu* (15:1-4) and *Melakhim* (23:26-27, 24:3-4) repeatedly attribute the destruction of the Temple and the national exile to the pernicious religious regime of Menashe. Our chapter gives the clearest warning of the impending *Churban*:

Thus says the God of Israel: "I am going to bring such a disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that both ears of everyone who hears it will tremble.⁴ I will apply to Jerusalem the measuring line of Shomron and the weight of the house of Achav.⁵ I will wipe Jerusalem clean as one wipes a dish and turns it upside down. And I will cast off the remnant of My own people and deliver them into the hands of My enemies." (21:11-14)

Menashe is so evil that the *Mishna* (*Sanhedrin* 10:1) groups him with Yerovam and Achav as the three kings whose actions precluded them a place in the afterlife. The common factor shared by these leaders is their advancement of idolatrous practices. Yerovam instituted shrines outside the Temple in Jerusalem, Achav was the first sovereign to abandon God worship and adopt Ba'al as the national deity, and now Menashe has introduced idolatry to Yehuda in an unprecedented manner. With Menashe's lengthy tenure, these practices have plenty of time to become deeply-rooted cultural realities, and even after his death the kingdom never recovered from the damage.

DIVREI HA-YAMIM: A DIFFERENT ENDING

Sefer Melakhim presents an uncomplicated biography for Menashe. However, when we study *Divrei Ha-yamim* we encounter a surprisingly different account of Menashe's end:

God spoke to Menashe and his people, but they paid no attention. So God brought the army commanders of the king of Ashur against them; they took Menashe prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Bavel. In his distress he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to Him, God was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so He brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Menashe knew that the Lord is God.

⁴ See *Yirmiyahu* 19:3, which uses this phrase. Since the chapter there relates to the Molekh in the Hinnom valley, the entire prophecy might have drawn strongly on the practices of Menashe.

⁵ The "measuring line" is a horizontal level which guides the builder to construct the wall in a perfect horizontal. The "weight" is a string attached to a weight which allows the builder to create a perfect vertical line. Of course, with Shomron destroyed, the "measuring line of Shomron" is a metaphor for absolute wreckage. For further uses of this construction metaphor in the context of the *Churban*, see *Amos* 7:8-9 and *Eikha* 2:8.

Afterward, he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David... He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the House of God... He restored the altar of God and sacrificed thanks-offerings upon it, and told Judah to serve the God of Israel. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 33:10-17)

The differences are so radical that they appear almost unbridgeable. First, *Melakhim* presents Menashe as irreparably devoted to idolatry and murder. His evil ways seal the fate of Jerusalem. In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, however, Menashe's idolatry is a passing event; he repents and restores Jerusalem to monotheism. Second, in *Melakhim* we hear nothing of Assyrian aggression against Menashe, no mention of *Divrei Ha-yamim's* account of the capture, incarceration and return of the sovereign.

We may suggest that *Divrei Ha-yamim's* account is historically accurate,⁶ yet *Melakhim* chooses to censor Menashe's repentance in favor of the dominant strain in his life – his idolatry. Indeed, while Menashe repented in his later days, the damage was so extreme, the influx of idolatry into the kingdom so prevalent and the degenerate public culture so pervasive that despite later attempts at rehabilitation, it was simply an incurable situation – too little too late. Menashe had contaminated the kingdom irreparably. And so, *Melakhim* ignores the episode of Menashe's repentance late in his life, preferring to present an accurate picture of the king's pernicious historic legacy, even if it does some minor injustice to his personal biography.

MELAKHIM AND DIVREI HA-YAMIM. DISTINCT AGENDAS

Furthermore, we should recall the central thesis of *Melakhim*. It attributes the Temple's destruction and the national exile to the sin of idolatry, targeting specifically the monarchy as the key culprits. *Melakhim* is a prophetic work, not a history book that records each and every detail. As such, *Melakhim* is uninterested in transmitting the character of Menashe – the worst royal offender – in a sympathetic manner, conveying a balance between his early sins and his later repentance. *Melakhim* looks to condemn Menashe's idolatry in the harshest terms. A focus upon his repentance can only obscure the message, so this detail is omitted.

⁶ Assyrian records describe how the Egyptian Pharaoh Nekho was brought to Ashur by Assurbanipal as a prisoner and then restored to his kingship (ANET, 295). In light of this, the story of Menashe seems like a reasonable historical possibility. The historical accuracy of this event is broadly discussed in Jacob Liver's lecture: *The Reign of Menashe* in *Studies in the Book of Kings - Proceedings from The Bible Study Circle at the Residence of David Ben-Gurion*, vol.2, B.Z. Luria (ed.) pg. 323-348.

One logical problem raises with the account in *Divrei Ha-yamim* is that if Menashe was indeed captured by the Assyrians, it is probably due to Assyrian concerns of rebellion or disloyalty. In that scenario, it is unlikely that he would have been able to build Jerusalem's wall or to undertake a religious revolution upon his return without again arousing Assyrian suspicions. Liver suggests that the order be reversed. The return to God and the construction in Jerusalem pre-dated his incarceration in Assyria. Menashe had come under the influence of anti-Assyrian opinion which affected religion and national policy. This policy reversal was precisely the red flag which attracted Assyrian suspicion and led to his imprisonment.

The philosophy of *Divrei Ha-yamim*, on the other hand, reflects other emphases. *Divrei Ha-yamim* is a Second Temple book that revels in repentance.⁷ Moreover, it expresses a particular perspective on divine reward and punishment. Whereas *Melakhim* asserts that the *Churban* is the product of the sins of Menashe, and even the accumulation of sins since the Exodus⁸, *Divrei Ha-yamim* contends that no generation is punished for the sins of its forebears.⁹ For *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the destruction of the Temple in the reign of Zidkiyahu is punishment for the sins of Zidkiyahu and his generation exclusively.

In Second Temple times, society felt condemned by the sins of the past: “Our ancestors sinned and are gone; but we bear the weight of their guilt” (*Eikha* 5:7). *Divrei Ha-yamim* champions an ideology that promotes the opportunity for repentance and repair, while upholding a sense of divine justice that blames no generation for the sins of the past. As such, *Divrei Ha-yamim*, in contrast to *Melakhim*, reports Menashe’s sins and his punishment. His incarceration by the Assyrians is retribution for his idolatry, and his long reign represents the reward for his repentance. Everything is balanced.¹⁰

THE EXTREMITY OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS

In the wake of *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the Rabbinic tradition presents Menashe as the most extreme exemplification of the principle that no penitent, however evil, is beyond acceptance and repair. The Talmud relates that Menashe, after being humiliated and tortured by his Assyrian captors, turned to God reluctantly, as a desperate last resort:

Rabbi Levi said: “[The Assyrians] filled a copper cauldron and placed [Menashe] in it and lit a fire under it. When he saw his plight, he called out to every idolatrous deity. When none assisted him, he said, ‘I remember that my father read me a verse in the synagogue: “When you are in distress, and all these things befall you in the latter days, you shall return to the Lord your God, and listen to His voice; He will not fail you nor destroy you...”’ (*Devarim* 4:30). Now I cry out to God. If He listens to me, well and good; if not, then all kinds of gods are alike.’ The angels barricaded the windows of heaven that the prayer of Menashe would not ascend to God, and they said: ‘Lord of the world! Are You willing to give gracious hearing to one who has worshipped idols and set up an idol in the Temple?’ ‘If I did not accept the penance of this man,’ replied God, ‘I should be closing the door in the face of all repentant sinners.’ God made a small opening under the Throne of His Glory, and received the prayer of Menashe through it.” (*Talmud Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 10)

⁷ This is noted by Y Eitzur in *Studies in the Book of Kings - Proceedings from The Bible Study Circle at the Residence of David Ben-Gurion*, vol.2, B.Z. Luria (ed.) pg.339.

⁸ 21:15

⁹ This aligns with the perspective of Yechezkel: “The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself” (Yechezkel 18:20).

¹⁰ See Prof. Sara Japhet’s *Ideology of the Book of Chronicles*, 140-144 [Hebrew].

And the Amora Rabbi Yochanan is willing to contest the *Mishna* above and suggests that Menashe will indeed receive a place in the world to come as a result of his repentance: “Rabbi Yochanan said: ‘Anyone who said that Menashe has no share in the world to come weakens the hands of repentant sinners’” (*Sanhedrin* 103b).

AMON

Amon continues the line trodden by his father. The text of *Sefer Melakhim* records him as “walking in all the path that his father had walked, serving the idols that his father had served” (21:21). Interestingly, *Chazal* see Amon’s actions as an intensification of the wrongdoings of his father: “Menashe placed [the idolatrous image] in the Temple... Amon introduced it into the Holy of Holies” (*Sanhedrin* 103b).

It seems that Amon imitated his father’s idolatry but failed to learn from his repentance.¹¹ To this end he is assessed more negatively than his father: “[Amon] did not submit to God as his father Menashe had submitted” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 33:23).

¹¹ Abarbanel. See also L. Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 4, p. 281.