

# BIBLE BRIEFING

## “Reform’s Cool”

Second Kings 18:1-6

**2 Kings 18:1** Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea the son of Elah, king of Israel, *that* Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign.

**2 Kings 18:2** He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name *was* Abi the daughter of Zechariah.

**2 Kings 18:3** And he did *what was* right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.

**2 Kings 18:4** He removed the high places and broke the *sacred* pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan.

**2 Kings 18:5** He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him.

**2 Kings 18:6** For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses.

The northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria. From this point on Second Kings follows only the history of the southern kingdom since the northern kingdom is out of the picture.

The reason God did not send Judah into captivity at this time is because Judah did have a few good kings who were responsible for a time of revival.

Hezekiah was one of these. In fact, he was the best king who reigned in the land after David.

At the very beginning of his reign Hezekiah instituted a series of spiritual reforms. Three are specifically mentioned in these verses:

1. He **removed the high places and broke the *sacred* pillars.**
2. He **cut down the wooden images.**
3. He **broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made.**

I want to explore Hezekiah’s three reforms and draw some conclusions from them for ourselves.

**High places** were originally the highest elevation in the surrounding area. We might call them hilltops. They were used by the Canaanite people as places of worship. Sometimes shrines were built on the hilltop. The shrine itself came to be called a high place. Thus eventually you could have a high place that was not on a hilltop. It could be an idolatrous shrine located anywhere. The Bible mentions high places in cities (Second Kings 17:9) and even portable high places (Ezekiel 16:16).

The mention of **sacred pillars** tells you these were hilltop high places. On the slopes leading up to the hilltop the worshippers would set up pillars. There could be one or many. They were regarded as the habitation of the deity. They were of various shapes for various purposes: sacrifice, burning incense, pouring of drink offerings.

There may have been a dwelling for the priest of such a high place but normally they lived in a surrounding city. There were often temporary shelters for worshippers to spend the night.<sup>1</sup>

**Wooden images** translates *Asherah*. It is sometimes poorly translated as *grove*. *Asherah* was the name of a Canaanite goddess although the origins were Assyrian.

The tree-trunk, pole, or cone of stone which symbolized *Asherah* was regarded as a Beth-el or "house of the deity" wherein the goddess was resident. The trunk of the tree was often provided with branches, and assumed the form of the tree of life.<sup>2</sup>

The **bronze serpent**, also known as the bronze snake (NIV) and the serpent of brass (KJV), was made by Moses, at God's command, during the Wilderness Journey. The Israelites had been speaking bitterly against God, to which The Lord responded by sending poisonous snakes among the rebels. The bronze serpent was provided as a visible means for repentant believers to be saved from their sin.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T4341>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?word=Asherah&action=Lookup&x=0&y=0>

**Numbers 21:4** Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way.

**Numbers 21:5** And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For *there is* no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread."

**Numbers 21:6** So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

**Numbers 21:7** Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

**Numbers 21:8** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live."

**Numbers 21:9** So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

In the New Testament Jesus discussed the figurative meaning of the bronze serpent:

**John 3:14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

**John 3:15** that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

After the incident in the wilderness they kept the bronze serpent. Somewhere along the line it became an object of worship. It was then it was given the title Nehushtan. (The word is sort of a combination between *serpent* and *bronze*).

Now that we know a little about these three things we can look at Hezekiah's reforms to see how they can relate to us.

Regarding the **high places** there is an interesting insight in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. After Jesus wowed her with His word of knowledge, she said,

**John 4:20** Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you *Jews* say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

Jesus answered, saying

**John 4:21** Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.

John 4:22 You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.

John 4:23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.

In other words, the Samaritans *were* wrong. Worship was no longer at high places in Samaria but in the Temple at Jerusalem. But a time was coming when worship would be set free of all location and ritual. After Jesus died and rose from the dead the way was made open to worship God in spirit and in truth without regard to location or ritual.

We are now set free to have a personal, intimate relationship with God. It is somewhat disheartening, then, that evangelical Christians are getting duped into thinking ritualistic worship is somehow more spiritual. A recent article in The Chicago Tribune tracks the trend toward formalism.

This trend comes as groups of evangelical Christians revisit a number of older church practices [like] fixed prayers... fasting during Lent, use of candles and icons in worship, and more regular observance of the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup>

Things like this strike me as modern-day high places. We worship God in spirit and in truth. **Turning or returning to them is just wrong!**

**Asherah** poles needed cutting down in Hezekiah's day. They were remnants of the things worshipped by the world. There is some archaeological evidence that pagans believed you could contact deities through use of the poles – since the deities inhabited them.<sup>4</sup>

Before you were saved you probably believed something else. Maybe it was a religion of some kind... Maybe it was a philosophy... Maybe it was in science... Maybe it was just the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom in general... Maybe it was in capitalism or communism or socialism.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chicago/chi-0704120573apr13,1,3704439.story?coll=chi-newslocalchicago-hed&ctrack=1&cset=true>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.adath-shalom.ca/ashera.htm>

After you are saved you often want to salvage some of what you previously pursued. You try to find a way to integrate it with biblical Christianity. For me it was psychology because I had majored in psych at UC Riverside. I discovered a movement within Christianity to integrate secular psychology with the Bible.

Thankfully I also discovered books like *The Seduction of Christianity* by Dave Hunt. I quickly understood that you could not add anything to the Word of God that would improve it.

For me psychology was an Asherah pole. It was something set-up by man to understand deeper realities. It had its 'deities,' who inhabited its ideas: Freud, Jung, Maslow, Skinner and the like.

It needed to be cut down.

What was it for you? Any poles still standing that you look to for wisdom other than God's Word?

The bronze serpent, was a visible means for those who repented to be saved. It represented to the Old Testament believer the coming of their Messiah who would save not just from physical death but from eternal death. All you had to do was look. It was by grace through faith you were saved. Still is!

The pole became a relic – the Nehushtan - that was worshipped. It is our nature to do this. It's why tortillas with the face of Jesus still attract crowds!

The bronze serpent served a great purpose. When it's purpose was done, it became Nehushtan and was still looked to for some spiritual help.

There is a spiritual lesson in this for us. I credit Dr. J. Vernon McGee with discovering it. In his comments on the passage he wrote,

There are certain organizations, certain movements, and certain methods that God has used in the past. Unfortunately, folk did not know when God was through with them, and they refused to disband them...They became Nehushtan.

They became brazen serpents that at one time had served a purpose and were mightily used by God. Then the day came when God was through with them.<sup>5</sup>

A method, or program, within the Church could be a form of Nehushtan. Every few years such a program comes along. It was something wildly successful in its home Church. It gets noticed, written about, packaged, and sold. It seems like every Church in the country and around the world adopts it. It seems successful... Until the next Nehushtan is raised and we look at it to 'save' us and others.

## Conclusion

On a more positive note, Hezekiah looked to David:

**2 Kings 18:3** And he did *what was* right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done.

With regards to worship David did several things, among which are:

1. He returned the ark of the covenant to the Tabernacle.
2. He planned and provided for the Temple to be built.
3. He established the singers in the Tabernacle.

In general we would say that David determined from the Lord and His Word how He wanted to be worshipped. Then he established proper worship. *being changed to bring change -*

But more than that, David personally worshipped the Lord with all his mind, heart, soul, and strength.

The mention of David tells you that Hezekiah's reforms were not simply outward. It wasn't just getting rid of high places, Asherah's, and the Nehushtan. It was getting right on a personal basis with God.

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<sup>5</sup>McGee, J. V. 1997, c1981. *Thru the Bible Commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.). Thomas Nelson: Nashville