

Hezekiah's Display (2 Kgs 20,12-19)

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The narrative of 2 Kgs 20,12-19¹ (// Jes 39,1-8) revolves around Hezekiah's "showing" the envoys of Merodachbaladan of Babylon all the resources of his kingdom (2 Kgs 20,13). As presented, this feature places the reader before various perplexing and unanswered questions. What did Hezekiah have in mind in making his display? Again, Isaiah's subsequent announcement that all the royal treasures Hezekiah had exhibited to the envoys will be carried off to Babylon (2 Kgs 20,17) certainly suggests that there was something reprehensible about the king's action. Curiously, however, that announcement, in contrast to the usual structure of the prophetic "judgment speech" lacks any preceding motivating accusation specifying in what precisely its wrongness consisted.

In the face of such puzzlements, older and more recent scholars have cast around for extra-Biblical analogues to Hezekiah's display capable of clarifying what that action involved. A first such "parallel" was cited already by W. GESENIUS, i.e. Herodotus' story of Solon's visit to king Croesus at Sardis² which relates: "on the third or fourth day after his coming Croesus bade his servants lead Solon round among his treasures, and they showed him all that was there, the greatness and the prosperous state of it ..." (I,30)³. As the continuation of Herodotus' story makes clear, Croesus' action was prompted by sheer vanity and self-satisfaction with his own prosperity which he hoped Solon (who was on a private visit to Sardis) would recognize as surpassing that of anyone he had ever encountered. Bringing this parallel to bear on our text might suggest similar motives prompted, inter alia, Hezekiah's

1 On this text, see C.T. BEGG, 2 Kings 20:12-19 as an Element of the Deuteronomistic History, CBQ 48 (1986) 27-38.

2 Der Prophet Jesaia, Leipzig, 1821, 1004.

3 The translation is that of A.D. GODLEY in the Loeb series.

display. Another 19th century author, i.e. G. RAWLINSON cites a further passage of Herodotus a propos of 2 Kgs 20,13⁴, namely his account of how Oroetes deceived the envoy of Polycrates by displaying to him eight stonefilled chests topped with a thin level of gold. Thereby, he aroused the cupidity of Polycrates who, taking Oroetes for a man of vast wealth, attacked him and suffered a disastrous defeat in consequence (III,123). In this case, the parallelism between the actions of the two figures seems a merely material one: both Oroetes and Hezekiah display their treasures to envoy(s) of a foreign ruler. At the same time, however, the Biblical narrative offers no hint of any intention on Hezekiah's part of deceiving and enticing through his showing comparable to that of Oroetes, and so this "parallel" does not seem particularly ad rem for the elucidation of Hezekiah's action.

Contemporary scholars have turned to other ancient cultural spheres in their search for analogues to Hezekiah's exhibition. A first author is P.R. ACKROYD. His starting point is the suggestion of D. DAUBE that the seeings/showings of land spoken of in various Biblical texts (e.g., Gen 13,14-15; Dtn 3,27; 34,1-4; Mt 4,7-8) be understood in terms of a Roman legal practice whereby an owner might transfer immovable property to a buyer by "showing" him the item in question with the intention of handing it over to him⁵. According to ACKROYD Hezekiah's display to the Babylonian envoys can be elucidated along similar lines; by means of it he has, in effect, already handed over his property to the one they represent so that Isaiah's later announcement simply explicates the import of the royal action⁶. More recently, H. WILDBERGER in his treatment of Isa 39,2 (= 2 Kgs 20,13)⁷, cites as an "instructive parallel" to this verse an Akkadian letter (RS 17.289) written to the king of Ugarit by the ruler of Carchemish in the name of their common Hittite overlord. The letter informs the addressee of an impending visit by a Hittite official who is to ascertain ("see") the extent of his military resour-

4 The Second Book of Kings, The Holy Bible, III, New York, 1886, 118.

5 Studies in Biblical Law, New York, 1969, 24-39.

6 An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39, SJT 27 (1974) 339-341. As ACKROYD admits, the Biblical text contains no indication that Hezekiah had the intention of handing over his property as would, on the analogy of the Roman practice, be required to make the "showing" a legally binding act of transfer. ACKROYD's solution to this difficulty is to posit that Hezekiah here is simply the unwitting agent of Yahweh who, in fact, does intend to transfer the Judean patrimony to the Babylonians.

7 Jesaja, BK 10/3, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982, 1472.

ces⁸. Against the background of this letter, one might understand Hezekiah's alacrity in displaying his possessions to the envoys as his anticipating- and acting to satisfy- a demand that one ruler might, in the practice of the time, make of another. The latest writer to suggest an extra-Biblical parallel for 2 Kgs 20,13 is B.G. OCKINGA⁹. His parallel is drawn from Egypt, specifically from the "Victory Stela" of King Piye who ruled 753-713 B.C.¹⁰. The relevant section of this document concerns measures taken by a petty chieftain, Pediese of Athribis in the face of Piye's victorious advance. Approaching Piye, Pediese invites him to come to his city, assuring him that his house and treasury will be open to him, and that he will be given rich presents. Subsequently, on the occasion of Piye's actual visit, Pediese takes an oath before his assembled fellow rulers, calling on them to denounce him if they know of his having concealed any of his possessions from Piye. In OCKINGA's reading of this passage, Pediese's display is a good-will gesture, signifying his readiness to enter into an agreement with Piye, i.e. it is a stage in a treaty-making process. Having developed this understanding of the Egyptian passage, OCKINGA goes on to briefly propose an analogous interpretation of Hezekiah's "showing" as expressive of his willingness to conclude a treaty of alliance with Merodach-baladan¹¹.

After the foregoing survey, I now wish to call attention to an additional extra-Biblical analogue to Hezekiah's display which, to my knowledge, has not hitherto been adduced in this connection and which, I believe, serves to confirm what the evidence of the last two parallels treated above suggests, i.e. in Ancient Near Eastern diplomatic relationships there existed a rather

8 PRU, IV, 192. The text reads: "... Voici que Talmitésub, gardabbu de Mon Soleil va aller chez toi. Il va voir (i-mar) à combien montent tes soldats et tes chars".

9 Hiskias "Prahlererei". Ein Beitrag zur Interpretation von 2 Könige 20,12-19/ Jesaja 39,1-8, Fontes atque Pontes. Eine Festgabe für Hellmut Brunner, ÄAT 5, Wiesbaden, 1983, 342-346.

10 There is a recent translation of this text in M. LICHTHEIM, Ancient Egyptian Literature, III, Berkeley, 1980, 66-84.

11 That Merodach-baladan's approach to Hezekiah was prompted by hopes of entering into such a treaty with him is affirmed explicitly already by Josephus (Ant., 10,30) and is generally accepted by commentators. The supposition is highly probable in view of our Assyrian documentation concerning the Babylonian king's long-term machinations.

widespread practice/expectation of one king's requiring another to show him/his envoys the whole of his available resources as proof of his good-will, trust, etc. The document in question is a letter, discovered in the Tell Amarna archives, from Ashur-uballit I of Assyria (1365-1330 B.C.) to Pharaoh Amenophis IV. It reads in the translation of J.A. KNUDTON:

...

Meinen Boten habe ich dir geschickt,
um dich zu sehen und dein Land zu sehen (a-na a-ma-ri-ka ù mât-ka a-na a-ma-ri)

Was bisher mein Vater

nicht geschickt hat,

habe ich dir jetzt geschickt:

ein vortrefflichen Wagen, zwei Pferde

[un]d l..... aus schönem Lasur-Stein

habe [ich zum Geschenk für dich

dich [ü]bersandt.

Der Bote, den ich dir geschickt habe,

[um zu sehen ([a-] na a-ma-ri)

seine.....

[möge] er sehen ([li-mu-ur) und dann gehen.

Deinen [W]illen und den Wi[[ll]en

deines Landes möge er sehen (erfahren) (li-mur)

und dann gehen!¹²

The above text, it will be observed, evidences a variety of noteworthy parallels with the presentation of 2 Kgs 20,12-19. Like 20,15.16 it speaks of a king's envoy(s)' "seeing"¹³ the belongings of the ruler to whom he/they go. In common with 2 Kgs 20,12 it has the "seer" giving gifts to the "shower" (rather than vice versa, as in the texts cited by WILDBERGER and OCKINGA). As does the Biblical text, Ashur-uballit's letter further concerns relations among kings (seemingly) more or less equal in rank, in contrast again to WILDBERGER's and OCKINGA's "parallels" where the relationship is explicitly that of inferior (the "shower") to superior (the "seer"). Finally, both passages appear to relate an initial contact¹⁴ between their respective kings to which

12 EA 15.

13 Note that it uses the same Akkadian word for "see", i.e. amāru, employed in the letter to the king of Ugarit cited by WILDBERGER.

14 For Ashur-uballit we possess a "followup" letter of his to Amenophis (EA 16), while 2 Kön 20,12 is the first mention of Merodach-baladan in the Deuteronomistic History.

pertains the showing/seeing spoken of.

In light of the above evidence I suggest, in conclusion, that 2 Kgs 20, 12-19 portrays Hezekiah as acting in according with standard Ancient Near Eastern diplomatic practice/expectations. At the same time, the fact that in so doing Hezekiah is shown not even "waiting to be asked" (recall that in WILDBERGER's and the Amarna text the ruler addressed is issued a call to display his property to the other king's envoy) underscores the impetuosity and wrongful taking of initiative involved therein¹⁵ which evoke Isaiah's word of doom.

15 Compare the somewhat analogous presentation in Josh 9 where Israel (culpably) takes the initiative in responding to the Gibeonites' request for a treaty without waiting for a directive from Yahweh.