

2 Kings 20 — The Fifteen Borrowed Years — Tears the Lord Saw, the Shadow That Climbed Backward, and the Treasures Shown to Babylon

2 Kings 20: Hezekiah, sick unto death, is told by Isaiah to set his house in order; the king turns his face to the wall and weeps sore, and before Isaiah can cross the middle court the Lord turns him around with a new word — fifteen years added, the city defended, and for a sign the shadow drawn ten degrees backward on the dial of Ahaz; then envoys of Berodach-baladan king of Babylon arrive with letters and a present, Hezekiah shows them every treasure in his house, and Isaiah names Babylon, for the first time in the story of the kings, as the power that will carry Judah's sons and treasures away; the sickness and the embassy belong to the years of the Assyrian crisis, c. 701–698 BC (scriptural chronology, counting the added years against the twenty-nine years of Hezekiah's reign; secular chronologies set Sennacherib's invasion at 701 BC and Hezekiah's death near 687 BC).

The angel has already gone through the Assyrian camp. One chapter ago we watched the largest army in the world melt away in a night — a hundred fourscore and five thousand dead men at dawn, Sennacherib slinking home to Nineveh to die under his idol's roof (2 Kgs. 19:35–37). And the king at the center of that deliverance was the best king Judah ever produced: Hezekiah, of whom the historian says flatly, "he trusted in the LORD God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him" (2 Kgs. 18:5).

Hebrew Word Studies

bakah (H1058) / dimah (H1832) (בָּכָה / דִּמָּה) — **to weep, bewail / tears vv. 3, 5.** "And Hezekiah wept sore" — the Hebrew doubles the root, wept a great weeping (bakah with gadol, H1419, "sore"). Then mark what the Lord's answer itemizes: "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears" (v. 5) — prayer and tears listed separately, as if heaven keeps two ledgers. Tears, in scripture, are not the failure of prayer but its second language, the part that goes up when the words give out. David knew the ledger existed: "put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Ps. 56:8); "the LORD hath heard the voice of my weeping" (Ps. 6:8). Enos "cried unto him in mighty prayer" a whole day and night before the voice came (Enos 1:4). And the incarnate Lord did not retire the language: he "wept" at a tomb he was about to empty (Jn. 11:35), and among the Nephites, with angels descending, "he wept" again over the little children (3 Ne. 17:21–22). A God who counts tears is a God who bends low enough to see faces turned to walls. The promise at the far end of the ledger is that the bottle gets emptied exactly once: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4). Until then, 2 Kings 20:5 stands as the plainest receipt in the Old Testament: thy tears — seen.

chayah (H2421) / rapha (H7495) (חָיָה / רָפָא) — **to live, revive, recover / to heal, make whole vv. 1, 5, 7, 8.** The chapter turns on one verb reversed. Verse 1: "thou shalt die, and not live" — from chayah. Verse 7: "and he recovered" — the same chayah. Between the two occurrences stand a wall, a prayer, and a bottle of tears; the grammar itself testifies that something moved heaven between the sentence and its commutation. This is the verb that revived the widow's son at Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17:22), the verb the king of Israel despaired of in the Naaman story — "Am I God, to kill and to make alive?" (2 Kgs. 5:7) — echoing the Lord's own self-description, "I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal" (Deut. 32:39). And there is the second verb: rapha, "I will heal thee" (v. 5), the name-verb of the covenant at Marah — "I am the LORD that healeth thee" (Ex. 15:26). Isaiah, who carried this healing word down a palace corridor, would later put rapha at the center of the gospel itself: "with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). The risen Christ holds the office still: "will ye not now return unto me... and be converted, that I may heal you?" (3 Ne. 9:13). Healing in scripture is never mere repair; it is the living God re-issuing the verb to live — sometimes through a word, sometimes through a lump of figs, and in the last day through a resurrection that makes verse 1 unsayable forever (D&C 42:48; Alma 11:42–44).

maalah (H4609) / shuv (H7725) (מָלַח / שׁוּב) — **step, degree, ascent / to turn, return, turn back vv. 5, 9–11.** The "dial of Ahaz" is not a word for dial at all — it is maalot, steps, degrees of ascent, from alah, "to go up." The same noun titles the pilgrim psalms, the "songs of degrees" (Ps. 120–134), sung going up to Jerusalem. So the sign is staged on a staircase of hours, and the miracle is told entirely in the chapter's master verb: shuv, to turn back. "Turn again (shuv), and tell Hezekiah" (v. 5); "shall the shadow... go back (shuv)?" (v. 9); "let the shadow return (shuv) backward" (v. 10); "and he brought (shuv) the shadow ten degrees backward" (v. 11). Shuv is the Old Testament's repentance word — the prophets' cry of "turn ye, turn ye" (Ezek. 33:11), the hinge of "return unto me, and I will return unto you" (Mal. 3:7; 3 Ne. 24:7). The God who asks his children for turning here performs one himself, on the sky, as a sign — the shadow retracing steps it had already descended,

the afternoon repenting of its own progress. It is the visible physics of what he offers every soul: what has gone down may, at his word, go back up; the descent already made is not final while the Lord of the dial lives. Only twice does the cosmic clock yield — Gibeon and here — and both times the awe lands on the same point: the LORD hearkened unto the voice of a man (Josh. 10:14).

shalom (H7965) / emet (H571) (שָׁלוֹם / אֱמֶת) — **peace, wholeness, well-being / truth, firmness, faithfulness vv. 3, 19.** The chapter is framed by these two words, and the frame is the sermon. At the wall, Hezekiah pleads that he has "walked before thee in truth (emet) and with a perfect (shalem, H8003) heart" — and shalem shares the root of shalom: whole, entire, undivided. At the end, he consoles himself that there will be "peace (shalom) and truth (emet) in my days." Same two roots, opposite altitudes. In verse 3 they describe a way of walking before God — truth as something a man does with his feet, wholeness as the condition of his heart. In verse 19 they have shrunk to circumstances — quiet borders and stable years, a climate rather than a covenant, fenced inside one lifetime. The Old Testament knows this counterfeit well; it is the priests' cry of "Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14), comfort purchased by refusing the horizon. Real shalom will not stay inside one man's days, because it is covenantal by nature — "my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed" (Isa. 54:10, this same Isaiah, speaking past the exile he announced in this room to the gathering beyond it). And real emet is load-bearing across generations or it is not emet: "the father to the children shall make known thy truth" (Isa. 38:19) was Hezekiah's own healed vow. The gospel's arithmetic runs exactly opposite to verse 19: "blessed are all the peacemakers" (3 Ne. 12:9) — peace as something made and handed forward, not a lease that conveniently outlasts the leaseholder.

From the Chapter's Architecture

And beneath the vocabulary, the deepest structure: the first panel is full of turning — Hezekiah turns his face to the wall (v. 2), Isaiah is turned around mid-court (v. 5), the shadow turns backward down the dial (vv. 9–11). Everything in the panel of prayer bends, reverses, comes back. In the second panel, nothing turns. No one turns the envoys toward the temple; no prayer turns the prophecy; the king does not turn his face to any wall for his sons. The chapter's first half demonstrates that the appointed course of things — even a course announced by "Thus saith the LORD" — will turn for tears. Its second half is the record of a sentence nobody wept over, and it did not turn. It is not a chiasm, and I will not dress it as one; it is two panels and a lesson in what moves, and what therefore fails to move, the hand that holds the dial.