

BEST LITTLE PRAYER ATTRIBUTED TO WORST KING

Wager a dollar against a donut hole that ninety percent of those who read this column have never run into “the Prayer of Manasseh,” and chances are you’ll win. Probably because it’s so hard find.

This little fifteen-verse poem is usually counted as one of the apocryphal books, so it isn’t even included in most Jewish and Protestant Bibles.

In Catholic and Orthodox versions its location can bounce around from one edition to the next.

And no wonder. The ancient versions didn’t always know what to do with the Prayer of Manasseh either. It never appears in any collection of the Hebrew scriptures.

But it is found in Greek language editions of the Jewish scriptures, usually sandwiched in at the end of the book of Psalms. In other manuscripts it is tacked onto the end of 2 Chronicles.

However, just because later editors couldn’t agree where to opt it, doesn’t mean it wasn’t popular.

On the contrary, over the centuries its on-again off-again popularity has been proved by the fact that it was printed in many prayer books.

If you can find it, it’s worth the minute or two it will take to read it. For it’s a dandy little example of pious repentance.

It starts out praising the Lord Almighty for his majesty and mercy (verses 1-7). A confession of sins (verses 8-10) is followed by a prayer for forgiveness (verses 11-13). It ends with a promise to praise the Lord for his kindness (verses 14-16).

It’s short and to the point, nothing fancy or flowery. A gem of simple devotion.

But why is it called the Prayer of “Manasseh”? That’s another story. Manasseh was one of the worst kings ever to rule the nation of Judah.

According to 2 Kings 21 (in some Bibles that’s 4 Kings 21), he allowed his nation to worship the pagan god Baal. He erected a statue of Baal’s wife smack in the middle of the Lord’s temple at Jerusalem.

He sacrificed his own son as a burnt offering. He consulted witches and wizards. Scores of innocent people were killed during his reign. In a nut shell, he perpetrated more evil than any pagan ever.

It’s hard to believe that such a scoundrel would ever have composed a prayer like the one named after him. But elsewhere in the Jewish scriptures is some mitigating evidence.

2 Chronicles 33 also lists Manasseh’s dirty tricks. But this chapter adds something not found elsewhere. It says that the Lord sent a foreign king to capture Manasseh, chain him up, and cart him off into exile.

There, down on his luck, he prayed to the Lord. The Lord forgave him and brought him back to Jerusalem, where he cleaned up his act by purifying the temple of idolatrous worship.

In fact, 2 Chronicles 33:18-19 even mentions two books which purport to contain a copy of his famous prayer. Of course, those records have long since been lost.

Centuries later some pious Jew composed a prayer for forgiveness, which he then named after King Manasseh. He didn’t fool anyone; the title was an obvious fiction.

But that’s OK, because the intention was to suggest that even the worst of sinners can count on divine absolution.

In any event, what we have in the apocryphal Prayer of Manasseh is a charming petition for mercy which becomes even more poignant by being attributed to such an immoral king.

For modern readers, that translates into the suggestion that the best of God is available even to the worst of people. Which isn’t a bad idea.