

Catie Wuensche

H#1264591

wuenschecc@hbu.edu

Dunham

Junior

Mentor Dr. Doni Wilson

“Hezekiah’s Tunnel and The Siloam Inscription”

1,162 words

“Hezekiah’s Tunnel: Examining The Siloam Inscription”

Hezekiah's Tunnel: Examining The Siloam Inscription

In 1880 a man in the prime of his life entered the ancient aqueduct of “Hezekiah’s Tunnel” from the Siloam side and saw there, for the first time since the times of the Bible, an inscription cut deep into the walls of stone. The inscription was written in Hebrew in the cursive Phoenician alphabet, according to Harold J. Abrahams (406). Erosion had taken a toll on the six lines, and some of the letters were not legible. However, the meaning of the inscription is crystal clear and tells of the “digging operations simultaneously from both ends with the excavators meeting shortly after being able to hear each other on opposite sides of the as yet unexcavated rock” (407). While the original is located in the Museum of the Ancient Orient in Turkey, the Dunham Bible Museum contains an exact replica of the carved stone upon which the Siloam Inscription is written. The replica sits in a glass container with the etches of markings barely visible under the light of the display case. It stands not only as a historical treasure, but as a remnant of the greatness of a king who served the Lord.

The Bible describes Hezekiah as a king with a personal relationship with God. He was known to do “what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God” (2 Chronicles 31:20). A son of the wicked King Ahaz, Hezekiah reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah for twenty-nine years, 715-686 BC. He was dedicated to the Lord and was more zealous for the Lord than any of his previous predecessors (2 Kings 18:5). In 701 BC, all of Judah was in the face of a crisis. The dominant world power, the Assyrians, invaded Judah and marched against Jerusalem. The northern kingdom of Israel and many other nations had already fallen to the power of the Assyrians, and now Judah was their next target (2 Kings 18:13). In comparison with the constructive decisions and creation of other kings, Hezekiah’s work was described in a rather “grudging and oblique” way, according to Jonathan Rosenbaum. (33). He is also exemplified like

other kings as a man who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kings 18:2; 2 Chronicles 29:2; 2 Kings 22:2). Hezekiah, being a man dedicated to God and his people and being faced with this imminent threat, decided to create what scholars have named today as “Hezekiah’s Tunnel.” Hezekiah disengaged the waters of the Upper Gihon Spring, located outside the defensive wall of Jerusalem, and “brought [the people] straight down on the west side of the city” (II Chronicles 32:30). The waters of the spring were diverted by a circuitous tunnel under the walls of the city to the famous Pool of Siloam inside the city walls (Abrahams 406).

The tunnel itself was created in order to provide a source of water for the city of Jerusalem. As Abrahams observes, it is the largest ancient hydro-technical structure in Israel (407). Throughout the history of Jerusalem, the Gihon Spring was a source of water critical to the city’s defense. Being the only source of groundwater in the area, the Gihon Spring was one of the reasons for Jerusalem’s location on Mount Zion (407). Today, the Gihon gushes water intermittently: “after about 40 minutes, it rests for about 8 hours, varying with the season, and produces about 1200 m³/day, with that amount declining somewhat during the summer” (405). Stig Norin reiterates the opinions of Rogerson and Davies who stated that there are three water systems connecting the Gihon Spring (38). Therefore, the tunnel project made the control of the Gihon spring possible “in a single, large, fortified reservoir” (Abrahams 407). The aqueduct cut through thick, solid rock and ran for the straight-line distance of 329 meters or 366 yards with the actual length being 525 meters or 583 yards, and was more than 1.8 m or 2 yd high (407). The creation of the tunnel itself, however, was a challenge. The builders had to face problems ranging from alignment to simply finding each other in the tunnel itself.

Due to a lack of necessary equipment, engineers ran into several problems during the construction of Hezekiah’s tunnel. The angling of the tunnel is uniquely controversial. Scholars

debate the reasoning behind constructing the tunnel at an angle. Some say that it is built at an angle because the builders wanted to carve in the smoothest stone such as soft limestone or the layer of least hardness called “meleke” (408). Others say that building at an angle was necessary to avoid the tombs of Davidic kings, and others say that the reasoning relates more to the problem of ventilation. But at the time Hezekiah’s engineers were not judged, for the attempt to construct such a tunnel was just evidence and a great demonstration of the knowledge, energy, skill, and courage of the builders of the time.

The Siloam inscription itself possesses nothing glorifying a king; rather, the writing is simple about the construction of the tunnel and the great effort it took to make it. The inscription was found in 1880 by a 16-year-old boy named Jacob Eliahu, and there is some uncertainty regarding the intention behind the creation of the writing itself (Norin 38). We do not know who wrote the inscription, why they wrote it, or how the writing of it would benefit the project overall. All we know is that it was made “in the bottom third of a polished part of the cliff” (38). We can only guess the possible reasons for the inscription. We could be as right to say it was merely “some workmen’s foreman or official at a relatively low level who arranged the making of a memorial inscription after weeks of hard and awkward work” (38). But the truth is we really don’t know much at all about the intentions of the inscription and the purpose or reasoning “will probably never be known” (38) The inscription describes how the miners worked “the pick, one toward another” and how they heard “the voice of each calling to the other” until they met each other “pick against pick” and the “water flowed from the source to the pool” (Abrahams 407). It is a simple description of hard work paid off by the effort of a people dedicated to the rule of their king, and the reward they received was the bliss of success and overflowing water.

The Siloam inscription, though shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, is a valuable possession of Dunham Bible Museum. It is a reminder of a great historical feat of courage, skill and perseverance. One can only imagine the sense of joy the miners felt when they struck the final blow to the stone which released the waters of the Gihon Spring. Along with this joy, the Siloam inscription relays the enduring strength of a people who followed not only a great king, but an almighty and powerful Lord.

Work Cited

Abrahams, Harold J. "The Hezekiah Tunnel." *Journal (American Water Works Association)*, vol. 70, no. 8, American Water Works Association, 1978, pp. 406–10.

The Bible: The Holy Bible ESV New Classic Reference Bible. English Standard Version, Crossway, 2011.

"The Siloam Inscription." 2010.625. Houston Baptist University Dunham Bible Museum.

Norin, Stig. "The Age of the Siloam Inscription and Hezekiah's Tunnel." *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 48, no. 1, Brill, 1998, pp. 37–48.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Hezekiah's Reform and the Deuteronomistic Tradition." *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 72, no. 1/2, Cambridge University Press, 1979, pp. 23–43.