

Interview with Jesse Ainslie

Sophomore, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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LaToya: Why don't we start with you introducing yourself?

Jesse Ainslie: My name is Jesse Ainslie. I am graying-bearded sophomore at UNC Chapel Hill. I have spent a good portion of my early life.... I spent on the road as a as a guitar player and musician. I've played in 46 U.S. states and, I think, all but like four countries that we would call Europe. Within the last couple of years, I had been, sort of on my own time, reading about certain ancient history and... not just ancient history but... our original storytelling practices and the icons and the tropes that we have relied on for 50... 70 centuries... for how we talk about ourselves and the world. You know, as a songwriter and as a musician... it's not always obvious that we are a part of a tradition that stretches back that far, but it is... it is worth knowing. It is worth asking the question of where... where we derive our poetry, where we derive our iconography, how meaning is created

through symbolism... It's the exact same thing is music. Tchaikovsky taught a lot of music theory and taught about how particular harmonies evoke particular emotions. Same thing... why does the sun mean what the sun means when we write the sun? So I came back to school as an older person with these questions in mind. The University of North Carolina has been associated with my family for four or five generations. My grandfather helped write some of the casebook that is used in the law school, and endowed the law school with a scholarship. And I've taken... I took part time classes here a few years ago. Reentering the University was very easy. With pandemic of the last year, everything I did... everything that was part of my income my life kind of disappeared and I needed something to do. I took a teaching English... just like an online English teaching course, and while I was doing that I was reading about ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt,... I was reading about ancient cultures and ancient poetry... and ancient technology, if that's the word we can use. So I got back into UNC and the Religious Studies department seemed to have the most useful set of instructors and subjects focusing on this early history of humanity, other than anthropology,... archaeology, of course. My work... has touched, and will touch on those things.... Then, I just started looking for professors who had some speciality in some arrangement of this field. Dr. Lam's CV really spoke to me, so I looked at the classes he was teaching and the first one that really grabbed my attention was this classical Hebrew and linguistic introduction to the Old Testament, which I took last semester.... Through that course Dr Lam invited me over winter break to work on this article on Manasseh.

LaToya: I'm interested in knowing how you felt about receiving this invitation. This isn't... an opportunity that most undergraduates get.

Jesse: I, I think for about a week I was, like, giddy with excitement! You know, I think I'm maybe 8 or 10 years younger than Dr. Lam, but in that moment I felt 25 years younger than him... like a tiny child excited for Christmas. ... I was excited about the work, I was excited about the opportunity, and I... felt honored to be asked. ... I'm coming up on six years sober, and I know that as a grownup who... used to be... a traveling musician, drug addict,... maybe, I should feel more numb, more cynical... less easily inspired.... But I don't feel that way. It's one of the things that I think I'm most grateful for in sobriety, and most admire in myself... that I haven't lost enthusiasm for learning, for life, for communication. Even my bottomest bottom. I still felt like there was something beautiful worth reaching for and that's what helped me get sober. It's what helped

keep me sober and it's what made me so excited to be a part of this project. Somebody who I respect, who I think is cool, and who I think has a wisdom that I want asked me to be a part of something. ... It's not the end all be all, it's not a career, it's not a new position doing something insane,... but it's a small thing that meant a lot and drew me forward to the next space of thinking. ... When I have an idea in front of me and I'm asked about it, I tend to just throw everything on the table, whether it's accurate or not... whether it's well thought out or no, I like to spill out a brainstorm and then cut away things that clearly don't make sense. Dr. Lam is very good at helping me cut away things that don't make sense and that's... one of the things that this project was helpful for. ... Honestly, I feel like... I confronted some commonly accepted wisdom around Manasseh, the character, in a way that didn't totally dismiss it but that did bring something different to this question of the difference between the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles and how his life is portrayed in the two stories. ... Part of what we're doing in this field is how we address inconsistencies... Do we try and make them work together, do we accept that they are simply different, and then what leads us to which of those two paths and how do those two paths look if we follow them. ... I was really excited to be invited and I felt good about doing the work that we did.

LaToya: Excellent! Thank you so much for that. You've already mentioned some really... amazing takeaways, one of which seems to be heavily connected with... a boost in confidence, right. ... You've also mentioned some good takeaways, as far as what we learn in the field, what we do in the field, and the skill of scaling away some of those... things that come out of our brain dumps. Are there any other takeaways that you want to mention as be close?

Jesse: I think ... if I was speaking to a younger person I would say, engage deeply with the brainstorm and don't be afraid of being wrong. Somebody's going to tell you, and there's no shame. ... We have to let our brains go a little wild, so we can arrive at some exciting new places, rather than waiting until we have all the confirmation and are sure of our opinion. ... Dialogue and growth requires going down the wrong path a couple of times so you can see that... it won't work. I see that it won't work and I see why it won't work so I can eliminate that and I can move to the next thing. If we don't say out loud the things that we get wrong, we'll never learn why they're wrong and will never hear other peoples's perspectives. ... Give yourself room to be wrong. Give yourself room to brainstorm. It's healthy, it's important... it's good for us.

LaToya: Yeah, I think we are concluding on a really good note.... It's important for us to freely brainstorm and to do that in a community of people. Thank you so much!

Manasseh

by Jesse Ainslie; Joseph Lam

The book of Kings and the book of Chronicles tell two very different stories about King Manasseh of Judah. What might have prompted these divergent stories?

What is significant about Manasseh of Judah?

He consigned his son to the fire;
he practiced soothsaying and divination
and consulted ghosts and familiar spirits;
he did much that was displeasing to the LORD, to vex him. (2Kgs 21:6)

The son of Hezekiah and the grandfather of Josiah, King Manasseh is described in 2Kgs 21:1-18 and 2Chr 33:1-20, and the activities of his fifty-five year reign weigh heavily on the fate of the Judean monarchy. In the book of Kings, his many idolatrous actions are credited for the misfortunes of Judah (2Kgs 23:26-27; see also Jer 15:4).

But there remains the matter and mystery of his repentance. According to Second Chronicles, after erecting altars and monuments to an indistinct pantheon, Manasseh is captured by Assyrian forces and imprisoned in Babylon. Alone and dejected, he turns to the god of his fathers and prays for deliverance. His prayer is answered, and he is returned to Judah, where he shores up the fortifications of the cities, removes the idolatrous altars, and offers sacrifices of thanks to Yahweh (2Chr 33:13-17). By contrast, there is no repentance in Second Kings: Manasseh is unwavering in his impiety, and his works are upheld as just cause for the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon and the subsequent exile of Judah.

Why are the accounts of Manasseh in Kings and Chronicles so different?

