

Interview with Dr. Joseph Lam
Associate Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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LaToya Leary: Hi. How are you? Great to talk to you. I'm really thankful that you took out the time to share with us! I want to start off by asking you to introduce yourself. Tell us what you are interested in and tell us a little bit more about this partnership.

Joseph Lam: Ok, so my name is Joseph Lam. I'm an associate professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In that capacity, I teach and do research and do all the things that professors do. Most of my teaching surrounds either Hebrew Bible... or the Old Testament, as well as biblical Hebrew language... and other topics related to ancient Near Eastern history and culture. That's mostly what I do and write and teach on.

LaToya: Awesome! So you and Jesse had an opportunity to work together to create a Bible Odyssey article on Manasseh. I'm interested in knowing why Manasseh? Who prompted this topic?

Joseph: I can tell you start the back story a little bit and then kind of say more about exactly why we narrowed down to this topic. So I actually got an email from John Kutsko, who's the executive director of the SBL. I worked with John and various other committees in the past, so he made me aware of an initiative that SBL had started related to their Bible Odyssey website, which I've used in the past for my courses, where they invite faculty members teaching in biblical studies to co-write articles with students ... to be published on the website.



This sounded like a great idea to me... a lot of potential benefits and a really interesting opportunity. As far as I remember, at that time there was a list of possible topics. There was some, you know, shorter list of possibilities that I presume these are possibilities that the website needed... articles that still needed to be written. Now, then I had to narrow down why Manasseh out of the various choices I had. There's sort of two reasons to it. Partly what was my understanding of sort of Jesse's progress. Jesse was in my Hebrew class last semester. I think I got the invitation at the end of the fall semester around winter break, and I knew that Jesse would be continuing with Hebrew and enrolled in a different course of mine on the history and culture of ancient Israel. Manasseh... is one of those kings of Judah and he was a really fascinating king in the history and interesting example.... Because I knew Jesse was going to be in those courses and that this topic would relate well to those courses, that was a good choice. But another reason was just, you know, this figure of Manasseh... a very fascinating King within Israel's history and ... anyone watching this video can go to the article to see why Manasseh is so interesting.... In short, Manasseh is described in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, but he's described very differently. He comes off as very negative in the 2 Kings's portrayal and in 2 Chronicles he has this dramatic repentance. The story is transformed in a very interesting way so this seemed to be just a really worthwhile topic to explore.

LaToya: So what exactly was your role in this project? How did you guys split your roles? What did you do compared to what Jesse did?

Joseph: Yeah, so you know, I didn't quite say it but I think you might have gathered that from the beginning, I had this idea... I kinda had Jesse in mind so I had to ask him whether he wanted to do it and had time to do it. There were other students who could have worked, but Jesse, you know, obviously is one of our... all of our students are great, but he's a great student of mine in the fall with a lot of enthusiasm for the topic and for these

topics of study. Once I invited him on board and he agreed... of course I was the one who initiated the topic of Manasseh, but once we got started...the way we worked was we talked it over a little bit.... I met with Jesse over Zoom and we kind of planned out our process. I made him aware of some books and articles relating to the topic that I think would be important for him to read and absorb and sort of incorporate.... I, then, let him do a first draft...after our discussions and after those books and articles. Then we just kind of went back and forth.... I forget how many rounds of drafts but it's quite a number of drafts. He would produce a partial draft, maybe one paragraph or half the articles, [and] send it to me. I would annotate it. I might add a few sentences...add my suggestions, [and] send it back to him. It really was a collaborative effort all the way through. I think it worked out really well! It went quite smoothly actually!

LaToya: Awesome! This is good to hear.... What seems central here is the centralization of the student in research and writing process. That's excellent. There's so many partnerships out there, but the student contributes more so to the research or bibliography. It seems as though Jesse had a very dominant role here which is excellent!

Joseph: Yeah. In this case,... I was confident in his abilities...his writing abilities and ability to articulate his ideas in a creative way and in an interesting way. I felt that this would be a great opportunity for him to learn about the topic as well... kind of on his own but also then to express it and articulate it with a particular perspective. I think the final result really is a combination of both Jesse's and my... ideas. The result, I think, is the greater than the sum of its parts.

LaToya: Thank you for that! That's awesome! I'm kind of curious.... Do you think these types of partnerships... are necessary? And if so, tell us why? I'm hoping in this answer you can talk to us about some of your major takeaways.

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?

Joseph: I think these are absolutely essential. It's a fantastic initiative... for one of the reasons I jumped on the opportunity when it was initially posed to me. You know, there are a lot of reasons, right? One reason is just... even from the perspective of teaching and fostering interest in the subject matter, these types of opportunities are invaluable... The prospect for a student working alongside a professor and ... in this intellectually intensive way... for them to get a glimpse at what publication looks like. You know, we went through the whole process: we wrote it, the article was peer reviewed, it was

copyedited.... Seeing all the steps of that process... most students don't ever see that process. I never saw that process when I was a student. It wasn't until I was in Graduate School that I learned about that. So all those are really valuable. Then, on top of that, the prospect of producing an article... a result that will actually be useful right on the Bible Odyssey website, that's used by so many people. I forget, you know, what the statistics are. At one point, I heard statistics about how popular a website it is and how much of a resource it is for... faculty teaching courses on Bible and for public engagement in general.... The idea of being able to produce something, a piece of research that is, then, useful more widely, I think, is really rewarding for students, beyond just the satisfaction, maybe, of just writing a course paper that only the professor will read. This is a totally different thing. I think it just broadens engagement all around, so I think it's a great idea. And certainly, takeaways... everything I've said, you know, just the positive kind of results of the process. I guess... a further takeaway would be just how... capable all the students in all their classes are.... Students need to be given the opportunity to rise to the occasion, and they often exceed our expectations. I think that's what happened here.

LaToya: Thank you so much Dr. Lam for talking to us and sharing with us. We certainly look forward to hearing from you in the future!