

## 2 Kings 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     2 Kings chapter 23 Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great.

And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. 3 And the king stood by the pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book, and all the people joined in the covenant.

And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the threshold, to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven.

4 He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. 5 And he deposed the priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places, at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem, those also who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and the moon, and the constellations, and all the host of the heavens.

6 And he brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord, outside Jerusalem, to the brook Kidron, 7 And burned it at the brook Kidron, and beat it to dust, and cast the dust of it upon the graves of the common people.

[ 1 : 2 3 ]     7 And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the Lord, where the women wove hangings for the Asherah. 8 And he brought all the priests out of the cities of Judah, and defiled the high places where the priests had made offerings, from Geba to Beersheba.

9 And he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua, the governor of the city, which were on one's left at the gate of the city. 10 However, the priests of the high places did not come up to the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, but they ate unleavened bread among their brothers.

11 And he defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech. 12 And he removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun, at the entrance to the house of the Lord, by the chamber of Nathan-Melech the chamberlain, which was in the precincts.

13 And he burned the chariots of the sun with fire, and the altars on the roof of the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars that Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

14 He pulled down and broke in pieces, and cast the dust of them into the brook Kidron. 15 And the king defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem, to the south of the Mount of Corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had built for Ashtoroth, the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites.

[ 2 : 47 ] 15 And he broke in pieces the pillars, and cut down the Asherim, and filled their places with the bones of men. 16 Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, that altar with the high place he pulled down and burned, reducing it to dust.

17 He also burned the Asherah. 18 And as Josiah turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount. 19 And he sent, and took the bones out of the tombs, and burned them on the altar, and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord that the man of God proclaimed, who had predicted these things.

19 Then he said, What is that monument that I see? 20 And the men of the city told him, It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah, and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel.

21 And he said, Let him be, let no man move his bones. 22 So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet who came out of Samaria. 23 And Josiah removed all the shrines also of the high places that were in the cities of Samaria, which kings of Israel had made, provoking the Lord to anger.

24 He did to them according to all that he had done at Bethel. 25 And he sacrificed all the priests of the high places who were there on the altars, and burned human bones on them. 26 Then he returned to Jerusalem.

[ 4 : 01 ] 27 And the king commanded all the people, Keep the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant. 27 For no such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel, or of the kings of Judah.

28 But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was kept to the Lord in Jerusalem. 29 Moreover, Josiah put away the mediums, and the necromancers, and the household gods, and the idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem.

29 That he might establish the words of the law that were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord. 30 Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to the law of Moses.

31 Nor did any like him arise after him. 32 Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him.

33 And the Lord said, I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, my name shall be there.

[ 5 : 15 ] 34 Now the rest of the acts of Josiah, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? 35 In his days Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates.

36 King Josiah went to meet him, 37 And Pharaoh Necho killed him at Megiddo, as soon as he saw him. 37 And his servants carried him dead in a chariot from Megiddo, 38 And brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own tomb.

38 And the people of the land took Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah, and anointed him, and made him king in his father's place. 39 Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem.

40 His mother's name was Hermutal, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libna. 41 And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done. 41 And Pharaoh Necho put him in bonds at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, 42 That he might not reign in Jerusalem, 42 And laid on the land a tribute of a hundred talents of silver, and a talent of gold.

42 And Pharaoh Necho made Eliakim the son of Josiah king in the place of Josiah his father, 43 And changed his name to Jehoiakim. 43 And he took Jehoahaz away, and he came to Egypt and died there.

[ 6 : 26 ] 44 And Jehoiakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh. 45 But he taxed the land to give the money according to the command of Pharaoh. 45 He exacted the silver and the gold of the people of the land, 45 From everyone according to his assessment, to give it to Pharaoh Necho.

45 Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, 46 And he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 46 His mother's name was Zebida, the daughter of Padiah, of Rumah.

47 And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done. 47 Second Kings chapter 23 belongs with chapter 22.

47 It continues the account of Josiah's reforms, 47 Especially following the discovery of the book of the law in the temple. 48 While Hezekiah had responded to the news that Judah would not meet its end in his reign with a complacent relief, 48 Josiah responds to the same news with a reforming urgency.

48 He's not merely concerned to be reprieved himself. 48 He's concerned for the well-being of the nation. 49 He assembled the entire congregation to hear the book of the covenant. 49 Everyone is brought together, which was the procedure for a covenant renewal ceremony.

[ 7 : 32 ] 49 Deuteronomy had mandated such a ceremony every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles. 49 Deuteronomy chapter 31 verses 9 to 13 reads, 49 Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, 49 Who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel.

49 And Moses commanded them, 50 At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the feast of booths, 50 When all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God, at the place that he will choose, 50 You shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

51 Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, 51 That they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, 51 And that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, 51 As long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.

51 We find such comprehensive covenant ceremonies in Deuteronomy chapter 29 and in Joshua chapter 24. 52 Josiah stands beside the pillar as he makes the covenant on his own part, and the people join in.

53 This is not just a renewal of the commitments of kingly office as such, it's a renewal of the mosaic covenant. Joash also stood by the pillar back in 2nd Kings chapter 11 verses 12 to 14.

[ 8 : 48 ] 53 Some have taken the pillar to be a reference to a platform upon which the king would stand. It might perhaps be the pillar of Boaz, however, representing the king alongside the priestly pillar of Jachin.

54 These are the two pillars which represent the two leaders of the nation. 54 Having renewed the covenant, Josiah undertakes comprehensive reforms. He purges the land of idolatry, beginning in the temple. 2nd Chronicles chapter 34 verses 3 to 7 mentions such reforms, beginning in the 12th year of Josiah's reign. So this is probably a great intensification of reforms that were already ongoing after the initial reforms had led to the discovery of the book of the law in the temple. Josiah might hold out hope for a reprieve of Jerusalem and Judah. However, whether or not such a reprieve would be forthcoming, he pursues the reforms because they are the right thing to do.

Every single idol and false form of worship is purged from the land. He deposes the priests who had been involved in worship on the high places. He removes the priests of Baal and the worship of the heavens.

He removes the Asherah from the house of the Lord. Manasseh had set up an Asherah in the house and then removed it in the course of his repentance. Perhaps we are to assume that Ammon simply reversed the reforms of Manasseh in his short reign. Josiah is concerned not merely to remove such idols and idolaters, but utterly to remove them, spiritually to scorch the earth where they once were, so that they will never return and take root there again. This is generally accomplished by defiling their sites with dead bodies or grinding things to dust and putting them in a defiled place. We get a sense of how bad things had become when we learn of the non-priestly men, which some have taken to be male cult prostitutes, and women serving the shrine of Asherah in the temple. He deposes the unfaithful priests, reducing them to the status of lay Levites. The reforms are extensive. They run throughout the land before returning to Jerusalem and dealing with the ways that pagan worship had become embedded at the heart of the nation. He follows the pattern of Deuteronomy chapter 12 verses 1 to 4.

These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess all the days that you live on the earth. You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.

[ 11 : 26 ] Josiah tears down and purges the whole stubborn legacy of idolatry and false worship in the land. The altars and shrines to false gods set up by Ahaz, Manasseh and Solomon are all destroyed. These may have been destroyed on previous occasions, but they seem to have been re-established afterwards.

Josiah is concerned that their destruction be complete and irreversible. The legacy of idolatry goes all the way back through the book of the kings, right back to Solomon. Josiah extends the reach of his reforms, beyond Jerusalem and up to Bethel, which had been the principal cultic site of the northern kingdom of Israel. It was at Bethel that Jeroboam erected one of his golden calves. Just as he uproots the idolatry of Solomon, which set the southern kingdom on its false course, he goes down to the root of the northern kingdom's idolatry in the altar and high place of Jeroboam in Bethel. His actions fulfilled the prophecy of the man of God from Judah, way back in 1 Kings chapter 13, shortly after the split in the kingdom. 1 Kings chapter 13 verses 1 to 5 read, 1 And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar, thus says the Lord. Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David,

Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you. And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign that the Lord has spoken. Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out. And when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, Seize him. And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself. The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord. The words of the prophet having been fulfilled, the mind of the hearer of the books of the kings should be taken back to 1 Kings chapter 13, considering the story of the man of God from Judah, and the old prophet from Bethel, considering the ways that it is a sign of the fate of the two nations. The fulfillment of all of this is underlined as Josiah sees the monument that was set up to the man of God from Judah, and asks concerning it, learning of the prophecy that the man of God from Judah had made, he leaves the monument alone. The old prophet of Bethel is referred to as coming from Samaria, which is anachronistic, as Samaria wasn't built until the time of Omri. However, as the land was later referred to more generally as Samaria, this isn't improper, and it has the effect of underlining the symbolic association between the northern kingdom and the old prophet. Josiah sacrifices priests of the high places on their altars in Samaria too, completely defiling them, so that they could never be restored.

Continuing his reforms, Josiah establishes a great Passover celebration, according to the instructions of Deuteronomy chapter 16 verses 1 to 8. Observe the month of Abib, and keep the Passover to the Lord your God, for in the month of Abib the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night, and you shall offer the Passover sacrifice to the Lord your God from the flock or the herd at the place that the Lord will choose to make his name dwell there. You shall eat no leavened bread with it. Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction. For you came out of the land of Egypt in haste, that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. No leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you sacrifice on the evening of the first day, remain all night until morning. You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, but at the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it. There you shall offer the Passover sacrifice in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt. And you shall cook it and eat it at the place that the

Lord your God will choose. And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. For six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly to the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it. 2 Chronicles chapter 30 records a great Passover celebration held by Hezekiah, which isn't recorded in 2 Kings. This might make the hero of 2 Kings wonder whether the book's claims about the uniqueness of Josiah's Passover are really accurate. However, 2 Chronicles, which records Hezekiah's Passover, is no less clear about the uniqueness of Josiah's Passover, 2 Chronicles chapter 35 verse 18 reads, No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet. None of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah, and the priests and the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Hezekiah's Passover had been irregular in its timing, and he had prayed to the Lord to cleanse the people, as many of them weren't ceremonially clean. Josiah's Passover, by contrast, is celebrated at the proper time and on a grander scale. It is described in great detail in 2 Chronicles chapter 35. We get some sense of the scale of that Passover in verses 7 to 9 of that chapter.

[ 16 : 51 ] Then Josiah contributed to the lay people, as Passover offerings for all who were present, lambs and young goats from the flock, to the number of 30,000, and 3,000 bulls. These were from the king's possessions, and his officials contributed willingly to the people, to the priests and to the Levites.

Hilkiah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, the chief officers of the house of God, gave to the priests for the Passover offerings 2,600 Passover lambs and 300 bulls. Conaniah also, and Shemaiah, and Nathanael his brothers, and Hashabiah, and Jeiel, and Jozebad, the chiefs of the Levites, gave to the Levites for the Passover offerings, 5,000 lambs and young goats and 500 bulls. Josiah was utterly unprecedented as a king in his faithfulness. He acted according to the great charge of the law in Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. However, despite everything that Josiah did, the Lord did not relent from the judgment that he had declared upon the nation, a judgment that especially resulted from the provocations of Manasseh. Despite Manasseh's repentance and Josiah's great faithfulness, the wickedness of Manasseh's reign still had irrevocable consequences. Josiah's life ends tragically. Pharaoh Necho of

Egypt is going up to the king of Assyria at the river Euphrates. Egypt and Assyria were allied against Babylon at the time. Pharaoh Necho is just passing through the region, on his way up to fight alongside the king of Assyria, but Josiah unwisely inserts himself into the situation, and he is killed by the Egyptians. There is a sort of unravelling that is occurring in the reign of Josiah. He removes idolatry and false worship from the land, right down to its roots in Jeroboam and Solomon, taking us back to the very beginning of the books of the kings. He then celebrates a great Passover celebration, before being killed by the Egyptians. It is as if Josiah is moving backward through the history of the nation, setting its house in order before its inevitable descent into the grave of exile, symbolically foretold in the story of the man of God from Judah. In fulfilment of the prophecy of Huldah, he dies in relative peace, before Babylon finally comes upon the nation. Josiah is replaced by his son, Jehoahaz, elsewhere called Shalom, who is chosen by the people of the land over some of his elder brothers.

He only reigns for a short period of three months. Even in that brief time, however, he reverts to the wickedness of the former kings. He is deposed by Pharaoh Necho, who had killed his father.

Pharaoh Necho brings him in captivity to Riblah and places the land under a heavy tribute. Eliakim is put in his place and his name is changed to Jehoiakim. Eliakim is the second son of Josiah and presumably is appointed as one who will support Egypt. The changing of his name is a curious detail, as Eliakim means God establishes, but Jehoiakim means Yahweh establishes. Perhaps this is designed to increase support from faithful worshippers of the Lord in Judah. The tribute is required of the people of the land, according to the command of Pharaoh. It isn't raised from the king's treasuries or from the treasuries of the house of the Lord, but it seems to be a punitive tax upon rebellious people in a tributary nation. Jehoiakim reigns for eleven years and he continues the pattern of wickedness of his younger brother who preceded him and of the former kings of Judah. A question to consider.

[ 20 : 19 ] Throughout the books of the kings we see much about the legacies of unfaithful rulers. Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, is the greatest example. The sins of such men long outlive them and are still having their impact centuries later. When Josiah seeks to reform the nation, he needs to dislodge the stubborn roots of sin that go all the way back to Solomon and Jeroboam, well over 300 years earlier. While several reform efforts had preceded him, none actually succeeded in uprooting these. They seem to be removed, but they can spring back to life again. How do the books of the kings serve as a commentary upon the effects of sin over a great many generations in the life of a nation? How might this help us to think more carefully about some of the sins of our own nations?