

Like Him None Before or After

“A child shall be born to the House of David, Josiah by name, and on this altar shall he offer the priests of the high places” (1 Kings 13:2).

JOSIAH: THE FAITHFUL, FORETOLD RESTORER

Josiah was the last good, and the last independent king of Judah. He came to the throne at eight years of age; at sixteen he began to seek God; at twenty he began to totally purge the land of all false worship; at twenty-six he repaired the Temple, the Law was found, and the Great Passover was held; at thirty-nine he died bravely in battle, defending God’s land.

He was, in some senses, the best of the kings. Nothing adverse is recorded concerning him. He is presented as having followed a totally obedient, totally zealous course from his earliest youth. We cannot say he was as great as David, but the record we have of him is more pure than David’s.

His reign is a fitting and striking ending to the Kingdom that had its true beginning in David. There was Saul before David, as there were four evil men—vassals of foreign powers—after Josiah. But the period from David to Josiah really comprehends the Kingdom.

There is much about Josiah’s life and circumstances that is typical of Christ. And, like Christ, he alone of all the kings had his name and work foretold long before his birth (1 Kings 13:2).

He began his reign about 640 B.C. In the loving providence of God, a final period of peace and prosperity was given to Israel. Assyria, which had long dominated and oppressed the whole area, was greatly weakened. Josiah was able to freely re-establish his rule over the whole land, right up to Naphtali, the most northern of the tribes (2 Chronicles 34:6), and he used the opportunity to totally cleanse the whole land of idolatry and corruption.

The record concerning him is in 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34-35. We get to his eighteenth year very early in the Kings record 22:3, but Chronicles gives fuller information of the beginning of his reign (2 Chronicles 34:3)—

“In his eighth year (he would be 16) he began to seek after the God of David.”

We do not know who guided him, or if it was entirely of himself. His grandfather Manasseh—wicked, but later repentant—had died when he was six. His totally wicked father Amon had died by murder two years later, when Josiah was eight and had the kingdom thrust upon him. Of course others would rule until he came of age. But at sixteen, in his eighth year, he began to seek God. Continuing 2 Chronicles 34:3 —

“In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem.”

He would now be twenty. This would probably be the age at which he was given complete rulership of the kingdom on his own. The prophet Zephaniah prophesied in his reign (Zephaniah 1:1), and from the nature of his denunciation and prophecy, it would seem that he prophesied very early in the reign, and was possibly the cause of the course Josiah followed. Jeremiah did not begin his prophetic work until one year after this, in Josiah’s thirteenth year (Jeremiah 1:2).

Verses 4-7 of 2 Chronicles 34 describe a very thorough cleansing, not only of Judah, but also the whole northern kingdom, which Josiah obviously added to his dominions at the withdrawal of Assyria as it weakened—

“Manasseh, Ephraim, even to Naphtali . . . all the land of Israel” (vs. 6-7).

This brings us (v. 8) again to his eighteenth year, indicating that the cleansing process occupied the six years from his twelfth to his eighteenth. We return now to 2 Kings 22:3, to pick up

this eighteenth year. We do not know what condition the national worship at the Temple had been in for these six reforming years. Clearly they had long since cleaned out the idols and corruptions, and doubtless a form of worship was being carried on.

But the Temple, broken down by Manasseh and Amon, had not been repaired. It is apparent too (v. 4) that a fund for repairing it had been for some time underway.

So now (v. 5) the Temple is to be repaired, and especial mention is made of the fact that there was no checking on the expenditures, because the workmen were faithful. This seems to be one of the hints that we find throughout that this reuniting and cleansing of the land, and purifying and rebuilding of the Temple by this most perfect of the kings was typical of the final restoration to come.

In the process of repair (v. 8), the High Priest Hilkiah finds the Book of the Law. Was it the original Book of Moses himself wrote, eight hundred years before? From one point of view, it does not seem likely, for when Solomon put the Ark in the Temple, it is pointedly recorded that there was nothing in it except the tables of stone (1 Kings 8:9). However, it is not certain whether the Book was to be put *in* the Ark or *beside* it (Deuteronomy 31:26 R.V.), and they may have been separated later. The Book may have been hidden by faithful priests in the time of wicked kings who sought to destroy the true worship.

And from another point of view, it would be very fitting and forceful if this truly was the original manuscript. The whole reign of this wonderful king seems very significant and symbolic.

Another question is whether this was the *only* copy then available to the rulership, and whether the Law was generally known. It seems certain that it was known of in general. The prophets always show complete familiarity with it. All the people were supposed to teach it diligently to their children (Deuteronomy 11:19). This presupposes general circulation. So there would bound to be copies and parts of copies in various hands, and many quotations in various writings.

Josiah's previous reforms show that he was generally familiar with God's laws. But it seems certain from his stunned reaction to this Book that he had no direct familiarity with a full and authentic text.

There is a strong Jewish tradition that both Manasseh and Amon had made great efforts to stamp out all copies of the Scriptures, and to persecute those that had them, like the Catholic Church in its heyday. And this indeed is exactly what we would expect—especially in the light of Jehoiakim's treatment of Jeremiah's prophecy, and his attempts to seize Jeremiah for writing it (Jeremiah 36:23-26).

How fitting and how powerfully dramatic if the very manuscript of Moses showed up by Divine Providence at this last bright moment of Israel's history, before the kingdom went into its two thousand five-hundred-year eclipse!

When parts of it were read to Josiah, he was tremendously moved and shaken. He was an extremely devoted and zealous man. For six years he had been labouring to cleanse the land from everything contrary to the Divine holiness. He would certainly have sought—and so far in vain—for a full, sure text of the Divine Law. And he now hears these ancient, inspired denunciations and dreadful, forewarned punishments of the very things he knows are deeply ingrained in the corrupted nation.

There is a great sense of urgency in his sending (2 Kings 22:13) the High Priest to enquire of God. He appears to realise that the cup of wrath is brimming full, and the threatened wrath about to fall. This gives us a deeper insight into the tense zeal which drove him to cleanse the land so thoroughly. We get the details of that cleansing in chapter 23, and no previous efforts begin to

compare with his. He knew how corrupt the nation was. He knew that God's patience had lingered long.

To whom does the *High Priest* go for the Divine word? To Huldah the prophetess! There is great and sad significance here. Where was the Urim and Thummim? The High Priest himself should have been the direct source of Divine communication. Where were Zephaniah and Jeremiah? They had to go to a woman (v. 14).

God had set it up from the beginning that *man* was to take the responsibility, and answer for it. The woman does not come into the governmental and legislative realm unless the man fails. We remember the striking case of the fearless prophetess Deborah, who rallied and saved Israel. Barak wouldn't go to the battle unless she went with him. The man had failed. God that day saved Israel by two women, just as He will save the race through the Woman's seed, because the man failed.

And that surely is the big lesson here. *Man* had totally failed of his Divine responsibilities, and God must drive that home by instructing him through a woman.

And that woman appears to be the first to announce to the nation that the long-drawn-out day of God's patience was finally ended, and there was no way now of averting the national disaster that Josiah's God-attuned mind had sensed was pending.

But there is a word of comfort for Josiah. He would not see it. He would die in peace, and be gathered to his fathers in honour and respect. He was the last king who was given an honourable in the city of God: the last to see peace in the land.

Beginning chapter 23, he called a great assembly of the nation: *all* that could be gotten together, both small and great, and read to them *all* the words of the Book of the Law that had been found. And—just as their forefathers had before Moses—all the people solemnly swore that they would perform the Lord's Word with all their heart and all their soul. And perhaps they even thought, they meant it.

Somehow, man has always had the fatal, subconscious assumption that if he *agrees* to do what God requires, that covers the necessities, and he can generally go his natural way on the whole, trusting God's "mercy" to bridge the gap between commitment and reality. And so it is today.

Most cheerfully agree that "Yes, of course, *that* is what God commands." But "No, He *really* won't actually require us to go to *that* extreme, for hardly anyone ever does—and surely He won't reject us all." Are we guilty of such folly, in spite of and in the light of the Divine record in the past? So Israel reasoned. Meditate upon their tragic two-thousand-year history.

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Verse 4 of chapter 23 takes us back. This is clear from the fact that verses 4-20 describe in detail what 2 Chronicles 34:3 tells us began in his twelfth year, which was six years before this. These verses appear to be a summary and description of *all* his activities for the cleansing of the land.

They were (23:4) to remove from the Temple everything to do with *Baal* (that was the worship Jezebel and Athaliah introduced from the Sidonians), and everything for the "*grove*" (or more correctly, for "*Asherah*," the goddess of the original Canaanites), and for the *host of heaven* (the worship of sun, moon and stars, which was introduced into Israel by Manasseh, though warned against as early as Deuteronomy).

It will be noted (end of v. 5) that for "planets" the margin has "twelve signs or constellations"—that is, the *Zodiac*: associated with very ancient pagan abominations. This God-denounced superstition still has wide currency, especially among the ignorant. Newspapers still publish "horoscopes" and speak of the "signs" people are born under. God's terrible denunciations on

all these pagan corruptions should warn us not to give currency for a moment—not even in lightness—to the slightest flavour of these superstitious things that God hates. It is not a harmless game, but godless corruption and idolatry: whether we so mean it or not.

The priests of paganism, as we see later (v. 20), Josiah slew without mercy. But verses 8-9 deal with the Levitical priests who had professedly led the worship of God, though in an unauthorised way on the high places. Here we have another interesting type, for these were taken to Jerusalem, but degraded from the Altar service, though maintained by the priestly supplies and doubtless put to mental work. (Compare Ezekiel 44:10-14).

V. 10: “*And he defiled Topheth, in the valley of Hinnom.*”

Here was the beginning of the Gehenna picture. Manasseh had established Molech worship in the valley of Hinnom beside Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 33:6), in which children were passed through fire, and in some instances burned in the fire. It is strange that Manasseh, who was for much of his life the most wicked king of Judah, who introduced every possible abomination, who murdered God’s people and tried to stamp out God’s worship—

“*He did more wickedly than all the Amorites before him, and he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood*” (2 Kings 21:11-16)

—it is strange that he should finally repent, and that God should accept his repentance and forgive him, and still finally cast off Judah “*because of all Manasseh’s abominations*” (2 Kings 23:26; 24:3). Human beings are strange creatures. And God’s ways are strange: but always right and just. If Manasseh were truly repentant (and he must have been for God to accept him), then the cruel evils that he had done, and the terrible judgments he had brought upon Judah, would be a dreadful, everlasting burden upon him.

Verses 11-12 give more of Manasseh’s abominations that Josiah cleansed. Then (v. 13) the places of blasphemous idol-worship that Solomon had built for the false gods of his wives. Solomon: wisdom and privilege such as no man had ever been given—and in his youth he was zealous for God, and God loved him (2 Samuel 12:24-25).

What tragedies of folly and wasted opportunity the Scriptures contain! Do we ponder them sufficiently? Are *we* doing *all* that God requires? —a total “living sacrifice”? —*everything* ruthlessly eliminated that can hinder our total service?

Why did the good kings like Hezekiah leave these abominations of Solomon? Doubtless some tried to obliterate them. But once these things had a historic existence, and a hold on the popular mind, the wicked kings would keep building them back up, as Amon did with all Manasseh’s corruptions that Manasseh in his repentance removed. Here is the tragedy of setting a precedent, and giving corruption a foothold.

But Josiah was more persevering and more thorough. Whatever idolatry he broke down, he defiled in such a way that superstition would thereafter avoid the place as a place of worship. There is a type here too in the finality of his thoroughness.

So far, 2 Kings 23:4-14 have paralleled 2 Chronicles 34:4-5. In verse 15 he moves to the northern kingdom, as 2 Chronicles 34:6-7 also tells us. He gave first and special attention to Bethel. We remember, when the ten-tribe kingdom was first established under Jeroboam, that Bethel was the main centre of the new idolatry: calf-worship (1 Kings 12:32-33). And a prophet came down from Judah and told Jeroboam that a man of the line of David *named Josiah* would slay the idolatrous priests on that altar, and burn men’s bones on it (1 Kings 13:1-2). That was three hundred years before, and the time had come for its fulfilment. God’s purposes work out slowly, but they never fail.

Both at Bethel, and throughout the northern kingdom (vs. 16-19) Josiah slew all the idolatrous priests right on their own altars, and burned men's bones on them: both actions very extreme, unusual and shocking. It was a total, dreadful cleansing of the land by blood, purging out all the leaven.

Zephaniah (1:4-9) appears to represent it as a great sacrifice to God, and a type of the last day judgment. And in a sense, it was a sacrifice: for the essence of sacrifice is the purging of the flesh, and if it is not done voluntarily, it will at last be done judicially.

And so, in this terrible—but necessary and righteous—way, the entire land was cleansed and united for its last great recorded act of worship: the great Passover of Josiah's eighteenth year. *He was still only twenty-six.*

Verse 22: *"Surely there was not holden such a Passover from the days of the Judges, nor all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah."*

There had been a similar cleansing of the land, and a similar Great Passover, under Hezekiah, one hundred years before (2 Chronicles 30), just before the northern kingdom had been destroyed by the Assyrians—a final Divine call for them, which they scornfully rejected.

Hezekiah's Passover was more deep and joyous. There is more indication of popular sincerity and enthusiasm and zeal. *Josiah's* was more total and thorough, and there's indication of a broader participation from the north—a more *nationwide* Passover. In Hezekiah's day, most of the north had mocked his invitation to attend.

Of course, in Josiah's day the population of the land was much less, because of the intervening captivities. It was a remnant that was left.

But though Josiah's Passover was the greatest ever held in the Kingdom, and possibly the greatest national Passover ever since its inauguration in Egypt, it was but a hollow form, carried through by the tremendous zeal of this one man. Josiah, having supreme authority, could thoroughly purge out all the apparatus and outward aspects of idolatry; but even he could not give spiritual life to this debased and corrupted people.

It would appear that Manasseh, with all his abominations and persecutions of the righteous, had merely given the people what they wanted. And so they must suffer for his sins; though he himself repented, and was forgiven. Therefore, the record continues (2 Kings 23:25-26)—

"And like him (Josiah) was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses: neither after him arose any like him."

"Notwithstanding, the Lord turned not from the fierceness of His great wrath, wherewith His anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked Him withal."

Josiah lived and reigned thirteen more years. We are not told one word about what occurred in them. God is not giving us *history*, as such, but *instruction*; and we must always remember this as we read. We come to the Word for lessons: not the story itself—though the better we get the story, the better we are likely to get the lessons, *if* our mind is right.

Doubtless there were thirteen more great Passovers. There's no indication Josiah slackened his zeal; much the reverse. But we are told nothing.

The next recorded event is his strange and puzzling death in battle, at the age of thirty-nine: the only king of Judah to die in battle. The record is given more fully in 2 Chronicles 35, beginning at verse 20. Assyria, which had dominated the Bible lands since the time of Hezekiah, had now declined. Babylon was rising in the East.

Egypt had a new young king, Necho, and he was determined to re-establish Egyptian power up the Mediterranean coast, now that Assyria was gone, and before Babylon got there. So he took his army to the north, to meet the advancing Babylonian forces in the area of Carchemish on the northern Euphrates, for Babylon now controlled that far, and was pushing west.

To get there, Necho had to cross Josiah's land. Josiah went out with an army to stop him. Necho tried to persuade Josiah that he had no quarrel with him, but just wanted to pass through. And he claimed verse 21 that he had God's authority to do so. But Josiah persisted, though his forces would be puny compared to Egypt's. And he was killed in the ensuing battle, and Judah was defeated, and the Egyptian king and army went on its way to the north to fight the Babylonians.

Was Josiah right or wrong? Necho's claim of divine authority could be dismissed as self-serving heathen lies, except for a strange remark by the inspired historian (2 Chronicles 35:22)—

“Josiah hearkened not to the words of Necho FROM THE MOUTH OF GOD!”

Was it a warning from God that he should have heeded? Or did he have a deeper communication from God that led him forward? We remember Paul on the way to Jerusalem, and to divinely-foretold calamity—and how he still pressed on toward his goal—

“Agabus said, Thus saith the Holy Spirit, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles.

“Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the Name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:11-13).

Was Paul right or wrong? Certainly the whole record, and Christ's words to him (as Acts 23:11), would indicate Paul was right, and following a higher call. And so it may have been with Josiah. God does not usually instruct His intimate and faithful servants through the mouth of heathen enemies.

In the Divine Purpose, the time had come for Josiah to be removed. His work was done, his record written in letters of gold. The judgments of God on wicked Judah were overdue, and they did not merit the continued blessing of such a righteous king. It had been promised to Josiah that the calamities would not come while he lived (2 Chronicles 34:28).

But Josiah did not know when the evils were due. He would feel it was his duty to defend the land. Hezekiah had been told the same about judgments to come, and peace in his day; and by his faithfulness he had preserved the kingdom, and it had gone on thereafter for another one hundred years.

And Pharaoh's claims about having no designs on Judah, spoken in the same breath, were false, as Josiah doubtless suspected. Necho was going to contest Babylon for control of the whole area.

Josiah may have felt strong reason to hope that, if he stood up to the enemy, God would give him victory as He had to Hezekiah, to carry on his righteous rulership of Israel, now that it was unified, strong, and cleansed. Sennacherib had made the same claims about being sent by God (Isaiah 36:10), and there was a certain amount of truth in the claim. But still God respected Hezekiah's faith, and preserved Jerusalem.

Or perhaps Josiah may have sensed that the time had come to give his life for his people. It was certainly fitting that he should end his life—which had been totally devoted to God's service—in defending the kingdom and people that God had entrusted to his care.

He was obviously courageous, as well as righteous and faithful, for he personally led his troops into battle, disguising himself so he could enter right into the fray (2 Chronicles 35:22).

There was great and unparalleled mourning at his death, unlike anything before. It was made a perpetual ordinance in Israel (2 Chronicles 35:25), and became proverbial (Zechariah 12:11). It appears to have been genuine, and doubtless was.

The shallow-minded people may have realised too late that the glory was gone, and that their national liberty and well-being had died with this wonderful young king whom God had given them in His mercy, and taken away in His wrath.

It was the end of their independence. Thereafter, till the kingdom was destroyed twenty-two years later, they were miserable vassals of foreigners, beginning with this Necho who had killed Josiah, and who took away his son Jehoahaz a prisoner, to die in Egypt.

It is remarkable that such a wicked people should have mourned so sternly righteous a king, who had so ruthlessly stamped out their beloved idolatries and corruptions. But he must have had other qualities than sternness to endear himself to them.

The depth and genuineness of the mourning is testified by its being made the type of the great mourning of Israel at the revelation of Christ to them, and their realisation that he is their rejected and crucified Messiah—

“In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadad-rimmon in the valley of Megiddon” (Zechariah 12:11).

They have been mourning ever since Josiah died. He was their last true king. The few who briefly followed him as puppets of Egypt and Babylon were worthless reprobates who took the nation to its ruin.

But the last great mourning to come will end all their mourning, and will usher in their everlasting joy.

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