

## Chapter One: King Josiah of Judah, 641-609 BCE

The young king walked through the Temple in Jerusalem. Josiah, the king, looked with distaste on the idols and altars to different gods that dominated the Temple. He tried to ignore the sounds of the priestesses prostituting themselves for gold in the name of these gods. The priests and priestesses of Baal and Moloch and the other foreign gods surely did not know that this young king walking past them would destroy their influence forever and bring his people back to a monotheism that emphasized justice. Few kings have left as positive a reputation as King Josiah of Judah. (1-7) Paradoxically, his reign ended in disaster, yet he is given credit for leaving behind a legacy that would last for thousands of years.

When Josiah was born in 641 BCE, the Middle East was dominated by Assyria. The Assyrians had destroyed the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, scattering the ten northern tribes into oblivion. The two remaining tribes, comprising the Kingdom of Judah, survived as a client state of the Assyrians. Such was the influence of the Assyrians that even their gods had influence in Judah. Rather than the monotheistic state we might envision, the god of the Jews shared power with multiple idols who filled much of the altars and holy places in the land. Josiah's grandfather, King Manasseh introduced the Assyrian gods and cults into Judah. He also built altars to the god Baal. Less than a mile outside Jerusalem there was a shrine to the god Moloch, who demanded the human sacrifice of children. Even the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was marred by sacred prostitution, intercourse with priestesses to win the favor of different gods. Soothsayers and astrologers became prominent parts of the royal court. (3)

When Josiah was eight, his father King Amon was assassinated by an anti-Assyrian faction in the court. Josiah became king, but the regents who took over power continued his father's pro-Assyrian policy. Josiah, however, was determined to change the existing order. The historian Flavius Josephus, writing some five hundred years later, commented about Josiah, "He was of an excellent character and well-disposed to virtue and emulous of the practices of King David...now when he was twelve years old, he gave proof of his piety and righteousness, for he sought to bring the people to their senses and urged them to give up their belief in idols." (5)

In 627 BCE, Josiah gained more power to make changes when the King of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, died. A civil war broke out within Assyria over the succession. Babylon and the Medes, two nations conquered by the Assyrians, took advantage of the civil war to regain their independence. Judah too could now make changes with less fear of Assyrian retaliation.

Around age 18, Josiah, having come of age, took over full rule of the Kingdom. The Torah tells how he ordered the Temple to be cleaned and fixed up. In 621 BCE, one of the momentous events of Jewish history occurred. As the Temple was being cleaned up and renovated, a scroll was found and brought to the High Priest Hilkiyah. The Torah says, "And Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the scribe, 'I have found this book of the law in the house of the Lord.' Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan and he read it. ...And Shaphan read from the book of the law to the king." (6)

The Torah, in II Kings, continued, "When the king heard the words of the book, he rent his clothes... (then the king said), 'Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people and for all Judah, concerning the

words of this book; for great must be the wrath of the lord against us, because our fathers have not done according to all that is written in it concerning us.” (6)

The scroll retold the story of the Jews after the exodus from Egypt, taking up from where the existing four books of Moses ended. In addition, the scroll contained statements of God’s commandments and laws. The scroll was to become the basis of the fifth book of Moses, Deuteronomy. The contents of the scroll have been identified as chapters 5-26 and 28 of Deuteronomy. (3) Whether the scroll was actually an ancient writing newly discovered is controversial. Some historians argue that the scroll was written at the time of Josiah, at his direction or that of the high priest or both, to provide theological backing for the reforms that were to follow. (2)

Following the discovery of the scrolls, Josiah consulted the prophetess Huldah, a cousin of the more famous prophet Jeremiah. Huldah, like Jeremiah later, prophesied doom if the people did not turn away from idol worship, but praised Josiah for his serious response, including the rending of his garments, in response to the finding of the writings. (2) Huldah was also reported to have prophesied that God would punish the people for their past sins by uprooting them from their country, but that this sentence would postponed for the sake of Josiah, a righteous man, during his lifetime.(5)

Josiah summoned a great meeting of all the people of Jerusalem. He read the scroll out the people. The document emphasized the blessings that would follow from following God’s commandments, stating, “If you obey the Lord your God, to observe faithfully all His commandments, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth...Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country.” (1) In equally stark terms, the scroll laid out the penalties for not following God’s laws, noting, “If you do not obey the Lord your God to observe faithfully all His commandments and laws...cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the country...Cursed shall you be in your comings and cursed shall you be in your goings. The Lord will let loose against you calamity, panic and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake.”(1) Most particularly, the words stated the importance of not following other gods, stating, “You must love the Lord your God with all heart and with all your soul and with all your might...Do not follow other gods, the gods of the people around you.”(3) The words continued, “You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are dispossessing worshipped their gods...Tear down the altars...and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their names from that site. Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner, but look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation.” (3)

The Bible states, “The king made a covenant before the Lord to keep his commandments and testimonies and his statutes. And all the people confirmed the covenant.” (6) The Temple of Solomon was purged of all pagan idols. Sacred prostitution and the associated fertility cult was outlawed. The Bible tells that Josiah, “removed the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense to Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the hosts of heaven...Josiah put away the wizards and the idols and all the abominations that were in Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might follow the law written in the book which Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord.” (6)

Josiah did not stop with simply cleaning out the Temple in Jerusalem. Throughout Judah local shrines, where idol worship was often mixed with Jewish ritual, were shut down. Jerusalem was to be the sole center of organized worship in the country. (1) Josephus recorded, “Going round the city and the entire country, the king cut down the groves dedicated to foreign gods and razed their altars...in this way he turned the people away from their belief in these gods to the service of God.” (5) The elimination of the

local shrines helped turn people toward personal prayer and focus on the Torah in preference to the prior local customs. (1) The Jewish priests in the countryside moved to Jerusalem to become part of the staff of the Temple, while the priests of the other gods found their influence destroyed. (7)

The preceding years had seen religious festivals neglected. Josiah reestablished the tradition of celebrating these festivals at the temple in Jerusalem, drawing worshippers from all over Judah. Most notably the public celebration of Passover, celebrating the exodus from Egypt, was reintroduced into the annual calendar. Of the celebration of Passover in 621 BCE, it was said, "There was not kept such a Passover from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah." (7)

Josiah also worked to build up the nation of Judah. Jerusalem was expanded to meet the needs of a larger, growing population. Its defenses were strengthened. Josiah also expanded Judean control west to the Mediterranean and south into the Negev desert. New towns were established. Trade increased. Judah also expanded into what had been the Assyrian province of Samaria, which had been the Kingdom of Israel. In Samaria, Josiah eliminated the central shrine at Bethel, with its worship of a bull or calf, seen as a competitor for the purer religion encapsulated in the Temple in Jerusalem. (1) In the words of Josephus, "King Josiah went also to the other Israelites, those who had escaped from the captivity and servitude under the Assyrians and persuaded them to give up their impious practices and abandon their worship of foreign gods." (5)

Josiah also implemented social reforms. For these too he claimed to be following the laws found in the new scroll. The section of Deuteronomy that comprised the writings on the scroll emphasized social justice. Every 7 years debts were to be forgiven. Deuteronomy goes on, "If there is a poor man in the land which the Lord gives you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand against him. But you shall open your hand wide and lend him sufficient for his need...I command you, open wide your hand to help your brother, the poor and the needy." (6) Another clause reads, "You shall not pervert justice, you shall not show partiality to persons; and you shall not take a bribe...and that which is altogether just shall you follow." (6) Following these and other precepts found in the scroll, Josiah attempted to bring justice to his kingdom.

Josiah emphasized the fair application of justice throughout the Kingdom. Josephus wrote, "He (Josiah) appointed certain judges and overseers who, in administering the affairs of individuals, were to put justice above everything else and treat it no less carefully than their own lives." (5)

Josiah's actions built upon the words of the Hebrew prophets, from Isaiah to Jeremiah, who preached that God was more interested in justice and morality than sacrifice. This helped provide the intellectual underpinning for the elimination of sacrifices (outside the Temple) and the increased importance of ethical conduct. (2)

The years of Josiah's rule saw a strengthened Judah along with a Judaism free of the influences of the pagan idols of the surrounding nations. Yet Judah could not escape the events outside its borders. In the south, the Babylonians had risen against Assyria, seeking to supplant it as the dominant nation in the Middle East. In 612 BCE Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was sacked and razed down to the ground by the combined forces of the Medes and Babylonians. The Babylonian chronicles recorded, "In the month of Abu, the city (Nineveh) was seized and a great defeat...inflicted upon the entire population...the city they turned into ruin -hills and heaps of debris." (3)