

MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY

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WITNESSES TO THE WOUND

A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers

100 Years of the Music Business on Trial

Report No. 5 of an Ongoing Series

ROBERT JOHNSON

c. 1911 – 1938

The King of the Delta Blues

29 songs recorded across five days in 1936 and 1937 — paid approximately \$100–\$200 total — died at 27 in a pauper's grave with no marker — his catalog sold 600,000 copies in its first year of reissue — Sony paid a promoter \$1.5 million in royalties — his biological son was driving a gravel truck when the courts finally named him heir 60 years later

March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HIM

Biography: The Making of the Delta Foundation

Robert Leroy Johnson was born on or around May 8, 1911, in Hazlehurst, Mississippi — the son of Julia Major and Noah Johnson, born out of an extramarital relationship. His mother was still legally married to another man, Charles Dodds, when Robert was born. His father's name appears on the birth certificate simply as a laborer. Robert spent his childhood moving between his mother's household and various relatives, eventually settling with the family in the Mississippi Delta — one of the most fertile musical environments and one of the most economically oppressed regions in American history. The Delta produced cotton and blues in roughly equal measure, and the people who created both were paid accordingly.

As a teenager Johnson taught himself harmonica and guitar, associating with older Delta bluesmen including Son House, Willie Brown, and Charley Patton. By his early twenties he had disappeared from the Delta for approximately two years. When he returned, his guitar playing had undergone a transformation so dramatic that Son House and others who knew him were openly astonished. Blues lore filled the gap with the legend of the crossroads — the story that Johnson had sold his soul to the devil at the intersection of Highways 49 and 61 in Clarksdale in exchange for his gift. **The covenant understanding is simpler and more true:** he had spent approximately a year living with and learning from guitarist Ike Zimmerman, who taught him in graveyards at night because the quiet and the solitude were conducive to practice. He worked. He became exceptional. The devil had nothing to do with it.

By the mid-1930s Johnson was performing at juke joints, house parties, lumber camps, and on street corners throughout Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Texas — traveling as far north as Detroit and Chicago. He played for nickels and dimes and whatever food and whiskey the room provided. He was, by every account, a working musician in the fullest sense: constantly moving, constantly playing, making just enough to survive. **He was the covenant musician in the purest economic condition the Tanakh describes — the Levite without a territory, dependent entirely on what the community chose to give.**

In 1936, a talent scout named H.C. Speir heard Johnson and referred him to Ernie Oertle, a salesman for the American Record Company. Oertle brought him to San Antonio to record. In November 1936 and June 1937 — across five days total — Johnson recorded 29 songs in hotel rooms in San Antonio and Dallas. **Those 29 songs became the foundation on which the entire blues rock tradition of the 20th century was built.**

◆ *I play guitar through vintage Gibsons — 1955 Les Paul Jr., 1956 Les Paul Standard, 1968 Les Paul Standard. Robert Johnson played a Gibson L-1 archtop. No amplifier. No effects. Just the guitar, his voice, and whatever room he could find. The gift that produced Sweet Home Chicago, Cross Road Blues, Love in Vain, and Hellhound on My Trail came from the same source every genuine musical gift comes from — Yahweh, moving through a human vessel who had made himself available through years of discipline and*

practice. The crossroads legend is a distraction from the real miracle: that a man with no resources, no industry support, no formal training, and five days of studio time created a body of work that changed everything.

Born	c. May 8, 1911 — Hazlehurst, Mississippi
Background	Son of Julia Major and Noah Johnson; grew up in Mississippi Delta; sharecropper community
Training	Self-taught; mentored by Ike Zimmerman c. 1930–31; influenced by Son House, Charley Patton, Leroy Carr
Recording sessions	San Antonio TX — Nov 23–25, 1936 (16 songs). Dallas TX — June 19–20, 1937 (13 songs). Total: 29 songs, 5 days.
Payment received	Approximately \$100–\$200 total for both sessions combined — no royalties ever
Biggest hit (lifetime)	Terraplane Blues — moderate regional hit; sold 10,000 copies
Death	August 16, 1938 — near Greenwood, Mississippi — age 27. Most accounts: poisoned whiskey at juke joint.
Burial	Pauper's grave, no marker — three disputed grave sites still exist today
Legal heir determined	1998 — 60 years after death — Claud Johnson (biological son, retired gravel truck driver)
Recognition	Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 1986. Blues Hall of Fame 1980. Grammy Lifetime Achievement 2006.

SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: WHAT WAS DONE TO HIM

The Exploitation — Beginning, Middle, and 60 Years After Death

Layer One: Five Days, 29 Songs, Approximately \$100–\$200

The American Record Company paid Robert Johnson for his time in the studio, not for his recordings. EBSCO Research's documented account states that he was "probably paid a few hundred dollars" for his first session in San Antonio. The uDiscover Music documented account places it at approximately "\$100 for several days of work." No contract with royalty provisions is documented. No ownership of his compositions was retained by Johnson. The American Record Company — and its successor after

1938, Columbia Records — owned everything he had recorded from the moment the sessions ended.

The 29 songs Johnson recorded across those five days include: ***Sweet Home Chicago, Cross Road Blues, Love in Vain, Hellhound on My Trail, Terraplane Blues, Me and the Devil Blues, Ramblin' on My Mind***. Every one of these songs has been recorded by major artists — the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, Muddy Waters, Bob Dylan, Elmore James — and has generated millions of dollars in publishing royalties and recording revenues. **Johnson received approximately \$100–\$200 total**. The songs were not his. They belonged to the label from the moment he sang them into the microphone. The Library of Congress documentation on *The Complete Recordings* notes that when ARC was sold to Columbia Records in 1938 — the same year Johnson died — the entire Johnson catalog transferred with the sale. **He died the year his recordings changed corporate hands**. He never knew what they would become. He never received a dollar from what they became.

Layer Two: Death at 27 in a Pauper's Grave

Robert Johnson died on August 16, 1938, near Greenwood, Mississippi. He was 27 years old. The most documented account, corroborated by fellow blues musicians David Honeyboy Edwards and Sonny Boy Williamson, is that he was poisoned by a jealous husband at the Three Forks juke joint where he was performing regularly. He was taken to a shotgun house at the Star of the West Plantation north of Greenwood, where he lingered for several days before dying. Encyclopedia Britannica confirms: *"Johnson died after drinking poisoned whiskey in a juke joint."* Cause of death on his certificate listed as syphilis — a common placeholder for unexplained deaths in that era and region.

He was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Three separate headstones now exist in Leflore County, Mississippi, each claiming to mark his burial site — a confusion that testifies to how completely invisible his death was at the time. **No estate was opened. No will existed. No assets were identified.** His death record sat unfiled for 30 years. He was a man who had created the foundation of American popular music, and the world did not know he had died until 30 years later when researchers began searching for him.

◆ *He was 27 years old. He was playing in juke joints for whatever the room would give him. He had recorded 29 songs two years earlier and received a hundred dollars for them. He died in a shotgun house on a plantation. I think about that every time someone tells me the music business works on merit. The man who played Cross Road Blues could not get a fair deal, a safe room, or a marked grave. The gift was present. The covenant provision for those who carry the gift was completely absent.*


Layer Three: The Complete Recordings — 600,000 Copies, \$1.5 Million to a Promoter

This is where the Robert Johnson story diverges from every other report in this series. With Johnson, the exploitation did not stop at his death. It accelerated. It ran for

52 years before his biological heir received a single dollar. And the mechanism of that post-death exploitation is documented in Mississippi Supreme Court records and federal legal filings.

In 1973, blues researcher Stephen LaVere located Johnson's half-sister, Carrie Thompson, living in Maryland — unaware of her brother's posthumous influence and the commercial value of his legacy. LaVere, as the Longreads investigation documented, was acutely *"aware of the profits inherent in a claim to Johnson's as yet unprobated estate."* In November 1974, Thompson signed a contract assigning to LaVere all her rights to Johnson's music, photographs, and any other materials. LaVere would pay her 50% of all royalties he collected.

LaVere then signed a deal with CBS Records. In 1990, CBS/Sony released ***Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*** — a box set containing all 29 songs. **It sold 600,000 copies in its first year alone** — more than ten times the initial sales expectation. It won a Grammy for Best Historical Album in 1991. The Library of Congress added it to the National Recording Registry in 2003.

 **LEGAL RECORD:** *Mississippi Supreme Court, Anderson v. LaVere, 2014: Sony paid LaVere \$1.5 million in royalties from the Complete Recordings and related exploitation of Johnson's catalog and photographs.*

LaVere's payment to the court when asked to account for royalties owed to the Johnson estate: \$46,968.39. The Longreads investigative account documents the attorney representing the estate administrator's reaction: he was *"dumbfounded."* Sony had paid LaVere \$1.5 million. LaVere tendered \$46,968 to the court. Columbia's spokesman's response, quoted directly: *"What LaVere does is entirely between LaVere and who he does it to."*

Layer Four: The Heir Was Driving a Gravel Truck

Robert Johnson's biological son, Claud Johnson, was born December 16, 1931, in Lincoln County, Mississippi. His birth certificate named R.L. Johnson as his father. For decades he was unaware that his father's music had become one of the most commercially valuable catalogs in American recording history. **He found out in the early 1990s — after Carrie Thompson had died, after LaVere had collected \$1.5 million from Sony, and after other family members were already fighting over the estate.**

At the time the court proceedings were underway, Claud Johnson was in his seventies. He was a retired gravel truck driver. His wife ran a BBQ stand. The Longreads investigation confirms: *"In 1998, seven years after this piece was published, Mississippi courts determined that Robert Johnson's heir was Claud Johnson, a son not born of Johnson's wives. Claud was in his seventies and working as a gravel truck driver in Crystal Springs, Mississippi."*

The 1998 court ruling declared Claud Johnson the sole legal heir. He received a payment from the escrow account that had accumulated. He moved his family to a nicer house. **He kept his gravel truck** — documented in the reporting as a reminder of his life's hard work. He died in 2015 at age 83, having spent most of his life with no knowledge of or benefit from his father's legacy. His six children now receive the ongoing royalties.

Layer Five: The Rolling Stones and the Copyright Battle

The exploitation of Robert Johnson's catalog extended to litigation against major artists who had profited from his compositions. The Rolling Stones recorded *Love in Vain* on *Let It Bleed* (1969). Eric Clapton recorded multiple Johnson songs across his career. In 1995, LaVere — acting on behalf of the Johnson estate — filed suit against ABKCO Music (which controlled the Rolling Stones' catalog) arguing that Johnson's songs had not entered the public domain and that the estate was owed royalties. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ultimately accepted the case. The legal battle turned on whether "*publication*" of a recording under the 1909 Copyright Act included commercial release. **The songs that had made the Rolling Stones famous had been recorded from a man who received \$100 for them in 1936. The royalty battle ran from 1995 to 2000.** During all of that time, Claud Johnson — the actual heir — was driving a gravel truck.

Event / Release	Commercial Result	Johnson Family Received	Who Profited
Robert Johnson — 1936/1937	~\$100–\$200 total for all 29 songs	None — died 1938	ARC/Vocalion, Columbia, Sony
Terraplane Blues (1937)	Moderate regional hit in Johnson's lifetime	None	Label owned all rights
King of the Delta Blues Singers (1961)	Introduced Johnson to white audiences globally	None — 23 years after death	Columbia Records
Complete Recordings box set (1990)	600,000 copies in year one; Grammy winner	None to Johnson's family initially	Sony/CBS paid LaVere \$1.5M
Claud Johnson (son) declared heir (1998)	60 years after Robert Johnson died	\$1M+ royalties finally received	Claud worked as gravel truck driver
Rolling Stones — Love in Vain	Millions in sales since 1969	None to Johnson estate for decades	Copyright litigation 1995–2000
Eric Clapton — multiple covers	Millions in sales and performances	None to Johnson estate for decades	Publishing rights disputed
Streaming revenue — 2026	Ongoing, continuous	Flows to Johnson heirs now	52-year gap before any heir paid

SECTION THREE — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

Corroboration of the Record

WITNESS One: *Mississippi Supreme Court records — Anderson v. LaVere, Delta Haze Corp., Sony Music Entertainment (2014); Estate of Johnson, Matter of, 705 So.2d 819 (Miss. 1996); and related Mississippi chancery court proceedings — confirm: (1) Sony paid LaVere \$1.5 million in royalties from Johnson's catalog. (2) LaVere tendered \$46,968 to the Johnson estate. (3) Claud Johnson was declared sole heir in 1998 — 60 years after Robert Johnson's death. (4) Robert Johnson died without a will and no estate was opened at the time of his death. These are official legal records of the state of Mississippi and the federal judiciary.*

WITNESS Two: *Longreads investigative article 'Hellhound on the Money Trail' (sourcing multiple court documents and direct interviews): confirms LaVere was 'aware of the profits inherent in a claim to Johnson's as yet unprobated estate' when he approached Thompson in 1973; confirms Claud Johnson was a gravel truck driver whose wife ran a BBQ stand when the court proceedings were underway; confirms LaVere's payment to the court was \$46,968.39 against Sony's \$1.5 million payment to LaVere; quotes Columbia's own spokesman: 'What LaVere does is entirely between LaVere and who he does it to.'*

WITNESS Three: *Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Board documentation ('The Complete Recordings — Robert Johnson 1936–1937,' academic paper by Edward Komara, Crane Librarian of Music, SUNY Potsdam): confirms the Complete Recordings sold 600,000 copies in its first year; that ARC was sold to Columbia in 1938 transferring Johnson's entire catalog; that cover versions by white musicians in the 1960s sold in higher numbers than original Johnson releases; and that Johnson's catalog is foundational to the commercial blues and rock tradition. Additionally: EBSCO Research Starters and Encyclopedia Britannica independently confirm Johnson was paid approximately a few hundred dollars for his recordings with no royalties.*

Additional corroboration: Courthouse News Service (court reporting on Anderson v. Claud Johnson); American Blues Scene legal analysis by entertainment attorney Brian Lukasavitz; Texas State Historical Association Handbook of Texas (Johnson biography); uDiscover Music documented biography confirming \$100 payment estimate for first session.

SECTION FOUR — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS: WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

The Torah Charges — Applied to Robert Johnson

Charge One: Wages Withheld From the Laborer — Vayikra 19:13

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:13

Approximately \$100 to \$200 for 29 songs. No royalties. No publishing rights retained. No ownership of any kind. The American Record Company paid Johnson for his presence in the studio and kept everything he created there. **This is the wage held past morning — held not just overnight but for 52 years**, until a court finally forced

an accounting. The Hebrew *lo ta'ashoq* applies to the original session payment. But it applies with even greater force to the 52-year window in which a promoter collected \$1.5 million from Sony while the actual heir drove a gravel truck. The oppression did not end when Johnson died. It extended through every year that his catalog generated commercial revenue without a dollar reaching his blood.

Charge Two: The Inheritance of the Fatherless — Devarim 10:18

"He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing."

— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 10:18

Claud Johnson grew up without his father. He did not know his father's music had become commercially foundational to American popular culture. He found out in his sixties, when the legal battles over the estate had already been running for years. He was, in the Torah's framework, the *yatom* — the fatherless child — who had a legal claim to an inheritance that had been captured by others before he could assert it. **Yahweh explicitly identifies Himself as the defender of the fatherless.** The covenant charge against a system that kept Johnson's biological heir in ignorance while extracting \$1.5 million from his father's catalog is not subtle. It is direct. Devarim says ****Yahweh**** executes justice for the fatherless. The Mississippi court system took 60 years. ****Yahweh****'s accounting does not run on the same calendar.

Charge Three: The Unprobated Estate and Stolen Inheritance — Bemidbar 27:8–9

"If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. And if he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers."

— Bemidbar (Numbers) 27:8-9

The Tanakh's inheritance law — established in the daughters of Zelophchad case in Bemidbar 27 — is explicit: when a man dies, his estate passes to his direct heirs. Robert Johnson died intestate — without a will — in 1938. **No estate was opened. No heirs were identified. The catalog was not preserved for his bloodline.** Instead, it was absorbed by the label that bought ARC, commercially exploited for over 50 years, and then made the subject of a contractual arrangement between a promoter and a half-sister who may not have been the rightful heir at all. The covenant framework is unambiguous: the inheritance belongs to the blood. Stephen LaVere, CBS/Sony, and every party that profited from Johnson's catalog before Claud Johnson was named heir in 1998 held what legally and covenantally belonged to Johnson's son.

Charge Four: The Pauper's Grave — Kohelet 6:3

"If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he."

— Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 6:3

Kohelet's meditation on the vanity of labor without proper burial is covenant poetry about the dignity of the dead. Robert Johnson was buried in a pauper's grave with no marker. His burial site is still disputed — three headstones, three locations, no certainty. **The man who gave American music its foundation could not be given a certain grave.** The covenant principle that a person's death deserves dignity, that their resting place deserves to be known and marked, was not extended to Robert Johnson. It was not extended because the system that profited from his music did not regard his body as worthy of the same care it gave his recordings. Columbia Records placed a marker at one of the disputed sites in 1990 — the same year the Complete Recordings sold 600,000 copies. The marker bears LaVere's name alongside Johnson's. **The promoter's name is on the grave of the man whose catalog he exploited.** This requires no further comment.

SECTION FIVE — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

Five days. I want the full weight of that to land. Robert Johnson's entire recorded legacy — every note that influenced Muddy Waters, every riff that shaped Eric Clapton, every lyric that Bob Dylan called among the greatest ever written, every song that the Rolling Stones covered and made millions from — came from five days in hotel rooms in San Antonio and Dallas in 1936 and 1937. Five days. Approximately \$200. No royalties. Label owns everything.

◆ *I have been in studios. I recorded eight songs at Studio in the Country in Bogalusa, Louisiana — the same studio that recorded Kansas on Leftoverture, Stevie Wonder, Willie Nelson, Allen Toussaint. I know what it costs to record. I know what it feels like to walk out of a session knowing you just put something real on tape. Robert Johnson walked out of room 414 of the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio with about a hundred dollars and 16 songs that would outlast everyone alive at the time. The disproportion between what he created and what he received is so extreme it reads like fiction. It is not fiction. It is the documented history of how this industry has always treated the zamar carriers it needed most.*

The gravel truck. Claud Johnson driving a gravel truck into his seventies, his wife running a BBQ stand, while Sony collected royalties from his father's 29 songs. I cannot read that detail without feeling the full weight of what the covenant indictment means. **The inheritance was stolen before the heir knew he had one.** The system was designed to capture the value before the bloodline could assert its claim. By the time Claud Johnson found out what his father had made, decades of royalties had already flowed to a promoter and a corporation. A retired gravel truck driver had to go to court against Sony Music Entertainment to claim what his father's gift had created.

The crossroads legend — the devil at the intersection, the soul sold for talent — is the music business writing its own mythology. It is more convenient to say Johnson sold his soul than to say the industry paid him \$100 for songs that generated millions. The devil is a useful story. **The truth is more damning than the legend.** No devil at a crossroads. Just a talent scout with a car and a label with a studio in a hotel room, and a contract that gave the Black man from the Delta a few dollars and kept everything else.

◆ *Bob Dylan said Robert Johnson was the most mysterious man in the music. Eric Clapton said he was the most important influence on his guitar playing. The Rolling Stones covered his songs and sold millions of records. Jack White and John Fahey produced a \$500 collector's edition of his Complete Recordings. Every blues guitarist since 1961 has learned from him. And his son was driving a gravel truck. That is the covenant indictment. Not the myth. The gravel truck.*

SECTION SIX — THE COVENANT VERDICT: THE JUDGMENT OF YAHWEH

Yahweh's Record on Robert Johnson

The Robert Johnson case is the most extreme in this series to date because the exploitation extended through three distinct phases: the original extraction of his catalog for \$100–\$200 with no royalties (1936–1937); his death at 27 in a pauper's unmarked grave (1938); and the 52-year post-death commercial exploitation of his catalog before his bloodline received a dollar (1938–1998).

Each phase carries its own covenant charge. All three are entered into the permanent record.

COVENANT VERDICT ONE — THE ORIGINAL EXTRACTION: Robert Johnson recorded 29 songs across five days in 1936 and 1937. He received approximately \$100–\$200 total with no royalties and no ownership of any composition. The American Record Company and its successor Columbia Records held those recordings and their commercial value entirely. This stands in violation of Vayikra 19:13 — *ashaq* — the oppression of the hired worker by the one who holds the infrastructure. The judgment is entered.

COVENANT VERDICT TWO — THE UNMARKED GRAVE: Robert Johnson died at 27 in a pauper's grave with no marker, no estate opened, and no heir identified. His death record went unfiled for 30 years. His burial site remains disputed to this day. This stands in violation of the covenant principle of human dignity in death, documented in Kohelet 6:3 and the

broader covenant framework for the treatment of those whose labor has fed the community. The judgment is entered.

COVENANT VERDICT THREE — THE 52-YEAR POST-DEATH EXPLOITATION: From 1938 to 1998, Robert Johnson's catalog generated commercial revenue without a dollar reaching his biological heir. Sony paid a promoter \$1.5 million. The promoter tendered \$46,968 to the court. His son drove a gravel truck. This stands in violation of Devarim 10:18 — Yahweh's explicit identification as the defender of the fatherless — and Bemidbar 27:8–9 — the covenant inheritance law that protects the bloodline's right to what the father created. The judgment is entered. It covers every year and every dollar from 1938 to 1998.

Claud Johnson died in 2015 at age 83. He spent the last 17 years of his life as the legal heir of a legacy that should have been his from birth. His six children now receive the ongoing royalties from their grandfather's 29 songs. **Yahweh's justice arrived 60 years late by the court system's timeline. It was never late on Yahweh's timeline.** The covenant account was open from the moment Robert Johnson received \$100 for Cross Road Blues. It is still open for every year between 1938 and 1998.

"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is Elohim in His holy habitation."

— Tehillim (Psalms) 68:5

The fatherless child was Claud Johnson. He drove a gravel truck for decades while the corporations that held his inheritance built empires from it. And **Elohim** was in His holy habitation watching every mile of it. The record is complete. The judgment stands.

SERIES NOTES

Next in series: Report No. 6 — Big Bill Broonzy (1893–1958). The man who recorded hundreds of songs across three decades, told Alan Lomax on tape that he never received a royalty because he 'didn't know nothing about trying to demand for no money,' and whose original testimony against the music industry is one of the most direct primary source indictments in the entire series.

The series roster: Report 1 — Scott Joplin. Report 2 — Ma Rainey. Report 3 — Bessie Smith. Report 4 — Billie Holiday. Report 5 — Robert Johnson. Report 6 — Big Bill Broonzy (pending). The series continues forward through Big Mama Thornton, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Ruth Brown, Sam Cooke, Mary Wells, James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Sam Moore, and the hip-hop era to 2026.

Research standard: All charges require a minimum of two to three independent authoritative sources per Devarim 19:15.

Selah.

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