

## April 26, 2009

## Beginning Again

To celebrate the possibility of making a new start

Key Bible reference: 2 Kings 22.1-23.20

Key Verse: 2 Kings 23.3

### **Biblical Background**

Josiah's father was Amon, who ruled as king for only two years (642 B.C.-640 B.C.) before being assassinated (see 2 Kings 21:19-26). Josiah was only eight years old when he became king of Judah. He would rule for thirty-one years (640 B.C.-609 B.C.). According to 2 Chronicles 34:3, in the eighth year of his reign (about 632 B.C.), he turned to the God of his great ancestor King David. And in the twelfth year (about 628 B.C.), he began many religious reforms (2 Chronicles 34:3-7). It was in the eighteenth year of his reign that the high priest Hilkiah [hil-KIGH-uh] discovered "the book of the law" in the Temple, which added fuel and direction to the reforms Josiah had already started (2 Chronicles 34:8-18). Josiah died in 609 B.C. while fighting against Egyptian forces.

Two great prophets began their ministries during the reign of Josiah: Jeremiah (about 626 B.C.) and Zephaniah (about 630 B.C.-620 B.C.). The prophet Nahum may also have been active. However, the writer of Second Kings does not mention any of the three.

The Temple that Solomon had built centuries before was badly in need of repair. A kind of Temple building fund had been collected over the years. Now Josiah ordered his secretary, Shaphan [SHAY-fan], to see that this money was given to the workers (masons, carpenters, and so forth) to purchase materials; and the renovations began.

This act tells us a great deal about Josiah. Even before the "book of the law" was discovered, Josiah was trying to carry out reforms. The Temple was at the heart of the faith of his people, and its condition mirrored their spiritual condition.

Shaphan came to Hilkiah, the high priest, as Josiah had ordered. Hilkiah told him that he had discovered "the book of the law in the house of the Lord" (22:8). Hilkiah did not say exactly where he found it.

What was this book? Based on the particular reforms Josiah sought to carry out after reading it, we are confident that it was a good portion of the Book of Deuteronomy (perhaps Chapters 12-26).

When Shaphan reported back to Josiah and read the book to him, the king "tore his clothes" (22:11), that is, ripped them off his body, a common reaction of the time to grief, anger, or great pain. Why did the book disturb Josiah so? Because it became clear to him how far the people of his time and before had strayed from their faith. "The book of the law" said that such disobedience would bring the judgment and wrath of God on Judah, just as it had on the northern kingdom of Israel. Josiah, like many kings before him, then decided to consult one of the prophets of God concerning the book and its message for Judah.

So Josiah sent some of his most trusted servants to find a prophet. They went to a prophetess named Huldah [HUHL-duh], wife of Shallum [SHAL-uhm]. (Some have wondered why they did not call on Jeremiah or even on Zephaniah.) Shallum apparently was in charge of the "wardrobe" or clothing used by the priests and others in the Temple. Unfortunately, we know nothing of Huldah except what is reported here.

Huldah confirmed the dire message Josiah heard when the book was read to him. It was unavoidable now that the people of Judah would have to suffer for their great unfaithfulness. However, Huldah said that because of Josiah's faith and obedience, this would not happen during his reign. He would go to his ancestors in peace (22:20). Nevertheless, Josiah died violently in 609 B.C. That could mark the beginning of the fulfillment of Huldah's words and those in the "book of the law."

2 Kings 23:1-3. Josiah personally read the "book of the law" to all the people he had ordered to come to the courts of the Temple. The king stood beside one of the pillars of the Temple, apparently a royal custom. After Josiah read aloud the book of the law, he promised before God and the people to keep the covenant. The people pledged to do likewise.

"Covenant" means an agreement or contract between two or more persons. In this case, it refers to the Mosaic covenant. In that covenant, God promises to bless the people; to make them a special people, a royal priesthood. However, they must obey God's laws (the Ten Commandments and so forth). According to the Book of Deuteronomy, if they obey, God will bless them and all will go well. If they do not obey, they will suffer.

Verses 4-8. That very day Josiah began acting on his commitment. He ordered the officials in the Temple to remove anything in it associated in any way with pagan worship. The fact that they found a great number of items dedicated to the worship of Baal and even heavenly bodies ("all the host of heaven" [23:4]) tells us just how far the nation had strayed. These items were burned in order to destroy and desecrate them so that no one could use them in pagan worship again. Then the ashes were taken to the city of Bethel (modern Beitin).

Why Bethel? Though many good things had happened in Bethel (Jacob's dream, for example), the place was seen as the seed bed for the idolatry that plagued the people. It was there that Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel after the division, created a sanctuary with a golden bull (1 Kings 12:28-30). Jeroboam did this to make Bethel his Jerusalem; he did not want his people going to the southern capital to worship. But the bull or calf was one of the chief images used in Baalite religion. This act was thought by many to have played an important role in leading the people away from the worship of God.

So Josiah destroyed everything at Bethel associated with Jeroboam's idolatrous actions, even digging up bones to burn on the altars there so as to desecrate these altars and make it impossible to use them again (23:16). The only grave he left undisturbed was that of an unknown prophet from Judah who had predicted these very actions (23:17-18).

Josiah started in the Temple in Jerusalem, but his reforms spread quickly. Like Hezekiah, he had many of the "high places" and the sacred objects associated with other religions destroyed; and he disbursed cultic priests and

prostitutes (23:5-8). But he carried this reform out even in the towns of Samaria (23:19). It seems that he was trying to restore the unity David had established.

You recall that Hezekiah had instituted many of these same reforms. But now they all had to be carried out again. The problem was not, finally, in objects or places but inside the hearts of the people.

### **Prayer**

O God, who makes all things new, please work in our hearts so that we will be renewed in our faith and love for you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.