

2ND KINGS

Week 37, Chapter 23 conclusion

I hope you are ready for a considerable bible history lesson today, because the last couple of chapters of 2nd Kings contains one of the most studied periods of Israelite history, and certainly one of the most pertinent and fascinating for modern Christians and Jews to learn about.

If we were to give a name to the overriding theme of King Josiah's life and his determined purpose, it would be, "Rediscovering God's Torah". Since 2nd Kings Chapter 21, when we were first introduced to King Josiah (Yoshiyahu), we have watched an exceptionally righteous king in action who the Lord favorably compared to King David.

CJB 2 Kings 22:2 He did what was right from ADONAI's perspective, living entirely in the manner of David his ancestor and turning away neither to the right nor to the left.

So as we continue our study of 2nd Kings 23 today, keep that context in mind. And how I pray that I, and all of you, will be welcomed into Heaven with words expressing that same thought when we have finished running our race.

Chapter 23 began with a lavish ceremony at the Temple in Jerusalem in which the Law of Moses was read to a mostly Judahite crowd consisting of Priests, Levites, the King's royal court, Elders, priests, and common citizens. Following the reading, we're told in verse 3 that all the people stood and pledged themselves to keep the covenant.

Immediately thereafter a program of thoroughly ridding the Temple Mount, Jerusalem and all of Judah of idols and pagan worship practices was initiated by King Josiah's administration. Priests to the various false gods (mostly non-Levites) were killed; other priests (Levites) who worshipped Yehoveh at unauthorized high places (bamot) were essentially fired. But Josiah didn't stop there. He next went into the former northern kingdom of Israel, where there were small remnants of the 10 tribes that had somehow escaped exile to Assyria many years earlier, and he did the same. He also attempted to set himself up as king over that region with the idea that he would re-unite all 12 tribal districts and re-create a unified Kingdom of Israel as it was under Kings David and Solomon. In that effort he did not succeed and in hindsight we can see that it was because in God's master-plan it was not yet time.

The next thing King Josiah did is what we'll examine today. So open your bibles to 2nd Kings 23, beginning at verse 21.

READ 2ND KINGS 23:21 – end

How fitting it was that the king would order that the Pesach feast would be the first one to be celebrated in the reformed Kingdom of Judah. Not only is Passover the 1st in the series of the 7 biblically ordained feasts, but it celebrates the breaking of the yoke to sin and depravation of God's people.

When Israel was in Egypt, the meaning of the Passover was self-evident and immediately observable as within hours of painting lamb's blood on the doorposts of their homes, the Hebrews witnessed mass death as the Lord passed through Egypt killing every firstborn male: human beings and domestic livestock. Yet in a miraculous and merciful way, death passed over the faithful. For every Passover after that one, the celebration was a commemoration of that bittersweet event. And now in Josiah's day, 700 years or more since that time, not just Passover but all the feasts had become mixed up with pagan elements and apparently had also become nearly irrelevant in the Promised Land. But Josiah determined to remedy that.

He ordered that all the people in his kingdom (including the remnant of the 10 tribes living to the north of Judah) were to bring their Pesach offering and come to Jerusalem to sacrifice. While 2nd Kings reports little more about it than it occurred in Josiah's 18th year on the throne, and that the Passover had not been observed so scrupulously according to the Torah instructions since the days of the Judges, 2nd Chronicles 35 goes into more detail. Let's go there now.

READ 2ND CHRONICLES 35:1 – 19

The Rabbis note that one the foundational principles of Passover is that it is kept in the springtime, when the earth comes back to life following a long season of death and dormancy. Little could better characterize the spiritual condition of God's chosen people at this time than dead and dormant. This gives us yet another good illustration of how Christ went to the cross on Passover in order to fulfill the highest meaning of it. He came as springtime to revitalize a dead and dying world with new life. An entire planet, not just Israel, has been living in a spiritual state of death and dormancy since the moment Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord's commandment and sin entered the world. And yet a Passover has been provided for the taking for everyone who bends their knee to the Father and appropriates the Blood of the Divine Lamb, Yeshua. And how right and good and obedient it is for all Believers to celebrate Passover annually not so much to remember Israel leaving Egypt, but rather to remember the moment that each of us painted the doorposts of our lives with Messiah's atoning blood and so God passed over us for the eternal death that all others, without exception, will suffer.

2nd Chronicles 35:1 tells us that Josiah's Passover was celebrated on the 14th day of the 1st month. This means that this Pesach was celebrated on the correct biblically ordained day, the 14th day of Nissan. Now Josiah was not the first king in Judah to try to righteously re-institute the biblical feasts. King Hezekiah did so a century earlier and yet something wasn't quite right about it.

2Chronicles 30:1-5 CJB

Then Hizkijahu sent to all Isra'el and Y'hudah, and wrote letters also to Efrayim and M'nasheh,

summoning them to the house of ADONAI in Yerushalayim, to keep the Pesach to ADONAI the God of Isra'el.

2 For the king, his officials and the entire Yerushalayim community had agreed to keep the Pesach in the second month.

3 They had not been able to observe it at the proper time because the cohanim had not consecrated themselves in sufficient number; also the people had not assembled in Yerushalayim.

4 The idea had seemed right to the king and to the whole community;

5 so they issued a decree that it should be proclaimed throughout all Isra'el, from Be'er-Sheva to Dan, that they should come to keep the Pesach to ADONAI the God of Isra'el at Yerushalayim; for only a few had been observing it as prescribed.

We're told that Hezekiah got together with all the people and decided that they would have Passover in the 2nd month (Iyar) instead of the God-ordained month of Nissan (the 1st month). So while they had good intentions, in fact they just picked for themselves when they wanted to observe Pesach. I have little doubt that this was a political compromise between the northern and southern kingdoms (we read in earlier lessons that King Jeroboam instituted a religious festival that mimicked the 7th month feast of Sukkot, but held it in the 8th month), and so moving Passover to the 2nd month served a number of practical logistic and cultural realities. Later in 2nd Chronicles 30 we read that some of the remaining folks from the 10 northern tribes decided not to go through the required purification rituals for Passover; in addition they turned the 7 days of Unleavened Bread observance into a 14 day party. And yet, we don't hear of the Lord necessarily condemning it (although there is no divine commendation for it either). This is why the author of 2nd Kings can say that Josiah's Passover edict was the most Torah observant Passover celebration since Samuel's time because by all accounts every minute detail of the Torah's Pesach ordinance was scrupulously followed.

We also see something else kind of interesting in 2nd Chronicles 35:

2Chronicles 35:3 CJB

3 To the L'vi'im who were teaching all Isra'el and were holy for ADONAI he said, "Put the holy ark in the house which Shlomo the son of David, king of Isra'el, built; after this, you will not have to carry it again.

In other words, the Ark of the Covenant was not at its usual place in the Holy of Holies, but rather had to be carried back in upon the shoulders of the Levites in time for Passover. No doubt this had something to do with the refurbishment of the Temple because it was in this same year that Passover was being celebrated (Josiah's 18th year in power) that Josiah had ordered the Temple to be repaired. So apparently the Ark had been moved to a temporary location so that the Holy of Holies could be entered and refurbished.

Back to 2nd Kings 23. Verse 24 basically sums up everything that Melech Yoshiyahu did to cleanse Judah (and the northern kingdom) of idols and heathen shrines. And the key phrase is that he did it not with whatever seemed right to him; not in accordance with whatever was the current religious philosophy or sense of political correctness. But rather it was done "in order to establish the words of the Torah". Oh that such a revival would sweep through Christ's church on earth today. But instead modern era revivals usually revolve around getting more people to come to church; or to champion a new social cause; or to embark on some new doctrine or trend. Yet Josiah saw that whatever small chance there might have been to reform the hearts of his people was bound up in learning God's actual Word and doing it! But as Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Habakkuk all report, this was a nation of people devoid of shame. Their hearts were so hardened and their desires so corrupt, that no amount of listening to Moses' words, or chastening by God's Prophets, or mechanical obedience to rituals, laws and commands, or participating in Biblical Feasts would change them. Even so, Josiah was exactly right to do what he did. All any human leader can do is present the people with the divine truth and urge them to follow it; what people decide to do is up to them.

Therefore despite the fact that other than for some outward window dressing there was no real substantive inner change within Judah, the Lord highly praised Yoshiyahu for his personal dedication, absolute faithfulness and tireless efforts.

2Kings 23:25 CJB

25 No previous king was like him; because he turned to ADONAI with all his heart, with all his being and with all his power, in accordance with all the Torah of Moshe; nor did any king like him arise afterwards.

No doubt Josiah had his days of deep disappointment and discouragement. He was too wise not to suspect that all was not well within his kingdom despite his heroic efforts. And let this be the model for all who want to be Ministers, teachers, elders or leaders of any kind within the Body of Messiah. Our job shall always be to present the truth. But how many or few among the congregation who sincerely accept it, and change their lives because of it, is not to be used by us as a measure of our success or failure. As with Josiah the ONLY measure the Lord ever uses is faithfulness and obedience towards Him in the task that has been assigned. Yet we are only human, and so it can be quite discouraging when the results aren't what we hoped and prayed for.

In fact, that thought leads us right back to 2nd Kings 22, when the last words of that chapter make it clear that indeed King Josiah will, despite his faithfulness and hard work, fail to affect a saving heart-change in the people of Judah. But it's OK because that isn't his responsibility.

2Kings 22:18-20 CJB

18 But you are to tell the king of Y'hudah, who sent you to consult ADONAI, that ADONAI the God of Isra'el also says this: 'In regard to the words you have heard,

19 because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before ADONAI when you heard

what I said against this place and its inhabitants- that they would become an object of astonishment and cursing- and have torn your clothes and cried before me, I have also heard you, says ADONAI.

20 Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors, you will go to your grave in peace, and your eyes will not see all the calamity I am going to bring on this place."

Look at verses 26 and 27. Although they seem to just be mixed in with all the others, and are put there to add more bits and pieces of information, in fact they are the words that tell us that the defining moment for the existence of Judah had arrived. Yehoveh saw all the beautification of the Temple, the frantic removal of pagan shrines and altars, the excited people congregating to hear His Word and their unity in saying "Amen!" to it. He observed with pleasure the smashing of idols and Asherah poles and still He came to the judgment that nothing of a spiritual substance had changed for the better within the people of Judah. God had even provided Israel with a leader that was literally on par with the nearly incomparable King David, and still the people's hearts and minds remained perverted and far from God.

Thus verse 27 pronounces the final, devastating verdict for Judah:

2Kings 23:27 CJB

27 ADONAI said, "Just as I removed Isra'el, I will also remove Y'hudah out of my sight; and I will reject this city, which I chose, Yerushalayim, and the house concerning which I said, 'My name will be there.'"

The ballgame was over. All that remained was for the many players that the Lord had prepared for their various roles in removing Judah from the land to act upon the Lord's mysterious, undetectable and irresistible unction within them. But something else remained undone as well: the fulfillment of God's promise to righteous King Josiah that he would not be alive to witness the horrific end to all that he had dedicated his life to preventing.

Thus to complete the final item on God's checklist before Judah is exiled to Babylon, the Lord (as He typically does) employs another gentile nation to do His bidding. And suddenly up pops Egypt. Now in reality, even though the Bible is almost silent on the subject, Egypt had become a prominent player on the world stage again, and had great interest in controlling everything from the Sinai to the Euphrates River. Let me see if I can sum up rather briefly what had transpired around the region during Josiah's time on the throne because it has everything to do with setting up Babylon as the next world superpower and enabling them to then act as God's hammer of justice upon Judah. As I have taught you on numerous occasions: these great biblical events didn't happen in a vacuum. The decisions and actions of kings and kingdoms had reasons for them, supported by agendas and circumstances.

It's around 610 B.C. and once mighty Assyria has been in serious decline for at least two decades. Instead of being an unstoppable conqueror, Assyria is now in a fight for its very existence. Babylon has arisen from centuries of near dormancy, and from being little more than a vassal state of Assyria, to a regional power player; and they were a serious threat to

Assyria's empire. Egypt was also a powerful nation with a well-equipped army and growing navy. Since their nation bordered on the Red Sea to the east and the Mediterranean on the north, they were able seafarers and had made treaties with many nations who were also seafaring. Thus Egypt had a substantial mercenary force that employed soldiers who were comfortable on the land and sea. But this also led to a natural interest in obtaining as much of the seacoast territory along the beaches of Philistia, Israel, and up to Lebanon as possible. Neco II was the new Pharaoh and his seafaring interests led him to do something astounding; he began a canal project to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. That's correct: he actually set about to build the 1st Suez Canal. Ancient records show that he nearly succeeded. More than 120,000 laborers died trying.

Neco II was the Pharaoh of Egypt at the same time that Nabopolassar was the King of Babylon. They were rivals and both hoped one day to take over the empire that Assyria had established but was in the process of losing. For the moment, however, Egypt was an ally of Sin-Sharra-ishkun King of Assyria, while Nabopolassar's Babylon was at war with Assyria and therefore also with Egypt.

Just a few years before this, Nabopolassar led an expeditionary force along the Euphrates River in hopes of capturing, one-by-one, towns and cities that up to now were loyal to Assyria. By now the Kingdom of the Medes had aspirations of regional power and they allied themselves with Babylon to finish taking down Assyria. Together they marched to what had been the Assyrian stronghold of Haran, conquered it, and forced the Assyrians to retreat northward to Carchemish.

In a couple more years, the Babylonian and Mede forces made a move to take Carchemish, which if successful, would signal the end of Assyrian dominance and make Babylon essentially the undisputed ruler of all of Mesopotamia.

With that as a background, let's pick up 2nd Chronicles 35 at verse 20.

READ 2ND CHRONICLES 35:20 – end

So here we find that Pharaoh Neco was marching his army northward from Egypt, along the ancient coastal highway (usually called the Via Maris), the same one that the Lord told Moses to avoid in their exodus. A little above Ashdod Neco began to cut inland towards the Jezreel Valley, where he planned on continuing north up that famous battlefield that in End Times is called Armageddon, to help his ally Assyria defend Carchemish from the Babylonians. But for some unnamed reason, King Josiah of Judah inserted himself in to the equation and decided to try to halt Egypt's progress through the Promised Land.

Verse 21 has Neco sending envoys to Yoshiyahu and asking him why he wanted to do battle with Egypt since Egypt had no intention of doing anymore than marching through Judah and then the former northern kingdom territory in route to Carchemish. Neco went so far as to say he had no bone to pick with Judah. He said bluntly that his enemy was in Carchemish and then began telling Josiah that God (elohim) wouldn't want Josiah to impede Neco and in fact God (elohim) was on Neco's side.

There's been plenty of academic conjecture regarding this short passage to explain 1) why Josiah decided to take on Neco, and 2) was this "God" reference meant to point to Israel's God or Egypt's god? I think both matters are fairly easily resolved. Let's start with the second question first: I'm in complete agreement with Kiel and Delitzsch that the term God (elohim) is obviously referring to Yehoveh, God of Israel. Pharaoh didn't have a "God"; rather the Egyptians had many gods. So Neco was necessarily meaning Israel's God. Even so we don't have to now take the view that some commentators do that Yehoveh indeed spoke to Neco (just because Neco said He did) and told him that He was on his side and that he should march through the Promised Land. It is unimaginable that a prophet of Yehoveh took an oracle to Neco guaranteeing him safe passage; and further there is no hint of such a thing in the Scriptures. Rather this was just one king trying to get the upper hand on another king, and doing what he could in a largely diplomatic effort to avoid an unnecessary conflict. Neco wasn't so bold as to actually call Israel's God by his formal name, YHWH, which indeed might have infuriated the pious Josiah. He just said "elohim", which is a more or less generic term for God, or for any god for that matter.

Now for the issue of why Josiah decided to try and stop Neco: Judah had a problem. Did they want Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon to dominate the region? Because pragmatically they had no ability to defeat any of these forces. In other words, in a choice of nothing but bad options, which one was the least worst? His calculation was that it was better to not allow Egypt to bolster Assyria, and thus permit the two of them together to dominate the region. It was well known that Egypt would want to control the area where Judah was located, especially the coastal areas (for the reasons I mentioned earlier). Assyria was more interested in controlling Mesopotamia because of the two major rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. What Babylon together with the Medes would want is almost identical with Assyria's interests, except it seems that Josiah's calculation was that a coalition of Babylon and Media were the best of the bad options. Perhaps it was due to Hulda's prophecy of doom for Judah in which Judah would suffer what Israel suffered (exile to Assyria), that Josiah figured it would of course be Assyria to where Judah would also be exiled. So maybe the thing to do was to contribute to weakening Assyria (by helping Babylon win at Carchemish) making Judah's experience of exile not only less onerous but maybe even less likely.

In any case King Josiah shunned Neco's warning and attacked (foolishly some might argue) the Egyptian forces at Megiddo. There he was shot by an Egyptian archer, and taken back to Jerusalem mortally wounded. 2nd Kings 23: 29 and 30 says that Josiah was shot and killed at Megiddo, where he died, and then his corpse was transported back to Jerusalem. Likely it was that he died on the way back to Jerusalem from Megiddo. Thus this is how God fulfilled His promise that Josiah would not witness Judah exiled from the land. I imagine that this is not what Josiah had in mind when he was told he would die in shalom and rest with his ancestors; rather he envisioned dying in bed, a very old man. But here is a good case study in why we must be very cautious in imagining that we have a good handle on how some of the remaining unfulfilled biblical prophecies might play out. Too often those who write about these prophecies take the rosier scenario and assume that this must be how it will go. So when you think about the End Times prophecies, be careful what you wish for.

The people of the land, the am eretz, a highly influential religious and social movement within

Judah, followed the typical succession protocol and had the political power to elevate Josiah's son Y'ho'achaz to the throne to replace his deceased father. Y'ho'achaz first went by the name Shallum. He was a young man of 23 years, and only managed to rule for 3 months. The author of 2nd Kings characterizes him as totally different from his father, and was but another in a long line of wicked kings. It seems that because Josiah attacked Neco's army and no doubt wounded it, the angry Neco responded by subjugating Judah and making them a vassal to Egypt (the very thing Josiah feared and hoped to prevent). Neco obviously wanted his own man on Judah's throne, so he deposed Y'ho'achaz (who had been chosen by the am eretz) and imprisoned him in a place called Riblah.

The Pharaoh chose another son of Josiah whose name was Elyakim to be the new vassal king over Judah. As was a customary show of regal superiority, Neco changed Elyakim's name to Y'hoyakim. He was apparently content to rule under Neco and remained on Judah's throne for 11 years, but as another bad king (there would be nothing but bad kings the last few remaining years before Judah was hauled off to Babylon). We are told that Y'hoyakim consented to send large sums of gold and silver to Neco; large enough that he had to impose a special tax upon the people of Judah to pay for it.

But during Y'hoyakim's reign, there was a dramatic shift of power in the region. He remained a vassal under Egypt from 609 B.C. to 605 B.C. but then Babylon's power came into full bloom at that time and Egypt was repulsed and pushed back to the Sinai. It happened when Egypt and Assyria joined together and attempted to take Haran back from Babylon and was thoroughly trounced. This was the moment we could point to when Babylon became the new dominating power of the Middle East and of the Asian continent, and the Assyrian Empire came to an end.

A great deal happened in 605 B.C. Nabopolassar, the Babylonian king, died and he was succeeded by the infamous King Nebuchadnezzar. It was he who would almost immediately push Egypt out of Judah and out of most of the coastal plains. So after 4 years as a vassal to Egypt, now for the next 3 years Y'hoyakim became a vassal to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This new arrangement never settled well with the King of Judah; after all he had been brought to power by Pharaoh Neco and had a comfortable arrangement with Egypt. But overnight with Babylon now in control, the tribute amount was upped, and the conditions worsened. He rebelled. Bad move. King Nebuchadnezzar immediately sent his battle hardened troops (here called Chaldeans) along with the troops of other conquered kingdoms (Aram, Moab, and Ammon) against Judah in reprisal. It is interesting that we are told in 2nd Kings 24 (which we will get into next time) verses 2 and 3, that this attack upon Judah by Nebuchadnezzar was entirely the doing of YHWH; He intended for it to happen and He made it happen because He wanted to inflict major harm to Judah as but the beginning of His wrath against them. And next week we're going to talk about this in some detail because it exposes a side to God, and how He operates, that most Christians either cringe at or simply deny and say that God changed and doesn't operate this way any longer.