

DEFENDING JOSIAH

ALLEN HANSEN

King Josiah is a figure of stark contradiction: revered in the Bible as a peerless reformer yet frequently dismissed by modern critics as a power-hungry zealot who invented scripture to centralize authority. This article challenges that cynical modern consensus, arguing that a robust historical and contextual analysis vindicates Josiah as a faithful restorer of Israel's covenant. Rather than a calculated political coup, his reforms were a desperate, pious response to the crushing idolatrous influence of the Neo-Assyrian empire. The text demonstrates that Josiah's actions, including the supposed "violence" of his purge, were standard ancient ritual measures to cleanse a polluted land, not the acts of a tyrant. Evidence from later Jewish and Christian traditions, as well as Restoration scripture, consistently upholds Josiah as a model of righteousness. Ultimately, Josiah emerges not as a villain, but as a tragic hero who reclaimed his nation's spiritual identity and sacrificed his life in loyalty to God.

King Josiah is a rare example of a man almost universally praised in the Bible, yet much maligned today; almost a 180° turn in appreciation. This major and dramatic divide boils down to a single issue: his reforms.

One Latter-day Saint summary sets the stage reasonably well:

The discovery of the Book of the Law during King Josiah's reign (from 640 to 609 BC) jump-started a reform movement within Judaism. As part of this reform, Josiah carried out an aggressive shift within the popular religion — removing pagan religious institutions, eliminating sites of worship throughout Judah in order to centralize all worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and attempting to reestablish the covenant between the Jewish people and God. These events are particularly noteworthy for LDS students of the scriptures since they occurred within the

early lifetimes of the prophets Jeremiah and Lehi, and these events influenced both their ministries and their theology. The scriptures that were being used in Jerusalem at the end of Josiah's reign, including some of the prophecies of Jeremiah and the Book of Deuteronomy (the Book of the Law) appear in the Brass Plates taken by Lehi to the New World.¹

How one perceives these reforms tends to determine one's view of Josiah. Many in the Bible viewed Josiah as a righteous king restoring proper forms of worship and bringing his people back to the Lord. His death — an enigmatic episode — may be read as the ideal fulfillment of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy, and he is depicted as God's loyal vassal who did not hesitate to lay down his life for his Lord.

Twentieth-century biblical scholarship presented a critical view of Josiah's reign and reforms that was radically different to his depiction in the Hebrew Bible.² He was viewed as a figurehead of a movement pushing a new agenda, which attempted to erase earlier, legitimate forms of YHWH worship. This movement has been termed as the Deuteronomists, called after the fifth book of the Pentateuch, which was supposedly written or extensively edited by King Josiah's priests and scribes.

The studies of Margaret Barker have contributed to a Latter-day Saint view of these reforms as apostasy, with the Book of Mormon serving as a righteous rejection of them.³ A slew of recent books and podcasts have gone farther, and taken a more extreme stance, viewing Josiah and his reforms as evil and the book of Deuteronomy itself as demonic.⁴ Such a caricature is an unwarranted distortion and rests on shaky ground.

1. Benjamin L. McGuire, "Josiah's Reform: An Introduction," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 161–163.
2. Though dated, one of the better, extensive treatments of the critical position remains Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).
3. The classic treatment remains Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Occasional Papers* 2 (2001): 1–94. See also his recent survey, "Twenty Years After 'Paradigms Regained,' Part 1: The Ongoing, Plain, and Precious Significance of Margaret Barker's Scholarship for Latter-day Saint Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 1–64.
4. David Butler, *In the Language of Adam* (Plain and Precious Publishing, 2024),

The book of Deuteronomy was important to the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants.⁵ So much in scripture would be missing and incomprehensible without it, and we cannot afford to discard it based on unsubstantiated speculation and conspiracy theories. Instead, Latter-day Saints must apply a critical approach, which does not seek to discard the Bible or any of its books, but to better understand them on their own terms, as a product of their times.

Ultimately, overtly negative and simplistic views damage our ability to learn from the scriptures. As a paradigm, it is a dead end.⁶ We need not return to a naive view of the Bible to appreciate Josiah's role as

and Jonah Barnes, *The Key to the Keystone* (Plain and Precious Publishing, 2024). The interested reader may find multiple such podcasts by searching the names of either author.

5. See Matthias Henze and David Lincicum, eds., *Israel's Scriptures in Early Christian Writings: The Use of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023), 767–794; Gregory Steven Dundas, *Mormon's Record: The Historical Message of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2024), 175–211, 289–324, but esp. 300–306. No study of Deuteronomy in the Doctrine and Covenants exists that I am aware of. For now, see Doctrine and Covenants 84:39–62 for examples of both the language of Deuteronomy ("For you shall live by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God") and its characteristic themes, such as covenant, heeding, hearkening, and being blessed for that or cursed for disobeying. It may be significant that Section 84 deals with the call to go to a new land of promise and build a new covenant Zion there.
6. One of Kevin Christensen's valuable contributions to church scholarship is to recognize the importance of paradigms. "In debates about religion, background theory is the issue, fundamental assumptions and basic concepts are at stake, and therefore, the dependence of measurement and observation on those assumptions is crucial. This theory-dependence was exactly the reason for, and substance of, my whole approach. It is why I cited the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wine Bottles. It's why I cite Kuhn and Barbour and Goff.... The whole concept of paradigm debate and the influence of theory on experiment design, testing, and interpretation has also been a prominent theme in my LDS writings since my first publication in 1990. And Stephenson's conspicuous failure to address that basic underlying premise means that the beam in his own eye remains in place to obscure his vision. Everything that follows in his essay suffers thereby." Kevin Christensen, "Image is Everything: Pay No Attention to the Man Behind the Curtain," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 99–150.

a righteous king and the book of Deuteronomy as valuable scripture. Even if there were excesses, these reforms were still necessary and an overall positive.

We can fully endorse William Hamblin's view that, "I believe Josiah's reform of the temple cult was both necessary and inspired and was not in itself the cause of a temple apostasy."⁷

TIME AND PLACE

The Why

There is a wonderful quote from Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

To begin your study of the life of Muad'Dib, then take care that you first place him in his **time**: born in the 57th year of the Padishah Emperor, Shaddam IV. And take the most special care that you locate Muad'Dib in his **place**: the planet Arrakis. Do not be deceived by the fact that he was born on Caladan and lived his first fifteen years there. Arrakis, the planet known as Dune, is forever his place.⁸

Historical context is time and place. Herbert adapted this from an insight in Lesley Blanch's now largely forgotten history of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and the Muslim leader of the resistance: Imam Shamil. "Thus, in writing of Shamil, we must place him first in his time — the first half of the nineteenth century, and then in his

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7. William J. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–176. Hamblin did not believe nothing was lost, just that the reforms did not create an apostasy, and that overall, they were needed. While I may differ in degree on what was lost, I find his position entirely reasonable. Neal Rappleye explores what some of these excesses may have looked like in the context of Lehi's family dynamics. See Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 87–99. Another possible example of what was lost is discussed in Neal Rappleye, "Serpents of Fire and Brass: A Contextual Study of the Brazen Serpent Tradition in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 217–298. Neal Rappleye is a good friend and co-author, and I am indebted to his many insights over the years on Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomists, and much more.
 8. Frank Herbert, *Dune* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965), 3. Paul is the charismatic, sympathetic and ruthless villain of the story, which I obviously do not view as holding true for Josiah. No comparison between the figures is intended.

place — the mountains — and then, in turn, we must place those mountains in their frame."⁹

The Caucasuses are nestled in between two seas and hemmed in by Russia to the north and the then-Ottoman and Persian empires to the southwest and southeast, respectively. When these empires expanded and fought each other, the Caucasuses were caught in the middle of it all.¹⁰ Blanch was right to insist that her readers must understand the geography to understand the people and events in her history. Time and place. Politics, culture, war, economics, intellectual and religious beliefs are all part of this. This is true for history in general, no matter its subset.

Judah in the 7th Century BCE

To understand Josiah, then, we must understand him in relation to time and place. He was likely born in 648 BCE and assumed the throne around the year 640. A potential meaning of his name is YHWH strengthens or empowers.¹¹

When examining a map of the Ancient Near East, one of the first things you may notice is how tiny Judah was, surrounded by bigger kingdoms and empires. The next thing is that, despite its size, Judah controlled vital trade and military routes between the empires. Assyria could not be reached by land from Egypt and vice-versa without going through Judah. The great empires always had an interest in the fortunes of that kingdom.¹²

9. Lesley Blanch, *The Sabres of Paradise: Conquest and Vengeance in the Caucasus* (London: John Murray, 1960), 27.

10. The Russian literature on this conflict is extensive. Important treatments in English are W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border, 1828–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953); Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* (London: Frank Cass, 1994); Gary Hamburg, Thomas Sanders, and Ernest Tucker, eds., *Russian-Muslim Confrontation in the Caucasus: Alternative Visions of the Conflict between Imam Shamil and the Russians, 1830–1859* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004).

11. Shalom Smirin, *Josiah and His Times* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1951), 33.

12. See "Map 4" in Yohanan Aharoni, Michael Avi-Yonah, Anson F. Rainey, Ze'ev Safrai, and R. Steven Notley, *The Carta Bible Atlas*, 5th ed. (Jerusalem: Carta Jerusalem, 2011), 13.

To Judah's immediate north, the kingdom of Israel and its capital of Samaria lay in ruins, destroyed by Assyria nearly a century prior.¹³ This is not to say it was a desolate wasteland; a certain number of Israelites remained, alongside administrators and colonists brought in by Assyria but the land *was* depopulated, a shadow of its former self.¹⁴ It was also a physical reminder of broken covenants and exile, that is, spiritual death.¹⁵

Judah had barely escaped destruction itself. The population decreased dramatically and much of the Shephelah — the breadbasket of Judah — was taken away by Assyria and given to Gaza and other Philistine kingdoms.¹⁶ The influx of rural and provincial refugees from Judah into Jerusalem caused an additional social upheaval, exacerbated by the arrival of Israelite refugees from the northern kingdom

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13. Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Study*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East, 18 vols., ed. Weippert and Baruch Halpern (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1992), is an extensive study of the difficult and often contradictory material on the conquest of the Northern Kingdom. A number of approaches to this problem were suggested in a 2017 conference organized by Shuichi Hasegawa. "Despite considerable scholarly efforts over many years, the events of the last three decades of the Northern Kingdom of Israel are still hidden beneath the veil of history. A number of questions remain unresolved..." Shuichi Hasegawa, "The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel: Introducing the Proceedings of a Multi-Disciplinary Conference," in Shuichi Hasegawa, Christoph Levin, Karen Radner, eds., *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 1.
 14. Gary N. Knoppers, "In Search of Post-Exilic Israel: Samaria after the Fall of the Northern Kingdom," in *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 170–171.
 15. On the topic of exile as death, see Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 121; Matthew J. Ramage, *From the Dust of the Earth: Benedict XVI, the Bible, and the Theory of Evolution* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 154.
 16. W. Boyd Barrick, *The King and the Cemeteries: Toward a New Understanding of Josiah's Reforms* (Leiden, NL: Brill Academic, 2002), 145–146; Shuichi Hasegawa, "History and Archaeology: The Kingdom of Judah," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Books of Kings*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Matthieu Richelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 253; C. L. Crouch, *The Making of Israel: Cultural Diversity in the Southern Levant and the Formation of Ethnic Identity in Deuteronomy* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1982), 71–74.

with their own culture and practices.¹⁷ Judah's prestige and political power were vastly reduced. Under Manasseh, the kingdom regained much territory, but sunk deeper in a spiritual morass.¹⁸

A fuller consideration of the proximate cause is necessary: Assyrian dominance.

Assyria

Assyria was among the greatest empires that the world had ever known; it stretched from parts of modern Iran in the east, to Armenia in the north, to Arabia in the south, and at times as far west as Egypt.¹⁹ Naturally, this was achieved by violent conquest and subjugation.

Per Mark Healy, "The Kings of Assyria were very mindful of the effectiveness of the 'invincible weapon' that existed in the form of the army they commanded. While it was never quite 'invincible', the Assyrian military was nonetheless the most effective in the Near East for over three centuries."²⁰

Imagine living in the world today and not experiencing some sort of presence or influence from the United States. Though without the intensity of modern mass media and global communications, that was

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17. See the map in Craig W. Tyson and Virginia R. Herrmann, eds., *Imperial Peripheries in the Neo-Assyrian Period* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2018), 1. Benjamin Toro cautions that "the Neo-Assyrian Empire was not a contiguous territory, but an imperial core dotted with 'islands' of imperial control or outlying provinces, surrounding other states, which are considered 'allies' or vassals." Benjamin Toro, *The Pax Assyriaca: The Historical Evolution of Civilisations and Archaeology of Empires* (Bicester, GB: Archaeopress Publishing, Ltd., 2022), 88. On the refugees, see Barrick, *King and the Cemeteries*, 146–159; William M. Schniedewind, *Who Really Wrote the Bible: The Story of the Scribes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 82–96.
 18. Paul S. Evans, *Sennacherib and the War of 1812: Disputed Victory in the Assyrian Campaign of 701 BCE in Light of Military History* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 53.
 19. For a concise political and military history, see Mark Healy, *The Ancient Assyrians: Empire and Army, 883–612 BC* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2023).
 20. Healy, *Ancient Assyrians*, 189. A fuller consideration of the Assyrian military and its religious dynamic is found in the relevant chapters of Charlie Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

Assyria in the Ancient Near East, and understanding that impact is crucial to understanding the Josian reforms.

Empire and war were religious imperatives in Assyria. The world was divided into a center and periphery. The center was Assyria, the abode of the gods, of civilization, and order instead of chaos. The periphery was where barbarians and demons and chaos resided, but it was rich in resources. The center had a divine mission to expand. They brought order and civilization; the periphery gave its resources.²¹

Ashur was originally the city-god of Ashur, its personification. He was a universalist god, and “the Assyrian king was “his chief priest and vicar on earth.” As G. Frame points out, “the god, the city, and the land were all known by the same name.”²² Ashur took on the attributes (and households) of the earlier, more powerful gods, Enlil and Marduk, and he mandated conquest to expand the center.²³ Assyria’s vassals were expected to recognize Ashur’s ascendancy and suzerainty.

However, there is no evidence that Assyria directly imposed the *cult* of their gods on subjugated peoples.²⁴ The subjugated could keep their gods as long as they accepted the suzerainty of Assyria and its god Ashur. *Rebellion* would result in the cultic images of the gods being exiled, just like their people. The stakes of defiance were high. Make no mistake, political rebellion was always understood as a religious act. The Rassam cylinder records how inhabitants of Ekron rebelled, that is, sinned against the god Ashur. Mention of the king comes after in this section of the account and is closely tied to the god.²⁵ The king

21. Mario Liverani, *Assyria: The Imperial Mission* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 12–14.

22. Douglas R. Frayne and Johanna H. Stuckey, *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Near East: Three Thousand Deities of Anatolia, Syria, Israel, Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Elam* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 34.

23. Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 34; Liverani, *Assyria*, 12–15. Todd Uriona raised the intriguing possibility that Assyrian ideology may be referenced in Nephi’s vision of the great and abominable church. Todd Uriona, “Assyria and the ‘Great Church’ of Nephi’s Vision,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 1–30.

24. Mordechai (Morton) Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press; Society of Biblical Literature, 1974), 88.

25. Lines 41–48 of the Rassam cylinder. Mordechai (Morton) Cogan, *The Raging*

punished earthly rebels, their dead ancestors, *and* their gods.²⁶ "The tombs of their former and later kings, (who had) not revered Ashur and Ishtar, my lords, (who had) harassed my royal ancestors, I ravaged, tore down, and laid open to the sun."²⁷

What is more relevant is Assyrian "soft power," or its cultural cachet and influence. Assyria was the dominant power in the world and other nations followed the trends the Assyrians set.²⁸ When you are the dominant power, many begin to see things your way. Cogan suggests that Manasseh's zealous and aggressive embrace of paganism was due in part to his wife, a lady of Yotbah in Assyrian-occupied Israel.²⁹ As can be seen by the examples of Solomon's wives and of Jezebel and Athaliah, women were indeed a driving force in cultic reforms.³⁰ Be that as it may, Assyria's influence on Israel and Judah's elite was clearly deleterious. It helped resurrect older, forbidden practices and transformed the meaning of others.

For instance, horses and chariots of the sun were worshipped as part of Canaanite/Levantine religion, and YHWH worship likely incorporated much of this imagery. Ancient Israel also perceived God and his angels as riding chariots.³¹ That was nothing novel, yet

Torrent: Documents from Assyria and Babylonia relating to Israel during the First Temple Period (Jerusalem: Carta Jerusalem, 2008), 108 [Hebrew].

26. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 22–37.

27. Steven M. Voth, "Jeremiah," in *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, 10 vols., ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 4:257.

28. It must be noted that much of this came by way of Aramaean influence and participation in Assyrian belief, culture, and administration. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 83–90; Eckart Frahm, "Introduction," in Eckart Frahm, ed., *A Companion to Assyria*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester, GB: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2017), 7.

29. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 91.

30. See Ginny Brewer-Boydston, *Good Queen Mothers, Bad Queen Mothers: The Theological Presentation of the Queen Mother in 1 and 2 Kings*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 54 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 9–15, for a helpful overview of queen-mothers in cult and politics. See also Elna K. Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and their involvement in the House of David*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 349, ed. David J. A. Clines, Philip R. Davies, and Andrew Mein (Sheffield, GB: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 154–172.

31. 2 Kings 2:11, 2 Kings 6:17; Zechariah 1:8–11. Ezekiel 1 describes an elaborate

we find them taking on a new ritual prominence during the era of Assyrian ascendancy. As noted by Eynikel, “The sun and moon cults were known in Syro-Palestine before the period of the Assyrian domination, but the cults were intensified as of this period.”³² “In Judah,” writes Cogan, “new forms dressed up old Canaanite ritual in a blatant assimilatory trend....”³³

What was true in general for Levantine worship was doubly so for such images as divine chariotry. This may be understood by looking closer at Assyrian practice and imagery.

In Assyria and Babylonia, pulling the ceremonial chariot bearing the image of Sams, Marduk, and Adad was serious and sacred business, requiring lavish preparation. Talented artisans crafted ornate blankets with tassels and intricate harness decorations to caparison the horses formally. The priests conducted complex rituals involving hymns and incantations, some designed to be whispered into the horses’ left ears, three times over, while they consumed the special offering set before them.³⁴

vision of God riding a chariot. This imagery persisted in Judaism. See Allen Hansen and Spencer Kraus, “My Name is the Sun,” in *Abraham and His Family in Scripture, History, and Tradition*, 2 vols., ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, John S. Thompson, Matthew L. Bowen, and David R. Seely (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2025), 1:150–152.

32. Erik Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah and the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, Old Testament Studies, 84 vols., ed., Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1995) 33:210. See also the fuller discussion in pages 205–211. For more on the sun cult, see Mark S. Smith, “The Near Eastern Background of Solar Language for Yahweh,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 1 (Spring, 1990), 29–39; J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 111, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield, GB: JSOT Press, 1993). Morton Smith, “Helios in Palestine,” in Morton Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, 2 vols., ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1995), 1:238–262, surveys evidence from later periods.
33. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 87–88. Cogan views that assimilatory influence as coming through Aramaic mediation.
34. Deborah O’Danie Cantrell, *The Horsemen of Israel: Horses and Chariotry in Monarchic Israel (Ninth–Eighth Centuries B.C.E.)*, History, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant, 11 vols., ed. Jeffrey Blakely and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns; University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2011), 1:58.

We have a striking visual record of the importance of chariots in Assyrian religion:

In a detail within Sennacherib's relief series of the battle of Lachish, two priests in tall hats are performing a ceremony before an altar within the military camp. The representation of two priests performing a ceremony in front of an incense-burner, an altar and a chariot, sometimes with divine standards, is repeated continuously.³⁵

These standards stood in for the gods, who rode the chariot like the king would while conducting the war and leading the army to victory. One of the Assyrian divine epithets was *Rakib-El*, or El's charioteer (likely the sun god was meant), attesting to the importance of chariotry in religion. This deity was also the patron of the aggressively expansionist Sam'al dynasty in Aramea that was alternately foe and vassal to Assyria.³⁶ One of the Sam'alians kings justified his legitimacy by emphasizing that both *Rakib-El* and the king of Assyria chose him to rule. *Rakib-El* thus had clear associations with legitimate kingship and Assyrian rule or ideology and could easily fit in a Yahwistic framework. Legitimate practices and symbols could become corrupted, and their meaning change over time; yet they were not the core of Israelite belief.

Josiah's reign coincided with the drastic decline of the Assyrian empire. Ashurbanipal died sometime between 630–627 BCE. Assuming the latter date, "just 15 years after the death of this last 'great king of Assyria', the Neo-Assyrian Empire was gone..."³⁷

Babylon was able to break free of Assyrian rule, and allied itself with the Medes, a new power in the region. Assyria's appeal to its Egyptian ally could not save it.³⁸ Nineveh, the largest city in the world, was sacked in 612, and the last king reigned only until 609 BCE

This gave Josiah a freer hand. "The general outline is clear: Josiah operated within a power vacuum that occurred because of the decline

35. Krzysztof Ulanowski, *The Neo-Assyrian and Greek Divination in War* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2021), 101.

36. Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 300. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 88–89.

37. Healy, *Ancient Assyrians*, 177.

38. Healy, *Ancient Assyrians*, 177–185.

of the Assyrian empire.”³⁹ When Josiah extended his rule to the north at Assyria’s expense, it was because the empire was unable to defend its far-flung territories.⁴⁰

Egypt

Space will not allow for a detailed look into the Egyptian kingdom, so a brief overview will have to suffice. During Josiah’s reign, the pharaoh Psamtik I was a member of the 26th dynasty, which had overthrown the Nubians. Assyria’s yoke had been broken in, and this opened a new cultural and political moment in Egypt.

Egypt had historical claims on the Levant; it had been part of their empire. Similar to the Assyrian model, this interest was as much religious as geopolitical. “The beginning of Egyptian expansion into the Levant was justified as an exercise in ‘extending the borders of Egypt’ and in ‘eliminating violence from the highlands.’”⁴¹

The Levant was where their ambitions lay, and likely why they came to Assyria’s aid against Babylon, despite their history of conflict. A strong Babylon would frustrate Egypt’s ability to control the region, whereas a weaker Assyria would be more amenable to territorial concessions.

After the fall of Assyria, Egypt exerted a powerful pull on post-Josian Judah. Babylon did not have a fraction of the influence on the region that either Assyria or Egypt did. Egypt, essentially, was reconstituting its empire, viewing Judah as a vassal. Many of the Judahite elite saw Egypt as their natural ally against Mesopotamian powers such as Babylon and the late, unlamented Assyria, much in the same way that the Scots viewed the *auld alliance* with France against England.⁴²

39. Bustenay Oded, ed., *2 Chronicles*, Olam HaTanach, 24 vols., 6th ed., ed. Y. Amit, A. Berlin, H. Cohen, et. al (Tel-Aviv: Divrei HaYamim Publishing, 2002), 24:260 [Hebrew].

40. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 71. How far north Josiah’s effective rule extended is a matter of dispute. However, he is depicted as acting in Samaria with impunity, and that was the seat of Assyrian administration in Israel. This fits the historical picture of Assyria’s downfall.

41. Liverani, *Assyria*, 13.

42. Siobhan Talbott, *Conflict, Commerce and Franco-Scottish Relations, 1560–1713*, Perspectives in Economic and Social History 28, ed. Andrew August and Jari Eloranta (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15–16. Niall Barr, *Flodden* (Stroud, GB: Tempus Publishing Group, LTD., 2003), explores the disastrous results

Cultural and historical ties were strong.⁴³ As Jeremiah (and, indeed, Josiah) predicted, Egyptian machinations resulted in Judah's ultimate destruction at the hands of Babylon.

Kingship

Kingship is another concept that may seem broadly familiar to modern readers, but requires some explanation if we are to more fully understand it with ancient eyes. According to Sarah Japhet, "YHWH's kingship is only realized by means of the Davidic dynasty."⁴⁴ The person of the king mattered. "[From] first to last the king or, to be more precise, the ruling member of the House of David is regarded in some way as the light or life of his people."⁴⁵

Unlike the rest of the Ancient Near East, Israel and Judah did not consider their king as "god," though in some sense he may have been more than human.⁴⁶ At the very least, he had a unique connection to God, and stood between Him and the rest of His nation. Kingship was a corporal and sacral concept.

Thus it is that any violent disturbance of the national life, such as that caused by a prolonged drought or an outburst of plague, may be attributed to the fact that the king himself has violated the sanctions of the group; and the whole royal house or the very nation itself may be involved with him in the condemnation which follows upon any such trespass. Correspondingly, if the nation is to prosper, the king must act as the embodiment of "righteousness." That is to say, it is first and foremost his concern to see that the behaviour of

the alliance had for sixteenth-century Scotland.

43. The literature on Israelite-Egyptian ties is rich. See J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 39; Bernd U. Schipper, "Egypt and the Kingdom of Judah under Josiah and Jehoiakim," *Tel Aviv* 37, no. 2 (2010): 200–226.
44. Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 310.
45. Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955), 2.
46. Nicholas Majors, *The King-Priest in Samuel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 3; Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh: The Messiah Concept in the Old Testament and Later Judaism*, trans. G. W. Anderson, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 104–110.

society at large is thoroughly “righteous” and that, to this end, the sanctions of the group, particularly the nation’s laws, are uniformly observed throughout the different strata of society; for it is only in this way, when the individual is restrained from doing “what is right in his own eyes,” that the wellbeing of the nation, in fact its life or vitality, can be assured.⁴⁷

Johnson observes that the king is responsible to God for the people because they are God’s people. Overseeing the cult so it functioned properly was another part of the king’s duties. This is analogous to how the latter-day President of the Church is responsible for temples and the endowment ceremony.

Comparative material bears this observation:

The ancient Near Eastern temple ideology embodied a mutual relationship between king and cultus: just as the monarch assumed responsibility for the cultus, the cultus bestowed blessings upon the monarch, legitimacy not being the least of these. Expressed in this way, it might be argued that monarchies exploited the religious traditions of their nations for their own glorification. Without excluding that possibility in individual regimes, the texts reveal a different perspective: the kingship existed, at least in part, for the sake of the cultus and the cultic responsibility lay near the centre of the very concept of king.⁴⁸

What is sometimes missed is that the king *was* the head of the priesthood on earth. Temples were his immediate concern, and the basis of his right to reign. For example, according to one Egyptian inscription, Amon chose Tutankhamen as king precisely because temples lay in ruins, and he was to restore them after the evils caused by his father Akhenaten.⁴⁹

From this perspective, kings are chosen to establish and maintain the cultus. Disregard for the cultic aspect of the royal vocation could be interpreted as the reason for a king’s removal (as in the case of Nabonidus), just as the cultic accomplishments of a monarch or dynasty could stand as implicit proof of the wise choice of the gods.⁵⁰

47. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship*, 3.

48. William Riley, *King and Cultus in Chronicles: Worship and the Reinterpretation of History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 159.

49. William Riley, *King and Cultus*, 160.

50. Riley, *King and Cultus*, 161.

In ancient Israel, the priest-king was not meant to replace the high-priest or the Levites. Rather "his role centers upon leading Israel with keeping all the words of the law (Deut. 17:18-20)."⁵¹ The king ensured that the temple was "up and running," and that there were enough Levites and supplies to function properly. He was to serve during the festivals. However, unlike in Mesopotamia, the Israelite king was *not* a lawgiver, but an upholder of the law, and this is an important distinction for Josiah's reforms. The command to have a copy of the law written by the king was a strong reminder that he was not above it and that he served God, not the other way round. Doing justice does not depend on the king, conceptually; rather, he depends on it to be a king in the first place.

It is illuminating to consider some of the kingship theologies developed on ancient and biblical bases, as they offer a window to a different conceptual world.

The idea that a ruler's will reflected God's will was ... commonplace in medieval Christian states and perhaps, if we leave aside the specifically Christian content, in almost all premodern societies. It is probably the most powerful political idea in human history, reflected for Christians even in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."⁵²

One medieval European writer offered a striking take on the king's identity as a deified man: "Concerning one personality, he was, by nature, an individual man: concerning his other personality, he was, by grace, a Christus, that is, a God-man."⁵³ Russian kingship theology also employed this idea: "Although the tsar's earthly nature is like that of every man, the power of his rank is higher, like God."⁵⁴ There is

51. Majors, *King-Priest in Samuel*, 70–71.

52. Daniel B. Rowland, *God, Tsar, and People: The Political Culture of Early Modern Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 383–384.

53. The Norman Anonymous, as cited in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 46.

54. B. A. Uspenskij and V. M. Zhivov, "Tsar and God: Semiotic Aspects of the Sacralization of the Monarch in Russia," in Boris Uspenskij and Victor Zhivov, *"Tsar and God" And Other Essays in Russian Cultural Semiotics*, trans. Marcus Levitt, David Budgen, and Liv Bliss, ed. Marcus C. Levitt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 4.

another statement in a Russian compilation that echoes the sixth-century Byzantine writer Agapetos, but it is shockingly addressed to a *pagan* king. “To you, tsar, a mortal and perishable man, we give honor and obeisance as to one who has power, because the kingdom and the glory of this quickly perishing world is given you by God.”⁵⁵

Daniel Rowland pointed out that maintaining this image was a massive investment and undertaking: “Rulers spent large amounts of their time, and often very large amounts of precious financial resources, to demonstrate their piety, and, through good works, the connection between their will and God’s will.”⁵⁶ To read this too cynically is to miss a valuable insight into how people imagined God and His representatives on earth.

In medieval Ethiopia, the role of the scribes was to magnify the righteous acts of the king.⁵⁷ This was not cynical or nefarious, it was how they perceived the world and the relationship of the king to God. “In these books, the emperor is described as God’s messenger and a miracle worker who can destroy his enemies by his very presence. Thus, all members of the kingdom must make obeisance to him; all who serve him will be blessed, and all who oppose him will be cursed.”⁵⁸ Saint Tekele Heymanot wrote that when the emperor and his army appeared on the battlefield, “As smoke is scattered by the wind so did their enemies scatter when facing them.”⁵⁹

The Deuteronomists are not nearly as effusive. The king is important, but decidedly human, and his appearance in battle does not guarantee victory. As great as Josiah was, he was not described as anything near like God, and he would die in battle without gaining victory. It is possible that in Ethiopia this is “an aspect of the general African ‘Konigskultur’ ... though not denying the importance of its Christian and Old Testament roots.”⁶⁰ Yet, this was also a feature of medieval

55. Uspenskij and Zhivov, “Tsar and God: Semiotic Aspects,” 4.

56. Rowland, *God, Tsar, and People*, 368.

57. Daniel Belete, *The Gideonites: A History of the Jews of Ethiopia and Their Journey to the Land of Israel* (Ariel, IL: Belete Books, 2024), location 21–23 in the Steimatzky e-reader [Hebrew].

58. Belete, *Gideonites*, location 21.

59. Belete, *Gideonites*, location 22.

60. Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible: The Schweich Lectures 1967* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1968), 131.

European belief. However we are to understand this, it highlights a powerful contrast between Deuteronomistic kingship and other forms, and the Hebrew Bible appears to be a deliberate exception to most kingship theologies.

This should inform our understanding of the scribal project both under and after Josiah's kingship, and it cannot be emphasized enough that the biblical scribes were not shy when it came to criticizing kings, even those whom they favored.⁶¹ The king was praised only for doing what was right before God, the temple, and the people.

WHAT WERE THE REFORMS?

Two Accounts

The Hebrew Bible presents us with two accounts of the reforms in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. The account in 2 Kings describes how Josiah discovered a book of the law while repairing the temple and launched an impressive series of reforms in the space of a year.

Despite some skepticism, the 2 Chronicles account should be preferred on historical grounds.⁶² According to the Chronicler, Josiah took his sacred duties as king seriously. At age sixteen — before attaining majority — he sought after God. This phrase suggests something of his goodness and abilities even at a young age. It also seems to suggest that God formed Josiah for the purpose of restoring proper worship in

61. See, for example, the episode of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11–12.

62. Barrick, *King and the Cemeteries*, 17–20; Lauren A. S. Monroe, *Josiah's Reform and the Dynamics of Defilement: Israelite Rites of Violence and the Making of a Biblical Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15–16, 57–58; Smirin, *Josiah and His Times*, 52–58. This paper adopts a holistic, unitary approach to the Bible. The texts more often demonstrate a literary unity and logic than not. Thus, the Documentary Hypothesis and classic source criticism are not the concern here and shall not be utilized. Others are welcome to take a different approach to the question at hand. The interested reader is directed to Jeffrey L. Morrow and John S. Bergsma, *Murmuring Against Moses: The Contentious History and Contested Future of Pentateuchal Studies* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023); Gary A. Rendsburg, *How the Bible Is Written* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2019); Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books; Koren Publishers, 2020). These provide a look into problems with the Documentary Hypothesis and suggest alternative approaches to biblical scholarship.

the temple, and that the young king intuitively recognized his mission. Anson Rainey noticed that the year 633 BCE was the very year Josiah married Hamutal of Libnah in the Shephelah. As this was a significant Levitical stronghold, Rainey speculated that marriage to an important Levitical family might have stimulated the reforms.⁶³ While impossible to prove, this may well have some truth to it. As we have seen, women were a powerful factor in cultic reforms, and priests and Levites were part of strong familial networks. Hilkiah and Shaphan, for example, were likely close relatives. The Levites also tended to be politically and religiously conservative, having a particular aversion to the northern and foreign worship introduced into Judah.⁶⁴

Josiah, it seems, was influenced in his youth by anti-Assyrian circles, and being of strong character knew what he must do. As king of Judah he aspired to be his own master, independent of all foreign powers. For this to happen he believed that a return to the source [of Israel's faith] and the traditions of the fathers was needed, necessitating the removal of all foreign worship from the land.⁶⁵

This should not be viewed as a cynical power-grab: if the kingdom were not free, then by implication, God — its ultimate king — was also a subservient vassal god, unable to fulfil the most basic of promises He made to His people. The king represented His agent on earth, mirroring God's own dominion over the world. Josiah never completely achieved his goal, and he ultimately died for it.

Josiah spent the next four years of his reign enacting cultic reforms aimed at restoring proper worship of YHWH, which was expressing faith in Him. We would do well to remember that faith in God was essentially loyalty to him.

The Chronicler and 2 Kings are not as contradictory as they may seem at first glance.⁶⁶ They contain the same kind of reforms and the same events but in a differing order; Chronicles also omits what Manasseh supposedly reformed after his repentance.⁶⁷ Otherwise,

63. Anson F. Rainey, "The Biblical Shephelah of Judah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 251 (1983): 16.

64. Rainey, "Biblical Shephelah of Judah," 16–17.

65. Smirin, *Josiah and His Times*, 63.

66. Smirin, *Josiah and His Times*, 36, 50–58; Oded, *2 Chronicles*, 24:258 [Hebrew].

67. The rhetoric of Chronicles is contradictory on this point.

they agree in substance. There are Assyrian examples relating to the land of Israel, where the king's deeds over a lengthy period are condensed into a single year.⁶⁸

Curiously, there is a well-known nineteenth century analogue. John Wesley Powell's popular *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* combined the dramatic events of his 1869 expedition with the scientific accomplishments of 1871–1874.⁶⁹ Thus, even in the modern age, strict chronological fidelity has sometimes been sacrificed for literary and rhetorical effect, as well as market demands.⁷⁰

The Reforms

As noted by Shalom Smirin, none of Josiah's reforms had needed a book; They followed the example of prior reforms.⁷¹ This was how the kings of Judah acted when they found the kingdom to be in serious trouble. Hezekiah, the most extensive reformer prior to Josiah, did much the same, but did not rely on a book, either (2 Kings 18:1–8). What, then, were these reforms?

William Hamblin listed three basics of Josiah's reforms:

1. Israel should worship only YHWH; Israel must not worship foreign gods.
2. Israel must not worship idols (or worship YHWH as an idol), or follow other Canaanite cultic practices.
3. To the extent they discuss it, Israel must worship only in the Jerusalem temple.⁷²

Whatever quibbles there may be, overall, the schema is sound. The point was to remove the presence and worship of other gods.

68. Sargon II's expedition against Philistine Ashdod. See Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 88–89.

69. Edward Dolnick, *Down the Great Unknown: John Wesley Powell's 1869 Journey of Discovery and Tragedy Through the Grand Canyon* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 290.

70. John F. Ross, *The Promise of the Grand Canyon: John Wesley Powell's Perilous Journey and His Vision for the American West* (New York: Viking, 2018), 240–241.

71. Smirin, *Josiah and His Times*, 52–54.

72. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," 171–172.

Following Smirin, it can be seen that all the specifics acts of Josiah described in 2 Kings 23 describe the removal of idolatrous worship:

- v. 4: The vessels for Baal, the Asherah, and other astral deities are removed from the temple and burned.⁷³
- v. 5: Idolatrous priests appointed by previous kings to offer incense to foreign gods are removed from office. A foreign term for priests is used.⁷⁴
- v. 6: The Asherah is removed from the temple, burned, and ground to powder.

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73. Baal was a central god of the Canaanite-Phoenician pantheon. Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 43–46; Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, eds., *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 97–153. There is considerable debate over the role of Asherah in ancient Israel. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Dearborn, MI: Dove Booksellers, 2002), xxx–xxxvi, is a useful overview of the problem. The notes in Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 202–205, contain remarkably helpful discussions of the secondary literature. The caution in Steve A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of Asherah: With Further Considerations of the Goddess* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), is commendable, and he corrects many misconceptions regarding the goddess. Pillar figurines are addressed in Erin Darby, *Interpreting Judean Pillar Figurines: Gender and Empire in Judean Apotropaic Ritual*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2 Reihe* 69 (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 37–43. The classic LDS treatment remains Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 191–243. Too close a connection between Asherah and our Restoration view of Heavenly Mother, as held by D. J. Butler and other podcasters, does not, in my opinion, hold up when the evidence is considered. Margaret Barker’s book, *The Mother of the Lord: Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), has been important to these claims. An extended excursus on the flawed methodology and dubious claims in the book would exceed the scope of this paper.
74. Barrick, *King and the Cemeteries*, 66–70. Butler’s suggestion that these were “veil men,” “priests of the veil,” or “chomer-priests” is entirely fanciful. Butler, *In the Language of Adam*, 310–311.

- v. 7: The houses of the *kadeshim* are smashed to pieces, which is where the women wove textile coverings for the Asherah.⁷⁵
- vv. 8–9: The priests from all the towns of Judah are brought to Jerusalem while the *bamoth* are defiled, and in some cases, smashed to pieces.⁷⁶
- v. 10: The *tophet* at the valley of Hinnom is defiled, which is where the Molech rites took place.⁷⁷
- v. 11: The horses dedicated to sun worship are removed from the entrance to the temple and sent elsewhere; the chariots are burned.
- v. 12: The altars built by Ahaz and Manasseh are smashed and ground to dust.

75. On the role of textiles in Assyrian worship, see Salvatore Gaspa, *Textiles in the Neo-Assyrian Empire: A Study of Terminology*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records, 23 vols., ed. Gonzalo Rubio (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 19:186–235. Though I disagree with some of Amanda Brown's conclusions on the nature of the reforms and Huldah's role in them, her recent paper is an excellent look at what we know of the cultic weavers, and how their craft was an expression of their devotion and worship. Amanda Colleen Brown, "Material Expression and Mantic Performance: An Examination of Women's Religious Experience at the Time of Josiah," in *Material Culture and Women's Religious Experience in Antiquity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. Mark D. Ellison, Catherine Gines Taylor, and Carolyn Osiek (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 71–97. *Kadeshim* were likely *not* cultic prostitutes, either male or female. See Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14–47.

76. *Bamoth* (sing. *bamah*) are cultic installations of some kind. The English "high places" does not particularly capture their meaning or use. W. Boyd Barrick, *BMH as Body Language: A Lexical and Iconographical Study of the Word BMH When Not a Reference to Cultic Phenomena in Biblical and Post-Biblical Hebrew*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 477, ed. Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein (London: T&T Clark International, 2008), 3–11.

77. On the question of Molech, whether it was a deity or form of sacrifice, the jury is still out. See Heath D. Dewrell, *Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 6–36; Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 18–21. The recent Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 213, comes down on the side of Molech being a deity. Regardless, the rites still involved the sacrifice of children.

- v. 13: Solomon's *bamoth* in Jerusalem which are dedicated to Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, Chemosh of Moab, and Milcom of the Ammonites are defiled.⁷⁸
- v. 14: The *masseboth* are broken and the *asherim* are cut down; human bones are put in their place.⁷⁹
- v. 15: The Bethel altar and the *bamah* built by Jeroboam are smashed to pieces. The *bamah* and an Asherah are burned.
- vv. 16–18: While desecrating idolatrous places of worship, Josiah discovers the tomb of the prophet who rebuked Jeroboam for his idolatry. His bones are spared.
- v. 19: The houses of the *bamoth* in Samaria are treated like those of Bethel.
- v. 20: The priests who officiated at the *bamoth* of Samaria are slain upon them, using the terms for sacrifice. The *bamoth* are further defiled by burning human bones upon them
- v. 24: Josiah's deeds are recapitulated and summarized as removing the diviners and *teraphim* and other idols. All of these are illegitimate practices.⁸⁰

The only act of the reform not aimed at removing idolatry was a positive enactment: the proper celebration of the Passover on a grand scale in Jerusalem. In this case, Josiah closely followed the instructions in Deuteronomy.⁸¹ But what is often missed is that this holiday celebration commemorated the *establishment* of Israel as a nation upon its God-given land. To remember the deliverance from Egypt was to

78. See the respective entries in Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 35–38, 160, 211.

79. Masseboth were standing stone monuments. On their use in worship, see Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion through the Lens of Divinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 335–336; Barrick, *King and the Cemeteries*, 103–105. *Asherim* (a masculine plural) are some sort of ritual object, but their meaning is uncertain. Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 200–201. For the burning of bones, see Monroe, *Josiah's Reform*, 105–107.

80. On teraphim, see Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1999), 844–850.

81. Jacob S. Licht, *Time and Holy Days in the Biblical and the Second Commonwealth Periods* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1988), 143–147 [Hebrew].

contrast their former situation as slaves with God's power to give them a land of inheritance; it all depended on the covenant they made with him at Sinai to keep His commandments.⁸² For Josiah, this would have been a highly public way to mark the renewed covenant between God and His people, and for the people to show their commitment to God. The Passover was also rich with themes of *protection* from death and destruction.⁸³ Josiah likely hoped to invoke that divine protection for the people.

The reforms were necessary because kings such as Manasseh had made aggressive changes to Judah's worship, installing the cult of other gods. "It may be supposed, therefore, that the King's historiographer did record historically accurate information as to the period of public inauguration of certain cults, even though he viewed all foreign cults under the general rubric Canaanite idolatry."⁸⁴

This was true also of the former kingdom of Israel, which introduced foreign priests into the cultus as well. Many legitimate practices were corrupted in the process, and kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah acted to undo those changes.

A helpful analogy from modern culture is the renewal of wedding vows. Israel was depicted in the Bible as God's wife. Apostasy and covenant-breaking was akin to adultery.⁸⁵ The kings were removing all markers of favor or devotion to other lovers: those foreign deities and their worship.

Turning to a cultic perspective, "Josiah's actions serve to render cult places and installations forbidden points of divine access by imposing a 'skull-and-crossbones' of sorts, a warning of danger or of poison cultically construed."⁸⁶ In simpler terms, Josiah denied idolaters the use of their holy spaces by defiling them and the defilement also served as a visible reminder of the spiritual danger of idolatry.

Drawing from Latter-day Saint church history, an example is the Mormon Reformation of the 1850s. "'The Great Reformation' which spread quickly throughout the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

82. Deuteronomy 16:1–12, especially v. 12.

83. Licht, *Time and Holy Days*, 139–140.

84. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 73.

85. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 39–40.

86. Monroe, *Josiah's Reforms*, 5.

Saints in 1856 and 1857, was a strenuous effort to promote a moral and spiritual awakening among members of the Church in Utah.”⁸⁷ There is no denying that, whatever the rhetorical excesses, there was a very real need for change among the Saints and a recommitment to God. Likewise with Judah and Israel.

The prominence of the *bamoth* in the reforms contrasts with their absence in Huldah’s prophecy, and it seems likely that their idolatrous use was the problematic factor rather than any centralization of worship.⁸⁸ “Huldah the prophetess does not warn against the high-places and does not call to centralize worship but reproves the nation for worshipping ‘other gods.’ From this it is doubtful that Josiah worked to centralize worship, or even operated on the basis of Deuteronomy at all.”⁸⁹

Symbols are not static; their meanings can change. The pentagram — whether inverted or not — was a powerful Christian symbol beginning in the Medieval era. It represented the five wounds of Christ and served to make His atoning sacrifice present among any who contemplated the image. “Thus through its close relation to Christ the pentangle becomes also a symbol of resurrection and potential divinity for humans.”⁹⁰

The pentagram was used in Christian art and architecture, including the famous Marktkirche of Hannover, as well as the stained-glass windows of the Nauvoo Temple and the exterior walls of the Salt Lake Temple. Yet, today, no one would casually decorate a church with pentagrams. Nor do teenagers who feel themselves angsty and edgy draw it for the Christian symbolism, but rather the opposite. The pentagram has been co-opted and transformed by Satanists, and the most visceral identification is now with them. As a Christian symbol, it has been retired, largely known as such only to historians and medievalists.

87. Howard Clair Searle, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857” (Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1956), 1.

88. Bustenay Oded and Michael Kochman, eds., *2 Kings*, Olam HaTanach, 24 vols., 6th ed., ed. Y. Amit, A. Berlin, H. Cohen, et. al (Tel-Aviv: Divrei HaYamim Publishing, 2002), 9:193–202.

89. Oded and Kochman, *2 Kings*, 9:193.

90. Piotr Sadowski, *The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 133.

Re-educating society at large would be an uphill struggle with little hope of success. Originally entirely positive, the pentagram's visual impact is negative and to use it today is to make a statement, the wrong kind of statement at that.

Thus it was with the items that Josiah removed. Whatever their original role may have been in Israel's worship, their meaning and purpose were corrupted to the point where the immediate association in Josiah's day was one of idolatry. From the association with Baal and the hosts of heaven, it is clear that Asherah was being worshipped in her Canaanite/Syrian identity as Baal's consort or associate, and not YHWH's.

When Judah's very survival as a nation lay at stake because of its idolatrous behavior, to leave these cultic implements and places up, or to attempt reeducation, was not an option Josiah could afford.

Discovering the Book

If the cultic reforms were not motivated by the discovery of the book, then what exactly was its role in them?

Temples were the repository of both sacred books and mundane records. The concept of a dedicated, freestanding library did not yet exist. The legitimacy of any text kept in the temple would have been assumed. While the episode can be read as the discovery of a book that no one knew anything about, this it is not a particularly sound reading. Neither Hilkia, Shaphan, Josiah, nor anyone else at the court raised the question of whether the book was authentic or not. Josiah rent his clothing immediately upon hearing the book read; this was a strong act of penitence, remorse, and grief. As king, he assumed personal responsibility for the nation's sins, even those that had been committed before his birth.

Josiah's question, rather, was what the book's message meant both for the king personally and the nation collectively.

Go ye, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found; **for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us** (2 Kings 22:13, emphasis added).

The book being some form of Deuteronomy is highly likely, given its focus on the consequences of breaking the covenant with God. The book may have been as short as to contain only Deuteronomy 26–29, with its list of blessings and curses pertaining to living the covenant in the promised land.⁹¹ The description in 2 Kings is too brief to permit any decisive conclusions about the book’s identity, but what is clear is that its contents terrified Josiah. He realized how severely the nation had sinned against the Lord for generations, and the book made the consequences of such feel much more vivid and real.

To see the reforms as primarily being based on Deuteronomy’s call to centralize worship in Jerusalem is to miss an important detail: “In all the chapter [2 Kings 23], Jerusalem’s special and unique status as the only place for cultic activity is not mentioned even once, in contrast with Deuteronomy’s frequent repetition of this theme (without mentioning Jerusalem by name).”⁹²

Josiah dispatched a delegation to Huldah the prophetess, headed by Hilkiah the high priest. Huldah’s oracle contained both good and bad news. Josiah, for his grief and contrition before God, would escape the coming evils and die in peace. The nation, though, would reap the fearful consequences of abandoning God and choosing to worship others: “My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and it shall not be quenched.”⁹³

Josiah’s personal greatness as king is shown by his next move. “[He] interpreted his role of reading the law and obeying the law as much larger than personal piety.”⁹⁴ Instead of giving up his nation for lost, and resting on the personal promise of a peaceful death, Josiah took charge: he would have everyone enter into a new covenant.

There is again an analog in the rebaptisms of the Mormon Restoration.

Apparently, [Jedediah] Grant had tired of preaching a reformation that never took hold; now he would require rebaptism and reconfirmation — outward signs of fealty to the thunderings of the Almighty through His chosen vessel. In

91. In the later Jewish division of scripture portions, Deuteronomy 26:1–29:8 is a singular unit, *parashat Ki Tavo*. The narrative unity in such a division is logical.

92. Smirin, *Josiah and His Times*, 48.

93. 2 Kings 22:17.

94. Majors, *King-Priest in Samuel*, 210.

effect, he would cut off the entire membership of the church and require them to submit to reconversion and rededication to the principles he and his colleagues had been hurling at them for years. There would be no passive Saints in the kingdom of Jedediah's stewardship. It would be all or nothing.⁹⁵

In theory, a new covenant would take precedence over the old one, and commend the people to God for their newfound commitment to Him: a clean slate. It was a gamble that ultimately failed. The spiritual rot had set in too deep, and the people's repentance was too shallow.

Still, this is the crux of the book's discovery: it was a stark witness and reminder of the covenant. "The importance of the book is that it serves as a covenant book, that is, the commitment of the people for all generations to follow the laws and commandments written in this record of the Torah of Moses."⁹⁶

Violence

Many later readers have been disturbed by the violence described in the narrative, be it killings, destruction of altars and cultic items, or the macabre burning of human bones. Some have taken this to an extreme, portraying Josiah as a bloodthirsty ("murder-happy") man who "smashed and killed those who disagreed" with him.⁹⁷ A number of recent books describe how supposedly "Josiah's men went burning and killing through the streets of Jerusalem."⁹⁸ The caricature, however, is untethered from reality, and is not reflected in the sources.

There is a single recorded incident when priests were killed by Josiah (2 Kings 23:19-20). These were the priests in Samaria, and were considered a foreign element imposed upon the cultus by wicked Israelite and Assyrian kings. To leave them in place would be to invite further pollution and chaos upon the land and provoke God further. This sort of violence was not something unique to Josiah or even to Deuteronomy, it was the warp and woof of holiness. What was holy had to be protected from the forces of evil, which constantly sought to pollute it, and a polluted land would spit out the inhabitants defiling

95. Gene A. Sessions, *Mormon Thunder: A Documentary History of Jedediah Morgan Grant* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 207.

96. Oded, *2 Chronicles*, 24:258 [Hebrew].

97. Butler, *In the Language of Adam*, 277, 279.

98. Barnes, *Key to the Keystone*, 162. The number of pro-Latter-day Saint podcasts where such claims are made is staggering.

it.⁹⁹ In fact, the language of violence in 2 Kings 23 echoes the language of the priestly inspections of contaminated houses in Leviticus 14.¹⁰⁰ Lauren Monroe observed:

References to burning, beating, scattering, casting of dust, and defiling in the reform account reflect apotropaic rites of riddance intended to contain contagion and eliminate dangerous forces perceived to be antithetical to Yahweh. Such rites are common in priestly texts of Leviticus and Numbers, but are almost entirely unattested in Deuteronomy and deuteronomistic texts.¹⁰¹

Josiah was thus fulfilling his role as the head of the priesthood and removing the forces of evil from his land and people. Otherwise, we find Josiah treating priests gently, even those directly involved in idolatrous practices.

Religion was not a private affair in the Ancient Near East but a public, communal one. It was essential to a family, village, town, region, or nation's survival.¹⁰² Improper practices endangered the entire nation by provoking God's wrath and displeasure, as well as giving power to His divine or demonic enemies. Josiah was aiming for a decisive break with idolatry, and that is why he acted as he did.

The Ideological/Theological Aftermath

The claim is often made that the reforms changed doctrine. However, the evidence for this is weak. As noted, Josiah removed the idolatrous horses and chariot of the sun. The sun was the premier

99. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, "Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns; American Schools of Oriental Research, 1983), 329–331, 333, 336–348; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, 95 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 3A:1482, 1572, 1580, 1583.

100. Monroe, *Josiah's Reform*, 25–30.

101. Monroe, *Josiah's Reform*, 24.

102. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 207. Asad explains succinctly how attitudes to religion changed in modernity. "This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is inessential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality."

god worshipped in the Levant. If the reforms were about changing doctrine, there should not be scriptures where such associations are deemed legitimate, yet the Deuteronomistic History and subsequent scriptures are teeming with them.

In 2 Kings 13:14, we read of Elisha's deathbed: "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he was to die; and Joash the king of Israel came down unto him, and wept over him, and said: 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!'"

Elisha then engages in a "magic" practice: he places his hands on Joash's hands while the latter shoots arrows to the east. This arrow signifies the downfall of Israel's Aramean enemies. Each arrow which strikes the ground corresponds with a victory.

In a society surrounded by pagan religions that named their gods divine charioteers, worshipped their horses, and brought chariots on campaign for the gods to ride, to call a man the chariot and riders of Israel would have come dangerously close to idolatry. Belomancy, or arrow magic, was widespread in the Ancient Near East. Arrows encapsulated attributes of the gods, and Assyrian kings also used them as votive offerings to the gods while on campaign.¹⁰³ The whole chapter is teeming with idolatrous associations which the Deuteronomists would have had to be blind to miss.

According to the logic which understands the reforms as inaugurating mass doctrinal change, such a pericope would have been anathema. This reading of the reforms is too facile, and should be rejected in favor of a more sophisticated understanding of the interplay between practice and belief.

THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

What Is It?

To know somewhat of the book of Deuteronomy and its outlook is essential. First, though, a note of caution on assuming a Deuteronomistic school of thought can even be spoken of accurately today:

103. Ezekiel 21:26; Samuel Iwry, "New Evidence for Belomancy in Ancient Palestine and Phoenicia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81, no. 1 (January–March, 1961): 27–34; Steven Winford Holloway, *Aššur is King! Aššur is King!: Religion in the Exercise of Power in the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, 146 vols., ed. B. Halpern, and M. H. E. Weippert (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2002), 10:161–162.

Indeed, “deuteronomistic” has become something of a portmanteau word so semantically overloaded in itself, and further befogged by differing understandings of the compositional development of the Book of Kings, that if “deuteronomism” ever existed in biblical Israel as a distinct point of view expressed in a distinct literary style, its characteristic features must be defined with greater precision for it to be a useful exegetical category.¹⁰⁴

This is rarely done. Instead, there is much speculation on what parts of Deuteronomy were written and when, with the questions framed so as to presuppose the conclusions:

Even the fulcrum of all this speculation — Ur-Deuteronomy — has become increasingly difficult both to differentiate from later “deuteronomistic” accretions and to date relative to pivotal material in the Former Prophets. These factors caution against taking the “Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis,” in any of its permutations, as a secure premise for a compositional analysis of what for purposes of neutral identification can be called the “Kings History” (KH).¹⁰⁵

Yehezkel Kaufman pushed back on common scholarly assertions on the nature of the book:

With all the importance of the question of [Deuteronomy]’s composition in and of itself, it has no decisive bearing on the development of Israelite religion. In [Deuteronomy] there are ancient laws. Whether these laws date to the days of Moses or the judges or Solomon — we are unable to say. There is room only for conjecture. It is also possible that the book had various forms and recensions, that were only collated later. Here, too, we can only speculate.¹⁰⁶

Kaufman goes on to state that overall, Deuteronomy has a unified structure and content unique to it. He objected to the Documentary Hypothesis, where Biblical books were stitched together out of different source documents like a patchwork quilt or Frankenstein’s monster. “At any rate, there are no grounds for assuming that this or that narrative detail was doubled unintentionally, or was not meant to drive home an exhortation, but that somehow these doublets occurred

104. Barrick, *King and the Cemeteries*, 13–14.

105. Barrick, *King and the Cemeteries*, 14.

106. Yehezkel Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel, from Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1955), 1:109 [Hebrew].

solely by combining different source documents."¹⁰⁷ Kaufman stated that there may well have been multiple recensions of Deuteronomy before it attained its final form.¹⁰⁸ Of this, there is some evidence from the Septuagint and from Qumran, most famously Deuteronomy 32, which appears in several dramatically different versions.¹⁰⁹

The book's title itself, and what it tells us, should also be examined. N. Tur-Sinai proposed that *mishneh torah* — the Hebrew name of Deuteronomy — means covenant or contract of the law.¹¹⁰ This is fitting, as it serves to remind the people that the laws are the conditions of the covenant. That is also how Josephus, as a student of the Hebrew Bible, understood it within a Greco-Roman political context. Deuteronomy, he explained to his gentile audience, was the Jews' national constitution.¹¹¹

What Does it Teach

To fully cover the teachings of Deuteronomy is not possible within the scope of this paper. Volumes have been written on it. What can be done is to provide a quick overview of some of its teachings which have

107. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, 1:108 [Hebrew]. On the various attempts to split Deuteronomy into various sources and compositional layers, Kaufman wrote on page 106 that, "without 'wishful thinking' and a priori assumptions that Deuteronomy is composed of different source documents, it is very hard to consider these attempts successful. There is no clear, substantive basis for separating it into sources."

108. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, 1:109 [Hebrew].

109. Though considering the Qumran *vorlage* of Deuteronomy 32:8 original, Bickerman also offered a caution. "As a matter of fact, only the printed book can produce textual uniformity." Elias J. Bickerman, "Some Notes on the Transmission of the Septuagint," in Elias J. Bickerman, *Studies of Jewish and Christian History*, 2 vols., ed. Abram Tropper (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007): 1:156. The sons of God passage was discovered at Qumran. The Septuagint has angels of God (with a notable exception reading 'sons of God'), and the Masoretic, children of Israel. Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 196.

110. Naphtali Hertz Tur-Sinai, *Vol. II: The Book, The Language and the Book*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1950), 2:226.

111. Joshua A. Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52.

a bearing on the question of the reforms, as they appear frequently in such debates.

Places of Worship

The idea that Deuteronomy is stating that only one temple can ever be built is problematic. While the Samaritan version echoes something similar — though more explicit in the location — neither they, nor the Jews of the early Second Temple Era saw an inherent problem in having multiple temples. Despite tensions between the groups, this did not cause a parting of ways.¹¹² For most of its history, the kingdom of Judah did not narrowly view the injunction in Deuteronomy, and legitimate shrines, cultic rooms, and temples continued to operate outside of Jerusalem.¹¹³ If the current understanding of the archaeological layers of Arad is correct, then the temple there continued to function even after the reforms.¹¹⁴ It is not always appreciated that while Exodus mentions multiple altars, it too presupposes a centralized worship site: the Tabernacle.

[Rowley] was skeptical of the idea that the notion of centralization was strictly Deuteronomistic: “But it is quite unnecessary to suppose that the author of Deuteronomy must have been the first to think of the suppression of the ‘high places’ and the centralisation of worship.”¹¹⁵

The Love of God

Deuteronomy has the love of God at the heart of its message, and it strongly binds the corporate identity of Israel to that of the priests, the king, the land, and God Himself on the basis of the covenant. Strong limits are placed on the king, who is firmly seen as a servant of God, the people, and the cultus. It is odd to imagine that a king and his court would have commissioned such a book that curtails their power. As Berman observed, other kings in the Ancient Near East “ruled by

112. Reinhard Pummer, *The Samaritans in Flavius Josephus*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 129 (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 14–15. My thanks to Spencer Kraus for this insight.

113. Avraham Faust, “Israelite Temples: Where Was Israelite Cult Not Practiced, and Why,” *Religions* 10, no. 2 (2019): 106.

114. Susan Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1992), 51.

115. As cited in Benjamin D. Thomas, *Hezekiah and the Compositional History of the Book of Kings* (Tübingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 15.

means of what may be called an exclusionary power strategy," meaning that *everything* was designed to concentrate power in the hands of the king alone.¹¹⁶ Deuteronomy rejects any such systems.

The Divine Council

Some of the strongest material on the Divine Council is found in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. There is no reason to think that Deuteronomy opposed the idea of prophetic involvement in its deliberations.¹¹⁷ Deuteronomy 32 was even read by later Jews and

116. Berman, *Created Equal*, 54.

117. Peter C. Craigie has pointed out how important the divine council is to Deuteronomy 33. "The theophany at Sinai is described as having been a time of bright light with the brightness emanating from the presence of God on the mountain. With God were the members of his divine council, *holy ones* and *warriors of God*...." The assembled people also seem to affirm this. "In v. 3b, the people affirm the role of the members of the divine council in assisting Moses in his task: his (i.e., God's) holy ones are at your (i.e., Moses') hand. ... The reference is to the assistance given to Moses by members of the divine council when Moses mediated the law of God to the people at Mount Sinai." While tentative, it is a compelling reading. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 393. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses invokes the theogonic pair of Heaven and Earth to witness him extoll the virtues of YHWH against the fickleness and perfidy of his people when they break the covenant. Eric Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1994), 134–136. There is no indication that the divine council was democratic or pluralistic, *contra* Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 52–53, who notes: "In their conception of God and emphasis on the Law, the Deuteronomists exhibited a centralizing, monist impulse at odds with the pluralism inherent in the council ethos. The implementation of their vision required an earthly analogue of their heavenly Solitary Sovereign, a Yahwist monarch. Thus the most important Deuteronomist was Josiah, the king. Without his leadership, the Deuteronomist revolution would have been impossible. Worship of the Abrahamic Gods of the Sôd was too entrenched and widespread to be eliminated without a strong monarch leader." As Theodore Mullen noted, "the divine council has no authority or power apart from the high god. Though a full hypostatization does not seem to have taken place, the assembly and the decree of the high god are inseparable." This is true of Canaanite and Phoenician formulations as well, and thus cannot be blamed on Deuteronomists. E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Leiden, NL:

Christians as teaching deification and astralisation.¹¹⁸ This reception history is a surer guide to what ancients found problematic than many modern assertions are.

An Embodied God

The God in Deuteronomy is an anthropomorphic, embodied God.

Consequently, it is crucial to note that neither these nor any other verses in Deuteronomy claim that God is invisible or lacks a body. Rather, these verses state that God's body cannot be seen by humans because the latter are on earth while God's body is in heaven. Scholars are correct to claim that Deuteronomy's is a theology of transcendence, but emphasizing transcendence and rejecting anthropomorphism are two different things. Deuteronomy's emphasis on transcendence remains quite literal: God transcends this world in the spatial sense that He sits enthroned up there, while we are down here. Consequently, there is no reason to suspect that the book's conception of God is anything but Anthropomorphic.¹¹⁹

Day of Atonement

It has been alleged that Deuteronomy is opposed to the day of atonement, since it is omitted from the list of holidays. The reasoning is somewhat facile, given how Exodus itself omits the day from its equivalent lists¹²⁰ "A key fact to remember is that Deuteronomy's laws respond to a new context of entering the promised land. Thus, the

Brill, 1980), 279.

118. David A. Burnett, "A Neglected Deuteronomistic Scriptural Matrix for the Nature of the Resurrection Body in 1 Corinthians 15:39–42?" in *Scripture, Texts, and Traditions in 1 Corinthians*, ed. Linda L. Belleville and B. J. Oropeza (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books; Fortress Academic, 2019), 187–211; David A. Burnett, "So Shall Your Seed Be": Paul's Use of Genesis 15:5 in Romans 4:18 in Light of Early Jewish Deification Traditions," *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 5, no. 2 (2015): 220–226.

119. Benjamin D. Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 64.

120. Exodus 30:10 mentions an atonement made once a year over the altar, but no fixed time of year is mentioned. Exodus 23 and 34 list the same festivals as Deuteronomy 16. "The problem of the first of Tishrei is connected to the tenth of it, which is the day of atonement. Apart from Lev. 16, it is mentioned only in the two holy day lists that include the first of Tishrei as a holy day." Jacob S. Licht, *Time and Holy Days*, 107.

legal revision that Deuteronomy employs is one that contextualizes and applies older laws for living in the promised land."¹²¹

How Old Is It?

An early date for Deuteronomy has never been off the table in biblical studies; almost as soon as the late date was proposed, an early date was defended.¹²² However, the dating remains a vexed issue. By means of illustration, "Ernest W. Nicholson has run the gamut of opinions within his career, originally affirming an eighth and seventh-century dating, before revising this opinion completely to prefer an exilic date."¹²³

A fruitful line of inquiry into Deuteronomy's composition date is to interrogate its teachings on kingship, and how that may reflect its historical environment. There is a dearth of any mention of specific administrative offices and realities that would reflect the period of the late monarchy and its interests. While Deuteronomy recognizes the need for a monarchy, it seems to come from a political context different than that of monarchy.

The King Law cannot be taken as an indication that essential parts of Deuteronomy or the Pentateuch are dependent on the Prophets. A more plausible background to the King Law should perhaps be sought in pre-monarchic circles in ancient Israel. It appears to stem from a period where Israel has not yet any direct experience with monarchy as a governmental system but would be tempted to adopt the value systems of ancient Near Eastern kingship together with the very notion of royal government.¹²⁴

In its political aspects, there are enough indicators of Deuteronomy predating Josiah's reign that it cannot be glibly assumed that either he or his supporters wrote it. If this cannot be safely assumed,

121. Majors, *King-Priest in Samuel*, 207.

122. Rannfrid Irene Thelle, *Approaches to the 'Chosen Place': Accessing a Biblical Concept* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 7.

123. Laura Elizabeth Quick, *Deuteronomy 28 and the Aramaic Curse Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 135.

124. Carsten Vang, "The Non-Prophetic Background for the King Law in Deut 17:14–20," in *Paradigm Change in Pentateuchal Research*, ed. Matthias Armgardt, Benjamin Kilchör, and Markus Zehnder, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Fur Altorientalische Und Biblische 22 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2019), 208.

then its relationship to the reforms and any distinctive school of deuteronomists should be reconsidered.

THE DEUTERONOMIST(S)

The historian-redactor responsible for the Kings History has earned the modern moniker of Deuteronomist. Regardless of his relationship to Deuteronomy, it is worth considering what kind of man he likely was.¹²⁵ One scholar observed:

Dtr is a skillful historian, with a deep and original understanding of the past. He is also a great writer, with a clear theological agenda. So he is a writer, a theologian, and a historian, and there is no contradiction between these definitions. ... [H]e is the most important historian of biblical times, who offered his readers a comprehensive historical picture of Israel's past, from the Exodus until the Babylonian exile. ... Dtr does not regard Israel's history as a random collection of events. Quite the opposite: he emphasizes the direct involvement of God in history. His work was not written just to teach the historical facts, although it is certainly important to him to describe the main events. He writes a moral history intended to teach his contemporaries a moral and religious lesson and to prepare them for future developments.¹²⁶

This not only sounds like Mormon, but it could also *be* Mormon; or at least an apt description of his literary project.¹²⁷ This is not the secret, sinister cabal of conniving scribes that some have imagined.

Galil argues that the Deuteronomist redactor lived in the early Babylonian exile and reworked prior editions of scriptural books into Deuteronomy, Joshua-Kings and Jeremiah, with small additions after him. Others consider the entire corpus pre-exilic, and still others date

125. He would almost certainly have been a man. We have no evidence for female scribes in ancient Israel, let alone ones who composed or redacted entire books. Athalya Brenner, "Introduction," in Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen Van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden, NL: E. J. Brill, 1996), 5.

126. Gershon Galil, *God's Love Story: Past, Present and Future in the Deuteronomistic Composition* (Münster, DE: Zaphon Verlag, 2022), 155.

127. I appreciate Gregory Smith sharing some turns of phrase with me. For more on the parallels between Mormon and the Deuteronomist redactors, see Gregory Dundas, *Mormon's Record*, 300–320, as well as his fuller discussion of sacral history and the Deuteronomists on pp. 175–211.

it far later to the Persian or even Hasmonean eras.¹²⁸ As mentioned, the question is vexed. Whatever the dating, the only substantive difference would be the specific historical circumstances of the redactor. As outlined by Galil, the character and value system would be relevant regardless of the chronology.

JEREMIAH

The prophet Jeremiah was a contemporary of Josiah, albeit a younger one.¹²⁹ No explicit references to the reforms appear in his writings, and many have argued against any implicit ones, either.¹³⁰ This silence is a puzzle with no satisfactory answer, and no consensus has been reached despite the life of Jeremiah being one of the most studied by scholars.¹³¹

Perhaps a partial answer is to be found in the later Jewish apocryphal tradition that Josiah did not believe Jeremiah's accusations against the people, because he trusted too much in the genuineness of their repentance.¹³² In other words, Jeremiah may have supported the need for the reforms, but was disappointed that the people's repentance was only skin-deep. There is, however, a more solid line of enquiry.

Is there anything in Jeremiah's teachings that would have conflicted with the reforms? The answer appears to be no.

Like Huldah, Jeremiah also accuses Judah of worshipping other gods, which will result in their destruction.¹³³ The teachings and oracles of Jeremiah abound with examples of God's anger over this dis-

128. Galil, *God's Love Story*, 155–156.

129. William Holladay concluded that the phrase "in the thirteenth year" really meant Jeremiah was born in that year, as he was called in the womb. This reading seems forced. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25*, Hermeneia Commentary (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 1–2.

130. Niels Peter Lemche, "Did a Reform like Josiah's Happen?" in *The Historian and the Bible: Essays in Honour of Lester L. Grabbe*, ed. Philip R. Davies and Diana Vikander Edelman (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2010), 17–18.

131. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: Reading the Prophet in His Time — and Ours* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1–2; Jack R. Lundbom, *The Early Career of the Prophet Jeremiah* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), xv–xviii.

132. See the discussion below of Babylonian Talmud, T. Ta'anit 22a–22b.

133. Jeremiah 4 and 11, among many; Oded and Kochman, *2 Kings*, 9:196.

loyal behavior. “By one count, 42 different verses in Jeremiah mention or elaborate on God’s anger.”¹³⁴

Jeremiah also, at times, speaks highly of Josiah and the members of the Hilkiad and Shaphanid families. This has led some to argue that positive references to Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist reforms were added later.¹³⁵ However, this is ad hoc reasoning, resting upon preconceived notions. J. Unterman refuted the claim that pro-Josianic passages in Jeremiah are a late addition.¹³⁶

Jeremiah 22:15–17 contains a striking assessment of Josiah’s righteousness, in contrast with that of his son, Jehoiakim.

Shalt thou reign, because thou strivest to excel in cedar? Did not thy father eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know Me? saith the LORD. But thine eyes and thy heart are not but for thy covetousness, and for shedding innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it.

According to this divine oracle delivered by the prophet, Josiah did justice, encapsulated by his treatment of widows and orphans, the most vulnerable members of ancient society.¹³⁷ The chronicler directs his readers to a corpus of laments, which includes some written by Jeremiah and others, for Josiah’s death (2 Chronicles 35:25–27). This is a strong, positive reference whose authenticity cannot be easily dismissed.

134. Elmer A. Martens, “Toward an End to Violence: Hearing Jeremiah,” in *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and J. Blair Wilgus (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 134.

135. J. Philip Hyatt, “Jeremiah and Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, no. 2 (April 1942): 165–172.

136. Jeremiah Unterman, *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah’s Thought in Transition*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 54 (Sheffield, GB: JSOT Press, 1987), 26–28. On the importance of the Shaphanid family to Jeremiah, see Nicholas R. Werse, *Reconsidering the Book of the Four: The Shaping of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah as an Early Prophetic Collection* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 334–336.

137. Sweeney observed that the things Josiah was praised for are characteristic of Deuteronomy’s legal code, and he cites further references to that code. Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 211.

THE DEATH OF JOSIAH

The death of Josiah is the most enigmatic episode in his life. Even ancient authors struggled with it, and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles differ in important details. The problem stems from a contradiction between Huldah's prophesied peaceful fate for Josiah and the actual circumstances of his violent death. That death would violate the principle of divine reward and punishment. Those problems cannot be resolved here.

When Josiah was 39, Pharaoh Necho II led an expeditionary force through the land of Israel. He was moving to aid the Assyrian empire against Babylon, and Josiah barred his way.

This was a pronounced pro-Babylonian policy based on geopolitical considerations, that shortly afterward were proven as justified: Josiah was convinced that the struggle between the principal players would not end in an Assyrian victory, and thus it was. Only, Josiah was unable to stop Pharaoh and was killed in battle.¹³⁸

Necho II sent a message to Josiah. The language is somewhat obscure, but the overall meaning was that Necho did not intend to interfere with Josiah's kingdom, so Josiah should let him pass. His problem was with Babylon. Josiah rightly saw through this sophistry, and recognized the ultimate threat posed by a strong Egypt.

Second Chronicles' geopolitical take on the events is preferred to 2 Kings, but when it comes to the religious significance, the latter offers the better reading. The links to Deuteronomy are strong, and hold the key to the entire narrative.

The verses of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 are part of a single unit and should be read together. They are typically known as the Shema, and together form a central prayer in Judaism to this day. The unit is liturgical-confessional, meaning that it was part of the formula of public worship and expressed the core of faith and worship. The Shema was seen as a form of bearing witness or testimony, and just like the latter word, was ultimately connected to the concept of covenant. The famous declaration that "YHWH is one" uses a term frequently

138. Yair Hoffmann, ed., *Jeremiah*, Olam HaTanach, 24 vols., 6th ed., ed. Y. Amit, A. Berlin, H. Cohen, et. al (Tel-Aviv: Divrei HaYamim Publishing, 2002), 11:121; Smirin, *Josiah and His Times*, 98–100, 102–103.

applied in the Bible to the object of one's love and thus, is deeply connected to the requirement in the next verse to love God.

Love in the book of Deuteronomy has the particular meaning of loyalty, and a completely identical phenomenon is found in fealty oaths by Ancient Near Eastern vassals, and also in treaties from the classical world — Greek, Hellenistic, Roman — terms of love and affection express loyalty. Whereas in the rest of the ancient world “love” meant political allegiance, here it means religious allegiance. Thus, the expression “Thou shalt love YHWH thy God” should be understood as “Thou must be loyal to YHWH thy God.”¹³⁹

The combination of the terms *lev*, *nefesh* and *me'od* indicate the complete and total nature of this love and loyalty to God. *Lev* is the heart, which anciently was the seat of thought, as well as of good and evil urges. *Nefesh* is the soul, which was also used synonymously with one's life. *Me'od*, or much, plenty, was often used to mean one's power and its sources: property and possessions. This encompassed not just wealth but also might of arms.¹⁴⁰

Over-familiarity with the repeated command to love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength may obscure just how strong a demand God can make on his covenant people. In many ancient treaties, a vassal was required to assist his lord “with all his heart,” which meant providing him with men and chariots — equivalent to *me'od* in Deuteronomy — and even a willingness to assist with “all his soul.” That is, the vassal was required to die for his lord if necessary.¹⁴¹

This is seen in the terms that are used in 2 Kings 23:25 to praise Josiah after he was killed in battle to defend his kingdom against Pharaoh Necho II. It states that Josiah turned back to God (repented and showed him loyalty) with all his *lev*, all his *nefesh*, and all his *me'od*.

139. Moshe Weinfeld, *The Decalogue and the Recitation of “Shema”: The Development of the Confessions* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuahd, 2001), 131 [Hebrew].

140. Hence the LXX ‘strength,’ *δυνάμεις*. For just how often this covenantal commandment is reiterated in the standard works, see Neil J. Flinders and Paul Wangemann, “A Systematic Examination of the Terms Heart, Mind, Might, and Strength as Used in the Standard Works of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium* 12, no. 1 (1986): 164–197.

141. Weinfeld, *The Decalogue and the Recitation of “Shema,”* 133 [Hebrew].

These are the exact trio of words used in the Shema. Josiah is shown to be God's selfless and loyal vassal who did not hesitate to lay down his life for Him in battle.

Josiah's vision of a righteous kingdom of covenant people died alongside him that day in Megiddo. Despite Egypt's best efforts, Necho II's subsequent defeat at Carchemish opened the door for Babylonian expansion to the south, and Egypt's allies were subjugated one by one. It was never again able to exercise control over the Levant until the period of the Ptolemies.

JOSIAH IN APOCRYPHAL AND POST-BIBLICAL TEXTS

How were Josiah's reforms and his own character later perceived? The question is important because such texts preserve, if not reliable history, then at least some kind of popular memory. The authors of such texts were also often perceptive readers of scripture. Scholars, such as Margaret Barker, have looked to such works for traces and echoes of unofficial or unorthodox and suppressed beliefs.¹⁴² It is thus fair to query them as sources of collective memory, whatever their accuracy.

References are infrequent but the picture is overwhelmingly positive. Ben Sira has high praise for Josiah, linking him to one of the most memorable features of the ancient temple to those who worshipped there: incense burning.

The name JOSIAH is like blended incense,
made lasting by a skilled perfumer.
Precious is his memory, like honey to the taste,
like music at a banquet.

For he grieved over our betrayals,
and destroyed the abominable idols.
He kept his heart fixed on God,
and in times of lawlessness practiced virtue.

Except for David, Hezekiah, and Josiah,
they all were wicked;
They abandoned the Law of the Most High,
these kings of Judah, right to the very end. (Ben Sira 49, NABRE)

142. Margaret Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 524–542.

The praise is effusive. The art of the ancient perfumer was highly demanding, especially when combining various elements into one whole.¹⁴³ Josiah is also sweet “like honey” in a society where sweeteners were hard to come by, and he is like the “music at a banquet” (Ben Sira says wine banquet), or in other words, a symposium. That is a communal gathering where “music and conversation between good men about good things are identified as the primary route to virtue and wisdom.”¹⁴⁴

The reasons for this praise are that Josiah kept his heart fixed on God; practiced virtue when others did the opposite; kept to what the Lord commanded; and grieved for the people’s apostasy. Most importantly, he rooted out the idols that turned men’s hearts away from God. Josiah embodied virtue.

Josephus also viewed Josiah positively.

And when he was twelve years old, he gave demonstrations of his religious and righteous behavior: for he brought the people to a sober way of living, and exhorted them to leave off the opinion they had of their idols; because they were not Gods; but to worship their own God. And by reflecting on the actions of his progenitors, he prudently corrected what they did wrong, like a very elderly man, and like one abundantly able to understand what was fit to be done: and what he found they had well done, he observed all the countrey over, and imitated the same. And thus he acted in following the wisdom and sagacity of his own nature, and in compliance with the advice and instruction of the elders. For by following the laws it was that he succeeded so well in the order of his government; and in piety with regard to the divine worship. And this happened because the transgressions of the former Kings were seen no more, but quite vanished away.¹⁴⁵

143. For Ben Sira this is the temple incense, and also connected with wisdom. Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 37–38; Jan Liesen, *Full of Praise: An Exegetical Study of Sir 39, 12–35* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1999), 135. On incense in general, see Alan Millard, “Incense - The Ancient Room Freshener: The Exegesis of Daniel 2:46,” in *On Stone and Scroll: Essays in Honour of Graham Ivor Davies*, ed. James K. Aitken, Katharine J. Dell, and Brian A. Mastin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 111–121.

144. Fiona Hobden, *The Symposium in Ancient Greek Society and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41.

145. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 10.4.1.

[Huldah] bid them go back to the King, and say, that "God had already given sentence against them, to destroy the people, and cast them out of their country, and deprive them of all the happiness they enjoyed; which sentence none could set aside by any prayers of theirs: since it was passed on account of their transgressions of the laws, and of their not having repented in so long a time: while the Prophets had exhorted them to amend, and had foretold the punishment that would ensue on their impious practices: which threatening God would certainly execute upon them: that they might be persuaded that he is God, and had not deceived them in any respect, as to what he had denounced by his Prophets: that yet, because Josiah was a righteous man, he would at present delay those calamities; but that after his death he would send on the multitude what miseries he had determined for them."¹⁴⁶

When retelling the story of Josiah's death, Josephus introduces the element of fate or destiny, making the king a victim of the same forces active in a Greek tragedy. That is, his death is not because of personal wickedness or sin. "But Josiah did not admit of this request of Neco's: but put himself into a posture to hinder him from his intended march. I suppose it was destiny that pushed him on this conduct; that it might take an occasion against him."¹⁴⁷

Elsewhere, Josephus wrote that "It is impossible for men to escape their fate even though they foresee it."¹⁴⁸ Josiah's death does not diminish his virtue or righteousness, and Josephus concludes by sharing the tradition that Jeremiah lamented his death. This is a tradition we find across various Jewish groups. "The Rabbis, as well as Josephus, understand 2 [Chronicles] 35.25 to refer to the Book of Lamentations, in which Jeremiah laments the fate of the 'anointed of the Lord' [Lamentations 4:20], by which Josiah is meant."¹⁴⁹

Second Baruch, a work likely written no earlier than the beginning of the second century AD, goes further in its praise of Josiah than the Hebrew Bible does. Baruch sees a vision of bright waters.

146. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 10.4.2.

147. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 10.5.1.

148. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 6.314, as given in Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 195.

149. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003) 2:1062.

And the tenth bright waters you have seen; that is the purity of the generation of Josiah, the king of Judah, who was the only one in his time who subjected himself to the Mighty One with his whole heart and his whole soul. He purified the country from the idols, sanctified all the vessels which were polluted, restored the offerings to the altar, raised the horn of the holy, exalted the righteous, and honored all those who were wise with understanding.¹⁵⁰

The reforms and, indeed, their violence are commended in the vision.

And he was zealous with the zeal of the Mighty One with his whole soul, and he alone was strong in the Law at that time so that he left no one un-circumcised or anyone who acted wickedly in the whole country all the days of his life. He, then, is one who shall receive reward forever and ever and be honored with the Mighty One more than many in the last time. For on his account and on account of those who are like him, the precious glories have been created and prepared which were spoken to you earlier. These are those bright waters which you have seen.¹⁵¹

A prayer which begins “even as you received the gifts of the righteous in their generations” includes Josiah among the righteous who are praised.¹⁵²

Pseudo-Hegesippus wrote something between a commentary and a paraphrase of Josephus’s *Wars*, and provided a Christian take on what he considered Josiah’s exemplary death.

What shall I say of Josiah, than whom no one was a better expounder of **religio**, despiser of death, advocate of liberty? For he, located on that regal promontory wherefrom it was possible to escape death, yet because he saw that on account of [its] grievous sins the captivity of the people of Israel was impending, embroiled himself in a foreign war, and he fled life. Neco cried out: “I have not been sent against you, but to the king of Israel.” Yet he did not fall back before falling victim

150.A. F. J. Klijn, trans., 2 (*Syriac Apocalypse of*) *Baruch* 66:1–2, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2010), 1:643–644.

151. Klijn, 2 *Baruch* 66:5–8, 1:644.

152.D. R. Darnell, trans., *Hellenistic Synagogal Prayers*, 6:3–10, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols., ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2010), 2:684–685.

to the lethal point of an arrow. Cast down by this wound, he is an indication to us whether merit or chance is more influential in war. Josiah, the restorer of sacred rites, was defeated, and Neco, the most villainous of all people, was victorious, but he (Josiah), conquered, is now with the angels, and this "victor" is in torment.¹⁵³

The Syriac Cave of Treasures continues along the same lines.

He was eight years old when he began to rule, and he reigned in Jerusalem for thirty-one years. ... He did what is good in front of the Lord, and did everything just as his father David had, swaying neither to the right nor to the left. Pharaoh the lame killed him, he died, and his son Jehoahaz ruled after him.¹⁵⁴

Other Syriac sources bear this out, and Ephrem the Syrian relates a fictional argument between Death and Satan over which of them is mightier.

DEATH: Josiah from his youth up
despised you, O Evil One, [II Kgs 22:1–2]
yet even in his old age
he could not get the better of me [II Kgs 23:29–30].¹⁵⁵

Death explicitly states that Josiah despised the Devil, and thus was a righteous man, yet even he could not avoid death.

A debate over which calamities require the sounding of an alarm leads the Talmud to discuss Josiah's fatal encounter with Neco.

Rather, even in a case of a sword of peace, when an army passes through with no intention of waging war against the Jews, but is merely on its way to another place, this is enough to obligate the court to sound the alarm, **as you do not have a greater example of a sword of peace than Pharaoh Neco**. He passed through Eretz Yisrael to wage war with Nebuchadnezzar, **and**

153. Carson Bay, *Biblical Heroes and Classical Culture in Christian Late Antiquity: The Historiography, Exemplarity, and Anti-Judaism of Pseudo-Hegesippus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 114–116.

154. Alexander Toepel, trans., *The Cave of Treasures* 40:11–14, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, 2 vols., ed. Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila, and Alexander Panayotov (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 1:570.

155. Sebastian P. Brock, *Treasure-House of Mysteries: Explorations of the Sacred Text through Poetry in the Syriac Tradition* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2012), 230.

nevertheless King Josiah stumbled in this matter. ... What is the meaning of the phrase “God, Who is with me”? Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: This is referring to Neco’s idolatry, which he brought for assistance. ... Josiah said: Since he trusts in idolatry, I will be able to defeat him. ... For what reason was Josiah punished? Because he should have consulted with the prophet Jeremiah to find out if he should go to war, but he did not consult with him. How did Josiah interpret the verses of the Torah? How did they lead him to go to war? The verse states: “Neither shall a sword go through your land” (Leviticus 26:6). What is the meaning of the term: “Sword”? If we say that it is referring to a sword that is not of peace, but isn’t it written earlier in the same verse: “And I will give peace in the land”? Rather, the verse must mean that even a sword of peace shall not pass through the land, and Josiah sought to prevent this occurrence, in fulfillment of the blessing. But he did not know that his generation did not merit these blessings, and he would therefore not receive divine assistance in this regard.¹⁵⁶

That is it, a single mistake. The Talmud closes out its discussion with a story involving the prophet Jeremiah and the dying king.

When Josiah was dying, Jeremiah saw his lips moving. Jeremiah said: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, he is saying something improper and complaining about God’s judgment on account of his great distress. Jeremiah bent over and heard that he was justifying God’s judgment against himself. Josiah said: “The Lord is righteous, for I have rebelled against His word” (Lamentations 1:18). At that moment, Jeremiah began his eulogy for Josiah: “The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was trapped in their pits” (Lamentations 4:20).¹⁵⁷

Even when Josiah made a mistake, he was believed to have acknowledged it and still praised God. The mistake in not consulting Jeremiah before going to war against Pharaoh was just that, a mistake, not an indictment of his character or reforms. In the narrative, Josiah’s humility and love for God, despite horrific physical pain¹⁵⁸ so moves Jeremiah that he composes an inspired lament on the spot. The

156. T. Ta’anit 22a-22b, *Babylonian Talmud*, Steinsaltz edition, 22 vols. (New York: Random House, 1995), 14:108–109, emphasis in the original.

157. Ta’anit 22b., *Babylonian Talmud*, 14:109, emphasis in the original.

158. The narrative says Josiah was shot through with so many arrows that he was like a sieve.

Targum of Chronicles continues this line of interpretation. "These words add to TC a depiction of Josiah as a righteous king, unwavering in his loyalty to the God of Israel, who ironically met his end as a result of an excess of faith in God."¹⁵⁹

Seder Olam Rabbah is an early chronology of biblical and Jewish history. Alongside the dry listing of events, it often contains narrative details.

(2Chr. 34:1, 2Kings 22:1) "Eight years old was Josiah when he became king and 31 years he reigned in Jerusalem. ... (2Kings 22:3) "It was in the 18th year of king Josiah 218 years." In that year, the book of the Torah was found in the Temple and in that year had Josiah made repairs to the Temple. There were from the repairs under Joash until the repairs under Josiah. And why was it necessary to repair so quickly in the days of Joash? (2Chr. 24:7) "Because of the criminal Athaliahu, her sons damaged the House of God. ..." That year, Josiah repented (2Kings. 23:25) "and before him there was no king who so wholeheartedly returned to the Eternal... ." Josiah hid the Ark as it is said (2Chr. 35:3): "He said to the Levites, the instructors of all of Israel, the ones holy to the Eternal, put the Holy Ark into the Temple built by Solomon, David's son, king of Israel, so that it cannot be carried further on the shoulders." (2Kings 23:29) "In his days there attacked Pharaoh Necho, the king of Egypt, against the king of Assyria on the river Euphrates; King Josiah went towards him, but he (Necho) had him (Josiah) killed as soon as he (Necho) saw (him)." (2Chr. 35:21–24) "He (Necho) had sent him messengers, saying: What have I to do with you, king of Judah ... But Josiah did not turn his face away from him ... And the archers shot at king Josiah ... So his servants transferred him to his secondary chariot and brought him to Jerusalem where he died ..." Jeremiah composed a funeral dirge about him (Threni 4:20): "The spirit of our life, the anointed of the Eternal, was caught in their pits."¹⁶⁰

The *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* is in many ways closer to Second Temple apocrypha and the rewritten Bible than it is to Rabbinic Judaism. It often preserves the witness of largely independent traditions. These also praise Josiah. *Pirkei* 17:14 holds that Josiah was foreor-

159. Leeor Gottlieb, *Targum Chronicles and Its Place Among the Late Targums* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2020), 351.

160. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam: The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998), 210.

dained, was perfectly righteous before God, and was killed for the secret sins of his people. He was too righteous to remain among the wicked.

Rabbi Nathaniel said: Three hundred years before the birth of Josiah, was his name mentioned, as it is said, “Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name” (1 Kings 13:2); “And he was eight years old when he began to reign” (2 Kings 22:1). What is the disposition of a lad of eight years of age? He despised the idols and broke in pieces the pillars, and smashed the images and cut down the groves. His merit was great before the Throne of Glory. Because of the evil which Israel did in secret the righteous one was gathered (to his fathers), as it is said, “For the righteous is taken away because of the evil” ([Isaiah] 57:1). || All Judah gathered together also with Jeremiah the prophet to show loving-kindness to Josiah, as it is said, “And Jeremiah lamented for Josiah, and all the singing men and the singing women spake of Josiah” (2 [Chronicles] 35:25).¹⁶¹

Apocryphal texts provide no support for any claims of wicked, corrupt reforms. If there were, it was not part of the collective memory several hundred years down the line. This is an idea that has only emerged in the modern era.

THE WITNESS OF THE RESTORATION

There are very few direct references to Josiah in the Restoration. All of them, though, view Josiah positively. While Latter-day Saints are not bound by tradition or precedent here, these do bear some weight and should be considered.

Joseph Smith would make two revisions to the Josiah narratives in his Bible “translation.” The first revision is this, 2 Kings 22:2: “And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord and walked not in all the way of David his father and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left.”¹⁶²

161. Gerald Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer: (the Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great) According to the Text of the Manuscript Belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1916), 121. See also 32:6, where Josiah’s divinely preordained name (*Yoshiyahu* יאשיהו) is punned upon by God as “let him be a gift” (*yaei shai hu* יאי שיהו) for the sacrificial altar.

162. Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; BYU Press; Salt Lake

Joseph took particular care to avoid the potential for misreading the verse as meaning that Josiah engaged in any of David's sins. In the OT Revision 2 manuscript, Joseph changed the word order of 2 Chronicles 34:16 from "and brought the king word back again" to "and brought the word of the king back again." Whatever Joseph may have meant by this, he was clearly not claiming Josiah and his men created the book themselves, or that they engaged in any kind of wrongdoing.

2 Kings, Chapter 9–25

The rest of the Second Book of the Kings Correct ...

2 Chronicles, Chapter 33

XXXIII— Correct—

2 Chronicles, Chapter 34

XXXIV— 16 Verse and Shaphan carried the book to the king, and brought the word of the king back again, saying, all that was committed to thy servants they do

2 Chroniclse, Chapter 35

XXXV— Correct—¹⁶³

Orson Pratt emphasized the importance of scriptures in many of his discourses, and Josiah was an important spiritual model for him.

The history of the inspired writings anterior to the Babylonish captivity is very brief. The number of copies were very few. In the days of Josiah, all of the Jews seem to have been destitute of a copy of the law. During the reign of that king, in repairing the house of the Lord, a copy of the book of the law was found; and when presented to the king, he sent five messengers to Huldah, the prophetess, saying, "Go, enquire of the Lord for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found." 2 [Chronicles] 34:21 The messengers returned and reported to the king that the book found was indeed a Divine revelation, and the king caused all the inhabitants of Jerusalem to be assembled to hear the words of the book. (See 2 [Chronicles] 34:1–33)

For a long period previous to finding the book, the Jews had been ignorant of the Scriptures, and had fallen into the grossest idolatry. A new revelation through the prophetess

City: Deseret Book, 2021), 153.

163. Joseph Smith, "Old Testament Revision 2," p. 78, *Joseph Smith Papers*, online at josephsmithpapers.org.

Huldah seems to have been sufficient to convince the king and all Israel of the divinity of the book. They must have been inclined, in that age of the world, to believe the history of the servants of God more than in this age; for now the people generally require a vast amount of evidence. The testimony of a dozen witnesses is scarcely regarded.¹⁶⁴

Orson would return to this theme in his sermon, this time explicitly relating it to the Book of Mormon. He saw strong parallels between it and Josiah's reforms, all positive.

I have already observed, through the persecutions raised against the house of Israel, their books were destroyed; yes, even the tables of stone, for some reason, were taken from them, and all Israel were left without even a copy of the law, until accidentally they happened to find one that had been hid in the house of the Lord, as I have already named; and they were so ignorant with regard to this copy that they were obliged to send for Huldah, one of the prophetesses in Israel, 2 [Chronicles] 34:22 to inquire of the Lord to know if it really was his word. They found a book, but they did not know whether it was true or false; and they thought it important that it should be determined by the immediate word of God.

Why not this generation go and do likewise? Why not inquire of the Lord whether the Book of Mormon is a Divine revelation? The copy found anciently contained the words of the Lord. And the people were so rejoiced that the whole nation of Jews gathered together to hear it read, and rejoiced over it, and gave heed to its precepts. They were not like the present generation; they did not fight it, and testify all manner of evil against it, and publish lies against it; but they believed it on the testimony of the prophetess.¹⁶⁵

Just as Josiah inquired of God through a prophet when he received new scripture, so too must people today when they encounter the Book of Mormon or the gospel as restored through the prophet Joseph Smith.

President Spencer W. Kimball continued this line of thought, commending Josiah as *the* model to follow.

The story of King Josiah in the Old Testament is a most

164. Orson Pratt, "Evidences of the Bible and Book of Mormon Compared," in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols., ed. G. D. Watt, J. V. Long, et al (Liverpool: Amasa Lyman, 1860), 7:23–24.

165. Orson Pratt, "Evidences of the Bible and Book of Mormon Compared," 7:24.

profitable one to "liken ... unto [our]selves." (1 [Nephi] 19:24.) To me, it is one of the finest stories in all of the scriptures.

Josiah was only eight years old when he began to reign in Judah, and although his immediate progenitors were extremely wicked, the scriptures tell us that "he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left." (2 Kings 22:2.) This is all the more surprising when we learn that by that time (just two generations before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.) the written law of Moses had been lost and was virtually unknown, even among the priests of the temple!

But in the eighteenth year of his reign, Josiah directed that the temple be repaired. At that time Hilkiah, the high priest, found the book of the law, which Moses had placed in the ark of the covenant, and delivered it to King Josiah.

When the book of the law was read to Josiah, he "rent his clothes" and wept before the Lord....

The king then read the book before all the people, and at that time they all made a covenant to obey all the Lord's commandments "with all their heart and all their soul." (2 Kings 23:3.) Then Josiah proceeded to clean up the kingdom of Judah, removing all the idols, the groves, the high places, and all the abominations that had accumulated during the reign of his fathers, defiling the land and its people. ...

I feel strongly that we must all of us return to the scriptures just as King Josiah did and let them work mightily within us, impelling us to an unwavering determination to serve the Lord.

Josiah had the law of Moses only. In our scriptures we have the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fulness; and if a taste is sweet, in fulness there is joy.¹⁶⁶

In the same vein, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin made brief mention of Josiah in a 1990 General Conference talk.

King Josiah was a king of Judah who reigned in righteousness. When he was only eight years old, he succeeded his father as king. Scripture tells us that although he was just a boy, Josiah "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, ... and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left" (2 [Kings] 22:2).¹⁶⁷

166. Spencer W. Kimball, "How Rare a Possession — the Scriptures!" *Ensign* (September 1976): 4–5.

167. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "The Straight and Narrow Way," *Ensign* (November 1990): 64.

Not a single prophet, apostle, or other general authority of the Restoration is on record condemning, disparaging, or rejecting the reforms.

CONCLUSION

When all is said and done, Josiah was no villain, but a king who sought to do God's will and save his people. He was a human king who sought to follow God and do right by him; succeeding on a personal level, but ultimately failing to save his nation. He was a king who took his royal and priesthood duties seriously, ultimately giving his life for them. That is the best reading of the present evidence.

The hope is that enough points in favor of Josiah and his reforms have been raised here that, as scholars and students of the gospel, we can reclaim him as a positive example for our discipleship. His example matters and he was no bogeyman. Prophets, both ancient and modern, knew it.

Most arguments against him are not as solid as they may have seemed. Some are entirely baseless. At heart, the reforms were an attempt to regain Judah's independence, stop idolatry, and prevent the destruction of the kingdom. They were not meant to change the text of scripture, but to demonstrate recommitment to God and His covenant. Legitimate practices and symbols of ancient Israelite religion had been corrupted through the idolatrous influence of Assyria; the covenant was broken and Judah's very survival as a nation lay at stake because of it.

As king, Josiah was the head of the Levitical Priesthood, responsible for the proper functioning of the temple, and ensuring that his people adhered to God's law. His reforms were needed to extract Judah from the spiritual morass into which they had sunk. They came too late, and Josiah gave up his life in the service of God, fulfilling the greatest commandment.

One final hope is this; that by highlighting the positive nature of Josiah and his reforms, and how Nephite kings and prophets emulated the ideal of kingship he embodied, some of the insights in this preliminary reappraisal will be taken up by others, and lead to a better understanding of the Book of Mormon and other Restoration scripture.