

57. Josiah's Venture

2Kgs 22-23

His role in the centralization of Yahweh worship is exaggerated, but his single military exploit won him praise.

Assyria weakened in the late 07c, tempting Judah to expand into the power vacuum in the north. But the Scythian mounted archers were a danger, in Palestine and all the way to Egypt. Psammetichos I in 640 bought them off with bribes, after which they pillaged the coastal cities, in particular Ashkelon, before returning to the Jordan via the Jezreel Valley, and so back north.¹

Josiah bided his time. He came to the throne in 0639, at the age of eight. In his 12th year, 0628, he began to prepare for a campaign in the north. War needs money, and Claburn (1973) shows the fiscal basis for this enterprise. It also needs national unity: you cannot *expand* your nation unless you *have* a nation. So local religious practices must go – what unites must replace what divides. As Charles de Gaulle once put it,

On ne peut pas à froid rassembler un pays qui compte 265 spécialités de fromages
One cannot in cold blood unite a country that has 265 different kinds of cheese

It is to Josiah's eighteenth year (0622) that Kings dates the recovery of "the book of the law of the house of Yahweh," found by Hilkiah the High Priest, and interpreted by Huldah the prophetess (2 Kgs 22:8-16). Josiah is said to have been inspired to order a religious reform by hearing her interpretation. But no King of Judah needed to be told about the religious situation of his nation. Yes, there *was* a reform, and most likely it was then that Josiah undertook it. Not a Deuteronomic ritual reform, but a military centralization policy.

Nineveh fell ten years later, in 0612, and the coast was clear. Josiah took his forces north. He was initially successful. But being overly emboldened, he took on Pharaoh Necho II, who was trying to reassert Egyptian power in that same much-disputed region. They met at Megiddo in 0609, and Josiah was killed.

Under Josiah's successor, the Egyptian puppet ruler Jehoiakim, the people promptly reverted to their old familiar mixed religious practice.

Remember now Winston Churchill's prime ministership in World War 2: at the end of which time, all our enemies having surrendered unconditionally, or being about to do so, I was immediately dismissed by the British electorate from all further conduct of their affairs.²

The people had always had their local interests and familiar worship places, and as soon as they could, they simply returned to them.

¹Herodotus 1:103-106; Redford **Egypt** 439-441, 449.

²Churchill **Gathering** 667.

The Scythians

The presence of the Scythians in the time of Josiah has been doubted. We have two witnesses. One is the prophet Zephaniah, prophesying “in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.” Having delivered in Zeph 1 an oracle against Judah and Ephraim (“the remnant of Baal”), he then adds:

Zeph 2:13 . And he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria, and will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like the wilderness.

This does not mention the Scythians. Our second witness is Herodotus.

Clearly, the author of Zephaniah knew of the fall of Nineveh (0612). Herodotus says that the period of the Scythians in Egyptian affairs (and thus for any activity in Palestine) lasted 28 years. 28 is not a symbolic number; it is more likely to be real. Now, $0612 + 28 = 0640$, and the Scythian period, if any, will thus have begin in 640, and lasted til 612. Those 28 years overlapped most of the reign of Josiah (0639-0609). Herodotus reports that the Scythians got as far as the border of Egypt, but that Pharaoh paid them hugely to depart. Egyptian tradition agrees. On their way back, the invaders sacked Ashkelon, and paused at Beth Shan, where northern armies turn north on their way home. Beth Shan has the alternate name Scythopolis. After that, the Scythian archers faded back into the lands whence they had come, and were heard of no more.

Josiah’s Reform

The Kings account of Josiah implies that the Hebrews had forgotten their tradition, until reminded of it by the discovery of a hidden Book of the Law. Nothing is less likely. Such rediscoveries are the oldest wheeze in the book, used when someone wants to make a basic *change* in the Law; another is Ezra’s mass divorces in Ez 7-10. It is far more likely that Josiah’s Reform of c0622 was merely Stage 3 in the following long-term 4-stage sequence:

- (1) The Judeans worship their own god (Yahweh) and the many native gods (the Elohim and any others), alongside the natives. This mixed worship has consequences; it produces some convinced northern believers in Yahweh. Later, when the Jerusalem Temple is rebuilt, they will offer their help. Being refused (Ez 4), they will build their own Yahweh temple in Samaria (§63).
- (2) Mixed worship is at some point disapproved. Many shrines of Yahweh, places where Yahweh “chooses to put his Name,” are created and recognized. In each, Levites are in residence, to conduct sacrifices and expound the Law.
- (3) As part of his program of miliary unification, Josiah decrees that *only* the Yahweh shrines shall be used for worship; this is in order to draw as strongly as possible on the aid of the national god in the coming national enterprise.
- (4) After Josiah’s death, the previous condition of mixed worship resumes.

The last laugh was with the Samaritans. At this very moment, Yahweh is receiving sacrifices *only* in Samaria, and the most basic Law, the Pentateuch, is being read there – not in Hebrew, *but in the Samaritan language*.