

«This Found Book» (2Kgs 22:13): Lessons in Biblical Renewal from Josiah

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In reflecting on what I might be able to share during these days, I took as my starting point the general theme of our gathering “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church: Integrating Biblical Studies and Theology in the Formation of Priests” and it seemed most fitting to me to contemplate this topic by means of and through the lens of Sacred Scripture itself – to try to listen to the Word and to see if something paradigmatic for us might be discerned there that can be used for the vocation of teaching in seminary. Reflecting on my own seminary, it has a long and gloried history but its present incarnation is significantly different from yesteryear. It has become a highly multicultural place – something that has enormous benefits and enormous challenges. Almost without fail, the seminarians have great good will but not a few are somewhat lacking the human, spiritual, and academic foundations that might have been taken for granted in previous generations. And, not only have some things been lost in their preparation for seminary, but also, in not a few cases, some rather poor intellectual habits have been picked up by our seminarians from our surrounding corrosive post-Christian world. All of these factors (and many more) obviously impact the way they interact with Scripture, whether at liturgy, in class, in personal study, or at prayer. And, being a child of my times, I must include myself explicitly in everything which I am saying. So, the question that sparked my reflection in preparing these thoughts was, “Has there been some time in the history of God’s people when the living with and living out of Scripture reached a particularly low ebb because of what had been lost and gained from the surrounding cultures?” And, if so, what can we learn from it, good or bad? While there are numerous biblical examples of individuals or the whole people falling away from the instruction of the Lord followed by the restoration of right relationship to God, of infidelity followed by fidelity, the one which seemed most apropos to my mind is that of the national renewal brought about by King Josiah, a renewal kindled precisely by the rediscovery of the Word, by the very physical rediscovery of the Book of the Law in the Temple.

This account, particularly as narrated in Second Kings 22-23, is what (ideally) anchors my words today. I am not presenting an exegesis of the chapters in question, nor am I looking in depth into the parallel account in Second Chronicles 34-35, in First Esdras 1, or the variations on the texts of the Septuagint and the Targum. Rather I hope to simply ponder and meditate on aspects of the text itself, hoping that the Lord will provide something for our reflection.

You know the general outline of the story well. Sometime, most likely during the winter of 622 BC, a religious renewal was begun in the city of Jerusalem, the capital of the little kingdom of Judah. A remarkable young king named Josiah, assisted by a prophetess named Huldah, a priest named Hilkiah, and ultimately by prophets named Jeremiah and Zephaniah, undertook what would amount to an ecclesiastical revolution which would lay down for all times the central tenets of biblical monotheism: the exclusive worship of one God in one sanctuary; the centralized, national observance of the main festivals of the Jewish Year, and a whole mass of legislation that covered social welfare and justice, community relationships, and personal morality. All of this was initiated by the (suspiciously convenient) discovery of a sacred book during renovations in the Jerusalem Temple. Since De Wette’s *Dissertatio Critica*¹ in 1805 the contents of “this found book” (2Kgs 22:13) have usually been identified

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with the biblical book of Deuteronomy, or with its nucleus, or perhaps with some form of an *Urdeuteronomium*. While vast amounts have been written concerning King Josiah's reign, it may be fruitful for us to direct our attention to two principle areas of the account: (1) the *setting* and the *man* – what took place among the Chosen People prior to the momentous events narrated in 2Kgs 22 and 23 and how does the sacred text depict the attitudes and actions, the character and deeds of Josiah, (2) the *discovery* and *reform* – what transpired on that fateful day and thereafter, and finally the implications of Josiah's reform and what it may mean for us.

1. The *setting* and the *man*.

First and foremost, the Judah into which Josiah and his reform came was in a very bad way. They were not going to hell in a hand basket – they had already arrived and set up shop some time ago. In the distant past, the people had sought out a king against the will of God, so it is not perhaps strange that their kings did not lead the religious life of their subjects at all well. Recall, the last good king of Judah had been Hezekiah, dead now two generations. In the nearer past, Hezekiah had been succeeded by his son Manasseh – a contender to be the very worst monarch of the whole line of David. He did not simply worship foreign gods – he set up an idol in the very Temple itself, engaged in necromancy, sacrificed his own son, seduced the people to do greater evil than even the Canaanites who had once dwelt in the land, and “shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another” (2Kgs 21:16). Throughout all of these infamies, Scripture attests the prophets protested greatly and continuously, but to no avail. The Lord God was absent and silent and Manasseh's infidelity seemed blessed with longevity: he reigned fifty-five years. He was succeeded by his son Amon – an apple who did not fall far from the tree. Amon “sinned more and more” and was slain by his own servants, who in turn, were overthrown by the “people of the land” who placed his son Josiah on this bloodstained throne. And, throughout all these many decades, the people were unable to console themselves with the words of Scripture. The words had not been taught diligently to their children, were not on their doorposts, bound to their arms or as a frontlet before their eyes. Indeed, the whole episode of the rediscovery of the Law shows us also that the word had been for a considerable period of time neglected and, for all practical purposes, lost. Things did not look good for the home team...

This then was the situation into which was born Josiah, a good son of an evil king. His reign, as recounted in 2Kgs 22-23 actually forms the pinnacle of royal history in ancient Judah. He was the only monarch whose birth was predicted, by name no less (1Kgs 13:2). From the spiritual perspective, however, Josiah had everything going against him. Son and grandson of wickedness, he was brought up in a corrupt court, in the midst of idols, among very wicked people, with all the temptations to self-will, self-absorption, and sensuality that come with the impunity of being king, while living after an apostasy of over half a century. And yet 2Kgs states that Josiah “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left” (2Kgs 22:2; cf. Deut 17:14-20). Jeremiah proclaimed that Josiah “did justice and righteousness...judging the cause of the poor and the needy” (Jer 22:15-16). Ben Sira declared “The memory of Josiah is like a blending of incense prepared by the art of the perfumer; it is sweet as honey to every mouth, and like music at a banquet of wine. He was led aright in converting the people, and took away the abominations of iniquity. He set his heart upon the Lord; in the days of wicked men he strengthened godliness” (Sir 49:1-3). So

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the stage was set for reform and the principle actor revealed. Now, what can we learn from this?

There are perhaps three lessons we might draw from the setting of Josiah's reform. First, it very often takes a great deal of time for confusion and ignorance and infidelity to come to full flower among the Lord's Chosen. Things are not a mess because the kings or God's people did one thing wrong. They practiced doing wrong over and over and over again and got really good at it. For a while – party! Then all those seeds sowed grew up. The wayward habits of the hearts of God's people multiplied over time. Therefore, I think, you and I are called to approach the situation in which we find ourselves with a boundless and serene patience. The situation did not develop overnight and, barring an extraordinary grace of the Lord, it will not be resolved overnight. As we know, poor noble Josiah did his utmost in the service of reform but ultimately he could not overturn in a few years the infidelity of decades. In a certain sense, we must be content to simply and patiently “push the iceberg” the other way; to generously sow seeds we might never see spring up. Second, we cannot avoid the work of renewal no matter how overwhelming it may seem. When we look at everything that needs to be done, and measure our own inadequacies, a huge helplessness can seize us. As Livy said of his own day, “We can endure neither our vices nor their cure.”² I mean, it is very tempting to simply deal with what comes across our desks each day. We all have courses to teach, committee work, families to take care of, personal study, etc. etc. It is tempting to say, “It's so complicated and I don't know where to begin.” But reform must begin somewhere and, just as the people of the land came to make Josiah king, so too the people of the land in our own day – ordinary parishioners – come to us hungry for a renewed relationship with the Lord. We must labor to satisfy their hunger. The world of Josiah and his contemporaries was one filled with enormous violence and brokenness. So too is our own. When we think of our parishioners and our students, their lives, like our lives, are strewn with the debris of infidelity: broken homes, broken hearts, broken lives, broken children. You and I must tenderly help mend this brokenness by reintroducing God's people with His word. We must work patiently, but we must work. Third, Josiah reminds us that renewal within the Church begins by seeking personal reformation. Second Chronicles states that “while he was yet young, Josiah began to seek after the God of David his father” (2Chron 34:3). Blessed are they who seek, for they shall find. Josiah did not start out to reform his kingdom, he started to reform himself. You and I will not be truly effective teachers of Scripture if we do not let the word make the demands on us in our own personal lives. God's people need us to practice personal reformation so our students can preach it. And they need them to preach it so they can practice it. As Francois Mauriac said, «The day on which you no longer burn, many others will die of cold». The beautiful thing about Josiah's journey of personal reformation may be found in the word “began.” Josiah “began to seek the Lord” – a very modest effort at first. All we have to do is start. Once we make a decision for personal reformation, once our vision of where God is calling us to go is clear, many of our choices are already made for us. Patience, a willingness to work, a willingness to begin with ourselves. This set the stage for the reform of Josiah and can set the stage for reform in our own days as well

2. The *discovery* and the *reform*.

Josiah's patience, his willingness to work, and, and his personal repentance naturally led him to the Temple. The house of God was a mess, due to the long infidelity of Manasseh.

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Scripture says that Josiah began with what was already contained in the Temple – all of the donations that had come in during the previous years (2Kgs 22:4) to fund his restoration. He brought in a significant paid labor force which discovered a sacred book during their work. A previous generation of scholars tended to smile knowingly at this discovery. However, the discovery of old documents during repairs of temples is an attested phenomenon in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Indeed, several Fathers of the Church (Jerome, Athanasius, and John Chrysostom) identified “this found book” with Deuteronomy. Evidently sacred scrolls were not infrequently used as ancient foundation deposits which were later eagerly sought after and their recovery faithfully recorded. The Syrian bishop Isho’dad of Merv thought that the book of the Law “was brought out through a divine action in order to show the people that it cried and argued against them because of their great iniquity and therefore did not want to remain any longer that in its place.”³ Whatever the case, the book was passed up the chain of command to Josiah. We the readers of Second Kings are not told what is in the book, but it is potent. It creates action in a circle of people that grows wider and wider. The reaction of the king himself is physical rather than verbal – he rends his garments and then issues orders to find out what God wants. His ministers go to the prophetess Huldah, who has very little in the way of consolation to share. Josiah is faithful to the Lord anyway, without regard to any hope of reward. The people are summoned, the book is proclaimed, and radical reform goes radiating out from the Temple. No words are spoken, but Peter Leithart notes a series of twelve distinct actions are carried out from 2Kgs 23:4-20, purging as it were even the absent tribes of Israel of all infidelity to the covenant in one great catharsis of the land⁴.

There is much here for us to ponder. Reform began in the Temple where, in spite of the loss of the word, in spite of all the evils in the kingdom, authentic worship continued to go on, offered and accepted. Real reform is always ecclesially-oriented. The king “stood himself next to the Temple” (2Kgs 23:3) to proclaim the word and so must we – always *ex corde ecclesiae*. Authentic reform builds on what has gone before. Just as Josiah took and refashioned the Temple treasures in order to rediscover the word, so too the many treasures in our history of biblical interpretation need to be sought out, refurbished, and put to use once more. Josiah knew that he might not be successful but he did not bemoan his fate or ignore it. Josiah trusted those he set to work – no accounting was made of how they spent their funds (2Kgs 22:7). Now, this may not be appropriate practice for our seminaries’ business managers, but it is important for us. We need a whole range of collaborators, of specialists whom we can trust implicitly if we are going to get anywhere in recovering the word. Most of all, however, I think what distinguishes Josiah’s reform is its radical nature.

Josiah was radical in the *swiftness* of reform. Josiah did not wait. He did not linger or procrastinate in what he was called to do. And procrastination is the greatest thief of God’s will in our lives. We convince ourselves that we will take up the burden – when the right time comes. Progress in renewal is indicated much more by actual choices than by pious feelings. We cannot wait for a time that is comfortable or a time when we have time. Like Josiah, we must pick the most important spiritual place in our lives, our Temples, and begin the reformation today. Josiah was radical in the *fullness* of his reformation. He was willing to pay the price. There is always a price to be paid. The price of changing or the price of staying the same: of disturbing the lives of so many of his people. And Josiah was willing to pay that price. He went throughout the whole length and breadth of his land “removing,” “tearing down,” “burning,” “demolishing,” “slaughtering,” “defiling,” “doing away with,” “breaking,” “grinding to dust.” There was a certain ruthlessness to his actions, a completeness as if he was cleaning up a toxic waste site (and in a sense he was). He moved

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with a certainty of action that would be scandalous to modern academics. No partial measures, but decisive, relentless, sustained effort. Wishing to be holy is not working to be holy. For renewal to take place, you and I have to move from wishing to working. Or, as Archbishop Timothy Dolan wryly observed, “the Church needs less wishbone and more backbone!” Less colloquially, though no less truly, Clement of Alexandria put it, “Genuine conversion means ceasing to sin without any backward glances.”⁵ Finally, Josiah was radical in his *willingness* to obey. All too often, biblical scholars are known for studying the word without heeding it. Speaking specifically to them, Raniero Cantalamessa wrote:

You cannot cultivate the Word of God without also cultivating obedience... Disobedience (parakoneia) means listening carelessly, with distraction. We could say it means listening in a detached or neutral way without feeling in any way obliged to act on what is being listened to and thus reserving one’s own power of decision. The disobedient are those who listen to the word but, as Jesus says, do not act on it (cf. Mt 7:26). It is not so much that they do not act on it as that they do not even think about acting on it. They study the word but without the idea of having to submit to it; they dominate the Word, in the sense that they are masters of the tools of analysis, but they do not want to be dominated; they want to maintain that neutrality proper to every scholar with regard to the object of his science.⁶

Josiah was willing to be “dominated by the Word.”

Like Josiah, as students of the Bible, our choices matter. They hurtle before us into eternity, pulling us in their wake. How we study and how we teach Scripture are important both for our students and for us personally. Ecclesially oriented, rooted in his tradition, not counting the cost, trusting of partners, radical in promptness, completeness and willingness to obey: these are some of the lessons we might learn from the discovery and reform of Josiah. When joined to the patience, perseverance, and personalism of the setting and the man, they lay out for us a program of biblical renewal as dramatic in our own age as it was in Josiah’s. May we have the courage to follow his path.

¹ Cf. W.M.L. de Wette, *Dissertatio critica qua Deuteronomium a prioribus Pentateuchi libris diversum alius cuiusdam recentioris auctoris opus esse monstratur* (Jenna: Leteris Eitzdorfii 1805).

² B.O. Foster, *Livy with an English Translation*, LCL 114 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1967) 7.

³ M. Conti, ed. *1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, ACC 5, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2008) 230.

⁴ Cf. P.J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Brazos 2006) 269.

⁵ Cf. G.W. Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria: Exhortation to the Greeks, The Rich Man’s Salvation, To the Newly Baptized*, LCL 92 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1919) 353.

⁶ R. Cantalamessa, *Obedience. The Authority of the Word* (Middlegreen: St. Paul Publications 1989) 61-62.