

2 Kings 23 — The Book That Remade a King — Josiah's Covenant at the Pillar, the Fire Through Every High Place, the Passover No Generation Had Seen, and the Chariot That Came Home from Megiddo

2 Kings 23: in the eighteenth year of his reign, c. 622 BC (secular chronologies agree closely, placing Josiah's reign at roughly 640–609 BC), Josiah gathers all Judah to hear the recovered book of the covenant, covenants at the pillar to walk after the LORD with all his heart and soul, purges Baal and the grove and Topheth and the sun horses from the land, defiles the altar at Bethel in fulfilment of a prophecy three centuries old, and keeps a passover unmatched since the days of the judges; yet the LORD turns not from the wrath Manasseh kindled, and Josiah dies at Megiddo facing Pharaoh Necho of Egypt, c. 609 BC, leaving Jehoahaz and then Jehoiakim on a throne that now answers to Egypt.

One chapter ago, a workman's renovation project in the temple turned up a scroll. Hilkiah the high priest handed it to Shaphan the scribe with the most understated sentence in the book: "I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD" (2 Kgs. 22:8). Shaphan read it before the king, and Josiah — twenty six years old, eighteen years on a throne he inherited at eight — tore his clothes. He sent to Huldah the prophetess, and her answer came back in two parts: yes, every word of judgment written in that book will fall on this place; and no, Josiah, not in your days — "because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the LORD... thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place" (2 Kgs. 22:19–20).

Hebrew Word Studies

berith (H1285) / karath (H3772) (בְּרִית / כָּרַת) — covenant, treaty, binding pact / to cut; to cut off, cut down vv. 2, 3, 14,

21. Hebrew does not "make" a covenant; it cuts one — karath berith, "cut a covenant," the idiom in verse 3, born from the ancient rite in which the covenanting parties passed between the divided halves of a sacrifice (Gen. 15:9–18; Jer. 34:18). A covenant, in this grammar, is a matter of life and death from the moment it is spoken: something dies to seal it. Now watch what this chapter does with the verb. In verse 3 Josiah cuts a covenant before the LORD; in verse 14 he cuts down (karath again) the groves. The same blade, both directions — and that is the whole logic of the reformation. Cutting a covenant with God and cutting away what competes with God are not two acts but one act, described twice. A covenant that severs nothing was never cut; it was only signed. The book Josiah read is even named for the word — the book of the covenant (vv. 2, 21; cf. Ex. 24:7, where Moses reads from a book of that exact name and the people answer, "All that the LORD hath said will we do"). And the people "stood" (amad, H5975) to it — covenant is something Israel does on its feet. King Benjamin's people stood in the same posture (Mosiah 5:2–5); so does every soul at the sacrament table, where the cutting has already been done, once for all, by the Lamb whose covenant it is.

tame (H2930) (טָמַא) — to defile, pollute, render unclean vv. 8, 10, 13, 16. Here is a verb you never expect in a righteous king's résumé. Tame is the great word of Levitical dread — the uncleanness that bars a soul from the sanctuary. Yet it is Josiah's signature verb in this chapter: he defiled the high places (v. 8), defiled Topheth (v. 10), defiled Solomon's shrines (v. 13), polluted the altar at Bethel (v. 16) — with graves, bones, and ash, the strongest contaminants in Israel's ritual world (Num. 19:16). The strategy is deliberate: an altar torn down can be rebuilt — Judah had watched Manasseh rebuild everything Hezekiah destroyed (2 Kgs. 21:3) — but an altar defiled with human bones is finished, because no worshipper of any god would use it again. Josiah is not redecorating; he is salting the ground so the crop cannot return. There is a theology of holiness in the paradox: what is done to false worship in the name of the true God is not vandalism but verdict — declaring unclean what had only pretended to be holy. The application cuts close. Repentance that merely unplugs a sin leaves the shrine standing for the next relapse to rekindle; the repentance this chapter models renders the old altars unusable — burns the contacts, ends the subscriptions, fills the high place with bones. "Touch not the unclean thing" (2 Cor. 6:17; Moro. 10:30) has a corollary Josiah understood: make sure the unclean thing is no longer touchable.

pesach (H6453) (פֶּסַח) — passover; the passover sacrifice — from pasach, to pass over, to spare vv. 21, 22, 23. The noun carries its theology in its etymology: pesach is built on the verb pasach, "to pass over" — "when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you" (Ex. 12:13). But translate it a shade more tenderly and the word opens: Isaiah uses the same verb for a bird hovering over its nest — "as birds flying, so will the LORD of hosts defend Jerusalem... and passing over he will preserve it" (Isa. 31:5). To pass over is not to skip the marked houses; it is to stand guard at the door

where the blood is. That is what Josiah restored to a nation that had forgotten it: not a heritage festival but a living rehearsal of the one arithmetic that saves — a lamb dies, its blood marks the covenant house, and destruction has no claim inside. Every generation was commanded to retell the deliverance as its own story ("this is done because of that which the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt," Ex. 13:8), until the night the story arrived in person — a Passover meal, "this do in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19), and the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; 1 Ne. 11:21). The sacrament table is Josiah's feast continued by other emblems: the covenant people gathered where the Lord has placed his name, eating the tokens of the blood that makes the destroyer pass over. There was not holden such a passover — until there was.

shub (H7725) / lebab (H3824) / nephesh (H5315) / meod (H3966) (שׁוּב / לֵבָב / נֶפֶשׁ / מְעֹד) — **to turn, return / heart / soul, life / might, muchness vv. 25, 26.** Verse 25 is the Shema with a verdict attached. Deuteronomy 6:5 commands love for God with all the lebab (the heart as the seat of will and thought), all the nephesh (the soul, the whole living self), and all the meod — an untranslatable noun that is simply the adverb "very" pressed into service as a substance: the total force of a life. No king in scripture is measured against all three and certified whole except Josiah, and the verb of his certification is shub, to turn — the Hebrew word for repentance itself. His greatness is not that he never faced the wrong direction; it is the totality of the turn once the book showed him true north. But the chapter is not finished with shub. The very next verse turns the verb around: "Notwithstanding the LORD turned not (shub) from the fierceness of his great wrath" (v. 26). One man's turning, however complete, did not turn the LORD from a judgment three generations in the making — the two shubs stand facing each other across the verse break like the chapter's whole tragedy in grammatical miniature. And yet even that is not the verb's last word, because the promise behind every prophet is that the two turnings are meant to meet: "return unto me, and I will return unto you" (Mal. 3:7). For Judah as a body politic, the meeting came too late. For any single soul — Josiah's record is the proof — the turn can still be total, and totally received (Moro. 10:32).

From the Chapter's Architecture

Watch, too, how the narrator laces the chapter with paired verbs that carry the theology. Josiah cuts (karath) a covenant, then cuts down the groves — one blade, two directions. He turns (shub) to the LORD with all his heart; the LORD turns not from his wrath — two shubs facing each other across the break between verses 25 and 26. He removes (sur) the high places; the LORD will remove Judah — the reformer's verb returning with the nation's name inside it. And the reading king and the crying prophet share one verb (qara) across three centuries. This is not decoration; it is the book of Kings teaching by grammar what it states nowhere in a sentence: covenant acts and covenant consequences are made of the same words, and the words keep their appointments.