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**2 Kings** Chapters 22 and 23:1-4, **ESV**, abridged

**22** Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. <sup>3</sup>In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king commanded, <sup>4</sup>“Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may count the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>And let it be given into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the LORD, and let them give it to the workmen who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house, and let them use it for buying timber and quarried stone to repair the house.”

<sup>8</sup>And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD.” And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. And Shaphan read it before the king. <sup>11</sup>When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes. <sup>12</sup>And the king commanded: <sup>13</sup>“Great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel to the King: <sup>19</sup>because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place.’ ”

**23** Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. <sup>2</sup>And the king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the LORD. <sup>3</sup>And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant.

<sup>4</sup>And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the keepers of the threshold to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Baal. He burned them outside Jerusalem.

## **God's second draft.**

When I was in ninth grade, I skipped school for two weeks so I could read the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, four books in all. And yes, my mother said this was just fine for me to do. She was excited at my dedication to reading. Recently, I came across an article that said that the first of the four books, The Hobbit, went through a very serious rewrite, that the book that was published was, in a sense, a second draft. I can't tell you if this is true, only that I read it. According to this article, in the first draft, J.R.R. Tolkien engineered the main character, Bilbo Baggins, very differently. One of the more significant changes is that in the original book, Gollum, the pathetic creature who has found the magic ring that will end up being the focus of the three books of the Lord of the Rings, gives the ring voluntarily to Bilbo. In the version of the book that was published, however, Bilbo has to trick Gollum into giving him the ring against Gollum's will. But this is no big deal, we are all aware that authors often create multiple, very different drafts of the books they write. Charles Dickens originally wrote his novels in serial form, and they were published incrementally in magazines. Then, when they were published in their complete form as novels, he apparently often made significant changes.

Here's something: the Bible has a similar history. Scholars have uncovered versions of various books of the Bible that conflict with the versions that are in the

official canon. But the differences are mostly minor and are often attributed to errors introduced when monks were manually making copies of scriptural books. The real issue is that the Bible has clearly been edited and reedited many times, with the final integrated versions of some books of the Bible looking very different from the pieces from which they were constructed. In other words, the Bible is not a document that was written once and then never substantially changed.

One of the most significant changes that we suspect was made to the Bible has to do with a King named Josiah, who is mentioned prominently in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. Josiah became King as a boy. His father and the kings just before his father had been corrupt, wicked men. Josiah, however, is famous as perhaps the most faithful of all of Israel's kings. He was in the lineage of King David and lived a few hundred years after David. Josiah's great contribution was a vast overhaul of Israel's moral climate: he worked to end idolatry and bring people back to worshipping the one, true God. Previous kings had allowed, even encouraged, the Israelites to worship not just God, but the gods of the Canaanites who lived among them. A chief pagan god was Baal. After he had already begun his revival, an official in Josiah's court discovered a long-lost book of faith in the Temple. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings it is referred to as a "*Book of the Law*". It was apparently a version of the Book of Deuteronomy. You might remember that in Deuteronomy Moses reiterates to a new generation of

Israelites - those largely born in the desert during forty years of wandering, and are about to enter Canaan, the Promised Land - the history of what has happened since the faithful escaped Egypt. The Israelites are encamped in Moab. They are waiting to cross the Jordan River and conquer the land of Canaan. Moses is going to die before entering Canaan and this is his opportunity to set them on the right spiritual track. The Book of Deuteronomy thus overviews for a naïve generation that has grown up in the desert the laws that God wants the Chosen People to live by.

When this Book of the Law is found in the Temple, King Josiah is greatly distressed. It is read to him, and he realizes just how far the People of God have fallen morally. This is what the king declares:

*“Great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book.”*

Josiah asks his officials to go to a prophetess named Huldah to try to get direction from God. Huldah announces that because of their worshipping of the gods of the Canaanites, God is going to punish the people of Israel. But she tells him that because Josiah has been true to God, he will not live long enough to see this disaster come about. Josiah then orders his officials to destroy all altars and icons that have been erected to honor Baal and other pagan gods. He gathers the people of Israel and leads them in renewing their dedication to the one, true God. The

Temple is cleansed of all that is pagan. He returns Passover to its original glory after previous generations have watered it down. Josiah would later die in a battle with Egypt, and Israel would become a vassal state of Egypt.

It's believed that the *Book of the Law* that is found in the Temple is a version of what we call the Book of Deuteronomy. It's thought that this Book of the Law contained roughly Chapters 5 to 26 and 28 of Deuteronomy. That would mean that the original *Book of the Law* was an early draft of Deuteronomy. Then, after Josiah's death, other people retargeted the book. Most likely, it was changed so that it flow better with respect to the books that follow it, namely the history books of Joshua, Judges, the two Samuels, and the two Kings, which together with Deuteronomy are typically called the "Deuteronomistic History". Many scholars believe that these books were written or perhaps edited at the same time so that they would tell a very specific story. Specifically, the person who put this series of books together, partly out of existing material, was trying to explain the reason for the Fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the Babylonian exile. In other words, God punished the people of Israel for their lack of faith, their tendencies toward idolatry, and in general, the breaking of the Old Covenant. The point is that material that had initially been written simply to encourage the Chosen

People to be faithful to God was turned into something that would explain away the terrible things that happened to the Israelites.

So, where does that leave us as readers of the Bible, as a people of faith who find our roots in the Old and New Testaments? It is very important for us to understand that the Israelite authors did not have the notion that we have today of strictly separating fact and fiction. They did not write, nor were they interested in reading, literal, tedious histories of the kind we read today. They blended what we would call fact and fiction when they wrote. Consider two things: First, the Bible has been written, rewritten, edited, and reedited. As each generation of authors worked on the material, they were motivated by varying goals. Those goals were not always to deliver a simple, literal history of the People of God. Sometimes they were concerned with helping the People of God maintain their faith by providing explanations for why certain things happened to them. Second, the overriding goal of the authors of the Bible, including both the Old and the New Testaments, was to provide a faith story. It's meant to tell us who God is, what God wants from us, and how to communicate with God – not to win a Pulitzer for the best modern history.

It's common for me to stand up here and suggest that certain parts of the Bible are best read as metaphors or allegories. In general, the further back we go in the Bible, the more we suspect that it's not literal. The Creation Story with Adam

and Eve and the Great Flood of Noah seem to be heavily influenced by pre-Israelite, pagan writings. Adam, Eve, Noah, and Abraham date so far back in history that it's easy to accept that they might be largely mythical characters based on oral traditions. Histories that were originally recorded in oral and not written form are likely to be part myth - no matter who wrote them. And there is good archeological, literary, and historical evidence to suggest that the Exodus from Egypt and the slaughter of the Canaanites didn't truly happen in the way they are described in the Bible. But what about later material? The histories of the Judges of Israel and the Kings of Israel might well have been altered by later writers and editors. But let's get to the bottom line, from the perspective of Christians.

Is the New Testament literally true? It has the advantage of being a much simpler story, namely the life of Jesus, and a description of the spread of Christianity after he is crucified. Even if Paul did not write all the letters attributed to him, we are confident that they were written either during his life or not long after he died. In general, the New Testament is much easier to defend. But that's not the real point. The notion of literalism, of insisting that the Bible must be taken as complete historical fact is not an ancient belief. It wasn't until the Enlightenment in the 1700s, when Christian leaders were trying to offset the growth of humanism, that people started to insist that the Bible must be taken literally. Moreover, the

Protestant Reformation was more than two hundred before this. Even Martin Luther was not a literalist. He believed that we had to use a mixture of Scripture and human reasoning to guide our faith. The Bible tells us about our faith - and it is up to us to interpret it by making use of the intellectual gifts that God gave us.

If we trust modern authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, to intelligently edit and improve a work before publishing it, maybe we should trust God. I am very confident that the version of these four books that are the best are the ones that J.R.R. Tolkien chose to publish. God surely did just as good of a job of producing Scripture. We do not have access to the *Book of the Law* that King Josiah is said to have found in the Temple. It's gone. There is a known fragment that appears to be a version of Deuteronomy that might be part of it, but we certainly do not have the entire original *Book of the Law*. We also do not have the many versions of the Scriptural stories that must have existed in ancient times. There are probably many letters written by Paul that we no longer have. There are most likely many other genuine writings about God that were written during Old and New Testament times that we don't have. We must accept that what we have as the Bible is what we were meant to have – even if some of it isn't the first draft of the material. God knows how to refine us - and God knows how to refine Scripture. Sometimes, God wants us to have the second draft.

God asks us to be trusting. What I try to do when I give sermons up here is to take the Bible as God left it to us. God may give us free will and allow us to make good and bad decisions, but God also heavily influences what happens. So, yes, the Deuteronomistic History, the version of the history books of the Bible that we have, is correct. If we fall away from our faith and stop trusting God, we will be separated from God. There might also be negative consequences in this world to either ourselves or our descendants. The thing about our Bible that strikes me over and over is how relevant it is to today. It contains spiritual lessons that are indeed eternal. It is truly a magnificent work. It might not be literally true by modern historical standards, and it might be, in a sense, God's second draft - but it is the Bible God wanted us to receive and it is very deeply true. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for giving us a scriptural legacy that gives our faith incredible depth. We turn to the Bible when we are making difficult decisions, when we are scared, sick, anxious, or lonely. From our Bible, we know that there is always a way to cleanse ourselves, start over, and live the way you want us to live – and we can do it without guilt. If everyone on this planet lived according to the lessons that Jesus left us – grace, peace, justice, and a concern for all people – the world would indeed be perfect. We also know from the Scripture that you left us that this perfect world will one day exist. Amen.*