

Chapter Five

JOSIAH

*Jerusalem
circa 600 BC*

From 2 Kings 21:19-24

It was loud that night in the palace. Footsteps filled the halls, swords clashed, and harsh voices barked in the dark. Josiah hid in the pantry. His mother, white-faced and panting, had carried him there. “Don’t make any noise,” she said. She smoothed his hair. There was fear, much fear, on her face. Below them, in another part of the palace, a scuffle erupted.

“Treachery!” someone yelled. The voice was cut short. Jedidah kissed Josiah’s face. “Be strengthened,” she said, “Wait here for me.” She covered him with a cloth, and left.

Josiah knew what it was.

His father was an unpopular man. A drunk. Much interested in women, and sorcerers. Amon—that was his name. His officials disliked him. Even Josiah could tell. There was a hush when King Amon entered a room, and his advisers eyed him with their lids down low. They traded secret looks, and answered him shortly. Jedidah, the queen, could see what was coming, though she pretended not to. She smiled for Josiah. She wore peace like a crown. But he could tell. A plot festered in Judah.

And so that night, when his mother lifted him from bed, he

knew, before anyone told him, that his father Amon was dead. And the city erupted.

“Murderers!” a voice called below. “Treason!” The people were roused, and a multitude roared in the street. Firelight showed under the larder door. The usurpers had mistaken the mood of the city, and a riot came to the palace.

Josiah hugged his knees. He covered his ears. There were shrieks and fights and clatters in the halls. He heard a crowd chant his name. *Yoshi-yahu. Yoshi-yahu.* Twice, feet came to the door. Twice, they turned away. At last, the noise died down. Later, much later, morning came, and the halls were still. A soldier passed, hollering at someone to go.

Josiah was thirsty. The room was cramped, and his joints ached. Time passed like water evaporating. At last, when it seemed he could not wait longer, the door opened. Josiah flinched. But no—it was not a stranger. His mother was there.

Josiah lifted the sackcloth. There was soot on her face and blood on her dress. Shaphan, a trusted adviser, stood by her. His long face was grave and there was a sword on his side. His mother, too, wore a dagger.

Jedidah knelt. Her whole body shook. “Josiah,” she gulped, “be brave.”

He looked back carefully. “Where are we going?” he asked.

She swallowed hard.

Josiah shrank. “The Topheth?” he whispered.

“No,” Shaphan interrupted. “The temple.”

Josiah did not understand.

Shaphan bent his head. “The anointing, Josiah. The people want you for king.”

He was then eight years old.



I would love to know more about King Josiah, or to learn that his name was carved on a rock somewhere. Alas for us; almost everything from that period was destroyed or carried off by Babylon.*

Josiah has a remarkable story, a short bright reign in Israel's slaughterhouse history. He ruled in the final years of the kingdom of Judah. He followed Amon, who followed Manasseh. Manasseh was a son of Hezekiah, and yet it was he who introduced child sacrifice to the land. He murdered his own son and kindled holy wrath. By the time Josiah was born, doom was already in motion. That wheel would not be stopped.

Yet a prophecy remained.

It hailed from Jeroboam's time, from Israel's early descent into madness. It anticipated a reign of purification and was addressed to, of all things, an altar. "Altar, altar! This is what the Lord says: 'A son will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you'" (1 Kings 13:2).

It had not been fulfilled. Judah was never purified.

But it would be.

Josiah is the reformer. He inherits a kingdom in ruins. In his life, we behold the purifying king. His ardor looks forward to a time when a greater king with a greater claim would come.

Of Josiah's early reign, there is not much to say. He ruled for eighteen years, and that time is not much commented upon in the Biblical record. He attempted early reforms. Without guidance they were incomplete (2 Chronicles 3-7). Even so, the desire was in him. A few additional things can be inferred. He was

* There are intriguing exceptions, including, but not limited to, a bulla (a kind of seal) from Josiah's day with Hilkiyah's name on it.¹

well-advised; he was virtuous; he talked straight; he respected his officials; they did not betray his trust. In fact, his confidence in them was so complete that, when he ordered the priests to spend national money rebuilding the temple, he said of the supervisors and tradesmen, “They need not account for the money, for they are honest in their dealings” (2 Kings 22:7). His trust was not misplaced. It’s remarkable how much the virtue of a king can shape a nation’s character.

At last, there came the day that would define his life.

From 2 Kings 22:8-11

Josiah was busy. The taxes were in, and so it was meetings, reports from foreign parts, and maps to consider. The palace was crowded. Elders voiced their grievances, priests were there for their money, and merchants from Judah wanted the roads improved. “If you build trade roads to Babylon,” Josiah said again, “Babylon will come down them. Is that what you want?”

Suddenly, the big stone room fell silent.

Shaphan stood in the door. He was venerable, very gray by then, with a face that showed what he thought. There was much dread upon it. One by one, the officials turned. Last of all, Josiah looked up. “Shaphan!” he cried, “What is it?”

Shaphan was trembling. There was a scroll, yellow with time, in his hands. “Hilkiah found something,” was all he could whisper.

Josiah stood. “Out,” he said, and the officials departed, casting backward glances.

Shaphan crossed the room.

Josiah was urgent. “What is it?” he pressed.

Shaphan licked his lips. “Disaster,” he said.

Josiah sat.

Slowly, Shaphan opened the scroll. The old page crackled as it was spread. “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel,” Shaphan began, and Josiah’s heart was stilled by the name. Moses. Could it be?

“Yahweh our God said to us at Horeb,” Shaphan continued, “‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain.’”

It was the Law.

Long neglected, stacked in a pile of old transcripts and tax records and administrative documents, covered in cobwebs, and faded with time.[†]

Shaphan read it in full. Shadows swung across the room, the air cooled, and Josiah did not move. “You shall have no other gods before me,” Shaphan read. “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.”

Do you know the rest?

“Do not carry the Name in a worthless way. Observe the Sabbath. Honor your mother and father. Do not murder, commit adultery, steal, give false witness, or covet your neighbor’s wife, or house or land.”

I cannot imagine discovering the law, especially in such a lawless time. They read about Jubilee, about the hard boundaries God had set on ownership. They read about the treatment of foreigners. They read about prohibitions on warfare. They read about Yahweh, and His love, and His way. There is nothing like it. Surely, Shaphan

[†] Many scholars think that it was an old version of Deuteronomy, Moses’s farewell sermon. Some also think that it was a conspiracy, that Hilkiah wanted to consolidate religious power in Jerusalem, that he “found” Deuteronomy at just the right time. There’s no reason for it to be that way. Old books do turn up at ordained times—take, as evidence, the 20th century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Also, if Josiah followed the law to the letter, Hilkiah might be killed. It’s hard to imagine the old priest intended some personal benefit.

shook as he read. Surely, Josiah set his head in his hands and hardly breathed.

“See,” Shaphan read. “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.”

He read:

“There is no one like the God of Jeshurun
 who rides across the heavens to help you
 and on the clouds in his majesty.
 The eternal God is your refuge,
 and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

At last he stopped. The room was dark. Carefully, he set the scroll on the table. It settled there like a stone.

Josiah was silent. His shoulders shook. He spoke softly, so that Shaphan had to lean in to hear him. “Doom,” he mourned. “Doom.” Through the window, the men could plainly see sacrificial fires burning on the heights. From the temple, there came magical wails and the jingle of money. Somewhere in the night, an infant screamed.

Allow me to explain.

By Josiah’s time, the cult of Baal was entrenched in Judah. It had come down from Israel, where Jezebel, daughter of the witch-king Ithobaal, had established the pagan religion. She was Phoenician, and the Phoenicians were forerunners in that regard. Baal worship included many horrific elements, but the worst of these was child sacrifice. Given the obvious presence of child sacrifice in the Old Testament (and in almost all ancient literature), it may surprise you to learn that for a long time scholars debated whether or not it happened. Then, in the 20th century, archeologists found something.

In north Africa, the Phoenicians established a colony called Carthage, and during the course of excavations, archeologists unearthed a massive burial ground there. It is called the Carthaginian Topheth Field, and it was for children. Children who had been sacrificed to Baal. Specialists speculate that, by the 4th century BC, it may have been as large as 64,000 square feet and included nine levels of burials. There may have been some 10,000 burials a year, and though the math is crass in this case, that averages about twenty-seven murdered children a day.²

Those children were roasted alive on a burning idol, or thrown into the mouth of a roaring oven.

I know that's disturbing. I don't want to traumatize you. I want you to see how serious this is. This is the worship Baal demands. And not just Baal—Saturn, too, and many of the other personas the demons put on to torment the world. The gods ordered child sacrifice, and the people of those cultures did it so often they designed poetic formulas to mark the occasion and even named the facial expression of the murdered children. They called it “sardonic laughter.”³ The Greek historians knew about it, as did the church father Tertullian. Eventually, in 146 BC, Carthage was razed to the ground and the Mediterranean center of child sacrifice was destroyed. But almost 700 years before that, in Ahab's Samaria, they lit the sacrificial fires.

In Josiah's time, they burned in Judah.

The land was lawless indeed.



Like one who grieves, Josiah took hold of his tunic, and tore it.

They were silent. No candle was lit. They sat in the darkness together.

Finally, Josiah spoke. “Go to Hulda,” he said. Good old Josiah—he did respect women. “Inquire of Yahweh what we are to do.”

Shaphan did. And Hulda said, “This is what Yahweh says: I will indeed bring the disaster of which you have read. But not in your time. You have humbled yourself. It will not come now.”

So.

What does a king do when he finds a temple desecrated and a kingdom defiled?

When the covenant, that was intended to be a blessing to many, is broken, and the people are ruined, and even the children are sacrificed?

This is what Josiah demonstrates that David does not. He told his officials, “Assemble the elders and ready my guard.” Then he added, “Don’t let word get out to the priests.”

What Josiah was about to attempt was risky in the extreme.

Rebellious spirits are not friendly. They are violent and seditious and imperialist, and when they compete for dominion, things get violent. The dissolution of the Neo-Babylonian empire was related to an attempt, by the Babylonian king Nabonidus, to reorder the local pantheon.⁴ The Roman emperor Caligula was assassinated after replacing the heads of the gods of Rome with his own bust and then announcing that he would depart for Alexandria to be worshiped as a god.⁵

There is, of course, a social dimension to all this: Priests limit the power of a king. Religious systems are hegemonic. They stabilize societies, usually by distributing the application of violence more widely. There’s a lot invested into the religious system of a civilization; there’s a lot invested into the makeup of most church’s elder boards.

And yet the social dimension is not sufficient to explain what happens when fickle gods get angry. There are literal bloodbaths (1 Kings 22:38). Religious reform is spiritual warfare.[‡]

‡ Things like the Protestant Reformation and the demonic violence of the Spanish Inquisition are obvious examples, but allow me one from a more recent century: In 1791, a revolution began in Haiti, which was then called Saint Domingue. At that time, Saint Domingue was one of the worst places a captive African could be. The plantation

And so what Josiah was about to attempt was dangerous indeed. His father had been assassinated. He understood human caprice. No one in Judah had heard the Law in a generation. To say that the Yahwehists were a minority would be an understatement in the extreme. Still, Josiah had two advantages. He had the extraordinary loyalty of the people, who had driven out the usurpers and installed him as king. Also, he had his character.

Josiah was unusual, to say the least. Some people love the truth. Some people refuse to live within other people's expectations. It may have been his youth, and the tragedy of his story, that made him that way. It may have been the influence of the women in his life. However it happened, Josiah was hard to manipulate. He refused all kinds of counsel, even some good counsel. He did what conviction compelled him to do. That was visible at the end of his life, and in the middle, when he went up to the temple ahead of the people.

From 2 Kings 23:1-9

The place was a carnival.

There were golden horses by the gate, leading the bronze chariot of the sun god. There was an Asherah grove of hewn poles, tall

owners feared an uprising and so employed a sadistic form of sanctioned terrorism to prevent it. They burned captive Africans alive, stuffed their ears and mouths with gunpowder and detonated their bodies. They poured boiling sugarcane over their heads, and severed their limbs.⁶ There are worse examples. The revolution there was indeed a long time in coming. When it began, it was a priest who led it. His name was Dutty Boukman. At a ceremony in the forest, accompanied by a priestess, Boukman framed the revolution in spiritual terms. "The white man's god," he said, "asks him to commit crimes. But the god within us wants to do good. Our god, who is so good, so just, He orders us to revenge our wrongs... We all should throw away the image of the white men's god who is so pitiless." The lower-g god is appropriate here; the slavers were not, in spite of much historical hand-pointing, serving Jesus. What spirit were they serving? I believe that the historian David Brion Davis named it, if accidentally: "Much of the new world then came to resemble the death furnace of the ancient god Moloch."⁷

and foul. There were altars to Baal—Baal!—inside the temple. There were altars to the moon and the sun and the stars, and to the Canaanite pantheon, and to the Assyrian gods, and to Babylonian deities. There were stone huts inside the temple for male cult prostitutes. There were priests of every variety, in black robes and veils and tall hats, with silver necklaces, amulets, and charms for sale. In the distance, upon the heights of the hills, fires burned, and oily smoke went up like snakes uncoiling into the sky.

It had been that way a long time.

Josiah had never known otherwise.

He did now.

He waited, with his guard, and tears shone on his face. In front of him, the priests of the gods hid their ceremonial daggers.

The people assembled. The orders had been clear: Come to the temple. No exceptions. Elders and prophets and women and children, from the greatest to the least, they came. In ordinary times, that would have been terrifying. In Israel, it was not unprecedented for a king to fill a temple and then kill everyone inside (2 Kings 10:18-27). But Josiah was trusted. Whatever it was, the people would face it. They filled the courtyard and packed the streets. The elders and prophets and priests were in front, the others, behind. King Josiah stood in front of the dais. He held out a hand, and Shaphan handed him the Law. “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel!” he called, and waited while criers carried the message downhill. “Yahweh our God said to us at Horeb!” he read, and the message resounded. Line by line, law by law, he told the people their story. *This is who you are*, he explained, *This is who God is*. At last, when the sun was low in the sky, Josiah concluded.

The echoes of Moses’s song went out into the city.

The priests waited. What would Josiah do? They noticed, not for the first time, that there was a sword on his side, and a hammer, such as the Babylonians used, at his feet.

Josiah picked it up.

In front of the altar, there was a bronze platform. It had been raised in Solomon's time for royal usage (2 Chronicles 6:13). Kings were anointed upon it (2 Kings 11:14). Josiah had taken his turn on the seat. Now he climbed it again.

He faced the crowd. "Today, I take an oath," he called. "To follow Yahweh, and to keep his commands and statutes and decrees with all of my heart and with all of my soul. This I swear forever." He paused. "Who is with me?" he said.

There was no conspicuous silence.

Conviction gripped the crowd. The elders leapt up. In their regional accents, they pledged themselves to the covenant.

Then silence returned.

One by one, the people noticed the priests.

In Hebrew, there is a special word for rebellious priests. It occurs only a few times. It is "chemarim," a word derived from "black." It may refer to the expensive and accursed robes they wore. Let us say that it is so. All over the complex, the chemarim peered out from underneath black hoods, suddenly conspicuous.

Josiah watched them. "And you?" he called. "Will you serve Yahweh?"

There was a magical muttering. One voice, it was hard to say whose, called out, "We have a lord."

"Very well," Josiah replied, "Go to him."

The temple erupted. Judah surged uphill. The chemarim who murdered children were engulfed as though by waves. Josiah himself drew a sword. He leapt down from the dais. There were tables all over, stacked with incense and clay gods and other forbidden things. With the hammer, Josiah swept these aside. With the sword, he clove the table. Then he turned over the benches.

"Out!" he called. "Out! Out of the house of Yahweh!"

To his right, the Asherah grove shook. Like a great tree, the main pillar twisted. It swung, and fell with a crash. Behind him, Hilkiah and the priests had stormed the inner chambers. They came out with their arms full of vessels and dishes and graven stones and spilled these into the courtyard. Josiah turned to the apartments, to the tents of the male prostitutes and of Asherah's witches. These had already fled, but their dwellings remained, and Josiah, together with his guards, slashed the fabric to ribbons. They broke Asherah's looms and unseated the anchor stones. "Down with Asherah!" Josiah hollered. "Down with Baal!" He spun. "Take that," he said, and pointed at the Asherah grove with his sword, "to the Stream of Darkness!" It was not enough to clean out the temple. Josiah intended to purify his kingdom. He went with the Asherah grove to the evil brook, and burned it there, and scattered the ashes on graves. He likewise burned the vessels and idols, and threw down the altars that were on the gates of the city. He worked, from one end of the city to the other, to purify Judah.

And then Jeremiah came to him.

From 2 Kings 23:10

Josiah was late in returning from the hills near Jerusalem, where he had scattered the altars and dispersed the priests and strewn the hilltops with bones. He was weary. It is not easy to confront a people's horrors, one at a time, day after day. But in the door of the palace, Jeremiah was waiting.

Josiah sighed. Jeremiah was a keen intellect and a passionate teacher. A prophet, too—he wandered the city lost in thought, and he reported faithfully what Yahweh commanded. That is not something most kings value, and so few liked the prophet's company. His face was long, like always, and his eyes were dark when he

spoke. “The Topheth,” Jeremiah said, and looked hard at the king. “It brought down a curse on Jerusalem.”

Josiah crossed his arms. He rubbed his beard.

He knew, of course. Jeremiah had long denounced the idol. But truly, Josiah feared the place. Hinnom, sometimes called Gehenna, the vale of fire. It was a valley on the south slopes of Zion where Manasseh, Josiah’s grandfather, had sacrificed his son. As a boy, Josiah could see the smoke from that altar. He knew it was not unlikely, until Amon was killed, that he would end up upon it. The place was a horror to him.

“You must destroy it,” Jeremiah pressed.

Josiah made no sign. A shadow fell on his face.

Jeremiah saw it. He sighed, and spoke softly. “There are many terrors in Judah,” he said.

“Too many,” Josiah responded. He shouldered his hammer. “But not forever.”



A steep stone staircase dove into the valley. The brush was thick below, and the vale was dark. Trees and raised stones hid the Topheth, but the smell of cinders was in the air, and a pall. Josiah had forbidden the use of the thing, but the people still went there at night and made the blue fire.

Josiah’s stomach was sour as he descended, and his breathing was shallow. A narrow path ran from the foot of the stairs. Josiah followed it, through darkening trees. At last, he saw the idol.

It was a huge, humped stone, hung with many horns. Around it, stone bull heads were arranged in a circle. The Topheth stone had a shelf halfway up its side, and that shelf had been fashioned into the likeness of arms. Upon them, a wide bronze dish was placed. Beneath it, there was a fire pit. Though there were no priests in

attendance, no musicians to beat the drums, Josiah could hear them. Even his guard shifted uneasily, casting backward glances.

Josiah went up to the thing. Asherah's weavings were hung on the trees and strung on lines, with images of fire and snakes and strange runes. The Topheth was ghastly. A crack crossed the stone, long and winding, like a toothy grin.

No one moved. Josiah stood in front of the idol. Far taller than the king, it was. He was like a child in front of it.

He did not speak. Josiah did not need to see the horror. He knew it from his nightmares, where it walked and said his name. His guards held their breath.

There was no denying the feeling. Malice went out from the stone. But inside the malice, a promise. *Serve me*, it said. *Feed me, and I will protect you. Defy me, and learn how I devour.*

The guards lowered their swords. They were caught, like gnats, in the allure of the thing. They had underestimated the power of the place, of the spirit. Who dared lay a hand on a god?

Then a low voice answered.

"I know you," it said, and at its sound the heads of the guards cleared somewhat. "I know you, fiend." The guards looked up with wonder. Josiah spoke to the idol. "I saw you on the face of my father, and in the images of his father. I smelled you in the stench of fire. I feared you," he said. There was a long silence then, and the enchantment, like fog, pressed back on the vale. Josiah spoke again. "I do not now," he said, and the tremor left his voice. "What did you think? That having escaped you, I would return to be your slave?" He paused. "I am Yoshiyahu," he said, and touched his chest in a gesture of defiance, "Yoshi-Yahu. *My fortress is Yahweh. Yahweh,*" he said again, "I have chosen. Lay a hand on his throne if you can."

The guards looked up. Josiah lifted his hammer. He swung, and a wind was in the swing, and he struck the face off the god. "He

desecrated Topheth,” the scriptures say, “which was in the valley of the Children of Fire.” He broke the idol to dust, and the dust even he scattered.

Never again could anyone sacrifice their children there.

Still, the work was not done.

From one end of the kingdom to the other, Josiah did what no other king could do. He burned the high places and broke the altars. He destroyed the multitudinous shrines of rebellious spirits. He dug up even the graves of evil prophets, and sponged the earth of their memory.

Truly, though, the scouring of the land was not an end in itself.

It was preparation. It was purification. It was done so that Yahweh could come.

“The king gave this order to all the people: ‘Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this Book of the Covenant.’ Neither in the days of the judges who led Israel nor in the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah had any such Passover been observed. But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was celebrated to the Lord in Jerusalem” (2 Kings 23:21-23).

At twilight, the lambs were prepared. A wash of blood was on the doors. No extra noise was in the street, no errands were done. The households were home, gathered around long tables. They wore their cloaks and secured their belts. A child was tasked to ask, “What is the meaning of this?”

No one remembered. It had to be written down, and rehearsed, and explained everywhere. And yet, as the families performed the liturgy, history, like an old friend, came to the door. It was familiar. Their bones knew. “It is Passover,” the fathers replied. “Tonight, Yahweh judged the gods of Egypt. But us, he delivered.”

They lifted the first clay cup, brimming with wine, fragrant as the turned earth. “This,” they said, “is the cup of sanctification.”

Judah was clean. Once, at least, in its existence, the land was presented to Yahweh without defect.

It was a prophecy fulfilled, and a prophecy of things to come. One day, all evil would be wiped away forever. And so once, at least, the people of Judah remembered their story. They remembered Yahweh, who had come for them, and saved them, and loved them of old.



So. What happened to King Yoshi-yahu?

He went off to war, in the end.

In the valley of Meggido, Josiah met Pharaoh.

The armies lined up. Horns blew, arrows hissed, stones whistled like birds. The noise was dire, and the armies clashed, and fate tipped one way, then the other, while the armies raged.

And it's most likely that they did not meet. It's most likely that all was confusion, that the armies were strange beasts wrestling together. In Kings, Pharaoh clashes with Josiah at once; in Chronicles, the archers seek him out. Those stories are compatible; they convey the same reality. And because it is true to the point of the story, let us say that they did. It is not impossible—Alexander the Great came within a horse's length of Darius III on the field, not once, but twice. Julius Caesar looked Vercingetorix in the eye.

So let us say their chariots clashed, and the vehicles spilled sparks. Let us say the armies were still as those men crossed the field like terrible angels. The drivers were slain already and so only the princes remained. The chariots came close—out came the swords. There was Neco. Pharaoh. An archetype of evil. There was Josiah. King of Jerusalem. An icon of God's dominion.

Truly, it must have seemed like the end of an age. Who could blame the soldiers for pulling apart, for shading their eyes? The kings traded blows, and the sound of it rang out over the field.

The chariots parted, passing dead horses, and then crashed together again. Neco caught Josiah with a blow, and both rulers tumbled to the ground. Then they sprang up. Josiah was young. His sword danced in the air. He was like a lion at war. Could this be the one who could meet evil hand-to-hand and prevail? For a moment, at least, I bet it seemed like he was.

But no—the answer is no.

It is a horrible, gut wrenching, utter no.

The scythe of Pharaoh is sharp. It hacks and cuts and slices and severs and ruins dreams and separates families and sends whole nations down to the dust. In one of those moments that separates one era from another, Pharaoh hacked past Josiah's defenses, and the king was no more.

“While Josiah was king,” the scriptures say, “Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the Euphrates River to help the king of Assyria. King Josiah marched out to meet him in battle, but Neco faced him and killed him at Megiddo” (2 Kings 23:29).

He failed, you see.

Even the best of them.

There was no one like Josiah, the scriptures say (23:25). Not before, not after. But he could not vouchsafe the city. He could not deliver the people. He could not save the temple. Soon afterward, Nebuchadnezzar came down and razed it to the ground. Neither could Josiah hold back the king of the dead. No one could.

It is impossible to convey what a tragedy the Old Testament is, how disappointing its ending.

But of course, I don't have to tell you. You know it from your own life.

When I was younger, I would wonder at my parents and their friends. We liked to camp, and when we sat by the fire, and they were unguarded, they'd open a bottle and take out the names.

Pop. Frank. Brent. Nona. Bill.

I wondered, back then, at the twist in my side. The Anglo Saxons called it *ubi sunt*, that wounded, painful, unbelonging that haunts humanity. Every culture I know of has a related expression. The Portuguese call it *saudade*. The Romans, *nostalgia*. The Celts, *hiraeth*. In time, I've learned what it means. It means Craig got cancer. It means we left the old home. It means that I saved a decade to buy a horse, and when he died, I gave him like the body of my past to the ground.

It means that Moses lay down. That David's hand went limp. That Elijah shot away. It means that Aaron was buried and Abraham decayed and Jeremiah, born away against his will, twisted in the saddle to catch one last glimpse of the temple, and then a hill blocked the view and he did not see it again. It means that, apart from some intervention, the world is a ruined dream.

But.

But.

That is not the end of things.

A message comes. It is like the horn of a delivering army heard long before the army appears. It is like a branch on that old favorite apple tree, the one that was cut down and burned, suddenly bursting into flower. A voice calls out, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

One is coming in whom the blood of the old kings runs again.