

THE TEMPLE GATES

Josiah and the Reformation of Judah

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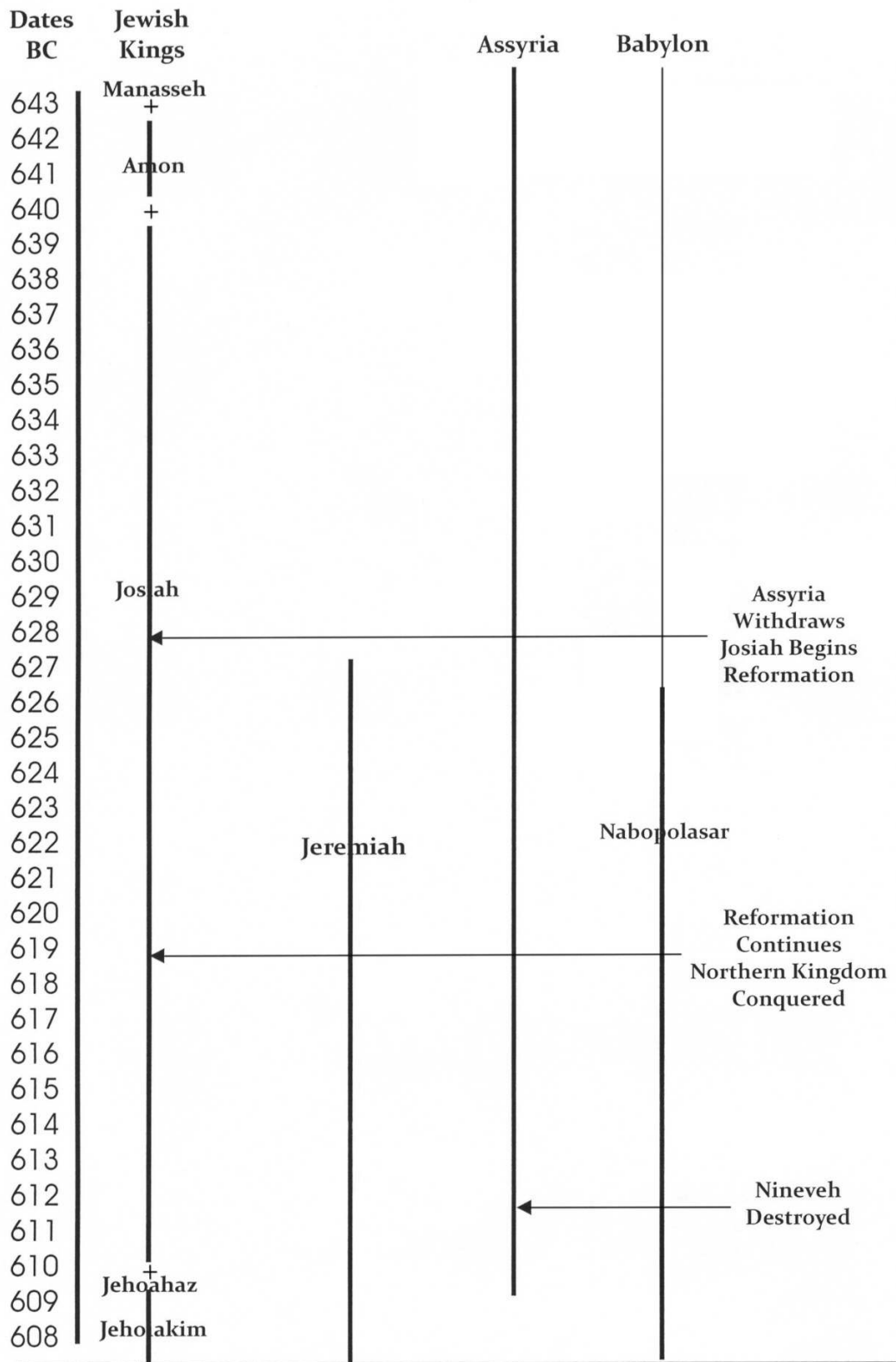
Dedication

To Jesus
Who is sufficient for our Salvation.
Jesus is Enough!

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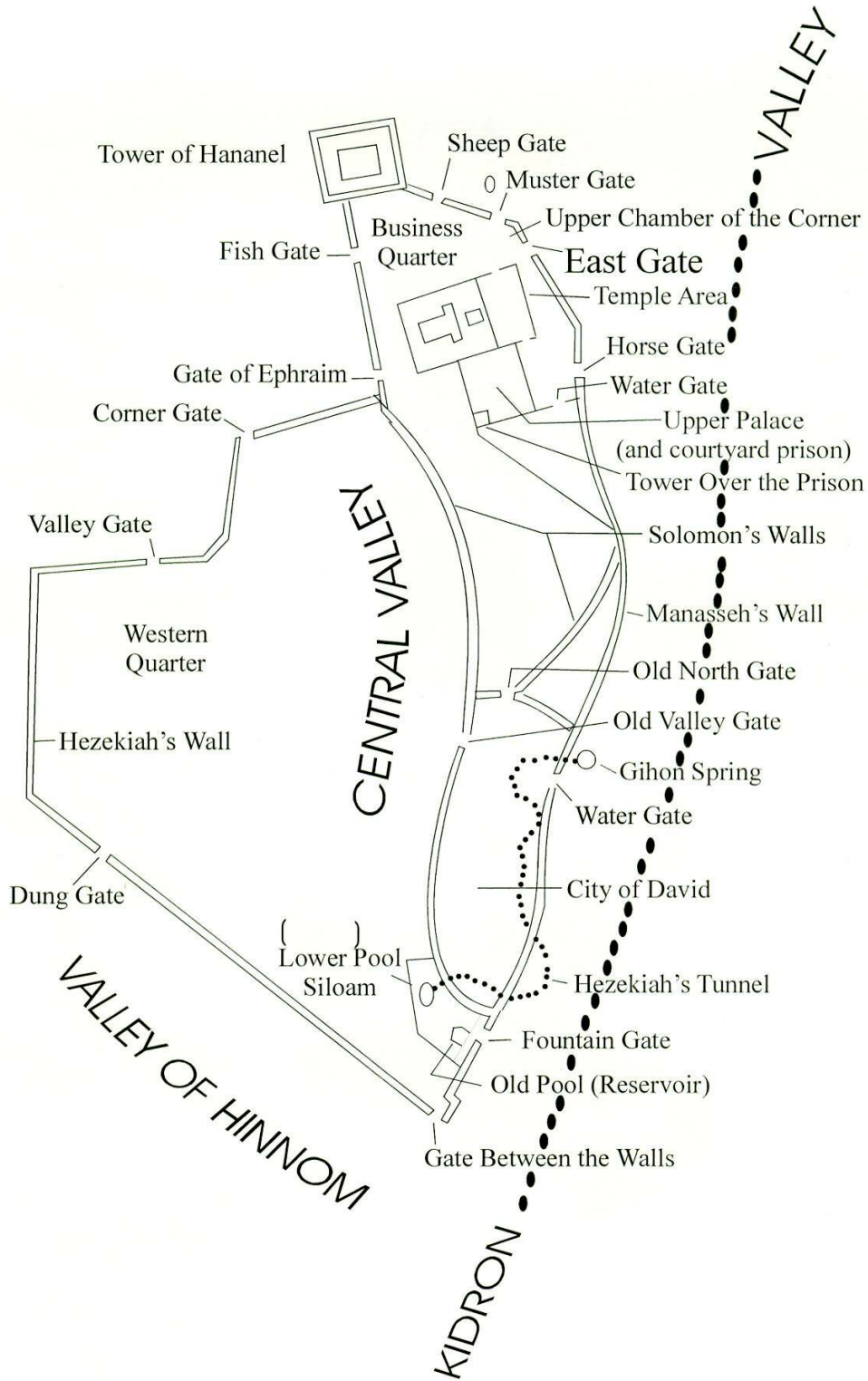
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A Chronology of Josiah's Time



Jerusalem in the Time of Josiah

(Compiled from several maps by Thurman C. Petty, Jr.)





Chapter 1

The King Is Dead! . . . Long Live the King!

“Where are you going?” As the sun began to brighten the horizon with a wash of pale light, the man sitting beside the warming flames of the cooking fire in the courtyard of his house glanced up from tightening the flint blade of his sickle.

“Up to the high place of Baal,” his swarthy friend replied as he stood in the courtyard doorway. “Want to come along?”

“I believe I will,” the first man agreed, laying down the sickle beside him. “We need Baal’s help to ensure a good harvest.”

The two strode up the stairway to Market Street, turned left, and made their way through the market as merchants began to set up their shops. Leaving the market area, they descended through the curves of East Street and exited the city through the East Gate.

“Too many people in Jerusalem, don’t you think?” the first man observed.

“I agree. A lot of people have moved in from the countryside. They think it might be safer in the city.”

“True. There’ve been lots of attacks and looting from bandits of late.”

The men climbed the slope of the Mount of Olives and soon reached the high place of Baal. The sun peaked over the

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eastern hills. They faced the sun, knelt with their toes pointing behind them, then sat down on their heels. The ritual had already started.

The priests of Baal prostrated themselves before the altar. Perched on its top was a small gold-covered image of Baal holding a lightning bolt while standing on the figure of a bull. The bolt of lightning symbolized his control of the vital rainstorms, and the bull represented his power of fertility. As the cult prophets chanted they quickly slid into an ecstatic state that soon spread among the rest of the worshippers.



Manasseh had led his people into a spiritual bottomland. The son of Hezekiah had become fascinated with the gods of his grandfather Ahaz, rather than Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth, whom his father had been faithful to. Instead, Manasseh served the gods of the Canaanites, who had been dispossessed by his ancient ancestors. He set up altars to Baal and Ashtoreth, and even burned his own son in the Molech Tophet fire pit. The king consulted mediums and witches, and, though he did not outlaw the worship of Yahweh, he persecuted those who remained loyal to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So the worship of God had to go underground.

One of the first individuals that Manasseh murdered was the great prophet Isaiah. Tradition claims that the king had the prophet placed into a hollow log, and then ordered it sawn in half. Thus he ended the life of one who had, for nearly 50 years, spoken against evil and preached the true worship of Yahweh. Manasseh hunted down every prophet or spiritual leader of Yahweh and systematically murdered them, so that it came to be said that he had filled Jerusalem with blood.

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A woman climbed the steps that clung to the side of her house in the Western Quarter. On the roof her husband already knelt toward the east, his arms extended with his palms facing up. She joined him. They mumbled the lines of an ancient poem as they gazed at the myriads of points of light that peppered the night sky.

“Has your star group appeared yet?” the woman asked quietly. “Mine has climbed high into the sky. The one with the tail. Some call it the ‘Great Bear.’”

“I’ve never seen a bear.”

“Nor have I,” the woman replied. “Notice that grouping of stars. Do you think someone somewhere might worship it?”

“Probably. But quiet now. Let us give our attention to our god—in the heavens.”



Manasseh built altars to the sun god Shamash and the moon god Sin, and set up other idols in both courts of the Yahweh’s Jerusalem Temple. He erected an Asherah pole in the Temple court and turned the rooms—set aside for the priests of Yahweh—over to male and female cult prostitutes. Thus those who came to worship Ashtoreth did so with the help of one or the other of these cult prostitutes. Sex in worship reminded the gods to maintain fertility for crops and animals, as well as for humans.

A young man stood on the steps of the Temple, examining the structure. *I’ve always been fascinated by that building*, he thought. *They say the Creator of heaven and earth lives in there. Why don’t we see Him, the way we can Baal and the calf that King Jeroboam made in Bethel?*

Just then the youth turned to see a friend approaching him. He studied the man’s expensive-looking clothing. “I

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swear by the name of Yahweh, Lord of heaven and earth, that I've not seen anyone who dresses better than you. That must be the new robe you told me about."

"That it is," the other replied, consciously modeling the expensive garment for anyone who passed. "I really got it for a bargain. A novice merchant from Babylon didn't really know the value of the wares he sold. Marvelous man. I'll have to see him again and discover what else lurks within his many trunks."

"I'll have to visit him too," the younger man said. "I swear by the god Molech, you did make a steal. I wonder what I could find."

The two climbed the remainder of steps and entered the Temple courtyard. Each passed the treasury and dropped a few pieces of silver bar into the receptacle, and went to kneel at their usual spot. There they worshipped the altar and the offering, praying to them as though they were gods in and of themselves.

Following the completion of the evening sacrifice, the worshippers were about to rise when someone stepped forward, dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. Everyone recognized him as a prophet. Later they learned that his name was Zephaniah.

"Thus says the Lord." His voice carried easily across the courtyard. "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem. I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests—those who bow down on the roofs to worship the starry host, those who bow down and swear by the Lord and who also swear by Molech, those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him. Be silent before the Sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. On the day of the Lord's sacri-

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“I will punish the princes and the king’s sons and all those clad in foreign clothes. On that day I will punish all who avoid stepping on the threshold, who fill the temple of their gods with violence and deceit.”**

The prophet seemed to have more to say, but suddenly stopped, turned, and strode out the side gate of the Temple. He disappeared before the royal guards could catch him.

The two friends looked at each other awkwardly. “I think he had us in mind,” the first gasped, swallowing hard.

“What do you mean?”

“Just before we came in here I took an oath by the Lord, and only a sentence or two later one in the name of Molech.”

“And I’m wearing foreign clothes.” The second man thought for a moment. “But I don’t see anything wrong with wearing clothes made in Babylon.”



For several years Manasseh remained a faithful vassal of Assyria, paying tribute to Judah’s great enemy. Throughout his reign the people increasingly resented their idolatrous king. In order to quiet the unrest, Manasseh decided to break his treaty with Assyria and assert his independence, as his father had done. At the end of the year he declined to pay the regular tribute demanded by his overlords.

“I think I’ll go to worship at the shrine at Bethel,” the king announced one day. “I believe that there I will receive greater power over my subjects.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” one of his counselors cautioned. “The Assyrians control that territory, and even though we haven’t seen any sign of them along our borders for some time, it seems to me it would be too risky to go there.”

“Nonsense,” Manasseh grumbled. “The gods will protect me from anyone who attempts to harm me.”

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And, true to his word, Manasseh and a bodyguard of 100 soldiers left Jerusalem and traveled north 20 miles to Bethel. The king approached the altar that stood before the golden calf and stood hands raised in prayer as the smoke of his incense curled toward the heavens.

“Assyrians!” one of his guards suddenly shouted. “Battle ranks!”

Manasseh’s guards sprang into action and charged the small Assyrian platoon that advanced toward them. The skirmish lasted only minutes, however, as Judahite soldiers were no match for the veteran troops of Nineveh. Those who did not fall by the sword retreated in all directions, leaving Manasseh standing, alone, by the altar.

The Assyrians bound him with chains, took away his royal robes and sandals, and, forced him to follow their chariots 800 miles to the jewel of the Assyrian Empire—Babylon. There they imprisoned him in a dungeon.

Days, weeks, months passed, and the stale bread and putrid water began to wear on his idolatrous heart. The stench of urine and the nauseous smell of feces sickened him. There seemed to be no way of escape. No one in Babylon cared about him, and none of his gods came to his aid.

Gradually Manasseh began to remember his father. Hezekiah had worshipped Yahweh faithfully, and even though he had suffered because of some of his own wrongdoing, Yahweh had come to his assistance. Once the Lord God had destroyed the Assyrian army in a single night. And He had healed a deadly boil, and caused the shadow of a sundial to go backward. Yahweh did all that for Hezekiah. And Manasseh, his son, had turned his back on the God of his people, choosing, instead, to worship impotent pagan gods.

One day the captive monarch began to weep. Tears ran down his cheeks and soaked his beard. Hour after hour he pleaded with Yahweh. “I have no reason to expect any help

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from You,” he acknowledged, holding his hands upward, palms up, begging for the blessing of Yahweh, but bowing his head, feeling unworthy even to look to heaven. “I have sinned in worshipping other gods. I’ve killed scores of Your innocent people. I filled the streets of Jerusalem with blood—forgive me, Yahweh. Forgive me and help me.”

Eventually a peace settled over him. His cell seemed to lighten a bit; the air smelled fresher than it had for months. “Thank You, Lord,” he finally exclaimed. “If I spend the rest of my days here, I’m grateful for Your forgiveness and Your peace.”



The sounds of laughter and the shouts of children filled the garden as Josiah and his friends frolicked together among the trees and shrubs. One of the boys had a stick and was beating a rhythm from a popular tune while other boys imitated dances they had seen at the festivals. They wore the traditional *kethoneth* [shirt] that hung to their knees. The woolen garments swayed as they moved about in time with the drum.

Old King Manasseh sat on a bench nearby, smiling. He enjoyed the antics of his grandson, Josiah, and the child’s friends. One of the greatest blessings grandparents received came from watching their grandchildren play.

The Assyrians had released Manasseh from his dungeon in Babylon, and, after having him swear allegiance to their empire, they sent him back to Judah to be king once more. Returning to his capital city, Manasseh spent the rest of his life working to undo the spiritual damage he had caused in Judah. He removed most of the high places, and directed the people to the Temple in Jerusalem as the only place they could worship Yahweh.

And yet the people had become wedded to their idols