

Michael Pietsch, DIE KULTREFORM JOSIAS: STUDIEN ZUR  
RELIGIONSGESCHICHTE ISRAELS IN DER SPÄTEN  
KÖNIGSZEIT

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The present book, the author's *Habilitationsschrift* submitted at Hamburg University in 2011, delves anew into the cultic reform of king Josiah, which constitutes a crucial "'Achsenkreuz' der Literatur- und Religionsgeschichte des alten Israel... (O. Kaiser)" (p. v), as is commonly acknowledged.

The voluminous book comprises nearly 550 pages divided into eleven chapters and five excurses. It begins with an introduction and ends by summarizing the results of the nine chapters in between, which together insightfully analyze 2 Kgs 22–23 in all relevant aspects.

Pietsch's overall thesis is that there was a historical Josianic cult reform (p. 471)—whose contours will be discussed below—and that 2 Kgs 22–23 (apart from very few additions) is a late preexilic account written by Deuteronomistic authors. It functions as the climax of their "spätvorexilischen Geschichtswerks über die Geschichte des Königtums in Israel und Juda" (p. 472). Thus, 2 Kgs 22–23 is an example of theological historiography and thereby should be located between fact and fiction (pp. 1–3, 19–23): Although the so called report of discovery (Fundbericht, 22:3–10) does not refer to the central elements of Josiah's reform process, the "konzeptionelle Zusammenhang von Verpflichtungszeremonie, Neuordnung des Kultes und Passafeier kann dagegen historische Plausibilität für sich beanspruchen" (pp. 472–73). This rather optimistic assessment contrasts considerably with the archaeological sources, which, according to Pietsch, do not provide any substantial evidence for a Josianic reform (p. 2 and elsewhere).

The *introduction* (pp. 1–23) begins with an outline of current research, which has abandoned the older consensus from around the 1980s.

This development does not doubt the Deuteronomistic coloring of 2 Kgs 22–23 nor the presence of older sources. It instead questions, first, the hypotheses of a Deuteronomistic History as a unified work. It also doubts the correlation of 2 Kgs 22–23 with the core of Deuteronomy (which can not be determined via the reform report), as well as the lack of “primary evidence” (a category Pietsch dislikes and problematizes [pp. 3, 19–20]) from archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic sources for a Josianic cult reform (pp. 1–2). This assessment is substantiated by more recent research focusing on programmatic changes and trends that Pietsch concisely evaluates (pp. 4–19).

Given the stark differences of opinion among scholars that can be explained by the ambiguity of the sources and hermeneutical premises of their interpretation, Pietsch concludes that all available sources should be used (and this should be done without categorizing them *a priori*) in order to reconstruct “ein möglichst konsistentes und plausibles Gesamtbild” (p. 20). As true as this is, it leaves the methodological problems unresolved and focuses (not unreasonably, however) on concrete questions and concrete sources. This provides Pietsch’s main argument for organizing his investigation according to the text sections of 2 Kgs 22–23 and closely combining all sources with one another (p. 22). This approach aims less at the inclusion of hitherto neglected material than at the critical evaluation of all available sources in order to develop a new synthesis that considers “vermehrt Unschärfen und Leerstellen in der historischen Rekonstruktion” (p. 22, cf. also p. 471).

In this respect, Pietsch’s insight that alternative religious symbolic systems coexisted in the late monarchic period (pp. 21–22) is both important and innovative: It takes seriously a religiously differentiated Judahite society, an aspect that has not adequately been accounted for in previous scholarship. This step also highlights that Josiah’s religious policy “ist nicht notwendig mit einem kulturgeschichtlichen Paradigmenwechsel einhergegangen, wie er in der Forschung häufig vorausgesetzt wird” (p. 22).

This conclusion is certainly correct, yet one might ask whether it does not in reality abet a separation of archaeological and textual sources in the main body of the volume, which would be very counterproductive—also according to Pietsch. From this point of view, therefore, it might still have been helpful methodologically to start with primary evidence, then move into secondary biblical texts, and finally to integrate both categories into a new, differentiated synthesis. However, the author has chosen, and not without reason, to proceed differently (see pp. 3, 19–20, 471, etc.).

*Chapter 1* (pp. 24–36) provides an exact translation, comments on text-critical problems, and anticipates the structure of 2 Kgs 22–23. The report of Josiah’s reform is clearly delimited in the context and can be

structured convincingly into seven scenes that follow a clear narrative sequence (“einen klaren szenischen Aufbau des Textes,” p. 45). It is enclosed by a framework (“Königsrahmen”) in 22:1–2 / 23:25–30a as shown by *chapter 2* (pp. 37–47). The well-composed narrative with the correspondence of 22:3–20 (discovery of the Torah document) and 23:1–24 (the king’s cultic reforms) implies that the author was “kein Chronist, sondern ein theologischer Geschichtsschreiber” (p. 39).

The following *seven chapters* correspond with the seven narrative scenes (ch. 3: Der vordere Königsrahmen 22:1f; ch. 4: Die Entdeckung des Toradokuments 22:3–10; ch. 5: Das Huldaorakel 22:11–20; ch. 6: Die Verpflichtungszeremonie 23:1–3; ch. 7: Der Reformkatalog 23:4–20; ch. 8: Passafeier und Nachtrag 23:21–24; ch. 9: Der hintere Königsrahmen 23:25–30), each analyzing a single section in depth and substantiating Pietsch’s overarching interpretation.

Special attention is due to *chapter 7*, which is by far the longest (pp. 206–442) and treats the cultic reforms in detail. After analyzing the compositional structure and the compositional history (the core of 23:4–20 is vv. 4a, 5\*, 6–8, 10–12, 15a\*), Pietsch conducts meticulous investigations of every section. To take the cult of Asherah (vv. 6–7) as an example (pp. 305–29), Pietsch first argues convincingly for an older independent tradition behind vv. 6–7\* (pp. 305–6). He then reconstructs the religious history of the cult of Asherah (pp. 309–29), evaluating the vast relevant material from the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean (Ugaritic and Hittite) literature, the archaeological excavations, and ancient Hebrew epigraphy. Attempting to deconstruct several hypotheses, Pietsch opts for the (in my view too extreme) understanding that Asherah in the preexilic temple in Jerusalem was “durchgängig ein Präsenzsymbol des Jahwekults” (p. 328). Even if one may contest this and several other interpretations, Pietsch’s conclusions are always well argued and thought provoking, making reading an erudite pleasure.

The *final chapter* (pp. 471–91) ties the individual investigations together and elaborates the overall thesis outlined above. The synchronic analysis of 2 Kgs 22–23, focusing on the narrative pragmatics (*Erzählpragmatik*), leads to a rather coherent and extensive report with comparatively few later insertions (esp. 22:11–20; 23:15b–20, 25–27). This thesis corresponds to the method applied. It will, of course, be hotly debated, and in my view tends to be too “maximalistic” and monolithic. To be sure, I fully agree that 2 Kgs 22–23, given its acknowledged historiographical interest, has “eine erstrangige Bedeutung als historische Quelle für die Rekonstruktion der Religionsgeschichte Judas in der späten Königszeit” (p. 472). However, in correlation with the external evidence (which I think Pietsch has by and large evaluated accurately), I see the

oldest kernel as much less expansive, not having originally been part of a comprehensive Deuteronomistic History (see also his concession that “der Bericht zwar ältere Überlieferungen verarbeitet hat,” p. 473). If this evaluation is correct, the value of 2 Kgs 22–23 as a (religious-)historical source would have to be differentiated according to layers in the text more thoroughly. This would likely result in connections to late preexilic, exilic, and postexilic contexts and developments. In any case, future scholarship will have to engage with Pietsch’s position. The same might be true for the correlation between 2 Kgs 22–23 and the core of Deuteronomy denied by Pietsch (despite accepting the concept of unity and purity of the cult for the reform report, see pp. 474, 482), although he is certainly right in denying a direct dependency between specific texts (pp. 473, 480–81, etc.).

Pietsch’s contention that Josiah’s measures were localized in the area of official religion promoted and controlled by the state (p. 474) is completely convincing. This insight accords well with the broader political and religious-historical developments in seventh century Judah, which are widely accepted in current scholarship on the basis of the primary (archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic) evidence. As a result, the Josianic reform is based on inner-Judahite constellations and not on an anti-Assyrian milieu as often has been assumed (476–80). Rather, several Judahite traditions of Deuteronomistic, prophetic, and especially Priestly provenance (such as the temple theology with the metaphor of king and the symbol of cherub-throne etc., pp. 483–87) coalesced in the long-term process of a “*religionsinternen Differenzierungsprozesses*” (p. 487), which first emerged on their own, only to be integrated intentionally into official religion under Josiah (pp. 487–91). Thus, the process portrayed as the Josianic reform pertained only to a (small although important) segment of the broad religious spectrum. It therefore had only limited impact, far from any broad geographical and sociological effect on the entire Judahite society. Due to this careful and complex reconstruction, any overall change of religious paradigms should not be expected—this, in fact, correlates with the archaeological evidence (see above). The larger picture adumbrated by Pietsch is very inspiring, highlighting once again that the Josianic cult reform was an *Achsenkreuz* of the literary and religious history of Ancient Israel.

The aforementioned controversial aspects in no way intend to minimize Pietsch's impressive synthesis, which truly provides a new, solid base for any further research. It is to be expected that it will stimulate and advance our understanding of king Josiah's cult reform, which is indeed crucial for the literary and religious history of late preexilic Israel.