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Isaiah 40:18-19, New Living Translation.

¹⁸ To whom can you compare God?

What image can you find to resemble him?

*¹⁹ Can he be compared to an idol formed in a mold,
overlaid with gold, and decorated with silver chains?*

Gold, and decorated with silver.

There is no Bible book dedicated specifically to King Josiah of Israel – but it is believed that he was highly influential in the evolution of the Israelites' movement from being a people who clung to some polytheistic beliefs to being a fully monotheistic people, the people of the one, true God. In the Bible, he is a great reformer, pulling the Israelites away from multi-god, pagan beliefs, and back toward the belief in God. Remember that the Israelites couldn't help but be heavily influenced by the pagan cultures that surrounded them. Interestingly, the Israelites were not the only monotheistic people. Many believe there was a monotheistic religion that predates the faith of the Israelites and was practiced by some very ancient Israelites. It's called Zoroastrianism, and it was practiced in ancient Persia, now called Iran. Although they were monotheistic, they did not worship the God of the Israelites, Jews, and later, the Christians. There are still

people there today who practice this faith. There are also Zoroastrian believers in India. There are probably no more than 100,000 people in the world today who practice Zoroastrianism. The faithful of this religion worship a god they call Ahura Mazda, who is said to be the creator of all that physically exists in the cosmos.

Josiah, an Israelite who was a champion of monotheism, is mentioned repeatedly in 2nd Chronicles and 2nd Kings, which roughly cover the time from Solomon's reign to the invasion of the Babylonians, and in the Book of Jeremiah, as well.

Jeremiah was a prophet who served up until the Babylonian exile. Josiah was a king of Israel, and he served from about 640 B.C. until about 609 B.C., in other words, until about 25 years before the Babylonians conquered Israel.

It's not known when the concept of there being one God – monotheism - first arose. That's not what's important, however. It would be extremely superficial to characterize the faith of the Israelites or Judaism or Christianity as consisting simply of being monotheistic. There is a lot more to the faith of the People of God. First, though, it is certainly true that over and over, when God and the prophets call for the Israelites to stop their wayward practices, they are talking largely about the adoption of the pagan ways of the peoples who surround them. And while today, it's easy enough for us to buy into the concept of there being only a single God, in their day, this was an almost novel belief, and they

lived alongside people who believed otherwise. For us, the issue seems academic. If monotheism was all that mattered, we could easily envision the Israelites being influenced toward polytheism without us having to feel that they were truly going against God's plans for them. But "God", our God, and the true God in the eyes of the People of God, wasn't simply a single pagan god, or perhaps the integration of many pagan gods. The prophets taught their people that their God was very different. The Israelites didn't live under the control of a suite of gods, each one in charge of some aspect of their lives, and each of them fallible, vain, human-like, fighting with each other, and capable of being bribed or intimidated into granting earthly wishes. The role of the prophets was, in part, to keep reminding their people that they believed in an all-powerful, infallible God, one who created everything. They believed that we are made in the image of God, not that God is somehow an image of a typical petty human.

In other words, the notion of the Israelite or Jewish or Christian God is sophisticated, more unearthly, and rather abstract, in comparison to that of a pagan god. A popular pagan God, Baal, a main god of the Canaanites, the people who lived in the Promise Land before Moses and his people showed up, was largely a god of fertility. Like many pagan gods, it served to satisfy specific worldly needs – and we're talking about fertility in general. Baal assured the people of

good soil, plenty of water, whatever was needed to grow food. Baal was sometimes called the Lord of Rain or the Storm god. Baal was called the god who “rode the clouds”. Much of what we know about Baal comes from tablets apparently dating to the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. Interestingly, Baal was more than the god of fertility. Baal was considered a powerful god, a god of gods, a king of gods. We can see why Baal might have been attractive to the Israelites, who believed in a single powerful God, but also had to live with the constant threat of famine. In the Old Testament, God sends Assyrian and Babylonian invaders as a violent reminder that they had better get their pagan tendencies under control. Importantly, Josiah, the king we are looking at, served before these two invasions, before the Israelites learned their lesson.

Josiah, who was in the lineage of King David, was only 8 years-old when he became King of Judah, the southern part of Israel, which included Jerusalem. His father, also a king, had been a wicked man, and had ruled for only a single year before being assassinated. But we are told that in the 8th year of his reign, Josiah sought out the Lord. He then set about restoring the proper faith of the Israelites. This is what we are told in 2nd Kings: After he has begun his spiritual revival, an official in Josiah’s court discovers a long-lost book of faith in the Temple. 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 who 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 teach this new generation, raised on the run, about the basics of their God and their way of life. The Book of Deuteronomy 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, i.e., Baal, 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 God. The Temple is cleansed of all that is pagan. He returns Passover to its original glory after previous generations have watered it down.

Again, 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. Some think that this Book of the Law contained roughly Chapters 5 to 26 and 28 of Deuteronomy. Most likely, Deuteronomy was changed by an editor chosen by Josiah to make it flow better with respect to the books that follow it, 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 heavily edited at the same time so that they would tell a very specific story. Perhaps whoever put this edited series of books together, largely out of existing material, but with heavy updating, was trying to explain the reason for the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the Babylonian exile – and explain it as God's response to the Israelites repeated tendency to worship the pagan gods of its neighbors. In other words – and this is what I want to focus on – in the 7th century B.C. the early books of the Old Testament, which we have traditionally been taught were written long before this, were probably pulled

together from existing material and then edited to tell a consistent story about the value of Israelite monotheism. Keep in mind that this means that a large part of what we know as the Old Testament was edited long, long after the events it describes occurred. The goal of this vast editorial project, put in place by Josiah's moral reforms, was motivated largely to back up his vision of Israel.

And importantly, this vision focused on a strict belief in the one, true God, but also was meant to establish him solidly as a king in the line of David and in the spiritual family of Moses. Josiah set out not just to reaffirm the faith of his people, but also to do something his father had failed at: become a long-standing, beloved, morally minded king. It is indeed widely believed that Josiah's priests, using collected stories of creation, Noah and the flood, and of Moses and the conquering of the Promised Land, created versions of the first five books of the Bible, thus spurring a great religious revival and anchoring his position in history.

But what does this mean for us today? Perhaps the biggest thing is that King Josiah, who reigned five hundred years after King David, deserves a lot more credit for what we believe than we have previously credited him with. As Christians today, we hear all about Saul, and his successor David, and David's son, Solomon. But it was probably much, much later when the Bible began to take its current form. Thus, King Josiah had a massive impact on our faith. We don't

know about him because his story is not clearly laid out in the Bible. His story has been pieced together only in relatively recent times. My point is not that the Bible is somehow a fabrication. We know that much of it was not accurate historically, that it is full of internal inconsistencies, that parts of it, like the invasion of Canaan, does not jibe with archeological, literary, and other historical evidence. We already knew that the Old Testament stories about Creation and the Great Flood were influenced by previous, pagan stories. And yes, we knew that the Bible was filled with allegories and metaphors, and that even when it was written, parts of it, like the Adam and Eve story were not perceived as literal history but rather as allegories. This does not in any way lessen the significance, truth, or power of the Bible. Rather, it focuses the Bible for us, and helps us see it as the true core of our faith and what we believe. Perhaps the biggest lesson for us is the fact that the Old Testament was written and engineered largely to tell a single, focused lesson: there is only one God, and our God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and deeply good. These were not the traits of previous gods.

When I was in the seminary, I remember being disappointed when I realized how much of the Old Testament is oriented around monotheism, and that when the prophets complained about the immoral lifestyle of the People of God, they weren't talking about what we would consider serious moral and

ethical failings today. Yes, there were acts of infidelity and murder committed by people, and even by kings. But much of the time, the concern is over two things: 1) worshipping idols and pagan gods and 2) introducing pagan practices into their worship rituals. Somehow, it seemed to be a letdown for me to find out that all this conflict, with a long series of prophets preaching to the Israelites to come back to God, and God sending foreign armies to punish his people, is all about this very abstract notion of monotheism vs. polytheism. But then I realized that I was missing the true beauty of the Bible, missing the incredible gift God gave us.

Once, when I was a boy, I went to a friend's church. I was Catholic. It was a Protestant church of some sort. I do, however, remember the preacher, who to my surprise was wearing a shirt and tie instead of fancy vestments, saying that God was not hung up on whether God was singular or plural, and God's anger with his people had to do with two things: First, God is not a fancy, powerful human, like a pagan god, capable of doing magic for his people. God is our creator, and in fact, the creator of everything. And second - and this is what he said that I remember most clearly - God has only one goal, and that is to love us. Everything else follows from that love, including God's forgiveness, God's gift of grace, God's presence in our lives, and God sending Jesus to this Earth to create a personal bond with each of us. Here is something for us today. Americans do

worship idols in a way, by valuing only what they can accumulate in their lives and dismissing the reality of having a personal relationship with God. The Book of Isaiah has something truly powerful to say about the impotence of pagan idols. I'm not going to end with a prayer today, but here are some verses, which also tell us about the futility of the lives lived by so many people in our nation today:

¹⁸ To whom can you compare God?

What image can you find to resemble him?

*¹⁹ Can he be compared to an idol formed in a mold,
overlaid with gold, and decorated with silver chains?*

*²⁰ Or if people are too poor for that,
they might at least choose an idol of wood that won't decay
and a skilled craftsman
to carve an image that cannot move!*

So, keep in mind that our Bible is a complex document, filled with many forms of writing: legal, historical, poetic, wisdom-filled, prophetic, documents that are letters address to individuals and to churches, and apocalyptic. It is long, complex, and very difficult for modern people to fully comprehend without being guided by experts. But it serves a single, focused purpose, and this is why it is so important for us to become familiar with its contents. The Bible tells us that we have not just one God, and not just an all-powerful God who is well above the petty emotions and selfish needs of humans: our God is, simply put, a God who created us so that he could love us.