

# Call and response


## A sermon on 2 Kings 22–23

Jonathan Dueck

### Retelling Josiah's story

Josiah, son of Amon, was eight years old and only just recently king.<sup>1</sup> All around him were ghosts of the end of Amon, hallways where the people of the land had surprised and killed the servants, the large and sunny front room in their family house where the servants beforehand, in their turn, had surprised and killed Amon. Josiah didn't know why. He just stood there, eight years old, in the middle of it all, as the new servants and other people moved around him like a wheel around its hub. He just stood there watching.

As ten years pass, Josiah thinks on the meaning of all of this, as he changes from boy to young man. What accounts for this violence? What are those who made this happen seeking? What is his own purpose here?

 **The law sounds like fire, like a bell, like a seed breaking its hull.**

When Josiah is eighteen comes the magic, transforming moment. Josiah sends payment to those who have rebuilt the temple with his secretary, Shaphan,

one who possesses the (at this time) esoteric ability to read, to decipher. When Shaphan gets to the temple, the high priest hands him a book. "I have found the book of the law here in the temple," the priest says (2 Kings 22:8). Surely some carpenter or stonemason found it and handed it to the high priest. But here it is, the great speech of Moses, from before there were kings.

Shaphan returns and reads the book, its words transforming Shaphan's voice, echoing around the room. The law sounds like fire, like a bell, like a seed breaking its hull.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon, originally titled "Call and response: A living tradition is a bending tradition," was written for and preached at Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

As Josiah hears it, he knows its truth. He understands that the people have not followed its commandments, that his father did not honor this covenant. He stands up from his chair as he listens, and then he tears his clothes. The secretary and the priest travel to meet Huldah, a prophetess somewhere in the retinue of the king. And she confirms Josiah's understanding: the covenant with YHWH God has been broken, and disaster is coming—but not yet, and peace can be made meantime because Josiah has heard and understood in his heart the words of the law as a call, a story that writes him.

Josiah calls the priests and the people together to the temple, and the book of the law is read—its words rolling across time and calling king and

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people to covenant. Listen to the words: “The King stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to *perform* the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant” (2 Kings 23:3).

This story is the one I remember from childhood. This is the 2 Kings account. This is a powerful story for me, first of all, because it's just such a good story, one like many children's stories, in which the parents early disappear so that the children can become the main characters, and in which they turn out to have a destiny. But second, it's powerful because of the way the book of the law appears as a kind of actor, as a numinous and living presence that, when sounded, tells us who we are, who we have been all these years, and it can do that *because* it tells us who God is. The sounding of it is not inconsequential here either.

For me as a child—and I think for many Mennonites here in Winnipeg and Manitoba—the story encapsulates the magical way in which words live when sounded, in which words on a page are always also the performance of those words, and those are sometimes also the moment of numinous and revealing encounter in which we find ourselves in a story, where it comes from, where we come from, where we are going. Text, tradition, and trajectory.

Following this moment in the Kings account, though, comes a text that I do not remember from childhood: the destruction of the cult and people of Baal. Some of this is of totems, signs, and places. Here are sacred poles; Josiah pulls them down. Here are heavy golden images of animals and people, the bones of offerings in front of them. Light fire to



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the building and watch as the gold melts and runs down the steps. But some of this destruction is, eventually, of people. The priests of these images are in hiding. When they are found, they are killed in spectacular and symbolic fashion, and their ghosts are added to the chorus of revenants in the city.

In the Chronicles version of this account, these things happen before the discovery of the book of the law; they appear as a necessary precursor to the

restoration and repair of the temple of YHWH, where the priest finds the book of the law.

There is something contemporary in this second part of the account. An origin story authorizes violence that is ethnocentric or even genocidal. This turn in the story reminds me of the larger critique that Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek offers of the Old Testament narrative—that its claims to land authorize a genocidal relationship to the people already inhabiting that land.

As a Mennonite Christian person at this moment in history, I feel a sharp tension between the beautiful and numinous first part of Josiah’s story and the violent excription—the writing-out of people from history—of the second part. The larger political landscape in this moment, in Canada and abroad, is part of this tension for me. *We need to know who we are and where we come from. Our relationships with each other and with the land depend on that understanding.*

But people are casting and deploying stories of where we come from in such rigid and damaging ways; I think of walls in Israel-Palestine, or of anti-Semitic violence in US cities, or of the former US president’s fantasy of a wall to keep out poor Catholic migrants, or of Quebec where “old stock” Quebecers are being counterposed to Muslim newcomers (mirroring similar dynamics in France), or of the Doctrine of Discovery in Cana-

da and the United States, which we are only now addressing in a tenuous moment of reconciliation.

### **Telling Harold's story**

I want to place a story next to Josiah's story that, for me, resonates with the numinous discovery of where we come from and that also helps to open up the story of where we are going and who we are becoming. I'm not trying to offer an exegesis of the Josiah story here to find out what it meant at the time. Instead I'm trying to pull it together with the story of another person in whom I've encountered God, to see where we end up.

The story is of my friend Harold Anderson. Imagine the sound of him playing bass: sitting with his huge string bass in front of him, eyes closed, head back, plucking the strings and sliding his hands up and down the neck of the instrument, the long slow delay of the sound making us realize the space we are sharing together.

Harold was a composer, an ethnomusicologist, my doctoral advisee and also my own teacher in many ways, a fellow bike rider and walker, and a grandparent-like presence for my children Anna and Ben in our town of Greenbelt. He recently died of cancer, and to me it is a magical and hopeful thing to remember his bass playing here, becoming present to me, to us, like words spoken from a page found dusty, long unopened, and now living in the moving air.

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Harold was African American. He grew up in Cleveland. His family was Catholic. He attended St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, a great books school where each professor must

be able to speak Latin and to teach mathematics and music and rhetoric. Two of my doctoral students at the University of Maryland, both African American men who were jazz and experimental music performers and scholars, had done their undergraduate work at St. John's College.

Harold played jazz and blues in the eastern United States. He was a virtuoso bassist and a composer and was known by many prominent jazz players—people like Chick Corea.

Harold was a traveler. He lived in New Zealand for many years, where he held the position of Mozart Fellow in composition at the University

of Otago. Otago and New Zealand are interesting to me. On the Canadian passport you can see the symbols of the French and English flanking a central heraldic device. On the New Zealand passport you can see the symbols of the English and Maori, the Indigenous peoples of New

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Zealand, flanking a central heraldic device. Otago is a place where Maoritanga, the knowledge of Maori traditions, language, and things, is important.

Harold became friends with a number of Maori musicians and began to study their music and traditions seriously. There was mutual learning about identities, where Harold's Maori friends learned in a particular way what African

American people might be like, beyond what is present in media, and where Harold began to learn what Maori people were like. This happened as much through musical performance and the making of new music together as anything else, and this was a connection that would continue all Harold's life.

Harold returned to the United States later and became an ethnographic fieldworker, working with many communities but especially with African American communities in the East. His work was featured in the Smithsonian Folklife festival. And through proximity—and because I was young and ready to learn from my students—he became my doctoral advisee at the University of Maryland.

Harold wrote about what he learned from Maori people in his doctoral work with me and composed music about it. Harold wanted to understand how *traditions* related to *people*. Maori people retell their stories through music, and they bring people into and out of the “known,” the “related-to-our community,” through music.

One of the kinds of Maori performance is called *whakapapa*, and it is like the genealogies in the Bible: it tells the story of where the singer comes from, mapping out a network of ancestors whose stories are also where the singer comes from.

Harold later put together a project called “Songs stories tell” that drew together Maori and African American music. That title, *Songs stories tell*, reminds me of *whakapapa*. In *whakapapa*, the singer is already emplaced in a story. The story calls out a song in the singer. The singer must embody the story. It's like the first part of the story of Josiah, where

the words exist before Josiah, and when found, they must be embodied in sound. They must ring out, traveling through our bodies physically, emplacing us.

Harold also taught me about another genre of Maori music, a chant called a *haka*, usually performed by men who make a set of aggressive ritual gestures and whirl and stab with a wooden spear called a *taiaha*. Most likely you have seen pictures of this kind of performance; it's the most well-known, even iconic, kind of Maori performance, and has been popularized by the All Blacks rugby team.


Haka is often performed at the opening of events. When it is performed at the beginning of an All Blacks game, it sounds like an aggressive message to the other team: *Our tradition is power! This is our territory!*

But Harold told me what work the haka is doing, and it is surprising. We went together to the Festival of First Americans, a giant festival of world Indigenous peoples on the Washington Mall. African Americans from Louisiana walked by in long Plains Indigenous headdresses. A Cree

rap group from Alberta called War Party performed, deep bass booming. We stopped at a stage of Maori men with a virtuosic performance of *taiaha* and *haka*—this all was at the beginning of the festival, on its first day.

Harold told me that a haka is also part of a ceremony called a *powhiri*. In the *powhiri*, the dances, *taiaha* and *haka*, are indeed demarcating territory. They are, at first, separating what is known from what is not known. What is

known is called *noa*, and what is not known is called *tapu*, which is where the English word *taboo* derives. The *powhiri* ceremony is performed when outsiders, people from another place, meet the Maori of the local place, and the work it does is to move those outsiders from a status of *tapu* (not known) to *noa* (known). The demarcation of difference is part of a ceremony that in the end invites the outsiders into a status that is known within a tradition.



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## Songs stories tell


I have been talking about Josiah's first moment of encountering the law as a "songs stories tell" moment—a moment of being called bodily into a tradition.

The way Harold read and understood Maori music reminds me of New Testament biblical narratives of calling into a tradition. It reminds me of the stories of the calling of the apostles. It reminds me the missionary journeys of Paul and the situation of the early church.

When Jesus calls the apostles—a call, a greeting, a sounded, full-bodied invitation—they join him, and together they form a new community that articulates a new moment in a long trajectory of tradition, a tradition in which covenant is extended.

Then Paul extends this call into covenant further into Hellenic, Greek-speaking Judaism and presses toward the outskirts of this community and past them. In so doing, the community itself is changed, and its narratives are changed.

The way we read and know the longer story of the People of God, including the Old Testament, comes also from these more recent Greek



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traditions, words, sounds, narrative and philosophical forms—all of which became part of the expanding trajectory of covenant in the New Testament.

When a tradition changes, when it expands radically, we are left to ask these questions: Is it no longer a tradition? Are the origins of the tradition damaged, replaced, displaced? Does it risk meaninglessness? What happens when a covenant, through expanding, draws

into itself ways of thinking that traverse back through the tradition to its origins, reimagining them? What happens when a tradition, like a dancing body or performing voice, bends with life?

Reflecting on my long conversations with Harold about Mennonites, Maori people, African American people, and music, I think that bending of this kind shows the presence of life and therefore, for me as a Christian, of God. A living reed bends, and when it pulls upright, its shape is forever changed a little, but it is still a reed. A living body, a living voice, surprises us with its bending, with the sometimes shocking, sometimes

beautiful forms it can take, yet remaining whole. A living covenant bends like a rainbow, like the hull of a boat, like the arc of a story or song.

We sing the songs that Scripture's stories tell.

Scripture reminds us where we come from and what our purpose is in ways that invite us to embody its narratives.

When our churches and communities join or are joined by people who seem distant, from a far religious or national or ethnic or gendered shore, we need not fear. Instead we need to invite, to respond to invitation, to become known, to bend.

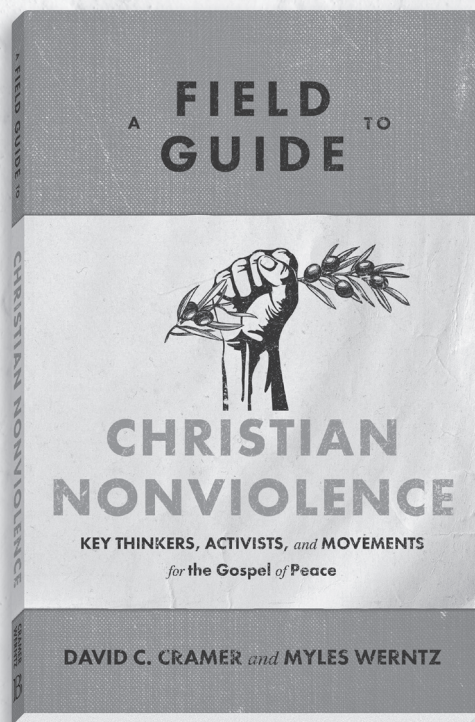
Where do we come from and where are we going? From life to life, bending along the way.

### **About the author**

Jonathan Dueck is vice president academic, academic dean, and associate professor of ethnomusicology at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He previously taught at George Washington University, Duke University, the University of Maryland, and the University of Alberta. He is a founding co-editor of *Prompt*, a journal of innovative writing-in-the-disciplines assignments and teaching reflections, coeditor of the *Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities* (2016), author of *Congregational Music, Conflict, and Community* (2017, Routledge) and *Performing Basketball* (Oxford, under contract), and has published articles in *Ethnomusicology*, the *Journal of American Folklore*, and *Popular Music and Society*.



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