

Death of King Josiah in Josephus

Commentary for August 1, 2021 — Slightly Different from the Biblical Account

I want to give an example that events in the Kingdom of Judah were not isolated from events outside its boundaries, a much larger area involving many kingdoms and empires. Events of the death of King Josiah of Judah and afterward illustrate this fact. The August 2021 article is "Israel and Judah: 41. Josiah, His Renewal, and Death." It tells of the continuing reforms to restore the exclusive worship of YHWH by the people of Judah by the actions of the last good King, Josiah. The "[August 2021 Newsletter](#)" introduces this true story.

As you will read in the article, King Josiah went out from Jerusalem to fight against Pharaoh Neco II of Egypt. The armies of Judah and Egypt were preparing for battle when King Josiah was severely wounded. According to Josephus, preparations for fighting ceased and the army of Judah obeyed Josiah's call to retreat, separating itself from battle. He was taken to Jerusalem where he died.

The Jewish historian Josephus wrote his own description about Josiah's death and events following. The information is historical and gives background to Josiah's death narrative. I begin quoting toward the end of Josephus telling about a glorious Passover celebration told in 2 Kings 23:22–23 and 2 Chronicles 35:18–19:

"Now Josiah after this [celebration] lived in peace and, moreover, enjoyed wealth and the good opinion of all men, but ended his life in the following manner. Necho [called Neco II by modern historians], the king of Egypt, having raised an army, marched toward the Euphrates river to make war on the Medes and Babylonians who had overthrown the Assyrian empire,¹ for he [Neco] had the desire to rule Asia.²

When he came to the city of Mende [biblical Megiddo] — this was in Josiah's kingdom — the latter came with an army to prevent him from marching against the Medes through his country. So Necho sent a herald to him, saying that he was not taking the field against him, but was making for the Euphrates [River], and he bade Josiah not provoke him into making war on him by preventing him from going where he had made up his mind to go.³

Josiah however, paid no attention to Necho's request, but acted as though he would not permit him to traverse his territory; it was Destiny, I [Josephus] believe, that urged him on to this course, in order to have a pretext for destroying him [Josiah]. For, as he was marshalling his force and riding in his chariot from

¹ The Hebrew does not mention Assyria, but the Greek Old Testament texts do. A diminished Assyrian Empire may have continued. Neco may have wanted to help Assyria, or more likely grab chunks from its rotting carcass.

² Josephus later wrote that all Syria was made subject to Neco II (*Antiquities* 10.84). Neco was apparently allied with Assyria just before the destruction of its empire. When Josephus wrote the term "Asia" he meant the general Anatolian peninsula, or Turkey today west of the Euphrates River.

³ It is common for "great men" and kings to get "testy" when their plans are opposed.

one wing to another, an Egyptian archer shot him and put an end to his eagerness for battle, and, being in great pain from his wound, he ordered the call to be sounded for the army's retreat, and he returned to Jerusalem. There he died from his wound and was buried magnificently in the tombs of his fathers,⁴ having lived thirty-nine years, of which he reigned thirty-one.

Great was the mourning for him observed by all the people, who bewailed him and grieved for many days. And the prophet Jeremiah composed a song of lament for his funeral which remains to this day [the Book of Lamentations]. This prophet also announced the misfortunes that were to come upon the city, and left behind writings concerning the recent capture of our city,⁵ as well as the capture of Babylon.

And not only this prophet predicted these things to the multitude, but also the prophet Ezekiel, who [Jeremiah] left behind two books [the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations] which he was the first to write about these matters. These two men were both priests by birth, but Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem from the 13th year of Josiah's reign until the city and the temple were demolished."

• *Josephus, Antiquities, 10.73–80*⁶

The account by Josephus on the death of Josiah comes close to the biblical record. The goals of Neco II are substantiated by other biblical passages. Apparently Neco was successful in expanding Egyptian rule to Syria, but 4 years later there was a battle at Carchemish:

"The word of YHWH which came to Jeremiah the prophet against the Gentiles; Against Egypt, against the army of Pharaohnecho [no spacing in the text] king of Egypt, which was by the river Euphrates in Carchemish, which Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon smote in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah.

• *Jeremiah 46:1–2*

Pharaoh Neco was defeated by Nebuchadrezzar. Neco retreated to Egypt after the battle. The power balance changed in Syria, Lebanon, Judah, along the Mediterranean coast up to the Egyptian border — all was to be ruled by Babylon:

"And the king of Egypt [retreated and] came not again any more out of his land: for the king of Babylon had taken from the river of Egypt unto the river Euphrates all that pertained to the king of Egypt."

• *2 Kings 24:7*

David Sielaff
david@askelm.com

⁴ Josephus confirms what 2 Chronicles 35:2 says in the King James Version, that Josiah **"was buried in one of the sepulchres of his fathers"** (2 Chronicles 35:24, KJV). This may mean Josiah is buried in the tombs of King David, David's immediate family (perhaps Bathsheba and Solomon and others) and certainly Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 32:33) along with other "good" kings of Judah.

See "[The Location and Future Discovery of King David's Tomb](#)." How the priests managed to preserve and protect the tombs over hundreds of years without them being looted, I do not know. Read Isaiah 22:22 where phrase **"the house of David"** refers to tombs of David.

⁵ Josephus says Jeremiah also predicted the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD (for which Josephus was a horrified eyewitness). He likely read this in the apocryphal book of 1 Esdras: **"not regarding the words of the prophet Jeremy spoken by the mouth of the Lord"** (1 Esdras 1:28).

⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Thackeray translation, Volume 6, book 10.73–80.