

What Happened at Megiddo?

Josiah's Death as Described in the Book of Kings

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At the close of the account of the reign of King Josiah of Judah in 2Kgs 23,29-30, we read:

“In his days Pharaoh-Necho king of Egypt went up against the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates; and king Josiah went against him; and he slew him at Megiddo, when he had seen him.

And his servants carried him in a chariot dead from Megiddo, and brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own sepulchre.”

Many researchers and commentators have pointed out that from this short account, it is difficult to know what circumstances underlay the conflict between King Josiah of Judah and Pharaoh-Necho king of Egypt in 609 BCE. In contrast, from the parallel account in 1Chr 35,20, it is clear that a battle took place between the two kings:

“After all this, when Josiah had prepared the temple, Necho king of Egypt went up to *fight* against Carchemish by the Euphrates; and Josiah went out against him.”

Later on in chapter 35 of 2 Chronicles, the Hebrew root לָחַם [“fight”] occurs three times: once in verse 21, and twice in verse 22.

Scholars who have studied this story discussed various questions that arise therefrom: Did a battle between Josiah and the king of Egypt take place also according to the account in Kings? Is the Chronicles version based on the Kings version, or is it taken from another source¹? To these must be added the problem of the fact that the story of Josiah's conflict with Necho is not documented in non-Biblical sources.

This article will deal solely with the first question. Our objective is to show that based on the account in Kings as well as Chronicles, Josiah died in battle. To that end, we propose a new analysis of the Kings account of Josiah's death, without discussing that in Chronicles².

¹ For a discussion of these questions, see the literature referred to Na'aman, Lists of Cities. This article was reprinted in English: Na'aman, Josiah. To this must be added Talshir, Deaths; Cline, Battles, 98-100; Delamarter, Death; Mitchell, Death.

² One claim heard against researchers seeking to reconstruct the history of the First Temple period based on a combination of Kings and Chronicles is that they harmonize them and they are not alert to differences between the books. See for example

The view according to which no battle between
Josiah and Pharaoh-Necho took place

Many scholars believe that no hint exists in Kings of an account of a battle between Josiah and Pharaoh-Necho³. So if not, then what did take place between the two kings? Some researchers believe that Pharaoh-Necho's purpose in coming to Judah was to demand Josiah's (vassal's) oath of loyalty. When Josiah did not take this oath as was accepted in those times, he was accused of disloyalty, and thus put to death⁴.

There are other proposals, all of which reject the possibility that a battle took place in Kings. Those who hold to these proposals argue that in Josiah's day, Judah was already under Egyptian rule, and there was no feud between Israel and Egypt at this time⁵.

The view according to which a battle between
Josiah and Pharaoh-Necho did take place

Another group of researchers believes that a battle did take place between Josiah and Necho at Megiddo. This group looks at the military logic of Josiah's actions. Malamet⁶ and others⁷ argued for a military logic behind Josiah's actions:

1. Egypt's previous defeats by Babylonia would have caused Josiah to view Necho's going to battle against Assyria as an opportune moment to defeat Egypt.
2. Movement in Wadi Ara would have been difficult for someone unfamiliar with the region's terrain, and Josiah would have exploited this to his advantage.
3. It was likely that Josiah feared that an Egyptian-Assyrian pact would lead back to a situation wherein Judah would be enslaved, and he hoped that his

Galil, Rereading. Because of this, we chose to ignore his testimony of Chronicles in order to refrain from expressing a similar claim against him.

³ Na'aman, Josiah, 65; Nelson, Kings, 353; Halpern, Manasseh, 503.

⁴ Welch, Death, 255; Cogan / Tadmor, Kings, 301; Na'aman, Josiah; Talshir, Deaths; Halpern, Manasseh; Sweeney, King, 46. Jones, Kings, 629, writes refuting this hypothesis, "There is no reason for supposing that Josiah had been summoned to meet Necho".

⁵ See Nelson, Realpolitik; Niehr, Reform, 42-47.

⁶ Malamet, Josiah's Bid, 277.

⁷ See Laato, Josiah, 79; Cline, Battles; Milgrom, Josiah; Weinfeld, Joshua, 148, n. 67 and 164; Seitz, Theology, 79-80; Galil, Chronology, 157.

expression of loyalty to Babylonia would bring about Judah's independence⁸.

4. The assumption that underlay the treaty between Josiah and Babylonia was not necessarily illogical. Such a treaty was signed between Hezekiah and Babylonia, as we read in 2Kgs 20⁹.

On the one hand, it appears that those taking the former (no battle) approach have not managed to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is no account of a battle in 2 Kings. On the other hand, the latter (a battle did take place) approach is hardly based on the text, but rather on external findings. Therefore, we propose herein a close reading of the writings. In 2Kgs 23,29, we read:

“In his days Pharaoh-Necho king of Egypt went up against¹⁰ the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates; and king Josiah went against him; and he slew him at Megiddo, when he had seen him.”

While some researchers believe that 2 Kings contains no hint that a battle was waged between Josiah and Pharaoh-Necho, they ignore the fact that the phrase הלך לקראת (“went toward”) as used in Scripture usually indicates the beginning of a battle¹¹. For example, we read in Gen 32,7 what the messengers tell Jacob about Esau, who is about to attack him: “...he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him.”¹² In 1Sam 17,48, we read about Goliath “...And it came to pass, when the Philistine arose, and came and drew nigh to

⁸ Cross / Freedman, Josiah's; Bright, History, 324-325; Oded, Judah, 468.

⁹ On this treaty, see Vargon, Hezekiah's, and the bibliography there. Compare Redford, Egypt, 448.

¹⁰ The beginning of the verse is difficult. The phrase “went up [against]” usually indicates battle, yet it is illogical for the pharaoh to be preparing for battle against the king of Assyria, as they are signatories to a pact. One possibility is to assume that the author of Kings erred in his account. Yet there exists another possibility, which is to assume that means אל, as expressed in many places in the Scriptures. See Hobbs, Kings, 340. Spieckermann relates briefly to the switching of al and 'al in the Scriptures. See Spieckermann, Juda, 143 n. 250; the phenomenon is in fact quite common. See 1Kgs 13,4; 17,21-22; 18,46; 20,43; 2Kgs 7,7; 8,3; 16,9; 22,8; and 2Kgs 22,20, in contrast to 2Kgs 22,16; Jer 18,11. This switch is particularly preponderant in Samuel.

¹¹ Cogan and Tadmor claim that הלך לקראת does not necessarily indicate military activity. Yet not only do they not specify what the occurrences were wherein this phrase does have military meaning; they do not even explain what the grammatical or compositional logic would be in 2Kgs 23 for understanding the phrase הלך לקראת in a military context. See Cogan / Tadmor, Kings, 301.

¹² On Gen 32,7, see Hamilton, Book, 322. Hamilton refers also to 2Kgs 23,29 in this context.

meet David, that David hastened, and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine.” Likewise, we read in 1Sam 23,28 that Samuel “...went against the Philistines”. In Ahab’s war in Aram, described in 1Kgs 20,27, we read that the children of Israel “...went against [the Arameans]; and ... encamped before them...”

In addition, there are many military connotations¹³ to the Hebrew word לקראת as can be seen in Num 20,20; 21,23; Jos 8,14; 16,20; Jud 7,24; 20,31; 1Sam 4,1-2; 17,2; 2Sam 2,9-10, 17; 18,6; and 2Kgs 9,21; 14,8, 16.

In order to support the view that we are actually reading an account of the swearing of an oath of loyalty by Josiah to Pharaoh-Necho, Talshir points out a parallel account in 2Kgs 16, according to which Ahaz was compelled to swear loyalty to the king of Assyria. Yet by the same token, it could be argued that the parallel from the wars of Amazia and Joash reveals the opposite:¹⁴

2Kgs 23,29

Josiah went to meet him; and Pharaoh Necho slew him at Megiddo, when he saw him

Other occurrences in the Book of Kings

“Come, let us look one another in the face (2Kgs 14:8).

And it came to pass, when the captains of the chariots saw... (1Kgs 22,32-33)

At this point, it is appropriate to bring in the account of the king’s burial. As we know, accounts of the burials of the kings of Judah are repeated throughout Kings, and are laden with meaning regarding the admiration for the kings of Judah on the part of the author¹⁵. It is difficult to imagine that the author of Kings would relate to Josiah’s having been put to death (as opposed to having died in battle) as one in whose wake the king’s servants would feel compelled to bury him in grandeur in the City of David¹⁶, as we read in 2Kgs 23,30: “[and his servants] brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own sepulchre”.

Moreover, Josiah’s honorable burial is reminiscent of Saul’s burial after being killed by the Philistines in 1 Samuel 31, in contrast to what befell Ahab in 1Kgs 22,37-38:

¹³ Compare Montgomery, Commentary, 538.

¹⁴ Zmirin, Josiah, 102. On the historical background of this battle, see Na’aman, Background.

¹⁵ Regarding the last, see Na’aman, Death Formulae.

¹⁶ On this point, compare Frost, Death, 376. On the version in 2Chr 35,24, according to which Josiah was buried in his family sepulchre, see Bloch-Smith, Burial Practices, 118; Japhet, Chronicles, 1044. For parallels in the ancient Near East according to which a king who died in battle was entitled to an honorable burial, see Hamilton, Body, 145-182.

... And they washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria; and the dogs licked up his blood; the harlots also washed themselves there..."

Or King Ahaziah of Judah as described in 2Kgs 9,27-28¹⁷:

"...[and they smote him] at the ascent of Gur, which is by Ible'am. And he fled to Megiddo, and died there ... And his servants carried him in a chariot to Jerusalem, and buried him in his sepulchre with his fathers in the city of David."

The indirect evidence for the evidence of a battle between Josiah and the king of Egypt

Indirectly, it can be said that Kings tells of a battle between Josiah and the king of Egypt. If indeed what is narrated is an account of a battle between Judah and Egypt, then this should provide a theological explanation for the death of Josiah, who was a righteous king. Yet based on the text, Josiah died in sin, which was his failure to consult with the prophets before going into battle.

According to the practice described in Scripture and in the ancient Near East in general, kings would consult with the gods before going out to do battle. The fact that Josiah neither inquired of God nor consulted with a prophet before the battle with Pharaoh-Necho constituted a violation of a well-known custom¹⁸.

Conclusion

From reading the text, an unequivocal conclusion cannot be drawn that a battle between Josiah and Pharaoh-Necho occurred. Yet that such a battle took place is not impossible, as emerges from the re-reading of the account that we propose. Before discussing the extra-Biblical contexts of any Biblical account, we must begin with a precise analysis of the story, examine its Biblical parallels, and only afterwards study the extra-Biblical parallels.

In this article, we have set aside for the moment the account in Chronicles, with the objective of focusing solely on what is written in Kings. The fact that the account in Kings is not logical in a military sense does not rule out the possibility that at least based on the Biblical account, a battle did take place at Megiddo.

Summary

Scholars who have studied the story of Josiah's death in 2Kgs 23:29-30 discussed various questions that arise therefrom: Did a battle between Josiah and the king of Egypt

¹⁷ A particularly interesting parallel to Ahaziah, the account of whose death is also connected to Megiddo, can be found in 2Kgs 9,27.

¹⁸ See an expansion on this discussion in Avioz, Josiah's.

take place also according to the account in Kings? Is the Chronicles Version based on the Kings version, or is it taken from another source? This article deals solely with the first question. Our objective is to show that based on the account in Kings as well as Chronicles, Josiah died in battle. To that end, we propose a new analysis of the Kings account of Josiah's death, without discussing that in Chronicles.

Zusammenfassung

Wissenschaftler, welche die Geschichte des Todes Josias in 2Kön 23,29-30 analysiert haben, stellen auf Grunde dieser Diskussion folgende Fragen: Hat der Kampf zwischen Josia und dem König von Ägypten auch nach dem Bericht im Buch der Könige stattgefunden? Ist die Version in den Chronikbüchern auf Basis der Version im Buch der Könige geschildert oder schöpft sie aus einer anderen Quelle? Der vorliegende Artikel analysiert nur die erste Frage. Unser Ziel ist es zu begründen, dass sowohl nach der Beschreibung im Buch der Könige als auch im Buch der Chronik Josia im Kampf gefallen ist. Dafür bieten wir eine neue Analyse der Beschreibung Josias im Buch der Könige, ohne die Beschreibung in der Chronik zu berücksichtigen.

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