

In this book, I intend to tell the Biblical story in the form of an historical epic without detracting in any way from its religious significance. I will not refer to very many of the events stressed in the Bible, because they deal solely with religious aspects, and that is outside my purview here. While the Bible describes the rule of the kings through the prism of their relationship with God, and does not often refer to international events and the role of the Israelite kingdoms in these events, I have taken upon myself to try to place things in the historical perspective. The religious lessons and explanations are clearly stated in the Bible, and there is neither need nor possibility to add to them.

**Josiah, son of Amon, King of Judah 640-609 BC. II Kings 22:1 - 23:30**

**Prophets during his reign: Nahum, Huldah, Jeremiah.**

Josiah was only eight years old when he became king of Judah in what likely was a calculated choice of “the people of the land.” After all, a boy-king needs a regent to guide him and train him for the monarchy, which affords the nobility and the priestly class an opportunity to exercise control over the monarch and his actions for at least a little while.

We may assume that “the people” comprised the more established elements of Judean society. These were the well-connected families of Jerusalem and of the kingdom, and their loyalty was not just to the House of David but also to the God of Israel. The very fact that, every time “the people” intervened, they did so on the side of the divinely chosen dynasty indicates that these were members of established families, and perhaps of the high priesthood, who worshipped the God of Israel.

Idol worshippers in Judean society were mainly foreigners. Even when the kingdom leaned toward the worship of other people’s gods, we may assume this reflected a foreign influence that was not well entrenched. As time passed and Judeans forged closer ties with the other peoples of the region, “foreigner” became synonymous with “idol worshipper.” (In Hebrew, the same word – *zar* – is used to refer both to a stranger and to the worship of false gods, making the equation more obvious.) The foreigners in the kingdom may have been civil servants appointed by the monarchy, commercial agents, or representatives of foreign delegations – a sort of diplomatic corps who lived permanently in the city. Over time they intermarried with the local populace, and they naturally preferred to worship the gods of the countries they came from rather than the God of Israel.

This foreign influence appears to have waxed during the reign of Manasseh and was still evident during that of his son, Amon. When Amon was killed, “the people of the

land” intervened to ensure that that the next king would be not only a member of the dynasty but also someone young and malleable. After decades of idol worship in Judah, here was an opportunity to re-establish a belief in the God of Israel and to restore His worship.

The Bible spells out in great detail King Josiah’s religious activities and says almost nothing about what was going on elsewhere in the realm. If Josiah had not been killed in a battle with Pharaoh Necho II in Megiddo, Egypt’s northward campaign might not even have been mentioned.

The reign of King Josiah saw far-reaching regional changes in which Judah of necessity played a role. However, because the Bible is so reticent, most of what is known about his reign comes from external sources – Assyrian, Egyptian and, most of all, Babylonian manuscripts.

In the case of Josiah’s reign, it is not possible to separate internal affairs from international relations since the biblical text contains so many points that require elucidation. For example, the Bible says Josiah destroyed altars in the areas of Manasseh and Ephraim. But those areas had been Assyrian provinces for some time. How could a Judean king do such a thing in what was essentially Assyrian territory?

As noted earlier, Assyria’s disintegration and diminishing presence in the region had begun back in the days of Manasseh. Assyrian attention was mainly focused eastward. Coordinated attacks by the Babylonians and Medians shrank the empire’s territory to the upper regions of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The shell of the great empire was still there, along with its representatives in the provinces; but it was crumbling from within, on the verge of collapse. The rulers needed all the forces they could summon to defend Assyria proper. The armies of the vassal kings were useless in this situation. Worse, the moment those kings sensed Assyria’s weakness – the moment word was received that Babylonian and Median forces were advancing on its heart – those kings would not hesitate to rebel and throw off the Assyrian yoke.

The Bible gives Josiah the highest marks of any king of Judah. There is not one word of criticism of this king or his deeds. It’s almost embarrassing to read, together with all the hymns of praise, that the king did not begin operating in earnest until his eighteenth year. How he ruled and what he achieved in his first eighteen years is left to the reader’s imagination. One must assume a political struggle was being waged within Judean society between those who supported an alliance with Egypt and those who wanted to maintain their ties to Assyria. Was there a connection between Josiah’s domestic agenda – that is, religious reform – and this internal conflict?

A number of mysteries concerning the reign of Josiah make it impossible to paint a reliable picture of events from the biblical text. The Bible does not mention Josiah's military campaigns or conquests. On the other hand, we do find the king of Judah operating outside the boundaries of his kingdom. Hezekiah, one of Josiah's forebears, had interfered in the religious affairs of a neighboring kingdom, Samaria, because there were Israelites there, some of whom worshipped the God of Israel. The current demographics of Samaria were quite different. What's more, Samaria was now divided into a number of Assyrian provinces. That is to say, there was direct Assyrian rule and Assyrian religion in the area.

Despite the paucity of information in the Bible about Josiah's diplomatic activity, we can assemble a reasonable picture of the order in which events occurred, based on Assyrian, Babylonian and Egyptian sources. Each source examines the situation from its own perspective; so it becomes necessary to combine the sources, fitting each scrap of information into the others until we complete enough of the puzzle to see the whole picture. In some cases it will be necessary to make assumptions and conjectures that cannot be verified beyond a shadow of doubt.

Archaeologists have found evidence of an Assyrian presence in the town of Gezer up until 649 BCE. That evidence consists of bills of sale written in Aramaic, which was also the official language used in Assyria. In the year 646 BCE there is a mention of an Assyrian governor settling in Samaria. Ashurbanipal's last campaign westward, toward Tyre and Acre, took place in 642 BCE. After that date there is no further mention in Assyrian sources of events in Asia Minor, and the history of Assyria focuses entirely on the empire's eastern front.

In the east, battles were heating up between the Assyrian army and the combined forces of Babylon and Media. Needing all its forces to defend the motherland, the Assyrian army withdrew eastward to the Tigris River and its native soil.

The rulers of the retreating empire tried to dictate conditions that would serve their interests after they were gone. Rather than evacuating vast territories wholesale and then watching from a distance as former vassal kings turned into enemies of Assyria, the weakened empire made an offer to Pharaoh Psamtik I of Egypt: The Egyptians would take over the areas evacuated by Assyria in return for cooperating with and providing military aid to the Assyrian army.

It was a reasonable proposition, and certainly tempting to Egypt. Why was it in Egypt's interest to accept the offer, given that Assyria was about to retreat in any case? A hasty, unilateral withdrawal by Assyria from the fortified cities and from the various national areas would have forced the Egyptian army to conquer those territories, an effort that would have exhausted Egypt. And, at the same time, Egyptian forces would have been occupied laying siege to those cities rather than

assisting Assyria. One can almost visualize the shock and dismay of the local populace, ignorant of how weak Assyria had become, as the Assyrian army marched out of the cities and Egyptian troops immediately enter to take their place.

The deal had to remain secret until the last minute, and the whole process required close coordination between the two armies. Thus the two one-time enemies came to a mutual understanding on a strategic matter of the first degree – a treaty between the Assyrians and their former vassal, the Egyptian pharaoh. Assyria was offering newly evacuated territory, with its implicit promise of economic security and political power, in return for Egypt's help in defeating Babylon.

Nearly a century of Assyrian control of the Land of Israel came to an end. Archaeological excavations all over the country reveal the depth of Assyria's hold. During that time the Assyrians treated the Land of Israel as a strategic asset and as a forward base for attacking Egypt. Like every empire before and after, they focused their attention mainly on the coastal plain, an area that was in the hands of Phoenicians in the north and Philistines in the south. But since the main governing body in the land was Judah, which occupied the hills, the Assyrians penetrated to the hilly areas as well. On the ruins of the Kingdom of Samaria they established the Samarian province, restoring the kingdom's cities – with an Assyrian nature, of course. Beyond transferring populations from elsewhere in the empire to the Land of Israel, there was a deliberate attempt to impart the Assyrian civilization to its inhabitants. The archaeological findings include walled cities, Assyrian-style places of worship, graves and everyday products that attest to Assyria's desire to inculcate their culture in the indigenous population, thereby creating loyalty to and identification with the empire.

With the collapse of Assyria's rule, the Kingdom of Judah saw itself as heir to what had been the Samarian province, Megiddo and other areas inhabited by Israelites. But despite the fact that the hilltops of Judah, Samaria and Galilee were deemed of lesser importance, that was precisely the territory that came under Egyptian rule in the wake of the Assyrian-Egyptian compact. Thus, the collision course between Josiah and the Egyptians appears to have been inevitable.

As long as Judah's interest was confined to the hills of Judah and Samaria – the focus of Josiah's religious activity – the Egyptians preferred to ignore Judah's muscle-flexing. Egypt's interest historically lay in control of the trade routes. The Land of Israel was poor in natural resources and had no products of interest to the Egyptians. Its importance lay in the fact that the main route to Egypt from the north went straight through its territory. As in the past, the Egyptians had little interest in what was happening up on the hilltops as long as Egyptian traffic could flow safe and secure along the Sea Highway.

The Assyrian administration collapsed, either by choice, when the Assyrian army retreated, or by force, when the civilian rulers lost their military backup. It would appear that the retreat and loss of control occurred toward the end of Ashurbanipal's era. (The king died in 627 BCE; so researchers believe the Assyrian evacuation of the Land of Israel occurred around 635 BCE.) At that time Josiah was still a boy, and his widespread activity did not begin until a few years later. As a result, Egypt had a several-year head start to consolidate its hold over the coastal plain and the northern valleys.

For centuries, Egypt had tried to intervene in the Land of Israel indirectly, through its allies in Philistia. Now the Egyptians had a physical presence and could exert direct influence. They could be the dominant player in the land without having to fight for it. This was without a doubt a rare opportunity, and Psamtik had no intention of passing it up.

We must assume that Egyptian forces fanned out immediately across the territories abandoned by Assyria so as not to provide an opportunity for the local populace to rebel. Despite Assyria's best efforts to transfer power to the Egyptians, some local rulers tried to take advantage of the brief vacuum to win their freedom. The ruler of Ashdod shut the gates of his city, forcing Psamtik to lay siege and conquer it. A stele from the 52<sup>nd</sup> year of his reign, 612 BCE, was found in Phoenicia, suggesting that the Phoenician coastal cities had changed patrons against their will and had become vassals of Egypt. But the fact that we don't hear about multiple rebellions, as might be expected in such a sensitive period, is evidence of an orderly transition from Assyria to Egypt in most parts of the Land of Israel and the coast of Lebanon.

After Assyria's retreat, the main chronicler of events in the region is Babylonian. Losers don't record their experiences; history is written by the victors. As hegemony moves from Assyria to Babylon, so do historical sources. It would appear that the two former enemies, Assyria and Egypt, signed their treaty around 635-630 BCE. Babylonian chronicles do not mention Egyptian participation in military confrontations in the region until 616 BCE. In that year, Egyptian forces marched across the Land of Israel on their way to aid the Assyrian empire in its final campaign. The embattled empire had shrunk considerably by then and was fighting for its life. It was the first time since Pharaoh Shoshenq, some 300 years earlier, that Egyptian troops had marched northward through the Land of Israel. Until then, they had confined their presence to certain key positions along the Sea Highway; and such places as Gaza, Gezer, Megiddo and Beit Shean served as Egyptian supply bases. The Egyptians either controlled or had good commercial relations with numerous port cities along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, which greatly increased their military capacity by allowing them to transport large amounts of equipment and manpower with relative speed at the right time of year.

A question remains about the fate of Samaria and Megiddo when the Assyrian administration gave up the ghost. The local population was made up of various foreign ethnic groups with no national identity to bind them to the land. Did someone from their midst attempt to grab power in the absence of another ruler? Or was this perhaps an opportunity for Josiah, king of Judah, to enlarge his kingdom and extend his sovereignty over an area that had been part of the historic homeland of both Judeans and Israelites?

Since the people of Samaria received their religious “education,” at their own request, from an Israelite priest, worship at the altars continued there.<sup>1</sup> The new Samaritans had become followers of the God of Israel as that religion was practiced in the Kingdom of Israel, not in Judah. That priest may have trained the Samaritans to serve in the priesthood, as Jeroboam did, which is how the system of worship in the Kingdom of Israel was established. The Israelite priests who taught the Samaritans about the God of Israel could not preach the centrality of Jerusalem or the House of David. Like their forefathers before them, their focus was on Beth-el, in Samaria. So the target of Josiah’s reforms, outside the borders of Judah, were not ethnic Israelites but Samaritans.

As the entire Land of Israel was considered holy, Josiah tried to uproot all forms of idol worship. That task was probably relatively easy to accomplish among the Samaritans. It would have much more difficult to confront Assyrian religious authorities, who practiced the worship of the gods of Assyria. It was only the retreat of their military backers, called to the Babylonian front, that made it possible at all.<sup>2</sup>

In 616 BCE, as Pharaoh Psamtik I was coming through with his army, Josiah was nearing the apex of his power. His religious reforms had been completed. His presence and influence in every part of the land except for the coast let the people of Judah accept him as the lord of the realm and observation of the laws of God was shared by all the inhabitants of the Land. In Samaria, where Josiah's activity was somewhat constricted by a certain degree of local governmental presence, his religious revolution was successful. That would have been impossible without the cooperation of the local inhabitants and, of course, the collapse of the Assyrian empire.

From II Kings 17 we learn that the exiles who were brought to Samaria by the Assyrians asked to learn the customs of the place and the requirements of the local

---

<sup>1</sup> II Kings 17: 25-28

<sup>2</sup> The Samaritans became fully integrated into Judean society, at least as far as religion was concerned. During the period of the return to Zion and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Samaritans sought to participate in the national effort. The fact that they recognized Jerusalem as their capital and asked to take part in Temple ceremonies is proof of the success of Josiah’s religious campaign among them. It was Nehemiah’s rejection of their request that led to the split and to the establishment of Mt. Gerizim as the Samaritans’ holy place.

religion. The fact that the Assyrians acceded and sent an Israelite priest indicates that they were not especially zealous about imposing their religion on the nations they conquered. Although the Assyrian empire was the biggest the world had ever known, its rule did not include a religious component. Moreover, the priest sent to guide the inhabitants of Samaria was an Israelite, not a Judean. It was a form of recognition by the Assyrians that inhabitants of the empire had the right to believe in whatever their hearts desired as long as they remained loyal to the rulers. True, there was worship of the Assyrian gods in Samaria, and that religion was perhaps favored over others. But the Assyrian authorities provided an opening for the locals to worship the God of Israel, even though that risked fanning the flames of Israelite nationalism.

What, exactly, did the Israelite priest preach to the people of Samaria? What was the chosen place of worship? Did this priest insist on the centrality of Jerusalem as the holy place and the House of David as the reigning dynasty? Probably not. (He was not, after all, a descendant of the priestly class. Israelite priests were appointed by Jeroboam and steeped in the sacred traditions of Beth-el and Dan, not to mention the worship of idols and golden calves.) Did this priest teach the people of Samaria about the Torah and the importance of obeying its laws? The Israelite priests had no access to the Temple at Jerusalem, or to any Judean archive that might have housed the Holy Scripture. But then again, perhaps the former Israelite priests had their own holy scribes. The northern kingdom might also have had religious archives. Is it not possible that Israelite priests, too, had copies of the Books of Moses? The Torah contains no reference to the centrality of Jerusalem or to the House of David being chosen by God to reign over the people. So the study of Mosaic scripture and its commandments did not contradict the principles of the Israelite faith, which was not tied to any specific holy place and which did not favor any particular dynasty.

It is likely that those among the local populace who chose to believe in the local god inevitably were taught about the importance of the altar at Beth-el, not Jerusalem. The Bible explains why the local inhabitants wanted to adopt the God of Israel – to stop the carnage the wild beasts were inflicting on them, which they perceived as punishment for their failure to worship the local gods. But although the new inhabitants of Samaria came to believe in the God of Israel, the Bible also says their faith was not as prescribed. The locals worshipped the God of Israel (“the local god”) alongside other gods and not as the One God. There were numerous holy sites for worshipping the God of Israel, as well as idol worship, as was typical of the period. At the same time, the people of Samaria were often more faithful to the God of Israel than the people of Judah had been under Manasseh or Amon. (In later centuries, the Samaritans believed the site of Mount Moriah was actually at Mount Gerizim, near Shechem, and not in Jerusalem. Where did that tradition come from? Is it possible that was a legacy of the education the people of Samaria received from

that Israelite priest? Was Mount Gerizim a holy place during the time of the Kingdom of Israel, or did its holiness date from Nehemiah's time, when the Samaritans were not permitted to participate in the building of Jerusalem?)

As Egypt's influence strengthened north of the Land of Israel and it planted a stake on the banks of the Euphrates, it became obvious that military campaigns through the territory of Israel had become rather routine. Undeniably, there was an Egyptian presence in Riblah, Carchemish and other riverside cities. The maintenance of these forward bases, and communication between them and the kingdom of Egypt, clearly required the establishment of land bridges and perhaps maritime channels as well. There was most certainly an Egyptian military presence throughout the Land of Israel, with regular movement of troops and supply caravans. How is it that there was no confrontation between Egypt and Judah, whose borders were widening and whose sphere of influence included the hilltops? Why do we not hear of attempts by Josiah to block Egypt's passage through territories he considered Judean?

It is possible there was a treaty or an understanding between the Egyptian pharaoh and the king of Judah. Such an agreement might have institutionalized an Egyptian administration alongside that of Judah while the Judean king confined his activities primarily to the religious sphere.

For years, as long as Josiah did not feel strong enough to take on an enemy like Egypt, he probably ignored the Egyptian convoys traversing his territory. But as the Judean sphere of influence expanded and the self-confidence of the young king grew along with the belief that God was on his side, Josiah began taking a more aggressive stance in an effort to maintain Judean hegemony over the whole territory. The Bible mentions a few details relating to his religious activity, but it's possible to learn much more from those passages.

"And he slew all the priests of the high places that *were* there upon the altars, and burned men's bones upon them, and returned to Jerusalem." (II Kings 23:20) On the face of it, the Bible is talking about the king of Judah slaughtering altar priests in the territory of the former kingdom of Samaria. Clearly, such a thing would have been possible only when Josiah ruled over the area, not while it was still an Assyrian province. (It is interesting to note that Josiah brought the priests who served at the Judean altars and holy places to Jerusalem and supported them economically while he killed the ones who served in Samaria.)

Although the historical sources mention only the Egyptian campaign of 616 BCE, there is no doubt there were many more. So what changed between the campaign of 616 BCE – or any other Egyptian military convoy that was allowed to pass unmolested – and 609 BCE, when Josiah decided to take a stand?

Level II of the Megiddo excavations uncovered a fortress that researchers attribute to the period of Josiah. There is some debate over who built the structure: Some experts believe it was Josiah, while others believe it was the Egyptian pharaoh. If Josiah was the builder, then Psamtik I would have had Josiah's cooperation as he marched toward Assyria, since the route of the Egyptian campaign passed through Megiddo. If, on the other hand, it was an Egyptian fortress, it's hard to credit that the empire that replaced Assyria would have willingly ceded control over a military position as crucial as Megiddo.

Much remains unknown about the delicate and rapidly changing balance of power among the forces operating in the region during the period leading up to the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah. But the overall picture is quite clear. After years of struggle, it appears that the region was divided between two entities: the Egyptian-Assyrian alliance, and the alignment between Babylon – the rising power – and Judah. If Josiah did, in fact, control Megiddo, then it's hard to understand how those frequent Egyptian convoys could have passed through the Land of Israel without clashing with Judean troops. One possibility is that the Judean-Babylonian axis developed only toward the end of Josiah's reign and, up until that point, Egyptian troops were able to pass through the Land of Israel, perhaps paying the king of Judah for the use of his facilities. If, alternatively, Megiddo was an Egyptian fortified city, then we must conclude that Josiah's kingdom was limited to the hilltops plus a few strongholds in the plain and even along the coast (such as Mesad Hashavyahu).<sup>3</sup>

The archaeological findings at Mesad Hashavyahu suggest that Josiah had ties with Greek traders, or that Greek mercenaries served in his army. Greek warriors are known to have served in Psamtik's army, as King Gyges of Lydia sent some of his men to help the pharaoh during the struggle for the Egyptian throne. Greek-style pottery fragments found at Mesad Hashavyahu support this theory.

In one ostracon (a fragment containing an inscription) a local peasant – apparently a slave – complains that he has been treated unfairly. He charges that his masters took his cloak as collateral to make sure he harvested his daily quota but refused to return it after he fulfilled his end of the bargain. He adds that there were witnesses to the events alleged in his complaint. Both the language of the inscription and the names mentioned in it are Hebrew.

A Judean presence on the Mediterranean coast in an area largely controlled by Philistines, who were Egyptian allies, tells us something about Josiah and his reign. It was rare for Judeans to have any kind of presence on the coast. A Judean fortress,

---

<sup>3</sup> Mesad Hashavyahu was a fortress on the southern coast that was built in the time of Josiah and abandoned after his death. The name "Hashavyahu" comes from an inscription on an **ostracon** (pottery fragment?) found at the site.

and perhaps a merchant colony, so close to the Sea Highway was a recipe for a potential clash with the old-new rulers of the region, the Egyptians.

To sum up Josiah's role in regional politics – an aspect the Bible barely touches on – we must rely on local archaeological finds and Babylonian history as well as the scriptural text.

As the young Josiah ascended the throne, the Assyrian empire was loosening its grip on the Land of Israel. An independent Egypt, which had recently shaken off the Assyrian yoke, was becoming more active in the region, especially in the Philistine and Phoenician coastal cities. Josiah remained uninvolved, focusing on religious reforms to unify his subjects and building his institutions around the Temple.

For some twenty years, there was virtually no overlap between the activities of the king of Judah and what was happening in the rapidly changing political world around him. The Egyptian-Assyrian agreement, which transferred control of the coastal areas and the international trade routes to Egypt, created the opportunity Judah had been waiting for. Between the departure of the Assyrians and the arrival of the Egyptians, Judah could improve its regional standing. Josiah exploited the administrative vacuum in the mountains to expand his religious and national hegemony, which likely included some sort of military presence in central Samaria.

Because of the increasing tension between Assyria and Babylon, and with Egypt hastening to lend a hand, Josiah's activities were barely noticed as long as he didn't interfere with the passage of Egyptian forces through the country. He penetrated Philistine territory to establish a port and trade hub on the Mediterranean that was manned by mercenaries and merchants of Greek extraction. With the geographical expansion of his kingdom and the success of his religious reforms, Josiah's self-confidence increased and perhaps also his political appetite.

Meanwhile, on the eastern front, the Assyrians were getting pushed out of their major cities. Ashur and Nineveh were captured, and the remnants of the Assyrian army pulled back to Harran, on the upper Euphrates, to await the arrival of their allies, the Egyptians. In 610 BCE, after a fierce clash with the Babylonian army, the Assyrians were dealt a fatal blow. The empire collapsed, and the super power that had ruled the entire region for centuries disappeared.

Assyria's Egyptian allies also sustained a serious, though not fatal, blow. At precisely the same time, Pharaoh Psamtik I died, ending a nearly 60-year reign that had transformed Egypt into a regional power for the first time in several centuries. He was succeeded by his son Necho II. With the disappearance of Assyria from the stage, Egypt was left to confront Babylon. The Egyptians, in fact, tried to take the

place of the Assyrian empire everywhere west of the Euphrates. Remnants of the Assyrian army assisted, and perhaps served officially with, the Egyptian army.

That was the background to the completely unnecessary clash between Josiah and Necho II in the fields of Megiddo.

Josiah had constructed the following picture of the international situation: Assyria no longer existed. Egypt's army, under the leadership of a young and inexperienced leader, now stood face-to-face with the rising power, Babylon, whose troops had recently bested the Egyptians. Given his own improved situation, conditions were ripe for him to impose his rule on the entire Land of Israel, since a victory over Egypt would cement his status as supreme leader.

As the Egyptian army was speeding northward along the Sea Highway, Josiah led his troops across the highlands of Judah and Samaria to the Jezreel Valley to block the Egyptians' path. The Book of Kings says simply that pharaoh slew Josiah the moment he laid eyes on him, which doesn't sound like an armed clash between armies. It's possible the two sides met to negotiate safe passage for the Egyptians through Josiah's territory and that's when Necho did the deed. The Book of Chronicles, which contains a more detailed version of events, describes the conversation between pharaoh's "ambassadors" and Josiah's people. According to the biblical author, pharaoh's warning to Josiah not to take up arms against Egypt came directly from God (II Chronicles, 35:21) (NOT 22). Nevertheless, Josiah apparently chose to risk it. He either was wounded in the opening battle and died later (II Chronicles) or died at Megiddo (II Kings).

The Book of Chronicles gives the impression that the battle at Megiddo took place shortly after Josiah rededicated the Temple, but that was in the eighteenth year of his reign. The Bible skips over twelve years, as if they were of no import, and goes straight to the battle at Megiddo.

To sketch the most accurate picture possible, one should also note the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE, even though his sources are not spelled out and it's unclear how accurate they were given the passage of time. Herodotus says the confrontation between the Judean and Egyptian armies took place at "Migdol" and not at Megiddo. Migdol is said to be near Ashkelon. He also mentions a large city in "Syria" (the Land of Israel) that was captured immediately thereafter by the Egyptians; that might have been Gaza. However, most researchers believe the fatal battle took place in Megiddo, on the edge of the Jezreel Valley, and not in the southern coastal plain.

The prophets tell us Josiah's death came as a bolt from the blue, which is surprising since, when a king leads his troops into battle, there is a reasonable likelihood that

he will be killed. There is no doubt that Josiah was perceived by his subjects as a king who had, and always would have, God at his side. Josiah demonstrated unqualified faithfulness to the God of Israel. In return, all his deeds were to be blessed and his success assured. His death, therefore, led to the sneaking suspicion among the masses that perhaps some of his deeds had not met with God's approval. It was hard for the contemporaneous viewer to understand how an unconditionally faithful king could be punished with a military defeat rather than rewarded by God for his steadfastness.

All indications were that Judah was headed for the kind of greatness it had enjoyed in the past: Assyria, the hated enemy, had been vanquished. The Temple in Jerusalem had been restored. Judah's influence under the God-fearing king was burgeoning. And Egypt looked very weak under the reign of a young and inexperienced pharaoh. The king's tragic and unexpected death destroyed the dream of a national religious revival among the people of Judah.

Meanwhile, the fateful clash near Megiddo caused only a slight delay in Egypt's northward advance. Necho II did not wait around to consider the significance of the death of Josiah or its effect on the kingdom of Judah. He led his men speedily toward the Euphrates River to link up with what was left of the Assyrian army.