

Who was Pharaoh Neco?

The biblical figure Neco, or Necho, king of Egypt, is identified with Pharaoh Nekau/Necho II, a pharaoh of the 26th dynasty who ruled Egypt from around 610–595 BC. His name means “carrying out the desires of the heart.” Pharaoh Neco appears in the biblical accounts of the Judean kings Josiah, Jehoahaz, and Jehoiakim, and Jeremiah mentions him in a prophecy.

Though Pharaoh Neco spent much of his time involved in battles, he commissioned several civil building projects, tried to form an Egyptian navy, and attempted to construct a canal connecting the Nile to the Red Sea—a precursor to the Suez Canal, finally built thousands of years later. Pharaoh Neco is mentioned a handful of times in the Bible, and he had significant power and influence at the crossroads of three major kingdoms of the time: Assyria, Babylon, and Judah.

For several years, Assyria was the most powerful nation in the Middle Eastern region. They conquered many other tribes, kingdoms, and cultures, demanding tribute and slaves from the defeated peoples. Babylon was one such kingdom under the Assyrian thumb, but they revolted. Led by general Nebopolasser, and with the help of the Medes and Scythians, Babylon overthrew the chief Assyrian city, Nineveh, in c. 612 BC.

The Assyrians were not going to hold out against the Babylonians without help from their allies. Egyptian reinforcements, led by Pharaoh Neco, marched toward the second Assyrian capital, Harran. On the way, they passed close to the border of Judah, where they were intercepted by King Josiah, and “Pharaoh Neco killed him at Megiddo, as soon as he saw him” (2 Kings 23:29, ESV). An additional detail comes from 2 Chronicles 35:20–24, which clarifies that Pharaoh Neco actually did warn King Josiah not to interfere, but the

Judean ruler did not listen and ended up losing his life. This happened in c. 609 BC.

The Egyptian army could not save Harran, and the city fell to Babylonian forces, also in 609. Pharaoh Neco had to regroup his troops at Carchemish on the west bank of the Euphrates, where Nebopolasser's Babylonian armies eventually defeated them in 605 BC (see Jeremiah 46:2).

Meanwhile, Pharaoh Neco and some of his troops were returning to Egypt, again passing by Judah. King Josiah's son Jehoahaz had inherited the throne, but he only reigned three months before Pharaoh Neco returned. The Egyptian king deposed the young ruler and placed his brother Eliakim on the throne instead, changing his name to Jehoiakim. Jehoahaz was taken to Egypt, where he eventually died, while Jehoiakim ruled Judah, paying a tribute of silver and gold to Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23:33-35; 2 Chronicles 36:3-4).

Later, Nebopolasser sent his son Nebuchadnezzar to lay siege against Egypt. Pharaoh Neco could barely stand against them, and when no reinforcements arrived, he was eventually forced to pay Babylon tribute. Jeremiah wrote of Egypt's defeat in Jeremiah 46, revealing that "the LORD will push them down" (Jeremiah 46:15). God judged Egypt and Pharaoh Neco for their sins and bloody actions against His people by delivering Neco into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 46:25-26). Nebuchadnezzar was also the force God used to discipline Judah for its disobedience (Jeremiah 46:28). However, Judah was not destroyed like Pharaoh Neco was; God's people were preserved (Jeremiah 46:27-28).