

## WHY CHANGE THE NAME OF A KING? (2 KGS 23:34) - QUESTIONS, EXEGESES, DILEMMAS

### Abstract

This study examines the change of a person's name as a mark of subordination in suzerain/vassal relations, using the case of Eliachim/Ioiachim as an example. The author points out that the change of name implies new obligations and rights for the vassal and becomes a 'trademark' of the vassal. The religious and political implications of the name change are discussed, using as an example the relationship between Pharaoh Necho II and King Jehoiakim. The author proposes three possible explanations for the fact that the name Jehoiakim does not indicate subordination to Egypt or any Egyptian deity: (1) the name change marks a change limited to political, economic and military aspects; (2) a possible link with the documentary theory of the Pentateuch; (3) the possibility that Jehoiakim was a "double agent" between Egypt and Babylon. In conclusion, the author suggests that the Jewish name of King Jehoiakim can be understood as a message from Pharaoh to the Jewish people, showing that Jehoiakim is God's anointed and that Pharaoh respects the Jewish Law. It also suggests that the name change does not necessarily imply a change in religious affiliation.



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### Preliminaries

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Middle East was marked by important political changes and a series of military confrontations with irrevocable consequences. The Assyrian Empire, which had fully dominated the region for centuries, was now tottering, weakened by political adversities and threatened by a strategic alliance mainly made

up of Scythians, Medes, Persians, and Babylonians in full expansion. In 612 BC, the armies of the alliance manage to conquer Nineveh, forcing the Assyrians to withdraw Westwards, to Harran. Here, Ashurballit II, the last Assyrian king, tries to organise a counteroffensive, waiting for help from the Egyptians. Pharaoh Necho II was faithful to the commitments made to the Assyrians by his predecessors, Pharaoh Necho I and Psammetichus I (also known as Psamtik I) (Spalinger 1976: 133-4), but also aware of the ever-growing danger faced by Egypt from the alliance between the Babylonians and the Medes, prepares a campaign to support the Assyrians and, implicitly, to counterattack the Babylonian expansion. But the armies of Nabopolassar and Cyaxares get ahead of him and, in the autumn of 610 BC, lay siege to Harran. Ashurballit II takes refuge in a safer place with part of his army, waiting for the Egyptian troops and hoping, with their help, to be able to repulse the siege of the Medes and the Babylonians. The garrison of Harran and the Assyrian troops who remained here barely resisted for a few months. As Egyptian military support is late, in the spring of 609 BC, Harran capitulates. The situation becomes even more dramatic for Ashurballit II. However, it seems that some of the Assyrian defenders manage to escape. They join the army accompanying the king. Egyptian help finally comes, but only towards the middle of 609 BC. An important Egyptian military force now joins the remaining Assyrian army. Together, they try to reconquer Harran, but their attempt fails. Towards the end of the summer of 609 BC, the Egyptian troops withdraw, abandoning Ashurballit II in the hands of Nabopolassar (Bertman 2003, 80; Lipschitz 2005, 19-20). Necho II is forced to reconsider his strategies, as he realised that, from now on, Egypt needs to exert its influence in the regions from the area of the Euphrates and to stand up to the Babylonian expansion mostly alone.

The victory of the Babylonians and the Medes over Harran marks the end of any kind of Assyrian influence in the region. For their part, the Egyptians are momentarily forced to withdraw and prepare a serious counteroffensive. A few years later, in 605 BC, they attempt for the last time to ensure well-delimited influence areas and, implicitly, to reduce the Babylonian power. Nonetheless, once again, this attempt has a disastrous denouement for them. The Egyptians are harshly defeated in the battle of Carchemish. Here, Nebuchadnezzar II crashes the Egyptian army and almost all that was left of the remaining Assyrian army, thus decisively imposing Babylonian rule in the region. This event opens a new page in the history of the Middle East in general and of the Biblical people in particular.

### **The Kingdom of Judah in the geo-political context of the 7th century in the Middle East**

Caught in the crossfire between these great powers of that time, the small Judean kingdom is too weak to allow itself the luxury of neutrality. An eloquent episode for the fate of Jerusalem at the end of that century takes place precisely in the aforementioned context. On their way to the besieged Harran, the troops of Pharaoh Necho II choose the fastest route, the so-called *via maris*. “The way of the sea” (acc. Is 8:23c; Mt 4:15-16) came from Egypt, continued along the Mediterranean coast and, somewhere on the territory of the current state of Israel, approximately where Haifa is, was heading East-South-Eastwards, across the Jezreel Valley, up to the Jordan Valley, bypassing the Sea of Galilee, then heading towards Damascus, where it branched out towards the Eastern and Western regions of Mesopotamia. Once in the Jezreel plain, the Egyptian troops are faced with unexpected resistance from the Judean king Josiah. The event is narrated in 2 Kgs 23:29-30, 2 Chr 35:20-25, and in deuterocanonical and extrabiblical sources (1 Esd 1:25-32; Flavius Josephus 1999, 566-7). It is not yet fully clear why Josiah shows this opposition or whether an actual confrontation takes place between the Egyptian army and the army accompanying the Judean king. Some historians suggest that Josiah had hoped to reunite Judah and Israel under his rule, using to his advantage the Assyrians’ fast decline and hoping to obtain protection from Babylonians. The hypothesis would be in agreement with the reforming tendencies which characterised Josiah’s rule, but it is not supported by actual sources. On the other hand, biblical and extrabiblical testimonies on a military confrontation between Josiah’s army and the Egyptians are quite confusing and interpretable (Talshir 1996, 213-36; Cline 2002, 92 *sq.*; Mihăilă 2011, 378-80). What is certain is that Josiah stops the Egyptians somewhere in the surroundings of the city of Megiddo, backing “the way of the sea”, most likely in the vicinity of the Aruna pass. The sources we have at our disposal mention that Josiah ends up being killed and the Egyptian troops continue their journey to Harran. Could this delay caused by Josiah’s opposition have played a role in the defeat of the Egyptian troops at Harran? (Lipschitz 2005, 29 *sq.*, 32 *sq.*)

Upon his death, Josiah is not followed by his firstborn, Eliakim, but by his youngest son, Jehoahaz. The latter enjoys the genuine sympathy of his people and probably intends to carry on the politics of his father. Jehoahaz’s rule is very short. He only rules for three months, more precisely, until Pharaoh Necho returns from his failed campaign meant to save the Assyrians. While retreating from Egypt towards Harran, Pharaoh Necho II

takes Jehoahaz prisoner and lies on the kingdom a tribute of a hundred talents of silver and a hundred talents of gold. Jehoahaz finally dies in his exile to Egypt. Necho replaces him with his older brother, Eliakim. Even if Eliakim does not enjoy the sympathy of the people, he is the rightful heir to his father's throne, being his firstborn. It is interesting that Necho changes Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim: "And Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim the son of Josiah king in the place of Josiah his father, and changed his name to Jehoiakim ..." (2 Kgs 23:34)

### **King Eliakim's name change to Jehoiakim – cultural usage, theological implications, explanations**

The name of this king is established as such, both in the books of the Holy Scripture and later on in rabbinic literature and in Jewish tradition, where the records made of him are far from being encomiastic (2 Kgs 23-24; 2 Chr 36). For their part, the biblical prophets Jeremiah and Daniel often portray him as terrible – Jeremiah himself suffered a lot from this king (Jer 22: 18-19; 26:20-23; 36:30 etc. Dn *passim*). The reality is that Jehoiakim rules for 11 years, until 598 BC, as a full vassal to Egypt; towards the end of his rule, he obeys the Babylonians, seeking however to remain faithful to Egyptians.

Jewish tradition likely remembers him under the name of Jehoiakim instead of his initial name of Eliakim precisely because of his very negative reputation. However, what has caught our attention is that the change of the king's name seems rather cosmetic, as it differs from the practice of changing one's name which existed back then. At that time, this practice was common in certain situations. For instance, Pharaoh Psammetichus I (*a. k. a.* Psamtik I, 664-610 BC), the predecessor of Necho II, is given the Assyrian name of Nabu-shezibanni when Egypt goes under Assyrian suzerainty, on the occasion of the second campaign against Egypt, led by Ashurbanipal (668-625 î. Hr.) (Spalinger 1976, 134-6; Miller, Hayes 1986, 369; Redford 1993, 430-5; Verreth 1999: 243). We find the same practice in 2 Kgs 24:17, where Nebuchadnezzar changes the name of king Mattaniah to Zedekiah. Similarly, Dn 1:6-7 mentions that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah receive Chaldean names. These are only a few examples. We notice that all these new names are fundamentally different from the initial names those persons had and they entail a transfer to another linguistic, cultural and religious area. In some cases, the new names seem to redefine political or religious subordinations. This is not the case with Eliakim/Jehoiakim. The name remains Jewish and subordinate to the God of Judeans. In this case, the prefix *El-* is replaced by *Y-*. It is known that both

prefixes refer to divinity, *El-* being a generic reference to “God” and *Y-* to “Yahweh”. However, ultimately, both *El-* and *Y-* refer to the God of Judeans. *Eliakim* was translated as “God will establish” and *Jehoiakim* as “he whom Jehovah has set up”. We cannot speak of a major difference between the two.

According to the customs of that time, Eliakim would have received an Egyptian name. Could this be the hand of the “Yahwist” or the “Eloahist”? Such a question cannot be taken seriously. Not necessarily. What then? Could it be a more obliging attitude on the part of Necho II towards the Judean king to consolidate his fidelity? Or maybe a diplomatic approach through which the Pharaoh tries to appease the discontent of the people, showing through this new name given to the king that Egypt respects the Judeans’ law. The fact is, as we have already seen, that Jehoiakim shows an unscrupulous servility towards Egypt and rules without taking into account the Law or the people; he manages to do so for a long period of 11 years. What are the actual reasons behind these changes of names? And still, why a rather cosmetic change of name for the Judean king?

The truth is that, in the Ancient world, the issue of names and of changing one’s name is extremely complex, with profound implications. In what follows, I will try to outline a few ideas in this respect, hoping to be able to finally clarify some of the reasons behind the transformation of Eliakim to Jehoiakim.

In Ancient Middle East, the aspect of the name and of changing one’s name has many philosophical implications and, last but not least, a religious background. In a few important lines, they start from how a name is understood at that time. We know that, in the Ancient world, the name of a person or a divinity is closely, almost concretely, connected to that person or divinity. The name is not only a label but an integral part of its bearer. For example, not far from our area of interest, in Ancient Egypt that is, the name is considered to be almost an avatar of its bearer and, in any case, it has to do with their personality. On the other hand, it is commonly believed that, by knowing one’s name, you have some sort of power over that person (Tower Hollis 1995, 196; Der Manuelian 2005, 437).

We find some interesting suggestions in this respect in Philo of Alexandria. Even if Philo writes a few centuries after the events mentioned in 2 Kgs 23, his texts are a real synthesis of the Hellenistic religious, philosophical and linguistic thinking and the Ancient Levantine heritage (Chirilă 2002: 3-15). Thus, in his treatise *On the Decalogue*, Philo says: “... the name always stands second to the thing which it represents as the shadow which follows the body” (*Περί των δέκα λόγων*, 82. XVII;

Philo 1998, 48-9). Philo even has a treatise which we find extremely interesting, called precisely *On the Change of Names*. Here, he also refers to some passages from the Bible, among which we choose one: “Moses changes the name of Hosea into Joshua (Nm 13:17, emphasis added); he thus changes the one who only displays a state through his way of being to the state itself. For Hosea is interpreted as being, in his (particular – emphasis added) way, the one who is saved, whereas Joshua is interpreted as the salvation which comes from God, that is, a name which denotes the very state, in its most accomplished form” (*Περὶ τῶν μετονομαζομένων καὶ ὧν ἐνεκὰ μετονομάζονται*, 121. XXI-122; Philo 1988, 204-5; Chirilă 2012: 19-31).

Thus, as to the situation tackled in this essay, we could say that, according to Philo, on the one hand, a person’s name is like a shadow accompanying that person and indicating their nature. On the other hand, changing one’s name can influence that person’s status and, implicitly, the person itself, through the simple fact that the bearer of the new name is recontextualised. The name contextualises the person. Changing one’s name recontextualises that person.

To better understand the implications of these (re) contextualizations a name and naming imply, we need to remember that, in the Hellenistic world, the discussions on this subject are vast and complex, but they do help us because they very well systematise the main conceptions of the Middle East. Here, there is a debate on whether the name, Gr. *ὄνομα*, refers to Gr. *νόμος* or to Gr. *φύσει*. Or to both? There is a discussion about the Gr. *ὄνομα κύριον* (Lat. *nomen proprium*) and the Gr. *ὄνομα προσηγορικόν* (or *προσηγορία*, Lat. *nomen appellativum*). The conclusion is that there are names which reveal a person’s nature, but also names which refer to their social/legal/administrative status. From an administrative point of view, someone’s name (Gr. *ὄνομα*) can refer, among others, to codes or documents which stipulate their rights and obligations or to documents which certify their ownership of certain goods. Therefore, the name (Gr. *ὄνομα*) can also have the function of legal or public title and can be used about ownership, indicating a person’s defining qualities, among which that of the owner or goods/objects owned by someone. Thus, most often, a person’s name indicates the connection between the Gr. *φύσει* and the Gr. *Νόμος* and the nature of the relation between them (Kittel, Bromiley & Friedrich 1976, 245-6).

Then, if we are to go back to the pages of the Holy Scripture, we will mention only a few of the most representative references out of many instances from the Bible, which only partially render the issue under discussion:

▪ by giving names to things, Adam becomes their owner: „Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and the birds of the heavens and every beast of the field...” (Gn 2:19-20)

▪ Here are a few places which are relevant to the idea that attributing a name is directly connected to owning the thing which is named: “And Joab sent messengers to David and said, “I have fought against Rabbah; moreover, I have taken the city of waters. Now then gather the rest of the people together and encamp against the city and take it, *lest I take the city and it is called by my name.*” (emphasis added) (2 Sam 12:27-28) In the Bible versions *Carol II (Gala Galaction)* – 1938 and *Anania* – 2001, the end of verse 28 are closer to the Hellenistic source, compared to the Masoretic one: “Now, therefore, gather the rest of the people together, and encamp against the city, and take it: *lest I take the city, and it is called after my name*” (emphasis added). (*Gala Galaction*) / “Now then gather the rest of the people together and encamp against the city and take it first, *lest I take the city first and it is called by my name.*” (emphasis added) (*Anania*) Here, changing the name of the city entails its passing under the control of the conqueror, who assumes its ownership. Changing the name certifies the fact that the city passes under the ownership of the conqueror.

▪ If one assumes the name of another person, this could mean they pass under the protection of the latter: “And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, We will eat our bread and wear our clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach.” (Is 4:1)

▪ Attributing an additional name could mean changing one’s social status, without necessarily changing their religious affiliation: “And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-Paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On.” (Gn 41:45)

The situation in 2 Kgs 23:34, just like Dn 1:7, could very well fit in any of the last two cases we mentioned. In the case of Daniel and his friends, changing their names shows that they become Babylonian subjects and that they go under the protection of the chief of the eunuchs. Necho II changes Eliakim’s name to Jehoiakim, thus certifying

his change of status (Eliakim, the son of King Josiah, becomes King Jehoiakim) and the fact that from that moment on, the Judean King is transferred under his protection. However, we underline once again that the name of the Judean king not only remains within the framework of the Hebrew linguistic context but also attests to the fact that he continues to be religiously affiliated with the God of Judeans. Nonetheless, as we have already seen, in such situations, the usual change of a name entailed either changing the etymon or changing the religious affiliation. In this respect, we could add an excerpt from a hymn dedicated to the goddess Ishtar, which praised her enthronement as Queen of Heaven. Among others, it says: “(17) I am Anu, the master who defends it: who rules over it! (18) Make its borders yours, rule by yourself! (19) Up to my throne hall, come, rise and sit! (20) May your name correspond to mine...” (“The Enthronement of Ishtar as Queen of Heaven” in *Gândirea asiro-babiloniană* [Assyro-Babylonian Thinking] 1975, 230) [our translation].

It is therefore clear that, in the case of such relations, changing a person’s name creates a suzerain-vassal relationship or sometimes even a possession relationship, in which the suzerain includes the one whose name changes in their sphere of influence. The above-mentioned hymn and other extrabiblical documents of that time suggest that changing one’s name entails both new obligations and new rights for the vassal. The new name becomes a sort of “registered trade mark” for them, a kind of “franchise” – if we are allowed to use these terms from a postmodern linguistic area. The existence of the newly named person is legally incorporated into the existence of the suzerain, thus becoming certified and consolidated. The suzerain and their world become the new context of the vassal, which is why, from now on, the vassal is defined through a name referring to this new context.

However, bearing all this in mind, the following question becomes ever more stringent: does this change of relations and status not necessarily entail a change in terms of religious affiliation? Was the vassal not supposed to necessarily pass under the protection of the gods of the suzerain – which essentially made up their sphere of existence? Some researchers would say yes, underscoring the fact that, in most cases, changing one’s name also entails changing their religion (Horsley 1987: 1-17). Coming back to our particular case: if Necho II, the Egyptian Pharaoh, changes Eliakim’s name and makes him his vassal, wouldn’t it have been logical to also mark his subordination to Egypt or an Egyptian deity through his name? Nevertheless, the name of Jehoiakim does not point to any sort of subordination. Moreover, it does not make any reference

to Egypt. In the historical context of that time, we consider there are three possible explanations for why he chose to act like this:

(1) The new name should have referred to an Egyptian deity if the king had also changed his religious affiliation. In this case, Eliakim/Jehoiakim remains Judean. He becomes the vassal of Necho II but keeps his Judean faith – although later biblical sources show that he was not a model of piety (2 Kgs 23:36). For him, the new name marks a change limited to political, economic and military matters. From now on, Necho II exerts his quality of suzerain over the territories administered by the Judean king, asks tribute and so on. The newly installed Judean king even hurries to pay off the obligations he took on. “And Jehoiakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh, but he taxed the land to give the money according to the command of Pharaoh. He exacted the silver and the gold of the people of the land, from everyone according to his assessment, to give it to Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs 23:35, see also 2 Chr 36:4).

Thus, there are no religious implications here. Egyptian deities are not imposed upon the Judean king and his people. It is known that, through Jehoiakim’s religious reforms, the idolatrous practices which were specific to the time of King Manasseh and which had been stopped by King Josiah reemerged. The fact that the king tolerates and even adopts idolatrous practices, probably some even of Egyptian origin, entails an alteration of the cult dedicated exclusively to Yahweh, but not a radical change of the religious paradigm. Most likely, that is why the name of the king remains attached to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, be it Elohim or Yahweh.

(2) Another possible reason, which we have only briefly, *cum grano salis* touched upon so far could be however related to the documentarist theory regarding the Pentateuch. It would be necessary to revisit the layers of the composition of this fragment, and the data regarding its drafting, all of which should be put about the moment when the Pentateuch was written. I have not dwelt upon this hypothesis, as it requires a distinct study, a more thorough textual and historical-critical analysis.

(3) The third possible answer also seems to be the most stimulating one, revealing an aspect of policier of the entire narrative. This takes into consideration the fact that the story does not end with 2 Kings 23: 34, but has a continuation which is very interesting from a strictly historical point of view. What happens after? Briefly, this is the whole picture: in the historical moment when these facts occur, as we have seen, the Assyrians are no longer a threat to Egypt. At the same time, they can no longer ensure any protection against a possible Babylonian attack. And such an attack could not come

through the desert, but through the routes which were used at that time, namely Israel/Jude. Under these conditions, Necho II needs a safety zone, a buffer between Egypt and the territories controlled by the Babylonians. Therefore, he makes sure the throne of Jerusalem is occupied by a king who is faithful to him. He thus eliminates Josiah for his opposition to Egypt. He also removes Jehoahaz, who intended to continue the politics of his father. He then appoints Eliakim/Jehoiakim, who becomes his trustful man, the puppet king of the Pharaoh. Only that, at some point, Jehoiakim also becomes the vassal of the Babylonians. He pays tribute to them for three years! After which he rebels! “In his days, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him.” (2 Kgs 24:1).

Could it be possible to be the servant of two kings at the same time? Especially if they are rivals? Don't you grow fond of one and get to despise the other (Mt 24:6)? Then, why did Jehoiakim not rebel against the Egyptians? Why did he rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, contrary to Jeremiah's advice (see in particular Jer 21-22; 42-44; 2 Kgs 24:1)? Could Jehoiakim have been a sort of “double agent”? A marionette of the Egyptians, a servant of the Babylonians? Was there an agreement with Egypt, hoping that a rebellion of Jehoiakim could have shaken the stability of Nebuchadnezzar, given that the military capacities of Egypt and its strategic area of action had been considerably reduced (2 Kgs 24:7)? In fact, this rebellion takes place almost at the same time as Necho organises a campaign to reconquer some territories in Western Asia Minor, at the end of which Egypt moves considerably forward and conquers several cities, among which Gaza? Could Jehoiakim's insurgence have been part of this campaign (Katzenstein 1983: 249)?

### Conclusion

To keep it short, as it seems we have generated questions rather than answers, I would like to end the discussion with one last conclusion: Eliakim/Jehoiakim becomes the vassal of Necho II but doesn't change his faith. His becoming a vassal is a strategic act. Thus, his name needs not to relate to any Egyptian deity. As to the fact that the king's name remains Judean, a possible answer would be that Jehoiakim, “he whom Jehovah has set up”, can be understood as a message the Pharaoh sends to the people. The king he imposed must be received as appointed to this position by Yahweh Himself, the God of Judeans. This is not a singular approach at that time, namely to have a representative of a foreign power stand before the Jews as an ambassador and person entrusted by

God Himself ( see the case of Rabshakeh, the Assyrian officer, who introduces himself as an ambassador of God among Judeans, having the purpose of conquering Jerusalem: 2 Kgs 18:25; see also how Jeremiah presents the Babylonians in Jer 21:4-5; 42-44). The Pharaoh thus shows that he respects the Law of Judeans and the fact that he appoints Jehoiakim king means fulfilling God's will. Therefore, the message conveyed is that Jehoiakim is God's anointed and he, Necho II, is the authority by which God's will is fulfilled on earth. By this authority, Judeans must bow before Egypt (we can thus understand why part of the population of the kingdom sought refuge in Egypt, where they enjoyed protection against the repeated attacks of the Babylonians; see also Jer 42-46).

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