

“He put to the sword all his brothers” (2 Chr 21,4)?

Ilan Abecassis

2 Chronicles informs us that, when Jehoshaphat “gave the kingdom to Jehoram because he was the first-born, Jehoram proceeded to take firm hold of his father’s kingdom and put to the sword all his brothers, as well as some of the officers of Israel” (2 Chr 21,4).¹

Why did he commit this act?² The use of the verbs “proceeded,” “take firm hold,” and “put to the sword” suggest that a power struggle between Jehoram and his siblings ensued following Jehoshaphat’s gift.³ The biblical texts customarily indicate succession to the

¹ Chronicles was written during the Persian period, probably towards the end of the empire (Rofé, Introduction, 169). Garsiel (Structure, 295) maintains that the book should be dated to the Hellenistic period. It was written in Judah rather than in the exile (Amit, Judges, 336). For an overview of the book as a whole, see Mazar, Chronicles; Kalimi, Ancient. For its sources, see Curtis, Chronicles, 17- 26; Galil, 1 Chronicles, 15-17; Japhet, I & II Chronicles, 14-23; Rofé, Introduction, 171-177. For the book’s biblical sources, see Japhet, I & II Chronicles, 14-19; Knoppers, 1 Chronicles, 66-71. For a discussion of the external sources, see Galil, 1 Chronicles, 15-17; Japhet, I & II Chronicles, 19-21; Knoppers, 1 Chronicles, 118-128. Quotations follow the NJPS.

² Elijah refers to the event in the letter he is said to have sent Jehoram: “... you ... have also killed your brothers of your father’s house, who were better than you” (2 Chr 21,13). Elijah’s presence in this story is chronologically problematic. 2 Reg 3 recording that “Jehoram son of Ahab” was involved in Jehoshaphat’s campaign against the Moabites and the prophet being said to have been taken up to heaven in 2 Reg 2, the letter postdates Elijah’s lifetime. For the letter, see Knuteson, Elijah’s; McKenzie, 1-2 Chronicles, 304-305. Johnstone, 1 and 2 Chronicles, 112-114; Klaus, 2 Chronicles, 160-162; Myers, 2 Chronicles, 121-122. Curtis (The Book of Chronicles, 415-416), Klein (2 Chronicles, 300) and Begg (Construction, 37) regard the letter as a literary fabrication. The assassination of potential rivals to the throne king is alluded to in the wake of Solomon’s succession of his father (1 Reg 2,25.34) – although there the murder is confined to his brother (Adonijah), cousin (Joab), and one other person (Shim’i).

³ Reviv, Clan, 186; idem, Society, 142; Galil, 1 Chronicles, 34. Curtis (Chronicles, 414) argues that the act was due to “tyrannical jealousy” – but provides no proof of this fact. Dillard (2 Chronicles, 190) accepts this contention and seeks to establish whether “the officers of Israel (שרי ישראל)” belonged to the southern or northern kingdom. McKenzie (1-2 Chronicles, 301-302) views the description as authentic and discusses the officers’ identity. On the basis of identical name and family relations between the Omride and Davidic dynasties, Strange (Joram, 196) maintains that Jehoram king of Israel and Jehoram king of Judah are the same person, the “officers of Israel” being the “princes of Israel.” While not directly indicated by the text, he suggests that the elders in Israel and Judah conspired to depose Jehoram king of Judah, Jehoram killing them when he discovered the plot. Galil (Israel, 34) accepts the account of the brothers’ murder but dates the event to late in Jehoram’s reign rather than the early date given in Chronicles. Johnstone (1 and 2 Chronicles, 109) regards the account as genuine and dates it to Jehoram’s early years on the basis of the biblical evidence, noting (ibid, 108) that it is not paralleled in the book of Kings. Myers (2 Chronicles, 120) opines that the Chronicler derived the information regarding the fratricide from historical documents. Thompson (1, 2 Chronicles, 297) takes the account at face value and compares Jehoram’s deed with Solomon’s. Japhet (Ideology, 431) raises the question of the narrative’s

throne in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel by the expression “and became king in his stead” or “and ... succeeded him”: so it is said of Rehobaom of Judah: “Solomon slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of his father David; and his son Rehoboam succeeded him as king” (1 Reg 11,43) and of Nadab son of Jeroboam of Israel: “Jeroboam reigned twenty two years’ then and he slept with his fathers, and his son Nadab succeeded him as king” (1 Reg 14,20).⁴

Can we thus treat the record that Jehoram of Judah massacred his brothers as reflecting a historical reality? Several factors weigh against this view.

1. The lack of reference to the event in Kings

The book of Kings gives two accounts of Jehoram’s succession to the throne: “Jehoshaphat slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of his father David; and his son Jehoram succeeded him as king” (1 Reg 22,51) and “In the fifth year of King Joram son of Ahab king of Israel—Jehoshaphat had been king of Judah—Jehoram son of King Jehoshaphat of Judah became king. He was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years” (2 Reg 8,16-17) – neither of which allude to this assassination. Would the author have omitted such a negative detail as fratricide from Jehoram’s biography when taking such pains to indicate that he “walked in the ways of the House of Ahab and did what was displeasing to the Lord, like the House of Ahab” (2 Reg 8,27) and “He followed the practices of the kings of Israel, whatever the house of Ahab did; for he had married a daughter of Ahab; and he did what was displeasing to the Lord” (2 Reg 8,18)?⁵

verisimilitude but does not discuss it. Later, she (I & II Chronicles, 807 - 808) discuss the event as historical fact.

⁴ For Judah, cf. also Abijah/Abijam (1 Reg 14,31), Asa (1 Reg 15,8), Jehoshaphat (1 Reg 15,24), Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat (according to Kings) (1 Reg 22,51), Ahaziah (2 Reg 8,24), Amaziah (2 Reg 12,22), Azariah (2 Reg 14,21, with a slight change), Jotham (2 Reg 15,7), Ahaz (2 Reg 15,38), Hezekiah (2 Reg 16,20), Manasseh (2 Reg 20,21), Amon (2 Reg 21,18), Josiah (2 Reg 21,26), Jehoahaz (2 Reg 23,30, with a slight change), Jehoiakim (2 Reg 23,34, with a modification), Jehoiachin (2 Reg 24,6), and Zedekiah (2 Reg 24,17, with a modification). For Israel, cf. also Baasha son of Ahijah (1 Reg 15,28), Elah (1 Reg 16,6), Zimri (1 Reg 16,10), Ahab (1 Reg 16,28), Ahaziah (1 Reg 22,40), Jehoram son of Ahab (2 Reg 1,17), Jehoahaz (2 Reg 10,35), Joash (2 Reg 13,9), Jeroboam (2 Reg 14,29), Shallum (2 Reg 15,10), Menahem (2 Reg 15,14), Pekahiah (2 Reg 15,22), Pekah (2 Reg 15,25), and Hoshea (2 Reg 15,30). This also holds true when the person in question had committed political assassination in order to gain his position.

⁵ Although 2 Reg 8,27 refers to Jehoram’s son Ahaziah, it also pertains to Jehoram himself.

2. Five massacres of Judean princes are described in the generation of Jehoram

- a) That of Jehoram's brothers (2 Chr 21,4).
- b) That of Jehoram's sons – except for Ahaziah/Jehoahaz – by the Arabs/Philistines:⁶“The LORD stirred up the spirit of the Philistines and the Arabs who were neighbors of the Cushites against Jehoram. They marched against Judah, breached its defenses, and carried off all the property that was found in the king's palace, as well as his sons and his wives. The only son who remained was Jehoahaz, his youngest” (2 Chr 21,16-17). While this text alludes to captivity rather than death, 2 Chr 22,1 refers to assassination.
- c) Jehu's murder of Ahaziah's sons: “Jehu came upon the kinsmen of King Ahaziah of Judah. ‘Who are you?’ he asked. They replied, ‘We are the kinsmen of Ahaziah, and we have come to pay our respects to the sons of the king and the sons of the queen mother.’ ‘Take them alive!’ he said. They took them alive and then slaughtered at the pit of Beth-eked, forty-two of them; he did not spare a single one” (2 Reg 10,13-14).⁷
- d) Jehu's murder of Ahaziah's brothers' sons: “...Jehu came upon the officers of Judah and the nephews of Ahaziah, ministers of Ahaziah, and killed them” (2 Chr 22,8).⁸
- e) Athaliah's slaughter of the “royal stock”: “When Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah, learned that her son was dead, she promptly killed off all who were of royal stock” (2 Reg 11,1; cf. the similar version in 2 Chr 22,10).⁹

3. The use of literary elements

The assassination of all the heirs in a single blow is a literary motif that appears in several sources. In the Hebrew Bible, Athaliah massacres “all who were of royal stock” (2 Reg

⁶ Begg (Construction, 40) saw the story about the Arabs as product of the chronicler's imagination.

⁷ Ibid, wrote that the chronicler copied Jehu's deed to Jehoram.

⁸ The writer of Chronicles altered 2 Reg 10,13-14 in order to resolve the contradiction between v. 1, which refers to the death of Ahaziah's brothers and the allusion here to the death of Ahaziah's brothers' sons (Kalimi, The Book of Chronicles, 51).

⁹ In all the massacres that occurred within the scope of one generation, it is difficult to believe that Athaliah was responsible for the murder of her grandchildren. She evidently ruled with the support of royal officials and it is quite possible that she ascended to the throne without being required to shed any blood at all. The fact that, she was from the northern kingdom and an offspring of the hated Omride dynasty (in the eyes of author of King) made it easy to turn her into a villain. Yeivin (Divided, 107, n. 237) regards the description in 2 Reg 11 as a literary motif, suggesting that the number of victims must have been limited after Jehu and the Arab forces' campaign.

11,1), Abimelech killed his brothers (Jud 9,5), the authorities in Jezreel slaughtered all seventy of Ahab's sons (2 Reg 10,7), Absalom is rumored to have killed all David's sons (2 Sam 13,30), and all Job's sons die when his house collapses (Job 1,18-19). In extra-biblical sources, the motif occurs in the Bar-Rakib inscription: "And killed his father Barşur and killed 70 brothers of his father" (line 3).¹⁰

The "one survivor of a massacre" thus constitutes a literary device. It is exemplified in Ahaziah son of Jehoram's survival, that of Jotham son of Gideon (Jud 9,5), that of Adad the Edomite, who escapes Joab's rampage (1 Reg 11,15-17), Elijah's claim that only he is left (1 Reg 19,10), and Joash, who survives Athaliah's massacre (2 Reg 11,1-2). The Bar-Rakib inscription similarly speaks of the survival of Panammuwa, the second king of Ya'diya, saved from death by the gods of the kingdom.¹¹

4. Fratricide was a Persian custom

In the Persian period during which the Chronicler composed his text, fratricide had become a regular element of succession to the throne.¹² While crown prince, Ochus – who became Artaxerxes III – drove one of his brothers to suicide and killed the other by the hand of an assassin:¹³ "For he secretly sent to Ariaspes [his brother] eunuchs and friends of the king, who constantly brought him word of sundry threatening and terrifying utterances implying that his father had determined to put him to a cruel and shameful death. ... they so terrified the prince, and filled his mind with so great trepidation, confusion, and despair, that he drank a deadly poison which he had prepared, and thus rid himself of life. ... Ochus would not postpone his design, but set Arpates, a son of

¹⁰ See Donner and Röllig, *Kanaanäische*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, line 2.

¹² Much of the information for this comes from classical sources. For these, see Sacks, Diodorus; Bigwood, Ctesias; Stern, Greek; Dana, Parallel. The desire to remove potential rivals appears to be the reason for the assassination of the king's brothers. While I have not found any parallel phenomenon in any other ancient Near Eastern culture, one was prevalent in the Ottoman Empire. After a brother – not necessarily the oldest – was able to manipulate the different groups in Istanbul into supporting him and take the reins of power, he killed all his siblings as soon as he was able – not only in Istanbul but all over the empire, and sometimes beyond. As Toledano (Introduction, 38) notes, "The systematic fratricide assured the stability of the throne. From the moment the goal was achieved, despite its cruelty, the ruler sat safely on his throne." This custom ended in 1648, being replaced by the "Kebes" – the confinement of those who had lost the "throne-race" in an isolated, well-guarded palace: see Erlich, Introduction, 167-168.

¹³ For accession of Artaxerxes III see Briant, *From*, 769.

Teribazus, to the task and by his hand slew the prince [Arsames]” (Plutarch, Life of Artaxerxes, 30, 2 - 4).¹⁴ According to the third-century C.E. Roman writer Justin, having usurped the throne, he then proceeded to get rid of his relatives and rivals: “Possession of the throne was given to Ochus [Artaxerxes III], who, dreading a similar conspiracy filled the palace with the blood and dead bodies of his kinsmen and the nobility, being touched with compassion neither for consanguinity, nor sex, nor age, lest, apparently, he should be thought less wicked than his brothers that had meditated parricide” (X,3),¹⁵ Bagoas the eunuch murdered Artaxerxes III and crowned Artaxerxes IV king,¹⁶ also killing all the latter’s brothers to ensure that the young ruler would remain under his own influence: “He similarly made away with the brothers of the new king [Artaxerxes IV] who were barely of age, in order that the young man might be isolated and tractable to his control” (Diodorus Siculus XVII,5,4).¹⁷ It is highly likely that the Chronicler was influenced by this custom, so common during his lifetime.

5. The use of general expressions

The expressions “Put to the sword *all* his brothers” (2 Chr 21,4), “*All* the older ones had been killed (2 Chr 22,1),” “He did not spare *a single one* (2 Reg 10,14),” and “She promptly killed *all* who were of royal stock” (2 Reg 11,1) suggest that their writers believed that no one – with the exception of Ahaziah and Joash – survived any of the events recorded. This causes us to wonder how many heirs existed in the royal house that they could be killed in five separate events.¹⁸

Conclusion

The above discussion indicates that a group of Judean princes were slaughtered under unclear circumstances. Over the course of time, the account of this event was turned into five sub-stories – two of which were placed in Kings and three in Chronicles, the

¹⁴ Trans. Perrin:

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Artaxerxes*.html. The *Parallel Lives* must be assumed to be based on prior sources, including Ctesias. For the history of the text, see Dana, *Parallel*. For Plutarch’s attitude towards Judaism, see Stern, *Greek*, 545-576.

¹⁵ *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* (trans. J. Watson; London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853): <http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/justin/english/trans10.html>.

¹⁶ For accession of Artaxerxes IV see Briant, *From*, 769.

¹⁷ Trans. Oldfather : http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/17A*.html.

¹⁸ The rate of infant mortality in the biblical period being so high, the suggestion that Jehoshaphat and Jehoram begat hundreds of offspring is implausible.

massacres being “credited” to Jehoram, Jehu (twice), the Arabs, and Athaliah. The reason behind the literary division remains obscure. It might be a function of oral tradition – as, for example, in the two versions of Naboth’s vineyard, the three accounts of King Saul’s enthronement and two of his deposal, the double narratives of David’s arrival at Saul’s court, and the dual stories of Saul’s attempt to kill David and David’s flight from Saul, etc.¹⁹ Memory may also have heightened the drama of the various incidents in which the princes of Judah were involved – the Arab campaign, Athaliah’s reign, etc.

The attribution of one of the fratricides to *Jehoram* is, perhaps, understandable in light of his great wickedness.²⁰ Other kings (Ahaz and Manasseh, for example) being equally – if not more – unsavory, however, this is not a sufficient reason. The combination of the facts that he “followed the practices of the kings of Israel,” had close ties with the Omride dynasty, assassinated a group of Judean princes, and the Persian royal custom of fratricide made it very easy for the Chronicler to incriminate Jehoram. In conjunction with the absence of any reference to this incident in Kings, it is thus very difficult to regard this text as historical. In our opinion, it must therefore be viewed as pure fiction.

Summary

Although 2 Chronicles records that Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat “put to the sword all his brothers,” several factors mitigate against understanding this statement literally: the lack of reference to the event in Kings, the fact that five massacres of Judean princes are said to have occurred during Jehoram’s generation, the use of literary elements, the knowledge that fratricide was a Persian custom, and the use of general expressions. It must therefore be regarded as a fictional account.

Zusammenfassung

in Chronik 2 lesen wir, dass Joram , Sohn von Joschafat, " alle seine Brueder toeten laesst". Einige Faktoren entschaeufen dieses Bild: Das Fehlen einer entsprechenden Referenz im Buch der Koenige, fuenf Massaker von judeaischen Prinzen werden in der Generation von Joram beschrieben, der Gebrauch von literarischen Elementen, Brudermord war eine persische

¹⁹ See Licht Biblical. About another doubling of literary elements in Ahaziah king of Judah's death see: see Hasegawan, Historical. For duplicate accession formula see: Treballe - Barrera, Jehu, and ibid, Centena

²⁰ Begg (Constructing, 46) suggested that, cruelty of Jehoram is a reflection of Asa's deeds (2 Chr 16, 10).

Tradition und der Gebrauch von allgemeinen Ausdrücken. Es muss daher dieses Bild als reine Erfindung gelten.

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- Dr. Ilan Abecassis. House 70, Giv'at Yesha'ayahu, Israel. 99825
E-mail: [Nabu ilan usur@walla.co.il](mailto:Nabu_ilan_usur@walla.co.il)