

המלכה עתליה

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**Racine reading Athalie before Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon;
Painting by Julie Philipaut, 1819. Louvre, Paris**

One of the central figures of the classical western literature is the French drama writer, Jean Racine. In 1691 Racine published a play called "Athalie" which was staged for the court of King Louis XIV. Voltaire considered the play the greatest triumph of the human mind. Unfortunately, Racine's play is based on non-critical reading of the Biblical story of Jehoiada, Jehosheba, Joash, and Athaliah. Although considered a literary and psychological masterpiece, Athaliah's wickedness and the pious and altruistic behavior of Jehoiada and Jehosheba has no factual credence.

In the Book of Kings we read:

ועתליה אם אחזיהו, וראתה (ראתה) כי מת בנה; ותקם, ותאבד את כל-זרע הממלכה.

“Now when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the seed royal” (2 Ki 11:1; see also: 2 Ch 22:10).

We may wonder why the mother of the late king would want to destroy **“all the seed royal”** including her baby grandson?

In the previous chapter we are told that in fact it was Jehu **“who arose”** and:

ויקם, ויבא וילך, שמרון-הוא בית-עקד הרעים בדרך. ויהוא מצא את-אחי אחזיהו מלך-יהודה ויאמר, מי אתם; ויאמרו, אחי אחזיהו אנחנו, ונרד לשלום בני-המלך, ובני הגבירה. ויאמר תפשו חיים, ויתפשו חיים; וישחטום אל-בור בית-עקד, ארבעים ושנים איש, ולא-השאיר איש מהם.

“And he arose and departed, and went to Samaria. And as he was at the shearing-house of the shepherds in the way,

Jehu met with the brethren of Ahaziah king of Judah, and said: Who are you? And they answered: We are the brethren of Ahaziah; and we go down to salute the children of the king and the children of the queen.

And he said: Take them alive. And they took them alive, and slew them at the pit of the shearing-house, even two and forty men; neither left he any of them” (2 Ki 12-14).

If forty-two of Ahaziah’s brothers were slayed we may wonder if the baby Joash, who we are told, was saved by: **“Jehosheba, the daughter of king Joram, sister of Ahaziah”** (2 Ki 11:2), was indeed the son of the dead king - Ahaziah.

The Chronicler tells us about this woman: **יהושבעת בת-המלך יהורם אשת יהוידע הכהן - “Jehosheba, the daughter of king Jehoram, the wife of Jehoiada the priest”** (2 Ch 22:11).

If at his death King Ahaziah had no children, it is possible that Jehosheba conspired to preserve the dynastic succession by pretending that her own child Joash (sired by the Priest Jehoiada) was **“actually”** the son of the late king.

The Chronicler tells us that seven years later it was the Priest Jehoiada who told the people of Judah:

הנה בן-המלך ימלך כאשר דבר יהוה על-בני דויד. “Behold, the king's son shall reign, as *YHWH* had spoken concerning the sons of David” (2 Ch 23:3; see also: 2 Ki 11:4).

ויכרת יהוידע את-הברית בין יהוה ובין המלך ובין העם, להיות לעם ליהוה; ובין המלך ובין העם.

“And Jehoiada made a covenant between *YHWH* and the king and the people, that they should be *YHWH*’s people; between the king also and the people” (2 Ki 11:17; 2 Ch 23:16).

We should notice that the Priest Jehoiada did not say **“Joash the son of King Ahaziah.”**

The Chronicler tells us:

ויזקן יהוידע וישבע ימים וימת-בן-מאה ושלשים שנה במותו.

ויקברו בעיר-דויד עם-המלכים :

“But Jehoiada waxed old and was full of days, and he died; a hundred and thirty years old was he when he died.

And they buried him in the city of David among the kings” (2 Ch 24:15-16).

Jehoiada is the only biblical non-royal person who was buried among the kings of Judah. This arrangement apparently allowed King Joash to be buried “among the kings” yet:

דוד - עם-אבתיו, בעיר דוד - **“with his fathers in the city of David”** (2 Ki 12:22).

If there were any lingering doubts about the real father of King Joash, we should listen to the words of the Chronicler:

ולא-זכר יואש המלך החסד אשר עשה יהוידע אביו עמו, ויהרג את-בנו;

“Thus Joash the king remembered not the kindness which Jehoiada his father had done to him, but slew his son” (2 Ch 24:22).

It is the irony of history that Joash, the king that inherited the throne of the murdered Queen Athaliah, was the first King of Judah to be murdered by his servants (2 Ki 12:21-22; 2 Ch 24:25-27). Furthermore, this was also the fate of his son - King Amaziah (2 Ki 14:19; 2 Ch 25:27). We may wonder whether these regicides resulted from rumors about the illegitimacy of the rule of these kings.

In the Book of Kings we are told about “Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah” that: **היתה-לו לאשה** - **“he had the daughter of Ahab to wife”** (2 Ki 8:18). Although her name is not stated here, it is assumed that she was **עתליהו בת-עמרי מלך ישראל** - **“Athaliah the daughter of Omri king of Israel.”** This assumption is based on the biblical statement that she was the mother of King Ahaziah who allegedly was the son of Jehoram. (2 Ki 8:26; 2 Ch 22:2).

We also read that after the death of King Omri: **אחאב בן-עמרי** - **“Ahab the son of Omri”** (1 Ki 16:28, 29, 30) “began to reign over Israel.” Now if Athaliah was indeed the daughter of King Omri then she was the sister of Ahab and therefore could not have been the wife of the Judean king Jehoram (who married a daughter of King Ahab).

Unlike the accounts about most of the kings that reigned in Judah, the Bible does not tell us the name of the mother of King Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat. However, about his father - King Jehoshaphat, who was a contemporary of Ahab the King of Israel, the Chronicler tells us: **ויהי ליהושפט עשר וכבוד לרב; ויתחתן לאחאב** - **“Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honor in abundance; and he allied himself with Ahab by marriage”** (2 Ch 18:1).

Although we are not told here the name of Jehoshaphat’s wife, it is not unlikely that King Jehoshaphat married Athaliah the sister of King Ahab. If this assumption is correct then Athaliah could have been the “unnamed” mother of King Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat. If Athaliah was also the mother of King Ahaziah, then we have to conclude that Ahaziah was the brother of Jehoram king of Judah, and not his son. Furthermore, we then have to assume that Ahaziah was also a son of the Judean king Jehoshaphat. Such a conclusion is supported by the words of the Chronicler:

ויהי כהשפט יהוא עם-בית אחאב; וימצא את-שרי יהודה ובני אחי אחזיהו, משרתים
לאחזיהו-ויהרגם.
ויבקש את-אחזיהו וילכדהו והוא מתחבא בשמרון, ויבאהו אל-יהוא וימיתהו, ויקברוהו כי
אמרו בן-יהושפט הוא.

“And it came to pass, when Jehu was executing judgment upon the house of Ahab, that he found the princes of Judah, and the sons of the brethren of Ahaziah, ministering to Ahaziah, and slew them.

And he sought Ahaziah, and they caught him--now he was hiding in Samaria--and they brought him to Jehu, and slew him; and they buried him, for they said: He is the son of Jehoshaphat” (2 Ch 22:8-9).

In the Book of Kings we are told about Jehoshaphat:

ויהושפט בן-אסא, מלך על-יהודה-בשנת ארבע לאחאב מלך ישראל.
ויהושפט בן-שלשים וחמש שנה במלכו, ועשרים וחמש שנה מלך בירושלם;

“And Jehoshaphat the son of Asa began to reign over Judah in the fourth year of Ahab king of Israel.

Jehoshaphat was thirty and five years old when he began to reign; and he reigned twenty and five years in Jerusalem” (1 Ki 22:41-42; see also: 2 Ch 20:31).

The Book of Kings also tells us that Ahab reigned twenty-two years (1 Ki 16:29), and we have to conclude that when Ahaziah the son of Ahab died two years later (1 Ki 22:52), it was the 20th year to the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah. Yet the writer of the Book of Kings tells us that when the next king of Israel - יהורם בן-אחאב - “Jehoram the son of Ahab began to reign over Israel” it was only the eighteenth year to the reign of King Jehoshaphat in Judah (2 Ki 3:1). The Book of Kings tells us that this Jehoram became the king of Israel because when Ahaziah son of Ahab died he did not have a son (2 Ki 1:17-18). However, surprisingly we are told here that this event took place: בשנת שתים ליהורם בן-יהושפט מלך יהודה - “in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah” (2 Ki 1:17).

Whether Jehoram son of Ahab became the king of Israel in the 20th (or just 18th) year to the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah, Jehoshaphat will continue to reign there for the next five (or seven) years. Now if Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah indeed became the King of Judah two years earlier, then we have to assume that in Judah there was a co-regency since the eighteenth (or the sixteenth) year to the reign of Jehoshaphat king of Judah.

The writer of the Book of Kings tells us that Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat was the king of Judah for just eight years (2 Ki 8:17; see also: 2 Ch 21:5), and we have to conclude that he died shortly after (or even prior) the death of his father Jehoshaphat.

It seems that one of the scribes of the Book of Kings came to similar conclusions and in an effort to “annul” the possibility of a co-regency he inserted the following enigmatic statement:

ובשנת חמש ליורם בן-אחאב מלך ישראל, ויהושפט מלך יהודה-מלך יהורם בן-יהושפט,
מלך יהודה.

“And in the fifth year of Joram the son of Ahab king of Israel, Jehoshaphat being the king of Judah, Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah began to reign” (2 Ki 8:16).

Athaliah, was not the only queen, that two of her sons became kings, and we were previously told that the mother of King Abijam and of King Asa was **מעכה בת-אבישלום** - “**Maacah the daughter of Abishalom**” (1 Ki 15:2, 10), the most beloved wife of King Rehoboam (2 Ch 11:21).

The writer of the Book of Kings tells us about Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat and about Ahaziah, the kings of Judah: **ויעש הרע בעיני יהוה** - “**and [he] did that which was evil in the sight of YHWH**” (2 Ki 8:18, 27). However, this is a far cry from the words of the Chronicler about Athaliah’s sons:

בניה פרצו את-בית האלהים ; וגם כל-קדשי בית-יהוה עשו לבעלים.
“**For her sons of, had broken up the house of God; and also all the hallowed things of the house of YHWH did they bestow upon the Baalim**” (2 Ch 24:7).

Whether Athaliah worshiped the god Baal or not it is not known. However, the fact that Jehosheba escaped with Joash to the house of *YHWH* and stayed there for six years (2 Ki 11:3; 2 Ch 22:12), indicates that it was known that Queen Athaliah respected the sanctity of the House of God and therefore it was safe for Joash to stay there. Furthermore, there are no indications that Athaliah interfered in any way with religious services conducted in the house of God by the Priest Jehoiada. We should also notice that the names of both her sons, Jehoram and Ahaziah mention God and not Baal.

I therefore suggest that in spite of the successful vilifying campaign of Jehoiada the Priest and his wife Jehosheba, Athaliah does not deserve the unique biblical eponym: **המרשעת** - “**the wicked woman**” (2 Ch 24:7).