

Lessons from the Reign of Athaliah

Reading: Psalm 2:1-12 “...*Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him...*”

Introduction:

If I were to ask you, “*who was the most evil woman that we read about in the scriptures?*”, who would you nominate? I guess most people would mention Jezebel. She was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of the Sidon (**1 Kings 16:31**), and had married Ahab, the King of Israel (c. 869 – 850BC¹).

Certainly, Jezebel was an evil woman, and her name is synonymous with evil deeds².

- she influenced her husband Ahab to do evil (**1 Kings 16:30-33; 21:25-26**).
- she was responsible for the killing of God’s prophets (**1 Kings 18:4**).
- she sought to kill Elijah after God’s victory at Mt Carmel (**1 Kings 19:2**).
- she arranged to have Naboth, the Jezreelite, murdered so that her husband could take over his vineyard (**1 Kings 21:1-16**).

But while Jezebel was certainly an evil person, I would like to suggest another contender for the dubious title – Athaliah. There is not a lot said about her in the scriptures, but her brief history on the throne of Judah provides us with some lessons that are applicable to us today.

LESSON

1) History of Athaliah

a) Athaliah’s upbringing and marriage

As it turns out, Athaliah was actually related to Jezebel - she was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. She grew up in an environment where the worship of the One True God had been replaced with idolatry and Baal³ worship. A study of the lives of Ahab and Jezebel (**1 Kings 16:29 – 22:40**) will show that this was not a “God-fearing” household.

During the time of Ahab, Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, had made peace with Israel (**1 Kings 22:44**), and his son Jehoram married Athaliah (**2 Kings 8:16-18; 25-26**) – see Annex A. As a result, the northern and southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah respectively) became related by marriage.

b) Athaliah’s influence on her husband

In a case of “like mother - like daughter”, Athaliah was a bad influence on her husband⁴. Jehoram (King of Judah) “*walked in the way of the kings of*

¹ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible, Volume 1, A-C, page 78, “Ahab”.

² In **Revelation 2:20**, her name is used in reference to someone in the church at Thyatira who led members of the church into sexual immorality and idolatry. It is unknown whether “Jezebel” was the person’s actual name, or whether the name was used in **Revelation** to indicate the person’s evilness.

³ Baal was a god of the Canaanites, a god who supposedly controlled the rain and fertility.

⁴ While Athaliah may well have been a bad influence on Jehoram, the principle from passages such as **Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 2:6-11** is that he (Jehoram) would still be accountable for his own actions.

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*Israel, just as the house of Ahab had done...*⁵ (**2 Kings 8:16-18**). He killed all of his brothers and other princes to secure his place on the throne (**2 Chronicles 21:4**). He “...made high places (for idol worship) in the mountains of Judah, ... caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to commit harlotry, and led Judah astray” (**2 Chronicles 21:11**).

c) Athaliah’s influence on her son

After the death of her husband, her son Ahaziah became king. But again, now as Queen Mother, we see that her evil influence continued to play a part. Like his father, Ahaziah “...walked in the way of the house of Ahab, for his mother (Athaliah) advised him to do wickedly..” (**2 Chronicles 22:3**).

d) Athaliah’s usurping of the throne

Following Ahaziah’s death, Athaliah usurped⁶ the throne (**2 Kings 11:1-3**). In the process, she had all of the royal heirs destroyed (**2 Chronicles 22:10**). This most likely meant that among those she had killed were her own grandchildren. Only one was spared, the child Joash⁷, secreted away with his nurse and hidden for six years by his aunt Jehosheba⁸ in the “house of the Lord” (**2 Kings 11:2-3**).

e) Athaliah’s final day

In the seventh year, Jehoiada the priest organised a “coup” to restore the throne to its rightful heir, Joash. Jehoiada made a covenant with the “captains of hundreds⁹”, the bodyguards, escorts and Levites. He showed them the child Joash, and made plans for the coronation (**2 Kings 11:4-8; 2 Chronicles 23:1-7**). On the Sabbath, at the changing of the guard, the plan was put into action, and Joash was crowned King (**2 Kings 11:9-12; 2 Chronicles 23:8-11**).

Athaliah heard the noise of the coronation and the people running to praise the new king. When she came to the Temple and saw what had happened, she tore her clothes and shouted, “*Treason! Treason!*” (**2 Kings 11:13-14; 2 Chronicles 23:12-13**). She was escorted out of the Temple, and subsequently killed (**2 Kings 11:15-16; 2 Chronicles 23:14-15**).

For the rest of this lesson, I want us to briefly consider four lessons that we can draw from this historical event.

2) Our influence on others

Unless we live our lives as hermits away from the rest of humanity, people with whom we have contact will be influenced to some extent by us. Our attitudes, our behaviour, and the things we say not only affect us (and will be a factor on Judgement Day - **Romans 2:6-11**), but will affect the lives of other people as well. The question is this; will their lives be blessed and enriched as a result of

⁵ All Biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

⁶ “*usurped*” means to take the role or position without having the authority or right to do so.

⁷ Also known as Jehoash (**2 Kings 12:1**). He was only a child when hidden, because when he became king six years later, he was still only seven (**2 Kings 11:21**).

⁸ Jehosheba was also known as Jehoshabeath (**2 Chronicles 22:11**).

⁹ Possibly military leaders, depending on your version of Bible – see **2 Chronicles 23:14**.

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their having known us? Will their time with us, however long or short that may be, help them to know and understand those things that are noble and true? Our influence can involve all areas of our lives. For example;

- As parents, when our children observe us, what lessons are we teaching them about the role of husbands, wives, fathers and mothers? (**Ephesians 5:22-33; 6:4**)
- As children, what are we teaching our siblings when they see the way that we respond to our parents? (**Ephesians 6:1-3**)
- In the workplace, what do our co-workers learn about the need to do an honest day's work when they observe us? (**Ephesians 6:5-9**)
- In society in general, what do people learn from us about good manners, consideration of others, showing patience, being a good citizen? What will they learn from us about the nature of God? (**Philippians 4:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:14-22; Romans 13:1-7**)

The point is this: As Christians, we are to have a godly influence on others. God has commanded us to be lights (**Matthew 5:14-16**), but if we live and act just like the rest of the world, then our lights will be dim, and our influence for Christ will be minimal. The time we have with people is an opportunity for us to be a positive influence in their lives, and to lead them one step closer to God.

3) We can be blind to our own sins while we accuse others

When Athaliah realised that Joash had been crowned King, she cried out "*Treason! Treason!*" (**2 Kings 11:14b**). As far as she was concerned, a great miscarriage of justice had been carried out against her. But there were at least two things that she had overlooked;

- a) Joash had been the rightful heir to the throne all along, not Athaliah. But more importantly,
- b) She had been worse than treasonous herself when she usurped the throne, because she was complicit in the murder of the rightful heirs outside of Joash.

We can often overlook our own faults when we accuse other of doing the wrong thing, because it is easier to see the failings in others than it is to see our own. In the same way in which Athaliah had accused the people of treason, King Ahab (Athaliah's dad) had accused Elijah of being a "*..troubler of Israel..*" (**1 Kings 18:17**). But it wasn't Elijah who was the "troubler", he was simply taking a stand for the Lord, *e.g.* **1 Kings 18:20-40**. Rather, it was Ahab himself who was the "troubler" because of his unfaithfulness to God (**2 Kings 16:33; 18:18**).

Also, we can sometimes be guilty of trying to "justify" our own sins by highlighting the sins of others. For example, we can make statements like;

- "*Well, they (other people) are a lot worse than me.*" (as though that somehow makes it alright for us to do it.), or,
- "*He (or she) does it and gets away with it, so why can't I?*"

Our lives are to be measured against what the Word says (**John 12:48**), not by what others do (**2 Corinthians 10:12**). Pointing out the failings of others does not do anything to address our own sins.

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The point is this: In **Matthew 7:1-5**, Jesus gives us a warning about how we judge others¹⁰. There is a time and a place for making others aware of their failings (**Matthew 18:15-17**). However, the approach we take must be with the intent of helping them (**Galatians 6:1**), not condemning them (**James 4:11-12**). But just as importantly (if not more so), we need to acknowledge and address our own sins (**2 Corinthians 7:1**; **James 4:8**; **1 John 1:8, 10**).

4) Evil times call on the righteous to be brave

When Athaliah was murdering of all the heirs to the throne, Jehosheba¹¹ rescued the child Joash and hid him (and his nurse) in the house of the Lord for six years. If she had been caught, surely her life would have been in jeopardy. After the six years, Jehoiada, the priest, organised a coup to restore the throne to its rightful heir, Joash (**2 Kings 11:4-12**). This also was a risky venture, as he had to trust the leaders and bodyguards when he revealed his plans to them. Fortunately (or providentially), they made a covenant with him to make Joash the king, and they succeeded.

There is a saying that goes something like this; “*Evil prevails when good men fail to act (or speak up)*”. More often than not, those who choose to take a stand for what is right are outnumbered by those who choose to do what is wrong or choose to do nothing at all. This can make those wanting to do what is right feel somewhat intimidated. It is not always easy to take a stand against the majority.

We have examples in the scriptures where good people took a public stand for what was right, in spite of the opposition. David, although just a youth at the time, was not going to allow an uncircumcised Philistine put to shame the armies of the Lord¹². He went out with the help of the Lord and confronted Goliath (**1 Samuel 17:1-51**). Peter, John, Stephen and Paul were not intimidated by those who rejected Jesus and the gospel (**Acts 4:5-20**; **5:25-42**; **7:1-60**; **13:45-46**; **14:19**). They proclaimed the truth, even if their lives were threatened.

The point is this: There is “...*a time to keep silence, and a time to speak (and to act)..*” (**Ecclesiastes 3:7b**), and we need the wisdom to know when each is appropriate (**James 1:5**). But when the time calls for it, we need to be prepared to act righteously (**James 4:17**) in the face of evil. Therefore, in the words of Paul “*Watch, stand fast in the truth, be brave, be strong.*” (**1 Corinthians 16:13**).

5) God’s plans will not be thwarted by man or woman

God had promised King David that his (David’s) “...*seed shall endure forever..*” (**Psalms 89:35-37**), *i.e.* that his descendants would not be completely “cut off” or destroyed, but continue on. In fact, the Messiah was to come through David’s seed-line - Jesus would be one of his descendants (**Isaiah 9:6-7**; **11:1-2**; **Matthew 1:6-16**).

¹⁰ There are times when judgements need to be made about other people, e.g. when the church chooses elders and deacons (**1 Timothy 3:1-13**), or has to discipline a disorderly person (**2 Thessalonians 3:6**). But the main point of **Matthew 7** seems to be the attitude with which we make the judgement.

¹¹ Jehosheba was married to Jehoiada, the priest (**2 Chronicles 22:11**).

¹² **1 Samuel 17:26**

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Whatever Athaliah knew of God's promise to David, it was of no concern to her. Her aim was to secure the throne for herself, and that meant eliminating anybody who had a rightful claim to the throne – including any that may have been her own children or grandchildren. And she very nearly succeeded, but for the providence of God. The last remaining heir of David, the infant Joash, was rescued by his aunt, Jehosheba (**2 Kings 11:1-3**) and kept hidden until the day of his coronation.

The point is this: No matter what plans or actions man may take to try and stop God's Will, they will not work; they will not prevent God from fulfilling His purpose – just ask Jonah¹³. God has power over everything – He is in control (**Jeremiah 32:17**), and He can and will do what He says He will do. Therefore,

- when God says, "*I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*" (**Matthew 16:18**), then we can believe it.
- when God says, "*Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (**Revelation 2:10b**), then we can trust Him to give us our reward.
- when God says, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you*" (**Hebrews 13:5b**), then we can depend on Him to remain with us, watching over us.
- when God says that at the return of Christ, "*...the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*" (**1 Thessalonians 4:16b-17**), then we can be confident that that is the way it will be.

When all around us may seem to be chaos; when things just don't seem to be working out the way we think they should, remember, God is still in control. Man will not stop God carrying out His Will.

Conclusion:

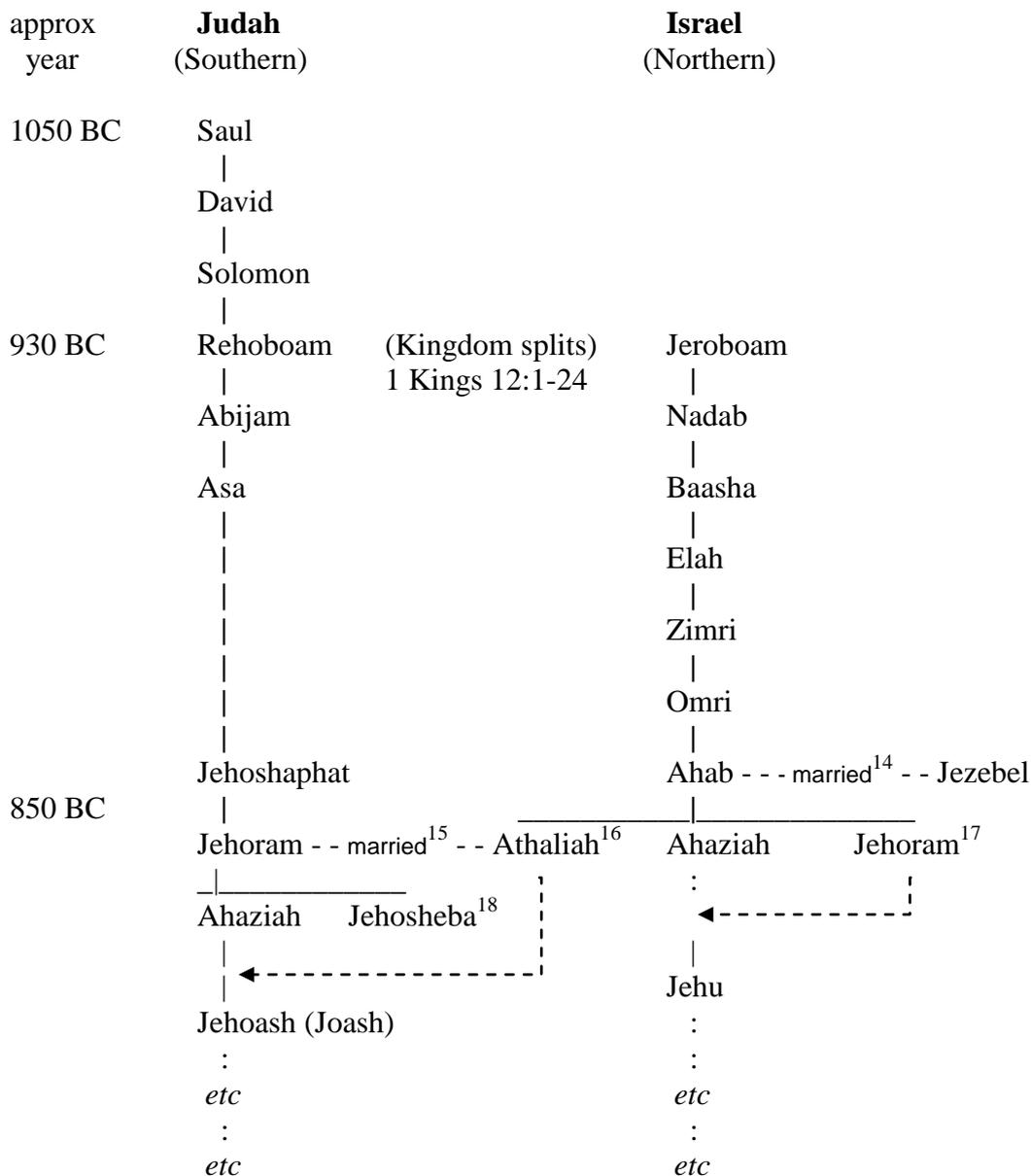
Athaliah was raised in an ungodly household. She was influenced by evil parents, and she in turn was an evil influence on both her husband and her son. Her taking the throne of Judah was surrounded by works of evil. It was certainly a dark chapter in the history of Judah. But while her life was tainted with unrighteousness, these events provide us with some valuable lessons;

- We need to be mindful of how other people influence us, and how we influence other people.
- Sometimes we can be blind to our own sins while at the same time we point out the failings of others.
- There will be times when courage is required to do what we know to be right.
- God is still in control, no matter what man may do.

¹³ God had told Jonah to preach repentance to the city of Nineveh. But Jonah ran away in the opposite direction. However, that did not prevent God's plan from being carried out (**Jonah 1:1 – 3:4**).

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Annex A - Kings of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms



¹⁴ **1 Kings 16:31**

¹⁵ **2 Kings 8:16-18, 25-26; 2 Chronicles 18:1**

¹⁶ Athaliah ruled in Judah after the death of Ahaziah (**2 Kings 11:1-3**).

¹⁷ Both Jehorams were also known as Joram. The Jehoram of Israel ruled Israel after the death of his brother Ahaziah (**2 Kings 1:17**)

¹⁸ Jehosheba was a daughter of Jehoram. She rescued her nephew Joash (also known as Jehoash) from being killed. (**2 Kings 11:2**).