

QUEEN ATHALIAH: THE DAUGHTER OF AHAB OR OMRI?

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In the Books of Kings, Athaliah emerges as the most notable female character not only because she is the only queen who ruled alone, but also because she serves as a bridge between the royal families of Judah (the Davidic dynasty) and Israel (the Omride dynasty). That is, her lineage links her to the Omride dynasty and she reigned as the sovereign regent of Judah by virtue of her marriage to Jehoram, a scion of the Davidic line. However, due to an inconsistency in the Bible, there is a controversy over the exact placement of Athaliah in the genealogy of the Omride family: some passages in the Bible seem to imply that her father was Omri, yet in other passages it seems that Ahab was her father. The problem is compounded by her marriage into the Davidic family – a halakhic issue because of other marriages between members of the Davidic and Omride dynasties.

THE PROBLEMATIC MARRIAGES

After the death of Zimri, king of Israel, the people of Israel split into two factions; one supported Tibni son of Ginath as the new king, while the other supported Omri. The Bible (I Kgs. 16:21-22) reports that the supporters of Omri prevailed and, upon Tibni's death, Omri became the undisputed king of Israel. Rashi and Kimḥi explain in the name of *Seder Olam Rabbah* (ch. 17) that when Asa, king of Judah, married his son Jehoshaphat to Omri's daughter (in what was probably a politically motivated move), Omri was seen as the more powerful of the two, and Tibni was then assassinated to eliminate the pretender. Accordingly, the royal families of Judah and Israel were related by virtue of Jehoshaphat's marriage to the daughter of Omri. This was the first instance of marriage between the two royal houses. It is not mentioned explicitly in the Bible.

Additionally, the Bible relates that King Jehoshaphat of Judah was *connected to Ahab through marriage* (II Chron. 18:1). While Rashi (to II Chron.

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22:2) explains that this refers to the above-mentioned marriage between Jehoshaphat and the daughter of Omri,² Kimḥi (II Chron. 18:1) says this means that Jehoshaphat took Ahab's daughter as a wife for his son Jehoram. Indeed, the Bible later mentions that Jehoram strayed from the path of his righteous forefathers and explains: *He walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as did the house of Ahab; for he had the daughter of Ahab to wife; and he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord* (II Kgs. 8:18, II Chron. 21:6).

This implies that the wife of Jehoram was the daughter of Ahab – the son and successor of Omri. However, when introducing the reign of Jehoram's son Ahaziah, king of Judah, the Bible writes:

In the twelfth year of Joram the son of Ahab king of Israel did Ahaziah the son of Jehoram king of Judah begin to reign. Two and twenty years old was Ahaziah when he began to reign; and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Athaliah the daughter of Omri king of Israel. And he walked in the way of the house of Ahab, and did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, as did the house of Ahab; for he was the son-in-law of the house of Ahab (II Kgs. 8:25-27).

This implies that Athaliah (the wife of Jehoram and mother of Ahaziah) was actually the daughter of Omri, not Ahab. The same is implied in II Chronicles 22:2. This is the above-mentioned contradiction as to whether Athaliah was the daughter of Omri or of Ahab.³ As explained below, the various commentators seek to reconcile this discrepancy by clarifying that one passage is literal while the other is not. Some affirm that Athaliah was indeed the daughter of Omri, while others state that she was really the daughter of Ahab. Either way, Athaliah, a scion of the Omride family, was married to Jehoram, king of Judah, creating a second union between the two families.

A third marriage between the two families is found in the above-mentioned passage which notes that Ahaziah *was the son-in-law of the house of Ahab*. This implies that Ahaziah was the son-in-law of Ahab.⁴

Among these unions, Jehoshaphat, the father of Jehoram, is said to have married a daughter of Omri, and Ahaziah, a son of Athaliah and Jehoram, is said to have married a daughter of Ahab. Accordingly, if Athaliah was a daughter of Omri, it would seem that her husband Jehoram married his aunt by marrying Athaliah (for Jehoshaphat his father also married a daughter of

Omri); and if Athaliah was a daughter of Ahab, it would seem that her son Ahaziah married his aunt by marrying a daughter of Ahab (for his mother Athaliah was also a daughter of Ahab). Thus, wherever one places Athaliah in the genealogy of the Omride family a problem arises, for one must explain how a king of the Davidic dynasty was apparently allowed to marry his mother's sister, an act biblically proscribed in Leviticus 18:13.

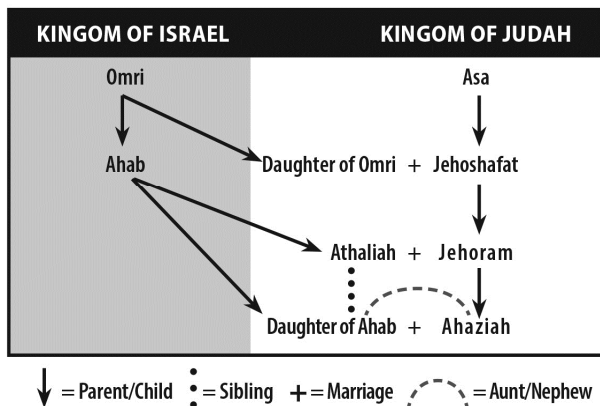
ATHALIAH AS THE DAUGHTER OF AHAB

Most of the classical rabbinic commentators elucidate that Athaliah was indeed the daughter of Ahab. According to this opinion, one must explain why Athaliah is also referred to as the daughter of Omri and how her son Ahaziah seemingly married his own aunt. Kimḥi (to II Chron. 22:2 and II Kgs. 26) writes that Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab, but was nonetheless "attributed" to her grandfather, Omri. His explanation is that since "grandsons are tantamount to sons,"⁵ Athaliah could be considered a daughter of Omri, even though she was really a daughter of his son Ahab. Gersonides (to II Kgs. 8:18) also writes that Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab, but concedes that sometimes the Bible traces her lineage to her father and sometimes to her grandfather. Abrabanel (to II Kings Ch. 8) adds that since Athaliah was raised as part of the household of her grandfather Omri, she is considered like his daughter, even though she was really his granddaughter. Rabbi Haim D. Rabinowitz (1911-2001) explains that although Athaliah was really the daughter of Ahab, she is mentioned as a daughter of Omri to stress that her lineage to Omri through Ahab was legitimately recognized since she was born to Ahab by a Jewish wife and not by Jezebel, who was not Jewish.⁶ Had Athaliah's mother been Jezebel, Athaliah would not have been considered Jewish and according to Jewish law would not be considered a descendant of Omri.⁷ These explanations account for the apparent contradiction regarding the parentage of Athaliah.⁸

However, one must still address the issue as to how her son Ahaziah could have been the son-in-law of Ahab if one is forbidden to marry one's mother's sister. These commentators are therefore forced to assume that Ahaziah was not literally a son-in-law of Ahab.⁹ Kimḥi (to II Kings 8:26) explains that when Ahaziah is referred to as *the son-in-law of the house of Ahab*, it does not mean that Ahaziah married a daughter of Ahab; it actually means that his

father Jehoram was the son-in-law of Ahab (because he married Athaliah, who was Ahab's daughter). Therefore, Kimḥi declares, Ahaziah is called Ahab's "son-in-law" because he was related to Ahab through marriage. Kimḥi remains consistent in his view that Athaliah was a daughter of Ahab. Nonetheless, Kimḥi's explanation is hard to accept, not only because Ahaziah was related to Ahab through his father's marriage to Ahab's daughter, but also because his mother was Ahab's daughter, making him a grandson of Ahab! It seems very odd to say that a man is related to his maternal grandfather "through marriage" (that of his parents) when the relationship is simply due to the fact that his mother's father was his grandfather! Rabbi Samuel Laniado of Aleppo, Syria (d. 1605), offers an alternate way of answering the difficulty: he notes that the Bible calls Ahaziah a *son-in-law of the house of Ahab*: it does not say that Ahaziah was the actual son-in-law of Ahab. Therefore, he writes, it is quite plausible to explain that Ahaziah married a daughter of one of Ahab's wives who was not fathered by Ahab. Such a marriage (to one's mother's father's wife's daughter) is completely permissible. This accounts for the wording *the house of Ahab*, because Ahab's wives and their children are all considered members of his household, even if they are in no way biologically related to him.

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Accordingly, one can explain that Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab without having to explain that Ahaziah married his own aunt, because Ahaziah did not actually marry a daughter of Ahab – he married a step-daughter of Ahab.¹⁰

ATHALIAH AS THE DAUGHTER OF OMRI

Some modern-day academic researchers have concluded that Athaliah was actually the daughter of Omri, not Ahab. They justify their claim through synchronization with the projected timeline of King Ethbaal of Tyre and Sidon (father of Jezebel). According to this explanation, Athaliah is referred to in the Bible as the daughter of Ahab simply because she was raised in the household of her older brother Ahab.¹¹

Though not noted by academic scholars, there are actually medieval rabbinic sources which also assume that Athaliah was the daughter of Omri.¹² Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (d. circa 1340) writes that the Hebrew word for "daughter" can also mean "sister."¹³ He makes this assertion because of the following biblical passage:

And the sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father with guile, and spoke, because he had defiled Dinah their sister, and said unto them: 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister...But if ye will not hearken unto us, to be circumcised; then will we take our daughter, and we will be gone' (Gen. 34:13-17).

In this passage, Jacob's sons first refer to Dinah as their sister and then later as their daughter. To reconcile this discrepancy, Bahya posits that *bat*, the Hebrew word for "daughter", can also refer to a sister. Bahya writes that the same is true of Athaliah, i.e., she was really the sister of Ahab even though she is referred to as his daughter. The same idea is presented in two recently published medieval commentaries on the Pentateuch, *Moshav Zeqanim*¹⁴ and *Perushei Rabbenu Hayyim Paltiel al Ha-Torah*.¹⁵ Bahya proves that Athaliah was really the sister of Ahab from the fact that Ahab had no daughters,¹⁶ as II Kings 10:1 only refers to his having seventy sons, no daughters being mentioned.¹⁷ However, one can just as easily argue that the Bible simply did not feel the need to mention Ahab's daughters or that "seventy sons" really means "seventy children." In fact, according to Hebrew

Another answer can be offered, based on a textual emendation to *Seder Olam Rabbah*. R. Eliyyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), in his glosses to *Seder Olam Rabbah*, emends the text to read "Asa married his grandson Jehoram to a daughter of Omri" instead of "Asa married his son Jehoshaphat to a daughter of Omri." Elijah Gaon (known also as Ha-Gra) justifies this emendation by explaining that the marriage referred to in *Seder Olam Rabbah* is that of Jehoram to Omri's daughter Athaliah.²² Of all three marriages between the royal families, two are mentioned explicitly in the Bible (that of Jehoram to Athaliah, and that of Ahaziah to a daughter of Ahab), yet this particular marriage is only mentioned in *Seder Olam Rabbah* and is not even alluded to in the Bible. The omission seems to lend credence to Ha-Gra's emendation. Others, however, declare that this emendation is unfounded, on the basis of earlier sources such as the *Tosefta* (*Sotah* 12:3), Kimhi, Rashi, and early manuscripts of *Seder Olam Rabbah*, all of which state that Asa married his son Jehoshaphat to a daughter of Omri.²³

CONCLUSION

The Bible relates that Jehu was commanded to slay the entire "house of Ahab" (II Kgs. 9:8) and that he did indeed kill "all that remained of the house of Ahab," leaving no survivors (II Kgs. 10:10-11). However, based on the above discussion, this passage is problematic because Athaliah, a member of the Omride family, remained alive and actually reigned as queen regent in Judah after Jehu's rebellion. R. Ya'akov Hayyim Sofer asks this question and presents two different answers in consonance with the above explanations. He writes that if Athaliah was a daughter of Omri, she was not included in the decree to destroy the "house of Ahab" because she was not one of Ahab's descendants. Alternatively, he explains, even if one understands that Athaliah was a daughter of Ahab, she still would not have been included because the decree applied only to the male descendants of Ahab, not to the females. In fact, the literal wording of the prophecy foretelling Ahab's doom runs: *The entire house of Ahab shall perish; and I will obliterate from Ahab all who urinate against the wall and anyone who survives or remains at large in Israel* (II Kgs. 9:8). The phrase *all who urinate against the wall* (*mashtin bekir*) is understood by Gersonides to refer specifically to males (see Gersonides there and to I Sam. 25:22, I Kgs. 14:10).²⁴

In summation, there seem to be two legitimate traditions concerning the parentage of Athaliah. Both traditions are forced to explain that some verses in the Bible are not literal. Some commentators propose that the word "daughter" can refer to a granddaughter, and that Athaliah was really the daughter of Ahab and is sometimes called the daughter of Omri because she was his granddaughter. Other commentators, who maintain that the word "daughter" can refer to a sister, therefore assert that Athaliah was really the daughter of Omri and is sometimes called the daughter of Ahab because she was his sister. According to the former stance, one must also explain that Ahaziah, Athaliah's son, was not literally a son-in-law of Ahab because that would entail marrying his mother's sister; while according to the latter stance, one must explain that Jehoshaphat did not marry a daughter of Omri or that even if he did, his son Jehoram was not a product of that union.

NOTES

Special thanks are due to Avi Levine, who designed the charts for this article.

1. Alternatively, Kimḥi explains that Tibni committed suicide when he realized that his influence had waned owing to Omri's success in politically engaging the kingdom of Judah.
2. See W. B. Barrick, "Another Shaking of Jehoshaphat's Family Tree: Jehoram and Ahaziah Once Again", *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 51, fasc. 1 (Jan. 2001) pp. 9-25. Barrick entertains the possibility that it was actually Jehoshaphat himself, not his son Jehoram, who married Athaliah. However, this explanation has no basis in the Bible.
3. Interestingly, one can regard Ahab's Hebrew name, *Aḥav*, as a portmanteau word meaning "brother-father." This alludes to both sides of the debate surrounding the lineage of Athaliah; Ahab was either her brother or her father.
4. The name given for the mother of Ahaziah's son and eventual successor, Joash, is Zibiah of Beersheba (II Kings 12:2). This may or may not refer to a daughter of Ahab. The fact that she is from Beersheba seemingly implies that she was not a daughter of Ahab, since Beersheba is located in the territory of Judah, not Israel. However, Rashbam (to Gen. 26:33) writes that there were two cities named Beersheba, based on the wording of I Kings 19:3, and [he] came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, implying that another Beersheba is located elsewhere. See S. Maimon, *Simḥat Yehoshu'a al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 2007) p. 20, for further discussion about these two cities.
5. Kimḥi compares this to the *midrash* (*Sifrei* to Num. 10:29, cited in Rashi to Exodus 18:1) which states that Reuel was the father of Jethro, although Jethro's daughters called Reuel their father (Ex. 2:18) since a grandfather is also called a father. All of this is based on a Talmudic postulate (TB *Yevamot* 62b) mentioned in regard to fulfilling the commandment of procreation through grandsons in the event of the death of one's children. See *Sedei Hemed*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1891) p. 130: 384, where the author proves from this discussion that the postulate extends to granddaughters, not just grandsons. The other commentators may have eschewed Kimḥi's explanation simply because they understood the Talmudic postulate to apply only to grandsons.

6. R. David Luria (1798-1855) wrote that Athaliah was indeed the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel: see *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Wagschall/Moznaim Publishing, 2001) p. 35. See also footnote 9 below concerning the view of Abrabanel.
7. H. D. Rabinowitz, *Da'at Soferim: Melakhim* (Jerusalem/New York, 1962) p. 89.
8. Cf. I. Weinberg, *Perush Niv Olam al Seder Olam* (Beit Shemesh, 2001) p. 133, who argues against the explanation of Rabbi Rabinowitz.
9. Abrabanel, in his commentary to II Kings 8:18, explains that Jehoram married Jezebel the daughter of Ahab and she caused him to stray. This is printed in all extant editions of Abrabanel including his *Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim* (Leipzig, 1686) p. 279b; *Sefer Melakhim* (Hamburg, 1687) p. 57a, and *Perush al Nevi'im Rishonim* (Tel Aviv, 1954). However, this is most certainly an error because nowhere else does one find that Ahab had a daughter named Jezebel (he had a wife with that name) or that Jehoram married a woman named Jezebel. Therefore, it seems that the proper reading of Abrabanel should be "Athaliah" instead of "Jezebel." In fact, Gersonides (to II Kgs. 8:26) explicitly identifies the daughter of Ahab mentioned in regard to Jehoram's straying as Athaliah. From this it appears that Abrabanel subscribed to the view that Athaliah was a daughter of Ahab; and this is also evident from the passage of Abrabanel mentioned above in which he explained that although Athaliah was a daughter of Ahab, she was raised in the house of Omri. Nevertheless, Abrabanel (to Deut. 27:14) writes that Ahaziah is mentioned as the son-in-law of Ahab because he sinned by following in the path of his mother-in-law Jezebel through the influence of his wife, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. He thus appears to believe that Ahaziah was literally a son-in-law of Ahab. If so, then Abrabanel must have understood that Athaliah was not a daughter of Ahab, but rather of Omri. There is therefore a contradiction in Abrabanel's stance regarding this issue.
10. E. Batzri, *Keli Yakar: Melakhim 2* (Jerusalem: Ha-Ketav Institute, 1994) p. 190.
11. H. J. Katzenstein, "Who were the Parents of Athaliah?," *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1955) pp. 194-197; William W. Hallo, "From Qarqar to Carchemish: Assyria and Israel in the Light of New Discoveries," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 23, no. 2 (May, 1960) p. 41, fn. 32; J. M. Miller, "The Fall of the House of Ahab," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 17, fasc. 3 (July 1967) p. 307; Susan Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 112, no. 3 (Autumn 1993) p. 395, fn. 37.
12. Independent of these sources, R. Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn of Horodna (d. 1862) also assumed that Athaliah was a daughter of Omri. See *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Wagschall/Moznaim Publishing, 2001) p. 35.
13. C. Chavel, *Rabbenu Bahya al Ha-Torah: Bereshit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966) p. 292.
14. S. Sasson, *Moshav Zeqanim* (London, 1959) p. 61.
15. I. S. Lange, *Perushei Rabbenu Hayyim Paltiel al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1981) p. 107 (his wording, however, is rather obscure). See I. M. Ta-Shma, "Hayyim Paltiel ben Jacob," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 8 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) p. 483. Ta-Shma theorizes that the author of this work (mentioned as "still unpublished" in his article) was R. Hayyim Paltiel ben Jacob, a noted German scholar of the late thirteenth century.
16. R. Yomtov Lipmann Heller (1579-1654) wrote that Bahya did not prove that Athaliah was a sister of Ahab from the fact that she is referred to in the Bible as the daughter of Omri (Ahab's father) because those passages can be reinterpreted in light of Kimhi's and Gersonides' explana-

tions to not mean that she was literally a daughter of Omri, as mentioned above. See A. Heller, *Tuv Ta'am al Rabbenu Bahya: Bereshit* (Benei Berak, 1992) p. 214.

17. Bahya also notes that *Targum Yonatan* translates "daughter of Ahab" as "sister of Ahab." However, this is not found in any extant editions of *Targum Yonatan*.

18. It seems that throughout rabbinic literature Ahab is viewed as a paragon of sin, or at least more so than his father. For example, see TB *Sanhedrin* 90a, which counts Ahab as one of three kings who lost their portion in the World to Come (including Manasseh of Judah and Jeroboam ben Nebat of Israel); see also Rashi (to Gen. 48:8), who states that Jeroboam and Ahab were wicked men descended from Ephraim, but does not mention Omri, Ahab's father. Cf. T. Ishida, "The House of Ahab," *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 25, nos. 2/3 (1975) pp. 135-137, and E. Ben Zvi, "The House of Omri/Ahab in Chronicles," *Ahab Agonistes: The Rise and Fall of the Omri Dynasty* (London/New York: T & T Clark and the Library of Biblical Studies, 2007) pp. 41-52.

19. E. Batzri, *Keli Yakar: Melakhim 2* (Jerusalem: Ha-Ketav Institute, 1994) p. 183.

20. Y. Abramsky, *Hazon Yehezkel: Tosefta Nashim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1963) pp. 55b-56a.

21. See R. Margolios, *Sefer Hasidim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1927) p. 20, who discusses a prohibition against a father and son marrying two sisters.

22. M. D. Yerushalmi, *Seder Olam im Bi'ur Ha-Gra* (Jerusalem, 1955) p. 55, #57, and *Seder Olam Rabbah* (Warsaw, 1905) pp. 47:51. However, see *Me'ir Ayin* there who points out that this explanation is unlikely because if Asa was still alive during Jehoram's marriage to Athaliah, Jehoram could have been at most two years old at the time of his marriage!

23. Y. M. Weinstock, *Seder Olam Rabbah Ha-Shalem, Seder Zemanim* (Jerusalem, 1956) p. 270, and S. Mirsky, *Midrash Seder Olam* (Jerusalem, 1988) pp. 35b-36a.

24. Y. H. Sofer, *Torat Ya'akov al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 2002) pp. 686-691; and *Kovetz Beit Aharon ve-Yisrael* (Karlin), vol. 95 (Sivan 5761) pp. 130-133. In the JPS, *mashtin be-kir* is euphemistically translated as "male" or "manchild" [Ed.].



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