

POLITICAL ASSASSINATION IN BIBLICAL ISRAEL

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POLITICAL ASSASSINATION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

It is virtually impossible to ascertain the precise number of rulers of nation-states and empires in antiquity whose demise was the result of assassination, but their numbers were clearly large. Our picture of ancient history in most cultures is rather sketchy, and the further back we go, the more shrouded it becomes in the mists of time. Lacking clear-cut textual evidence, historians have had to rely on other data sources. For instance, archaeological finds, calligraphic illustrations on the walls of tombs and, more recently, DNA analysis and advanced photographic tomography have been applied to the mummified remains of Egyptian Pharaohs. These advanced techniques assist experts attempting to reveal whether or not these rulers died a natural death and, if not, whether they were murdered or killed in battle. Despite the extremely partial data base, it is clear that many rulers from antiquity down to the present day have indeed been victims of assassination. One modern work on the subject, without claiming to be exhaustive, lists dozens of examples of possible, probable and definite assassinations in ancient Egypt, China, Rome, Byzantium, and other parts of Europe.¹

POLITICAL ASSASSINATION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Turning to Israel's history, we note in passing that if other ancient peoples had produced works comparable to the Bible, and if such works had survived the ravages of time, we would be in a better position to compare ancient assassination across cultures. While it was not written to provide a full and objective historical account, the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) does provide a narrative of the most ancient part of the long history of Israel, and certainly a much fuller picture than that available for other ancient cultures. Thus, to determine whether political assassination occurred in ancient Jewish history, the Tanakh is the place to start.

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To pursue our inquiry, we shall define political assassination as the murder of elite political figures by an individual or ²group acting outside governmental roles and without due process of law. This article focuses on internal political assassination of the leaders of Israel by their own subjects.

ASSASSINATION IN THE BIBLE

Does the Bible contain any examples of Jews assassinating their leaders? One notable case was that of Gedaliah ben Ahikam. After conquering Judea and Jerusalem, destroying the First Temple, and exiling many of the Jews in 586 BCE, the king of Babylon appointed Gedaliah to be governor of Judah. He was assassinated by a militant leader of royal descent (II Kgs. 25:22-26; Jer. 41). The annual Fast of Gedaliah, observed one day after the Jewish New Year, commemorates that dismal event. Though appointed by Nebuchadnezzar, Gedaliah was the last head of that era's last independent Jewish kingdom. Ironically, the considerable attention that Judaism devotes to his tragic murder has apparently hidden many similar grim events from Jewish public awareness.

However, let us begin at the beginning. It seems that no clear-cut political assassinations of Israel's national leaders are described in the Pentateuch or the Book of Joshua.³ Such outrages first occur in Judges 9, where Abimelech seizes power by murdering 70 of his half-brothers, the sons of Gideon.⁴

THE REGAL AGE OF ASSASSINATION

The advent of Israelite kings heralds a quantum leap in political assassination, and the first king leads the way. Saul tries repeatedly to spear David; sends men to drag him from bed for execution; dispatches him on suicide missions; and goes on repeated expeditions to capture him (I Sam. 18:11, 17, 21, 25-27; 19:10-18; 22-24, 26).⁵ Later, Saul's heir, Ish-bosheth, is killed in his bed by two of his own officers (II Sam. 4:2, 5-12).

ASSASSINATION IN JUDAH

Political assassination escalates after Solomon's death and the division of the kingdom. In Judah, King Jehoram murders his brothers and some officers (II Chron. 21:4). King Ahaziah and his relatives are slain by Jehu while visiting Jezreel in Israel (II Kgs. 9:27; II Chron. 22:9). Ahaziah's mother,

Athaliah, then becomes queen and does away with potential claimants to the throne (II Kgs. 11:1; II Chron. 22:10); she is eventually killed by order of Jehoiada the priest, who crowns Prince Jehoash in her stead (II Kgs. 11:4-16; II Chron. 23:13-15).⁶ Later, Jehoash has Jehoiada's righteous son, Zechariah, stoned to death (II Chron. 24:20-22) and is assassinated by rebels avenging that murder (II Kgs. 12:21-22; II Chron. 24:24-26). His son, King Amaziah executes the killers (II Kgs. 14:5-6; II Chron. 25:3); but he, too, is slain by other conspirators (II Kgs. 14:18-19; II Chron. 25:27). King Amon is later murdered by courtiers whom the people execute (II Kgs. 21:23-24; II Chron. 33:24-25). Finally, Gedaliah the governor is assassinated.

To sum up, five of twenty rulers of Judah (Ahaziah, Athaliah, Jehoash, Amaziah, and Amon), not counting Gedaliah, were assassinated: six in all out of 21 (29%). Seven Judean monarchs are documented murderers, at least five of them having disposed of political opponents. However bad this may sound, the situation in the Northern Kingdom of Israel was even worse.

ASSASSINATION IN ISRAEL

At the outbreak of Jeroboam's insurrection, the chief tax official is stoned to death and King Rehoboam barely escapes with his life (I Kgs. 12:18).⁷ King Nadab, son of Jeroboam, is assassinated by Baasha, who wipes out Jeroboam's entire family (I Kgs. 15:27-29). Baasha's son, King Elah, is murdered by Zimri, a high-ranking army officer who, facing defeat one week later, burns down the palace over himself (I Kgs. 16:9-18).⁸ King Ahab's Phoenician wife, Jezebel, has many of the Lord's prophets slaughtered (I Kgs. 18:13; 19:10, 14). Ahab's son, King Joram, along with Judah's King Ahaziah, Ahab's family and widow, Queen Jezebel, as well as the prophets of Baal, are all put to death by Jehu (II Kgs. 9-10).⁹ Later, King Zechariah is publicly assassinated by Shallum (II Kgs. 15:10), who is in turn killed by Menahem (II Kgs. 15:14); and Menahem's son, Pekahiah, is murdered by Pekah (II Kgs. 15:25), who is assassinated by Hoshea (II Kgs. 15:30), during whose reign the Ten Tribes are exiled.

Although it lasted for a much shorter time than the Kingdom of Judah, Israel offers more instances of regicide. Four of five consecutive monarchs are assassinated within a mere 15 years (II Kgs. 15:10-30) as the Kingdom of Israel heads for destruction. In short, no less than eight of 19 kings are

assassinated (42%): Nadab, Elah, Zimri, Joram, Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah, Pekah, each murdered by his successor; while 13 (fully 68%) either assassinate others, are themselves assassinated, or both.

ANALYSIS OF BIBLICAL ASSASSINATION

The number of biblically documented assassinations of the rulers of Israel and Judah totals 14 out of 39 (36%). During the 342-year span of the Kingdom of Judah (928-586 BCE),¹⁰ the six murders (including Gedaliah's) come to an average of one assassination every 57 years. During the 204 years of the Kingdom of Israel (928-724 BCE), the eight murders represent an average of one royal assassination every 26 years. Thus, persons living 50-60 years in either kingdom during their parallel existence would, on average, have experienced no less than three royal assassinations in their lifetime. Including the period of the united monarchy (Saul through Solomon, c. 1020-928 BCE) and the assassination of Ish-Bosheth leads to a total of 15 murdered monarchs out of 44 (34%).

A closer analysis of the time line of royal assassinations shows that their distribution is far from regular. In Judah, no monarch is assassinated from the beginning of Rehoboam's reign (928 BCE) until Ahaziah (842 BCE) – a span of 86 years. By contrast, the next 73 years see the murder of four rulers.¹¹ This is followed by a break of 129 years until Amon (640 BCE), and of another 65 years until the assassination of Gedaliah. A similarly irregular but this time bi-modal distribution emerges for Israel: three rulers are murdered near the birth of the kingdom within a span of 24 years, one more 40 years later followed by a respite of 94 years, and then four assassinations within 15 years.¹² A high degree of variability can thus be seen in the frequency of this occurrence, and a clear tendency for assassination to occur in spurts.

One explanation for this variability may be the social and political instability characterizing transitional periods before kingdoms are well-established and as they near demise, when internal stress and external threats destabilize traditional power structures. Another explanation is blood feud, with one assassination leading to another. In Judah, Athaliah, Jehoash, and Amon fell victim to this kind of vendetta; and in Israel, Zimri and Shallum were quickly disposed of after assassinating their king. Additionally, a modeling effect may have operated and, perhaps, social acceptance or

acquiescence in the phenomenon, since the breaking of a taboo increases the probability of recurrence.

The importance of taboo may help to explain the different rates of assassination between Judah and Israel. The stability of the Davidic line and an awareness among the people that its descendants were the rightful, divinely ordained heirs to the throne may have afforded some defense against potential conspiracies, leastways from outside the family (although this was a factor in the assassination of Gedaliah). It is worth noting that in other cultures, where the ruler was not only held to be divinely anointed but to actually *be* a god (e.g., in Egypt and Rome), this did not prevent assassins from committing “deicide.” It would seem that loyalty to the royal (Davidic) line and belief in divine involvement in national leadership may have been significantly stronger in Judah than in and outside Israel. The difference in this regard between Judah and Israel is particularly striking when viewed from the angle of succession: none of the killers of the six Judean leaders replaced their victims on the throne, whereas all the assassins of the kings of Israel did in fact rule in their place. In Judah, apparently, the people would not suffer an assassin to rule, and all the more so if the assassin had no claim to Davidic lineage.

The fact that in antiquity kings ruled until their death in a system of hereditary monarchy indicates that political assassination could be viewed as the only possible method of governmental change, implemented by the people or by political contenders according to the circumstances. While its legitimacy may be debated, the lack of an alternative may help to explain its frequent cross-cultural occurrence.

THE BIBLICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD POLITICAL ASSASSINATION

Most of the assassinations surveyed above are reported in the Bible without either positive or negative comment. The major exceptions are those which inflict the foretold punishment of the victims for their sins (or the sins of their house). Yet clear and multiple messages negating political assassination appear to be sent by King David in the Books of Samuel. These messages are present in a variety of situations.

We have David’s reaction to the Amalekite who claims to have killed Saul at Mount Gilboa and who may be embellishing the story for his own

supposed benefit. Even if the event he describes is true, it occurred in the heat of battle and at Saul's express request, so that Israel's king would not be captured alive by the Philistines, thus sparing him torture and humiliation. Nevertheless, David's reaction is swift and fatal. *'How did you dare,' David said to him, 'to lift your hand and kill the Lord's anointed? . . . Your blood be on your own head! Your own mouth testified against you when you said 'I put the Lord's anointed to death' (II Sam. 1:14-16).*

The message is clear, but apparently does not register with the men of Ish-Bosheth, son of King Saul. He is murdered while asleep by two of his officers, who bring his head to David, evidently expecting a reward. However, David condemns these *wicked men [who] killed a blameless man*. Their recompense is immediate execution, with the unusual distinction of having their mutilated bodies hung up for all to see (II Sam. 4:9-12). David thus repudiates their betrayal, negating political assassination. Between the death of Saul and the assassination of Ish-Bosheth, Joab avenges his brother's murder by killing Abner. Although this act may have been a political necessity, David's reaction falls in line with his other statements. He curses the perpetrators (II Sam. 3:29), calls them *treacherous men* (3:34), and concludes: *May the Lord requite the wicked for their wickedness!* (3:39).

In all the above David maintains a position consistent with two earlier, parallel narratives. Each time, Saul relentlessly pursues David, aiming to kill him, but God leaves Saul at the mercy of David. In the first episode, Saul unwarily enters the very cave where David and his men are hiding, and David lets him go unharmed (I Sam. 24:2-8). In the second, David takes Saul's water jar and the spear placed next to him as he sleeps, leaving him unscathed once again (I Sam. 26:7-9). David's words on both occasions deliver a clear message to anyone who cares what he and the Bible have to say on the topic. Despite the fact that Saul is bent on killing him and his men, despite the allowance for self-defense in Jewish tradition ("If someone comes to kill you, go and kill him first" – TB *Berakhot* 58a, *Sanhedrin* 72a), and despite exhortations to kill Saul, whom God has now delivered into his hands, David rebukes his men and will not countenance any attack on the king: *The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my lord – the Lord's anointed – that I should raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed.* (I Sam. 24:7). He says as much to Saul as well (24:11, 26:23) and

quotes an old proverb, '*Wicked deeds come from wicked men*,' declaring that '*My hand will never touch you!*' (24:14). David even goes so far as to reproach himself for cutting off the corner of Saul's cloak, with the sole purpose of demonstrating his innocence (24:6). His repeated allusions to wicked deeds and wicked men, echoed later after the assassinations of Abner and Ish-Bosheth, cannot be mere coincidence. The repetition and emphasis of these anti-assassination messages highlight the approach of the Tanakh.

One might suspect that the books or interpolations accentuating this message were written at a time when the ruler had a particular fear of assassination. The text could thus have been an attempt to draw up or buttress a kind of sacred life insurance policy, decreasing the potential risk. As shown above, there were certain periods when rulers of Israel and Judah had even more reason to fear for their lives than those in a leadership position normally faced. In Judah, the most dangerous time for a monarch was from 842 through 769 BCE, the period in which Ahaziah, Athaliah, Jehoash, and Amaziah were all assassinated. Alternatively, any interpolations attaching wickedness and capital culpability to assassination might have been useful in condemning the act and justifying the execution of assassins after the fact, an important deterrent in and of itself. One may accordingly surmise that a knowledge of the Book of Samuel (or oral traditions of its contents) did have the welcome effect of buttressing the status and security of the Davidic kings, thus helping to prevent royal assassinations (of which there was a relatively lower rate in Judah than in Israel) and avert succession to the throne by any "wicked" assassins.

CONCLUSION

Many Jews display surprising ignorance of their people's history. One recent survey in Israel found that college students often know very little about their historical and religious heritage.¹³ Another specifically indicates that most Israeli Jews are oblivious of political assassination in Jewish history.¹⁴ When Israeli college students were asked how many political assassinations are recorded in the Bible, their most common response was that such things never or hardly ever happened. Just over one assassination was the average estimate, despite the numerous occurrences listed above. This may relate to conscious and unconscious psychological mechanisms at

the level of the individual and/or the collective, in educational and religious systems, which have fostered avoidance of the facts. The Fast of Gedaliah, though instituted as the final element of a series mourning the destruction of both the Temple and Jewish independence in the Land of Israel, can be utilized by educators to shed important light on the tragic national consequences of assassination.

Throughout the ages, political assassination appears to have been an inherent feature of human society. It stands to reason, therefore, that recognizing the universal propensity to murder one's leaders would be the first step in studying and better understanding this phenomenon. If, in the past, justification could be found for the assassination of hereditary, autocratic monarchs, democratically chosen leadership today obviates any resort to or justification of such antiquated and brutal methods of governmental change.¹⁵

NOTES

1. F. Sanello, *To Kill a King: A History of Royal Murders and Assassinations from Ancient Egypt to the Present* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011).
2. There are numerous definitions of political assassination. J. F. Kirkham, S. G. Levy & W. J. Crotty, eds., *Assassination and Political Violence* (New York: Praeger, 1970), distinguish political assassination from ordinary homicide by focusing on its elite target and political motivation, and from the legal execution of political elites by due process. See N. Ben-Yehuda, "One More Political Murder by Jews," in Y. Peri, ed., *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) pp. 63-95.
3. The case of Phinehas and Zimri is debatable and, in any case, involved at most a tribal leader.
4. This is the first example of many in which a leader's family is wiped out by his successor. Abimelech is particularly heinous for betraying his own father in a fratricidal frenzy. His victims are clearly of the elite: the people offered kingship to Gideon (Judg. 8:22-23), and his son by a concubine is named (or takes the name) Abimelech, meaning "my father is King" (Judg. 8:30-31), thus making himself and his brothers veritable princes. On the elite status of Israelite judges' sons, see also 10:3-4.
5. David is by then a popular, elite political and military figure, having defeated Goliath and betrothed the king's daughter (I Sam. 17:48-18:17, 30). The case of Absalom is debatable, since it occurred in the context of rebellion and warfare, and is not here counted among the assassinations.
6. This is deemed assassination here, since there is no description of any trial by due process.
7. Jeroboam had previously fled to Egypt to escape from King Solomon (I Kgs. 12:2).
8. Since Zimri had assumed the throne, his forced suicide is taken here to be a royal assassination.

9. Note that Jehu is not a usurper but the chosen instrument of God's retribution against the House of Ahab. See II Kings 9:7, 25f, 36-7; 10:10, 16. See H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) pp. 249-50.

10. All dates from *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) 8:766ff.

11. After Ahaziah in 842 BCE, we have Queen Athaliah in 836, Jehoash in 798, and Amaziah in 769 BCE. During this period in Judah, the average was one royal assassination every 18 years.

12. The first cluster includes Nadab, second king of Israel, slain in 906 BCE; Elah, the fourth king, and Zimri, the fifth, killed in 882 BCE – during which period one king was assassinated every eight years. Forty years later, the victim was Joram. The four of five consecutive kings slain are Zechariah and Shallum in 748 BCE, followed by Pekahiah in 735 and Pekah in 733 BCE.

13. N. Davidovitch, "Israeli Students and Israeli Culture and Tradition?," *Moresheet Israel: Journal of Judaism and Zionism* 1 (November 2004) pp. 100-134. Immigrant students knew less than Israelis, and the more recent they were in Israel, the less they knew. Thus, one may assume that the average Jewish college student living outside Israel will know even less. In this survey, only 3 of the 45 questions tested knowledge of the Bible.

14. A. Birnbaum, "Israelis' Attitudes toward the Disengagement Plan, Perceived Risk, and Knowledge of Biblical Events," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 101 (August 2005) p. 42.

15. My thanks to Rabbi Prof. Ervin Birnbaum for scholarly discussion and significant assistance, and to Hadassah Birnbaum MSW, and Rabbi Prof. Shlomo Sharan for their helpful comments.



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