

THE ASSASSINATION OF KING AMON OF JUDAH

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The mysterious assassination of Amon, King of Judah in 640 BCE has intrigued scholars for many years. The most popular theories are that courtiers assassinated the king for religious/cultic, geo-political or intra-dynastic reasons.¹ I will suggest that the absence of any such explanation in the Biblical texts reflects what happened: the courtiers assassinated the king for reasons involving their own positions or power.

THE TEXTS OF II KINGS 21 AND II CHRONICLES 33

Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem; his mother's name was Meshullameth daughter of Haruz of Jotbah. He did what was displeasing to the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done. He walked in all the ways of his father, worshiping the fetishes which his father had worshiped and bowing down to them. He forsook the LORD, the God of his fathers, and did not follow the way of the LORD. Amon's courtiers conspired against him; and they killed the king in his palace. But the people of the land put to death all who had conspired against King Amon, and the people of the land made his son Josiah king in his stead. The other events of Amon's reign [and] his actions are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Judah. (II Kgs. 21:19-25)

Amon was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. He did what was displeasing to the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done. Amon sacrificed to all the idols that his father Manasseh had made and worshiped them. He did not humble himself before the LORD, as his father Manasseh had humbled himself; instead, Amon incurred much guilt. His courtiers conspired against him and killed him in his palace. But the people of the land struck down all who had conspired against King Amon, and the people of the land made his son Josiah king in his stead. (II Chr. 33:21-25).

The only real difference between the two texts is that the latter text reviews what II Chronicles 33 says about Manasseh's repentance. Now Amon looks

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even worse for committing idolatry and not just because his father did; he commits these sins in his own right. Since we see that the Chronicler is not simply duplicating what he reads in II Kings, it is instructive that his version of this assassination remains the same; there simply is nothing to be added or changed. What we have in the II Kings text is all there is to say.

This is very different from what we see in comparing the texts about other assassinations in the Books of Kings and Chronicles. A quick example is if we compare II Kings 14:19 and II Chronicles 25:27 about the assassination of King Amaziah of Judah:

A conspiracy was formed against him in Jerusalem and he fled to Lachish; but they sent men after him to Lachish, and they killed him there. (II Kgs. 14:19)

From the time that Amaziah turned from following the LORD, a conspiracy was formed against him in Jerusalem, and he fled to Lachish, but they sent men after him to Lachish, and they put him to death there. (II Chr. 25:27)

The second text connects Amaziah's religious position with the conspiracy.

A more striking example is the differences between the two books about the assassination of Joash in II Kings 12 and II Chronicles 24:

His courtiers formed a conspiracy against Joash and assassinated him at Beth-Millo that leads down to Silla. The courtiers who assassinated him were Jozacar son of Shimeath and Jehozabad son of Shomer. He died and was buried with his fathers in the City of David; and his son Amaziah succeeded him as king. (II Kgs. 12:21-22)

...his courtiers plotted against him because of the murder of the sons of Jehoiada the priest, and they killed him in bed. He died and was buried in the City of David; he was not buried in the tombs of the kings. These are the men who conspired against him: Zabad son of Shimeath the Ammonitess, and Jehozabad son of Shimrith the Moabitess. (II Chr. 24:25-26)

In the second text, the motivation for the assassination of Joash is the story told earlier in II Chronicles 24:17-24 about the murder of Jehoiada's son Zechariah, who, enveloped by the spirit of God, denounced the king's idolatry. Zechariah's dying prayer for God's justice is now answered. This is completely different from the first text, which has nothing about Zechariah. This contrast is a subject for inquiry in itself as it raises interesting questions about the selections from sources and emphases of these writers/editors.

For our purpose here, it is important to see that there are no such differences between the two accounts of the assassination of Amon.

I will review the theories that have been proposed that would explain the assassination of Amon in other ways.

WAS AMON ASSASSINATED FOR A GEO-POLITICAL REASON?

Malamat initiated modern discussion about the motivations of the assassins by claiming that an anti-Assyrian party of nobles assassinated Amon and that the people of the land then killed them out of fear of the Assyrians.² Malamat suggests that like his father Manasseh who was a loyal vassal of Assyria (see ANET 291, 290b, 294), Amon did not want to join in a revolt by other small kingdoms against Ashurbanipal in 640-39 advocated by the courtiers. The courtiers may have judged that it was the right time to revolt because Assyria was in decline. Earlier, in 656, Egypt had expelled the Assyrians from Egypt. It may have been that Assyrian weakness had prompted Manasseh to fortify Jerusalem and other citadels in Judah (II Chronicles 33:14-16). Then, after putting down revolts in Babylonia (652-648) and Elam (642-629), the Assyrians may have seemed unable to respond to a widespread rebellion with any strength.³ Then, according to this reconstruction, when Ashurbanipal came to Syria and captured Akko (ANET 300b) in a show of power, the Judean people feared the Assyrians and killed the courtiers, placing the loyal Amon's son Josiah on the throne.⁴

Malamat later modified his theory to say that with Egyptian instigation, a pro-Egyptian Judean faction assassinated Amon.⁵ In this view, there were pro-Egyptian and pro-Assyrian factions in the court. Since II Kings 21:20-22; II Chronicles 33:22-23 show that Amon perpetuated the foreign cult connected with Assyria, it was possible that pro-Egyptians who killed him.

As Cogan and Tadmor demonstrate, however, the main problem with this theory is that the punitive action against Akko was very specific to that city and more importantly cannot be dated later than 644/43.⁶ In the years 643-639, the Assyrians were occupied in the northern parts of the empire. The timing of an anti-Assyrian assassination in 640, after the Assyrians had demonstrated their control of the region, would not be in consonance with international events. Any fears of Assyrian reprisal on the part of the people of the land would be minimal.

One must respect this attempt to see the assassination in the geo-political context, especially considering the rise and fall of the Judean kings who follow Amon, all of whom were caught, as Malamat says elsewhere, in the international “maelstrom.”⁷ There is no evidence, however, to substantiate this theory.

WAS THE ASSASSINATION OF AMON RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED?

A very different theory is that the rebellion involved courtiers supportive of the pro-monotheistic priests who had been relegated to the side during the years of Manasseh and Amon, who assassinated Amon in order to reform the cult.⁸

There are several questions, however, that should be asked of this theory:

1. Why now, after all the years of Manasseh’s rule and the first two of Amon’s reign, would the courtiers have been so concerned with the cult and the priesthood?
2. The courtiers are killed and replaced by a boy who will become a hero of the priesthood and the cult. If the courtiers wanted a cultic reform, why did they not put Josiah on the throne themselves?
3. Nielsen places the pro-monotheistic priesthood against a populace that is not concerned with the cult but is concerned with the perpetuity of the Davidic dynasty. If so, again, why would the pro-monotheistic courtiers not prop up the boy Josiah themselves and retain their power?
4. If the assassination of Amon were motivated by the religious zeal of conspirators who wanted to reform the cult from the pagan practices of Manasseh, why would the populace rise in anger? The populace seemed to be quite in line when Josiah went on to make such reforms.
5. If we think about it the other way and say that Amon wanted to make cultic reforms and the conspirators tried to stop him from doing so, we are rejecting the text that says that Amon carried on the pagan practices of his father.⁹ It would then not make sense that the people of the land killed them for making these reforms only to support Josiah’s reforms.¹⁰
6. It does not seem like the cult was the issue at all. If there were a strong desire for cultic reform, why did it take Josiah eighteen years to make reforms, only to do so when Hilkiah the priest finds the “Book of the Law” (II Kings 22:3-20).¹¹ II Chronicles is so embarrassed about this delay that it

moves the purification of the cult up to Josiah's twelfth year (II Chronicles 34:14).¹² If any of these actions involved cultic reform, why were there so many years before the reforms were initiated, and why do the reforms promulgated by the Book of the Law seem to come as such a surprise?

I would conclude, therefore, that the assassins of King Amon were not motivated for religious reasons.

FRATERNAL RIVALRY: WAS THIS AN INTRA-DAVIDIDE STRUGGLE?

If Amon was twenty-two when he became king, and Manasseh died at the age of sixty-seven,¹³ Amon was born relatively late in his father's life (forty-five). This seems unusual. Heirs were paramount and life for a king was uncertain. It does feel like there must have been older children born in the decades before this.¹⁴ Cogan and Tadmor raise the possibility that older brothers who had been overlooked may have opposed Amon.¹⁴

If there were rivalry between brothers, however, and Amon supplanted older brothers, one would think it would be mentioned, as we see in the explanations of irregular succession in many other cases: Solomon (II Samuel 9-20 and I Kings 1-2), Abijam (II Chronicles 11:21-22), Ahaziah (21:17, 22:1), Azariah (II Kings 14:21, II Chronicles 26:1, Jehoahaz (II Kings 23:30, II Chronicles 36:1), and Zedekiah (II Kings 24:17, II Chronicles 36:10). Even in the case of Jehoram, who though the first-born son of Jehoshaphat had to contend with his brothers, the rivalry is clear.¹⁵ An intra-family succession struggle is a very different story than a coup by courtiers.

ASSASSINATION AND INSTABILITY

We can broaden the discussion to see the assassination of Amon in its historical context. Assassination was a well-known phenomenon in Judah during the period between the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (ca. 928-586).¹⁶ A third of the rulers of Israel and Judah, 13 out of 39, were assassinated. During the 204 years of the Kingdom of Israel (928-724), there were eight assassinations: Nadab (906), Elah (882), Zimri (also 882), Joram (842), Zechariah (748), Shallum (also 748), Pekahiah (735) and Pekah (733). Five of out of the twenty monarchs of Judah, Ahaziah (842) Athaliah (836), (Jehoash) 798, Amaziah (769) and Amon were assassinated.¹⁷

While there were no regicides in the 86 years from the beginning of the Kingdom of Judah under Rehoboam (928) until Ahaziah (842), there were four in the next 73 years. This is followed by a break of 129 years until Amon (640). Birnbaum concludes:

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.

Here is Japhet:

The causes of these conspiracies are probably to be sought in the kings' internal and international policies, the details of which are no longer available. It is nevertheless no coincidence that the unrest and general lack of stability which characterize the days of Jehoram – Ahaziah – Athaliah continue during the reigns of the succeeding kings, Joash and Amaziah.¹⁸

And yet grouping these assassinations may not be as appropriate as studying them individually. To the contrary, Amon followed his father Manasseh's long reign of forty-five years. There was no instability before Amon's assassination and there was no instability after it. Oded states: "Amon's assassination was not followed by the establishment of a new dynasty in Judah. This phenomenon of stability within a dynastic succession was typical of Judah in contrast to Israel, where assassinations on several occasions led to the overthrow of dynasties."¹⁹ The assassination of Amon was not the result of instability but the cause of some very temporary instability, which may be exactly why the assassins were killed by the people of the land for whom stability was synonymous with the succession of Davidides to the throne.

COURTIERS

If we reject the theories of modern historians, we can get back to what happened according to the biblical texts, the assassination of Amon by his courtiers.

While kings in theory had unlimited power, they needed courtiers to administer the kingdom. Giving power to these administrators was necessary but

risky. Courtiers often primarily were concerned about themselves; their loyalties might be as much to their own self-interests as to a particular king or kingdom. Support for a king might easily evaporate, bringing the king down in the process.

Duindam's general statement holds true in Judean history:

It appears to be a universal principle that handing out favours is temporarily effective as an instrument of power, but eventually burdens the dispenser with newly-established interest groups. . . . Favourites could turn into rebels with remarkable speed . . . Power delegated, titles and privileges granted, places sold or given away would initially create a group loyal to the king, who usually, however, eventually turned into quick-tempered defenders of their own privilege.²⁰

Amon (b. 663 BCE), son of Manasseh (who ruled 698-642), became king at the age of twenty-two in 640. I speculate that, given the timing of the assassination, a year or so after Amon's ascension, the courtiers who had long had power under his father Manasseh found themselves shunted to the side by Amon's own favorites, and took matters into their own hands.

Since Alt, scholars have distinguished between the "charismatic" nature of Israelian kingship and the "dynastic" nature of the Judean throne.²¹ But each Israelian dynasty hoped to become perpetual, and while we assume the inevitability of Davidic heirs, given events in Judah and Israel, courtiers may have been of a different mindset and may have nurtured their own ambitions to the kingship of Judah.

The *am ha'aretz*, the "people of the land," whether they were the nobility or simply the populace, may have been outraged at this gratuitous assassination and killed the conspirators, placing Amon's young son Josiah on the throne and perpetuating the Davidic dynasty. Scholars who see the *am ha'aretz* as supporters of the Davidic throne may be correct, but this may also point to the fact that there were those who harbored other feelings about the dynasty.

The text does not say that the assassination was religiously motivated, though this would be a perfect thing for the Deuteronomic historian to talk about, an uprising against an idolatrous king. The text also does not say that the assassination was a political one against a king who was a subservient vassal to Assyria, though this also would have met the approval of the histo-

rian, who would have seen it as a blow for Judean independence and perhaps again, religious separatism from paganism.

It is appropriate for scholars to fill in lacunae; historians look for motivations and cause and effect. Legitimate and well-grounded speculation, however, no matter how well regarded the historians may be, is not evidence. The Biblical text tells you what it wants to tell you: The king's courtiers killed Amon in an internal court intrigue. For all the elegant and sophisticated scholarly theories, we must always focus on the biblical text itself.

NOTES

1. Y. Levin, *The Chronicles of the Kings of Judah: 2 Chronicles 10-36* (London: T&T Clark, 2017); W. Johnstone, *1 & 2 Chronicles* (JSOTSup. Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 253-54.
2. A. Malamat, "The Historical Background of the Assassination of Amon King of Judah," *IEJ* 3 (1953), 26-29; Malamat, "The Last Wars of the Kingdom of Judah," *JNES* 9 (1950), 218 (218-227).
3. M. A. Sweeney, *1 and 2 Kings* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 433.
4. Malamat, "The Historical Background of the Assassination of Amon," 26-29.
5. Malamat, "Josiah's Bid for Armageddon: The Background of the Judean-Egyptian Encounter in 609 B.C.," in the *Gaster Festschrift*, *JANES* 5 (1973), 271.
6. M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, "Gyges and Ashurbanipal. A Study in Literary Transmission," *Or* 46 (1977), 81-85; M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars, 1974), 70-71.
7. A. Malamat, "The Twilight of Judah in the Egyptian-Babylonian Maelstrom," *VT Sup.* 28 (1975), 123-45.
8. E. Nielsen, "Political Conditions and Cultural Development in Israel and Judah During the Reign of Manasseh," *Proceedings of Fourth WCJS, Papers* (Jerusalem, 1967) 1/103-6; repr. E. Nielsen, *Law, History and Tradition: Selected Essays by Eduard Nielson* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1983), 132-35.
9. E. Sellin, *Geschichte des israelitisch-jüdischen Volkes I* (Leipzig: 1924, 1935), 282; R. Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel II* (Stuttgart: 1925) 401.
10. Johnstone sees the reform movement that is squashed by the people as eventually finding a new life with Josiah, which would explain why it took ten years to start the reforms again (W. Johnstone, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, 2:231).
11. II Kings 22:1-23:14 says that the reforms begin when Josiah is eighteen; II Chronicles 34:3 has him start at the beginning of his reign and developing them through his twelfth year to his eighteenth, perhaps to say he had begun the reforms before they "found" the scroll; this avoids the problem of why he waited ten years before doing the reforms (A. F. Rainey, "The Chronicler and his Sources-Historical and Geographical," 67-69 in the *Chronicler as Historian* ed. by M. P. Graham, K. G. Hoglund and S. L. McKenzie (JSOT Sup. 238; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Japhet, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 1017-20.
12. Manasseh became king at 12 and ruled for 55 years; II Kings 21:1; 19; II Chronicles 33:1, 21.

13. Perhaps there were older brothers whom Manasseh had killed. It may be far-fetched, but one wonders if he had a firstborn son whom he sacrificed. Others could have died from natural causes.

14. M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988), 276.

15. I. Tomoo, *History and Historical Writing in Ancient Israel: Studies in Biblical Historiography* (*Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East*) (London: Brill, 1999), 83.

16. A. Birnbaum, "Political Assassination in Biblical Israel," *JBQ* 43 (2015), 194.

17. At least four Judean monarchs destroyed political rivals (Jehoram, Athaliah, Jehoash, Amaziah). Jehoram murders his brothers and some officers (II Chronicles 21:4). Ahaziah and his relatives are slain by Jehu while visiting Jezreel in Israel (II Kings 9:27; II Chronicles 22:9). Ahaziah's mother, Athaliah, then becomes queen and murders possible heirs to the kingship (II Kings 11:1; II Chronicles 22:10); she is killed by a rebellion led by the priest Jehoiada who crowns Jehoash in her stead (II Kings 11:4-16; II Chronicles 23:13-15). As we saw above, Jehoash has Jehoiada's son, Zechariah, executed (II Chronicles 24:20-22) and is assassinated himself (II Kings 12:21-22; II Chronicles 24:24-26). His son, Amaziah executes the killers (II Kings 14:5-6; II Chronicles 25:3); but is assassinated (II Kings 14:18-19; II Chronicles 25:27).

18. S. Japhet, *I and II Chronicles*, (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 853.

19. B. Oded in J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 456.

20. J. Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern European Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), 50–51.

21. A. Alt, "The Monarchy in Israel and Judah," 239-260 in A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson (JSOT; Sheffield; Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).



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