

Athaliah on the Throne (2 Kgs 11 = 4 Reg 11)

Considerations on the Source-Problems
in Early Latin History of Interpretation

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ABSTRACT • The interest of this paper lies on the reciprocal role of the Vulgate, the history of interpretation and the influence they have on each other. The narrative of 2 Kgs 11 experiences little reception in the first millennium, which is why the Vulgate becomes extraordinarily important as a complete and interpretative translation. At the same time, this small study explores the question, as to what extent the history of interpretation can help to situate the Vulgate in textual and interpretive traditions (*ante* and *post*).

KEYWORDS • 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Athaliah, Jehoiada, history of exegesis, Jerome, *Vetus Latina*, Theodoret of Cyrus, Flavius Josephus

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • Das Interesse dieses Beitrags liegt in der wechselseitigen Rolle von Vulgata und Auslegungsgeschichte füreinander. Die Erzählung aus 2 Kön 11 erfährt relativ wenig Rezeption im ersten Jahrtausend, weshalb die Vulgata als vollständige und interpretierende Übersetzung außergewöhnlich wichtig wird. Zugleich legt diese kleine Studie Spuren zur Frage, inwieweit die Auslegungsgeschichte helfen kann, die Vulgata in Text- und Auslegungstraditionen (*ante* und *post*) zu verorten.

SCHLAGWORTE • 2 Kön; 2 Chr; Atalja; Jojada; Auslegungsgeschichte; Hieronymus; *Vetus Latina*; Theodoret von Kyrus; Josephus Flavius

Introduction

The self-crowned queen Athaliah and the Jerusalem priest Jehoiada quarrel about the Davidic Throne in Jerusalem. This text is not very prominent in the history of reception until the historical exegesis got interested in the relationship between the Israelite and the Judean Court.

The aim of this paper is to examine a small commented text of the Bible and compare it to the Vulgate version. The focus lies on Latin Church Fathers, yet also annotations on some Greek and Syrian Fathers are included in order to identify dis-/continuities in interpretation and translation. This is to test how fundamental Jerome and his full text are to the history of interpretation of 1-4 Reg.

1. Occurrences of the Athaliah Narration in the Hebrew Bible

We encounter the Athaliah narrative in both 2 Kgs 11 and 2 Chr 22:12–23:21, both versions being largely identical. In addition, we learn from 2 Kgs 8:26 that Athaliah is a daughter of Omri, thus a (half) sister of King Ahab and the sister-in-law of Jezebel. Hence, the two women from the court of the northern kingdom, who are known by name and evaluated negatively, have a direct textual and kinship relationship to each other. Their counterpart is the queen mother Bathsheba, whose start is connotated negatively, but then stands out positively as the wife and above all as mother of a king (2 Sam 11, 1 Kgs 1). While Bathsheba allies with Nathan, the prophet of YHWH, Jezebel, as a Baal-worshipper, is in permanent conflict with Elijah.

Athaliah, the third in the alliance, resides in the Southern Kingdom, yet after the death of her son, she tries to ascend the throne illegitimately by trying to eliminate all other potential heirs to the throne. She does not succeed because she does not have the support of YHWH and his man of God, in this case the priest Jehoiada. Athaliah does not change the existing cult policy and apparently also stays away from the Jerusalem temple, where Joash hides. Whether cultic reasons can be associated with this remains unclear in 2 Kgs 11. In 2 Chr 24:7, however, Joash has to restore the cult, this suggests a cult violation by Athaliah. While the crown prince Joash of Judah is more or less a puppet, Athaliah and the priest Jehoiada are involved in a cold power struggle over the southern kingdom. The background may reside in the Northern Kingdom being severely weakened by the deaths of Ahab and Jezebel and will soon fall. The last Omride Athaliah thus no longer obtains any political power behind her and also no son, who could preserve her status; she is powerless unless she takes action.

Jehoiada as a priest is an unusual figure as he appears as a positive advisor to Joash, a quality usually reserved for the prophets of YHWH in the royal court. Jehoiada is a harbinger of a new priesthood that will culminate in the cultic reform of Josiah. His power is obviously not dependent on the court but to the continuity of the Davidic throne, as is the power of the other factions who are immediately on hand at the crucial moment.

Athaliah meets a violent death, Jehoiada fades in history – we only learn that he will not always be an advisor, especially after he has provided the king with two wives (2 Kgs 12:3 // 2 Chr 24:2f.). Lastly, he appears in 2 Kgs in the context of a corruption scandal at the temple (2 Kgs 12:8-10 // 2 Chr 24:6:14), while Chronicles predicts an old age and the establishment of a priestly dynasty (2 Chr 24:15.20-25). According to 2 Chr 24, the suggestion that Jehoiada might have lost the confidence of King Joash due to corruption is interchanged with a cult apostasy of the king after

the death of the priest, culminating in the murder of Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada – thus ending the priestly dynasty which had just been established with positive connotations.

While Jehoiada and Joash are ambivalent men who have to oscillate between cult and politics in Kings and Chronicles, the woman Athaliah is associated negatively. Her situation as a woman at court was the most endangered, yet nowhere a report of cult apostasy on her part can be found. What is interesting, however, is how [Jews and] Christians interpret this story in late Antiquity.

2. The Reception of 4 Reg 11 by Jerome

Jerome translates the present text very uniformly and in close proximity to Chronicles.¹ In the LXX, 1-4 Kingdoms belongs to the late translations, as Chronicles was already available and its temple theology was probably closer to the interests of the diaspora community.² However, a very similar system can be observed there, as far as additions and deviations are concerned. This, we may interpret as a first indication of Jerome using the Greek text as a “Vorlage”

If we look at the individual deviations from the MT in 2 Kgs 11 (4 Reg 11) that are evident in the Vulgate; various techniques and conspicuous features become apparent in the translation:

In v.1 Athaliah is called “mater vero Ahaziae” – the “verum” is a common translation for *waw copulativum*. It does not change the meaning and also occurs many times in the Vulgate. A change in sense is the deployment of the militia in v.11, which in the Hebrew translation is from “north to south” and in the Latin from “the right to the left” (*dextra... ad sinistra*), the same applies to the LXX. There is a slight change of meaning, which may relate to the use of language or also to the lack of local knowledge, since the readers outside Jerusalem or after 70 CE no longer knew where and how the temple was aligned.

A second technique is evident in v.3, where consistently concordant Heb. or gr. “βασιλεύουσα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς” is translated as “regnavit super terram”. What is meant here is a rule over the kingdom, yet in my opinion, the Latin and Greek terms have a more universal meaning, as less ambiguously vocabulary could have been chosen instead. In Hebrew, יהודה or עם (“people”) would still have been possible, but here the limited nature of their rule is clear; the explicitly feminine verb of the Hebrew translation cannot be depicted grammatically in Latin.

Jerome is less concordant in his treatment of the designation of the Jerusalem Temple as the “house of God”. While the Hebrew consistently says “בית יהוה” (instead of e.g. היכל), the Vulgate alternates between “templum Domini” and “domus Domini” in v.4 and v.15 even when it occurs repeatedly. In the LXX, the οἶκος κυρίου occurs only once in v.4; the oath is taken “before God”

1 Significant deviations are that the name Athalia becomes Otholia (22:10), the people as a whole are not totus but universum (23:16) and not every variant from 2 Kgs 11 is present here, i.e. the translation is sometimes more precise in 2 Chr.

2 Vgl. Collinet, Benedikt J.: Die letzten Könige von Juda. Eine narratologische und intertextuelle Lektüre von 2 Kön 23,30–25,30 (BBB 188), Göttingen 2019, 47-49, bes. die Literaturverweise in FN 197-207.

and not in the house of God, so the doubling is eliminated. In v.15 the same term follows, so it is concordant. Whether Jerome has rhetorically introduced a variance here, similar to the elimination in the LXX, or whether it has a different textual source, must remain unclear.

Jerome also deviates from the original text in v.13. While Athaliah joins the people because she has disturbed their noise (2x **דע** resp. **λαός**), Jerome uses *populus* only once and the other time he uses *ad turba*, an onomatopoeic form of tumult. Again, it cannot be said with certainty whether this is due to a model or due to a rhetorical trick.

In v.18 Jerome eliminates a third doubling by omitting the name Jehoiada and speaking solely of the "sacerdos". This leads to the fact that syntactically the Ba'al priest Mattan, who the people just had killed before, is the nearer option – only the semantic context suggests the grammatically improbable "Ioiada".

A final example points to a lack of terminology in Jerome. The coined term of **עַמ־הָאָרֶץ** is translated by him once with "populus terrae" and another time with "civitas", in the LXX it says "ὁ λαὸς τῆς γῆς". Here, the variance changes the meaning, since in one case it refers to the world population or the rural population and in the second case to the bourgeoisie or the urban population. In this way, Jerome suggests two groups to the readers of the Vulgate, where in the MT there is only one.

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Jerome also refers to Athaliah and Jehoiada again in his Jeremiah commentary, the few references being found mainly in In Jer. Proph. VI, lib. IV and lib. V. Only the references to 2 Kings 11:14, 18 // 2 Chr 23:17, 21 are interesting here, since these passages explain who the priest Jehoiada is, yet ignore Athaliah and the conflict in the background, as they play no role in Jeremiah.³ Another examples is the Book of Hebrew names, where Jerome translates Athaliah with "I am sorry for your sin" and Ioiada with "I know my Lord".⁴

Let us summarise: Jerome bases his translation of 2 Kgs either on an unknown source or on a comparison of Greek and Hebrew versions. In doing so, a certain independence can be established, as three indications of rhetorical smoothing of the text are evident. The few changes in the meaning of the text do not seem intentional, and Jerome does not comment on the text outside of the Vulgate either, nor does he refer to it. This indicates that the text was of secondary importance to him.

3 Vgl. Hieronymus, In Jer. proph. VI, lib. V, 68, 6-7 [= CCSL 74, p.287–288].

4 Hieronymus, Lib. Interp. nom. Hebr., "Ath-"; "Io-".

3. The history of Interpretation by other Church Fathers

What is the situation regarding the other Church Fathers? The Athaliah pericope is referenced very little compared to other biblical texts; within the commentaries on Kings and Chronicles, it lies in the average of the lesser-known texts.⁵ The most referenced passage, with 18 references, is 2 Kgs 8:26, i.e. the relationship of Athaliah to King Ahab; all these references are found in the Greek Fathers.

As with Jerome, it is hardly possible to distinguish between references to 2 Kgs 11 and 2 Chr 22f. They must be treated together. Only the three “usual suspects” namely Josephus Flavius in the *Antiquitates*⁶, Eusebius in his *Chronicon*⁷ and Theodoret in his *Quaestiones in Paraleipomena*⁸, refer consistently to history. In addition, the fragments of Procopius of Gaza suggest a longer commentary.⁹

In addition to these traces, which are mainly to be attributed to the Antiochene School, there is also a reference in Clement of Alexandria, who renders 2 Kgs 11:1-3 in a similar way to Eusebius – possibly influencing him.¹⁰ Neither Philo nor Origen comment on the Athaliah pericope – indicating a breakdown in the dominant allegorical tradition.

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In the Latin tradition, Jerome is the main witness. Besides him, there are only two notable references to the text. Ambrosiaster’s asks in q.46 of his commentary about the relationship of priests and prophets in relation to Samuel, since Eli raised the latter as a prophet. As a reference, he relates to Jehoiada, whom he calls “sacerdos magnus”, thus emphasising him over the biblical designation. This is further enhanced by the reference to the failure of the wife (uxor), a clear allusion to Athaliah.¹¹

The second evidence is found in Cyprian’s work on the Passover festivals in Israel. Within a list of all the reigns and the associated passover dates, eight feast days are given for Athaliah,

5 Well-known texts deal with David and Solomon, with the temple and the Exile or with the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

6 Josephus Flavius, *Ant. Jud.* X.

7 Eusebius, *Chron.* to 2 Kgs 11:1-3.

8 Theodoret, *Quaest. in Par.* [=PG 80, 819–858, 841 refers to 2 Chr 24:7]; Theodoret, *Quaest in Oct. IV*, 35-39.45 refer to 2 Kgs 11:1-8.11-12.14-15.17.

9 Procopius, *Comm. in Oct.* [fragm. 165; 192] refers to 2 Kgs 11:1-4.6.8.11-12.14-15.17. The clear proximity to the verses that are also in Theodoret’s work, leads us to assume a reference in terms of content. However, there is mainly a renarration.

10 Clemens of Alex., *Strom.* I, 116, 1.

11 Ambrosiaster/Ps-Augustinus, *Quaest. in VT et NT*, q.46, 12 [= CSEL 50, p.90].

following 2 Kgs 11:4 // 2 Chr 23:1.¹² By this counting, Cyprian indirectly legitimises Athaliah's reign, because he does not simply assign her chronology to the heir to the throne, Joash.

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The "Ancient Christian Commentary" refers to two texts of Syrian provenance alone in interpreting this passage.¹³ Isho'dad of Merv declares Athaliah to be a diabolical temptress from whom humanity could only be redeemed after seven years. For him, she is a demoness, who eats royal children, which Isho'dad correlates to human beings in that they are children of Adam and rulers by creation.¹⁴

The second comment comes from Ephraim, who sees her death as necessary for the cultic purification of the people, who had become heretical through the dynasty of the Omrides. For Ephraim, death outside the sanctuary is the restoration of the ideal cult kingship under David.¹⁵

The tour de force through the few references to the pericope is relatively one-sided. Most of the Church Fathers do not report on this passage at all or merely in a historicising way. The failure of allegorical interpretation, which only appears in the late Syrian Fathers, is also striking. The interpretation of Athaliah is predominantly negative, while Jehoiada is viewed positively. Overall, however, the sources are too weak as to state anything more precise and the line of interpretation simply corresponds to the biblical narrative.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning, we asked as to what extent Jerome and his Vulgate can provide insight into the history of interpretation of the Books of Kings. On a formal level, the Vulgate is the only complete tradition of this text. On the one hand, its translations point to a continuity of the Greek tradition of placing Kings in a certain dependence on the more recent book of Chronicles. On the other hand, Jerome's quite independent profile is present even within this little-known pericope.

On the part of the history of interpretation, it is noticeable that Jerome does not have recourse to Philo and Origen and is very sparing with his references and interpretive interventions in the text. It almost seems as if he has translated it solely for the sake of completeness and polished it a little rhetorically.

¹² Cyprian, *de pascha computus*, 11 [=CSEL 3, p.258].

¹³ Conti, Marco, *1-2Kings et al.* (ACC V), 192f.

¹⁴ Isho'dad of Merv, *Book of Sessions* [= CSCO 229, 139–140].

¹⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *2 Kgs* [= ESOO 1, 545].

The comparison to the other Fathers makes it evident that the pericope was of more interest to the eastern or easternmost Church Fathers, which might be the result of external political pressure or historical interest. However, there is still little interest in this text.

Concluding with a prospect to the present, we can see a double continuity as well as a divergence. Even today, 2 Kgs 11 is one of the lesser-noticed exegetical texts, even within the group 1 Sam to 2 Kgs and Chronicles. Even the bulk of contemporary commentaries are primarily concerned with historical-critical interests of interpretation rather than with the story itself or its intention. The only new features are the occasional feminist or gender-sensitive commentaries on this passage.¹⁶ This small study shows how much potential lies dormant even in a marginal text of the Bible and how much is still left to be singled out of Scripture and its reception history even today – be it in the commentaries of the Hebrew texts, the Septuagint version or the Vulgate.

¹⁶ See e.g. Pyschny, Katharina: Eine große Geschichte. Die Erzählungen über die Könige Israels und Judas, in: WUB 96,2 (2020) 10-17, bes. 15f.; Müllner, Ilse: Isebel, Atalja, die Macht und das Böse, in: Böse Frauen (FrauenBibelArbeit 15), Stuttgart 2005, 29-40.