

2 Kings 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Kings chapter 10. Now Ahab had seventy sons in Samaria, so Jehu wrote letters and sent them to Samaria to the rulers of the city, to the elders, and to the guardians of the sons of Ahab, saying, Now then, as soon as this letter comes to you, seeing your master's sons are with you, and there are with you chariots and horses, fortified cities also, and weapons. Select the best and fittest of your master's sons, and set them on his father's throne, and fight for your master's house. But they were exceedingly afraid, and said, Behold, the two kings could not stand before him. How then can we stand? So he who was over the palace, and he who was over the city, together with the elders and the guardians, sent to Jehu, saying, We are your servants, and we will do all that you tell us. We will not make anyone king. Do whatever is good in your eyes. Then he wrote to them a second letter, saying, If you are on my side, and if you are ready to obey me, take the heads of your master's sons, and come to me at Jezreel tomorrow at this time. Now the king's sons, seventy persons, were with the great men of the city, who were bringing them up. And as soon as the letter came to them, they took the king's sons, and slaughtered them, seventy persons, and put their heads in baskets, and sent them to him at Jezreel. When the messenger came and told him, They have brought the heads of the king's sons, he said, Lay them in two heaps at the entrance of the gate until the morning. Then in the morning, when he went out, he stood and said to all the people, You are innocent. It was I who conspired against my master and killed him. But who struck down all these?

Know then that there shall fall to the earth nothing of the word of the Lord which the Lord spoke concerning the house of Ahab, for the Lord has done what he said by his servant Elijah. So Jehu struck down all who remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, all his great men and his close friends and his priests, until he left him none remaining. Then he set out and went to Samaria.

On the way, when he was at Beth-Ekhead of the shepherds, Jehu met the relatives of Ahaziah king of Judah, and he said, Who are you? And they answered, We are the relatives of Ahaziah, and we came down to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother. He said, Take them alive. And they took them alive and slaughtered them at the pit of Beth-Ekhead, forty-two persons, and he spared none of them.

And when he departed from there, he met Jehonadab, the son of Rechab, coming to meet him. And he greeted him and said to him, Is your heart true to my heart as mine is to yours? And Jehonadab answered, It is. Jehu said, If it is, give me your hand. So he gave him his hand, and Jehu took him up with him into the chariot. And he said, Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord. So he had him ride in his chariot. And when he came to Samaria, he struck down all who remained to Ahab in Samaria, till he had wiped them out, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke to Elijah. Then Jehu assembled all the people and said to them, Ahab served Baal a little, but Jehu will serve him much. Now therefore call to me all the prophets of Baal, all his worshippers and all his priests. Let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal. Whoever is missing shall not live.

But Jehu did it with cunning, in order to destroy the worshippers of Baal. And Jehu ordered, Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal. So they proclaimed it. And Jehu sent throughout all Israel, and all the worshippers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left who did not come. And they entered the house of Baal, and the house of Baal was filled from one end to the other. He said to him who was in charge of the wardrobe, Bring out the vestments for all the worshippers of Baal. So he brought out the vestments for them. Then Jehu went into the house of Baal with Jehonadab, the son of Rechab. And he said to the worshippers of Baal, Search and see that there is no servant of the Lord here among you, but only the worshippers of Baal. Then they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings.

[3 : 58] Now Jehu had stationed eighty men outside and said, The man who allows any of those whom I give into your hands to escape shall forfeit his life. So as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, Jehu said to the guard and to the officers, Go in and strike them down. Let not a man escape.

So when they put them to the sword, the guard and the officers cast them out and went into the inner room of the house of Baal. And they brought out the pillar that was in the house of Baal, and burned it.

And they demolished the pillar of Baal, and demolished the house of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day. Thus Jehu wiped out Baal from Israel. But Jehu did not turn aside from the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin, that is, the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan.

And the Lord said to Jehu, Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. But Jehu was not careful to walk in the law of the Lord, the God of Israel with all his heart. He did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam, which he made Israel to sin. In those days the Lord began to cut off parts of Israel.

Haziel defeated them throughout the territory of Israel, from the Jordan eastward, all the land of Gilead, the Gadites, and the Reubenites, and the Manassites, from Oroah which is by the valley of the Anon, that is, Gilead and Bashan. Now the rest of the acts of Jehu, and all that he did, and all his might, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel?

[5 : 32] So Jehu slept with his fathers, and they buried him in Samaria. And Jehoahaz his son reigned in his place. The time that Jehu reigned over Israel in Samaria was twenty-eight years.

Jerome Walsh observes the way that 2 Kings chapter 10 is part of a larger cyclical pattern of violence and death, running from chapters 9 to 11, as the sins of Ahab and all associated with him come crashing down on their heads. The first cycle begins with the death of Joram of Israel, in chapter 9 verses 14 to 26, followed by the death of Ahaziah of Judah, in chapter 9 verses 27 to 29, followed by the death of Jezebel, in chapter 9 verses 30 to 37. The second cycle begins with the death of the 70 sons of Ahab, in chapter 10 verses 1 to 11, followed by the death of the 42 relatives of Ahaziah, in chapter 10 verses 12 to 17, followed by the death of the worshippers of Baal, in chapter 10 verses 18 to 28. The final cycle begins with the death of Jehu, in chapter 10 verses 29 to 36, followed by the death of the seed of Ahaziah, in chapter 11 verses 1 to 3, with the death of Athaliah, concluding the sequence, in chapter 11 verses 4 to 20. The sequence associates the deaths of Joram and Jehu, kings of Israel, with the deaths of the 70 sons of Ahab, the greatest of the Omri dynasty. It associates the death of Ahaziah of Judah, with the death of his 42 relatives, and the death of his seed. Finally, it associates the deaths of Jezebel, the worshippers of Baal, and Athaliah.

Ahab has 70 sons, a number representing the full number of the nations in Genesis chapter 10, and it's also the number of the Jewish elders. Killing 70 sons suggests a comprehensive judgment.

It might also remind us of the story of Gideon, or Jeroboam, in Judges chapter 9 verses 1 to 5. Now Abimelech, the son of Jeroboam, went to Shechem, to his mother's relatives, and said to them, and to the whole clan of his mother's family, say in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, Which is better for you, that all 70 of the sons of Jeroboam rule over you, or that one rule over you? Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh. And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the ears of all the leaders of Shechem, and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, He is our brother. And they gave him 70 pieces of silver out of the house of Baal-bereth, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows who followed him. And he went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers, the sons of Jeroboam, 70 men, on one stone.

But Jotham, the youngest son of Jeroboam, was left, for he hid himself. This event might also come to mind at the beginning of the next chapter, as Athaliah kills off the royal household of Judah, save for one son who hides himself. Jehu has to deal with potential rivals. As Ahab has so many sons, Jehu needs to ensure that none are set up as a rallying figure for Omri's supporters against him.

[8 : 33] He begins by laying down the gauntlet, challenging the men of Samaria to appoint one of Ahab's sons as king and fight for him as king. He is probably gambling on them not daring to do so. They respond by presenting themselves as his servants, declaring that they will appoint no rival to him. He then instructs them to take the heads of their master's sons and bring them to him in Jezreel, as a proof that they are on his side. The instruction is an intentionally ambiguous one, as commentators generally observe. It could refer to the heads of Ahab's sons, meaning those set over them as guardians, or it could mean their literal heads. The men of Samaria go with the latter meaning and decapitate them, bringing their heads in baskets to Jezreel. Jehu allays any fear that the men of Samaria might have concerning reprisals from him. He openly acknowledges his role in the conspiracy and his responsibility for killing Joram, but he presents the killing of the sons of Ahab as if it were not his responsibility, taking advantage of the plausible deniability that his ambiguous statement had given him. In killing the sons of Ahab, they are made complicit in Jehu's coup. That Jehu intended their death is quite apparent, and it's suggested by the statement that he makes following concerning the fulfilment of the word of the Lord through Elijah. He then proceeds to kill anyone else associated with

Ahab and Jezreel, his officials, his friends, and his priests. As Judah had become so tangled up with Ahab's house and its sins, they too will suffer at the hand of Jehu. Just as Ahaziah of Judah was in the kingdom of Israel and was killed there by Jehu and his men, so relatives of Ahaziah are now visiting.

They seem to be entirely unaware of what has happened. They don't know that Ahaziah is dead. They don't know about Jehu's coup, the death of Jezebel, and the fact that Jezreel has been taken over. They are going to visit the great lady in the court, presumably Jezebel. Jezebel is the grandmother of Ahaziah, the king of Judah, and so they intend to meet with relatives. Jehu instructs his men to take them alive, and they take them alive so that they can slaughter them together at a pit.

Forty-two people are killed in this massacre, which likely reminds us of the forty-two that are killed back in chapter 2, verse 23 to 25. This suggests a parallel between Jehu and Elisha that has already been drawn back in chapter 19 of 1 Kings. On his way to Samaria, Jehu meets Jehonadab, the son of Recap, coming out to meet him. He takes him with him as a witness to what he is about to do. He is going to show him his zeal for the Lord. When we think of zeal for the Lord, we can think of Moses, of Phinehas, or of Elijah earlier on in the book of the kings. Jehu will be another example of what zeal for the Lord can look like. When Jehu arrives in Samaria, he kills any of the surviving persons of the house of Ahab. He then gathers all of the people and speaks concerning this great celebration that he is about to have. As the new king, he bears a particular responsibility for upholding the religious cult of the nation, and so from the very outset he declares his great loyalty to Baal.

He is going to be even more of a servant of Baal than Ahab, and so he wants all the prophets, all the worshippers, and all the priests of Baal to gather together. He's going to have a great sacrificial event. Any servants or worshippers of Baal that do not attend are going to be killed, so there's a great incentive to turn up. All of the worshippers and priests and prophets are gathered together, and then a solemn assembly is called for Baal and proclaimed. Then he calls further afield, he brings all the people throughout all Israel, all the worshippers of Baal. There's no one left who does not come. In addition to all the priests and the prophets and the worshippers of Samaria, all the worshippers of Baal throughout the land are now gathered. Then he gets the person who's in charge of the wardrobe and brings out the vestments for all of the worshippers of Baal, so they are all going to be dressed in distinct garments that mark them out as his worshippers.

[12 : 20] Having brought them all into the house, he then gets them to search to ensure that there is no servant of the Lord among them. Once that has been done, they go in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. Jehu and his cunning has gathered all these people together, mark them out, and now he instructs the eighty men that he had stationed outside to go in and slay them all. When all of the prophets, the priests, and the worshippers have been killed, his men remove the pillar of Baal, which they then burn. They demolish the pillar of Baal, and they demolish the house of Baal.

The house of Baal is reduced to a latrine, much as the body of Jezebel was reduced to dung. By this act, Jehu effectively wipes out official Baal worship within the land of Israel.

Jehu's action might also remind us of the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal that were gathered together at Carmel for a sacrifice, and then killed because of their idolatrous worship of Baal.

For all of his zeal and his opposition to the worship of Baal, Jehu continues in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat in worshipping the golden calves at Dan and at Bethel. However, of all the kings of Israel, Jehu is the one that stands out. He is the one king that really makes a stand against the evil of Baal worship. He's the one king that to some degree turns the spiritual tide in the north, and the law commends him for this. On account of his faithfulness and the way that he has deceived and overcome the servants of Baal and the house of Ahab, he is going to be blessed with a dynasty.

In contrast with his predecessors on the throne of Israel, the Lord will establish his house for four generations. However, on account of his failure to turn away from the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, the Lord begins to chip away at the edges of Israel. Haziel of Syria in particular ravages the Transjordan.

[14 : 01] Haziel had been anointed by the Lord to judge his people Israel, and if Jehu would not judge them effectively from within, Haziel would have to judge them from without. A far more painful judgment.

A question to consider. Comparing and contrasting the zeal of Jehu with the zeal of figures like Elijah, Moses and Phinehas, what differences can we see? What are some of the limitations of the form of zeal that Jehu represents?