

17—JEHOSHAPHAT AND THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD

INFORMATION about Jehoshaphat in the first book of Kings is heavily overshadowed by the events in the northern kingdom when Ahab ruled, and the work of Elijah the prophet. Apart from the details of Jehoshaphat's affinity with Ahab, only brief biographical information appears about him in [1 Kings 22:41–49](#).

By contrast, 2 Chronicles provides a lot of information about Jehoshaphat's reign, both expanding on these biographical details, and adding substantially to them. We need to consider these details, and also ask why there is so much additional material in Chronicles.

If there was only the Kings account, we should conclude that Jehoshaphat's reign was relatively insignificant, and that Judah came almost completely under the influence of the northern kingdom when he was king. The picture in Chronicles is drastically different, presenting Jehoshaphat as one of the most significant kings of either kingdom. When he became king he continued the reforms that his father Asa started. Asa had fortified the border cities between Judah and Israel ([2 Chronicles 16:6](#)); but Jehoshaphat "placed forces in all the fenced cities of Judah, and set garrisons in the land of Judah, and in the cities of Ephraim, which Asa his father had taken" ([17:2](#)).

Significant Religious Reforms

Jehoshaphat turned back the clock to how things had been when Asa first became king: "he walked *in the first ways* of his father, and of David (KJV margin), and sought not unto Baalim" (verse [3](#)). This attitude was shown particularly in his religious reforms. He set a good personal example by abhorring idolatry, and by taking away "the high places and groves out of Judah" (verse [6](#)).

Good though this was, more was needed if the nation was to return to the sole worship of the LORD God. Jesus explained that the simple removal of "unclean spirits" creates a void that will quickly be filled by an even worse situation ([Matthew 12:43–45](#)). So Jehoshaphat set about putting things right in Judah. For the first time since the times of Joshua, the scriptures mention "the book of the law of the LORD", and how Jehoshaphat sent priests and Levites with the princes of Judah, who "went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people" from that book ([17:9](#), cp. [Joshua 8:34](#)).

Nothing like this had happened before, and certainly not in Asa's days. Azariah the prophet told Asa that, "*for a long season* Israel hath been without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law" ([2 Chronicles 15:3](#)). Jehoshaphat was trying to remedy this serious deficiency.

His father's reforms were a challenge to the northern kingdom of Israel. It was Israel in the first instance that fortified the border cities to prevent an exodus of its subjects who were attracted by the different religious attitudes and consequent prosperity in Judah. But when Jehoshaphat was king and was instituting his reforms, a different response occurred in the surrounding nations: "The fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, so that **they made no war** against Jehoshaphat" ([17:10](#)).

Sound Principles

The importance of this response for the first readers of Chronicles was that it gave an impetus to the priorities they needed to establish as they returned from exile. Judah needed founding on the sound principles of God's word, and these must be taught to the people as they were when Jehoshaphat was king. An emphasis on "the book of the law of the LORD" would surely result in "the fear of the LORD" falling on their enemies, just as it had on Israel, Syria and the Philistines in Jehoshaphat's day: "Some of the Philistines brought Jehoshaphat presents, and tribute silver; and the Arabians brought him flocks" (verse [11](#)).

Judah's prosperity and strength were seen in the massive growth of the armed forces. When Asa was king, Judah's army of 580,000 faced an Ethiopian army of over a million men. Only thirty years or so later, Jehoshaphat was able to call on a combined army that was larger than that of Ethiopia. He had 1,160,000 men, made up of 780,000 from Judah (under three commanders), and 380,000 from Benjamin (under two commanders).

The reason for this massive increase is explained in part by the territorial expansion of Judah that included Simeon, part of Dan, and the southern area of Ephraim; the army also included auxiliaries from the Philistines and Arabians who were tributary states. The three commanders of Judah were responsible, one for the men of Judah, one for Dan and the Philistines, and one for Simeon and the Arabs. The two commanders in Benjamin were respectively over the Benjamites, and the annexed part of Israel.

Alliance with Israel

All the riches and strength of Judah persuaded Ahab that Israel's best policy was to effect an alliance with Jehoshaphat, and not to harass Judah by constant skirmishes, which had been Baasha's response. The scriptures do not explain with certainty where the initiative arose for the alliance between the two kingdoms. But just as Balaam encouraged an alliance with Moab when Israel was in the wilderness ([Numbers 31:16](#)), it is likely that the first move was made by Ahab, or more probably by his wicked and idolatrous wife Jezebel.

Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram married Ahab's daughter Athaliah ([21:6](#); [22:2](#)), a woman cast completely in the mould of her mother Jezebel. After all the reforms introduced into Judah, it is almost impossible to understand how Jehoshaphat was persuaded to agree to this disastrous alliance, whose effects plagued Judah for thirty years and almost snuffed out David's line completely. Yet we know from our own lives how easy it is to slip from the highest spiritual plane and become involved in the earthiest thoughts and actions. Such is the fickleness of the human mind and heart.

Jehoshaphat therefore found himself in Samaria at a lavish banquet prepared by Ahab, and in those persuasive surroundings he foolishly agreed to a joint campaign to recapture Ramoth-gilead from the Syrians. As Jehu the prophet said to Jehoshaphat after the event, this was "helping the wicked, and loving them that hate the LORD" ([19:2](#)). Jehoshaphat must have been aware of the potential danger, for he asked Ahab to "enquire at the word of the LORD" before finally agreeing to commit himself.

The details of this enquiry, and of the battle with Syria, appear in both [1 Kings 22](#) and [2 Chronicles 18](#), and comprise the only common parts of the two accounts. Michaiah was the only true prophet in Israel, and his words were ominous: "I did see all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd: and the LORD said, These have no master; let them return therefore every man to his house in peace" ([2 Chronicles 18:16](#); [1 Kings 22:17](#)). The significance of these words is indicated by the Lord Jesus quoting them when in his days he saw the multitude coming to him in sickness, distress and need ([Matthew 9:36](#); [Mark 6:34](#)).

The LORD Heard Him

The outcome of resisting this clear message from God was different for the two kings. Ahab who had consistently rejected God's word was killed, even though he made elaborate arrangements to disguise his own royalty and expose Jehoshaphat's. But Jehoshaphat was miraculously preserved: "Jehoshaphat cried out, and the LORD helped him; and God moved them (i.e., the Syrian chariot captains) to depart from him" ([2 Chronicles 18:31](#)). And God sent Jehu the prophet to confirm God's warning about the dire consequence of such alliances.

The heart of the king wanted to follow the things of God, so with renewed vigour "he went out again through the people from Beersheba to mount Ephraim, and brought them back unto the LORD God of their fathers" ([19:4](#)). Once again, Jehoshaphat was foreshadowing the work of Christ for, immediately after Jesus saw the multitudes "as sheep not having a shepherd", Mark records that "he began to teach them many things" ([Mark 6:34](#)). And, just as Jesus was assisted by his disciples, who took Jesus' words and distributed them to the people (for this was the significance of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand that occurred at that time), so in order to maintain the rule of God's law, Jehoshaphat appointed judges "city by city". He instructed them to uphold the judgements of God and not to be influenced either by bribery or "respect of persons" (verses [5-11](#)).

These important events are also commemorated in the Psalms. [Psalm 82](#) establishes the principle of human judgement, that it has to allow God's assessment to predominate: "God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods" ([Psalm 82:1](#)). And it also expresses the priority of divine judgement, that it is aimed at delivering "the poor and needy: (to) rid them out of the hand of the wicked" (verse [4](#)). Most significantly of all, the Psalm reinforces the truth of Jehoshaphat's own name, which means "Yahweh is Judge"!

Jehu's message to Jehoshaphat was two-fold. Because he entered into a league with wicked Ahab, "wrath is upon thee from before the LORD" (2 Chronicles 19:2). But, because "there are good things found in thee", there was a further opportunity for Jehoshaphat to encourage the nation in the ways of God. We have seen how he did this by bringing the people "back unto the LORD God of their fathers", but we have not yet considered the wrath that came upon him from God.

As we have briefly indicated, the effects of his unwise alliance were very far-reaching. His son Jehoram sought to strengthen his own position by slaughtering anyone with a claim to the throne (2 Chronicles 21:4). Because of Jehoram's disastrous rule, the Philistines and Arabians killed his sons, leaving alive only his youngest, Jehoahaz or Ahaziah (verse 17). He in turn was slain by Jehu, leaving his mother Athaliah (Ahab and Jezebel's daughter) to seize the throne and kill anyone who might challenge her authority (22:10). Without the courage and faithfulness of the high priest and his wife, David's line would have ended at that time.

In twenty short years, therefore, Judah descended from the heights of favour when Jehoshaphat reigned wisely, to the depths of being dominated by Jezebel's daughter. Such is God's condemnation of those who try to compromise their beliefs by an alliance with wickedness.

Psalm 83

But all this was still in the future when Jehoshaphat returned from the battle of Ramoth-gilead, and his initial response of educating the nation in God's word suggests that he had learned his lesson. His commitment was soon to be tested, however, for a great force was being organised against Judah, "a great multitude ... from beyond the sea on this side Syria" (2 Chronicles 20:2). The attackers were led by Moab, and included the Ammonites and the Meunites (RSV and NIV, probably referring to the Arabs). These enemies of Jehoshaphat are the subject of Psalm 83 and its description of a confederacy comprising "the tabernacles of Edom, and the Ishmaelites; of Moab, and the Hagarenes; Gebal, and Ammon, and Amalek; the Philistines with the inhabitants of Tyre; Assur also is joined with them: they have holpen the children of Lot" (verses 6–8). The route of the attack is also confirmed in this passage, approaching Judah from Edomite territory, and therefore involving the inhabitants of Mount Seir (2 Chronicles 20:10).

This was an extremely serious threat to Judah's security, as indicated by Jehoshaphat's fearful reaction. But had he not got a massive army? Why was he so frightened by the news of an approaching military force? Surely Jehoshaphat was thinking that the impending attack was the "wrath" prophesied by Jehu (19:2). If it was from God, how was Judah's king and its large army going to resist it?

Jehoshaphat did the only thing that was possible in these circumstances. He threw himself completely on the mercy of God, recognising His supremacy over all His creation: "none is able to withstand thee" (20:6). In common with Chronicles' approach, Jehoshaphat's prayer and the subsequent national gathering are faithfully recorded.

The Salvation of God

By the Spirit of God coming on a Levite called Jahaziel, Judah was reassured that God would fight for them. It was a replay of His saving work when Israel fled from Egypt: "Set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the LORD (cp. Exodus 14:13), O Judah and Jerusalem: fear not, nor be dismayed; to morrow go out against them: for the LORD will be with you" (verse 17).

on previous occasions, God allowed Israel's forces to be victorious, but this time the victory was to be manifestly His, in a way that is reminiscent of the destruction of Jericho. When the army went forth the following day, it was not led by its champion warriors, but by a choir of Levites singing "Praise the LORD; for his mercy endureth for ever" (verse 21).

Who ever heard of a battle being fought—and won—by singers? But this one was, for it was "*in the time that they began to sing*" (verse 22, AV margin) that God caused the attacking force to turn against itself: "every one helped to destroy another" (verse 23). All this happened out of the view of the Judean army. Only as the army came to "the cliff of Ziz ... the watchtower in the wilderness" did they see "the multitude; and, behold, they were dead bodies fallen to the earth, and there were none that escaped" (20:16, 24). Instead of using their armaments, Judah's troops were free to collect the spoil. There was "more than they could carry away: and they were three days in gathering of the spoil, it was so much" (verse 25).

But in all this, God was not forgotten. There are two accounts of their remembrance, one in Chronicles and the other in the Psalms. As we have seen, [Psalms 82](#) and [83](#) have their foundation in the times of Jehoshaphat, and so does [Psalm 84](#). The stripping of the slain took place in the valley of Baca, so named because historically it was a place of 'weeping'. But in Chronicles, it is called "the valley of Berachah (or blessing); for there they blessed the LORD" ([2 Chronicles 20:26](#)). The Psalm commemorates this change, when it says, "Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee; in whose heart are the ways of them. Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools" ([Psalm 84:5, 6](#)).

So a chapter that began with the bad news about an impending attack by Judah's warlike neighbours, and fear in the heart of Judah's king, ends with the return of a victorious army, still singing praises to God: "Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat in the forefront of them, to go again to Jerusalem with joy; for the LORD had made them to rejoice over their enemies. And they came to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets unto the house of the LORD" ([2 Chronicles 20:27, 28](#)).

Once more Jehoshaphat reigned over a kingdom at peace, with the fear of God keeping all enemies at bay. The disastrous campaign against Ramoth-gilead was only a faint memory; just a momentary dip in Judah's fortunes. As a result of the astounding defeat of the neighbouring armies, Judah's stock was at an all time high. This confirmed that, even when His servants act foolishly, as Jehoshaphat did when he formed his alliance with Ahab, God never forsakes those who call to Him in time of trouble. If the chapter ended here with the simple summary of Jehoshaphat's reign as given in verses [31–34](#), it would seem most appropriate: "He walked in the way of Asa his father, and departed not from it, doing that which was right in the sight of the LORD" (verse [32](#)).

Post Script

But there is a sad post script to the story, and on this occasion the account in Kings gives the fuller picture. The defeat of Judah's enemies placed Jehoshaphat in a position of great power in the whole region. Ahab's son Joram sought help from Jehoshaphat against the Moabites whom God defeated on Judah's behalf. Using exactly the same words as he used when he was allied to Ahab, Jehoshaphat said, "I am as thou art, my people as thy people, and my horses as thy horses" ([2 Kings 3:7](#), cp. [2 Chronicles 18:3](#)). And, just as he did on the former occasion, he sought confirmation through a prophet of the LORD. Elisha provided the divine advice, and two miracles occurred. First, God provided much needed water for the combined armies of Israel, Judah and Edom. Secondly, by seeing the rising sun reflected off the flooded valley the Moabites were convinced that the confederate armies had slaughtered themselves in a great bloodbath. Moab walked confidently into the trap, and were defeated.

This incident is not recorded in Chronicles, and we wonder how Jehoshaphat towards the end of his reign became once more entangled with the northern kingdom. It all arose from the earlier miraculous defeat of the Edomites and Amalekites. The territorial gains from this victory gave access to the port of Ezion-geber, near the modern city of Eilat on the Red Sea. This opened up a trade route to the east, like the one Solomon utilised during his reign to import "gold of Ophir" ([1 Kings 9:26–28](#)). Solomon was joined in these endeavours by Hiram king of Tyre, and it may have been this alliance that dulled Jehoshaphat's memory of his fateful association with Ahab. Ahab's son Ahaziah (a Baal worshipper who reigned briefly for two years before Joram) wanted to associate with Jehoshaphat in his trading exploits.

It seems from the two slightly different accounts ([1 Kings 22:48, 49](#); [2 Chronicles 20:35–37](#)) that Jehoshaphat at first resisted cooperating with Ahaziah, but subsequently relented. God, however, was still in control, and His prophet Eliezer informed Jehoshaphat that his schemes would be frustrated: "And the ships were broken, that they were not able to go to Tarshish" ([2 Chronicles 20:37](#)). But the divinely ordained destruction of the ships did not sever the link between Israel and Judah, and when Jehoshaphat died he left a son on the throne whose queen was Jezebel's daughter.

Jehoshaphat's decline may be explained by the fact that his son Jehoram became his co-regent in the closing years of his life. Jehoram, and more especially his wife Athaliah, was thus in a position of enormous influence. The next chapter in Judah's history is totally dominated by this evil woman.