THE TWO AHABS OF THE SOUTH: JOASH AND JOSIAH

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Within the book of Chronicles there are often to be found plays-on-words or ironic twists to the names of the kings of Judah, such that the designation of a monarch turns out to be related to a specific aspect of his reign. This literary device is considerably more prominent in Chronicles than it is in the parallel stories to be found in the book of Kings, to the extent that it appears to have been a deliberate feature of the telling of the tales in Chronicles, an indication of the systematization of accounts and the tying up of loose ends that characterizes the work of the editors of the book.1

In order to see something of this feature, the present study scrutinizes the intriguing cases of two specific monarchs who share a crucial element in their regal names and who also share a crucial element in their fates within the story-world of Chronicles. The kings to be investigated here are Joash and Josiah, whose stories are told in 2 Chr 22–24 and 34–35 respectively (with parallel accounts in 2 Kgs 11–12 and 22–23).2

I. The Regal Names

The English forms of the names of these two kings, ‘Joash’ and ‘Josiah,’” might lead a casual reader to think that the common element is the initial syllable ‘Jo,’ but that is somewhat coincidental. In Hebrew they are יֹאָשׁ (normally so spelt in Chronicles, though on one occasion as יַאָשׁ)3

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1 I have attempted to trace aspects of this feature in my commentaries on 1 Chronicles (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) and 2 Chronicles (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), particularly in the latter volume in the “Survey of Judah’s Kings,” 63–87, but the present study seeks to develop the notion more thoroughly in the cases of the two kings Joash and Josiah.

2 This essay is a modified version of a paper delivered to the 19th Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament at the University of Ljubljana in July 2007, in the Chronicles session chaired by Hugh Williamson. It is a pleasure to present it in this volume as a tribute to Hugh, whose scholarship I have much admired and whose collegiality I have much appreciated over the years.

3 Of the eight occurrences of the name of this Judahite king in Chronicles, the spelling יֹאָשׁ appears seven times (1 Chr 3:11; 2 Chr 22:11; 24:2, 4, 22, 24; 25:25) and the spelling יַאָשׁ appears once (2 Chr 24:1). There are also six occurrences of יֹאָשׁ as the name of a
and יָאשֶׁי,\(^4\) with the common denominator being the verbal element of יש. The English versions of the names mask this common element by having no equivalent to the Hebrew letter ב and by transliterating the Hebrew letter ש as ‘sh’ in the case of Joash but as ‘s’ in the case of Josiah. But matters are already difficult enough in Hebrew, since one of the three root-letters of the verb is not evident in the form utilized for the names, and also because the name יָאשֶׁי is often spelt with a י following the initial י, which makes it look like the divine element ‘Yo,’ an abbreviation of ‘YAHWEH.’ Indeed on several occasions in the book of Kings (though never in the book of Chronicles) the name is given in the form יָאשֶׁי,\(^5\) which indisputably opens with the divine designation ‘Yeho.’ If the fullest spelling is accepted as the proper form of the name of Joash or Jehoash, that is יָאשֶׁי, then the name would appear to be making the proclamation or expressing the hope that ‘Yeho’ does whatever action is denoted by the verb יש. This would be the same expression, in reverse order, as that set forth in the name of יָאשֶׁי, which similarly is saying that ‘Yahu’ does whatever action is denoted by the verb יש, there in the imperfect or forward-looking formation. The other possibility for יָאשֶׁי is that it too is the imperfect formation of יש rather than being the divine element plus יש, and that the shorter spelling of י (for the imperfect) and then ב and ש is to be accepted. In this case, the name Joash is simply stating that ‘he יש-es’ or ‘may he יש’ without specifying whether it is the deity or the monarch who does the activity designated by יש.

Well, then, what does it mean to speak of someone being called upon to יש or being known for such an activity? The form יש could derive from a hollow verbal root יש (or יש) or from an initial-י root יש (or such a root transmogrified into an initial-י stem יש) or from a final-ה root ישש. Unfortunately none of these possible roots is commonly used in Biblical Hebrew, and so we moderns cannot say for certain what

4 The name יָאשֶׁי appears nineteen times in Chronicles (1 Chr 3:14, 15; 2 Chr 33:25; 34:1, 3, 5, 7, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30, 34) and fourteen times in Kings (1 Kgs 13:12; 2 Kgs 11:2, 22:24, 26; 22:3, 23:23, 24, 25, 26; 26: 36:1) and seventeen times in the book of Kings, the spelling יָאשֶׁי appears nine times (2 Kgs 11:2, 12:20, 23; 13:1, 12, 13, 17, 23) and the spelling יָאשֶׁי eight times (2 Kgs 13:12, 23, 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 17). Of the eighteen occurrences of the name of Joash king of Judah in the book of Kings, nine are in the form יָאשֶׁי (2 Kgs 13:2, 22:24, 26; 22:3, 14:8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17). The form יָאשֶׁי also occurs in 1 Kgs 22:26 as a son of King Ahab.