

## The Political Situation in the East of Jordan during the Time of King Mesha'

The history of the region east of the Jordan valley during the 9th century BC is characterized on one hand by the struggle for entering into the heritage of the disintegrated Davidian Empire, and on the other hand, by the beginning of Assyrian expeditions into Syria, which not yet reached but strongly affected the Jordan region and thus determined the policies of the Syrian and Palestinian states.

The facts in particular are not easy to elucidate. The source material available is rather poor. Beside the instructive inscription of king Mesha' of Moab, the Old Testament remains the main source for the history of Transjordan during the Iron Age. Unfortunately, the value of the information provided by the Old Testament is diminished by the fact that it has largely taken on the form of anecdotic narrative. There are obvious exaggerations, obscurities and contradictions. Also, some of it cannot be reconciled with reliable information from other sources. For this sort of reason, the whole complex of the reports, however detailed and vivid, about military conflicts between the kings Ahab (871–852) and Joram (851–845) of Samaria and contemporary Aramaic rulers of Damascus (1 Kings xx, xxii, 11 Kings vi.8–viii.15) is unhistoric. It can only be related to events occurring after 845 BC and thus must have been linked up with Ahab and Joram by later redaction<sup>1</sup>. The same applies to the narrative recounting the campaign of the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom against a king of Moab in 11 Kings iii.4–27. In all probability, this narrative is historically based on a military enterprise to be dated about the year 800 BC and has only secondarily been connected with King Mesha' of Moab and antedated to his days<sup>2</sup>. These confusing instances of misarrangement are easily explained. All those traditions are texts originating from a collection of popular tales about the political activities of prophets. The attention is focussed on these men, their prophetic teachings and deeds, rather than historical events. This enabled redactors to arrange the narratives within the chronological scheme of the Book of Kings in an arbitrary manner.

The episode of David's empire did not effect any deep changes in the region east of the Jordan river. It was just a loose linkage of existing bigger and smaller polities, or even individual cities, into an empire centred upon King David's person. In particular, David used quite different methods. The small estates, ruled by Aramean upper classes, on the northern East Bank and east of the 'Adshlun mountains were connected to David's kingdom by installing governors. Already during his former reign in Hebron, David had linked the Aramean kingdom of Geshur (east of Lake Genezareth) to himself by establishing a family relationship. Maacha, the daughter of King Thalmai of Geshur, was one of his wives (11 Sam. iii.3). As a matter of course, David's father-in-law kept his position as monarch (11 Sam. xiii.3 sqq.). Of the ancient Canaanite cities in the Bashan region, only those south of Yarmouk (Sheri'at el-manadire) are likely to have fallen into closer dependence. The wooded region of 'Adshlun, hard to control, was already dominated at that time by the few settlements of groups from Ephraim and Manasse that had come over from the West Bank<sup>3</sup>. A similar situation may be supposed for the mountainous region further to the south down to the north corner of the Dead Sea.

It was only by armed force, however, that David was able to annex the three relatively well-developed territorial kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom in southern East Jordan. King Hanun of Ammon, with the help of Aramean mercenaries, seems to have resisted most fiercely. There is a report in 11 Sam. xii.31 about recruiting Ammonites for compulsory labour on a large scale, i.e., pretty rigorous measures. But the territory of Ammon was left untouched within its own borders. David incorporated it in his empire by simply crowning himself King of Ammon in place of the defeated King Hanun. After David's arrival at Mahanaim when he was fleeing Abshalom, remarkably enough, it was among others Sobi, a brother of the dethroned Hanun, who came running with commodities from Rabba, the Ammonite capital (11 Sam.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Jepsen, *Israel und Damaskus*, AfO xix, 1942, pp. 153–172.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. K.-H. Bernhardt, *Der Feldzug der drei Könige*. In: *Festschrift A. Jepsen*, Berlin/Stuttgart, 1971, pp. 11–22.

<sup>3</sup> Also personal relations seem to have existed here since the time of David's connection to Saul's family. He was granted refuge in Mahanaim, the main place of the region, when he was fleeing Abshalom (11 Sam. xvii.27–29), just as Saul's son Ishbaal had set up his short-lived kingdom in succession to Saul from Mahanaim (11 Sam. ii.8–10).

xvii.27–29). From this, in contrast to the record of measures taken after the conquest, we may conclude the maintenance of relatively good relations with the Ammonite royal family, perhaps even their participation under David's supremacy in the administration of the country.

Little is known about the conquest of Moab. At any rate, her territorial integrity remains untouched. The King of Moab kept his throne as a vassal tributary to David. There had been old ties with David also in the case of Moab. Ruth, a Moabite woman, is named among his pedigree. Furthermore, David is said to have taken refuge with the King of Moab and left his parents in his custody when he was persecuted by Saul (1 Sam. xxii.3 sq.). In striking contradiction to this tradition and the treatment of the King of Moab, it is recounted that two thirds of the Moabite army were cruelly executed (11 Sam. viii.2). Should this be reliable, there must have been particularly hard conflicts during the conquest of Moab. Edom, on the contrary, was not granted any form of self-government but administered by David's governor.

The administrative situation in East Jordan was paralleled by that on the West Bank. On the whole, David's imperial creation was composed structurally of rather different elements, without recognizable traces of a uniform administration. The essential political tie was David's person and his experienced mercenary troops. Under these circumstances, the attempt made by his successor Solomon, to forge a uniform state out of the territorial acquisitions and conquests that had made up into an empire within a few years, held from the outset but little promise for effective and lasting success. Of the East Jordan parts of the empire, interestingly enough, only a strip of 20–45 km. between the Yarmouk and the north corner of the Dead Sea was included among the new provinces created by Solomon. It may be doubted that Solomon maintained the personal union as King of Ammon. There is some indication that the domestic dynasty resumed power over Ammon. Then, like Moab, the country would have been subservient to Solomon mainly in terms of regular tributes. Solomon's efforts to tie the two satellite states more closely to his supremacy did not go further than establishing dynastic relations and taking action in cultic policy. Naama, the mother of his eldest son and successor to the throne Rehoboam, was of Ammonite descent (1 Kings xiv.21). The indigenous gods of Moab and Ammon, Kamosch and Milkom, were conceded places of worship in Jerusalem (1 Kings xi.1 sqq.).

There was indeed a great deal of reason for a careful treatment of the two dependent states in southern East Jordan, since the international situation of the Davidian Empire rapidly worsened in Solomon's time. The pharaohs, after some longer interruption, again came to play an active political part in Palestine and Syria. After an apparent Egyptian campaign into the Palestinian coastal plain as early as 960 BC (1 Kings ix.16), those political forces struggling to get rid of Solomon's rule were increasingly supported by Egypt. This is evident in the case of the Edomite prince Hadad and of

Jeroboam, the leader of the Israelites who strived for autonomy (1 Kings xi.14–22). Hadad obviously already succeeded in coming to the throne of Edom in Solomon's lifetime (1 Kings xi.25b), whereas Israel was not able to leave the federation until Solomon's death (926 BC). After the central region of David's Empire had been split up into two antagonistic kingdoms, i.e. Israel and Judah, there was no longer any risk for Shishak I of Egypt even in intervening military in 922 BC. His Palestinian expedition, which led him as far as Byblos at least, was primarily designed to demonstrate political power. Thus it was made clear to all parties involved that the episode of an empire in Palestine which could have been dangerous to Egyptian interests had come to an end. Palestine and her neighbouring countries fell back to the level of small rival states.

As to the situation in East Jordan, however, another process was of far greater impact. An empire similar in its structure to that of David's began to be formed around Damascus. Its prospect in terms of stability and durability was a better one because it was based on a homogeneous ethnic layer, the Arameans. Its founder was a certain Rezon ben Eljada who, similar to David, had first become renowned as a commander of mercenaries (1 Kings xi.23–25a)<sup>4</sup>. Within a short time he installed Damascus in the place of the kingdom of Zobah as the predominant power in Aram<sup>5</sup>. Probably even in Solomon's lifetime, the small states north of the Yarmouk river which had been subjugated by David may have fallen gradually under the supremacy of Damascus<sup>6</sup>.

The disintegration of the Davidian Empire after Solomon's death gave rise to a new situation for Ammon and Moab too. On the basis of 11 Kings i.1 it is usually assumed that Moab remained in the vassalage forced upon her by David up to and beyond the time of Ahab's death (852 BC). But recently objections to this view have been advanced with some good reason<sup>7</sup>.

The king of Moab was a tributary vassal to David and the dynasty he had founded. The disintegration of the empire did not alter his legal position, but did change the political situation that was prerequisite for the vassalage to be effective. Being confined to the state of Judah after 926 BC, the Davidian dynasty was unable to maintain effective control over Moab. Judah and Moab were separated by the Dead Sea. Thus there was an opportunity for the King of Moab to get rid of his bondage to the house of David, the more so since their rulers were persistently engaged in fighting Israel.

<sup>4</sup> The vast range of Damascene supremacy only a few decades after Solomon's death is signified by the votive stela of Barhadad, the grandson of Hezyon, which was found in Brëdsch near Aleppo. It is not certain, however, whether the find was also the place where it was originally set up.

<sup>5</sup> For an identification of this Rezon with the Hezyon of 1 Kings xv.18, the father of Tabrimmon (=Tub-Rammân) and grandfather of Benhadad (=Barhadad) of Damascus, see M. F. Unger, *Israel and the Arameans of Damascus*, London, 1957, pp. 56 sq.

<sup>6</sup> Probably it is this process what lies behind the rather general statement made in 1 Kings xi.25a, that Rezon/Hezyon was 'an adversary to Israel all the days of Solomon.'

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Liver, *The Wars of Mesha, King of Moab*, PEQ cxix, 1967, pp. 14–31; J. M. Miller, *The Moabite Stone as a Memorial Stela*, PEQ cvi, 1974, pp. 9–18.

Both the Old Testament and the Meshah inscription, however, presuppose the dependence of Moab on the state of Israel founded in 926 BC. Hence Moab must have fallen under the supremacy of the kings of Israel at some time earlier or later after her detachment from the Davidian dynasty. Fortunately, we are definitely informed about the time of Moab's subjugation in King Meshah's inscription. After some introductory phrases, Meshah says, 'Omri was king of Israel, and he suppressed Moab for a long time . . .' This allows for no other interpretation than that it was Omri (882–871) who imposed on Moab some sort of dependence which cannot be more precisely defined, which obviously included the tribute payments mentioned in the Old Testament (II Kings iii.4). Meshah does not mention these payments but speaks about the territorial changes enforced by Omri: He 'took possession of the entire country of Mahdeba.' The extent of the country of Mahdeba can be approximately assessed from the mention, made in the same context, of the cities of Ba'al Me'on (mā'in) and Kirjathon (el-Ḳurēje). With the city territories of Nebo and Heshbon as its northern border, the country of Mahdeba may well have extended as far as the system of Wādi Zerḳā Mā'in/Wādi el-Habīs to the south and east, the central area of the southern Belkā. Meshah's wording makes it clear that the land of Mahdeba had been an old Moabite property. Unfortunately he offers no comment about the reasons of Omri's expansive policy towards Moab. But we may obtain, or at least infer with a high degree of probability, some information from the Old Testament.

The situation of the Kingdom of Israel, both in internal and foreign affairs, had worsened increasingly after the death of its first king Jeroboam. His son Nadab who succeeded him on the throne was assassinated by a conspirator, Baasha by name, after a two year reign (907–906). While in power for a longer period (906–883) Baasha carried on a rather unlucky war against Judah. His son Ela had kept the throne for two years (883–882) when he was killed by Simri, the commander of the chariotry. Meanwhile the army had elected their commander-in-chief, Omri, King of Israel. Simri committed suicide after a reign of seven days. Omri, probably a professional soldier of Arab descent<sup>8</sup>, had to fight for his absolute monarchy for another four years.

Under such circumstances Omri had to assign priority to taking action for the domestic stability of his government. Carrying on the futile military conflicts with Judah and the Philistines was out of the question. It is a safe assumption that after the civil war (882–878) Omri set to restoring public order in the country. Then, in 876 BC, he founded Samaria as his new capital, situated on his own land acquired by purchase, which was a very important step towards founding an internally independent dynasty. As another effective measure to stabilize his dynasty, he established relationship by marriage to the neighbouring royal families of Tyre and Jerusalem.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, BWANT III, 10, Gütersloh 1928, p. 63.

The occupation of Mahdeba would have been one of Omri's first steps towards restoring order and stability in his country. It should be taken into account that the region north-east of the Dead Sea between Wādi Nimrīn and Wādi 'Ajuñ Mūsā—as an inroad area to the Jordan plain, used especially by nomadic groups—was of great strategic importance. One may assume that during the period of her instability and weakness Israel had lost all control over this region. The Jordan valley was open to any raids, in particular by nomads from the east. It is possible that sometimes groups of Moabites took part in such operations, as Moabite raids occasionally are mentioned in the Old Testament<sup>9</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was a matter of consequence for Omri to lay hands on the region between the Jordan valley and the border of Ammon and furthermore on the adjoining territory of Medeba, thus securing faster the frontier to the south and the east. Certainly, there were other reasons connected with Omri's pressure on Moab. The domination of Transjordanian caravan routes and the exaction of a considerable annual tribute must have enriched the revenues of the Omri dynasty. In addition to that, Omri's efforts to secure the southern frontier of his kingdom—by military operations as in the case of little Moab or by matrimonial alliance as in the case of the much more imposing Kingdom of Judah—may have had another motivation, which was no less important. In 877 BC, the second year of Omri's unlimited monarchy, Asshurnasirpal II of Assyria had undertaken a first campaign into Syria, ranging southward along the Phoenician coast perhaps as far as the northern frontier of Israel. This westward expansion of Assyria which might swoop down on Omri's kingdom by a repeated campaign at any moment, forced Omri to take precautions. One of the steps to meet this constant threat of Assyrian invasion was to secure Israel's retreat. An attack in the rear simultaneously with military aggression from the north could be a mortal danger to the existence of Omri's state.

The king of Damascus was in a similar situation. He was obliged to consolidate and to improve his relations with the neighbours round about, and he was doing so. In particular, we can extract some—as it seems—authentic information referring to this from the biblical narrative concerning the conflict between Baasha of Israel and Asa of Judah, which occurred in one of the last years of Baasha (I Kings xv.16–22). We learn from this tradition that there was a system of treaties of confederation between the King of Damascus on the one hand and the Kings of Israel and Judah on the other hand. Referring to his and his father's treaty with Barhadad of Damascus and his forerunner, Asa sent gold and silver to Barhadad begging him to break his treaty with Baasha and to come to his aid against Baasha, who had seized and begun to fortify the town of Ramah (er-Rām) which was situated

<sup>9</sup> Cf. II Kings xiii.20–599. I Chron. iv.21, II Chron. xx.1. The original elements in the narrative of Ehud and King Eglon of Moab (Jud. iii.12–30) describes such an incident. C. the reconstruction by E. Täubler, *Biblische Studien*, Tübingen, 1958, pp. 21–42.

only about 8 km. north of Jerusalem in a position of high strategic value. At once Barhadad sent an army to threaten the northern provinces of Israel, thereby forcing Baasha to withdraw from the south and abandon Ramah.

This event shows us the King of Damascus in a dominating position, able to control the balance of power on the West Bank, and intervention in the conflict between Asa and Baasha might have strengthened this position. The Kings of Damascus as the rulers of the strongest state in Western Asia during that time had become virtually the overlords in this region. Their overlordship seems to have been much more characterized by attempts to establish friendly relations with their neighbours east and west of the Jordan river than by brutal suppression. In accordance to such policy we find no traces of territorial expansion by annexation. Barhadad did not take possession of the northern provinces of Israel, which his army temporarily had entered and controlled. On the contrary, it is possible and perhaps probable that Barhadad supported the exertions of Omri to build up a new dynasty in Samaria, a dynasty which would not fight for any exclusiveness but would be open to cultural and religious influences from outside<sup>10</sup>. It is a certain indication of the good relations between Damascus and Samaria as well as the unquestioned leadership of the King of Damascus that the Omrides has been faithful partners in the coalition of Hadadezer (Adad-Idri) of Damascus against Shalmaneser III of Assyria in the years 853, 849, 848 and 845 BC<sup>11</sup>.

During the period of the 'entente' between Damascus and Samaria the region east of the Jordan river enjoyed the comfort of a 'pax aramaica'. According to Shalmaneser's Monolith Inscription, King Ba'sa ben Ruhubi of Ammon had himself become a member of the anti-Assyrian coalition, and as far as the northern part of Transjordan is concerned, we have no sure signs of any military confrontation in the area traditionally contested between Arameans and Israelites<sup>12</sup>. Moab, however, had derived no advantage from the 'pax aramaica'. The Mesha' Inscription mentions new measures of the Omrides increasing the pressure on Moab. Arranged in geographical order, the inscription in its second part (10–20) gives insight into the history of the Land Atharoth. Thereby Mesha' states that the 'King of Israel' has 'built' the towns of Atharoth ('Aṭārūs) and Jahaz (Khirbet Iskander) in this region, and that the King of Israel had dwelt in Jahaz 'while he was fighting against me'. The best way to understand that report is to assume military operations by one of the successors of Omri to widen the controlled area of Moab in a southerly direction down to the natural border of

Sel Hēdān/Wādi el-Wāle. At this frontier the sites of 'Aṭārūs and Khirbet Iskander are places of great strategic importance<sup>13</sup>. We do not know whether there was an unsuccessful attempt by Mesha' to free the occupied parts of his country, the cause of the measures taken by the King of Israel. At any rate, these measures may have taken place during the last years of Moab's suppression.

The year 845 BC was a turning point in the history of Western Asia, which radically changed the political situation. Simultaneously the hitherto reigning dynasties of Damascus and Samaria were brought to their end by usurpation, revolt or revolution. There are some reasons to ask if there is any deeper connection between both events. In the biblical narratives of the Book of Kings we find two traditions giving an interesting answer to this question. The short anecdote in I Kings xix.15–17 lets us know that the prophet Elijah had anointed Hazael, as well as Jehu, kings by divine order of Yahweh. II Kings viii.7–15 gives us a detailed account about Elisha's prophetic activities in connexion with the usurpation of the throne of Damascus by Hazael. Elisha, however, had been the leader of the opposition to the house of Omri, anointing the army officer Jehu king of Israel.

It is very difficult to decide to what degree those reports might have historical value. At any rate, the political programme both of Hazael and Jehu evidently has been similar. The beginning of their reign was the end of the anti-Assyrian coalition and of the 'pax aramaica'. They both took the dangerous course of a nationalistic policy. The result was a long-lasting time of wars and devastations, until the Assyrian kings, as the real winners in the conflict, eliminated the poor remains that nationalistic policy had left of Aram and Israel.

Transjordan was the place of the first military confrontation between the former confederates. A campaign of Joram of Israel and Ahasja of Judah against the usurper Hazael is mentioned in II Kings viii.28–29. This must have taken place in the short interval between Hazael's accession to the throne and the murder of Joram and Ahasja by Jehu, and seems likely to have been an unhappy attempt to restore the policy of the anti-Assyrian coalition by removing the usurper from Adad-Idri's throne.

Jehu could hold his position in northern Transjordan for some years, as long as Hazael was tied down in fighting against Shalmaneser's invading armies (845, 841 and 838 BC) which, in their last campaign, pushed southward as far as the Hauran region. When, after 838 BC, Hazael was on the way towards the realization of a Syrian-Palestinian Empire, Jehu was not able to offer resistance in an effective manner. Soon he lost all his territory in the area east of the Jordan (II Kings viii.11 sq.). At this time or some years before, Moab re-

<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, Mesha' made a differentiation between the ancient settlement of the Israel tribe Gad in this area and the towns built up (and, of course, fortified) by the 'King of Israel'.

<sup>14</sup> For further details, cf. K.-H. Bernhardt, *Beobachtungen zur Identifizierung moabitischer Ortslagen*, ZDPV LXXVI, 1960, pp. 138–158.

<sup>10</sup> For this position of the Omrides cf. H. Donner, in: J. H. Hayes/J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History*, London, 1977, pp. 399 sqq.

<sup>11</sup> Though the participants in the anti-Assyrian coalition were mentioned by name only in Shalmaneser's report on his first invasion into Syria, there can be no doubt about Israel's participation in the following campaigns. C. one of Shalmaneser's smaller inscriptions (ANET<sup>2</sup>, p. 281): 'Hadadezer . . . together with 12 kings of Hatti-Land, rose against me. For the fourth time I fought with them . . .' This report points clearly enough to the unchanged identity of the member of the coalition.

<sup>12</sup> The narrative I Kings xxii is certainly of a later date. C. above, p. 1.

covered her independence and the Lands of Atharoth and Medeba, probably by a sudden attack<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, Meshah and his successors were able to guard their independence during the long reign of the great Conqueror Hazael as suggested by the biblical narrative of the campaign of the kings of Judah, Edom and Israel against Moab. Unfortunately, we have no certain knowledge about Ammon's situation at

that time. As a former ally of the Barhadad dynasty of Damascus her relation to Hazael might have been not much better than that of the states on the West Bank. The main part of Transjordan, however, from the utmost north to the Dead Sea, was now under Hazael's sway, and essentially remained—although not undisturbed—in Damascene control later on.