

CHAPTER 7

The Early Divided Monarchy

IT has been widely held, since A. Alt first argued the position,¹ that David and Solomon, unlike Saul, ruled not a single united realm, but a twin kingdom; in other words, Israel and Judah were quite separate political entities, united only in the fact that each acknowledged the same man as king. If, therefore, the two kingdoms should ever decide to offer allegiance to two different men, very few links would need to be broken; Israel and Judah would quite naturally fall apart.

Despite such tenuous political bonds, Israel and Judah had been united now for fully a century, if we ignore the two year reign of Eshbaal, and it is clear that Solomon's son and successor Rehoboam did not envisage any political disaster when he went to Shechem for his second coronation service (so to speak). Equally, it seems that the men of the northern tribes had no thought of doing other than ratifying his kingship over them (1 Kings 12:1ff.). Their request for more lenient treatment than they had been experiencing under Solomon was a fair one, even if Solomon's old enemy Jeroboam had returned from Egypt and put in a good deal of propaganda. But Rehoboam's foolish response was all that the situation required to divorce the two political units. Rehoboam was of the tribe of Judah; very well, Judah was welcome to him. The king's crowning act of folly was his choice of mediator — Adoram or Adoniram, who had supervised the forced labour levies, and who must have been the most unpopular man in all Israel. The fact that Adoram was summarily stoned to death is in itself indicative of the hatred Solomon's measures had caused.

1. Cf. A. Alt., *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 205-237. Alt's original article (in German) was published in 1930.

Rehoboam made one final attempt to remain master of his inherited domain; he mustered a fair-sized army and was on the point of marching into the seceding territories when a prophet unexpectedly intervened. The prophet, Ahijah, a northerner, had some years earlier recommended to Jeroboam the division of Solomon's kingdom; now Shemaiah, a southern prophet, took exactly the same line, and found no difficulty in persuading Rehoboam's troops to go quietly home again (1 Kings 12:22ff.). Whether Rehoboam could have achieved anything by military force is in any case dubious; if southern troops had shed northern blood, it would scarcely have helped to heal the breach, plainly. The breach was irrevocable, but at least there was no large-scale warfare between Rehoboam and the seceding tribes. The "continual fighting" to which 1 Kings 14:30 refers was not an attempt at conquest by Rehoboam, but rather an effort to stabilize a secure frontier between the two states.

The failure of Solomon to unify his kingdom, the social injustices he had tolerated if not actually fostered, and now the incredible stupidity of Rehoboam, turned an empire of moderate dimensions into two small, second-rate states. The conquests achieved by troops and diplomacy were lost overnight, with the sole possible exception of Edom. To the west, the Philistines broke free from their tributary status. Other areas which had been dominated by Solomon were separated from Rehoboam's control by the sheer geographical fact of the existence of the new state of Israel, the northern kingdom. The only bonus for Rehoboam was that the tribe of Benjamin linked itself firmly with Judah, though the wording of 1 Kings 12:20f. may imply that Benjamin did so perforce and not of free choice. The fortress of Jerusalem on her very borders may have put an irresistible pressure on the Benjaminites.

At least Rehoboam had the benefit of a firmly-established personal position in Judah and Benjamin, and of an existing administration there. The new kingdom, Israel, on the other hand, had to create everything from scratch. It is evident that they aped Judah in every way possible; to begin with, they decided to continue with a monarchy, and did not revert to the old "Judges" structure of earlier days. The man they elected to take office, at the instigation of the prophet Ahijah, was Jeroboam. In his very name we may see other deliberate conformity with Judah. Many a reader of the English Bible must have found the names Jeroboam and Rehoboam confusingly alike; they are equally alike in Hebrew, and also in their meanings, "May the people increase!" and "May the people expand!" respectively. We know that at least two Hebrew kings had throne-names,² and it may well have been common practice;³ very

2. See 2 Kings 23:34; 24:17.

3. Cf. A. M. Honeyman, *JBL* 67 (1958), pp. 13-25.

probably, then, Jeroboam deliberately chose a name like his rival's.

For a capital, Jeroboam chose Shechem, a city of central position and long-standing importance. From the political aspect, it could well rival Jerusalem, but Jeroboam was well aware that David had given Jerusalem a religious status second to none, and Solomon's temple, containing the unique ark of the covenant, could well have continued to attract devout worshippers from the north. Jeroboam felt it was not enough to organize a closely similar culture and ritual, quick though he was to do this; he decided he must find religious rivals to Jerusalem, and his choices were Dan, on his northern boundary, and Bethel near his frontier with Judah (or rather, Benjamin). There may have been strategic reasons behind his choice; certainly he could build upon ancient traditions in both cases. The sanctuary at Dan had links with Moses himself,⁴ while that at Bethel dated back even further, and was closely associated with none other than Jacob, forefather of the Israelite tribes.⁵ Accordingly, Jeroboam made Dan and Bethel royal shrines; that is to say, he sought to make his own position secure within the liturgies of those shrines, in the same way that the Davidic kings' rule was guaranteed in the liturgy and traditions of the Jerusalem temple.⁶

These various policies of Jeroboam had their effect, and he held the throne of Israel till his death, without apparent difficulty. Presumably his subjects accepted Dan and Bethel readily enough. But the worship at both sanctuaries was very quickly corrupted, 1 Kings 12:32 relates, and the whole sacrificial system of the northern kingdom is characterized as "a sin in Israel" (v.30) by the Old Testament historian. It is true that in his view of the matter all sanctuaries outside Jerusalem were *ipso facto* unacceptable to God; but he had good historical reasons for this attitude, in view of the syncretistic and idolatrous practices which regularly affected the worship of Yahweh at such shrines. What offended the Bible writer most about Jeroboam was his installation of golden images, of bull-calves, at Dan and Bethel. Now it could be true, as W. F. Albright suggested,⁷ that these images functioned in precisely the same way as the cherubim of the Jerusalem temple, i.e. as pedestals or supports for the "throne" of Yahweh. But this possibility scarcely tells the whole story. Why, it may be asked, did Jeroboam choose bulls instead of cherubim for this cultic adornment? And must they not have been more visible and accessible to the general public than were the Jerusalem cherubim? For the latter never gave rise to

4. Cf. Judges 18:30; the AV reading "Manasseh" is incorrect, though based on an ancient Jewish alteration to the Hebrew text.

5. Cf. Genesis 28.

6. See especially 2 Samuel 7: 1-16.

7. Cf. W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*² (Garden City, 1957), pp. 298-301.

idolatrous worship, to our knowledge; but Jeroboam's bull-calves were immediately reminiscent of the Canaanite religion, in which the senior deity, El, was actually worshipped as a bull on occasions.⁸ It is probable that Jeroboam was deliberately permitting, indeed inviting, pagan rites to take place, no doubt with the intention of keeping all his subjects happy. The Dan sanctuary, as we know from Judges 18:31, had a long history of idolatrous practices, and Jeroboam was not the man to offend a majority of his subjects by a religious purge. On the contrary, he felt he could afford to let priests and worshippers whose standards were higher abandon their possessions and go south to Judah (cf. 2 Chronicles 11:13ff.).

It is perhaps worth recalling in this connexion that since the conquest of Canaan the Israelite people had always had a multiplicity of shrines; Bethel and Dan were no innovations. During the whole period of the monarchy Judah no less than Israel had its various sanctuaries, one of which, at Arad, has been excavated in recent years. The Arad temple is in most respects a perfect replica of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, though on a smaller scale.

From this point on, the writers of Kings and Chronicles give us far less detail about the lives and careers of the Hebrew kings; the biblical historians were much less interested in purely political events than we are, and at times their omissions tend to surprise modern readers. The next major event in the history of Palestine illustrates this point very well. 1 Kings 14:25f. relates it thus: "In the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem. He removed the treasures of the house of the LORD and of the royal palace, and seized everything, including all the shields of gold that Solomon had made". 2 Chronicles 12:2ff. adds some details of the size of the Egyptian force, and mentions that "the fortified cities of Judah" were captured. Questions immediately spring to our minds. Why did Shishak attack? Was this a punitive raid, or an endeavour to secure Jeroboam's throne for him (after all, Jeroboam had been Shishak's recent protégé)? With just the biblical data to hand, we might have come to the conclusion that the last suggestion was correct; it sounds plausible, and would also explain conveniently why the Egyptians returned and took no further active interest in Judah for some years afterwards. But in fact such a theory is totally ruled out by other evidence; Shishak's chief target was not Rehoboam at all, but Jeroboam and his newly-acquired kingdom! We may instead hazard the guess that Jeroboam failed to keep certain promises he had made to his former protector.

Our evidence that Jeroboam was also attacked comes from an Egyptian temple inscription. In the Amun temple at Karnak,

8. The alternative to Albright's hypothesis is accordingly that Jeroboam's bulls were intended as images of Yahweh.

death. Jeroboam's son, Nadab, soon embarked on a campaign against the Philistines, besieging Gibbethon — a campaign which is probably again to be interpreted as a border dispute, in much the same general area as the Israel-Judah dispute. While engaged in this siege, Nadab lost his throne and his life to a man of Issachar named Baasha, who like Jeroboam had prophetic support in claiming the crown. Thus the very first "dynasty" of Israel terminated swiftly after the death of its founder, a precedent which would be followed all too often.

By about the year 900, then, we find Asa as king of Judah and Baasha as king of Israel, with the border feud still continuing. Till that time this had been a private quarrel, but the situation was now to be complicated by outside interference. First there came another invasion from Egypt, probably under the command of Shishak's son and successor Osorkon I;¹³ on this occasion Judah was the target. Asa, unlike his grandfather, proved equal to the occasion, and this time the Egyptians were repulsed with heavy losses; it was a long day before they interfered in Palestinian affairs again. It seems likely, however, that the effort involved in meeting and defeating this serious challenge from the south weakened Judah, because soon afterwards Baasha succeeded in retrieving all the border territory lost by Jeroboam, and in pushing Judah's frontier back south of Ramah, a mere five miles from Jerusalem. He proceeded to fortify Ramah against Asa's troops. Asa felt that this was an intolerable situation, but he was not strong enough to throw the Israelite troops back by frontal assault. A diversionary tactic was called for; his father, no doubt with the same possibility in mind, had made a treaty with the former king of Damascus (Tabrimmon), and Asa now renewed it, suggesting to the present king of Damascus that he should invade Israel from the north, so relieving the pressure upon Judah. The Syrian ruler, Benhadad I, was happy to oblige; he swiftly captured a number of Israelite cities of importance, such as Dan and Hazor, and probably also overran the northern part of Israelite Transjordan at this juncture. From Judah's point of view, all this had the desired effect. Baasha — previously in treaty relationship with Damascus himself — had to return to his capital to organize his northern defences, and he was forced to draw troops away from his southern frontier. Asa then pushed that frontier northwards once more, and established secure fortresses at Mizpah and Geba, utilizing the building materials from Baasha's abandoned fortress at Ramah. This new frontier was little different from the line inherited by Abijah; two generations' struggles in that area thus achieved little but the ultimate stability of the frontier, and of course served to weaken both kingdoms not a little. The swift rise of

13. The Bible calls him Zerah the Ethiopian (2 Chronicles 14:9).

Shishak (or Shoshenq) himself recorded in remarkably full detail the events of his campaign in Palestine (although there are difficulties both in reading and interpreting the inscription).⁹ Shishak's troops captured towns as far north as Megiddo and Shunem; the Egyptians must have bypassed Bethel and Shechem by a very narrow margin — indeed, one wonders if Shechem bought Shishak off, as Jerusalem did, or if it was perhaps captured (there is a gap in the inscription just at this interesting point). Shortly, in any case, Israel chose a new capital, Tirzah (cf. Kings 15:21).

Shishak's campaign seems to have been connected in the main with trade-routes; he asserted Egyptian domination over the major highway through Palestine — up the Philistine coast, and through the pass of Megiddo into the Plain of Jezreel. Then he turned south and apparently destroyed Solomon's fortress at Ezion-geber, in order to damage Judah's Red Sea trade.¹⁰

The biblical writers were in general more interested in Judah than in Israel; apart from that, they wished to emphasize how far Rehoboam fell in a mere five years. He had inherited an empire; five years later, master of a small state, he could protect his capital itself only by denuding his palace of its treasures. Solomon's court had despised silver; his son's court had to be content with bronze! The biblical writers were not slow to point the moral.

Rehoboam used the twelve years that remained to him after Shishak's invasion in building secure defences for his state. Details are given in 2 Chronicles 11:5ff., which make it clear that the king of Judah was enough of a realist to retract his southern and western frontiers to defensible lines, abandoning some of the key fortresses of Solomon's era.¹¹ Interestingly, however, he drew no northern frontier, and it may be that he never gave up his dream of becoming king of all Israel one day.

Rehoboam predeceased Jeroboam by a few years;¹² his son Abijah (also called Abijam) continued the border strife with Israel, and was able to inflict a heavy defeat on Jeroboam, as 2 Chronicles 13 relates. Jeroboam lost many men and some miles of border territory — Bethel included. Before this victory, the frontier lay a mere eight miles north of Jerusalem — one can understand the anxiety of the kings of Judah — a distance Abijah was able to double. Abijah's reign was short; his successor Asa inherited the benefits of the victory, and was able to maintain this frontier until after Jeroboam's

9. For details, see B. Mazar, "The campaign of Pharaoh Shishak to Palestine", *VTS* 4 (Leiden, 1957), pp. 57-66; Y. Aharoni, *LB* pp. 283-290; *MBA* map 120; K. A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* (Warminster, 1973), §§252-258.

10. Shishak's inscription breaks off before Ezion-geber is mentioned, but the excavations there have shown that the fortress suffered destruction at about this period.

11. See *MBA*, map 119.

12. Various computed; see the tables on pp. 293f.

Damascus to a position where it could threaten and embarrass Israel was certainly due in no small measure to the folly of Rehoboam and to the strained relations between Israel and Judah which inevitably ensued.

The border hostilities between Israel and Judah gradually died out, either of their own accord, or (more probably) because of the foresight and diplomatic skills of a new king on the throne of Israel, Omri by name. His son Ahab is far better known to posterity, not because he was more able than his father, but because the biblical writer has given us far more information about him; that fact in turn is due to the fact that Ahab was the contemporary of an outstanding Israelite prophet, Elijah the Tishbite.

Omri's name (as also Ahab's) perhaps suggests some Arab ancestry;¹⁴ be that as it may, he certainly fell short of the high religious standards set by the writer of 1 Kings. Moral and religious questions apart, however, he was a man of no little political acumen and achievement; it may be no accident that in later years the Assyrians referred to Israel as "the house of Omri", even after the fall of his dynasty. Omri gained the throne within a year or two of Baasha's death. Baasha's son, like Jeroboam's before him, was able to hold the throne no more than a year or so, before falling victim to a *coup d'état*. No fewer than three army officers contended for the crown: first Zimri captured it, then he lost it to Omri, from whom Tibni endeavoured to wrest it unsuccessfully. Needless to say, Baasha's son (Elah), Zimri and Tibni all lost their lives in the struggle. How long these struggles lasted is difficult to say; Zimri's "reign" lasted seven days, according to the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 16:15, but the Greek text makes it seven years (improbably). Between Tibni and Omri, however, there was a measure of civil war, and no indication is given how long it lasted; some scholars calculate that the two men reigned over different parts of Israel for four or five years.¹⁵ By 875 B.C., in any case, Omri held the throne of all Israel quite securely. In all, including the period of civil war, he reigned only twelve years, but in them he gave Israel a new strength and stability. It must have been he who established the friendly relations with Judah which his son Ahab found valuable (cf. 1 Kings 22:1 ff.). It was he, too, who renewed the good treaty relations between Israel and the Phoenicians, thereby giving to his kingdom west of the Jordan stability, security, and some economic advantages besides; on the debit side, however, he also gave his kingdom a future queen who was to prove notorious, for undoubtedly it was Omri who engineered the diplomatic marriage

14. On Omri's name and background, see J. Gray, *Kings*, pp. 364f.

15. E.G. J. Begrich and E. R. Thiele; but W. F. Albright places the civil strife within one single year (876 B.C.). See pp. 293f.

between Ahab and Jezebel, daughter of the king of Tyre. He also provided his kingdom with a measure of glory; 1 Kings 16:24 relates how he appropriated the site of Samaria and made it his capital, while excavations have revealed something of the magnificence which he and his successors gave it.¹⁶ In some ways, clearly, Omri was a second Solomon.

Unlike Solomon, however, Omri was prepared to take military initiative where he thought it necessary. The steady increase of the power of the Syrian kingdom of Damascus must have caused him some concern, though evidence is lacking that there was any direct conflict between him and Benhadad. What is certain is that Omri sought to give greater strength to his Transjordanian possessions by reconquering Moab, which had been lost to Israel on Solomon's death. A Moabite inscription, known as the Moabite Stone or Mesha Stele, testifies to this: "Omri, King of Israel" — it reads — "he oppressed Moab many days",¹⁷ and goes on to mention briefly the fact of Omri's conquest.

Omri's reign was not a long one, perhaps only seven years as sole ruler (or so a comparison of verse 23 with verse 29 of 1 Kings 16 suggests). On his death, his son Ahab succeeded to the throne, and reigned in Samaria for more than twenty years, the contemporary of Jehoshaphat of Judah. The Bible tells us more about Ahab than about any other ruler of the Northern Kingdom, but even so we could wish that the details were fuller! The documentary sources for Ahab's reign utilized by the author of 1 Kings seem to have been primarily concerned with the prophets of the day, notably Elijah, and so Ahab's doings are reported only where they led him into conflict with the prophets.

It is clear, at any rate, that he continued his father's policy of good relations with Phoenicia to the north and Judah to the south. He was married to Jezebel, the king of Tyre's daughter, and he arranged a marriage between his own (and presumably Jezebel's) daughter and Jehoshaphat's son. Both these marriages had disastrous consequences, as will be seen; but at least they secured Israel's northern and southern defences. Such security was vital, because it was now that the Syrians really became a power to be reckoned with, and a hostile power at that. The king of Damascus, Benhadad,¹⁸

16. A large number of ivories were found at Samaria; cf. 1 Kings 22:39. There may well have been ulterior motives behind the creation of this new capital. It may have been intended to serve the non-Israelite sector of the population and therefore housed a temple to Baal instead of Yahweh, cf. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History* (OTL: London 1977), pp. 402f.

17. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 196.

18. It is not clear whether this was the same king that had invaded Israel in Baasha's reign or a son and successor bearing the same name (or title). Cf. K. A. Kitchen in *NBD*, s.v. "Benhadad". This (?second) Benhadad is called Adad-idri (i.e. Hadad-ezer) in Assyrian records.

(883-859 B.C.), whose armies had been able to reach the Mediterranean coast. None of the small or relatively small states of Palestine, Syria, or eastern Anatolia (i.e. Turkey) could fail to take warning; and when Assurnasirpal's son and successor Shalmaneser III marched westwards in 853 B.C., he found that a coalition of major dimensions had been formed to resist him. (See plate 1 facing p. 48.) Ahab and Benhadad had made a truce (cf. 1 Kings 22:1), and were leaders of this league, together with another Syrian king, Irhuleni of Hamath. Ahab supplied 2,000 chariots, 10,000 infantrymen; Benhadad 1,200 chariots and 20,000 men. Even Egypt sent a token force of 1,000 men, while an Arabian king supplied 1,000 camels. It is interesting to note that none of the Phoenician cities joined the coalition, perhaps out of prudence; and neither did Jehoshaphat of Judah.

The battle was joined some distance north of Hamath, at Qarqar on the Orontes. All our information about it — for the Bible mentions nothing but the truce between Samaria and Damascus — comes from Shalmaneser's own record, a monument called the Kurkh Stele, now in the British Museum. We need not doubt Shalmaneser's veracity (in general terms) when he lists the names of his foes and the size of their armies, but something of a question-mark arises in one's mind on reading his account of the outcome of the battle. He claims a handsome victory: "They came directly toward me in close battle, but with the superior aid which Ashur the lord had given, and with the mighty weapons which Nergal, my leader, had gifted me, I fought with them. From Qarqar to Gilzau I defeated them. I smote 14,000 of their men with weapons, falling upon them like Adad pouring down a hailstorm. I flung their bodies about, filling the plain with their scattered soldiery."²¹

But if a victory it was, it was to say the least a Pyrrhic one. Two facts seem to speak louder than Shalmaneser's boastful words. In the first place, it is on record that far from following up his alleged victory, he did not send his armies so far west again for four years or so. Secondly, Ahab and Benhadad felt free, within a very short time after the battle of Qarqar, to resume their own petty quarrels.

The final event of Ahab's reign, which must have taken place within three years of Qarqar, and probably very soon after the battle,²² was Ahab's attempt to recapture the Israelite city of Ramoth-gilead. It is clear that Benhadad had either never fulfilled his promise to withdraw from Israelite territory in Transjordan, or else had encroached once again during the period of truce with

21. *DOTT*, p. 47.

22. Qarqar gives us the first absolute date for the history of the Israelite monarchy. In any case, Ahab died within three years of Qarqar (cf. 1 Kings 22:1), i.e. no later than 850 BC; but since the next Assyrian invasion came in 841 BC, when Jehu was king, and since we have to fit in the twelve year reign of Jehoram (cf. 2 Kings 3:1) in the interval, it seems tolerably certain that Ahab died in 852 BC at the latest.

was a capable soldier and administrator, who appears to have been bent on empire, for he was able to enforce his will over smaller Syrian states; 1 Kings 20:1 relates that thirty-two lesser kings supported his invasion of Israel; within a year he had removed them from office (verses 24f.). It was not always easy to assess the purpose of invasions of ancient times; we do not know whether Benhadad was seeking to add Israel to his territory, or whether he was endeavouring to force Ahab into alliance with him, to face a greater foe, Assyria. It is fairly clear at least that this was not a mere plundering raid, or he would not have taken the time and trouble to besiege Samaria, which soon proved by its defensibility what a good choice of capital Omri had made.

This invasion by the Syrians, and the siege of Samaria, seem to have taken Ahab by surprise. Subsequent events show that his forces were far from negligible, in numbers or competence. Archaeological discovery has confirmed this fact: at Megiddo alone, Ahab had a fine chariot city.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Ahab's response to the invasion was initially weak-kneed; he was prepared to go to almost any lengths to placate Benhadad, as 1 Kings 20:1ff. reveals. However, once Ahab was prompted to retaliate — by Benhadad's overreaching himself, by the advice of Ahab's counsellors, and by a prophet's favourable predictions — a heavy defeat was speedily inflicted on the Syrian army. Benhadad needed the winter to reorganize; then in the spring he invaded again. This time Ahab was ready for him, and the battle was joined near Aphek, a little south of the lake of Galilee.²⁰ Although the terrain was of the Syrians' own choosing, and despite their greater numbers, they once again suffered a heavy defeat; Benhadad himself was captured. The prophets, who were growing to be a force in Israel to be reckoned with, maintained that Benhadad should not have been released, and the sequel showed that the Syrian king was not to be trusted; but no doubt at the time Ahab felt that he was getting favourable terms, when Benhadad covenanted to restore territory wrested from Israel, and to permit Israelite bazaars to be established in Damascus itself. Ahab would have preferred good trade to constant warfare.

Ahab was not to escape warfare, however. In recent years a major nation of the upper Tigris region, Assyria, had embarked on a policy of aggression and expansion. During David and Solomon's era, Assyria had been quiet and inactive, but from the end of the tenth century the Assyrian kings found themselves more free to pursue their own designs. The city of Tyre, now Ahab's ally, had been one city forced to pay tribute to the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II

19. Cf. Y. Yadin, "Megiddo of the Kings of Israel", *BA* 33 (1970), pp. 66-96.

20. A different Aphek from that mentioned in connection with the Philistines in 1 Samuel 29:1.

Ahab. Taking the advice of most of his prophets, Ahab marched on Ramoth-gilead, an important city which lay on one of the major routes through Palestine-Syria, "the King's Highway." It was however the one prophet he chose to ignore, Micaiah ben Imlah, who told the truth: Ahab would fall at Ramoth-gilead. Despite the king's precautions in disguising himself, a chance arrow found a weak point in his armour, and he was mortally wounded. He displayed considerable courage at the last, allowing himself to be propped up in his chariot all day, so that his men should not panic at the news of his fall. It was probably loss of blood that killed him. His courage saved a rout; but his death signalled the end of the campaign, and Ramoth-gilead remained in Syrian control.²³ Further south in Transjordan, the Moabites took heart from the Israelite failure at Ramoth-gilead, and proceeded to reassert their independence and to retrieve lost territory.

Jehoshaphat, as was noted above, was not amongst the confederate kings who fought the Assyrians at Qarqar; but he was Ahab's willing ally at Ramoth-gilead. Indeed, his willingness was so unreserved that it is sometimes suggested that Jehoshaphat was Ahab's vassal. Other biblical data rule out this possibility, however; both *Kings* and *Chronicles* make it clear not only that there was no warfare at any time between Ahab and Jehoshaphat, but also that Jehoshaphat was a reasonably strong king in his own right. Jehoshaphat's declaration to Ahab, "What is mine is yours; myself, my people and my horses", is somewhat reminiscent of Ruth's pledge to Naomi — "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" — which nobody could say was a pledge extracted from her under duress. A further parallel is that Ahab and Jehoshaphat were related by marriage, just as Ruth and Naomi were.

Jehoshaphat's strength was largely shown in the fact that his neighbours left him well alone, according to 2 Chronicles 17:10f. He brought security to his kingdom by means of well-planned military and administrative measures, as the same chapter relates. Y. Aharoni sets out²⁴ in map form the twelve administrative districts which it is widely thought that he instituted in Judah. In the south of his realm, he was able to control Edom and deny it a king of its own (cf. 1 Kings 22:47). He sought to utilize the port of Ezion-geber to the commercial and economic advantage of Judah, but a storm apparently wrecked his merchant fleet.

23. It should be mentioned that there is a tendency among present-day scholars (contrast Gray's first and second editions of *Kings*) to deny that "the king of Israel" of 1 Kings chapters 20 and particularly 22 was Ahab. It is true that Ahab's name is rarely mentioned in these chapters, and could be attributed to a late editor; but Jehoshaphat — Ahab's contemporary — is named with some frequency in chapter 22, and no convincing alternative possibility to Ahab has been suggested.

24. *MBA*, map 130. See also his discussion, in *LB*, pp. 297-304. The information from which the map is drawn is found in Joshua 15: 21-62.

Jehoshaphat's alliance with Ahab also brought him into conflict with the Moabites and their allies. It is difficult to be sure when exactly the Moabites embarked on their campaign to achieve their independence, and to carry the war into the enemy's camp. That Jehoshaphat was involved in the fight with Moab is beyond doubt, but it is not certain whether the Moabite revolt began before or after the death of Ahab. The Moabite king, Mesha, who ultimately emerged victorious, set up a triumphal stele which was discovered in the area in 1868, and which gives us full details of his campaign. The relevant parts of it read as follows: "Omri . . . oppressed Moab many days . . . And his son succeeded him and he too said, 'I will oppress Moab!' In my days he spoke thus, and I saw my desire upon him and upon his house."²⁵

If we take the reference to Omri's "son" literally, we must conclude that it was Ahab who bore the brunt of Mesha's attack, presumably at a time when Israel was fully stretched in holding the Syrians at bay. But in ancient Near Eastern literature, "son" was often used loosely for "descendant" or "successor" (even an unrelated one), so that one cannot be certain that Mesha's inscription really intended a reference to Ahab. (It is certainly impossible to take literally this inscription's reference to "forty years" of Israelite domination by Omri and his sons, since the whole dynasty of Omri reigned scarcely forty years!) On the other hand, the Bible's very concise remark that Mesha revolted after Ahab's death (2 Kings 1:1, 3:5) is not necessarily decisive; it may mean no more than that serious Israelite military operations did not take place till after Ahab's death, even though Mesha may have stopped paying tribute and started on his policy of expansion some time previously. At all events, whatever the precise chronology may have been, it is clear from 2 Kings 3 that the struggle with Moab lasted well into the reign of Ahab's son Jehoram; Ahab was briefly succeeded by his son Ahaziah, who apparently achieved little of note during his short reign except to fall out of an upper window, injuring himself fatally, and leaving the throne to his brother Jehoram.

Mesha's first move was undoubtedly to stop paying the high annual tribute demanded of him — 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams (2 Kings 3:4). He then set about retrieving lost territory, and pressing northwards, overran some of the territory of the Israelite tribe of Gad. The Israelite residents of Transjordan thus found themselves in danger of being crushed between Aramaean pressure from the north, and Moabite expansion from the south. The king of Israel was forced to take action eventually.

Jehoram laid his plans well; first of all he made it a joint campaign, utilizing like his father the new friendly relationship with

25. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 196.

Judah. Jehoshaphat was once again willing to offer troops, and his vassal, the king of Edom, was also pressed into service. The plan of campaign was equally shrewd; the allied force attempted to surprise Mesha by attacking his rear — marching right round the south of the Dead Sea, and invading Moab from the south. This was Edomite terrain, and the presence of an Edomite contingent was no doubt very valuable. The allied campaign proved initially successful; but when the Moabite king took the drastic step of offering his own crown-prince in sacrifice to the Moabite god Chemosh, the superstitions of the troops of Jehoram and his allies overcame their valour, and they withdrew, fighting a final battle at Horonaim, as the Moabites pursued their advantage.

Apparently the Moabites decided on reprisals against Judah; 2 Chronicles 20 records that they in turn mustered a confederate army and invaded, followed an unexpected route, almost certainly fording the Dead Sea at its narrowest point to reach the western shore some miles south of En-gedi. From En-gedi they marched toward Jerusalem; Jehoshaphat was ready for them, and marched to give battle near Tekoa. However, it appears that the confederates fell out among themselves, and Moabites, Ammonites, and “men of Seir” attacked each other savagely. Thus the danger to Jerusalem was averted; and Jehoshaphat took good care to scotch any future surprise attack of this sort by establishing forts at En-gedi and on Masada (a natural vantage-point dominating the ford which the Moabites must have used).²⁶

Of Jehoshaphat's successors, his son and his grandson, little need be said. It is unfortunate, that they bore the same names as Ahab's two sons who succeeded to the throne in Samaria — though they reigned in reverse order! In Jerusalem, Jehoram reigned before Ahaziah, in Samaria Ahaziah reigned before Jehoram!²⁷ Jehoram of Judah proved less able than his father, and he lost control of Edom, and with it the lucrative southern trade-routes. On his death, his wife Athaliah — Ahab's daughter — continued to exercise a dominant role in the state; evidently the queen-mother often held an important position in state affairs.²⁸ In any case, Ahaziah's reign was to be cut short very quickly, as we shall see.

The Israelite Jehoram lost control of Moab, as we have described. But it appears that he may have had some slight success on the Syrian front, because we read in 2 Kings 9:14 that the Israelites, by

26. Masada is best known nowadays because of its association with the final episode of the Jewish revolt against the Romans, AD 66-70. Masada was such an impregnable fortress that it held out against the Roman armies for a further three years or so.

27. In 2 Kings 8:16-29 the Israelite king is called “Jehoram”, the Judæan king “Joram” (an abbreviated form of the same name), to distinguish them, but these spellings are not used consistently.

28. Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*² (London, 1965), pp. 117ff.

the end of his reign, were defending Ramoth-gilead instead of attempting to capture it. The story of Naaman of 2 Kings 5 belongs to the reign of Jehoram; the story itself is too well known to need repeating here, but its political background is worth noting. The Israelite girl in Naaman's employ had been captured in a Syrian raid on Israel, we are told. But it is clear that there was no full-scale warfare between the two nations, at least at the time when Naaman could visit Israel — a Syrian general, carrying a "letter of commendation" from the king of Damascus to the king of Israel! On the other hand, Jehoram's rather worried reaction (2 Kings 5:7) indicates how tense relations still remained. Indeed, it may be that at some stage in his reign Samaria suffered yet another siege, which brought the city to the verge of starvation; but it is perhaps more likely that the narrative of 2 Kings 6:24-7:20 relates to a later date (and to a later Benhadad).²⁹ Be that as it may, hostilities broke out at Ramoth-gilead late in Jehoram's reign, and like his father before him, he put in a personal appearance at the battlefield; history again repeated itself when he was wounded, but there the coincidence ends. Unlike Ahab, Jehoram's wound was not fatal, and he retired to Jezreel in order to recuperate. His days were nevertheless numbered, and his throne in danger; but apparently there was little hint of the disaster to come, or else we may be sure that the king of Judah, Ahaziah, would have kept well out of the way. Instead, he paid a visit to Jezreel, and put his own head in a noose thereby. A whirlwind *coup d'état* eliminated both kings at one stroke.

If the *coup d'état* was swift and sudden, the forces that motivated it had not by any means materialized overnight. It is clear that the author of the Books of Kings considered the two prophetic figures of Elijah and Elisha as of considerably greater consequence than Omri and his successors on the throne of Israel. True, the biblical writer's interests were primarily religious, but the fact was that quite apart from these prophets' religious importance, both Elijah and Elisha were far from negligible as political figures in Israel. To a large extent, in fact, the fall of Omri's dynasty was due to their activities. But we must retrace our steps to the early years of Ahab's reign to see how the quarrel between king and prophet built up.

Perhaps the beginning of the conflict can be traced to a single event, the political marriage between Ahab and the Phoenician princess, Jezebel. Such unions for political advantage were no novelty in the ancient (or more recent) world; David himself had set the precedent in Israel. But the position of queen was a position of power and influence, for those who cared to take advantage of it, and Jezebel must have been a particularly strong character. One

29. See below, p. 154.

imagines that Ahab can scarcely have been a weakling, but in the biblical records Jezebel emerges as the dominant partner. Ahab, for his part, though we may well doubt whether he was ever notably devout, was quite content to observe the traditional worship of his own people, even if he did bow the knee to Baal as well when it suited him. His courtiers included prophets of Yahweh, and his two sons who succeeded him both bore names which incorporated the name of Israel's God (*Ahaziah* and *Jehoram*).

That Jezebel should wish to retain her own religion is not particularly surprising, and again there was precedent for that, in the provision made in Jerusalem for Solomon's Egyptian queen. But Jezebel was not content with a private chapel, nor with her husband's readiness to pay lip-service to Baal; she meant to dethrone the God of Israel, and make her Baal the chief deity and her faith the official state religion. There has been some discussion as to which "Baal" she revered,³⁰ but it would seem highly probable that the god of Tyre, known as Melqart, was the deity whose worship she sought to promote. Whether her militant advocacy of this foreign cult was for purely religious reasons is not so certain; it may be that much of her motivation derived from the fact that the prophets of Yahweh limited by constitutional right the powers of the king — and queen. In either case, she encountered the opposition of the Israelite prophets, and responded vigorously. Some were massacred, and at least 100 of them driven into hiding (cf. 1 Kings 18:4). Jezebel can have been in no doubt that she had won.

The abrupt appearance of Elijah heralded the fact that she had won no more than the first battle, even though his message to Ahab had no apparent bearing on the religio-political situation. He simply predicted a long drought (17:1), intimated that only he — as God's agent — could end it, and disappeared as abruptly as he had come. We find him — though Ahab could not! — in Jezebel's own home territory, Phoenicia, before long. There is magnificent dramatic irony here; in Phoenicia and in Israel alike, the official deity, Melqart, was shown to be powerless to control the elements, while the God of Israel could sustain his prophet, and others besides, as easily in Sidonian Zarephath as on Israelite soil. But of all this Ahab knew nothing; and he chose to ignore the fact that the drought was Yahweh's doing — so far as he was concerned, it was Elijah and Elijah alone who was the troubler of Israel.

The long drought (attested by the Greek writer Menander, so Josephus records)³¹ must have caused ordinary citizens no little hardship and distress, and made them at least dimly aware that *some* deity was letting them down. Melqart was equated with Baal in

30. See D. R. Ap-Thomas, *PEQ* 92 (1960), pp. 146-155.

31. *Ant.* viii, 13, 2.

4. Sargon II





Israel — the god of the weather. Where was he? Elijah's sarcastic challenge to Jezebel's prophets (1 Kings 18:27) will have struck a ready response in Israelite ears. No few of the ordinary citizens will also have resented Jezebel's rough handling of the prophets of Yahweh.

Thus the scene was set for the second round of the struggle. The contest took place on Mount Carmel, a wedge-shaped range of hills near the Mediterranean coast; the fine city of Haifa today lies on its lower slopes. It was renowned for its beauty and fertility, but presumably Elijah had other reasons than these for choosing it for his battleground. Indeed, it is not clear why it was chosen; there was good reason for Elijah to keep out of Jezebel's way, to be sure, but then neither Dan nor Bethel was at all close to the capital, and either would have served equally well from that point of view. Both Dan and Bethel were corrupt shrines, on the other hand, and probably Elijah wanted nothing to do with them. But the Carmel altar had been abandoned, and by repairing and using it Elijah would avoid giving any appearance of supporting an adulterated Yahweh-worship. We do not know when it had been abandoned, however, and it may be that Jezebel's recent policies had been responsible for its destruction, if 1 Kings 19:10 offers any clue; if so, Elijah's choice of Carmel may well have been symbolic. The choice may also have been strategic, for Carmel lay very close to the border with Phoenicia; the discomfiture of the prophets of Melqart on the very borders of his proper domain would speak for itself.

Many explanations of the miraculous fire which consumed Elijah's sacrifice have been proffered — none more ingenious (and improbable) than the suggestion that the "water" which doused the sacrifice was in reality naphtha! Lightning would still seem the most probable solution.³² However sceptical of miracles some modern readers may be, it must at least be beyond doubt that something startling occurred, to give Elijah the unanimous popular support which enabled him to exterminate the idolatrous priesthood. Nor could the whole chapter be dismissed as legend, for it would leave far too little basis for the great reputation which clung to Elijah's name ever afterwards.

Probably Elijah hoped that his Carmel victory would force Jezebel's hand, since it would show the strength of popular resistance to the religion she was seeking to enforce, and since the cultic officials had been decimated. But possibly he would have been better advised not to shed blood, despite the provocation, for then the feud that arose between the court and himself and his followers might

32. There has been some discussion of the possibility of lightning from "a clear blue sky". But the fact that the sky was clear when Elijah went to the summit (verses 42ff.) does not necessarily imply that it had been clear all day.

have been avoided. It may not be without significance that the biblical writer does not suggest that the Lord instructed Elijah to slaughter the Baal-prophets. . . .

Whatever might have been, the reality was that Elijah did resort to bloodshed, following Jezebel's precedent, and she responded promptly with a threat on his life. Elijah fled; clearly he placed no confidence in the popular support he had just elicited at Carmel. His wilderness encounter with God (1 Kings 19) taught him the power of the spoken word. He was instructed, we are told, to "anoint" a new king in the Syrian kingdom of Damascus, a new king in Israel, and finally a new prophet, Elisha, to be his own successor. It has often been pointed out that he did not literally obey any one of these three instructions; he did appoint Elisha, though not by anointing, but he left it to Elisha to carry out the other two commands. However, we should not be too literalistic in our reading of the passage. The point was that Elijah, the rugged individualist, was from now on to adopt a different policy; hurricane, earthquake, drought and lightning, devastating though they may be at the time, do not carry the same power of conviction as the quiet word of reason and persuasion. From now on Elijah must ensure continuity and co-operation in building up a popular front, headed by Elisha and the prophetic bands ("the sons of the prophets"), against Ahab and his court, and even influence the affairs of Damascus, as opportunity presented itself, with the same objective in view. A show-down must come, in which many lives would be lost; in that sense Elisha wielded a sword as much as did Hazael of Damascus and Jehu, the future king of Israel.³³

The prophetic bands were well placed to preach to the populace, for they were located at sanctuary-cities like Bethel (cf. 2 Kings 2). But their message was not limited to religious considerations; the foreign gods of Jezebel could not be divorced from the foreign ways she sought to introduce. The marked difference between her conception of royal rule and the traditional ways of Israel was high-lighted by the Naboth affair (1 Kings 21). Nowadays, of course, Naboth would have lost his vineyard by compulsory purchase order, as H. L. Ellison has aptly remarked,³⁴ but apparently under Israel's laws Ahab could do nothing to circumvent Naboth's curt refusal to sell the property which adjoined the royal residence in Jezreel. Ahab was content to sulk; the law was the law. Jezebel was incredulous: "You make a fine king of Israel, and no mistake!" (1 Kings 21:7, JB), she exclaimed. There were other laws about property, such as the one that made an executed criminal's holdings forfeit to the crown, and

33. For a useful discussion of 1 Kings 18, see H. H. Rowley, *Men of God* (London, 1963), pp. 37-65.

34. *The Prophets of Israel* (Exeter, 1969), p. 31.

before long Jezebel saw to it that Ahab gained the piece of land he fancied. The ordinary citizen was not safe while Jezebel controlled affairs in Samaria, though perhaps many failed to realise the fact, in view of the apparent legality of Naboth's trial and execution. But Elijah took a hand. While his denunciation and threats made no difference in the short term, they served two immediate purposes: they brought the Naboth affair to public notice, and they made it clear that Elijah championed the cause of the ordinary citizen. It took time, but eventually there were fully 7,000 in Israel who repudiated the worship of Melqart, and with it the rule of Ahab and his queen.

Elijah could never have settled at court, if only because Jezebel would not have tolerated it, but his successor Elisha acquired a house in Samaria, where he could be in contact with the court. He must have worked subtly and secretly for the overthrow of Omri's dynasty, meanwhile claiming the right exercised from the very beginning of the Hebrew monarchy for prophets to have an official voice at court. Much of his ministry, it appears, was not in itself political, but consisted simply of helping ordinary folk in time of trouble, so demonstrating God's love and power; for those who chose to consider the implications, however, it was a reminder of the powerlessness of the gods of Jezebel, and a call to worship Yahweh, to whom alone their national covenant obligations were due.

At last Elisha found that the time had come to act decisively. The king of Damascus, who had achieved little against Israel in recent years, fell ill. Elisha immediately went to Damascus, and put it into the mind of Hazael, a mere palace official or courtier at the time, to seize the Syrian throne. So Hazael became king; the Assyrians disparagingly termed him "a son of nobody",³⁵ but his lack of royal blood was more than compensated for by his military ability. He at once put strong pressure on the Israelite army at Ramoth-gilead. The Israelite forces there, we may safely assume, were "demoralized by Israel's long and costly war with Damascus, dissatisfied with the weak leadership of Joram, and resentful of the luxurious indolence of the court in Samaria."³⁶ The Israelite king, true, was prepared to leave his court and grace the battlefield, but he was wounded and retired to Jezreel to recuperate. That left the way open for the army's discontent to mature; and Elisha again moved decisively, sending a young prophet to anoint a high-ranking army officer at Ramoth-gilead, Jehu by name, as the next king of Israel. Jehu required no second bidding, and his speed of action more than matched Elisha's. Enjoining secrecy, he pursued Jehoram to Jezreel as fast as he could.

35. Cf. *ANET*, p. 280.

36. E. W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms*, (London, 1968), p. 90.

Jehoram must have been astonished to see troops approaching his Jezreel residence, and even more so to see that Jehu had deserted his post at Ramoth-gilead. Probably fearful that the city had fallen to Hazael, he enquired urgently whether all was well. But Jehu, deliberately misinterpreting the question, responded that all was far from well as long as Jezebel — Jehoram's mother — was alive and active, and he thereupon killed the king with a single arrow. The king of Judah, Ahaziah, who had been visiting Jehoram, was quick to flee, but the blood-thirsty Jehu ordered his death too; in fact, the small party from Judah escaped, but not before Ahaziah received a wound from which he died only a few miles away. It is difficult to see what advantage Jehu hoped to gain from his death, unless he feared that Ahaziah would seek to avenge his near relative's death. Jehu's next victim at Jezreel was Jezebel, who at least met her end with courage. Having thus superintended personally the deaths of the king and the powerful queen mother, Jehu proceeded to engineer from a safe distance the massacre of all Ahab's surviving kith and kin in Samaria. So perished the dynasty of Omri, and soon afterwards the last vestige of the foreign idolatrous cult was eradicated. The prophets had won the day — or had they?