

A Reconstruction of Moabite-Israelite History

GARY RENDSBURG
Canisius College

As known from both the Mesha Stele (MS) and the Bible (cf. 2 Kgs. 1:1, 3:5 ff., 13:20, 2 Chr. 20:1 ff.), the Israelites and the Moabites engaged in a series of wars during the 9th century B.C.E. How are these battles to be unscrambled so that they fit into a coherent, chronological picture? This paper is an attempt to solve that question. It shall offer a new reconstruction of the Israelite-Moabite wars, including the hitherto neglected role of the prophet Elisha.

As most scholars have recognized, one major historical fact that is learned from the MS is that sometime after the death of Solomon, Moab freed itself from the vassalage imposed by David (2 Sam. 8:2-3). This is inferred from MS:7-8 where it is stated that "Omri had taken possession of the land of Medeba," or northern Moab. For Omri to have conquered part of Moab, the country must have been independent from Israelite rule. Given Israel's weakness during the Jeroboam-Nadab, Baasa-Elah, and Zimri "dynasties" that preceded Omri, Moabite independence was probably achieved with relative ease. Exactly when Moab freed itself is not known, though most believe it to have occurred during Jeroboam's break when internal Israelite affairs were most propitious for a Moabite rebellion.¹

When Omri conquered Moab, he occupied only the northern part of the country and even allowed the Moabite kings to continue to rule, although he did exact tribute. The first can be inferred from the fact that a city such as Kerioth appears to have been allowed to remain Moabite (MS:13), and the second is known from 2 Kgs. 3:4. It is interesting to note that perhaps Omri's greatest accomplishment—the subjugation of Moab—is known not from the Bible, but from the MS!²

¹ Thus, Hayim Tadmor in H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 108; John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London, 1972), 228; E. W. Heaton, *The Hebrew Kingdoms* (London, 1968), 6; and Roland E. Murphy, "Israel and Moab in the Ninth Century B.C.," *CBQ* 15 (1953), 412. For the minority view that Moab never freed itself from Israelite rule, but instead continued to pay tribute until Mesha's time, see Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (London, 1960), 227-28, 244. Herbert Donner in John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History* (Philadelphia, 1977), 386, noted both possibilities.

² Similarly, Ahab's military prowess at the battle of Qarqar is known not from the Bible but from Assyrian sources; see James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, 1969), 279. These

Although both 2 Kgs. 1:1 and 2 Kgs. 3:5 state that Mesha rebelled against Israel after Ahab's death, MS:8, *wyšb bh ymh whšy ymy bnh*, "and (Israel) dwelt there (in Medeba) during his (Omri's) day and half of his son's days," suggests that Moab revolted while Ahab was still alive. The latter is more generally accepted and the rebellion is usually dated to the end of Ahab's reign,³ when Israel was at war with both Assyria and Aram in the north. The employment of Israelite forces in the north no doubt depleted Ahab's army in the south and Moab would have been able to free itself from Israelite rule.

A sound presentation for Mesha's rebellion coming after Ahab's death has been forwarded by Bayla Bonder. Based on a translation of *bnh* in MS:8 as "his sons," Bonder dated the revolt to the reign of Ahaziah.⁴ Regardless how many troops Ahab employed in his northern battles, Bonder felt that Ahab was too strong a ruler for Moab even to attempt a revolt. When Ahab died, he was replaced by his son, Ahaziah, whose two-year reign was characterized by political weakness (1 Kgs. 22:49-50) and personal illness (2 Kgs. 1:2f). This would also have been a good time for Mesha to rebel.⁵ Moreover, this adheres to the Biblical text.

Mesha's war with Israel was distinguished by expert military strategy and a reckless ruthlessness against his enemy. Mesha's first step was to advance northward along the King's Highway and conquer Medeba and the neighboring cities of Baal-meon and Kiriathaim (MS:8-10). By so doing, Mesha split the Israelite fortifications and gained full control of Moab's major thoroughfare.

Mesha next attacked Ataroth, a major Israelite city where "the men of Gad had settled" years before (MS:10-11). Mesha was successful and showed no mercy on the Gadites as he slaughtered them (MS:11-12). Mesha next attacked Nebo (MS:14-15). Again he was successful and again he slaughtered all the Israelites (MS:15-16). Finally, Mesha captured Jahaz (MS:20), an Israelite fortress in eastern Moab on the edge of the desert, and his country was freed of all enemy troops.

J. Liver noted that never in the MS is there mention of Mesha encountering any "Israelite forces in open battle."⁶ His only opposition appears to have come from local citizenry or military outposts, and never was there an Israelite counterattack.⁷ Moreover, Moab's forces could not have been very large, for no vassal state had much of a standing army.⁸ Indeed, Mesha was able to capture Jahaz, an Israelite fortification

omissions may be explained by our author's desire to suppress any information on the accomplishments of kings whose policies he disapproves of, lest one think that those whom Yahweh condemns may also enjoy success.

3 Thus, for example, Heaton, *Hebrew Kingdoms*, 82; John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, Vol. I (Oxford, 1971), 71; S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford, 1913), lxxviii, xciv; Benjamin Mazar, "Mêša", *Enzyklopedie Miqra'it*, Vol. IV (Jerusalem, 1962), 922; and A. H. Van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Leiden, 1960), 139.

4 Bayla Bonder, "Mesha's Rebellion Against Israel," *JANES* 3 (1970-1971), 88.

5 Apparently agreeing with this dating of the rebellion, Edward L. Greenstein and David Marcus, "The Akkadian Inscription of Idrimi," *JANES* 8 (1976), 64, compared Mesha's revolt upon the accession of a new king in Israel to the attack on Idrimi "as soon as he established himself as King of Alalah." Needless to say, there are many such instances of this phenomenon in world history, both ancient and modern.

6 J. Liver, "The Wars of Mesha, King of Moab," *PEQ* 99 (1967), 22.

7 Loc. cit.

8 Loc. cit.

no less, with just two hundred men (MS:20). This harks back to my earlier contention that the Moabite revolt probably came at a time when most—if not all—of Israel's army was fighting in the north, and thus dating the revolt to late in Ahab's reign may be correct.

Liver also suggested that the slaughters mentioned in MS:11 and MS:16 "was Mesha's consistent policy towards the captured Israelite population."⁹ This is probably correct, but it need be mentioned that he also took some Israelites captive and enslaved them in an exhaustive building program (MS:25). Though only the term "Israelites" is used, we can assume they too were Gadites. Although Reubenites also lived in the area, they were an insignificant tribe who did little more than raise herds and thus only the Gadites are mentioned in the MS.¹⁰ I mention this fact only to recall it later in discussing the activity of Elisha. Thus Mesha's policy was probably to keep alive as many people as he needed for slaves and to kill the remainder.

The aforementioned building program is described in great detail in the MS. Among those activities mentioned are repairing the acropolis, repairing city gates and towers, repairing the king's palace, creating reservoirs, building cisterns, and mending the King's Highway (MS:21-26). Mesha also rebuilt and fortified a series of towns along Moab's northern frontier (MS:9-10, 29-30). Such a public works project needed a sizable task force and the Israelite captives were a ready asset.

It also appears that Mesha moved the capital of Moab from the traditional Kir-hareseth in the south to a new city called Dibon in the north. One of Dibon's excavators, A. D. Tushingham, noted that "the earliest occupation of the mound coincides almost exactly with the floruit of Mesha."¹¹ The MS reflects this as well. Mesha states that he built "this high place for Chemosh" (MS:3) suggesting that Dibon may have been a new city. MS:24-25 also seems to bear this out, as Mesha commands the residents of *qrhw* (= Dibon) to make cisterns for their homes. Furthermore, he calls himself "the Dibonite" (MS:1-2), perhaps alluding to the fact that he built the city and made it his capital.

Two more of Dibon's excavators, Fred V. Winnett and William L. Reed, noted that "the two features of a water conservation program at Dibon proposed by King Mesha, namely, reservoirs and cisterns, have been amply illustrated by excavations."¹² Finally, excavations at Aroer "have revealed the technical skill of the Moabites in building strongholds, watchtowers, [and] walled cities."¹³ In short, Mesha's statements were not merely boastful propaganda but rather correct facts as revealed by the spade 2800 years later. With the completion of his building program, Mesha had turned Moab from a small vassel state to a powerful kingdom within one generation.

Throughout this period, Moab's neighbor to the south, Edom, had been under

9 Ibid, 25.

10 Bright, *History*, 132, went so far as to state that "Reuben, its Transjordanian holdings exposed to Moabite depredations, virtually vanished from history by the eleventh century," i.e., 200 years before the events described in the MS.

11 A. D. Tushingham, "The Excavations at Dibon (Dhiban) in Moab," *AASOR* 40 (1972), 24.

12 Fred V. Winnett and William L. Reed, "The Excavations at Dibon (Dhiban) in Moab," *AASOR* 36-37 (1957-1958), 66.

13 Bustanay Oded, "Moab," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 12 (Jerusalem, 1971), 191.

Judahite rule. Mesha saw in Edom a relatively weak state which he believed was encroaching upon Moabite land. Much has been written on the ambiguous and incomplete final lines of the MS, but with A. H. Van Zyl,¹⁴ I take MS:31-33 to refer to the Edomites and Moab's subjugation of them.

The subjugation of the Edomites was also an attack on Judah, which had ruled Edom since David's time. This war on Judah is described in 2 Chr. 20, where it is stated that Moab, Ammon, and Edom all attacked Judah. Moab, as the most powerful of the three, was the instigator of the invasion. Ammon, as its kindred nation, was persuaded to join, and Edom, as subject to Moab, was forced to join.

But Judah turned out to be more powerful than Israel, a fact which the Moabites (and Ammonites) realized when they reached Tekoa. Mesha, still the cruel warmonger depicted earlier, thus turned (with Ammon) to further make war with Edom (2 Chr. 20:23). If it be argued that Moab had no need to attack its subject state Edom, then perhaps an Edomite insurrection caused the battle, a fact excluded from Chronicles as unimportant. As merciless as Mesha had been with the Israelites, so he was with the Edomites. Years later, a prophet from Tekoa, namely Amos, recalled the event when he stated that the Moabites burned the bones of the Edomite king (Amos 2:1-2) not even affording him a "decent burial" as it were.¹⁵

Soon after this event must have come the attack on Moab by the triple alliance of Israel, Judah, and Edom (2 Kgs. 3). Each of the three had a specific reason to battle Moab. Israel was seeking revenge for the massacres of Atharoth, Nebo, etc. Judah wanted to show Moab that they could not get away with their attack—after all, they had marched as far as Tekoa, just ten miles from Jerusalem. Edom was avenging the Moabite wars against them and of course the killing of their king.

It is interesting to note that Jehoram is king of Israel at this time. If, as many scholars believe, this alliance took place immediately after Mesha's revolt and without the transpiring events I have included, why is Ahaziah not king of Israel, regardless of the date of the revolt? There must be an explanation for Jehoram's presence, namely that Moab's subjugation of Edom, attack on Judah, and second attack on Edom occurred before the triple alliance against Moab.¹⁶

The first step was to decide by which route to attack Moab. For several reasons, the

¹⁴ Van Zyl, *The Moabites*, 143.

¹⁵ I am well aware that burning the deceased's bones was also considered a sign of honoring the dead, e.g., the men of Jabesh-gilead burned Saul's corpse in 1 Sam. 31:12-13, the Achaeans burned Patroclus' corpse in Iliad 23:208-225, and the Trojans burned Hector's corpse in Iliad 24:786-787. Amos himself may even refer to the custom in Amos 6:10 (so *KJV*, *JPSV*, though *NJPSV* takes this to refer to burning incense for the dead). On "Homeric burning" see Cyrus H. Gordon, "Indo-European and Hebrew Epic," *Eretz-Israel* 5 (Benjamin Mazar Festschrift) (1958), 11*; *idem*, *Homer and Bible* (Ventnor, N.J., 1967), 53-54; *idem*, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York, 1965), 18. In Amos 2:1-2, however, the practice is vigorously condemned as a heinous crime parallel to Edom's attacking his brother with the sword, Ammon's ripping open pregnant women, and Judah's spurning God's law. In this regard, Heaton, *Hebrew Kingdoms*, 268, has inferred from Lev. 20:14 that denying a body decent burial by burning it "was an act of desecration reserved for criminals."

¹⁶ Accordingly, the narrative in 2 Kgs. 3 must be divided into two distinct parts, separated in time. Verses 4-5 relate Mesha's revolt and verses 6-27 relate the triple alliance, but the events in 2 Chr. 20:1-30 intervene. There seems to me no other way to explain the presence of Jehoram and not Ahab or Ahaziah in

southern route was chosen. First of all, it would more openly involve the Edomites. Secondly, the northern border was heavily fortified as detailed in the MS¹⁷ and the Moabites could also rely on their Ammonite brethren to assist them. A third reason is also worth suggesting. It is possible that the account in 2 Kgs. 3 is a counterattack on the Moabite incursion described in 2 Chr. 20. Thus the Moabites (and Ammonites) would be retreating home around the southern end of the Dead Sea and the allies sought to pursue them.

As was customary in ancient Israel, before proceeding to battle the armies sought out a prophet to receive an oracle. In this case, Elisha was consulted and his response is noteworthy. First of all, it should be noted that this is the first instance in the Bible where Elisha acted on his own and not under the tutelage of his mentor Elijah. Elisha responds that the allies will be successful, but more significant is his call for the allies to “smite every fortified city, and every choice city, and [to] fell every good tree, and stop all fountains of water (Heb. *ma^cay^onê mayim*; cf. MS:23, *m^cyn*), and mar every good piece of land with stones” (2 Kgs. 3:19).

Elisha’s words are extremely harsh, and it is no coincidence that he calls on Israel and Judah to ruin the cities and water system of Moab. According to the MS, it was exactly these things that the Israelite slaves in Moab had built. As mentioned earlier, these Israelites were from Gad, which may further explain Elisha’s harshness. As is well known, Elisha’s teacher, Elijah, was from Gad, as is evidenced by the term *mittôšavê gil^cad* (1 Kgs. 17:1). What has not been recognized is that Elisha too was from Gad. 1 Kgs. 19:16 states only that he was from Abel-meholah, which most geographers have placed west of the Jordan near Beth Shean. But the foremost explorer of Transjordan, Nelson Glueck, placed it in Gilead, identifying Abel-meholah with present-day Tell al-Maqlûb.¹⁸ The *Oxford Bible Atlas* accepts Glueck’s identification and unquestionably locates the town east of the Jordan in the heart of Gilead.¹⁹ Assuming Glueck is correct—and his arguments are quite cogent—then Elisha too would have been a Gadite. When Elisha called on the allies to devastate Moab, he was speaking not only with a nationalistic chauvinism but also with a tribal pride.

Elisha’s prophecy was correct and the allies totally ravaged the Moabite terrain. Only one city was left unconquered and that was Kir-hareseth, the traditional Moabite capital. Thus even Dibon, apparently the “new” capital of Mesha, was subdued. Glueck, who spent several seasons exploring Moab in the 1930’s, wrote:

From about the middle of the Early Iron II Moab entered upon a rapid decline. There is an extreme paucity of pottery from the latter half of EI II. Moab does not seem to have recovered from the destruction wrought by [Israel and Judah] . . . Many of the cities destroyed were probably never rebuilt.²⁰

2 Kgs 3:6. Bright, *History*, 244, explained Jehoram’s presence by dating the Moabite rebellion to his reign and not to either Ahab’s or Ahaziah’s, but this raises more difficulties than it solves.

17 Bright, *History*, 244, placed the coalition attack on Moab *before* Mesha’s incursion into Gadite Israel and his fortification of Moab’s northern border. But if northern Moab was still controlled by Israel, it seems likely that Jehoram would have attacked Moab from the north.

18 Nelson Glueck, “Three Israelite Towns in the Jordan Valley: Zarethan, Succoth, Zaphon,” *BASOR* 90 (1943), 10–12.

19 Herbert G. May, ed., *Oxford Bible Atlas* (London, 1968), 61, 62, 65, 69, 73, 117.

20 Nelson Glueck, “Explorations in Eastern Palestine, I,” *AASOR* 14 (1933-1934), 82. As far as I know,

Glueck's archaeological evidence is supported by a Biblical reference as well. From 2 Kgs. 10:32-33, it is inferred that Moab never did regain its former territory and that Israel retained much of it, or at least that land north of Aroer near the Arnon River. Moreover, since Moab is not mentioned by Shalmaneser III, who ruled between 858-824, we can assume it truly was an insignificant kingdom.²¹

This phase of Moabite-Israelite relations ended with the death of Elisha as noted in 2 Kgs. 13:20. The text mentions that immediately after Elisha's burial, marauding Moabite bands began invading Israel. We can surmise that Moab had no armed forces anymore and that their entire military strength was centered around groups of hoodlums. It is also possible that the Moabites feared Elisha so much due to his prophecy, that they remained at home until his death.

Whether Mesha was still king of Moab at the time of the allies' devastation and Moab's subsequent weakness is not known. The last event which can be certainly dated to his reign is the Moabite subjugation of Edom. If he died soon thereafter, we can characterize his reign as quite successful. If on the other hand Mesha lived to see the destruction of his country, then for sure his long and eventful reign ended in disaster and must be labeled an ultimate failure. Of course from the ancients' viewpoint, the fact that Kir-hareseth was never captured was considered a victory for the Moabites, not a defeat (2 Kgs. 3:27).²²

To summarize this reconstruction of a portion of Moab's and Israel's history:

- A. Moab freed itself from Israelite rule not long after Solomon's death (inferred from MS:4-8).
- B. Omri subjugated Moab, occupied the northern part of the country, and exacted tribute (MS:4-8, 2 Kgs. 3:4).
- C. Mesha led a successful revolt either during or after Ahab's reign, slaughtered and enslaved the Israelites, and rebuilt Moab (MS:7-10, 2 Kgs. 3:5).²³
- D. Mesha subjugated Edom and attacked Judah (MS:31-33, 2 Chr. 20)
- E. Moab turned from Judah and instead fought again with Edom (2 Chr. 20:23).

J. Maxwell Miller's current survey of Moab has not contravened Glueck's conclusion vis-à-vis Early Iron II. See provisionally his "Archaeological Survey of Central Moab: 1978," *BASOR* 234 (1979), 43-52.

21 Van Zyl, *The Moabites*, 146, n. 1. Of course the same may be concluded of Judah, since it too is not mentioned by Shalmaneser III.

22 This is additional proof for dating the triple alliance after the events in the MS. If the Biblical author considered the battle of Kir-hareseth a victory for the Moabites, then certainly Mesha did too. Since it is inconceivable that he would have neglected to mention this battle in his victory stele, the suggestion by Donner, *History*, 408, that the MS may have been set up after Jehoram's rule and the fall of the house of Omri, should be discarded. Gibson, *Textbook*, 71, wrote that we need not "accept Mesha's inscription as wholly accurate. Thus it makes no mention of the siege of Kir-hareseth (el-Kerak), which is prominent in the story in Kings." The reconstruction presented herein alleviates this objection.

23 I am aware that until now I have not commented on the famous crux in MS:8, *ʾrbʿn ʿst* 'forty years.' With the majority of scholars I do not take this figure literally, rather as a stereotyped number representing an undetermined length of time, perhaps a generation or two. Thus Bonder, 87-88; Gibson, *Textbook*, 79; Murphy, 413-14; and Liver, 19. Attempts to interpret this figure literally, such as those by E. Lipiński,

- F. Israel, Judah, and Edom attacked Moab and ransacked the country (2 Kgs. 3:6-27).²⁴
- G. Moab returned to its former status as a relatively insignificant state (inferred from 2 Kgs. 10:32-33, 2 Kgs. 13:20, and the silence of the annals of Shalmaneser III).

"Etymological and Exegetical Notes on the Meša' Inscription," *Or.* 40 (1971), 330-32; and G. Wallis, "Die vierzig Jahre der achten Zeile der Mesa-Inschrift," *ZDPV* 81 (1965), 180-86, are forced into chronological gymnastics and therefore should *a priori* be rejected. On a related issue arising out of MS:7, I see no reference here to the end of the Omride dynasty.

²⁴ This reconstruction should also lay to rest the objection of Noth, *History*, 236, that 2 Kgs. 3 "is very obscure historically and difficult to elucidate."