

CHAPTER 8

Syria Rampant

FROM the religious point of view, Jehu was raised up to punish and to outroot the idolatry fostered in Israel by Omri's successors and Jezebel in particular. So much had been the word of the Lord to Elijah. But Jehu himself was not one of the prophets, and at the moment of time when he organized the death of the last members of Ahab's family it was by no means self-evident what he represented, apart from his own personal ambitions and interests. Jehu was in full control, with the army's backing, and it remained to be seen what his policies would be. It was clear to him that the previous dynasty's downfall had been due to their willingness to embrace foreign ways of life; very well, he would ally himself with the most conservative elements in Israelite life. He therefore sought out the leader of an extremely conservative, indeed extremist group, the Rechabites. We know from Jeremiah 35 that these folk still pursued the nomadic ideal, refusing to live in houses or to enjoy any of the fruits of civilization, and served Yahweh with a zeal that bordered on fanaticism. They would have no qualms about bloodshed in what they considered a good cause. But in making alliance with them, Jehu seems to have by-passed the prophets, probably deliberately.

Reaching his capital, Jehu announced that he meant to support the foreign Baal cult of Jezebel, which was a credible pose, and so succeeded in assembling together every priest and devotee of Melqart. He then slaughtered every man of them without compunction, and ensured that this form of idolatry could never recur by destroying and desecrating the temple of Melqart and every article sacred to it. "Thus Jehu stamped out the worship of Baal in Israel" (2 Kings 10:28).

By these means Jehu eliminated every rival (his dynasty was to

last much longer than any other in Israel) and sought to enlist the support of the conservative elements of the population. It soon became apparent, however, that his support of Yahweh-worship was for political ends only; as the author of Kings puts it, "Jehu was not careful to follow the law of the LORD the God of Israel with all his heart" (10:31). In the situation of the time, nobody would have expected him to spare potential enemies, and his attack on Ahab's successors had had the divine blessing pronounced upon it in advance; but Jehu showed a ruthlessness and blood-lust that was unforgivable by any standards. 2 Kings 10 records how he slaughtered the nobility and the friends of the previous court, and also a fresh group of men of Judah who chanced to make an innocent visit to Jezreel. The prophets could not condone this sort of wanton brutality, and a century later one of their number still recalled with horror the murders committed at Jezreel.¹ We cannot even credit Jehu with a desire to put right the social wrongs and religious syncretism which had developed in recent years.

If Jehu had secured his own position inside Israel, he had done untold harm to the international position of his kingdom. He had deserted his post at Ramoth-gilead, and left the king of Damascus free to overrun all the Transjordanian territories: "In those days the LORD began to work havoc on Israel, and Hazael struck at them in every corner of their territory eastwards from the Jordan" (2 Kings 10:32f.). He had lost every ally the previous dynasty had won; if Phoenicia could have overlooked the death of Jezebel, Judah would certainly not readily forgive the death of her king, Ahaziah. Meanwhile in Samaria itself, every statesman and administrator of ability and experience had been killed off.

No king can afford to weaken his realm in order to strengthen his own position, but Jehu did just that. If he had nobody he need fear in Israel, there were those outside Israel's frontiers whom he had every reason to fear, and this grim truth was very quickly brought home to him. He came to power in 841 BC; that very year he was utterly humiliated by the Assyrians, who were still ruled by Shalmaneser III. Under Ahab, Israel had acquitted herself reasonably well twelve years earlier, at the battle of Qarqar; the kingdom of Damascus, now under Hazael, was as able to hold out against the Assyrian armies as she had been at Qarqar, and indeed it may have been due to Hazael's relative strength that the Assyrians decided to turn their attention westwards.² But Jehu could not offer the slightest show of strength, and he had no option but to pay the tribute imposed upon him by Shalmaneser. The tribute was not

1. Cf. Hosea 1:4f.

2. Shalmaneser claims that he besieged Damascus, but he did not take the city (*ANET*, p. 280).

large, as it turned out: "silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase, golden cups, golden buckets", with one or two other other items, are listed. (The source of our information is a limestone obelisk found at Nimrud, the biblical Calah, on which Shalmaneser records some of his military successes.) Perhaps Jehu made light of it; but the fact remains that his humiliation was recorded in visible form for all time. The same Assyrian monument³ depicts Jehu kneeling prostrate before the Assyrian monarch. We know of no other contemporary representation of any king of Israel or Judah; Solomon in all his glory is left to our imaginations; Jehu in all his humiliation is graven in the rock for ever. (See plate 2 facing p. 49.)

The Bible is silent on this episode, and Shalmaneser's record is laconic in its brevity; hence an alternative interpretation must be allowed, namely that Jehu voluntarily paid tribute to the Assyrians, in an effort to secure their help against Hazael. If so, the Assyrians did nothing to help, and on the whole it seems more likely that Jehu had no option in the matter. Excavations at Hazor in upper Galilee seem to show that Shalmaneser now attacked and destroyed it, which would obviously mean that Jehu tried to resist the Assyrians. But even if he paid tribute of his own free choice, his humiliation was none the less for that.

In passing, it is intriguing to note that the Assyrian king set up his royal monument at a place on the Mediterranean coast called Ba'li-ra'si, which has been identified with the Mount Carmel headland.⁴ So here where through Elijah Yahweh had achieved a signal victory a few years before, the Assyrians now demonstrated to both Phoenicia and Israel who was the most powerful human ruler in the whole region. However, after token tribute and the symbolic act of erecting this monument, Shalmaneser marched back to Assyria with his armies, and left Phoenicia, Israel, and Damascus to their own devices.

Meanwhile what of Judah? It is strange how frequently the history of one Hebrew kingdom mirrors that of the other. Jehu's *coup d'état* in Samaria was followed by a double *coup* in Jerusalem. However, there is a clear and direct connection between the two events. In the Northern Kingdom, as we have seen, the bloodthirstiness of Jezebel was replaced by that of Jehu. In the south, the primary factor in the chain of events were the bloodthirstiness of Jezebel's daughter, Athaliah, and the typically bloodthirsty intervention of Jehu.

Athaliah had married the crown prince of Judah during the reign of Jehoshaphat to cement the newly-forged alliance between Israel (ruled by Ahab) and Judah. She was Ahab's daughter, we know, but

3. The Black Obelisk is now in the British Museum. For the text, see *DOTT*, p. 48.

4. Y. Aharoni, *LB*, p. 310.

it is nowhere recorded that Jezebel was her mother. J. Bright⁵ has shown reasons for doubting that Jezebel was her mother, but it seems hard to imagine that anyone other than Jezebel's daughter could have been such a replica of the Phoenician queen in both creed and conduct. Like Jezebel in Samaria, Athaliah sought to introduce idolatry in Jerusalem itself, probably the same cult of the Phoenician god Melqart, and would brook no opposition. Her husband Jehoram gave her no trouble when he came to the throne; and on his death Athaliah as queen-mother was in a powerful position to dominate her son, the new king Ahaziah. He, however, had a very short reign, since he was murdered by Jehu, as we have seen. We do not know who might have succeeded him in the normal course of events; the royal line of Judah had suffered tragedy of late. First, Jehoram, Athaliah's husband, had eliminated every potential rival to the throne; secondly, a raid on Jerusalem by Philistines and others had swept away most of Jehoram's own family (cf. 2 Chronicles 21:16f.); and now Jehu had murdered not only Ahaziah but some forty-two of his "kinsmen" (2 Kings 10:12ff.). Athaliah now determined to compound this iniquity, by taking the throne herself and murdering all the survivors of the royal line of David. Presumably she had no sons of her own;⁶ and she meant no sons of any other queen to survive. The line of David almost came to an abrupt end in this fashion, but unknown to Athaliah there was a single survivor, a baby boy, Joash by name, who was rescued by his aunt and hidden away by the priests in the temple of Yahweh. Athaliah's partisans had no respect for the temple, and broke into it to ransack its treasures to enhance the Baal cult; but they never suspected the existence of Joash, and he remained unharmed, brought up safely by the chief priest, Jehoiada, who happened to be the husband of the boy's rescuer.

Athaliah must have ruled with an iron hand, but there was no lasting strength in her position. We may guess that her supporters were either time-servers or foreigners. The ordinary citizens of Judah had no love for her, and must have resented much that she had done, but they were in a dilemma. By now the line of David was part and parcel of the constitution of Judah, and there appeared to be no survivor of the dynasty — undoubtedly the very existence of Joash must have been the best-kept secret — while Athaliah was by legal right the queen-mother. So law-abiding citizens seemed to have no alternative but to endure Athaliah. Even the prophets were silent.

Six years passed uneventfully, though evidently during this time Jehoiada sought to build up some sort of opposition to Athaliah.

5. *op. cit.*, p. 238 n. 41.

6. But see 2 Chronicles 24:7 (NEB).

Finally, when he judged the time to be ripe, he made sure he had sufficient military strength to win the day:

The dramatic story of the overthrow and death of Athaliah is told in detail in 2 Kings 11, retold in 2 Chronicles 23. This *coup d'état* was very different from Jehu's in the north. It was inspired not by the prophets but by the chief priest; it was carried through with a minimum of bloodshed; and far from displacing and destroying a dynasty, it replaced on the throne a true son of David — the seven-year-old Joash. There was popular rejoicing: "the whole people rejoiced and the city was tranquil" (2 Kings 11:20).

But the sorry chain of events had weakened Judah as much as Israel. The whole region between Egypt and the northern Euphrates had broken up into small, mutually hostile or suspicious kingdoms. Judah had not only suffered a raid on Jerusalem itself by Philistines and others, she had lost control of Edom, and with it her access to the Gulf of Aqaba and her port of Ezion-geber; Joash could do nothing to reverse this loss, and his kingdom was thrown back on its own limited resources throughout his reign.

The Syrian kingdom of Damascus, however, was able to profit by the weakness of the states to the south. Once the Assyrians had withdrawn, the king of Damascus, Hazael, built up his army afresh, and embarked on a policy of conquest. He swept the Israelite forces out of Transjordan, and there is evidence to show that he also made himself master of the territories of Moab and Edom further south in Transjordan. Undoubtedly the purpose behind this activity was to control the important trade routes with Arabia. West of the Jordan, too, the Israelite forces were hard pressed by Hazael's attacks. Philistines and Ammonites seized their opportunity to plunder their Israelite neighbours, as the Book of Amos indicates.⁷ Jehu went to his grave after a twenty-eight reign which can have brought him and his subjects little joy. His son Jehoahaz (814-798) had scarcely succeeded to the throne when the Syrian inroads reached their peak. The fortress city of Hazor, which had so recently fallen to Shalmaneser's armies, was now destroyed once more, as excavations have shown, and it can be assumed that this disaster for Israel was accompanied by the utter defeat of her army. Hazael could, if he had wished, have deposed Jehoahaz, but he preferred to reduce Israel to a dependency, leaving Jehoahaz as a puppet king. Israel's chariotry, so powerful half a century earlier, was reduced, on Syrian instructions, to a mere ten in number (2 Kings 13:7). Hazael intended invading Judah as well, though no reasons are given, but Joash was able to buy him off by paying a handsome tribute. The Philistine city of Gath (perhaps still under the control of Judah) also felt the weight of the Syrian armies.

7. See M. Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 249 for details.

Hazael's successor Benhadad III⁸ showed no signs of relenting when he came to the throne of Damascus in c. 806 B.C.; the prophet Amos brackets him with his father as an aggressor against Israel (Amos 1:4).⁹ Nevertheless the day of retribution had come for Damascus, because "the LORD appointed a deliverer for Israel" (2 Kings 13:5). The biblical writer does not trouble to specify who the deliverer was; but Assyrian records unfold the story. Shortly after Benhadad's accession, the reigning king of Assyria, Adad-nirari III, brought Assyrian armies into Syria once again, and this time the power of the kingdom of Damascus was permanently broken. Israel and other small states had to pay the Assyrians tribute once again, but at least they were spared the devastation caused by armies marching through their lands. Benhadad had no such relief; the Assyrian campaigns against him culminated in his abject surrender, as in his own captured palace he had perforce to pay over a very heavy tribute.¹⁰

Once again the Assyrian armies withdrew to their own territory, allowing the smaller powers of Syria and Palestine to draw breath. The armies of Benhadad were not the formidable war-machine they had been, however, and other states set about reaping the advantage. Another Syrian kingdom, Hamath, started to expand at the expense of Damascus, and slowly the two Hebrew kingdoms also began to retrieve their fortunes.

8. Or perhaps Benhadad II; see p.154, note 4.

9. It is perhaps at this point in time that the siege of Samaria described in 2 Kings 6f. took place. Cf. J. Gray, *Kings*, pp. 517ff. See above, p

10. *ANET*, p. 281.