CHAPTER 14
Transjordan and Amalek

ALTHOUGH it was undoubtedly Philistine pressure which brought about the unification of the Israelite tribes under Saul, the first military campaign of the monarchy, as recorded in 1 Samuel, was not after all with the major foe to the west but with the much smaller nation of Ammon, across the Jordan. During the monarchy, the northern part of what we can conveniently call Transjordan was peopled by Israelites; but south and south-east of the Israelite area (Gilead) lay the three small nations of Ammon, Moab and Edom.¹ Their relationship with the Israelites was one of friction when it was not outright hostility, even though all were closely related and appear to have spoken the same language, or rather, slightly varying dialects of the same language.²

The Book of Genesis sets the scene for this relationship. Genesis 19 depicts the origins of Moab and Ammon as distinctly sordid; and Genesis 36:1, which equates Edom with Esau, indicates that the tension between Jacob and Esau was symptomatic of the whole relationship between their respective progeny. Such passages in Genesis also acknowledge the fact that these three Transjordanian peoples were, unlike the Philistines, close relatives of the tribes of Israel, and of course each other. We may also glean from Genesis that the three groups were semi-nomadic at first.

By the thirteenth century B.C., Moab and Edom had established themselves strongly athwart the major trade route known as the

². Probably an Edomite would have understood an Israelite as readily as a Scotsman can understand a Yorkshireman today.
King’s Highway; Ammon took longer to abandon semi-nomadism, but all three kingdoms presented something of a barrier to the Israelite tribes as they sought to enter Transjordan via the King’s Highway. Moses avoided causing them any offence by taking a circuitous route to avoid Edomite and Moabite territory, and then marching between the Moabite and Ammonite lands, en route defeating the king of Heshbon, Sihon by name (Numbers 20f.). Sihon was an Amorite, who had previously attacked Moab, so the Moabites must have welcomed the Israelites’ action. It was the tribe of Reuben which came to occupy this region, and thus separated the Ammonites from the Moabites. The latter, however, who had earlier forfeited some of this territory to Sihon, lost no opportunities to infiltrate and overrun Reubenite lands; the Moabite boundary should have been the Arnon River (which runs west into the Dead Sea). This conflict came to a head when a Moabite king named Eglon was able to conquer Reuben, cross the Jordan, and make himself master of the Jericho area in Benjaminites territory; Ehud was the “judge” who drove the Moabites back across the Jordan (Judges 3:12-30). The Ammonites had supported the Moabites in this campaign, and in spite of Ehud’s victories, the position of Reuben remained far from happy or secure, with hostile neighbours to the south and east. Later it was the Ammonites’ turn to take the initiative against the Israelites in Transjordan; Jephthah was the Israelites’ leader and deliverer on this occasion (Judges 11).

A period of peace followed, in which it was evidently safe and even advantageous for a Judaean family to migrate to Moab (Ruth 1:1); the consequence was that King David’s great-grandmother was a Moabite woman. No doubt there was a good deal of friendliness between ordinary citizens of the Israelite tribes and Moab and Ammon; otherwise there would have been little temptation for Israelites to start worshipping Moabite and Ammonite deities (cf. Judges 10:6). It is difficult to be sure how to interpret the fact that during the conflict between Saul and David, the latter’s family took refuge with the Moabite king (1 Samuel 22:3f.). It may be that David’s family had always remained on good terms with the Moabites; alternatively, we may view the Moabite king’s action as intended to be hostile to Israel, since David was a thorn in the side of Israel’s king. It is not unlikely that the Ammonite king Nahash befriended David at the same time (cf. 2 Samuel 10:1f.), and in his case there was no reason why he should show favour to David except hostility to Saul.

There was every reason for Nahash to be hostile to Saul. Some time before David came on the scene, Nahash had endeavoured to

3. For a discussion of the uncertainties of the early history of Moab and Edom, and for further general information, see J. R. Bartlett in POTT, Chapter 10.
make himself master of the Israelite territory to the north west, and had attacked and besieged the city of Jabesh-gilead. This Ammonite attack happened to coincide with Israel’s half-hearted decision to adopt a monarchical constitution; and so it came about that the first enemy of the Israelite monarchy was Ammon. Saul, who had become king only a few weeks earlier, rose to the occasion nobly and inflicted a heavy defeat on Nahash’s army. If we can credit Philistine pressures with leading Israel into a monarchy, we can in turn credit the Ammonites with supplying Saul with the opportunity to prove himself an effective king. His victory in Transjordan brought all Israel behind him (1 Samuel 11).

No details are given of his further campaigns against the Transjordanian kingdoms, but 1 Samuel 14:47 records that Saul inflicted defeats on Ammon, Moab and Edom alike. These campaigns were intended to secure Israel’s frontiers, insofar as they were not defensive measures. Thus Edom, which had played little part in Israel’s history during the period of the Judges, will have met Saul’s armies in battle on the southern border of Judah, near the south west end of the Dead Sea; it is clear that Saul did not march right through Moabite territory in order to attack the Edomites.

It was David who turned defence into attack. What series of incidents precipitated his wars with Moab and Edom we have no way of knowing, but it seems clear that the Ammonites chose to pick a foolish quarrel with David. No doubt both Moab and Ammon felt much less friendly towards David once he became king of a united and potentially powerful Israel. At any rate, the upshot was that in spite of such alliances as they could form, the three Transjordanian kingdoms were conquered by David, with a great deal of bloodshed. The Moabite ruler seems to have remained king, but as a mere tributary vassal of David. The Edomite royal house was all but exterminated; a lone survivor fled to Egypt. Edom had an Israelite governor appointed over it; but Ammon may well have had as its governor an Ammonite appointed by David. It is interesting to note that when David fled to Transjordan during Absalom’s revolt one of his wealthy friends and benefactors there was Shobi, a brother of the defeated Ammonite king (2 Samuel 17:27). Quite conceivably Shobi was governor of Ammon.

The united monarchy of Israel had little difficulty in controlling Ammon and Moab, but Solomon evidently experienced some difficulty in maintaining his grip on Edom. The prince who had escaped to Egypt, Hadad by name, decided that he could safely return to Edom early in Solomon’s reign, and he did so. “He maintained a strangle-hold on Israel and became king of Edom” (1 Kings 11:25). It seems likely, however, that his “rule” was purely

4. 2 Samuel 10:1-5. See above, p. 46.
nominal, and that a constant guerrilla campaign was all that he could achieve against Solomon. By contrast, Ammon probably endured Israelite suzerainty without too much concern, since her trading was healthy and rewarding. Solomon contracted diplomatic marriages with all three kingdoms, in an effort to keep the situation stable (1 Kings 11:1).

The situation changed dramatically on Solomon's death, when Israel broke into two halves. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, retained its hold on Edom, apparently, for more than half a century later a deputy of King Jehoshaphat ruled there. Ammon and Moab, on the other hand, which came now within the orbit of the Northern Kingdom, in due course took the opportunity to break free, apparently without any serious attempt by Jeroboam or his successors to hinder their defection. Omri was the king of Israel who imposed control over Moab once again. Ammon remained independent, and joined in the coalition headed by Israel and Damascus which confronted the Assyrian army at Qarqar, in 853 B.C. The king of Ammon, Ba'asa by name, sent a contingent of troops, Shalmaneser III records. 5

Moab and Edom were not long in following Ammon's lead. The king of Moab who gained independence for his country was Mesha, whose rebellion is discussed in 2 Kings 3. This same Mesha left his own document recording the course of events — the so-called Moabite Stone, 6 discovered in 1868 in the ruins of the ancient Moabite city of Dibon. From this it appears that Israelites of the tribe of Gad had occupied the territory, formerly in Reuben's possession, which separated Moab from Ammon. Moab had always begrudged Israel's holdings in this region, and Mesha now determined not only to free his country from Israelite control but also to add to his realm this disputed territory; after a struggle he achieved both objectives. The strategy of the Israelite king Jehoram was clearly to surprise Mesha by attacking him where he least expected it — i.e. from the south, advancing via Judaean and Edomite country — but the ploy, though it came within an inch of success, failed to bring Mesha to heel. Moab's border was therefore now located considerably further north than had hitherto been the case. 7 The joint Moabite, Ammonite and Edomite attempt at reprisals against Judah was however unsuccessful. 8

Edom's moves towards independence seem to have been more gradual. The Judaean governors of earlier days had before this campaign been replaced by an Edomite king, presumably a vassal of

5. Cf. DOTT, p. 47.
7. See MBA, map 131.
8. See above, p. 78.
Jehoshaphat (cf. 2 Kings 3:9); the next king of Judah was unable to maintain Judaean control, and the Edomite king became independent (2 Kings 8:16, 20).

In the first half of the eighth century, both Israel and Judah grew relatively strong again, after the collapse of the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus (which may well have been dominating Ammon and Moab as well as Israel). The result was that all three Transjordanian kingdoms were brought to heel once again. Amaziah of Judah reconquered Edom, and his son Uzziah probably asserted control or partial control over the Ammonites and Moabites. By now Moab was in decline, partly due to Ammonite encroachment, it would appear. The power of Judah proved ephemeral, of course, and though immediately after Uzziah’s death Ammon tried unsuccessfully to break free again (2 Chronicles 27:5), before long it was Assyria, not Judah, which was imposing its control upon Transjordan. Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) was the first king of Assyria to make the Transjordanian kings his vassals. They were unwilling vassals, naturally, and Assyrian records mention occasional revolts by them. Edom and Moab are explicitly mentioned along with Judah and Philistia as would-be rebels against Sargon II in 711 B.C.

Of the three kingdoms, Ammon was the most prosperous under Assyrian rule; the Assyrians evidently permitted the Ammonites to make good use of their advantageous position on the trade-routes. But Ammon’s decline was not long delayed; she proved as resolutely unwilling as Judah to permit the Babylonians to replace the Assyrians as the masters of the whole area, and showed the same folly in defying Nebuchadrezzar. At the same time as Jehoiakim’s revolt, to be sure, Ammon remained loyal to Nebuchadrezzar, and sent detachments of troops to assist the Babylonians against Judah, as did also the Moabites (2 Kings 24:2). But at the “pan-Palestinian congress” of 594 B.C., Ammon, Moab and Edom were all represented, and from then on Ammon’s hostility to Babylon became entrenched. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., many Judaeans fled to Transjordan, and one nobleman of Judah, Ishmael by name, conspired with the Ammonite king Baalis to assassinate the Judaean governor, Gedaliah, whom the Babylonians had appointed over Judah (Jeremiah 40:13-41:2).

Josephus reports that the Babylonians in due course took punitive measures against Ammon, and archaeological investigation has revealed that the territories of the three Transjordanian

9. Cf. 2 Kings 10:32f. (The city of Aroer was by now in Moabite territory.)
11. See above, p. 128.
12. Ant. x, 9, 7.
kingdoms became significantly depopulated during the sixth century B.C., the vacuum being filled by wandering Arab tribes (who had in fact been putting considerable pressures on the settled population for some time past). One specific result of the Arab pressures was the displacement of the Edomites, who moved steadily westwards and northwards, occupying territory in the south of Judah. A comparison of a map of New Testament Palestine with a map of Old Testament Palestine will show how the Edomites had moved.\(^\text{13}\)

It was no doubt an early assault on Moab by Arab tribesmen which led to the disasters depicted in Isaiah chapters 15 and 16. This passage is unusual among the prophetic oracles concerning foreign nations for its sympathetic tone: "My heart cries out for Moab", exclaimed the prophet (15:5). In general, the prophets felt that the misfortunes of the Transjordanian kingdoms were well deserved. Amos, for instance, attacked Ammon in these terms: "For crime after crime of the Ammonites I will grant them no reprieve, because in their greed for land they invaded the ploughlands of Gilead" (Amos 1:13). It is interesting that his denunciation of Moab, on the other hand, is based on Moabite injustices towards the king of its neighbour Edom (cf. 2:1), not on its dealings with Judah or Israel.

The Edomite encroachment upon south Judah was particularly resented; even if the Edomites were themselves under pressure, they showed unwarranted and unbrotherly harshness in their callous appropriation of Judaean lands at a time when Judah was reeling from the Babylonian onslaught. The exilic Psalm 137, recalling how "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept", invokes the Lord to "remember... against the people of Edom the day of Jerusalem's fall, when they said, 'Down with it, down with it, down to its very foundations!'". Similarly Ezekiel 35:5 accuses the Edomites thus: "You have maintained an immemorial feud and handed over Israelites to the sword in the hour of their doom, at the hour of their final punishment". And the whole of the little Book of Obadiah constitutes a vigorous denunciation of Edom.

We need not trace the history of these Transjordanian kingdoms further. The area became more and more Arab in character as time passed, though the ancient names of Ammon, Moab and Edom persisted into early Christian centuries. Indeed, the name Ammon still persists, in the form Amman, the capital of the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan. This city's full name in Old Testament times was Rabbath-beney-Ammon, i.e. "Rabbah of the Ammonites". Rabbah was the Ammonites' capital and only major town. David's men were able to capture it only after a siege which lasted a period of at least some months; it was during the siege of Rabbah that David

\(^\text{13}\) The New Testament Greek name for "Edom" is Idumaea; Herod the Great was an Idumaean.
committed adultery with Bathsheba, and her husband Uriah's death occurred outside the city walls (cf. 2 Samuel 11).

The Old Testament testifies to some of the chief pursuits and interests of the Transjordanian kingdoms. Moab, 2 Kings 3:4 indicates, gained its main wealth from sheep — the geography and climate still make sheep-farming very common in this region, which consists mainly of a high plateau (to the east), with a steep descent to the more fertile eastern shores of the Dead Sea. Its northern boundary was the gorge of the River Arnon, its southern boundary the Brook Zered. Its chief towns were Kir-hareseth (Kir-Moab) and Dibon, north of the Arnon, after Mesha's ninth century conquest of that district.

Moab's southern neighbour, Edom, was famed for its pursuit of wisdom, on which it prided itself. Wisdom was an international pursuit, and Edom's geographical position gave it ready contact with various countries — Egypt, North Arabia, Canaan, Syria and also Mesopotamia. It seems likely that Job's three "comforters" were wise men of Edom; Eliphaz, at least, came from Teman, one of the chief towns of Edom. The arrogant dogmatism of Job's friends seems to have typified Edomite wisdom, if we may judge by the challenge uttered by Jeremiah, as he predicted disaster for Edom: "The LORD of hosts has said: Is wisdom no longer to be found in Teman? Have her sages no skill in counsel? Has their wisdom decayed?" (Jeremiah 49:7). Obadiah referred to their "proud, insolent heart", as he prophesied the destruction of all their sages and their wisdom (Obadiah 3,8).

Edom's chief towns were Sela and Teman (both near Petra), and Bozrah further north. Her territory centred in the Arabah — the valley which lies between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba — and it was here that the chief source of her wealth lay, in the copper that was mined and exported. At times both Edom and Ammon were richer than Judah, as can be judged from the relative size of tribute imposed on them by the Assyrians.

Religion of Edom and Moab

We are not well informed about the religion of ancient Edom; the Old Testament indicates that the chief deity of Ammon was named Milcom (cf. 1 Kings 11:5) and the state deity of Moab Chemosh (cf. 1 Kings 11:7), but there is no such information for Edom. Other sources, however, give the name Qaus as Edom's chief god. None of these three kingdoms was monotheistic, and the evidence is clear that all three worshipped a similar pantheon which included deities drawn from the North Arabian and also Canaanite cultic systems. The ubiquitous Canaanite Baal, for instance, was worshipped in
both Ammon and Moab; while the name of the lone survivor of the Edomite royal family in David's time, Hadad, tells its own tale — that Baal was worshipped in Edom too, but under his other name Hadad. Some description of Canaanite religious belief and practice is given elsewhere in this book;¹⁴ but the further question arises whether we can identify any of the Transjordanian state deities with any deities worshipped elsewhere. Possibly the Edomite Qaus (if not an Arabian deity) was yet another name for the storm-god Baal or Hadad; and a good case can be made for thinking that the Ammonite Milcom was simply the Moabite Chemosh under another name, and that both are to be equated with the Molech worshipped just outside Jerusalem.¹⁵ It is possible, on the other hand, that the Moabite Chemosh, at least, was the same god as Baal once again.

Something of the Moabites' own conception of their faith can be gauged from a study of the Mesha Stele — a document unique of its kind. The Stele reveals both the degree of similarity and dissimilarity between the faith of Moab and that of Israel and Judah. The Moabite king who authorized the inscription believed that Moab's political troubles had been due to his god's anger; in other words, his philosophy of history was closely akin to that of the Old Testament writers. On the other hand, the wrath of Chemosh, unlike that of Yahweh in the Old Testament, has no moral or religious quality about it”.¹⁶ The harsh Moabite god changed his mind, King Mesha believed, because of the fact that the crown-prince was put to death as a sacrifice, or so we may judge from 2 Kings 3:27. Such a practice and such a concept are far removed from the biblical understanding of what would gratify Yahweh.

The Amalekites

Very close kin to the Edomites were the Amalekites (cf. Genesis 36:12, 16), who were a foe confronted by both Saul and David. Unlike the Edomites, however, they were nomads, and the various biblical references to them show how mobile they were. In the main they roamed in the desert and semi-desert areas south and south-east of Palestine, and it was here, therefore, that most of their recorded clashes with Israel took place, from the time of Moses onwards (cf. Exodus 17:8f.). They gained much of their livelihood from raiding (in the immemorial nomadic fashion), and this feature made them the inveterate and feared enemies of settled populations; thus in Saul's reign the Philistines and the Judaeans were united in their

¹⁵. See below, p. 205.
hostility to the Amalekites, a situation from which David was able to profit (cf. 1 Samuel 27:7ff.).

No doubt the weak and disunited character of Israel during the later period of the Judges permitted and encouraged Amalek to prey systematically on the southern tribes of Israel; at any rate, they established a settled headquarters somewhere to the south of Judah, and they were sufficiently organized to have a king. They posed a sufficient threat to oblige Saul to embark on a full-scale and far-reaching campaign against them. It was a very successful campaign, too, and the Amalekite king Agag, was captured (1 Samuel 15).

David inflicted further defeats on them, after they had recovered sufficiently to start a fresh series of impudent raids on south Judah. It would seem that between them Saul and David decimated the Amalekites, and effectively prevented their raids on Israelite territory. We hear very little more of them; a mere five hundred Simeonites wiped out the last remnant of them in Hezekiah's reign, c. 700 B.C. (cf. 1 Chronicles 4:42ff.).