

CHAPTER 15

Syria

ANOTHER early and persistent enemy of the Israelite monarchy occupied the regions to the north east of Palestine, in other words the country we know as Syria, in Hebrew "Aram".¹ Modern Syria is a political unity, but in Old Testament times the Aramaeans were divided into a number of kingdoms; of these kingdoms the nearest neighbour to Israel at most periods was the kingdom of Damascus, and when the Old Testament refers to Syrians without further description, the inhabitants of this territory are usually intended.

The Israelites and the Aramaeans became masters of their respective areas at roughly the same time, though both peoples could lay claim to ancestors in these same regions in the preceding centuries. The name "Aramu" appears in Akkadian records as early as 2000 B.C.; no doubt Aramaeans gradually infiltrated the more fertile lands north of the Syrian desert (probably their original home) throughout the second millennium B.C., till by 1000 B.C. they were the dominant element in the population of Syria. In Genesis, the name Aram first appears as a son of Shem (10:22), and then as a descendant of Abraham's brother Nahor (22:21). Undoubtedly the patriarchs of Genesis were very close kin to the Aramaeans of their day; Jacob's wives were Aramaeans, and at a later date Israelites recognised that they could appropriately call their own forefathers Aramaeans (cf. Deuteronomy 26:5). In process

1. The names "Aram" and "Edom" are scarcely distinguishable in the Hebrew script, and as a result it is not always clear which people or territory is under discussion. In 2 Samuel 8:13, for instance, some Hebrew manuscripts have the one name, some manuscripts the other.

of time, however, a distinction in language grew up between the two peoples, the occupants of Syria speaking Aramaic, the Israelites Hebrew. The earliest witness to this difference is the narrative of Jacob's pact with his father-in-law Laban (Genesis 31). The cairn of witness bore the Aramaic name Jegar-sahadutha, and the Hebrew name Gal-ed (verse 47). Obviously these two names happen to be totally dissimilar, but in general the two languages were very alike,² as close as modern Spanish is to Italian, for example.

Friendly relations seem to have continued between Aramaeans and Israelites during the era of the Judges, while both peoples were settling down and establishing themselves. But Israel's very first king, Saul, clashed with at least one Aramaean king, according to 1 Samuel 14:47. The latter's territory was Zobah, to the north-west of Damascus; but we are not told where the battles were fought. Zobah was a rich kingdom and powerful at this time, and it is possible that its troops aided the Aramaean states south of it — Beth-rehob, Maacah and Geshur³ — against Saul. But we can only conjecture.

Whether Geshur (which lay immediately east of the Sea of Galilee) was hostile to Saul or not, its king Talmai was quite prepared to befriend David. David married a royal princess of Geshur, who became the mother of Absalom (2 Samuel 3:3). Once David became king of a united Israel, we may judge from the silence of the records that Geshur, his nearest Aramaean neighbour, decided that discretion was the better part of valour. The other three kingdoms we have mentioned, however, plus the kingdom of Tob (east of Gilead) were drawn into conflict with David. Zobah no doubt took the lead, and sent troops to assist first the Moabites and then the Ammonites in their unavailing efforts to withstand Israelite pressure (cf. 1 Chronicles 19:7; 2 Samuel 10:6-19).

The king of Zobah, by name Hadadezer, though unsuccessful in extending his influence in Transjordan, had mastered the Aramaean states to the north of him, up as far as the Euphrates. One of his vassals, Toi of Hamath, organized a revolt against Hadadezer, who responded by setting out "to re-erect his monument of victory by the river Euphrates" (2 Samuel 8:3). Thus the major part of the Aramaean armies were directed northwards, away from Israel, and David chose this precise strategic moment to strike. Despite a hasty attempt by the Aramaeans of Damascus to cover Hadadezer's rear, David won a handsome series of victories, by which he smashed the power of Zobah, and himself became suzerain of the whole Aramaean region as far as the Euphrates. King Toi of Hamath sent David greetings and congratulations — but also tribute (2 Samuel 8:9f.). An Israelite garrison was stationed in Damascus (verses 5f.).

2. For instance, the Hebrew word *shekel* has *tekel* as its Aramaic equivalent, cf. Daniel 5:27.

3. See *MBA*, maps 101f.

So long as Israel remained united, the Aramaeans could not hope to retrieve their fortunes to any appreciable extent. Solomon held them as firmly under control as did David before him. One section of Aramaean territory sought to break away, but Solomon "went to Hamath-zobah and seized it", and felt secure enough to build store-cities in the neighbourhood (2 Chronicles 8:3f.). There was also a measure of trouble at Damascus. 1 Kings 11:23f. recounts briefly how a young Aramaean soldier of fortune, Rezon by name, deserted from the army of Hadadezer of Zobah and became captain of a guerrilla band based on Damascus. This adversary of Solomon ultimately became king of Damascus, and thus established a kingdom which was to give Israel a great deal of trouble in later days; but it is doubtful if Solomon considered Rezon a serious enemy.

When Solomon's kingdom fell apart, however, the Aramaeans found themselves independent, and Damascus soon achieved a power to rival Jeroboam's Israel (Zobah had now declined, and the only other Aramaean state to achieve power west of the Euphrates was Hamath). The first king of Damascus, after Rezon himself, to figure in Israel's history was Benhadad I, who came to the throne סוּחַ after 900 B.C. His father and predecessor Tabrimmon had made an alliance with Judah against Israel; but in Benhadad's reign some sort of pact was made between Damascus and Israel, until King Asa of Judah paid him to change sides and attack Israel. Benhadad willingly did so, and invested Dan and other Israelite cities on Israel's northern frontier (1 Kings 15:16-21). The sequel is not recorded, but presumably Benhadad withdrew once the main Israelite armies came to the rescue of their beleaguered cities. But by the middle of the ninth century we find a Benhadad — either the same king or (more probably) an identically-named successor⁴ — firmly in control of the Israelite city of Ramoth-gilead, in north Transjordan (cf. 1 Kings 22.1ff.). The Syrian inroads into Israel had begun.

Meanwhile the Assyrian inroads into Aramaean territory had also begun. A century or two earlier the Aramaeans had put a great deal of pressure on Assyria itself, but the Assyrians had gradually resolved their difficulties and taken the offensive. In the early ninth century Ashurnasirpal II had sent armies through northern Syria, and now in 857 B.C. his successor Shalmaneser III defeated the major Aramaean state north of the Euphrates, Bit-Adini,⁵ and went on to capture the city of Carchemish. The kingdoms to the south west took fright, as well they might, and a strong coalition was formed to stop the Assyrian advances. The kings of Damascus,

4. In Assyrian records he is called Adad-idri (cf. *DOTT*, p. 47), i.e. "Hadadezer" — unless Hadadezer was successor to Benhadad.

5. The Old Testament Beth-eden (cf. Amos 1:5).

Hamath and Israel (Ahab) were the leaders of this confederacy, which confronted the Assyrian armies at the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C.⁶ The Aramaean kings and their allies gained a temporary respite as a result of the battle.

In his more local struggles, Benhadad succeeded in deposing minor Aramaean kings and extending his own kingdom. Against Israel, he had some successes but more failures. He was able to lay siege to Israel's capital city, but was driven back and soundly defeated; an invasion south of the Sea of Galilee was also driven back (cf. 1 Kings 20); and it seems that he lost control of the city of Ramoth-gilead (cf. 1 Kings 22).

The king under whom the power of Damascus reached its zenith was Hazael, a usurper in whose accession both Elijah and Elisha took some interest. Early in his reign there was a fresh invasion by Shalmaneser III's armies, and twice over Damascus was assaulted (841 and 837 B.C.), but not captured. Otherwise Hazael was left free to pursue his own interests, until the closing years of his life. For the rest of the century Israel (ruled by first Jehu, then Jehoahaz) was almost helpless against him. He recaptured Ramoth-gilead, and proceeded to annex all Transjordan; he crippled the Israelite armies; he conquered parts of Philistia and threatened Judah, whose king hastily bought him off with a large bribe. By thus achieving control of Palestine and the Transjordanian trade-routes, he enriched his own kingdom at the expense of the other states in the vicinity, and bade fair to make Israel and Judah mere Aramaean vassals. But he failed to reckon with the Assyrians.

It was in the closing years of the century that Assyrian armies again took the field in the west, under Adad-nirari III. Numerous Palestinian states paid him tribute, possibly with the express intention of persuading him to take their part against Hazael. At all events, the Assyrian king tells us the sequel in his own words: "I marched to Aram and shut up Mari', king of Aram, in Damascus his capital city. The awful splendour of the god Ashur his lord overwhelmed him and he seized my feet, expressing submission. 2,300 talents of silver, 20 talents of gold, 300 talents of copper, 5,000 talents of iron, embroidered linen garments, an ivory bed, a couch embossed and inlaid with ivory, countless of his goods and possessions I received in his own palace at Damascus."⁷ A further Assyrian attack on Damascus in 797 B.C. left this Aramaean kingdom yet weaker, and permitted the gradual resurgence of Israelite power.

The Israelite armies of Jehoash did not immediately profit from these disasters suffered by Damascus; Hazael's successor Benhadad

6. See above, p. 75.

7. *DOTT*, p. 51. Note that the record calls Hazael "Mari' ", which simply means "my lord".

It was now that the prediction of Amos came true:

For crime after crime of Damascus

I will grant them no reprieve,

because they threshed Gilead under threshing-sledges spiked with iron.

Therefore will I send fire upon the house of Hazael,

fire that shall eat up Ben-hadad's palaces;

I will crush the great men of Damascus

and wipe out those who live in the Vale of Aven

and the sceptred ruler of Beth-eden;

the people of Aram shall be exiled to Kir.

It is the word of the Lord.

(Amos 1:3ff.)

Israel lost three-quarters of its territory, and the annexed districts were reorganized into Assyrian provinces; similarly the former Aramaean states were all divided up and brought into the Assyrian provincial system. Damascus itself was captured and ravaged, and its monarchy brought to an end with the execution of Rezin (732 B.C.).

Thus ended all Aramaean independence. The Aramaean people, of course, was not exterminated, although many of them were uprooted and settled elsewhere by the Assyrian deportation policies.¹² Some of the citizens of Hamath were settled in Samaria after the fall of Israel's capital, a few years later.

After Assyria's fall, the Aramaean lands did not recover their lost independence, but came instead under the dominion of Babylon. After the Babylonians, the Persians became masters of the whole of Syria-Palestine, and on their heels came Alexander the Great. Soon after his death we find a kingdom in Syria again, but it was a Greek kingdom, ruled by the Seleucid Greeks. In the first century B.C. the Romans conquered Syria-Palestine. Damascus did become a Semitic king's capital once again in 85 B.C., when Aretas III made it the capital of the Nabataean Arabs' kingdom; but it is clear that Aretas ruled under the tutelage of Rome. It was Aretas IV, a century later, whose governor in Damascus tried to capture the apostle Paul (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:32f.); yet Damascus lay in the territory of the Roman province of Syria, and there can be no doubt who were the real rulers of the whole region.

In the early centuries A.D. Syria became a powerful centre of Christianity — Antioch was evangelized before Paul's conversion, and soon became the hub of a thriving missionary work. It was not until the eighth century Muslim conquests that the whole character of Syria changed.

12. See *IDB* i, p. 193 (s.v. "Aramaean") for details.

III was at first successful against Israel (cf. 2 Kings 13:3). However, the kingdom of Damascus was drawn into a conflict with its northern Aramaean sister-kingdom, Hamath, now ruled by a king called Zakir. Zakir was originally king of a minor state called Lu'ash, but he succeeded in adding Hamath to his realm; that he achieved this success is rather surprising, and it looks as if he may have been a protégé of the Assyrians. At any rate, Benhadad of Damascus felt himself obliged to muster a coalition of considerable size against the usurper, and he led an assault on the city of Hadrach (or Hazrak). But he lost the battle.

For the story of the clash between Zakir and Benhadad, we are indebted to a monument in Aramaic which Zakir himself erected in commemoration of his victory.⁸ It helps to explain why Damascus so rapidly lost its power; Jehoash of Israel inflicted several defeats on Benhadad, and then Jeroboam II was able to recoup for Israel all the territory which Jehu had lost to Hazael half a century earlier. Apparently Jeroboam was never able to make Damascus, and Hamath too, subservient to his wishes (cf. 2 Kings 14:28).

But in the middle of the eighth century a king came to the Assyrian throne who was to finish all hopes of Aramaean independence: Tiglath-pileser III. Hitherto Syria and Palestine had suffered occasional Assyrian forays and invasions; from now on they were to come under permanent Assyrian rule. The Syro-Palestinian states did not submit without a struggle, however; two major coalitions were formed against the invading armies, though both were doomed to failure. The first of these was led by "Azriau of Yaudi" — apparently Uzziah (= Azariah) of Judah,⁹ although at a later date there was a north Syrian state with a name very like Yaudi,¹⁰ a state possibly founded by Jews who migrated there at an unknown date. Azriau's efforts to thwart the Assyrian advance failed, while the second coalition fared even more disastrously. The second confederacy was headed by the kings of Damascus and Israel, Rezin and Pekah respectively. Ahaz of Judah, it will be recalled, refused to support the ill-advised venture, and was repaid by an attack on his own country and its capital by the confederates. It is of special interest that had Rezin and Pekah succeeded in capturing Jerusalem, an Aramaean would have been placed on the throne of Judah.¹¹

8. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 246f.

9. See above, p. 94.

10. The consonants of the Syrian state's name are Y'dy; the vowels can only be conjectured.

11. Cf. Isaiah 7:6 (and see above, p. 99).

Aramaean Religion

The names of several deities worshipped by the ancient Aramaeans are known to us. Most of the names are already familiar from other sources, but the most distinctive name, and the name most familiar to Old Testament readers, is that of Rimmon. Naaman, the Aramaean general healed by Elisha, apologized in advance for the fact that he was under obligation to join his master the king of Damascus in the worship of Rimmon (2 Kings 5:17f.). The implication of the passage is that Rimmon was the chief deity of Naaman's homeland.

Rimmon means "the Thunderer", and in fact the name signified the deity otherwise called Hadad,¹³ the god of thunder. He was the chief god of the Aramaeans' pantheon, and his name is embodied in the names of such kings as Hadadezer and Benhadad. In the Zakir Stele, discussed above, several other deities are mentioned, but especially "Baal-shamen", or "the Baal of heaven". It would seem that this was the patron god of Zakir, and that there was a local cult in his honour somewhere in the state of Zobah (Zakir's original home). However, Baal-shamen was probably just another designation of Hadad. The polytheists of the ancient Near East readily equated and identified gods originally distinct, and by the same token they seem to have localized deities who were strictly speaking cosmic.¹⁴ Certainly, at any rate, both Hadad and Baal-shamen designated a god of the sky. At a much later date, Baal-shamen was given yet greater prominence in Syria, when under Greek rule Baal-shamen was equated with the chief Greek deity, Olympian Zeus. When Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) made his attack on Judaism in c. 167 B.C., it was an altar to this deity which was erected in the Jerusalem temple, to the horror of all devout Jews.¹⁵ The name Baal-shamen would have had as its Hebrew equivalent "Baal-shamayim"; and this is the name parodied in the Book of Daniel by the term "the abomination of desolation", or rather "the abominable thing that causes desolation" (Daniel 11:31, 12:11), in Hebrew a pair of words of which the first replaces "Baal" and the second (*shomem* or *meshomem*) caricatures the word *shamayim*, "heaven".

Another Baal was worshipped by King Benhadad I of Damascus, who set up a brief inscription in honour of the god Melqart.¹⁶ The name means "King of the city" (i.e. of the underworld). The

13. The two names are bracketed together in Zechariah 12:11.

14. Thus it was possible to speak of Baals (or Baalim) and other deities in the plural. The word *Ba'al* meant "lord" or "possessor" and can have been made the title of various deities, moreover.

15. Cf. 2 Maccabees 6:2.

16. Cf. *DOTT*, p. 239.

worship of this deity was particularly favoured by the Phoenicians, of whose city, Tyre, Melqart was the patron deity.

Other divine names in Aramaean religion were Elyon and Yahu. The former is the same name as that found in Genesis 14:18ff., and usually translated "Most High". The latter can be none other than "Yahweh", the name of Israel's God; it is thought that this worship must have commenced in Hamath in consequence of David's victories, which bought Hamath under Israel's jurisdiction for the time being.¹⁷

Aramaic Language

On the whole it seems that the Aramaeans were borrowers rather than creators where religion was concerned. But in another cultural aspect they were the benefactors of much of the ancient Near East; both their language and their script came to have very wide currency. The script was a simple alphabetic one, and it was very much more convenient than the cumbersome cuneiform syllabary used by the Assyrians and Babylonians, for example. It had its predecessors — it was a development of the Canaanite alphabet — but it in turn fathered a great many other alphabets, including the Greek, Roman (and so our own), Arabic, and a variety of Indian scripts. Even Hebrew came to adopt the Aramaic script in preference to its own earlier alphabet; the familiar "square" Hebrew letters, as in printed Hebrew, came from the Aramaeans.

The Aramaic language was of a relatively simple structure, and it had been taken into Mesopotamia by Aramaean migrants, so that it was not unknown there. Syria itself was something of a cross-roads in the ancient world, moreover, so that the language of Syria was well placed to carry its influence in all directions of the compass. Before the Assyrian empire collapsed, therefore, Aramaic had come to function as the diplomatic language of that empire, and indeed was widely spoken in Mesopotamia itself. The Babylonian empire, and after it the Persian, continued to use Aramaic as the diplomatic language. Moreover, the deportation policies of the Assyrians and Babylonians had given it prominence as the *lingua franca*. The result was that before New Testament times Aramaic had come to be the vernacular of many areas all round Syria, even though by now Greek too had wide currency in the Levant. One of the languages which suffered because of the advance of Aramaic was Hebrew itself.

17. For further details of Aramaean religion, cf. T. C. Vriezen, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (ET London, 1967), pp. 56-59.

A small part of the Old Testament is in Aramaic — principally a few chapters in Ezra and Daniel. But by New Testament times Aramaic was so widespread in Palestine that even in Jerusalem itself Aramaic place-names abounded, such as Gethsemane, Gabbatha and Golgotha. Without doubt our Lord could read the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Luke 4:16-20), and it is possible that he could speak Greek; but beyond a shadow of a doubt Aramaic was his everyday tongue. “Abba” and “Talitha cumi” are Aramaic words from his lips; and to them the early church added “Maranatha”, “Come, O Lord!”.

If today the Aramaic tongue has almost died out (the effect of the Muslim conquests, again), its imprint in the substratum of the New Testament can never be eradicated.¹⁸

18. For further information on the Aramaic language, cf. F. F. Bruce. *The Books and the Parchments*³ (London, 1963), chapter 4. For further details about the Aramaeans see A. Malamat in *POTT*, chapter 6.