

THE REBELLION OF JEHU

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The citadel of Ramoth-gilead stood guard over Israel's territory east of the Jordan River, on a site so strategic that the kings of Israel and neighboring Aram repeatedly fought to hold it, take it, or take it back. The last deed of King Ahab was a battle to recover it from Aram, and he lost both the battle and his life (I Kgs. 22; II Chron. 18). More than a dozen years later, the last deed of his son King Joram [or, in alternate form, Jehoram] was a battle for Ramoth-gilead.

Joram had an ally in this war: 22-year-old Ahaziah, King of Judah, whose mother was Ahab's sister Athaliah, and these two cousins were friends as well as military-political allies.

And he [Ahaziah] went with Joram ben-Ahab to war with Hazael, King of Aram, at Ramoth-gilead, and the Aramaeans smote Joram.

And the Aramaeans wounded Joram. And King Joram returned to be healed in Jezreel of the wounds that the Aramaeans had given him at Ramah, when he fought against Hazael, King of Aram.

Ahaziah ben-Joram King of Judah went down to see Joram ben-Ahab in Jezreel, because he was sick (II Kgs. 8:28-29).

A few passages farther on it is again noted:

Joram had been guarding Ramoth-gilead, he and all Israel, because of Hazael, King of Aram. But King Joram returned to Jezreel to be healed of his wounds that the Aramaeans had given him when he fought with Hazael, the King of Aram (9:14; cf. II Chron. 22:5-6).

The sequence of events at Ramoth-gilead is not clear. If Joram and Ahaziah went to battle to take the city from the King of Aram, then they succeeded. If Israel had already regained Ramoth-gilead at some past time, then Hazael, the fierce King of Aram, was attacking it, and the Kings of Israel and Judah successfully warded off the attack. Either way, Joram now held it but had to fight to guard it.

Joram, again like his father, was wounded at Ramoth-gilead. This time the

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wound was not mortal, but it was severe enough for him to retire from the fray. To recuperate, he went not to the royal palace in the capital city of Samaria, but to his private country house in the town of Jezreel. Here, Ahaziah came for a peaceful family visit.

JORAM

Joram was in his 12th regnal year as the fourth monarch of the House of Omri, in succession to his grandfather, father, and senior brother. The dynasty had ruled for almost half a century, during which it defended Israel against aggressive neighbors, raised its international standing, expanded diplomatic and trade relations, built new cities, and developed the economy. But a central royal government and the taxes it would have to impose were incompatible with traditional freedoms of a people never amenable to the authoritarian, and disturbed the balance of a once simple and egalitarian society.

The regime had failed spiritually and morally, sponsored foreign pagan cults and perpetrated injustice as well as infidelity. Other dynasties were scored on similar charges, but this one bore a unique burden in the person of Jezebel, a Phoenician princess who had been Ahab's consort and his bane (II Kgs. 21). She tried to force his subjects to bow to her pagan Tyrian deities, ordered the massacre of faithful prophets of Israel, contrived the judicial murder of Naboth, and became the embodiment and symbol of all that was oppressive, corrupt and alien in the Kingdom of Israel. In the protocol of the Hebrew realms it was the king's mother who was the highest-ranking lady of the land, so widowhood did not diminish Jezebel's rank. Her personal power was diminished because Joram was not as submissive to her domination as his father and his brother had been (II Kgs. 3:1), but the outrage she provoked, building up for decades, was neither tempered nor waning.

An accumulation of religious, social, and economic grievances can open the way for a rebel or revolutionary who promises to set all wrongs aright. This time, it was the military establishment that rose against the regime, presumably dissatisfied with the sovereign's record or prospects.

Joram's hard campaign against rebellious and belligerent Moab had failed to subdue the erstwhile vassal. He had presumably won back Ramoth-gilead from Aram, but that did not render Hazael any less dangerous a foe. The contest between Israel and Aram was playing out against the background of a

regional contest between mighty Assyria, bent on conquering the small states west of the Euphrates River, and princes of those states who formed leagues to resist that conquest. Ahab was a prominent and powerful member of the first league, but it is not known whether in subsequent leagues Joram filled his father's place or opted out of the alliance. Either way, he might displease his officers: If he joined, he was expending men and resources on distant battles for the benefit of the hostile Aramaeans, and rashly provoking the Assyrian superpower. If he stayed out, he was failing to protect Israel from Assyrian aggression and failing to maintain its status as a regional power. Whichever course he took, a rebel could win support by condemning and promising to reverse it.

JEHU

For a rebellion, there must be a leader to focus discontent and convert it into action. That leader was Elisha, a prophet who enjoyed such repute that even rulers of Aram had confidence in his vatic powers and his political acumen (II Kgs. 8:7-15). His role now is adumbrated in an assignment addressed to Elijah but carried out by his successor: *Go, turn back on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and go in and anoint Hazael for king over Aram, and Jehu ben-Nimshi anoint to be king over Israel . . .* (I Kgs. 19:15-16). To that end, Elisha made cause with a man strong enough to carry out a successful coup d'état: Jehu ben-Jehoshaphat ben-Nimshi.

Jehu was a professional soldier, who had once been in Ahab's guard (II Kgs. 9:25) and had since risen to high rank in the officer corps. When Joram went home to Jezreel, Jehu was one of the captains he left to guard Ramoth-gilead, and possibly in command there. If the King put his trust in Jehu, Elisha knew that trust was misplaced.

And Elisha the prophet called one of the Sons of the Prophets, and said to him: 'Gird up your loins, and take this vial of oil in your hand and go to Ramoth-gilead. And when you come there, look there for Jehu ben-Jehoshaphat ben-Nimshi, and go in and cause him to get up from among his brothers and bring him to an inner room.

'And take the vial of oil and pour it on his head, and say, Thus says The Lord: I have anointed you king over Israel. Then open the door, and flee, and do not tarry' (II Kgs. 9:1).

This story begins abruptly, with no matrix of the conspiracy behind it. The summons did not come as a surprise to Jehu, nor did Elisha dispatch it without knowing how it would be received. Either Jehu, struck by vaulting ambition, sought and won the support of the prophetic party, or else Elisha determined it was time to rid the realm of its dynasty and picked Jehu as the man to do the job. Between them, they concocted a plan to take power.

Contrary to Elisha's admonition on brevity, the messenger added his own elaborations:

And the young man went – the young man the prophet – to Ramoth-gilead., and came in And he said, 'I have an word for you, O captain.'

And Jehu said, 'To which of us all?'

And he said, 'To you, captain.'

And he got up and went into the house. And he poured the oil on his head, and said to him, 'Thus says The Lord God of Israel: I have anointed you king over the people of The Lord.'

'And you shall smite the House of Ahab your master, that I requite the blood of My servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord at the hand of Jezebel.

. . . And Jezebel the dogs will eat in the portion of Jezreel and none will bury [her]' (9:4-10; cf. I Kgs. 21:23).

This excoriation does not name Joram, the reigning monarch, nor Omri, founder of the dynasty, while Ahab is named four times and Jezebel twice, as though their careers subsume all grievances against the regime.

Jehu returned to his colleagues; officers who, as the Narrator reminds the reader, were in the service of King Joram.

And Jehu went out to those who served his master, and [one] said to him, 'Is it shalom ["peace" or "well-being"]? Why did this mad-man come to you?' . . .

And he said, 'Thus and thus he spoke to me, saying: Thus says the Lord: I have anointed you king over Israel.'

Then they hastened and each took his garment and put it under him on the top of the stairs, and blew a horn, saying, 'Jehu is King.'

So Jehu ben-Jehoshaphat ben-Nimshi conspired against Joram[. . .] And Jehu said, 'If this is your mind, then do not let anyone escape and go forth out of the city, to go to tell [it] in Jezreel.'

And Jehu rode [in a chariot] and went to Jezreel, for Joram was lying there, and Ahaziah, King of Judah, had gone down to see Joram (vv. 14-15).

The brother officers showed no surprise at this dramatic interruption of the tedium of garrison duty. Jehu demurred at repeating the words of the mad fellow, pointing out that they already knew the contents of the message. When they insisted on a direct quote, he gave Elisha's terse version. It is likely that these men were privy to the plans of Jehu and Elisha, had already pledged themselves to the plot, and were waiting for Elisha's signal that it was time to act. It may be that this moment was chosen to launch the rebellion because Joram – who, as will be seen, was now strong enough to drive his own chariot – might soon leave his vulnerable rural retreat for his heavily-fortified stronghold in Samaria. Ahaziah would go home to Jerusalem, and the future King Jehu would miss the chance to be rid of a half-Omride King of Judah who would surely be his devoted enemy.

Jehu's reign, like Omri's, began in a military camp, but not this time at the will of "all Israel" (cf. I Kgs. 16:16). This little band performed a parody coronation, with improvised rites that could have validity only for those already committed to Jehu's cause. It took place not in a temple or palace but in a barracks room. He was anointed not by a High Priest but by an uncouth eccentric. He stood not on a fine rug but on some cloaks. He was hailed not with a ceremonial trumpet fanfare but with an amateur blast of a horn, acclaimed not by the voice of his subjects-to-be in assemblage but by a shout from his co-conspirators. The final act in a coronation was for the king to assume the crown and take his seat on the throne. This part had to be postponed.

Jehu's tactics were wily. Without any overt initiative of his own, he had the highest-ranking men at Ramoth-gilead commit themselves to making him king. He did not announce the anointing, but made the men coax him to reveal it. To their proclamation of his accession, he responded *'If this is your mind,'* making loyalty to him an act of their free choice. After making sure that anyone at the fortress still loyal to Joram could not bring him warning,

he set off with a band of officers and men, thereby leaving Ramoth-gilead more vulnerable to Hazeal.

The arrival in Jezreel is narrated in a folkloristic style of repetitive pattern on the motif of *shalom*, a word that connotes both "peace" and "well-being." When Jehu received the message of the mad prophet, a fellow officer asked '*Is it shalom?*' The King now asked the same question, and the response may be a sarcastic play on the word.

And the watchman standing on the tower of Jezreel saw the company of Jehu as he came, and said 'I see a company.' And Joram said, 'Take a horse-man and send [him] to meet them. And let him say: Is it shalom?' (v. 17).

'*Is it shalom?*' could be a query on the military situation at Ramoth-gilead, but why would a whole band of chariot officers bring news that could be carried by a courier on horseback? Or, it could be a query to the company – "Do you come with peaceful intent?" – but why would the King ask that unless he had cause to feel doubtful?

And the rider on the horse went to meet him, and he said, 'Thus says the King: [Is it] shalom?'

And Jehu said, 'What [is] shalom to you? Turn round behind me.'

And the watchman declared, saying, 'The messenger has reached them and he has not returned'

And [Joram] sent out a second rider on a horse. And he came to them and said, 'Thus says the King: [Is it] shalom?'

And Jehu said, 'What [is] shalom to you? Turn round behind me.'

And the watchman declared, saying, 'He came to them, and he has not returned. And the driving [is] like the driving of Jehu ben-Nimshi, for he drives madly.'

And Joram said, 'Hitch up.' . . . And Joram, King of Israel and Ahaziah, King of Judah, went out each in his chariot (v. 9:18-21).

Once Jehu was recognized by his road manners, Joram was aware that the captain had left his post at Ramoth-gilead. Now the latter was coming near with a military company, and had presumed to countermand the King's orders to his messengers. It might be prudent to wait inside Jezreel, ringed by a wall and a moat, at least until it was known whether or not this was *shalom*. Instead, Joram went forth to meet Jehu in the open, and took Ahaziah with him, each driving his own chariot and it would seem without an escort. Usually,

the subject comes to the monarch, not the other way around.¹ If Joram had no suspicion about Jehu, going out to greet him was an act of special grace and favor. If he did have suspicion, he was displaying a regal disdain for caution.

And they went out to meet Jehu, and found him in the portion [of land] of Naboth the Jezreelite..

And it came to pass, at Joram's seeing Jehu, that he said, 'Is it shalom, Jehu?'

And he [Jehu] said, 'What shalom while the whoredoms of your mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts are so many?'

And Joram turned his hands [on the reins] and fled. And he said to Ahaziah, 'Treachery, O, Ahaziah!' [. . .]

And Jehu drew his bow with his full strength, and smote Joram between his shoulders, and the arrow went out at his heart. And he sank down in his chariot (vv. 21-24).

An insult to a man's mother is a declaration of war, as Joram grasped instantly but too late. His attempt to escape ended as swiftly as an arrow can fly and, like his father, he died in his chariot (cf. I Kgs. 22:34-38; II Chron. 18:33-34). Joram, the last and least reviled king of the House of Omri, came to his end in the midst of such swiftly moving events that the Narrator skips his standard formulaic remarks on the conclusion of a reign.

Jehu did not accuse the King himself of wrongdoing, but put all the onus on Jezebel, whose power was now probably in decline. "Whoredoms" may be taken figuratively as in *whoring after strange gods*, while "witchcrafts" can cover the the range of often gross pagan cultic practices.

And [Jehu] said to Bidkar his captain, 'Lift [him] up and cast him into the portion of the field of Naboth the Jezreelite. For remember, I and you rode together after his father Ahab, and the Lord laid upon him this burden: Surely, the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons I saw last night, says the Lord, and I will requite you in this portion says the Lord' (vv. 25-26).

If Jehu calculatedly drew Joram to this particular spot, he meant thereby to invoke the memory of Naboth and present himself not as a rebel but as the destined avenger. He even presented himself and his comrade Bidkar as witnesses to Elijah's prophecy. This reminder – whether recollection or invention or a blend thereof – could be repeated to other audiences in the hours and

days ahead. That this prophecy was so important to his cause may be the reason that the rebellion was directed not against the House of Omri, the proper designation of the dynasty, but against the House of Ahab.

Jehu then went on to Jezreel, where Jezebel awaited him and her own now ineluctable end. She used her few remaining moments to array herself for her final state appearance; a bravado that inspires the prudish metaphor "a painted Jezebel."

As at Ramoth-gilead, Jehu made others act on his behalf:

And he lifted up his face to the window, and said, 'Who is with me? Who?'

And two or three courtiers [or: eunuchs] looked out to him, and he said 'Throw her down.'

So they threw her down, and [some] of her blood sprinkled on the wall, and on the horses, and they trampled her (vv. 32-33).

Jehu now demonstrated his mastery of the king's house by having a repast served to him. Then he ordered a show of respect for royalty in whose ranks he had just enrolled himself.

And he came in and ate and drank. And he said, 'Look after this cursed one and bury her, please, for she is a king's daughter ' (vv. 34-37).

Joram's last words were a warning to Ahaziah, who took flight in his chariot. Jehu sent a posse to pursue him. The Narrator and the Chronicler have different versions of his fate: (1) He was overtaken on the road and wounded, managed to reach Megiddo, and there expired of his wound (9:27-28); or (2) He reached Samaria, but there was caught and executed (II Chron. 22:9).²

Jehu did not have to leave Jezreel to establish his power in Samaria, the capital city and seat of government. He did it by mail.

And Ahab had seventy sons in Samaria, and Jehu wrote letters and sent to Samaria, to the rulers of Jezreel [an error for Israel?], the elders and the guardians of [the children of?] Ahab, saying: 'And now, at the coming of this letter to you, and with you there are sons of your master . . . look for the best and most upright of your master's sons, and set [him] on his father's throne, and fight for your master's house.'

And they feared greatly, and said, 'Lo, the two kings did not stand before him, and how shall we stand – we?'

And he who was Over-the-Household [the chief minister of state] and he who was Over-the-City [the mayor of Samaria] and the elders and the guardians, sent to Jehu saying, 'We are your servants, and all that you say to us we will do. We will not make anyone king – do what is good in your eyes' (10:1-5).

Seventy is a formulaic figure rather than a precise count of the victims; all available kinsmen and descendants of the Omride kings, including juveniles under the tutelage of guardians. Once again, Jehu inveigled others into complicity. The chief men of Samaria, having declined to accept his dare, got their orders:

. . . He wrote them a letter a second time, saying: 'If you are for me and hearkening to my voice, take the heads of the men – the sons of your master – and come to me about this time tomorrow to Jezreel.' And the sons of the King were seventy men, were with the great men of the city who brought them up.

And it came to pass, at the coming of the letter to them, that they took the sons of the king and slaughtered seventy men, and put their heads in baskets and sent them to him in Jezreel.

And the messenger came and told him, saying: 'They have brought the heads of the sons of the king'

And it came to pass in the morning that he went out and stood and said to all the people, 'You are righteous. Lo, I conspired against my master and slew him, but who smote all these?' (vv. 6-9).

This gruesome display had no precedent in either of the Hebrew kingdoms. It was a blatant imitation of the sadism of Assyrian monarchs. From there, he proceeded to finish off *all those left to the House of Ahab in Jezreel, and his great men and his acquaintances and his priests [or: chiefs] until he [Jehu] did not leave a remnant to him [Ahab] (v. 11)*. A century later, the prophet Hosea gave the still-ruling House of Jehu the Divine warning that *'I will visit the blood of Jezreel on the House of Jehu'* (Hos. 4:1).

Neither the Narrator nor the Chronicler suggests any foreign role in Jehu's rebellion, but there may be traces of one in an inscription found at the ancient Israelite city of Dan.³ It is written in Aramaic of the ninth-eighth century

BCE, and three fragments of it have been found, broken, disconnected, and only partly legible. Spliced together, they yield text that reads in part:

Hadad made me king. And Hadad went in front of me. [...] [. . .]ram son of [. . .] king of Israel, and [. . .] killed [. . .]yahu son of [. . .]g of the House of David. And I set [. . .] their land into [. . .] other [. . .]led over Is[. . .] siege upon [. . .]

Hadad was the tutelary deity of Damascus, so a king who presented himself as royal protégé of Hadad must be a ruler of Aram-Damascus, who held Dan long enough to set up a stele there. The text notes the killing of a king of Israel whose name ends with "ram" and a king of the House of David – meaning Judah – whose name ends with "yahu." Kings of Israel and Judah who were contemporaries and were both slain at the same time can only be Joram and Ahaziah, whose names in the original Hebrew forms are Yoram/Yehoram and Ahaziyahu. The man reigning in Damascus when they were killed was Hazael, who had a link to Elisha (8:7-15) who struck the spark of Jehu's rebellion.

So much of the text is missing and the reconstruction is so conjectural, that it can only be speculative that it connects Hazael with the overthrow of the Omride dynasty, whose rulers had so long been thwarting the ambitions of Aram-Damascus. If Hazael had any part in planning and executing the rebellion, then he could claim hyperbolic credit for its success and the deaths of the two kings who were his enemies. Hazael was a leader of the anti-Assyrian league, so if he did conspire to replace Joram with Jehu he must have expected Jehu to join that league as an obliging ally of Aram-Damascus. It may even be that Elisha and/or Jehu led him to believe this in order to secure his support. As it turned out, one of the first official acts of King Jehu was to do homage to Assyria and render tribute to its King Shalmaneser III. Hazael, thereafter, did much damage to both Israel under the House of Jehu and to Judah (12:18, 13:3-5).

The House of Omri had seemed firmly established. It had a citadel-capital and strategically-placed fortified cities, commerce and trade and affluence, military victories, international standing and alliances. It had won the recognition and friendship of the revered House of David. Yet when the shrewd and swift-striking Jehu set forth with part of the garrison of Ramoth-gilead behind him, the dynasty crumbled without a blow in its defense. From the

time Elisha sent off his eccentric emissary, a mere few days passed before the House of Omri was no more.

NOTES

1. There might be exception in deference to a prophet. Ahab went to Elijah (I Kgs 18), and Joram/Jehoram of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah went to Elisha (II Kgs 3:11-13).
2. The Narrator's version of Ahaziah's end is very similar to the end of his descendant King Josiah (II Kgs 23:29-30; II Chron. 35:20-24). There is no such similarity in the Chronicler's version.
3. The discovery and description of the Tel Dan Stele are reported in Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993) pp. 81-98, and "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment," *Israel Exploration Journal* 45 (1995) pp. 1-18. There is now a substantial corpus of writings with variant and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the stele and the text.



QUESTIONS FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. **How can you relate the *Sotah* (suspect wife) ritual (Numbers 5:11-31) to what precedes it?**
2. **Why is the section on the Nazirites placed just after the section on the *Sotah* in Numbers (Chapter 6) ?**
3. **In Numbers 21:17, Israel sings its gratitude for fresh water, In only two other instances does the Torah refer to a poem as *hashirah* (the song). Which are they?**

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