CHAPTER THREE

OMRI AND SON, INCORPORATED:
THE BUSINESS OF HISTORY

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The question of the Bible and the history of Israel is often discussed in too abstract a manner, with emphasis on “methodology” and what might or might not have been the case. What is badly needed in the discussion, however, are concrete examples for which we have considerable biblical and extra-biblical data. A wonderful case study is the reigns of Omri and Ahab because we have data from a number of different sources.

The aim of this paper is to look at what we know of the reigns of these kings from extra-biblical sources and to then compare this information with the biblical account. The ultimate aim is to draw out principles for (re)constructing the history of ancient Israel: how should we go about the business of writing history when the biblical text is a major source?

THE ARTISTIC PORTRAITS IN THE VARIOUS SOURCES

1 Kings 16:23–28: Omri’s reign in 6 verses.
1 Kings 16:29–34: summary of Ahab’s reign.
1 Kings 17–19: the Elijah narrative.
1 Kings 20: the king of Israel versus Ben-Hadad of Damascus.
1 Kings 21: Ahab and Naboth’s vineyard.
1 Kings 22: the battle of Ramoth-gilead and the death of Ahab.
2 Kings 2: Elijah ascends to heaven and is replaced by Elisha.
2 Kings 3: Jehoram of Israel and his allies against Moab.
The Picture in the Assyrian Sources

We are fortunate in having a number of inscriptions from the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (c. 859–824 BCE) who was the first Assyrian king to come in contact with Israel. The Kurkh Monolith details Shalmaneser III’s campaign in his sixth year (853 BCE). It describes the force that met him after he had worked his way as far as Qarqar on the Orontes in northern Syria:

1200 chariots, 1200 cavalry, 20,000 footsoldiers of Adad-idri of Aram-Damascus (šá kur-]-anše-šú); 700 chariots, 700 cavalry, 10,000 footsoldiers of Irhuleni, the Hamathite (kur A-mat-a-a); 2,000 chariots [2 lim giš.gigir.meš], 10,000 footsoldiers of Ahab (‘A-ha-ab-bu) the Israelite (kur Sir-‘-la-a-a)—; these 12 kings, he brought as his allies. They came against me to [wage] war and fight. In the exalted might which Ashur my lord gave me (and) with the strong weapons which Nergal, who goes before me, presented to me, I fought with them. I defeated them from Qarqar to Gilzau. I slew 14,000 of their soldiers with the weapons (and) rained, like the god Adad, the destructive flood upon them. (Yamada 2000, 156–57, 376.)

Further inscriptions indicate that the coalition continued to oppose the Assyrians successfully for many years: according to the Baghdad Text in both his 10th year and his 11th year Shalmaneser was again opposed by Hadadezer of Damascus, Irḫulēnu of Hamath, as part of a coalition of twelve kings (Grayson 1996, 32–41 [A.0.102.6]). According to the Calah Annals, in his 14th year Shalmaneser had an army of 120,000 but was once more opposed by Hadadezer, Irḫulēnu, as part of a coalition of twelve kings (Grayson 1996, 42–48 [A.0.102.8]).

In his 18th year, however, the situation was different (Aššur Basalt Statue):

I defeated Adad-idri of Damascus with 12 kings, his helpers, and laid down 29,000 of his brave fighters like reeds. The remainder of his army, I cast into the Orontes river. They fled to save their life. Adad-idri died. Hazael, son of a nobody [dumu la ma-ma-na], took the throne. He mustered his large army and came against me to wage war. I fought with him and defeated him (and) took off the wall of his camp. Hazael fled to save his own life. I pursued (him) as far as Damascus, his royal city. (Yamada 2000, 188–89; cf. also Grayson 1996, 118 [A.0.102.40: i 14–35]; ANET: 280.)

The Kurba’il Statue gives some similar information but also adds data not in the other inscriptions: