THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE OF JEROBOAM BEN JOASH

BY

MENAHEM HARAN
Jerusalem, Israel

The reign of Jeroboam ben Joash is briefly depicted in seven verses in the Book of Kings (2 Kings xiv 23-29), stressing his military victories which concluded in tremendous territorial expansion—in an empire paralleling that of David and Solomon. Jeroboam’s reign, however, extended over 41 years (ibid. 23) approximating the time-span from 789-7 to 748-7 B.C. 1). This marks a period long enough for experiencing political and military vicissitudes. In truth, once the biblical allusions in this regard and their proper juxtaposition with Assyrian inscriptions are exhausted, the likely conclusion might be drawn that the growth of Jeroboam’s dominion to imperial proportions was confined to its final years only. The existence of this empire is actually conceivable over a chronological interval of no more than seven or eight years. On the other hand, the period during which conditions were conducive to imperial growth included the initial years of the reign of Menahem ben Gadi. Investigation may, indeed, indicate that Jeroboam’s imperial structure remained intact for some time following his death. During the greater part of his reign, however, Jeroboam’s dominion was restricted to Israelite soil. Moreover, at the outset his kingdom did not attain even this scope and he had yet to restore Israelite sway over Trans-Jordan.

1) For synchronizing the chronological systems in this matter see H. TADMOR, Encyc. Miggreyt IV, cols. 261-262. For S. YEIVIN’s approach, see also his brochure Chronological Lists on Israelite History in the Period of Monarchy (Hebrew), Tel Aviv (1962), pp. 8, 17. A. JEPSEN’s recent system, closely akin to that of J. BEGRICH, is indicated in his latest publication (in collaboration with R. Hanhart), Untersuchungen zur israelitisch-jüdischen Chronologie, Berlin 1964, pp. 35, 42. Even if we were to accept THIELE’s approach, according to which Jeroboam’s reign was already at an end in 753 B.C., it would in no wise detract from our considerations (see particularly below, sect. IV). In Josephus Flavius’ view, Jeroboam ben Joash retained power for no longer than 40 years (Antiquities IX, x, 1, 3) but this would seem to be only a round number.
I. Restoration of Israelite Sovereignty 
Over Trans-Jordan

Trans-Jordan was still outside Jeroboam's domain during the initial stage of his reign. Certain scholars are of the opinion that this territory had already come under Israelite control at the time of Joash, Jeroboam's father, who had inflicted three defeats upon Aram and "recovered the cities of Israel" (2 Kings xiii 25). This argument, however, may be easily refuted by a careful examination of the relevant texts.

In 838 B.C. Shalmaneser III conducted his last military expedition in Aram, which ended like the previous expeditions, without succeeding in taking possession of Damascus. On this occasion the Assyrian monarch contents himself with accepting gifts from the coastal cities. With his death (824), Jehu still rules over Israel. Shalmaneser III was followed on the Assyrian throne by his son Shamshi-Adad V (824-811), whose interests lay outside the west. At the time of his demise Jehoahaz, son of Jehu, was in the first years of his reign. Adad-Nirari III had assumed the crown while yet a child, the reins of power being held for five years by his mother, Sammuramat (811-806), the Semiramis of Greek tradition. During this time Assyria was engaged in warfare primarily on the Indian frontier. Thus the years between 838 and 806 mark the period in which the kings of Damascus, Hazael and his son, Ben-Hadad III, were free to wage wars against Jehu and Jehoahaz, to wrest territory from Israel and oppress it to the point where it had become "like the dust at threshing" (2 Kings xiii 7).

In his fifth year of reign Adad-Nirari III came of age and thereupon assumed full control of the kingdom (806). In that very year he leads a military expedition in the direction of Philistia, with the intention of punishing the countries beyond the Euphrates which had ceased forwarding their tributes to Assyria. He lays siege to Damascus, ultimately imposing heavy taxes upon its ruler, Mari, that is, Ben-Hadad III. The "saviour" (môshîa') of Israel from the