Modern Old Testament scholarship is gradually recognising that the historical accounts furnished by the biblical documents are not always adequate to explain what, from other sources, we know to have taken place. Nowhere, however, does the biblical account appear so biased and inadequate as in its treatment of the age and dynasty of Omri. This cannot be explained by arguing for the obscurity of our sources which lay behind this particular period. For although as many as eight sources 1) are recognisable in the Books of the Kings we have, nevertheless, only a most inadequate account of the achievements and significance of Omri and his house. Omri himself receives only the most curt attention, being dismissed in some five or six verses (1 Kg. xvi 23-29). Indeed, the writer has done little more than supply us with the standard formula which describes the accession and death of each king. It is true ‘his might’ is mentioned, but it is a brief evaluation of his merits in comparison with the prominence attributed to him in extra Israelite sources. Yet for Israel the reign of Omri was of the greatest significance. He ascended the throne of Israel in 882 B.C., when a disturbing half century had elapsed since the disruption of the Davidic kingdom. At least three families had reigned over Israel since Solomon, and each reign was characterised by incompetence, bloodshed and treachery.

In the meantime the neighbouring kingdom of Damascus had been steadily gaining to a position of prominence, and eventually succeeded in recapturing much of the territory earlier appropriated by David. More ominous still was the fact that with the accession of Ashur-nasir-pal II, Assyria had entered upon a period

of conquest in the West. Within a decade this king had reached the Phoenician coast. His campaigns and achievements are amply documented in the form of inscriptions bequeathed to us. Thus, he claims to have received “the tribute of the kings by the side of the sea, from the lands of Tyre and Sidon and Byblos and Markhallet and Maisa and Amurru and Arvad” 1). It is noteworthy that Israel, although bordering Phoenicia, is not mentioned among these as a subject state. And its significance lies in the fact that Omri assumed the leadership of Israel three years after the accession of Ashur-nasir-pal 2). He was therefore a contemporary of the great Assyrian monarch, and proved himself an equally competent ruler. Within the early years of his accession he not only stabilised the enfeebled kingdom of Ephraim 3), but had actually made some conquests in Transjordan. Mesha, king of Moab, recorded on the Moabite Stone: “Omri was king of Israel and he afflicted Moab for many years” 4). It is also evident from this inscription that Omri subdued other territory north of Moab, because mention is made of “Omri’s possession of the land of Medeba” 5): other places, once in the possession of the Reubenites in Transjordan, are also mentioned as having now come under Omri’s rule 6). Omri’s reorganisation of the Israelite people, and his conquests across the Jordan at a time when Assyria threatened Syria-Palestine with invasion are thus remarkable achievements. But Omri was still able to devote time to the founding and building of a royal residence in Samaria (1 Kg. xvi 24). This was the first establishment of an Ephraimite capital, and from excavations carried out in Samaria, it appears that the palace founded in Omri’s day was far superior, both in the strength of its fortifications and in the elegance of its architecture, to the structures later erected there by Jehu and his dynasty 7).

3) For the importance of Omri as the founder of the dynastic conception of kingship in Israel, see ALBRECHT ALT, Das Königtum in den Reichen Israel und Juda, V.T. Vol. I, pp. 9-11, Jan. 1951.
4) Lines 4-5.
5) Lines 7-8.