JEHU’S CORONATION AND PURGE OF ISRAEL

by

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The Jehu tradition (II Kings ix-x) is complex and difficult. Some interpreters basically accept the text’s deuteronomistic perspective, viewing Jehu as a king committed to “Yahweh’s continuing mastery over Baal and the political machine promoting Baal worship.” From this point of view, Jehu is merely and only a purgation tool in the hands of Yahweh.

Others disagree. G. Ahlström, for example, sees him as a political revolutionary. When Jehu kills the royal families of both Judah and Israel, this shows to Ahlström only that a Yahwistic minority has become desperate enough to use terrorism as a political weapon. Later this behavior is creatively translated into religious terms and theological categories. Ahlström justifiably questions Jehu’s use of violence and deception, but in so doing he subordinates the tradition’s theological characteristics to a hypothetical reconstruction of its politics. In addition, he fails to explain why or how this so-called “powerless political minority” stays in power for several more generations.

H. D. Hoffman reads the Jehu story against the Ahab story, isolating and comparing what he calls the “standardized language” of both accounts. From this comparison he concludes that no ancient


historical annal could possibly have lain beneath this text, though to support this conclusion he too must focus on the redactoral possibilities above the text instead of the theological conflicts within the text.\textsuperscript{5}

Even among those who accept the story as in some sense historically true, many doubt whether everything Jehu does in Yahweh’s name has Yahweh’s approval. Hosea’s negative appraisal, for example, is quite serious (Hos. i 4), and the negative appraisal of Dtr himself seems definitive (II Kings x 31). From this angle the conclusion seems obvious that the biblical tradition itself is ambivalent. Th. Mullen recognizes this ambivalence, yet notes that even though Jehu receives the same negative reprimand as every other northern king, he also receives some very high praise:

Because you have done well in carrying out what I consider right, and in accordance with all that was in my heart have dealt with the house of Ahab, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.\textsuperscript{6}

Mullen notes that this is “the strongest endorsement given to any northern monarch in Dtr,” and suggests that it be interpreted as an “innovation on the concept of eternal dynasty promised to David” (II Sam. vii 12-16).\textsuperscript{7} In his view, Dtr “utilizes the stories of the actions of Jehu in fulfillment of the prophetic condemnations of the house of Ahab” in order to “provide the basis for a uniquely designed divine assurance of dynastic stability for the Jehu dynasty.”\textsuperscript{8} This explanation is attractive, even if it, too, says little to the nature and character of the text’s theological conflicts.\textsuperscript{9}

\textit{People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible} [San Francisco, 1986], p. 147) takes a sociological tack, arguing that Jehu perverts the whole “Yahwistic notion of community.”\textsuperscript{5} That is, Hoffman presupposes that the ancient readers of this text “must rely on our knowledge of texts and traditions at that time” (D. C. Polaski, \textit{Authorizing an End: The Isaiah Apocalypse and Intertextuality} [BIS 50; Leiden, 2001], pp. 44-45 [emphasis original]).

\textsuperscript{6} II Kings x 30.


\textsuperscript{8} Mullen, p. 198.

\textsuperscript{9} Negative appraisals of Jehu are nothing new. Augustine, for example, finds him a reprehensible character motivated only by “the lust of his own domination” (\textit{To Consentius: Against Lying} § 3). In the Talmud, Rab Joshua ben Levi throws Jehu onto something of a moral “compost heap” with six other “idolatrous kings”—Jeroboam, Baasha, Ahab, Pekah, Menahem, and Hoshea (\textit{b. Git.} 88a). Talmud, however, is ambiguous. Attempting to explain why Jehu, a “righteous man,” eventually defaults to Jeroboam’s bad example (II Kings x 31), one rabbi rather feebly suggests that it is because of his boast in...