THE WRATH OF MOAB

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Israel had a distant kinship with Moab, whose eponymous ancestor was a son of Lot, and a geographical propinquity with this kingdom on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. It was directly south of Israel's territory east of the Jordan River, with the Arnon River as the boundary between them. Moab had briefly held lands and cities north of the Arnon, a region more habitable than its own rough terrain, but lost them to Sihon, King of the Amorites, just in time for him to lose them to the newly arriving Israelites. The Israelites were forbidden by Divine command to touch any Moabite territory, but the tribes of Reuben and Gad settled the pastoral tableland above the river, and the Arnon was the border of Moab (Num. 21:10-22:1,32; cf. Jud. 11:14-25).

David brought Moab into vassalage to Israel, and after the schism of Judah and Israel the overlordship devolved on the Northern Kingdom. There is then a gap in the record until the reign of Omri, King of Israel circa 886-874 BCE. If his predecessors kept the mastery of Moab, he maintained it; if they lost it, he restored it. Moab had its own king, but that king was not his own man. He was a vassal of the King of Israel, to whom he rendered political fealty and an annual tribute levied on a principal resource of Moab's economy: . . . the wool of one hundred elef [thousand?] lambs and one hundred elef rams (II Kg. 3:4).

Two Moabite vassal-kings are known for the Omride period, and they came not from Moab itself but from Dibon, north of the Arnon. They were Khemoshyati, whose name invokes the Moabite patron deity Khemosh, and his son Mesha, a most devout servant of Khemosh and a most resentful servant of the King of Israel. Mesha submitted under the formidable Ahab ben-Omri, but after Ahab fell in battle against the Arameans, Mesha rebelled. As tersely noted in two biblical citations: Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab (II Kg. 1:1), and when Ahab was dead, the King of Moab rebelled against the King of Israel (3:5). These references appear in the successive reigns of Ahaziah ben-

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Ahab, that lasted less than two years, and of his brother and successor Jehoram ben-Ahab. Whenever the rebellion was launched and however quickly it progressed, it was Jehoram who had to deal with it.

The biblical record on Omri cites *the might that he showed* (I Kg. 16:27) but gives no example of it. The might he showed to Moab is known only from Mesha's memoir, inscribed on a stone stele that he erected near to his hometown of Dibon. When this stele was discovered in 1868, local tribesmen smashed it, and only 34 lines – about two-thirds of the original text – can now be reconstructed, with lacunae where words are eroded, illegible, or unintelligible. Mesha reports without undue modesty on his ambitious program for Moab: Setting up shrines for Khemosh, building or rebuilding cities and fortifications, constructing roads and reservoirs, enrolling and training warriors. His proudest vaunts supplement the biblical material on the interplay between Israel and Moab in this period:

> I am Mesha, son of Khemosh (...), King of Moab, the Dibonite. My father ruled over Moab for 30 years, and I ruled after my father. I made this high place for Khemosh . . . . for he saved me from all the kings and let me enjoy the sight of [or: look down on] all my enemies.

> Omri (*was*) King of Israel, and he oppressed Moab many days, for Khemosh was angry with his land. And his son succeeded him, and he too said: "I will oppress Moab." In my days he said so, but I enjoyed his sight and that of his house [or: looked down on him and his house]. And Israel perished [or: was defeated] utterly forever.

> And Omri had taken possession of the land of Medeba. And he dwelt in it in his days and (*the sum?* half?) of the days of his sons: 40 years; but Khemosh restored it in my days . . . . And the men of Gad had dwelt in the land of Atarot from of old, and the King of Israel built Atarot for himself; but I fought against the town and took it, and I slew all the people . . . .

> And Khemosh said to me: "Go! Take Nebo against Israel." And I went by night and fought against it from break of dawn till noon. And I took it and slew all: 7,000 men, boys, women, girls . . . because I had devoted it to Ashtar-Khemosh . . . .
And the King of Israel had built Yahaz, and dwelt therein while he fought against me; but Khemosh drove him out before me. . . . and I dug the (ditches?) for Qeriho with prisoners of Israel.¹

Much computation has been devoted to dating the 40 years of Omride "oppression," but it is more likely a standard round number equivalent to one generation than a precise statistic. More salient than exact dates is the area where Omri and Ahab "dwelt." The towns that Mesha names were not within Moab, but north of the Arnon River; the region that the Moabites had lost to the Amorites 400 years in the past and where, as Mesha himself acknowledged, "the men of Gad had dwelt in Ataroth from of old." But Moab had never ceased to hanker for this land, and it may be that at some time – perhaps after the death of Solomon – some King of Moab had won it. If so, then Omri won it back for Israel, stirring a new Moabite irredentism.

Mesha was not fighting to expel Israel from Moab, for it never "dwelt" there. The King of Israel held the King of Moab as a vassal, but apparently did not annex territory south of the Arnon, and nothing in Mesha's account even hints at Israelite settlement there. Thus, Omri and Ahab were "building" and "dwelling" within their own realm, probably to strengthen its defenses against Moab, Aram, Ammon or any combination thereof. Mesha's rebellion was to assert his independence as a sovereign, who would no longer pay tribute to a foreign overlord or follow his policies, and his attacks were to extend his kingdom north of the Arnon.

His assaults were not frontier raids, but invasions as far north as the border with Ammon, attacking, seizing and looting Israelite towns, enslaving the residents or slaughtering them as sacrifices to Khemosh. The magnitude of Jehoram's response to Mesha's rebellion suggests that it came after these bloody onslaughts had been launched, but that is speculative and the sequence is not beyond dispute.² It was imperative for a King of Israel to defend his subjects and his land. and it was a strategic necessity not to permit a hostile King of Moab to control the east bank of the Jordan River, where he could align himself with Aram or Assyria, two aggressive states against which Ahab had fought to defend Israel.

Omri and Ahab had held their trans-Jordanian territory and their mastery of Moab without assistance. However, Ahab did seek an ally for his expedition to recover the fortress of Ramot-gilead from the Arameans, and turned then
to Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, a fellow Hebrew and a kinsman by marriage. Now, Jehoram, too, turned to Jehoshaphat. The King of Israel determined on a campaign and marshaled his troops before he approached the King of Judah who, as may have been expected, replied in virtually the same courteous words he had addressed to Ahab.

But when Ahab was dead, the King of Moab rebelled against the King of Israel. And King Jehoram went out of Samaria at that time and mustered all Israel.

And he went and sent to Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah, saying:
'The King of Moab has rebelled against me, will you go with me to battle against Moab?'

And he said, 'I will go up. I am as you are, my people as your people, and my horses as your horses' (II Kg 3:4-8; cf. I Kg. 22:4, II Chron. 18:3).

A few years before, Jehoshaphat had assented to Ahab's request to join the battle against Aram and the battle was lost (I Kg. 22; II Chron. 18). He had agreed to Ahaziah ben-Ahab's proposal of partnership in a trading fleet to Ophir, and the ships sank (II Chron. 20:36-37; but cf. I Kg. 22:49-50). Despite this experience, he now made league with Jehoram ben-Ahab against Moab.

The last extant lines of the Moabite's memoir have him moving southward:

And (the House of David?)

3 dwell in Horonen . . . and Khemosh said to me: "Go down! Fight against Horonen." And I went down, and (I fought against the town, and I took it?).

Horonen was presumably the biblical Horonaim (Isa. 15:5, Jer. 48:3,34), just north of the Zered River, the boundary between Moab and Edom. At that time, There was no king in Edom, a deputy [of the King of Judah] acted as king (I Kg 22:48). The ruler of Edom was thus a vassal of Jehoshaphat, and willy-nilly made a third in the alliance of Israel and Judah. Whether this alliance came before or after the Jehoram-Jehoshaphat expedition, Mesha was at some time in the period moving toward Edom and infringing on Judah's sphere of interest. While Jehoshaphat may have wished to keep up his entente with the House of Omri, he may also have had a strategic concern of his own pulling in the reins on Mesha.
When the allies deliberated on tactics, they had at least three possible plans from which to choose:
1. The men of Judah and Edom would march north to join those of Israel, then either cross the Jordan River into Gilead and march south, or cross the ford of the Jordan at Jericho. By either route, they would then engage the Moabites in the tableland north of the Arnon River, or even below the Arnon in Moab itself. This plan would bring the most immediate succor to the imperiled tribes of Reuben and Gad, regain whatever cities had already been lost in the tableland, and relieve the threat to Gilead.

2. The men of Israel would march south to join those of Judah, and on to the lower end of the Dead Sea for a rendezvous with the Edomites. The attack on Moab would be at its southern and more vulnerable border. This would not directly drive Mesha off the tableland, but it could distract him from further assaults there.

3. Jehoram would attack on the north and Jehoshaphat simultaneously on the south, forcing Mesha to divide his forces and fight on two fronts.

When it came to choosing a plan, an ambiguity of pronouns leaves it unclear whether Jehoram deferred to the older, experienced and highly respected King of Judah, or Jehoshaphat left the decision to the King of Israel who had initiated the expedition and had the most at stake: And he said, 'Which way shall we go up?' And he answered, 'The Way of the Wilderness of Edom.' (II Kg. 3:8).

The rationale for this decision may be that Mesha’s strength in the north was inhibiting. If so, the rebel King of Moab must have moved very quickly in the few years since the death of Ahab, to seize or build a line of fortifications there. Perhaps he designed this line to repel an anticipated counterattack from Israel, not expecting that it would come from the opposite direction.

Finally, the tripartite expedition took the road, and after a week had made the turn around the tip of the Dead Sea to its eastern shore:

So the King of Israel went, and the King of Judah, and the King of Edom. And they made a circuit in seven days. And there was no water left for the host or the beasts that were with them (II Kg. 3:4).

Three kings would not lead so many men, horses and pack-asses into a long desert trek without knowing that they would need far more water than they could carry with them. They may have thought to find fresh springs and streams along the way, but springs and streams that flow sweetly one year
may run dry another. The hosts found themselves in or near enemy territory without the water to sustain life much less fighting vigor.

There is now a sudden change in the tone of the narrative, hinting at a switch from a political-military source to a prophetic one. While Jehoram was in despair at their plight, Jehoshaphat characteristically sought a prophet to consult (3:11, cf. I Kg. 22:5,7; I Chron. 18:4,6), and was told that Elisha was available. His presence with the expedition is never explained. Monarchs did take their personal seers to war with them, but Elisha, though a native of the Kingdom of Israel, never served Jehoram. On the contrary, when the kings came to him, he flaunted contempt for his own sovereign and granted an interview only out of respect for the pious Jehoshaphat. He produced this forecast:

'Thus said The Lord: This wadi shall be full of pools. For thus says the Lord, You shall see no wind, you shall see no rain, and yet the wadi shall be filled with water. And you and your cattle and your pack animals shall drink.' . . . .

. . And in the morning, about the time of making the offering, that behold there came water by the way of Edom, and the country was filled with water (vv. 15-17, 19).

The putative prophetic source saw Elisha's performance as an inspired vision of a forthcoming miracle. A modern meteorologist on the same site could produce the same prophecy if he observed low clouds and distant electrical flashes of a distant storm with heavy rainfall that would in the course of the night run down to fill the dry streambeds.4

Elisha accompanied his prediction of water with a program for action:

'He will also deliver the Moabites into your hand. And you shall smite every fortified city, and every choice city, and fell every good tree, and stop all springs of water, and mar every good piece of land with stones' (vv. 18-19).

In his fierceness, Elisha violated the principle in Deuteronomy 20:19-20, wherein men at war inside enemy lands are asked: Is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? (The answer: If there is an urgent need for timber it can be taken, but fruit trees must not be destroyed.) The devastation that Elisha prescribed is similar enough to Mesha's own rampages to suggest vengeance for the fate of the Israelite cities, though the irascible
prophet did not call for the slaughter or enslavement in which Mesha took pride.

The men had scarcely slaked their thirst when they had to face the Moabite host quick-marched to the scene. It is not noted whether Mesha himself was present to command in person.

*Meanwhile, all the Moabites had heard that the kings were advancing to make war on them. All those old enough to gird on a sword rallied, and they stationed themselves at the border. Next morning, when they arose, the sun was shining over the water and from the distance the water appeared to the Moabites as red as blood.*

*That is blood!* they said. *The kings must have fought among themselves and killed each other. Now to the spoil, Moab!*

*They entered the camp of Israel and the Israelites arose and attacked the Moabites, who fled before them (vv. 21-24).*

Streambeds that cut through reddish rock (the name "Edom" means "red") might carry russet sediments or reflect the hues of overhanging cliffs, or both, giving them a fiery cast under the sun's rays. The Moabites should have been familiar with such effects, yet the commanders persuaded themselves that there had been a falling out in the enemy camp violent enough to incarnadine a rushing stream. Only a fantastical hope could have Jehoram and Jehoshaphat turn on one another, but wishful thinking might evoke a strike by the King of Edom against his overlord.

From this victory, the expedition proceeded into Moab, and Mesha could not withstand the onslaught:

*They advanced, constantly attacking the Moabites. And they destroyed the cities. Every man threw a stone into each fertile field, so that it was covered over. And they stopped up every spring and felled every fruit tree. Only the stones of Kir-hareseth were left and the slingers encompassed it and smote it (v. 25).*

They closed in on Mesha's last stronghold of Kir-hareseth, a stout citadel atop a steep hill where the King of Moab made his last-ditch stand. *And when the King of Moab saw that the battle was too severe for him, he took with him seven hundred men that drew sword, to break through to the King of Edom, but they could not (v. 26).*
It may be that Mesha judged the Edomite line to be the weakest link in the siege-ring, where he might break through and escape. Or, it may be that he was trying to reach a secret friend, whose real sympathies were with the rebel vassal rather than his own master. (As Moab had cut loose from Israel after the death of Ahab, Edom was soon to cut loose from Judah after the death of Jehoshaphat.) Perhaps, with or without cause, Mesha expected the King of Edom to change sides; it could even have been a misconception that he had already done so that lured the Moabites into their disastrous attack on the camp by the red waters.

Whatever hope led Mesha forth with his 700 men, it failed him. He had but one most desperate move left. He must buy succor from his patron deity Khemosh: *Then he took his eldest son, that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall* (v. 27). In time of victory, Mesha sacrificed prisoners to Khemosh as payback for his assistance. Now no offering would suffice but the most precious of all. Mesha must buy his kingdom with the life of the crown prince. This was the custom of Semitic societies from Babylon to Carthage; the belief that the sacrifice of one's child – preferably a first-born son – was the way to a deity's heart. Mesha performed the deed on the city wall, within view – but not range – of the enemy.

Thus far, there is a detailed report on the expedition, with direct quotations from participants. Now, there is an abrupt and cryptic ending: *And a great wrath [קְצֵף – ketzef] came upon Israel, and they departed from him, and returned to their own land* (v. 27). This comes directly after the immolation of the Moabite prince, and the successive verses are often read as cause-and-effect. But the text does not say the sacrifice brought about the ketzef and the lifting of the siege; only that first one happened and then the other. Indeed, to suppose that the first caused the second would impute efficacy to an abhorred pagan rite.

The noun ketzef is commonly rendered "wrath," often with the connotation of Divine wrath that may be followed by a dire punishment. It seems also to be used for a calamitous event that befalls those whose deeds incurred ketzef. In Joshua 9:30, the Israelite chiefs, who had been tricked by Hivites into swearing to a treaty, decide that regardless of the deceit they must honor their pledged word 'so there will be no ketzef against us.' In I Chronicles 27:23-24,
a forbidden census is cut off by an undefined *ketzef*, while in II Samuel 24:10-17 that same offense is punished by an epidemic; a parallel implying that the *ketzef* took the form of pestilence.

Reading "*ketzef*" here as an emotion, it could have been outrage among the Israelites and Judeans at the filicide. If the latter, then the two parts of the verse would, here too, be merely a chronological sequence and not cause-and-effect. The allies, on the verge of victory, would scarcely abandon the field because of anger at the foe. Josephus has the retreat impelled by "humanity and pity," and later interpreters take similar views. But "wrath" does not manifest itself as compassion. The Kings of Israel and Judah were fighting because Mesha was dangerous, and no responsible rulers would leave him free to make more bloody mischief because they felt sorry for him.

Reading "*ketzef*" as an event rather than an emotion, suggests some mishap that befell the allies and compelled them to break off the campaign: Perhaps the Moabites were inspired by the sacrifice to a berserk but effective attack, or there was an epidemic in the camp, or a loss of the food and water supply, or news of some emergency back home. To view any such contingency as a "*ketzef*" implies that it was interpreted as punishment for some misdeed. At least one transgression is explicit in the text; the violation of the Deuteronomistic ban on destroying fruit trees, that Elisha had no authority to abrogate. There may have been some other doings, not preserved in the text, to instill a feeling of guilt.

Jehoshaphat would not believe that any *ketzef* could be the work of Khemosh, nor probably would Jehoram. But the pagan King of Edom and his men might be susceptible to fear of the Moabite god, and so might the more superstitious among Israelites and Judeans. Dread and demoralization would exacerbate the trouble – whatever it was – and bring demands for a quick flight from this alien and tainted place.

Whatever befell the three kings and their men and drove them off, Mesha would feel sure that his sacrifice had brought it about; that, in the words of his own stele "[Khemosh] saved me from all the kings, and caused me to triumph over my enemies."

In the end, both rival enterprises failed in part. Mesha kept his kingdom, but did not establish Moabite rule north of the Arnon. Jehoram preserved Israel's territory east of the Jordan, but did not crush Mesha. The old enmity
lingered on. A half-a century later, the Moabites still made an annual razzia against the Israelites, when *Moabite bands raided the land with the coming of the year* (13:20).

NOTES
1 Translation based on André Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription," *Biblical Archaeologist*, July 1994, pp. 31-37. Uncertain or restored readings are in italics in parentheses, alternative readings are in brackets.
3 "House of David" is Lemaire's proposed but debatable restoration of an indistinct phrase in the inscription.
5 Philo of Byblos, in the Sixth Century BCE, wrote of the Phoenicians: "It was an ancient custom in a crisis of great danger, that the ruler of a city or nation should give his beloved son for the whole people as a ransom [and] dressed him in royal robes and sacrificed him up on the altar when the country was in great danger from the enemy." See also, Baruch Margoliot, "Why King Mesha of Moab Sacrificed His Eldest Son," *Biblical Archaeology Review* XII:6 (1986) pp. 62-63, with a text from Ugarit prescribing child sacrifice to the Canaanite god Baal as the remedy for enemy siege.

The exegete R. David Cassuto, quoting his father, suggests that 'he took his first-born' refers to the son of the Edomite king, whom Mesha held captive. This might explain why the Edomites had joined the alliance.