

Bayla Bonder

**Mesha's Rebellion
Against Israel**

This study seeks to investigate the dating of the successful rebellion of Mesha, King of Moab, against his Omride overlord. The two sources at our disposal, the Mesha Stone¹ and the biblical Book of Kings,² both describe the event in question. According to the biblical source, Mesha rebelled against Israel at the death of Ahab,³ while the Mesha Inscription seems

¹ C. Clermont-Ganneau, La Stèle de Dhiban (Paris, 1870); G. A. Cooke, A Textbook of North-West Semitic Inscriptions (Oxford, 1903), pp. 3-13 (hereafter = Cooke); H. Donner and W. Röllig, Kanaanäisches und aramäisches Inschriften (Wiesbaden, 1964), 181; S. R. Driver, Notes on the Hebrew Text and Topography of the Books of Samuel (Oxford, 1913), pp. lxxxvii-xci (hereafter = Driver, Notes); C. D. Ginsburg, The Moabite Stone (London, 1871) (hereafter = Ginsburg); M. Lidzbarski, Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik, Vol. I (Berlin, 1902), pp. 6-7 and 19-42 (hereafter = Lidzbarski, Ephemeris), and Handbuch der nordsemitische Epigraphik, Vol. I (reprint: Weimar, 1962), pp. 415-416; R. Smend and A. Socin, Die Inschrift des Königs Mesa von Moab (Fribourg-en-Brigau, 1886); A. H. van Zyl, The Moabites (Leiden, 1960) (hereafter = van Zyl). See now J. C. L. Gibson, A Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Vol. I (Oxford, 1971), pp. 78-84 (hereafter = Gibson), where a complete bibliography is also given (pp. 85-87).

² II Kings 1:1; II Kings 3:5. Note also II Kings 3:4-27, where both Mesha's successful revolt against Ahab and Jehoram's attempt to recoup his father's losses are discussed.

³ The chronology of Mesha's rebellion is given in both II Kings 1:1 ('hry mwt 'h'b) and II Kings 3:5 (wyhy kmwt 'h'b). These statements can only mean that Mesha rebelled when Ahab died, i. e., as a reaction to Ahab's death. For 'hry mwt used in this way, cf. Num. 35:28; Josh. 1:1; Judg. 1:1; Ruth 2:11, etc. For kmwt, cf. II Chron. 24:22.

to indicate that the rebellion took place at a later time.

The point of conflict between the two sources stems from line 8 of the MI:

וַיֵּשֶׁב בָּהּ יָמָה וְחֲצִי יָמֵי בְנֵה אֲרַבְעָן שָׁנָה

And (Israel) dwelt there (in Madeba) during his (Omri's) reign and during half the reign of his son/sons, forty years.

From this, most scholars understand that Omri and some descendant/descendants held Moab for a total of forty years and that this forty-year period began at the time of Omri's reign and ended halfway through the reign of his successor/successors.

The reigns of the Omride dynasty may be schematized as follows:

Omri	12 years ⁴	} son grandsons
Ahab	22 years ⁵	
Ahaziah	2 years ⁶	
Yehoram	12 years ⁷	

Thus, according to the biblical figures for the Omride dynasty and its dating of Mesha's rebellion to the death of Ahab,⁸ the Israelite occupation of Moab could

⁴ Omri's reign over Israel lasted from the twenty-seventh year (I Kings 16:15) to the thirty-eighth year (I Kings 16:29) of the reign of Asa, king of Judah--a total of 12 years. I Kings 16:23 must be understood to imply, therefore, that in his fifth year (= the thirty-first year of Asa's reign), Omri obtained undisputed control over Israel and then reigned an additional seven years. His first six years he reigned in Tirzah, in the last six years, in the new capital Samaria, which he built. Thus, Cooke, p. 9, and Gibson, p. 79, who accept I Kings 16:23 as evidence for a reign of 18 years, are incorrect. For an alternative explanation of these seemingly conflicting chronological statements, see C. F. Burney, Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings (reprint: New York, 1970), pp. 203-204.

⁵ I Kings 16:29.

⁶ I Kings 22:52.

⁷ II Kings 3:1.

⁸ See note 3 above.

have lasted a maximum of only 34 years. Omri's conquest of Moab took place during his later years,⁹ so the figure is further reduced.¹⁰ Since the attempts of various scholars to resolve this discrepancy have been largely unsatisfactory,¹¹ a new interpretation of

⁹ Omri rose to power as a result of the reaction of the people against Zimri's murder of Elah (I Kings 16:8-20) but was favored by only part of the population and was engaged in civil war for about four years against Tibni and his supporters. Even after Tibni's removal (a fact about which the Bible is vague--I Kings 16:22), it scarcely seems possible that all enmity was removed or that Omri was able to muster an army to conquer Moab. Not until his sixth year did Omri even purchase hr šmr for the purpose of building a capital city (I Kings 16:23), and this elaborate construction must have involved a few years of labor.

¹⁰ The period would not be less than 22 years, nor more than approximately 25. For the upper limit, see note 9 above; for the lower limit, see note 5 above.

¹¹ Three solutions have been advanced by scholars to resolve this discrepancy:

- A) While the revolt began approximately at the death of Ahab (or a few years before), it continued well into the reign of Jehoram. Thus, the Book of Kings is talking about the political beginning of the revolt, while the Mesha Inscription is speaking about the actual commencement of hostilities (Cooke, pp. 9-10; F. M. Cross Jr. and D. N. Freedman, Early Hebrew Orthography [New Haven, 1952], pp. 39-40).
- B) The revolt began in the latter half of Ahab's reign and continued until his death. Thus, the Book of Kings is referring to the end of the revolt, while the Mesha Inscription is speaking of its beginning (Gibson, p. 71).
- C) The occupation of Moab began in the first decade of Omri's reign and ended some 40 years later when Mesha rebelled at Ahab's death (J. Wellhausen, Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel [reprint: Cleveland, 1965], p. 459, n. 2).

The first view is unacceptable, because according to note 10 above, the revolt could not have begun any later than approximately 25 years after the date of Omri's occupation of Moab. This would place the "commencement of hostilities" either at the very end of Jehoram's reign or at the beginning of the reign of Jehoram's successor. The amount of time between "the setting into motion of the machinery of revolt" and "the commencement of hostilities" would then be at least fifteen years (!).

The second view is untenable because the Book of Kings is most definitely referring to the beginning of the revolt. This is the only possible way of understanding both II Kings 1:1 and II Kings 3:5 (see above, note 3). The third view need not be refuted, since

line 8 of the MI will be presented here, which will hopefully reconcile the two sources dealing with Mesha's rebellion.

At the outset, it should be stated that any solution to the problem of chronology must first deal with the ambiguities of grammar and syntax which are present in line 8 of the MI. The main difficulty lies in the meaning of the phrase 'rbCn št and what its antecedent is. Subordinate to this is the question of whether bnh is to be taken as "his son"¹² or "his sons."¹³ Thus, the literal forty-year period¹⁴ could refer to a) the regnal years of Omri and half the reign of his son/sons¹⁵ or b) half the reign of his son/sons.

By interpreting bn as "his sons" and considering this plurality of reigns as the antecedent of 'rbCn št, we then obtain the correspondence of the literal forty years with half the reigns of Ahab,

it simply disregards the biblical timetable and thus eliminates the problem. The solution presented here seeks to resolve the discrepancy without resorting to such extreme measures.

¹² Van Zyl, p. 139; Driver, Notes, p. lxxxviii; B. Mazar, Encyclopedia Migrait, Vol. IV (Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 921-922 (in Hebrew); this option would place the revolt midway through Ahab's reign (see the second view referred to and its refutation in note 11). Note that Cross, p. 39, and J. Bright, A History of Israel (London, 1960), p. 228, both translate bnh "his grandson," referring to Yehoram. This would place the revolt in the time of Yehoram, which is unacceptable for the reasons presented above (note 11). It should also be noted that while bn can mean "grandson" (it can indeed refer to any descendant), the name of the father is usually given to avoid ambiguity (e.g., Num. 16:1; II Sam. 9:6, 21:7), although there are several cases where the father's name is omitted (e.g., Gen. 29:5, 31:28; cf. Ruth 4:17).

¹³ Nordlander and Winckler, cited in Driver, Notes, p. xc; Cooke, pp. 8-9; Lidzbarski, Ephemeris, pp. 6-7. This option would place the revolt several years before Ahab's death and would be untenable in the light of the biblical evidence (Cooke's solution, which presumes that the rebellion began before Ahab's death and continued through the later years of Yehoram is unacceptable for all the reasons mentioned in note 11).

¹⁴ Compare such biblical verses as Gen. 32:15, which present the same syntactic problem (although this particular case is clarified by its context).

¹⁵ All the scholars referred to in this paper adopt option A, presumably because the forty-year period, if taken literally, is more than the sum total of Omri's reign and half the reign of his sons. Adopting option B would make the apparent discrepancy between the 40 years and its antecedent even greater. However, syntactically option B is as valid as option A.

Ahaziah, and Yehoram. While the numerical total of the reigns of these three sons is 36 years, half of which is 18, this poses no serious problem. In fact, the number of years itself is of no importance, for, as A. Malamat¹⁶ has shown in work restricted to the biblical Hebrew 'rbCym šnh,¹⁷ the term denotes not only "40 years," but also, less literally, "a generation."¹⁸ Considering the affinities between the Moabite and Hebrew languages and cultures,¹⁹ it is likely that the phrase 'rbCn št is to be interpreted along the lines of

¹⁶ A. Malamat et al., The History of the Jewish People in Ancient Times (Tel Aviv, 1969), p. 48 (in Hebrew). Cf. Gibson, p. 79, and Encyclopedia Miqrat IV, pp. 921-922. This possibility was first suggested by van Zyl, p. 138, but was not developed by him.

¹⁷ Malamat, *ibid.*, p. 48, notes that the term 'rb'ym šnh is frequently used in the Bible as the accepted term for a generation. This is particularly demonstrated in the case of the generation which wandered in the desert (Num. 13-14; Deut. 29:4; Amos 2:10, 5:25; Ezek. 29:11-13; Ps. 95:10). He further postulates that the forty-year periods of oppression and quiet in the Book of Judges (3:11, 5:31, 8:28, 13:1) must also be understood as standing for a generation, while eighty years (Judges 3:30) stands for two generations. For applications of this theory to specific problems in biblical chronology, see Malamat, pp. 48ff.

¹⁸ While biblical Hebrew has another word for "generation," namely dwr, there is no reason why the two terms cannot exist side by side. Furthermore, dwr in its meaning of "generation" is limited almost exclusively to the Hebrew Bible. Elsewhere in Semitic languages, as well as in a majority of cases in biblical Hebrew, the term dwr (= Ug. dr; Phoenician dr; Akk. dār) denotes "totality, either of time or of group." Only in Mari does dāru occur once as "generation": ištu šulum Agade adi šarrūtiya adi šabāt Nurugi 7 da-a-ru itiqma, "Since the end of (the) Akkad (dynasty), until my accession to the throne, until the conquest of Nurugi, seven generations had passed" (AAA 19, pl. 81, i 18 [Šamši-Adad I], quoted in CAD, D, p. 115). For Hebrew dwr, "eternity," cf. e. g., Exod. 3:15, 17:16; Deut. 32:7; Isa. 13:20, 58:12; Jer. 50:39; Pss. 22:31, 61:7, 100:5, 106:31, 146:10. For Phoenician dr, "totality of group" or "forever," cf. e. g., KAI 27:11-12 (Arslan Tash); KAI 26A, III:19 (Aztawadda); KAI 128:2 (Neo-Punic). For Ugaritic dr, "assembly" (= totality of group) (often // mphrt) or "forever" (dr dr // clm), cf. e. g., UT 1:7, 2:17 and 34, 107:2-3; IIIAB:A:10; ID:154, 161-2, 167-8. For Akkadian dār (in absolute state only), "forever" (cf. dāriš, dārû, etc.), cf. e. g., UET I, 275, i:2 (Naram-Sîn); CH 25b:1 (both quoted in CAD, D, pp. 107-108).

¹⁹ As this study, which involves only an isolated instance of similarity between Moab and Israel, reveals, there is much to be said about the similarity of these two cultures. The language, idioms, and vocabulary are in many cases identical, as a reading of the Mesha

this biblical usage. When viewed in terms of generations,²⁰ the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah, and Yehoram total two generations, half of which may be equated with the 'rbCn Št of the MI. This would bring us to the end of Ahab's reign. Thus, line 8 of the MI may now be translated:

And (Israel) dwelt there (in Madeba) during his (Omri's) reign and during half the reign of his sons--one generation.

This interpretation of the MI allows for the following historical reconstruction. Omri captured Madeba and held it during his lifetime. His son, Ahab, succeeded him and as a powerful king was able to maintain control. We are told that Mesha was forced to pay an enormous tribute.²¹ However, at Ahab's death, Mesha rebelled. In view of the explanation offered above, the MI confirms the biblical timetable, because it could be understood to say that Omri's dynasty held Madeba in his (Omri's) time, and through half the period of his heirs, which itself equalled one generation. Thus, both documents agree that the rebellion took place at the death of Ahab.

Stone will illustrate. In addition, one outstanding point of similarity is the relationship which both Israel and Moab had with their god, who was an important motivating factor in their historiography (MI 9, 12, 14, 19, 32) and a national savior (MI 3-4) (cf. van Zyl, pp. 138, 141, 161, 188-189, 201; Ginsburg, pp. 22-30; Gibson, pp. 71ff.).

²⁰ Cf. e. g., I Kings 21:29 (concerning 'h'b). Here it should be noted that Gibson, p. 79, states, concerning the phrase hšy ymk, "The meaning need not be strictly 'half'," and cites Jer. 17:11. However, there is no reason why this phrase in Jer. 17:11 should be translated any differently from its counterpart in Ps. 102:25, "half-way through my lifetime."

²¹ We are told (II Kings 3:4) that Mesha paid 100,000 lambs and 100,000 rams in tribute. It is doubtful that this number is accurate, but it nevertheless reveals the humiliating burden under which Moab was placed.