

55. The Battle with Moab

2Kgs 3:4-27

We have had the Balaam's-eye view of this battle (§32); here it is again, as the parties themselves put it into the record of their doings.

David¹ had conquered Moab. His successors exacted an annual tribute of sheep and wool. But after the death of the northern ruler Ahab, their grip weakened, and Moab rebelled. Somewhere around 0835, the king of Israel invited the king of Judah, and together they attacked Moab. The war led to retreat for Israel/Judah, and victory for Moab. Here is how Kings tells it:

2Kgs 3:4. Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheep-master, and he rendered unto the king of Israel the wool of a hundred thousand lambs, and of a hundred thousand rams. [5] But it came to pass, when Ahab was dead [0854], that the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel. [6] And king Jehoram went out of Samaria at that time, and mustered all Israel. [7] And he went and sent to Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, saying, The king of Moab hath rebelled against me: wilt thou go with me against Moab to battle? And he said, I will go up: I am as thou art, my people as thy people, my horses as thy horses. [8] And he said, Which way shall we go up? And he answered, The way of the wilderness of Edom.

[9] So the king of Israel went, and the king of Judah, and the king of Edom, and they made a circuit of seven days' journey, and there was no water for the host, nor for the beasts that followed them. [10] And the king of Israel said, Alas! for Yahweh hath called these three kings together to deliver them into the hand of Moab. [11] But Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of Yahweh, that we may inquire of Yahweh by him? And one of the king of Israel's servants answered and said, Elisha the son of Shaphat is here, who poured water on the hands of Elijah. [12] And Jehoshaphat said, The word of Yahweh is with him. So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him.

[13] And Elisha said unto the king of Israel, What have I to do with thee? get thee to the prophets of thy father, and to the prophets of thy mother. And the king of Israel said unto him, Nay, for Yahweh hath called these three kings together to deliver them into the hand of Moab. [14] And Elisha said, As Yahweh of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, surely, were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee. [15] But now bring me a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of Yahweh came upon him. [16] And he said Thus saith Yahweh, Make this valley full of trenches. [17] For thus saith Yahweh, Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, and ye shall drink, both ye and your cattle and your beasts.

That rain miracle will indeed come to pass. Yahweh promises a *second* miracle, but this second miracle will not turn out as expected . . .

¹More likely Ahab or another Davidic ruler; for David and Moab, see §68 (Ruth),

[18] And this is but a light thing in the sight of Yahweh; he will also deliver the Moabites into your hand. [19] And ye shall smite every fortified city, and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop all fountains of water, and mar every good piece of land with stones. [20] And it came to pass in the morning, about the time of offering the oblation, that, behold, there came water by the way of Edom, and the country was filled with water.

And after all these promises and preliminaries, we finally arrive at the battle.

[21]. Now when all the Moabites heard that the kings were come up to fight against them, they gathered themselves together, all that were able to put on armor and upward, and stood on the border. [22] And they rose up early in the morning, and the sun shone upon the water, and the Moabites saw the water over against them as red as blood; [23] and they said, this is blood; the kings are surely destroyed, and they have smitten each man his fellow; now therefore, Moab, to the spoil! [24] And when they came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose up and smote the Moabites, so that they fled before them; and they went forward into the land, smiting the Moabites. [25] And they beat down the cities, and on every good piece of land they cast every man his stone, and filled it; and they stopped all the fountains of water, and felled all the good trees, until in Kir-har-eseth only they left the stones thereof; howbeit the slingers went about it, and smote it. [26] And when the king of Moab saw that the battle was too sore for him, he took with him seven hundred men that drew sword, to break through unto the king of Edom; but they could not. [27] Then he took his eldest son, that should have ruled in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall. And there was great wrath against Israel, and they departed from him, and returned to their own land.

This is not exactly a Moabite victory; it is more like a Moabite survival. But bottom line: the attack failed, both the two attacking kings went back empty, and the former Davidic control over a neighboring people was not restored.

The power of the Omrides was being lost after the death of Ahaz.

The Mesha Stele²

Mesha, king of Moab, has left behind an account of his entire reign, including the battle just described. Here is what remains of that inscription:

I am Mesha, son of Chemosh- . . . king of Moab, the Dibonite – my father reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after my father, who made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh . . . because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries. As for Omri, king of Israel, he humbled Moab many days, for Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son [Ahab] followed him and he also said, “I will humble Moab.” In my time he spoke thus, but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel hath perished for ever! Now Omri had occupied the land of Medeba, and had dwelt there in his time and half the time of his son, forty years; but Chemosh dwelt there in my time.

²ANET 320 (Albright, with emendations from some later translators).

And I built Baal-meon, making a reservoir in it, and I built Qaryaten. Now the men of Gad had always dwelt in the land of Ataroth, and the king of Israel had built Ataroth for them; but I fought against the town and took it and slew all the people of the town as satisfaction for Chemosh and Moab. And I brought back from there Arel [or Oriel], and I settled there men of Sharon and men of Maharith. And Chemosh said to me, "Go, take Nebo from Israel!" So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction for Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the [hearth-altars] of Yahweh, dragging them before Chemosh.

And the king of Israel had built Jahaz, and he dwelt there while he was fighting against me, but Chemosh drove him out before me. And I took from Moab two hundred men, all first class warriors, and set them against Jahaz in order to attach it to Dibon.

It was I who built Qarhoh, the wall of the forests and the wall of the citadel; I also built its gates, and I built its towers, and I built the king's house, and I made both of its reservoirs for water inside the town. And there was no cistern inside the town at Qarhoh, so I said to all the people, "Let each of you make a cistern for himself in his house." And I cut beams for Qarhoh with Israelite captives. I built Aroer, and I made the highway in the Arnon [valley]; I built Beth-bamoth, for it had been destroyed; I built Bezer, for it lay in ruins, with fifty men of Dibon, for all Dibon is my loyal dependency.

And I reigned in peace over the hundred towns which I had added to the land. And I built . . . Medeba and Beth-diblathen and Beth-baal-meon, and I set there the . . . of the land. And as for Hauronen, there dwelt in it . . . And Chemosh said to me, "Go down, fight against Hauronen." And I went down [and I fought against the town, and took it] and Chemosh dwelt there in my time . . .

The Sacrifice of the Eldest Son

All agree that Moab won, and was not again subject to the House of David. But did Mesha sacrifice his eldest son, as a last desperate measure? He does not say so. But official records can be incomplete,³ and the psychological probability is that Mesha did make that sacrifice.

For Mesha, it will look better to posterity if he wins by the power of his national god Chemosh, not with the aid of some ancient superstition, so he does not mention it; he emphasizes Chemosh throughout his narrative. As for the two attacking kings, Mesha's use of that ancient sacrifice will avoid attributing their own military failure to Yahweh, and so they *do* mention it.

Both sides are protecting the public image of their god.

³No one wise in the ways of the world will automatically credit official statements. One upon a time, a student was defending a dissertation on the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 7 July 1937, used by Japan as a pretext for invading China. She was asked what sources she had used. She replied, "Official Japanese government documents." Remarked the examiner, "I was there. It isn't true."