

The Tel Dan Stela

2Kings 9 v 1 to 29 describes the coup d'état of Jehu, a Commander in the army of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was prompted to move by the actions of Elisha the prophet of God. Elisha had sent an emissary from among the prophets to anoint Jehu as king. It appears that this action was a cementation of the inevitable because on hearing the prophets message from Jehu's own lips the other commanders declare him as king.

The back story is that Joram and his ally Ahaziah of Judah were in a lull in their fight with Hazael king of Aram of Damascus.

So Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi, conspired against Joram. (Now Joram had been defending Ramoth Gilead, he and all Israel, against Hazael king of Syria. But King Joram had returned to Jezreel to recover from the wounds which the Syrians had inflicted on him when he fought with Hazael king of Syria.)” 2Kings 9 v 14-15

As a result of the insurrection, King Joram (also known as Jehoram) was killed by Jehu at Jezreel and Ahaziah was shot during his escape from Jehu's men and died at Megiddo, before his body was transported to Jerusalem for burial.

The political context then is one of war between nations. Hazael of Syria is in a state of war with Israel. Joram of Israel has been wounded in battle in his fight with Hazael and Ahaziah his ally is with him to support him. This is the moment Jehu strikes and performs his successful revolt.

It is in the context of these events that the Tel Dan Stela was written. In the 1993/94 excavations at Tel Dan, the site of the ancient town of Dan, at the northern most tip of what was the northern kingdom of Israel, turned up two broken fragments of an inscription written in Aramaic. There are 13 lines of text visible, though parts are missing, these being broken pieces of a complete monument. A translation of the text is given below. Sections in square brackets are either reconstructions from missing areas of text or have been left blank to indicate breaks in the inscription

- []...[] and cut []
- [] my father went up [] he fought at [...]
- And my father lay down; he went to his
- [fathers]. Now the king of I[s]/rael had penetrated
- into my father's land before. [But then] Hadad made me king,
- And Hadad marched before me. So I went forth from [the] seven[...]/S



- of my rule, and I killed [seve]nty kin[gs] who had harnessed thou[sands of cha]/riots
- and thousands of cavalry. [And I killed ...]ram son of [...]
- the king of Israel, and I killed [...]yahu son of [... the ki]/ng of
- the House of David. And I made [their towns into ruins and turned]
- their land into [a desolation ...]
- others and [...Then...became ki]/ng
- over Is[rael...And I laid] 13'. siege against [...]

As is common with many monuments from this period, the king is claiming numerous victories for himself. He is declaring his own greatness. The author describes himself as a king and claims his authority from the god Hadad, which identifies him as a Syrian King.

He is clearly at war with his neighbour Israel, who appears to be allied to the king of Judah, of the house of David. He claims to have killed two kings, one of Israel who's name is only partly visible as [...]ram and one of the house of David, again only part of the name is visible as [...]yahu (or equally rendered [...]yah.) There is only one king of all the kings of Israel who's name ended in "ram" and that is Jehoram. Of the kings of Judah and of the line of David there are several kings who's names end in "iah", these are Ahaziah, Amaziah, Uzziah, Hezekiah and Zedekiah. Only Ahaziah fits the context, he being contemporary with and allied to Jehoram. All the other names appear too late in the history of Judah to qualify. It seems then inescapable that the author of the Stela was Hazael of Syria.



But what of Hazael's claim to have finished Jehoram and Ahaziah? Surely this is at odds with the biblical record which records how it was Jehu's mutiny that resulted in both kings death. There are several answers to this...

- It was common for rulers to claim credit for another's actions, especially if it gave them extra gravitas.
- Hazael may have considered the battle with Jehoram, where his enemy had been wounded, reason enough to claim he brought about the circumstances of Jehoram's and Ahaziah's death.
- Hazael may have considered Jehu as a vassal and therefore claimed credit for anything that Jehu achieved.

There is another monument that fits the context of this one very well. That is the famous Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. In one section it describes the tribute of Jehu king of Israel, an event that can only have happened in Jehu's first year as king. It suggests he may have been seeking support from the Assyrian king in his fight against Hazael. In effect siding with the biggest bully in the playground. This was not a particularly unusual activity, Ahaz of Judah, did exactly the same thing with a later king of Assyria, Tiglath-pileser, when he was threatened by Israel and Syria.

“Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, saying, "I am your servant and your son. Come up and save me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who rise up against me." And Ahaz took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasuries of the king's house, and sent it as a present to the king of Assyria.”

2 Kings 16 v 7 - 8

The House of David...

There is one other point of interest regarding the Tel Dan Stela, and that is its reference to the “House of David”. This fragment was found at a time when a scholarly argument was raging about whether the kingdom of David and Solomon had ever existed. What archaeological evidence there was, happened to be more circumstantial than direct. As a result some scholars who identified themselves as biblical minimalists suggested that the powerful united monarchy of David and Solomon was little more than legend and perhaps the monarchs had never existed. The Tel Dan Stela put paid to this notion with its clear reference to the line of kings descended from the House of David in Judah, written only 130 years after the death of king David and 90 years after the death of Solomon his heir.