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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12775/BPTh.2026.013>

19 (2026) 2: 275–305

ISSN (print) 1689-5150

ISSN (online) 2450-7059

Jehu or Hazael? The Mysterious Deaths of Kings Joram and Ahaziah in Light of the Hebrew Bible and the Tel Dan Stele

Jehu czy Chazael? Zagadkowa śmierć królów Jorama i Ochozjasza w świetle Biblii Hebrajskiej i Steli z Tel-Dan

Abstract. The deaths of Kings Joram and Ahaziah are described differently in the Hebrew Bible and the Tel Dan Stele, a discrepancy that has sparked considerable controversy among biblical historians. The aim of this article is to present and explain the reasons behind this controversy and to offer a reinterpretation of the source texts on the basis of the author's own observations.

Streszczenie. Kwestia śmierci królów Jorama i Ochozjasza opisana została odmiennie w Biblii Hebrajskiej i Steli z Tel-Dan, co jest obecnie zarzewiem sporu wśród historyków-biblistów. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie i wyjaśnienie przyczyn rzeczonego sporu, a także dokonanie reinterpretacji tytułowych tekstów źródłowych na bazie własnych spostrzeżeń.

Keywords: Jehu, Hazael, Joram, Ahaziah, Bible, Tel Dan Stele, Israel, Judah, Aram.

Słowa kluczowe: Jehu, Chazael, Joram, Ochozjasz, Biblia, Stela z Tel-Dan, Izrael, Juda, Aram.

Introduction

From the standpoint of modern biblical historiography, the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Kings Joram and Ahaziah raise significant controversy due to the fact that the available sources attribute their assassination to two different figures: Jehu, a high-ranking Israelite military commander often described as a general (שַׂר), and Hazael, the king of Aram. According to the biblical narrative found in the Second Book of Kings and the Second Book of Chronicles, which is generally considered the “classical version,” this double regicide is attributed to Jehu, who was allegedly acting from a religious motivation. However, two fragments of an inscription discovered in 1993–1994, which came to be known in historiography as the “Tel Dan Stele” and historically predate the books of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), point to King Hazael rather than Jehu as the perpetrator. This fundamental contradiction has generated a range of interpretations among historians, fueling a lively debate about the reliability of the two sources and even prompting some scholars to question their authenticity.

According to the account preserved in the Hebrew Bible, the man responsible for the deaths of both kings is Jehu, who—as the narrative claims—was acting from a religious motivation, that is, at the command of the prophet Elisha. In the biblical tradition, Jehu was carrying out a mission entrusted to him by Yahweh: his task was to execute judgment upon the “house of Ahab,” which was accused of introducing the worship of Baal, a deity competing with Yahweh, into Israel. This version of events, however, has a strong theological dimension—a dimension which may in fact have served to legitimize Jehu’s coup d’état. Therefore, when analyzing the biblical account, it is important to consider the fact that its presentation of events is shaped primarily by ideological concerns, emphasizing the primacy of the Yahwistic religion over other, “foreign” forms of worship.

By contrast, the Aramaic Tel Dan Stele, which is at least two and a half centuries older than the Books of Kings,¹ attributes the killing of Joram and Ahaziah to Hazael, king of Aram, thus directly contradicting the biblical account.

¹ This is based on the assumption that 1–2 Kings were composed in their original form during the Babylonian exile (ca. 586–538 BC) or slightly later. It is generally accepted that their final versions were completed in the Persian period (538–332 BC) (see Lemaire 2000, 446–461; Brzegowy et al. 2008d, 619–620; McKenzie 2019, 44–45).

The stele, which is one of the few known extra-biblical accounts from the ninth century BC that refer directly to events in Israel and Judah, portrays Hazael as a triumphant ruler who personally defeated and killed (or at least caused the deaths of) no fewer than two, or, literally, as many as “seventy” kings (Biran and Naveh 1995, 12–13). It has to be noted, however, that ancient Near Eastern rulers frequently claimed major military victories, even contrary to fact, as part of political propaganda intended to consolidate their authority and inspire fear and respect among their subjects and neighbors. An analysis of these two accounts must therefore take into consideration both their respective credibility and the potential propagandistic motives underlying each of them.

1. Major Theories in Modern Historiography

In the formative period of modern biblical historiography, the historicity of Jehu and Hazael was generally not questioned, since nineteenth-century archaeological discoveries originating from the ancient Assyrian cultural sphere—such as the Royal Annals and the Black Obelisk from Kalḫu—confirmed the existence of both rulers (Grayson 1996). Conversely, the biblical account was often called into question during that period. According to a once-influential theory put forward by the historian Michael C. Astour (1971, 388), Jehu’s coup was inspired by Assyria, which had an interest in eliminating the anti-Assyrian faction associated with the house of King Ahab. As we know from the biblical narrative (1 Kings 20:34) and independently from Assyrian sources, Ahab had been part of a coalition formed by Syro-Palestinian states (including Aram) against Assyria, most notably at the time of the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BC (Grayson 1996, 23). According to this theory, Jehu—a high-ranking Israelite commander—was a traitor in the service of Shalmaneser III, king of Assyria, and his actions were directed against the Syro-Palestinian coalition that included Aram under King Hazael. The subsequent events described in the Hebrew Bible, taking place during the war between Israel and Judah on the one hand and Aram on the other, would then be a fabrication intended to justify Jehu’s actions before future generations of Israelites (Astour 1971, 383–389). It must be acknowledged that Astour’s theory was considered plausible in its time as it was based on the interpretation of the Black Obelisk from Kalḫu, which mentions Jehu’s tribute to Shalmaneser III (Grayson 1996, 54) and likely depicts Jehu in a posture of prostration. Moreover, according to Shalmaneser III’s

annals, Jehu's tribute was paid in the eighteenth year of the king's reign, 841 BC (Grayson 1996, 149), and Jehu's accession to the throne is also dated to that same year, further strengthening the theory's credibility.

The last scholar to propose an interpretation similar to Astour's theory was the Swedish historian Gösta W. Ahlström, who claimed that, contrary to the biblical account, King Joram did not march to Ramoth-Gilead to fight Aram; rather, as an ally of Aram, he went to war against Assyria (Ahlström 1993, 592–595). Accepting this interpretation would naturally place King Hazael outside the circle of suspects with regard to the deaths of Joram and Ahaziah.

The situation changed dramatically with the discovery of fragments of the Tel Dan Stele in 1993–1994. The inscription on the stele made it clear that the biblical account of a war between Israel and Judah on the one hand and Aram on the other was not an invention but a historical fact. This lent credibility to the Hebrew Bible's narrative and necessitated a reinterpretation of the earlier positions that dismissed its historical value.

The discoverers of the Tel Dan Stele, Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, were the first to formulate the now widely accepted view that the author of the inscription was Hazael and that the two kings whom he claimed to have killed were Joram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah of the "House of David," king of Judah. This, in turn, means that the inscription is essentially parallel to the biblical account (Biran and Naveh 1995, 1–18).

Biran and Naveh's proposition was taken up by historians Nadav Na'aman (2000) and Stuart A. Irvine (2001), who argued that since the Tel Dan Stele is contemporary with the events that it describes and since it predates the Hebrew Bible (which was edited into its final form only during the Babylonian exile), it should be regarded as the more reliable historical source. Moreover, according to the theory put forward by Irvine, it was the killing of Joram and Ahaziah by Hazael that prompted Jehu's rebellion; the same position was also adopted by the Polish historian Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spanò (Niesiołowski-Spanò and Stebnicka 2020, 121). However, as David T. Lamb (2007, 105) notes in his monograph, this scenario appears improbable since "after each of the seven other Israelite regicides, the victim is succeeded on the throne by his slayer (Baasha, Zimri, Omri, Shallum, Menahem, Pekah, and Hoshea)."

Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the historiography of Judah or Israel, upon which the Books of Kings and Chronicles relied, would attribute Jehu's accession to a double regicide if this were not historically accurate. A more plausible alternative is that Jehu did in fact kill Joram and Ahaziah and that

later historiography sought to justify these events by portraying Jehu as the Lord's anointed.

The discoverers of the Tel Dan Stele, Biran and Naveh (1993, 1–18), also proposed a theory that synthesized the accounts of the Hebrew Bible and the Tel Dan Stele. According to that interpretation, Jehu may have been acting in alliance with King Hazael at the time of the killings. Consequently, when Hazael claimed to have killed Joram and Ahaziah, what he meant was that he had solicited the killings, to use a criminal law term, whereas the direct perpetrator was Jehu—acting on behalf of (or in coordination with) the king of Aram. As of now, this is probably the most widely accepted theory for reconciling the literal conflict between the two sources (see, for instance, Lamb 2007, 102–110; Robker 2012, 273–274; Horn and McCarter 2018, 221). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that there are also specialized publications on this period that, without engaging in extensive theoretical discussion, simply accept the biblical account as historically accurate (see Mitchell 1982b, 486; Lipiński 2018, 91–98; Lipiński 2020, 41–43).

Notwithstanding the above, it is notable that according to the chronology preserved in the Assyrian royal archives, Jehu—already as king—paid tribute to Shalmaneser III in the eighteenth year of the latter's reign, that is, in 841 BC, as recorded on the Black Obelisk from Kalḫu (Grayson 1996, 149). This date corresponds to the traditional dating—based on the Hebrew Bible—of the deaths of Kings Joram and Ahaziah (Thiele 1944, 137–189; Mitchell 1982a, 488; Horn and McCarter 2018, 221; Lipiński 2018, XII). At the same time, we know that twelve years earlier, in the sixth year of Shalmaneser III's reign (853 BC), the famous Battle of Qarqar took place, in which Assyria clashed with a coalition of twelve Syro-Palestinian states, including Israel (commanded by Ahab of the Omride dynasty) and Aram (led by Hadadezer, the biblical Ben-Hadad II, who, according to the Tel Dan Stele, was allegedly Hazael's father) (Biran and Naveh 1995, 1–18). These two kingdoms fought side by side as allies against Assyria, as confirmed by the Kurkh Stele (Grayson 1996, 23). In addition, we also know that Shalmaneser III fought against this same alliance at least three more times (Elat 1975, 25–35): in his tenth regnal year (849 BC), in his eleventh (848 BC), and in his fourteenth (845 BC) (see Michel 1947, 57; Elat 1975, 25; Frahm 2025, 119).

Since the Israelite rulers of the Omride dynasty were enemies of Assyria, the kingdom that posed the greatest threat to Aram, Hazael certainly had no interest in killing his potential allies in the struggle against the Assyrians. This casts

doubt on Biran and Naveh's theory regarding Jehu's role as an agent of Hazael. In fact, the situation became even more disadvantageous for Aram when the newly crowned king of Israel, Jehu, almost immediately (and certainly within a year) paid his tribute to Assyria—a development which placed Aram in a very difficult geopolitical position. Furthermore, if Hazael had indeed murdered the king of Israel, this would have resulted in significant territorial losses for Israel, or even its vassalization, of which there is no evidence whatsoever.

Another possibility, which appears plausible under the above circumstances, is that when Israel was defeated by Aram, it chose to submit to Assyria in order to avoid further weakening and to prevent Hazael from expanding deeper into its territory. Although Aram did not openly yield to Assyria, it may have sought to avoid provoking it. In this reconstruction of events, however, it seems highly unlikely that the tribute to Assyria would have been paid by an agent of King Hazael. Rather, one would expect this tribute to come from a ruler acting with full independence, which makes it highly unlikely that Jehu was indeed an agent.

2. A Critical Analysis of the Hebrew Bible Account

2.1. The Second Book of Kings

According to the account given in the Second Book of Kings, during the battle for the city of Ramoth-Gilead, in which the combined armies of Israel and Judah led by Kings Joram and Ahaziah were resisting the attack of King Hazael of Aram, the king of Israel, Joram, was wounded in combat. As a result of his injuries,² he was forced to withdraw to Jezreel in order to recover, accompanied by King Ahaziah, his nephew (2 Kings 8:26–29).

The Second Book of Kings reports that this moment was immediately seized upon by the prophet Elisha, who—allegedly acting on Yahweh's command—sent one of his disciples to anoint Jehu, a high-ranking Israelite military officer, as the new king of Israel (2 Kings 9:1–10). As described in 1 Kings 21:17–29, Elisha's actions were motivated by the death sentence that Yahweh had pronounced, through the prophet Elijah, upon Ahab and all his descendants for the unlawful

² According to the Septuagint's account (2 Kings 9:16), King Joram was shot by Aramean archers (“ἀπὸ τῶν τοξευμάτων, ὧν κατετόξευσαν αὐτὸν οἱ Ἀραμῖν”). The Hebrew Bible merely states that he was wounded.

dispossession and murder of Naboth of Jezreel, as well as for introducing the foreign cults of Baal and Asherah into Israel. The introduction of these cults was linked to Ahab's marriage to the Phoenician princess Jezebel (1 Kings 16:29–34). According to the biblical account, Jezebel's influence caused the Canaanite cult of Baal to overshadow the worship of Yahweh, leaving only a small number of Yahwistic prophets (1 Kings 18:1–19; 19:1–14). As recounted in 1 Kings 21:29, the judgment announced by Elijah was postponed during the reign of Joram (Ahab's son) because of the repentance displayed by Ahab himself.

When Elisha's disciple arrived at Ramoth-Gilead as instructed by his master, he found there an Israelite military encampment under the command of General Jehu. This is described as follows in 2 Kings 9:5–10:

And when he came, behold, the commanders of the army were in council. And he said, "I have a word for you, O commander." And Jehu said, "To which of us all?" And he said, "To you, O commander." So he arose and went into the house. And the young man poured the oil on his head, saying to him, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I anoint you king over the people of the Lord, over Israel. And you shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish, and I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. And I will make the house of Ahab like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah. And the dogs shall eat Jezebel in the territory of Jezreel, and none shall bury her." Then he opened the door and fled.³

As a zealous devotee of Yahweh, Jehu accepted the task given to him by his deity. Immediately after the incident, he was proclaimed the new king of Israel by his subordinates and took action to dethrone the reigning monarch, Joram. To that end, he resolved to ride swiftly to Jezreel, where Joram was recovering from his wounds, in order to kill him there (2 Kings 9:14–16).

When the watchman standing on the tower in Jezreel saw a company of warriors approaching rapidly in chariots, he reported this to King Joram, who ordered that a mounted messenger be sent out to meet them and determine whether they were coming in peace (2 Kings 9:17). Shortly thereafter, the watchman announced that the rider had reached the group but was not coming

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in English follow the English Standard Version.

back (2 Kings 9:18). The king then dispatched a second messenger, but he too failed to return after reaching the approaching company (2 Kings 9:19–20). Reporting the second disappearance, the watchman added that the manner in which one of the warriors was driving his chariot was “בְּשֹׁנֶיךָ,” or “furious”—“like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi” (2 Kings 9:20). Upon hearing this, King Joram ordered the horses to be harnessed for himself and for King Ahaziah of Judah, his nephew, and together they drove out to meet the approaching riders. When the kings met the warriors riding toward them in their chariots, they found among them—as the watchman had predicted—the Israelite commander Jehu son of Nimshi. Joram greeted him with the customary salutation: “הַשְׁלֹום” (“Is it peace?”).

The situation is described in detail in 2 Kings 9:22:

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת יְהוֹרָם אֶת־יְהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְׁלֹום יְהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה הַשְׁלֹום עַד־זֶנוּבִי אֵיזָבֵל אִמִּי
וּכְשִׁפְיָהּ הַתְּרָבִים:⁴

The Greek rendering of this verse in the Septuagint reads as follows:

καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς εἶδεν Ἰωραμ τὸν Ἰου, καὶ εἶπεν Εἰ εἰρήνη, Ἰου; καὶ εἶπεν Ἰου Τί εἰρήνη;
ἔτι αἱ πορνεῖαι Ἰεζαβελ τῆς μητρός σου καὶ τὰ φάρμακα αὐτῆς τὰ πολλά.⁵

A literal rendering of this passage into English would be as follows:

And it came to pass when Joram saw Jehu that he said, “[Is it] peace, Jehu?” And Jehu said, “How [can it be] peace as yet [there are] the whoredoms of your mother Jezebel, and her abundant witchcrafts?”⁶

The above exchange is immediately followed by the climax of the narrative. Realizing that he had fallen into Jehu’s trap, Joram turned to flee, crying out to his nephew “מֶרְמָה אֶתְחַזֶּה” —“Treachery, O Ahaziah!” (2 Kings 9:23). At that moment, standing in his chariot, Jehu aimed his bow at the reigning king of Israel and let loose an arrow, striking Joram between the shoulders, thus piercing

⁴ All quotations from the Hebrew Bible follow Schenker and Weil 1997a–b.

⁵ All quotations from the Septuagint follow Rahlfs and Hanhart 2006a–b.

⁶ This translation into English (with slight modifications) is based on Brenton 1879, 501.

his heart and killing him (2 Kings 9:24). Of particular significance for the Deuteronomist is the command that Jehu then issued to his aide Bidkar: to throw Joram's body onto the plot of land belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite (2 Kings 9:25).

The event is described as follows in 2 Kings 9:25–26:

Jehu said to Bidkar his aide, "Take him up and throw him on the plot of ground belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. For remember, when you and I rode side by side behind Ahab his father, how the Lord made this pronouncement against him: 'As surely as I saw yesterday the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons—declares the Lord—I will repay you on this plot of ground.' Now therefore take him up and throw him on the plot of ground, in accordance with the word of the Lord."

Thus, the prophecy of Elijah in 1 Kings 21:19 is fulfilled:

And you shall say to him, "Thus says the Lord, "Have you killed and also taken possession?" And you shall say to him, "Thus says the Lord: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood.""

According to 2 Kings 9:27, Jehu then issued the order to pursue the fleeing Ahaziah, king of Judah, with the intention of killing him as well. The order was carried out, and although Ahaziah managed to escape, he ultimately died from the wounds inflicted on him by Jehu's men:

When Ahaziah the king of Judah saw this, he fled in the direction of Beth-haggan. And Jehu pursued him and said, "Shoot him also." And they shot him⁷ in the chariot at the ascent of Gur, which is by Ibleam. And he fled to Megiddo and died there.

On the basis of the dialogue between Jehu and Joram as recounted above, it is possible to examine the motives that the author of the Second Book of Kings attributes to the Israelite commander. First, it is worth noting that Joram, accompanied by Ahaziah, approached Jehu without suspecting any hostile intentions on his part. This may indicate that Jehu had previously demonstrated loyalty to his king, thereby earning his trust. If we accept the testimony of the Assyrian inscription on the Black Obelisk from Kalḫu, Jehu was a descendant

⁷ In the Septuagint's account (2 Kings 9:27), Jehu personally struck ("ἐπάταξεν") Ahaziah.

of King Omri: “^mia-a-ú DUMU ^mhu-um-ri-i”⁸ (Grayson 1996, 54). If true, this would mean that he was closely related to both Joram and Ahaziah, which could have further strengthened their trust in him. As the source reports, the king of Israel greeted his officer with the customary formula “הַשְׁלוֹם,” which may be translated as “Is everything all right?” or, more literally, “(Do you come) in peace?” This is because in Biblical Hebrew, the word “שָׁלוֹם” denotes not only “peace” in the sense of the absence of conflict but also “welfare,” “health,” or “prosperity” (Brown et al. 1907). In the situation in question, all these meanings seem relevant to the context of Jehu’s statement since the condition of the kingdom of Israel is the opposite of everything conveyed by the term “שָׁלוֹם” (see 1 Kings 16–22; 2 Kings 1–9).

The Septuagint translators rendered the Hebrew greeting “הַשְׁלוֹם” as “καὶ εἶπεν Εἰ εἰρήνη, Ιου” (2 Kings 9:22), meaning: “And [Joram] said, ‘Is it peace, Jehu?’” The use of the word “εἰρήνη” suggests that Joram posed a question rather than offering a greeting to Jehu, which implies that he had doubts about Jehu’s intentions. It seems unlikely, however, that the king would have left a fortified position to inquire about the intentions of armed warriors approaching in chariots if he had suspected danger.

When approached, Jehu directed highly offensive accusations at his interlocutor’s mother, Jezebel, speaking of “whoredoms” (“זְנוּנוֹת”) and “witchcrafts” (“כְּשָׁפִיָּה”). The overtone of this statement, containing such strongly negative terms, clearly revealed Jehu’s hostile intentions, leaving no room for alternative interpretation. The word “כְּשָׁפִיָּה” derives from the verb “כָּשַׁף,” meaning “to practice sorcery” (Brown et al. 1907, 506). In the historical context of the period in which Jehu uttered these words, the accusation of sorcery amounted to a charge of a capital crime, prohibited under penalty of death (Bretherton 2005, 145–152; Adu-Gyamfi 2016, 15–29).

The second and equally serious accusation was that Jezebel had committed “whoredoms” (“זְנוּנוֹת”). The Hebrew verb “זָנָה,” most commonly translated as “to commit fornication,” originally referred to sexual practices considered immoral in Judaism, such as prostitution or adultery (Brown et al. 1907, 275). Like sorcery, this act constituted a grave offense, in some cases even punishable by death (see, for instance, Gen. 38:24; Ezek. 23:35–45; Lev. 20:10–12; Lev. 21:9; Deut. 22:22–24). The Hebrew Bible also uses the term “זָנָה” to denote idolatry (as in Brzegowy

⁸ The Akkadian text is quoted using the conventional transliteration into the Latin alphabet.

et al. 2008a–d), that is, the act of offering sacrifices to gods other than Yahweh (as also noted in Brown et al. 1907, 275). The use of this word in the passage in question stems from the fact that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is frequently compared in the Tanakh to a marriage in which Yahweh is the faithful and loving husband, and Israel is his “bride”—the beloved spouse who, paradoxically, shows no gratitude and does not remain faithful but commits adultery, or engages in “whoredom” (see, for example, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah).

In the Septuagint, the word “זְנוּנִי” is rendered by the vulgar term “πορνεία,” meaning “whoredom” (Abromowiczówna and Appel 2021, 242), derived from “πόρνη,” a highly pejorative word for a prostitute. To illustrate how offensive this term was in Koine Greek, it is worth noting that in the dictionary compiled by Zofia Abramowiczówna and Włodzimierz Appel (2021, 242), “πόρνη” is translated as “street whore”; the non-vulgar term for a prostitute in Hellenistic Greek would have been “ἑταῖρα.” Regarding the word “כְּשָׁפִיָּה,” it is rendered in the Septuagint by the term “φάρμακα,” which denotes dangerous spells associated with black magic. To clarify the negative connotations of this term, it should be noted that it derives from the word “φαρμακεία,” which in ancient Greek denotes “sorcery” (Abramowiczówna and Appel 2021, 64) or “poisoning” (2021, 504). Therefore, the lexical choices made by the Septuagint’s translators seem to indicate that they intended to convey to the reader, above all, the fact that Jehu hurled extremely grave and explicitly insulting accusations at King Joram.

2.2. The Second Book of Chronicles

A partially independent account of the deaths of Kings Joram and Ahaziah is preserved in the Second Book of Chronicles, where the Chronicler describes Ahaziah’s reign (2 Chron. 22:1–9). The overall historical background of this account is essentially parallel to that presented in the Second Book of Kings. According to the Chronicler, the regicide likewise occurred during the battle for Ramoth-Gilead, in the course of the war between Hazael, king of Aram, and the allied kings of Israel and Judah—Joram and Ahaziah (2 Chron. 22:5). Here too, King Joram was wounded in battle and went to Jezreel to recover from his injuries, accompanied by his ally, King Ahaziah (2 Chron. 22:6).

As in the Second Book of Kings, the two rulers were killed by Jehu (2 Chron. 22:7–9). Here, however, the parallel ends, since the circumstances of their deaths presented by the Chronicler differ from those described in 2 Kings.

In the Chronicler's version of events, the kings are not confronted by Jehu; instead, they themselves go out to meet him at an unspecified location. Moreover, the text does not explicitly mention King Joram's death.

The situation is described in 2 Chron. 22:7 as follows:

וּמֵאֱלֹהִים הָיְתָהּ תְּבוּסָתָא אֶתְזָזָהוּ לְבוֹא אֶל־יֹרָם וּבָבְאוּ יָצָא עִם־יְהוֹרָם אֶל־יְהוּא בֶן־נִמְשִׁי אֲשֶׁר
מָשְׁחוּ יְהוָה לְהַכְרִית אֶת־בֵּית אָחָאב:

In the Septuagint, this verse is rendered as follows:

καὶ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐγένετο καταστροφή Οχοζία ἐλθεῖν πρὸς Ἰωραμ· καὶ ἐν τῷ
ἐλθεῖν αὐτὸν ἐξῆλθεν μετ' αὐτοῦ Ἰωραμ πρὸς Ἰου υἱὸν Ναμεσσι χριστὸν κυρίου
τὸν οἶκον Ἀχάαβ.

A literal translation from Hebrew would be as follows:

And it was from God that destruction came upon Ahaziah in his going unto Joram; for when he had come, he went out with Joram against Jehu the son of Nimshi, whom the Lord anointed to cut down the house of Ahab.

In the English Standard Version, this verse is translated as follows:

But it was ordained by God that the downfall of Ahaziah should come about through his going to visit Joram. For when he came there, he went out with Jehoram to meet Jehu the son of Nimshi, whom the Lord had anointed to destroy the house of Ahab.

It does not follow explicitly from the above verse that King Joram died, and the subsequent verses of the book make no mention of this matter either. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the Books of Chronicles were composed from the perspective of the kingdom of Judah during the period of the Second Temple (Kalimi 2016, 37–61) and that according to the tradition reflected in the Septuagint, they were intended primarily as a supplement to the Books of Kings.⁹ Therefore, the Chronicler may have assumed that the circumstances of Joram's death after his encounter with Jehu would be self-evident

⁹ This conviction on the part of the Septuagint's translators is reflected in their designation of the Books of Chronicles as "Παραλειπομένα," which is usually rendered as "things left out."

to his readers since they were already familiar with the story from earlier works. A hint of the Israelite king's "encounter with death" may be found in the part of the verse in which the Chronicler states that the kings went out to Jehu son of Nimshi, whom "Yahweh anointed" ("מִשְׁחוּ יְהוָה") "to cut down the house of Ahab" ("לְהַכְרִית אֶת־בֵּית אַחָאָב"). The Hebrew verb "לְהַכְרִית" may be translated as "to destroy," "to annihilate," or "to cut down." Its base form, "כָּרַת," carries the meanings "to destroy," "to annihilate," "to cut down," "to kill," "to eliminate," "to hew," or "to cut off a body part" (cf. Brown et al. 1907, 503–504).

Interestingly, in the Septuagint's rendering of this verse, the element explicitly indicating that Jehu was appointed to destroy the house of Ahab is absent. The text only states that Ahaziah and Joram went to Jehu son of Nimshi, whom "the Lord had anointed [concerning] the house of Ahab" ("χριστὸν κυρίου τὸν οἶκον Ἀχααβ"). There is no word in this passage that would literally indicate that Jehu's mission was to exterminate Ahab's dynasty—as found in the original Hebrew text. Nevertheless, one may infer from the context that Jehu was anointed by God ("χριστὸν"), in a sense, with regard to the house of Ahab, since the Greek accusative phrase "τὸν οἶκον Ἀχααβ" may be translated here as "with regard to / concerning the house of Ahab." Evidently, the Septuagint translator chose to employ an even more condensed formulation than the author of the Second Book of Chronicles did when explaining Jehu's mission to the reader.

While one can only infer from the Chronicler's account that Joram met his death at the hands of Jehu, the subsequent verses provide a precise description of the circumstances of King Ahaziah's death, even though they differ from those recounted in the Second Book of Kings.

The account in 2 Chron. 22:8–9 reads as follows:

וַיְהִי כִּהְשַׁפֵּט יְהוּא עַם־בֵּית אַחָאָב וַיִּמָּצֵא אֶת־שָׂרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְנֵי אֶחָי אֲחֻזַּיָּהוּ מִשְׁרָתִים לְאַחֲזִיָּהוּ
וַיַּהַרְגֵם:

וַיִּבְקֹשׁ אֶת־אַחֲזִיָּהוּ וַיִּלְפָּדֵהוּ וְהוּא מִתְחַבֵּא בְּשִׁמְרוֹן וַיִּבְאֵהוּ אֶל־יְהוּא וַיִּמִּיתֵהוּ וַיַּקְבְּרֵהוּ כִּי אָמַר יְהוָה
יְהוֹשָׁפָט הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דָּרַשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּכָל־לִבָּהּ וְאִין לְבַית אֲחֻזַּיָּהוּ לַעֲצֹר כֶּחָ לְמַמְלָכָה:

In the Septuagint, these verses are rendered as follows:

καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἐξεδίκασεν Ἰου τὸν οἶκον Ἀχααβ, καὶ εὗρεν τοὺς ἄρχοντας Ἰουδα καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς Οχοζια λειτουργοῦντας τῷ Οχοζια καὶ ἀπέκτεινεν αὐτούς.

καὶ εἶπεν τοῦ ζητῆσαι τὸν Οχοζιαν, καὶ κατέλαβον αὐτὸν ἰατρευόμενον ἐν Σαμαρείᾳ καὶ ἤγαγον αὐτὸν πρὸς Ἰου, καὶ ἀπέκτεινεν αὐτόν. καὶ ἔθαψαν αὐτόν, ὅτι εἶπαν Υἱὸς Ἰωσαφατ ἐστίν, ὃς ἐζήτησεν τὸν κύριον ἐν ὅλῃ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ. καὶ οὐκ ἦν ἐν οἴκῳ Οχοζία κατισχυῖσαι δύναμιν περὶ τῆς βασιλείας.

A literal translation from Hebrew would be as follows:

And it came to pass when Jehu was executing judgment on the house of Ahab that he found the princes of Judah and the sons of the brothers of Ahaziah that ministered to Ahaziah, and he slew them.

And he sought Ahaziah, and they caught him, for he was hiding in Samaria, and brought him unto Jehu, and he put him to death. And they buried him, because it was said: “He is the son of Jehoshaphat, who sought the Lord with all his heart.” And there was no one of the house of Ahaziah to retain the power of the kingdom.

In the English Standard Version, these verses are translated as follows:

And when Jehu was executing judgment on the house of Ahab, he met the princes of Judah and the sons of Ahaziah's brothers, who attended Ahaziah, and he killed them.

He searched for Ahaziah, and he was captured while hiding in Samaria, and he was brought to Jehu and put to death. They buried him, for they said, “He is the grandson of Jehoshaphat, who sought the Lord with all his heart.” And the house of Ahaziah had no one able to rule the kingdom.

It is now clear that the narrative of the Second Book of Chronicles differs in the details concerning the death of King Ahaziah from that of the Second Book of Kings, yet remains parallel to it in its overall message. Here, too, the person responsible for Ahaziah's death is Jehu, although he is portrayed not as a usurper but primarily as God's anointed (“מָשִׁיחַ,” “χριστός”)—that is, the one who holds authority over Israel by the will of Yahweh. It is not surprising, then, that Jehu is depicted as the legitimate ruler of Israel: one who does not murder Ahaziah but rather “puts him to death” (“וַיָּמִיתֵהוּ”), though it cannot be ruled out that he carries out the execution himself. The Hebrew term “וַיָּמִיתֵהוּ” derives from the root “מָוַת,” which—depending on context—may mean “to die,” “to kill,” or “to put to death” (Brown et al. 1906, 559–650). In this case, the last two meanings

fit the broader context. Taking the full context of the expression into account, it appears plausible that Jehu, as king of Israel, condemned Ahaziah to death and then perhaps carried out the sentence himself.

In the Septuagint, the translators rendered this word with the verb “ἀπέκτεινεν,” derived from the base form “ἀποκτείνω,” which in Koine Greek is a technical legal term meaning “of judges, condemn to death” (Liddell and Scott 1940).

The same Greek term, “ἀποκτείνω,” is also used to describe Jehu’s killing of Ahaziah’s nephews. In the Hebrew original, the word used in this case is “וַיַּהַרְגֵם,” whose base form “הָרַג” means “to kill,” “to slay,” “to murder,” or “to destroy” (Brown et al. 1907, 256–247). In either case, responsibility for the deaths of Kings Joram and Ahaziah is, once again, attributed to Jehu.

In summary, the Second Book of Kings and the Second Book of Chronicles—both in the Hebrew original and in the Greek translation of the Septuagint—assign responsibility for the deaths of Joram and Ahaziah (directly or indirectly) to the commander Jehu. However, while the narratives in both books are consistent in their general message that Jehu was the principal agent of the two kings’ deaths, they differ in their detailed accounts. In the Second Book of Kings, Ahaziah dies from wounds inflicted by Jehu’s men, whereas in the Second Book of Chronicles, he is captured, condemned to death, and executed—possibly by Jehu himself.

The divergent accounts of the two books may indicate that the tradition concerning Jehu’s coup circulated in several variants, preserved in parallel in collective memory for many centuries. At the same time, the essential consistency of these accounts suggests that they were built upon the foundation of a historical event. It seems that if the narratives had been entirely fictional or secondary, they would likely have been homogenized at a later stage, yet both books preserve their own versions, handed down with great care over a very long period without attempting to create a single unified story. The persistence of these parallel traditions suggests that the editors of the two books had access to different source materials, which they considered credible or at least potentially reflective of historical reality.

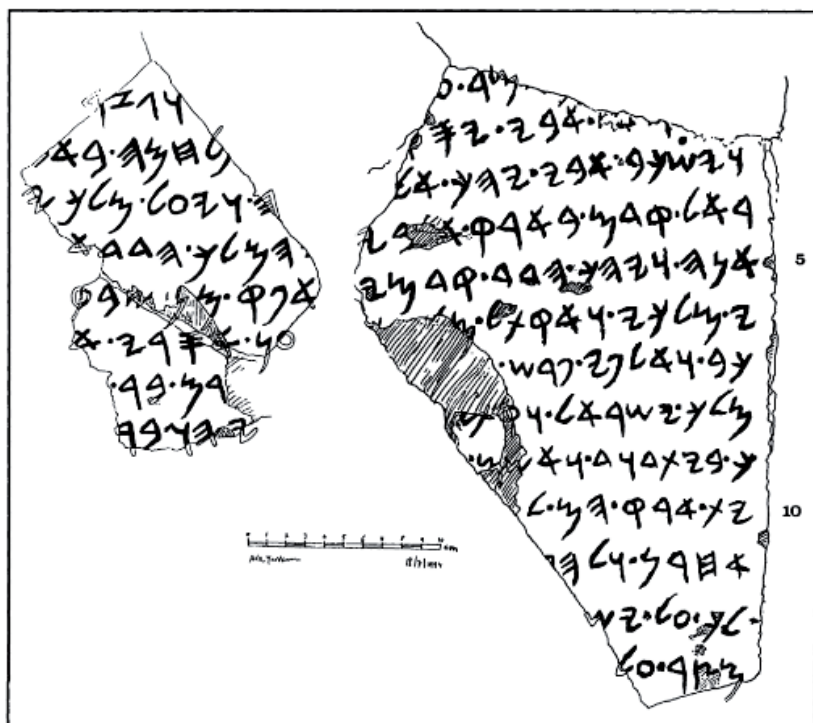
3. A Critical Analysis of the Tel Dan Stele

The discovery of the Tel Dan Stele marked a turning point in biblical historiography by providing the first extra-biblical confirmation of the tradition concerning the existence of David as the progenitor of the Judean ruling dynasty, referred to in the inscription as the “House of David” (“בֵּית דָּוִד”). Initially, the disbelief and cognitive dissonance among some biblical scholars were so strong that accusations of forgery were levelled at the stele’s discoverer, the archaeologist Avraham Biran. Today, however, there is a scholarly consensus that the Tel Dan Stele is authentic.¹⁰

The meaning of the inscription was initially unclear and sparked considerable controversy. For example, in the period after the discovery of the two fragments known today but before the publication of the text from the second fragment (which took place in 1995), the historian Aaron Demsky (1995, 29–35) argued that the Tel Dan Stele likely referred to events chronologically earlier than previously assumed—namely, that it described the death of King Ahab. This position, however, lost much of its relevance when the second fragment was published.

A facsimile of the two fragments of the Tel Dan Stele inscription, drawn by the epigraphist Ada Yardeni, was first published in Biran and Naveh’s article (1995, 1–18) in its original Aramaic language, written using the Phoenician (paleo-Hebrew) script:

¹⁰ The vast majority of scholars consider the Tel Dan Stele to be authentic. As Lester L. Grabbe has rightly observed, “the Tel Dan inscription generated a good deal of debate and a flurry of articles when it first appeared, but it is now widely regarded (a) as genuine and (b) as referring to the Davidic dynasty and the Aramaic kingdom of Damascus” (2007, 333). The isolated position denying the authenticity of the Tel Dan Stele was advocated in the past—and appears to be maintained even today—by the Danish biblical scholar Niels Peter Lemche (see, e.g., Lemche 1998; Lemche 2003).



Below is a transcription of the facsimile from the original Phoenician script into the Hebrew (square) script. Dots are used to separate the words as in the original. Empty brackets indicate damage or lacunae, and the text within brackets contains the reconstruction proposed by Biran and Naveh (1995, 12):

1. [---]מרע [---]וגזר [---]
2. [---]אבי יסק.עלוה.בה[תלחמה.בא-].
3. וישכב.אבי.יהך.אל[אבהו].ה.ויעל.מלכי[ש]
4. ראל.קדם.בארק.אבי[ו].יהמלך.הדד[.א]יתי.
5. אנה.ויהך.הדד.קדמי[ו].אפק.מן.שבוע[ת.---
6. י.מלכי.ואקתל.מל[כן.שב]ען.אסרי.א[לפיר].
7. כב.ואלפי.פרש[.קתלת.אית.יהו].רם.בר[.אחאב].
8. מלך.ישראל.וקתל[ת.אית.אחז].יהו.בר[.יהורם.מל]
9. ד.ביתדוד.ואשם[אית.קרית.הם.חרבת.ואהפך.א]
10. ית.ארק.הם.ל[ישמן---
11. אחרן.ולה[---]ויהוא.מ]
12. לך.על.יש[ראל.---.ואשם].
13. מצר.על [---].

Biran and Naveh (1995, 13) proposed the following translation:

1. [...] and cut [...]
2. [...] my father went up [against him when h]e fought at [...]
3. and my father lay down, he went to his [ancestors (viz. became sick and died)].
And the king of I[s-]
4. rael entered previously in my father's land, [and] Hadad made me king,
5. And Hadad went in front of me, [and] I departed from the seven [...]
6. s of my kingdom, and I slew [seve]nty kin[gs], who harnessed th[ousands of
cha-]
7. riots and thousands of horsemen (or: horses). [I killed Jeho]ram son [of Ahab]
8. king of Israel, and [I] killed [Ahaz]iahu son of [Jehoram kin-]
9. g of the House of David, and I set [their towns into ruins and turned]
10. their land into [desolation]
11. other [...] and Jehu ru-]
12. led over Is[rael and I laid]
13. siege upon [...].

On the basis of the translation proposed by Biran and Naveh, the Polish biblical scholar Urszula Szwarc (1999, 142) offered the following Polish rendering of the inscription:

1. [...] i obciął [...]
2. [...] mój ojciec wyruszył [przeciw niemu] on walczył pod [...]
3. i mój ojciec położył się i poszedł do swoich [przodków], a król Iz
4. raela wkroczył poprzednio do kraju mojego ojca [i] Hadad uczynił mnie królem
5. i Hadad poszedł przede mną [i] ja zabrałem siedem
6. [...] mojego królestwa. I ja zabiłem [siedem]dziesięciu król[ów] którzy
zaprzęgli ty[siąc ryd]
7. wanów i tysiąc koni [Ja zabiłem Jeho]rama syna [Achaba]
8. króla Izraela i [ja] zabiłem [Achaz]iasza syna [Jehorama kró]
9. la domu Dawida. I ja obróciłem [ich miasta w ruinę i zamieniłem]
10. ich kraj w [pustkowie]
11. inni [...] i Jehu rzą]
12. dził nad Iz[raelem ... i ja wszcząłem]
13. oblężenie przeciw [...].

Other scholars have presented their own reconstructions, which differ only slightly from one another—at most in individual lines. For example, according to the translation proposed in 1998 by well-known French biblical scholar and archaeologist André Lemaire (1998, 3–14), the text in lines 6–7 should be rendered in such a way that “two” rather than “seventy” kings were killed, and that their army consisted of “two thousand chariots and two thousand horsemen” rather than “thousands of chariots and thousands of horsemen,” as Biran and Naveh had suggested.

The extended reconstruction of the Hebrew transcription of the Tel Dan Stele made in 2002 by the German biblical scholars Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig (2002, 76), which supplemented Biran and Naveh’s earlier findings, added the name Ben-Hadad (“**בן־הדד**”) in the second line, in the illegible section preceding the word “my father” (“**אבִי**”).

The reconstruction proposed in 2012 by the German biblical scholar Jonathan Miles Robker (2012, 264) reinterpreted the earlier proposals. Robker accepted Lemaire’s 1998 interpretation of lines 6–7 (namely, that two rather than seventy kings were killed) as plausible, whereas in the second line, he suggested that the letters “**בא**” should be followed by the ending “**-שר**” to form the word “**באשר**” and thus render the following translation: “[...] my father went u[p with him] in his [bat]tle against A[ššur?...]”

It is also worth noting that in an article published in 2015 on the website of the prestigious Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Robker presented an updated reconstruction of the Tel Dan Stele which, in his view, can be obtained with a high degree of probability on syntactic and semantic grounds. Still, this reconstruction does not differ in principle from that proposed by Biran and Naveh. The key difference is that in line 6, the author of the Tel Dan Stele would have claimed to have killed “thousands” rather than “seventy kings.” The crucial passage concerning the killing of “Joram . . . king of Israel” and “Ahaziah . . . king of the House of David” remains unchanged (Robker 2015, 3–4).

In light of the above, regardless of which reconstruction is adopted as the basis for translation, there appears to be a consensus among scholars that if the standard arrangement of the fragments is assumed (as in the facsimile above), the author of the Tel Dan Stele indeed claims in lines 7–8 to have killed Kings Joram and Ahaziah. This interpretation rests on the assumption that the author of the inscription was Hazael, the king of Aram known from the biblical account, which is supported by numerous elements in the text.

The author of the extensive 2003 monograph on the Tel Dan Stele, George Athas (2003, 193–194),¹¹ offers what is arguably the most detailed analysis of both fragments of the inscription. He proposes an unusual reconstruction and translation based on the assumption that the larger fragment (“Fragment A”) was originally located above the smaller fragment (“Fragment B”), which would allow for the following reconstruction of the text:

Fragment A (larger fragment of the inscription):

1. תשר.ע[...][...] 1.
2. [יבח[ס]ד]י.אבי.יסק[...]
3. וישכב.אבי.יהך.אל[...בכל.א]
4. ראל.קדם.בארק.אלבי[תאל...]
5. אנה.יתך.הדד.קדמי[...יום]
6. י.מלכי.ואקתל.מל[ך].ו[אלפי.ר]
7. כב.ואלפי.פרש[...יהואחז]
8. מלך.ישראל.וקתל[מל...]
9. ך.כיתדוד.ואשם[...א]
10. ית.ארק.הם[ל...]
11. אחרי.ולה[...יהואש.מ]
12. לך.על.יש[ראל...שמת]
13. מצר.על[שמרן...]

Translation:

1. [...] you will rule ov[er...]
2. [and because of the p]iou[s act]s of my father, may [?] go up [...]
3. and my father will repose. May he go to [... at every]
4. ancient hearth on ground of El-Bay[tel ... am]
5. I, so Hadad would go before me [... the day-]
6. -s of my reign, and I would slay a kin[g] and [... thousands of cha-]
7. -riots and thousands of horsemen [...]

¹¹ George Athas developed an unusual theory according to which Fragment B of the inscription may originally have been positioned significantly lower than Fragment A, which would support the conclusion that the author of the inscription was Ben-Hadad III, the son of Hazael, and that the kings who died were not Joram and Ahaziah. Instead, the king from the House of David who perished would have been Joash son of Jehoahaz, which would shift the dating of the stele to a later period. Such an arrangement of the text would also explain why the author of the inscription referred to his father three times, since Ben-Hadad III was indeed the son of Hazael. This reconstruction, however, has been criticized as methodologically flawed.

8. the king of Israel, and [I] killed [him... kin-]
9. -g of Bayt-Dawid. And [the] name of [...]
10. their land to [...]
11. another and to [...Jehoash r-]
12. -eigned over Is[rael... I laid]
13. siege to [Samaria...]

Fragment B (smaller fragment of the inscription):

1. [...] ונזר [...]
2. [...] תלחמה לא [...]
3. [...] ה. ויעל מלכי. הדד [...]
4. [...] ? ה. מלך. הדד. א. יהי [...]
5. [...] מ. אפק. מן. שבע. מלכ [...]
6. [...] ען. אסרי. א. ש [...]
7. [...] רם. בר [...] ¹²
8. [...] אמע. יהו. בר. יואש [...]

Translation:

1. [...] and [?] cut [...]
2. [...in] his [f]ighting against A[?...]
3. [...]?. But my king, [Hadad,] would come [...]
4. [...] Hadad made m[e] king [...]
5. [...b]raver than seven [kings...]
6. [...]ty captured m[en..]
7. [...]ram¹³ son of [...]
8. [... Amaz]iah son of [Joash...]¹⁴

¹² According to Athas, the only thing that could potentially have stood in this position is the shortened form of King Joram's name, "יורם" ("Joram"), rather than "יהורם" ("Jehoram"), as originally proposed by Biran and Naveh. In his view, this was necessary due to the lack of sufficient space for the full form of the Israelite king's name (Athas 2003, 186). It is also worth noting here that the German scholars Donner and Röllig (2002, 76) arrived at exactly the same conclusion as Athas in proposing their own Hebrew transcription of the text.

¹³ As above.

¹⁴ The translation "son of [Joash]" is the alternative proposed by Athas on the assumption that Fragment B of the inscription could be placed below Fragment A.

Athas's proposed translation of the inscription is based on the assumption that in reconstructing the text, it is possible to place the smaller Fragment B below the larger Fragment A, which would lead to an interpretation where the true author of the inscription was King Ben-Hadad III. Accepting this theory would solve the problem of the author's repeated references to his father as his predecessor on the throne, since Ben-Hadad III was indeed the son of Hazael. Since Hazael himself was a usurper, his father could not have reigned before him.¹⁵ According to this reconstruction, the king from the House of David (Judah) who died would have been Amaziah son of Joash. Athas (2003, 192–254) argues that his alternative interpretation of the inscription is possible because the lines of text on the two fragments are sloped in ways that, in his view, do not align with one another. According to the overwhelming majority of contemporary biblical scholars, however, this alternative arrangement of the fragments is methodologically unsound due to the fact that it is impossible to determine the angle of the lines of text in the two fragments (Lamb 2007, 104). Moreover, this "solution" creates additional interpretive problems because in Athas's arrangement, the reference to the god Hadad appears at the end of the inscription rather than at its beginning, which contradicts all known inscriptions from the same historical period, where the ruler's divine legitimation is always mentioned first (Lamb 2007, 104–105).

In 1999, the Dutch biblical scholar Jan-Wim Wesseliuss (1999, 177–190) proposed yet another unusual theory, according to which the author of the inscription was the king of Israel, Jehu. This would make the Tel Dan Stele the first Israelite royal inscription: "eerste Israëlitische koningsinscriptie" (Wesseliuss 1999, 190). In Wesseliuss's view, the fact that the text contains repeated references to the god Hadad does not preclude its Israelite origin, since the Second Book of Kings indicates that Jehu was initially misunderstood by his subjects (1999, 189). The relevant passage is 2 Kings 10:18–27, which describes how Jehu, at the beginning of his reign, used deception and pretended to be a worshipper of Baal in order to gather all of those still faithful to that deity in one place and massacre them. On this basis, Wesseliuss argues that Jehu could likewise have presented himself as a devotee of the Aramean god Hadad.

Wesseliuss's theory has been criticized as improbable and incompatible with the existing evidence because it overlooks the important fact that the author

¹⁵ A more in-depth discussion on this issue is presented in the subsequent sections of this article.

of the inscription refers to his father no fewer than three times and because it downplays the two references to the god Hadad. As David T. Lamb (2007, 103) rightly observes in his monograph:

It is unlikely that a usurper like Jehu would mention his father several times and that he, as a zealous YHWH-istic reformer, would speak about Hadad in this manner. Despite Wesselius's attempt to address both of these points, his arguments are not able to overcome the difficulties associated with the theory of Jehu's authorship.

Legitimate doubts about the content of the inscription arise from those passages in which the author refers to someone whom he calls his father (“אבִי”) and who is said to have reigned before him, while both the biblical account and the Assyrian sources state that Hazael was a usurper. According to the biblical narrative, Hazael murdered his predecessor Ben-Hadad II (2 Kings 8:15). Likewise, Assyrian sources describe Hazael as “the son of nobody,” or “^mḥa-za-a’-DINGIR DUMU la ma-ma-na” (Grayson 1996, 118), which was a technical term used in Assyrian records to designate a usurper. The author of the inscription mentions his “father” multiple times within the short fragment—namely, in lines 2, 3, and 4. As previously noted, in the reconstruction proposed by the German biblical scholars Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, the name “[ב]ר[ה]דד,” resembling the biblical “בֶּן-הַדָּד,” appears in line 2. This reconstruction of the alleged “father’s” name, absent from Biran and Naveh’s version, is based on a reading of the faint fragments of Phoenician letters in the second line of the inscription (see the facsimile of the original script) as the consonants “דד” and “ר.” The German scholars’ interpretation further indicates that the author of the inscription was a ruler of Aram, since only he could have been the successor of King Ben-Hadad. It is possible that Hazael used a propaganda ploy here to conceal from his subjects the fact that he was not the legitimate ruler of Aram. While such deception may seem easy to detect today, in the ninth century BC, this could have been an effective tool of disinformation—especially if directed at a largely illiterate population lacking the means to refute it. It is well known that even in the feudal period, most subjects did not know what their ruler looked like. Such a “falsehood” could therefore have served as a means of keeping the populace under control after Hazael’s successful coup, a hypothesis that appears plausible.

A linguistic analysis of the inscription leads to the conclusion that the narrative on the stele was written by a ruler trying to legitimize his authority

through investiture by the god Hadad (“הדד”), the tutelary deity of the Aramean royal dynasty.¹⁶ The short fragment of the inscription contains two references to Hadad, appearing in lines 4 and 5. The inscription was written in Aramaic during the period in which the kingdom of Israel and the House of David (“בית דוד”), that is, the kingdom of Judah, coexisted. This allows us to establish an absolute *terminus ante quem* before 722 BC, which is when the kingdom of Israel fell, and also before 732 BC, which is when Aram was conquered by Assyria. The author of the Tel Dan Stele inscription, most likely the king of Aram, boasts of his victories in war and of the fact that he has killed an Israelite king whose name ended in “-רם,” which perfectly fits the Israelite king Joram (“יורם” or “יהורם”), and a king of the House of David (“בית דוד”), that is, of Judah, whose name ended in “-יהו,” corresponding to the Judean king Ahaziah (“אחזיהו”).

As we have already established, the Hebrew Bible recounts that two kings perished during the military campaign against Aram under King Hazael: Joram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah, king of Judah. Since the historical books of the Hebrew Bible indicate that only two kings of Israel and Judah died simultaneously during the same military operation and that their names were Joram and Ahaziah, it seems highly unlikely that the Tel Dan Stele refers to a different event and that its author is anyone other than the Aramean king Hazael. Moreover, we know that Hazael reigned ca. 842–798 BC (Frymer and Sperling 2007, 485–486; Pitard 1992, 83), which is a period during which the rulers of Israel and Judah were, according to the biblical account, King Joram (ca. 850–841 BC) and King Ahaziah (ca. 842–841 BC) (Galil 1996, 45; Horn and McCarter 2018, 201; Tadmor 2007, 110; Skolnik and Berenbaum 2007, 539–540). In light of the above, it is highly probable that the author of the Tel Dan Stele was the king of Aram, Hazael, whose historicity is confirmed by both biblical texts and Assyrian epigraphic sources.

As noted from the outset, the most problematic portion of the inscription is the passage in which Hazael claims to have killed Joram and Ahaziah, which appears to contradict the biblical account. In this case, the author uses the verb “קתלת,” derived from the base form “קטל,” meaning “to kill” (Briks 2022, 413), which in the form appearing in the text means “I killed.” In the inscription, Hazael literally says “I killed Joram son of Ahab, king of Israel” (“קתלת אית יהורם

¹⁶ The sources indicate that rulers of Aram bore theophoric names referring to the god Hadad (“הדד,” “Adād”), including names such as “בן-הדד” (Ben-Hadad) in the Hebrew Bible, or Adād-Idri in the Assyrian inscriptions.

”בר אחאב מלך ישראל”), followed by “and I killed Ahaziah son of Joram, king of the House of David” (“וְקָתַלְתִּי אֶת אַחְזִיָּהוּ בֶרֶךְ יְהוֹרָם מֶלֶךְ בֵּית־דָּוִד”). Thus, if taken literally, the reconstructed text of the Tel Dan Stele attributes the killing of Kings Joram and Ahaziah to the author of the inscription, that is, Hazael, which creates interpretive difficulties by contradicting the biblical narrative.

Conclusions and Proposed Historical Reconstruction

The above theories attempting to explain the discrepancies between the Tel Dan Stele and the Hebrew Bible seem to rest on the insufficiently justified assumption that since the biblical account was composed at a later time, it must be less reliable than that preserved on the stele. Scholars who proceed from this assumption appear to discount the possibility that it could be the stele's narrative that lacks credibility, especially given the fact that it literally contradicts not only the Bible but also the known epigraphic texts, including those from the Assyrian royal archives, which all point to the fact that King Hazael was a usurper (Grayson 1996).

The key to determining who killed Joram and Ahaziah may lie in the identity of the author's “father.” Given that two independent historical sources—the Hebrew Bible and the Assyrian records—report that Hazael was not Ben-Hadad's legitimate successor but a usurper, the logical conclusion is that the inscription on the Tel Dan Stele contains fabricated information insofar as it claims that Hazael was preceded on the throne by his unnamed father. Therefore, instead of speculating about an alternative placement of the fragments, as proposed by George Athas, a far more sound and rational option is to question the credibility of the corresponding portion of the inscription.

To reiterate, there are two independent historical sources claiming that Hazael was not the son of Ben-Hadad II but a usurper who murdered him: the Hebrew Bible and the Assyrian inscriptions. At the same time, there is also the inscription on the Tel Dan Stele, in which King Hazael claims that his father reigned before him over Aram. Which of these two versions of events should be trusted? As it stands, it seems far more logical and reasonable to accept the testimony of two completely independent yet mutually consistent sources and thus to conclude that it is King Hazael who strays from the truth when he asserts that his father ruled before him.

The above conclusion seems to be corroborated by our broader historical knowledge, which reveals the patterns that coups d'état have followed in virtually every era. In the period in question, a coup generally involved the elimination of not only the royal court but also a substantial portion of the elite supporting the opponent. As recounted in the Hebrew Bible, Jehu did exactly that after seizing the throne through a coup (2 Kings 9–10), and so did Queen Athaliah, who “destroyed all the royal family” (2 Kings 11:1) shortly after Ahaziah’s death as she usurped royal authority in Judah. Why, then, should the situation in Aram have been any different?

For the average person, the mere authority of a royal stele could lend sufficient credibility to the claim that the reigning monarch’s accession was legitimate, and for those more informed, it was often preferable to either feign ignorance of the true circumstances or pretend to believe the official narrative. Similar patterns of behavior can be observed across all historical periods. This makes it highly likely that the Tel Dan Stele functioned as a primitive yet adequate propaganda ploy intended to keep the subjects of Aram in line by deliberately misleading them about the manner in which Hazael came to power. Consequently, if we assume that the stele did intentionally mislead its audience by asserting that Hazael had inherited the throne legitimately, then we must also conclude that its account is not reliable in that regard.

Once we accept that the Tel Dan Stele does not necessarily convey the truth when it claims that Hazael was the legitimate heir to the throne, we should also consider the hypothesis that it likewise misrepresents the facts when it asserts that Hazael killed Kings Joram and Ahaziah. This, in turn, puts us in a position where two opposing accounts must be confronted: (1) that of the Hebrew Bible, which—as demonstrated by the above analysis—carries a propaganda message, and (2) that of the Tel Dan Stele, which—as we have established above—also has a fundamentally propagandistic nature, or even contains significant fabrication insofar as it claims that Hazael was the legitimate successor to the throne of Aram.

To resolve this dilemma, we must ask an important question: Who stood to gain from claiming responsibility for the deaths of Joram and Ahaziah? It seems highly unlikely and contrary to common sense to assume that Jehu could have derived any political benefit from perpetuating an image of himself as the murderer of his kingdom’s legitimate royal dynasty. A far more plausible explanation is that, having already carried out a coup and caused the deaths of the monarchs, he also launched a propaganda campaign to justify his actions.

Perhaps this is how the narrative about Jehu as God's anointed came into being? Certainly, he would not have boasted of killing the two kings without a compelling reason.

The circumstances were vastly different in the case of King Hazael, for whom claiming responsibility for the killing of Kings Joram and Ahaziah constituted a clear political advantage. By doing so, he attributed to himself military competence that effectively legitimized him as ruler in the eyes of his subjects—something that would have been particularly important for a usurper. By asserting that he had killed two monarchs, Hazael enhanced his social and political prestige.

Considering the above findings, it is far more likely that it was Jehu rather than Hazael who killed Joram and Ahaziah and that the Tel Dan Stele's claim to the contrary is, in all probability, Hazael's fabrication calculated to secure political benefit. While there is a popular theory nowadays that seeks to reconcile the two accounts by suggesting that Jehu was an ally of Hazael, it is not supported by any sources and should therefore be rejected as implausible. Another argument against it comes from the later narrative in 2 Kings 10:32–33 and from the Assyrian record preserved on the Black Obelisk from Kalḫu (Grayson 1996, 54), both of which indicate that almost immediately after taking power through the coup, Jehu waged war against Aram and allied himself with Aram's enemy—Assyria. While the date of Jehu's accession (ca. 841 BC) and the date of his tribute to Shalmaneser III as recorded in the Assyrian annals (the king's eighteenth regnal year, i.e., ca. 841 BC) (Grayson 1996, 149) coincide chronologically, there is no mention in any sources of a prior alliance between Jehu and Hazael. If Jehu had indeed acted on behalf of or in coordination with Hazael, it would be surprising that he paid homage to Assyria almost immediately after assuming power in Israel (which is what Astour's theory is based on). In view of the above, the theory concerning a Jehu–Hazael alliance is entirely implausible.

An alternative theory which could be reconciled with the source material is that although Hazael claims the regicide, his claim should be taken metaphorically rather than literally. Specifically, the king of Aram may have asserted that he had contributed to the deaths of the two rulers because his earlier military actions against Israel had started a chain of causation that ultimately led to their demise. However, given the strictly propagandistic character of the Tel Dan Stele and the fact that Hazael fabricated the claim that he was the legitimate ruler of Aram, it seems more likely that Hazael would have also fabricated his claim to have killed Joram and Ahaziah.

The case of King Hazael—who, in the Tel Dan Stele inscription, not only sought to present himself as the legitimate heir to the throne of Aram but also attributed to himself significant military achievements—is a model example of a charismatic ruler building a political myth in order to legitimize his position by demonstrating the expected political agency. Further research on the Tel Dan Stele or similar epigraphic sources should therefore take into account not only the linguistic and factual aspects of such sources but also the political motivations behind their creation. An interesting avenue to explore in future studies on this subject would be to compare the ways in which Israel, Judah, and Aram depicted succession, coups d'état, and the legitimation of power and to juxtapose the findings with accounts from other states. A more extensive analysis may facilitate deeper reflection on historically universal phenomena such as propaganda, manipulation, and creation of political myths to legitimize power, which remain relevant in the contemporary world. Ultimately, scholars may also raise compelling questions about the mechanisms through which historical consciousness has been shaped by those with access to the means of public dissemination.

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