

2 Kings 3: History or Historical Fiction?

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It has become fashionable in recent decades for biblical scholars, sometimes termed "biblical minimalists," to deny thoroughly the historicity of virtually all biblical narratives. 2 Kings 3 has not escaped this trend to repudiate reconstructions that harmonize the biblical account with extrabiblical data, in this case with the Mesha Inscription (Moabite Stone). Rather, such minimalists label 2 Kings 3 "historical fiction" with the emphasis on fiction and see little genuine history in the chapter. This paper examines the arguments of biblical minimalists concerning 2 Kings 3 in comparison with the Mesha Inscription and presents what can be termed a "historical maximalist" response for this story, evaluating the arguments of the minimalists while providing a positive historical reconstruction of this period on "maximalist" assumptions. It is concluded that a reconstruction that takes both 2 Kings 3 and the Mesha Inscription as essentially accurate history is possible, and that the objections raised by historical minimalists to such a reconstruction, though not without weight, are by no means conclusive. Hence, historical maximalism for 2 Kings 3 appears to be a viable option.

Key Words: *Mesha (king of Moab), biblical minimalists, Kir Hareseth, Jehoshaphat (king of Judah), Jehoram (king of Israel)*

INTRODUCTION

It has become fashionable in recent decades for biblical scholars, sometimes termed "biblical minimalists;"¹ to deny thoroughly the historicity of virtually all biblical narratives and to decry any attempt to harmonize biblical and extrabiblical data, just as it had been

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fashionable during the heyday of the Albright School to affirm the historicity of biblical narratives and to look more favorably upon harmonizing reconstructions. 2 Kings 3 has not escaped this trend to repudiate reconstructions that harmonize the biblical account with extrabiblical data, in this case with the Mesha Inscription (Moabite Stone). G. Garbini² for example criticizes M. Noth, A. H. van Zyl, and G. Rendsburg for attempting such reconstructions. Rather, such minimalists tend to agree with H. C. Brichto³ in labeling 2 Kings 3 "historical fiction" with the emphasis on fiction and see little genuine history in the chapter. This paper examines the arguments of biblical minimalists concerning 2 Kings 3 in

¹ See, for example, "Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists meet their Challengers," *BAR* 23/4 (July-August 1997) 26-42, 66. For the debate on the methodological level, see I. Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *JBL* 114 (1995) 585-606; T. L. Thompson, "A Neo-Albrightean School in History and Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 114 (1995) 683-98; P. R. Davies, "Method and Madness: Some Remarks on Doing History with the Bible," *JBL* 114 (1995) 699-705.

² G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 34-35.

³ H. C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 201-9.

comparison with the Mesha Inscription, and presents what can be termed a "historical maximalist" response for this story.

SUMMARY OF 2 KINGS 3 AND THE MESHA INSCRIPTION

It will be helpful to our discussion to review the content of 2 Kings 3 and the Mesha Inscription.

2 Kings 3 describes the invasion of Moab by Israel under King Jehoram, allied with Judah under King Jehoshaphat and an unnamed king of Edom. According to this account, these allies waged war against Mesha, king of Moab, who at the death of Ahab had rebelled against Israel and ceased to give Israel its tribute of sheep (vv. 4-5). The coalition invaded from the south by the "way of the wilderness of Edom" (vv. 6-8). Things go badly for the coalition, however, because of lack of water for the armies and their cattle (v. 9). Jehoram sees this as a sign of the impending judgment of Yahweh on the coalition, but the pious Jehoshaphat requests that a prophet of Yahweh be consulted (vv. 10-11a). Elisha happened to be in the neighborhood, and so Elisha, after dismissive remarks toward Jehoram and positive remarks about Jehoshaphat, predicts that water would come without rain into pits that they should dig (vv. 11b-17). Moreover, he announces that Yahweh will give the Moabites into their hands and predicts that these kings will devastate the land of Moab—conquering fortified cities, cutting down the fruit trees, stopping up wells, and ruining the fields with stones (vv. 18-19). The next day, sure enough, water fills the pits that have been dug, and the Moabites, thinking that the coalition has fought with one another and that the pools are pools of blood, attack, only to be forced into a hasty retreat that

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turned into a rout (vv. 20-24). The coalition then goes on to do exactly what Elisha predicted to the land, springs, and trees, till they come to the city of Kir Hareseth, which they surround and attack (v. 25). Mesha tries and fails to break through the enemy lines in the direction of the Edomite forces. Then, realizing that things are going badly, he takes his son, the heir to his throne, and sacrifices him as a burnt offering on the wall, after which "great wrath came upon Israel" and Israel returns to their own land (vv. 26-27).

The Mesha Inscription, discovered in 1868 at Dhiban, Jordan (biblical Dibon) and now in the Louvre in Paris, is written in first person by "Mesha, son of Chemosh-yat, king of Moab the Dibonite," who ascended to the throne after his father's 30-year reign (lines 1-3a).⁴ The inscription dedicates at the Qarḥo⁵ quarter of Dibon a sanctuary of Chemosh (the national god of Moab), who "delivered me [Mesha] from all assaults and... let me see my desire on all my adversaries" (lines 3b-4b) and records some of Mesha's accomplishments.

The major achievement Mesha attributes to Chemosh is independence from Israel, who under Omri had "oppressed Moab many days, for Chemosh was angry with his land" (lines 4c-5). Omri's "son" during Mesha's "days" also said, "I will oppress Moab," but Mesha saw his desire upon him and his house, and "Israel perished utterly forever" (lines 6-7b). Omri, Mesha

⁴ Translations of the Mesha Inscription are from John C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1: *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 71-83, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Vocalizations for קרְחֹ vary. Others vocalize it Qorḥo, or Qeriḥo. Cf. K. A. D. Smelik, *Converting the Past: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Moabite Historiography* (OTS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 63 n. 9.

says, possessed the land of Medeba, and for some 40 years during Omri's and much of his "son's" (or "sons"⁶) days Israel controlled it, "but Chemosh dwelt in it in my days" (lines 7c-9a).

Mesha describes his building programs in the northern cities of Baal-meon and Kiriathaim and that, though the king of Israel had fortified Ataroth where the Israelite tribe of Gad had lived from of old, Mesha conquered the city and "slew all the inhabitants of the town, a spectacle for Chemosh and Moab;" dragged off some treasure

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or cult object (אֲרָסָל רֹרְהָ; 'r'l *dwdh*)⁷ as a votive offering to Chemosh, and repopulated the city with others (lines 9b-14a). He also, at Chemosh's direction, took the town Nebo from Israel, where he slaughtered "seven thousand men and women, both natives and aliens, and female slaves," having "devoted"⁸ them to Ashtar-Chemosh along with the vessels of Yahweh (lines 14b-18a). Chemosh, Mesha goes on, drove the king of Israel out of the fortified city of Jahaz, which Mesha went on to rebuild and annex to Dibon (lines 18b-21a). Other building projects were at the Qarḥo quarter of Dibon (where the inscription was placed; cf. line 3), which included gates, towers, the king's residence, cisterns, and ditches "dug for Qarḥo by Israelite prisoners" (lines 22b-25) and at Areor, Arnon, Beth-bamoth, Bezer, all of which among many others he annexed into Moab, as well as Medeba and Beth-diblathaim (lines 26-30a).

At Beth Baal-meon Mesha sent shepherds to tend the sheep of the district (lines 30b-31).

Finally, although the geographical names to this point in the text have all been of places in the northern part of traditional Moab, the broken end of the inscription describes how Chemosh directed Mesha to take the southern city of Horonaim from the foreign (Israelite?)

⁶ Arguing for the plural is Bayla Bonder, "Mesha's Rebellion against Israel," *JANESCU* 3 (1971) 83-88. Moabite, like ancient Hebrew with which it has close affinities, was written without vowels. The form בְּנֵי in line 8 could be vocalized either something like *bēnō* ("his son") or *banehu* ("his sons"). The form בְּנֵי (also in line 8) seems to mean "his days" (something like *yamehu*) rather than "his day" (*yōmō*), showing that masc. pl. nouns with 3d masc. sing. suffixes cannot be distinguished from masc. sing. nouns with 3d masc. sing. suffixes. For the grammar, see Kent P Jackson, "The Language of the Mesha Inscription," *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ed. J. Andrew Dearman; Archaeology and Biblical Studies 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 109-10, 126.

⁷ The phrase אֲרָסָל רֹרְהָ ('r'l *dwdh*) is uncertain in meaning. Gibson (*Textbook*, 76, 79-80) translates "the lion figure of David," taking *dwdh* as the personal name David (the famous Israelite king?), which supposes some sort of dialectical variation in pronunciation, though he acknowledges the uncertainty of both 'r'l and *dwdh*. Other interpretations of 'r'l include "altar-hearth," a personal name such as Uriel (1 Chr 6:9), and "warrior." Besides "David," *dwdh* has been understood as "leader," "chief," and "beloved." Against taking *dwdh* as the personal name David of the Bible is the final *h*, which does not occur in either the Bible's spelling of David or the spelling of David in the Tel Dan inscription (N. Na'aman, "The Campaign of Mesha against Horonaim," *BN* 73 [1994] 28). Moreover, the final *h* may be a pronominal suffix. Cf. Jackson, "Language," 112-13, for a discussion and references. *Dwdh* probably cannot be a feminine singular noun since feminine nouns in the absolute in the Moabite Stone end in /-t/. לַיְלָה (*laylāh*, "night") in line 15 is no exception (contra Jackson, "Language," 114, 125) since *laylāh* in Hebrew is not a feminine noun, but a masc. one. *Laylāh*'s / -āh / ending was not derived from the Proto-Semitic feminine ending / -āt / where the pronunciation of the / t / was dropped in absolute forms, but as a result of the breaking up the awkward consonantal cluster *layl* after Northwest Semitic had dropped case endings.

⁸ הִתְרַמְתָּה, from the root תָּרַם meaning to devote to deity for destruction, the same word used in the Hebrew Bible for putting the Canaanites under the ban.

Edomite?—the text is broken) population that had settled there, which he did, allowing Chemosh then to dwell there" (lines 32-33). The remaining lines (at least two) are too broken to make any sense, and it is impossible to determine how many additional lines there may have been. The Louvre's reconstruction of the base assumes the text is nearly complete.

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ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE RELIABILITY OF 2 KINGS 3

There are a number of specific, substantial arguments used by historical minimalists to reject the historicity of the narrative in 2 Kings 3. First, Bartlett and Brichto⁹ argue that the reference to the king of Edom in 2 Kings 3 is in contradiction with statements made previously and subsequently in Kings that imply that there was no king in Edom at this time (1 Kgs 22:48 [English v. 47]; 2 Kgs 8:20).

Second, there are chronological conflicts between the Mesha Inscription and the account in 2 Kings 3.¹⁰ The Bible states that Israel rebelled after Ahab died, whereas Mesha in his own inscription states that it was during the reign of Omri's son that he rebelled, which would presumably be during (not after) the reign of Ahab. Mesha's attribution to Omri and his son (Ahab?) of a 40-year domination of Moab (line 8) cannot easily be reconciled with biblical chronology. Garbini takes the Mesha Inscription to imply Omri was still alive after this 40 years, further contradicting the Bible's statement of his death after a 12-year reign, and eliminates as unhistoric the reigns of Ahaziah and Jehoram of Israel (whom he identifies with the Jehoram of Judah), taking the biblical traditions of this period to be a confused, "inextricable tangle of names, dates and facts."¹¹ The Bible itself seems to limit the whole dynasty of Omri from its beginning to the death of Jehoram to a maximum of about 44 years.¹² But according to the Bible's chronology, there is no room, even in these 44 years, for a 40-year domination of Moab. At the beginning of Omri's reign, Omri was occupied with a 4-year civil war with Tibni (1 Kgs 16:22),¹³ during which time taking control of Moab seems out of place. Moreover, since Jehoram came to power in the 18th of Jehoshaphat's official 25-year reign (2 Kgs 3:1; cf. 1 Kgs 22:42), the battle involving Jehoram

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and Jehoshaphat against Moab must have taken place, if historical, in the first half of Jehoram's 12-year reign while Jehoshaphat was still alive, cutting off another 6 years or so from the 44. Hence, the date of the campaign of 2 Kings 3, in contradiction to Mesha's

⁹ John R. Bartlett, "The 'United' Campaign against Moab in 2 Kings 3:4-27," in *Midian, Moab and Edom: The History and Archaeology of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Jordan and North-West Arabia* (ed. J. F. A. Sawyer and D. J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 24; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983) 139; Brichto, *Poetics*, 204, 284 n.13.

¹⁰ Summarized by J. Andrew Dearman, "Historical Reconstruction and the Mesha Inscription," in *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ed. J. A. Dearman; Archaeology and Biblical Studies 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 164-67.

¹¹ Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 36-37.

¹² According to the MT, Omri reigned 12 years (1 Kgs 16:23), Ahab 22 years (1 Kgs 16:29), Ahaziah 2 years (1 Kgs 22:52 [Eng. v. 51]), and Jehoram 12 years (2 Kgs 3:1), adding up to 48 years. However, because of overlaps and counting the last year of a previous king as simultaneously the first year of the next, it appears that the maximum length of the Omride dynasty is 44 years assuming no co-regencies, per Thiele's chronology (see below). On the Lucianic chronology, see footnote below.

¹³ Zimri's 7-day reign began in the 27th year of Asa, but he was deposed by Omri (16:15-20), but 16:23 says it was in Asa's 31st year that Omri became king, suggesting that the civil war with Tibni (16:21-22) lasted 4 years.

explicit statement, appears closer to 30 than to 40 years from the beginning of Omri's subjugation of Moab.¹⁴

Third, the presentation of matters in the contemporary Mesha Inscription differs radically from the biblical account, suggesting that the biblical account is not reliable as history. The following arguments are summarized from Stern.¹⁵ In the Bible, Jehoram of Israel is a central figure, but the Moabite Stone makes no mention of him. In the Bible, Kir Hareseth, usually identified with el Kerak roughly twenty miles south of the Arnon, is the prominent city in the story, but in the Mesha Inscription the Qarḥo district of Dibon is prominent, and it does not even mention Kir Hareseth. Indeed, although the Bible generally ascribes the territory of Moab as from the Arnon River south to the Zered River (Num 21:13; Judg 11:18; etc.) and ascribes the entire area north of the Arnon to Gad and Reuben (Num. 32:34-36),¹⁶ it appears doubtful from his inscription that Mesha controlled very much territory south of the Arnon, but that Moab's territory was mainly north of the Arnon. According to his inscription, Mesha had a string of unbroken victories, while the biblical picture shows Israelite victories followed by a retreat without losses. The claims of the Mesha Inscription and the claims of the Bible's account cannot both be true, and of the two versions, the Moabite Stone is arguably the more historically reliable. The Bible is incredibly vague about what precisely led to Israel's retreat—the enigmatic "great wrath came upon Israel" (2 Kgs 3:27)—while the Mesha Inscription, though attributing the victories to the god Chemosh, describes more

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run-of-the-mill military actions. The Moabite Stone's description of an extensive building program in the north explains why Moab maintained its independence, but the victories described by the Bible's account makes it incredible to think that Mesha did not lose his independence, if not to Israel then to some other power. The emphasis in the Moabite Stone's account is the territory north of the Arnon River, whereas the Bible discusses southern Moab. Mesha, according to his inscription, slaughtered and enslaved Gadites, while the biblical account's silence about this slaughter and enslavement of the tribe of Gad, even though this slaughter must have been a main issue provoking the war, renders dubious in Stern's mind its claim to historical accuracy.

Fourth, the literary dependence of 2 Kings 3 on prophetic legends renders the narrative unusable to the historian. The central core of 2 Kings 3 contains an implausible miracle story as the means by which Israel got water and obtained victory. The redactor(s) of Kings has used as a source at least in vv. 11-19 the prophetic legends about Elijah and Elisha which have been incorporated here and there throughout Kings. These tales are too full of fanciful

¹⁴ Biblical chronology is helped by the fixed date of the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE, in which Ahab participated, but even so chronologists differ in detail based on differing assumptions, and the lack of unanimity complicates historical reconstruction. M. Cogan (s.v. "Chronology," *ABD* 1.1010) offers the following dates: Omri 882-871, Ahab 873-852, Ahaziah 852-851, and Jehoram 851-842—about a 40-year total. Thiele's chronology (*Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* [3d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1983]) begins Omri earlier (885) and ends Jehoram later (841), making for a 44-year chronology. J. Hayes and P Hooker (*A New Chronology for the Kings of Israel and Judah* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1988]) begin Omri in 879 and end Jehoram's reign (whom they identify with Jehoram of Judah) in 840, about 39 years. As for the end of Jehoshaphat's reign, it is variously dated at 846 (Cogan), 848 (Thiele), and 853 (Hayes/Hooker). The Hayes/Hooker reconstruction is least compatible with the historicity of 2 Kings 3.

¹⁵ P. D. Stern, "Of Kings and Moabites: History and Theology in 2 Kings 3 and the Mesha Inscription," *HUCA* 64 (1993) 2-11.

¹⁶ J. Liver, "The Wars of Mesha King of Moab," *PEQ* 99 (1967) 15.

happenings to be trusted for historical reconstruction. Moreover, the remarkable parallels between this passage and 1 Kings 22 suggest that 2 Kings 3 is dependent on this earlier account and has been distorted so as intentionally to parallel the earlier story:¹⁷ (1) In both accounts an evil Israelite king who typifies unbelief asks Jehoshaphat of Judah to join in a foreign war, and in both Jehoshaphat agrees with the words "I and you are alike, my people are as your people, my horses are as your horses" (1 Kgs 22:4; 2 Kgs 3:7). (2) In both the godly Jehoshaphat wants to inquire of a prophet of the LORD (1 Kgs 22:7; 2 Kgs 3:11). (3) In both there is a typical prophetic figure who shows contempt for the king of Israel but goes on to give the requested prophecy (Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 and Elisha in 2 Kings 3). (4) Both stories record fulfillment of the predictions and end unfortunately for Israel (Ahab is killed and every man returns to his own city in 1 Kgs 22:34-37; "great wrath" upon Israel and their withdrawal to their own land in 2 Kgs 3:27). There is arguably also literary dependence on Numbers 20 where similarly a cry for water is followed by deliverance by a prophetic figure.¹⁸ These parallels suggest that the story of 2 Kings 3 may have had more of a prophetic and theological basis than a historical one.

Fifth, there are miscellaneous other problems within the 2 Kings 3 narrative. Reference to two hundred thousand sheep involved in

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Mesha's tribute to Israel (2 Kgs 3:4) seems excessively high.¹⁹ Brichto²⁰ considers several other elements of the story implausible: the impractical southern route, the effortless victories, the need to muster such a great confederate army and use a circuitous southern route for such an formidable enemy, the fact that even the Edomite allies did not know the location of water holes in their own territory, the stupidity of not considering a strategic retreat when water supplies ran low, the statement that these kings made a seven day's journey (3:9) given that the southern border of Moab (the Zered River) is only twenty miles from the capital of Kir Hareseth, and the unlikelihood that Elisha would just happen to be in the Edomite wilderness at the time of the invasion. Stern adds that there is a lack of archaeological confirmation of the biblical invasion in that evidence of widespread destruction levels in ninth-century Moab is lacking.²¹

Such arguments as the ones above have led many to regard the biblical narrative as primarily unhistoric, drawing upon a loosely connected and largely misarranged legendary collection of tales about the political activities of the prophets. Some go so far as to say that the redactor has taken the rebellion that took place under Mesha ca. 800 BCE and wrongly attributed it to the time of Jehoshaphat and Jehoram before 845 BCE and connected it with the legendary activities of Elisha.²²

¹⁷ Bartlett, "The Campaign against Moab," 135-36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁹ The exact translation of 2 Kgs 3:4 is somewhat disputed: "100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams" (RSV, JPSV); "the wool of 100,000 lambs and rams" (JPSV). NKJV, *ad. loc.*, takes the first term for sheep (כַּרְיִים) to be a "(young) ram (for slaughter)" and the second (אֵילִים) combined with the צֹמֶר ("wool") to mean "unshorn rams." The numbers, regardless of rendering, look too big.

²⁰ Brichto, *Poetics*, 204-5.

²¹ Stern, "Of Kings and Moabites," 4.

²² Karl-Heine Bernhardt, "The Political Situation in the East of Jordan during the Time of King Mesha," in *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan 1* (Amman: Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 1982) 163-67.

A MAXIMALIST RESPONSE TO MINIMALIST ARGUMENTS ON 2 KINGS 3

It is, by nature of the scanty and incomplete extant evidence, impossible to disprove the historical minimalist position, but its arguments can be put into perspective. The Moabite Stone certainly does verify that certain things recorded in 2 Kings 3 are accurate, and makes other things in the biblical text more understandable:

1. There was a Mesha king of Moab.
2. Mesha had been subject to Israel under the Omrides (cf. reference to the son of Omri who said, "I will oppress Moab" in

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the Mesha Inscription, line 6, with the Bible's claim that Mesha was subject to Ahab [Omri's son] after whose death Mesha is said to rebel, 2 Kgs 1:1; 3:5).

3. Mesha affirms with 2 Kings 3 that the Israelite god was Yahweh (Mesha Inscription, line 18 refers to vessels of Yahweh plundered from Nebo; 2 Kgs 3:10 where Jehoram laments that Yahweh intended to give them into the hands of Moab).
4. According to both accounts, Mesha rebelled and gained his independence from the Omrides.
5. This Mesha, according to both accounts, was responsible for flocks (2 Kgs 3:4; Mesha Inscription, line 31, "I led [my shepherds] up there [in order to tend the] sheep of the land").
6. According to both accounts Mesha was a man who could take human life as a religious act of devotion to his god (Mesha Inscription, lines 11-12,15-17, "I slew all the inhabitants of the town [Ataroth], a spectacle for Chemosh and Moab... I slew all in it [the city Nebo], seven thousand men and women, both natives and aliens, and female slaves; for I had devoted it to Ashtar-Chemosh"²³; and Mesha's offering of his own son as a burnt offering in 2 Kgs 3:27).²⁴

²³ Note Mesha's various acts of piety toward Chemosh as described in the Mesha Inscription:

I built this high place for Chemosh in 𐤒𐤓𐤕𐤓; Qarḥo, a high place of salvation, because he delivered me from all assaults and because he let me see my desire upon all my adversaries. Omri, king of Israel, had oppressed Moab many days, for Chemosh was angry with his land [lines 3-4]; Omri had taken possession of the land of Medeba, and dwelt there his days and much of his son's days, forty years; but Chemosh dwelt in it in my days [lines 8-9]; I slew all the inhabitants of the town, a spectacle for Chemosh and Moab. I brought back from there the lion figure of David, and dragged it before Chemosh at Karioth [lines 12-13]; Next, Nebo said to me, Go take Nebo from Israel [line 14]; I slew all in it, seven thousand men and women, both natives and aliens, and female slaves; for I had devoted it to Ashtar-Chemosh. I took from thence the vessels of Yahweh and dragged them before Chemosh [lines 15-17]; Chemosh drove [the king of Israel] out before me [line 19]; and Chemosh said to me, Go down, fight against Horonaim. So I went down, and Chemosh (dwelt) there in my days [lines 32-33].

²⁴ Smelik, *Converting the Past*, 91.

7. Mesha in both the Bible and the Mesha Inscription affirmed the power of his god to drive away enemy armies (implied by his sacrifice of his son in 2 Kgs 3:27; stated in the Mesha Inscription, line 19, "Chemosh drove [the king of Israel] out before me").

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8. The Mesha Inscription confirms the Bible's various assertions that Gadites occupied territory immediately north of the Arnon "from of old" (line 10), and conversely the Bible does not deny that Moab often occupied the territory north of the Arnon opposite Jericho (e.g., Eglon, Judg 3:12-20), territory it labels the "plains of Moab" (Num 22:1; Deut 34:1, 8; Josh 13:32) even when it was not subject to Moabite rule.²⁵ Moreover, his malicious prior slaughter and enslavement of Gadites (Mesha Inscription, lines 10-12, 25), though not mentioned in the Bible, do render more understandable the adoption by Israel of vindictive military tactics such as destroying cities, stopping up wells, marring fields with stones, and cutting down fruit trees (2 Kgs 3:24-25).
9. Although the Mesha Inscription emphasizes matters to the north, both it and the Bible affirm that Mesha also conducted military campaigns south of the Arnon River (Mesha Inscription, lines 31-33 describe in a somewhat broken text a campaign against Horonaim; 2 Kings 3 a campaign from the direction of Edom), though whether the Mesha Inscription's southern campaign occurred before, after, or concurrent with the Israelite invasion of 2 Kings 3 is difficult to determine. In addition to the famous Moabite Stone, there is also a second, less famous and very broken inscription written on gray-black basalt with a highly polished surface, discovered in 1958 at el Kerak (often identified with biblical Kir Hareseth) in a script very close to that of its more famous cousin. This second "Mesha Inscription" seems to dedicate a sanctuary of Chemosh at el Kerak, thus proving that Mesha occupied territory well south of the Arnon as the Bible suggests.²⁶
10. Mesha's southern campaign (lines 31-33) and general build-up of military strength render understandable the willingness of the king of Edom to participate in the campaign with Israel and Judah against Moab. The Mesha Inscription suggests that one motive for Edomite participation was fear. Whether or not Edom were a vassal of Judah, on political grounds Edom's interests would have corresponded with Judah's in seeing Mesha's development of a strong and independent

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state to their north as threat to their security.²⁷ Moreover, if the foreign population of Horonaim in the broken text of line 31 which Mesha displaced were Edomite and if this occurred before the allies invaded, Edom would have the additional motive of revenge. Either reason would have been sufficient for participation in an incursion.

²⁵ Liver, "Wars of Mesha," 17.

²⁶ Gibson, *Textbook*, 83-84. Gibson's translation of the three lines with legible script, "(I am Mesha, son of Ch)emosh-yat, kung of Moab the Di(bonite)... (in the temp)le of Chemosh as an act of purgation, because I lo(ve)... and his.... And behold, I have constructed...." Note that the name Mesha is a reconstruction, though a fairly certain one given the spacing and the parallels in formula with the Moabite Stone.

²⁷ Bartlett, "The Campaign against Moab," 137-38.

Not only does the Mesha Inscription confirm or explain aspects of 2 Kings 3, the biblical account of Moab's invasion helps explain why Moab is nowhere mentioned in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (858-824): Israel's punitive raid had rendered them militarily not worth mentioning.²⁸

Since the biblical text appears true to life in some details, one cannot quickly dismiss the possibility of accuracy in details not subject to verification by external sources or difficult to reconcile with external sources. Hence, as Herrmann puts it, although detailed synchronization between the Mesha Inscription and 2 Kings 3 is problematic, "on the whole, the texts complement each other."²⁹

Historical maximalists cannot prove the historicity of 2 Kings 3 (or the Moabite Stone for that matter), and apart from the discovery of new, relevant ancient texts maximalists will never be able to propose on the basis of evidence presently available any reconstruction that will satisfy the demands of the historical minimalists. On the other hand, in order to remain an intellectually viable option, maximalists must and can demonstrate at least the plausibility that 2 Kings 3 is primarily historical by addressing the arguments of the minimalists and by attempting a positive historical reconstruction utilizing both Bible and the Mesha Inscription.

To begin, to the claim based on 1 Kgs 22:48[47] that there was no king of Edom at the time of Jehoram, Cogan and Tadmor reply: "It would not, however, be unusual for the same official to be referred to as a 'deputy' in a chronistic source (so 1 Kgs 22:48) and a 'king' in a prophetic narrative."³⁰ Moreover, 2 Kgs 8:20 ("In [Jehoram of Judah's] days, Edom revolted from the authority of Judah and set up a king of their own") does not state, contra Brichto and Bartlett, that there had been no king in Edom up to that time; it could simply mean that they replaced the puppet king/deputy approved by Judah with one of their own liking. The inferior status of this king of Edom is underscored in 2 Kings 3 by the fact that he has neither dialogue, actions nor even a name.

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The chronological statements about Jehoram's reign and the date of Mesha's rebellion (2 Kgs 1:1; 3:1, 4) appear to be taken directly from Israelite and Judaeon chronicles, and there is no persuasive reason to suppose that the chronicles used were inaccurate.³¹ Thus we may say that, from the Israelite perspective, Mesha's rebellion began after the death of Ahab. Since the nature of this "rebellion" is a failure to send tribute to Israel, from the Moabite perspective it could have started even before the death of Ahab, but nonpayment of tribute took some time to register in Samaria,³² especially given the turmoil around the death of the king. But if Omri's "son" in the inscription refers to Jehoram, as will be argued below, there is no discrepancy at all.

The Mesha Inscription reads, "Omri had taken possession of the land of Medeba, and dwelt there his days and much (literally "half") of his son's days, forty years; but Chemosh dwelt there in my days" (lines 7-9). If Omri's "son" is Ahab, and Israel's domination only covered

²⁸ G. Rendsburg, "A Reconstruction of Moabite-Israelite History," *JANESCU* 13 (1981) 72.

²⁹ S. Herrmann, *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times* (2d ed.; trans. J. Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 216.

³⁰ M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988) 44.

³¹ Smelik, *Converting the Past*, 81.

³² Bartlett, "The Campaign against Moab," 144.

"much of " Ahab's reign, then it is impossible to harmonize biblical chronology with this text statement about 40 years. There are two possible solutions to this problem. One, argued by Bonder,³³ is to vocalize "son" in line 8 as plural "sons," in which case the whole dynasty of Omri including Ahaziah and Jehoram could be the reference. Perhaps better, however, is to understand the term "son" with Smelik in the sense of "descendant,"³⁴ in which case Jehoram as the last Omride who tried to subject Moab would be the reference. Taken the latter way, the Mesha Inscription emphasizes the beginning and end of the reign of the Omrides, putting the "son of Omri" literally in parallel with himself as "son of Chemosh-yat" and in the process shows contempt for Jehoram by leaving him unnamed.³⁵ Moreover, Smelik's reading allows line 6, where the son of Omri says, "I will oppress Moab," to be an allusion to Jehoram's invasion.

As for Mesha's 40-year domination, once the term son/sons in line 8 is allowed to refer to Jehoram, an approximately 40-year domination from Omri to Jehoram becomes possible. The Mesha Inscription states that Omri dominated Israel "many days." Stern rejects the view that Omri would have had to wait until he had consolidated his rule before attacking Moab, observing that attacking a common enemy is a good way to rally one's country to one's rule and that otherwise Mesha's statement about Omri's ruling Moab many days would make no sense.³⁶ Instead, Omri's action must be early in his reign of 12 years,

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politically serving to rally his divided nation around himself. Following Thiele's chronology, Omri reigned from 885-873. It is conceivable that Omri came to dominate Moab in 884 early in his reign. And taking the "son" of Omri in line 8 of the Mesha Inscription to refer to Jehoram and on that basis placing Jehoram's invasion somewhere in the middle of Jehoram's reign (852-841), then one could go on to suggest that after some unsuccessful conflicts in the north mentioned by Mesha in the early years of Mesha's rebellion, the invasion from the direction of Edom occurred in 849, the year before Jehoshaphat's death, some 35 years later. Rounded to the nearest decade, Israel thus oppressed Moab "40 years."

Even if, as is not unlikely, the campaign is taken as closer to the beginning of Jehoram's reign in 852, it would have served Mesha's purpose in glorifying himself and his god at the breaking of a long standing domination to round up to the next higher decade rather than to round down. Historical maximalists may concede some degree of hyperbole both here within the Mesha Inscription and in the Bible. Fouts³⁷ demonstrates that the Hebrew Bible systematically employs large numbers as a form of conventional, literary hyperbole, as do other documents from the ancient Near East. Examples of this in the books of Kings include the 40,000 horses and the 1,000 wives of Solomon (1 Kgs 4:26; 11:3), which taken literally are absurd but were originally intended as hyperboles that, what Solomon did, he did in a big way.³⁸ The hundreds of thousands of sheep claimed as tribute in 2 Kgs 3:4 is probably another

³³ Bonder, "Mesha's Rebellion against Israel," 86. Cf. Gibson, *Textbook*, 79 n. 8.

³⁴ Smelik, *Converting the Past*, 81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

³⁶ Stern, "Of Kings and Moabites," 2.

³⁷ D. M. Fouts, "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *JETS* 40/3 (1997) 377-87; *idem*, *The Use of Large Numbers in the Old Testament with Particular Emphasis on the Use of 'ēlêp* (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992).

³⁸ Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995) 60, 93. Provan notes that Cant 6:8-9 records the more realistic figures for Solomon's wives: 60 queens, 80 concubines, not to mention "virgins without number."

example of this—Israel received “huge numbers” of sheep. The Moabite Stone’s statement about a 40-year domination of Israel appears to be yet another hyperbole. Mesha’s statement about the “son” of Omri (Jehoram?) oppressing Moab for “half” of his reign (line 8) may be a third. The “40 years,” then, is an approximate, if somewhat hyperbolic, figure, “a standard expression for a long period of time, also in biblical literature,”³⁹ not in contradiction with biblical chronology.

Smelik⁴⁰ also makes an attractive proposal for resolving the problem of the absence of Kir Hareseth in the Moabite Stone. Smelik observes that twelve of the place-names in the Moabite Stone are also

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mentioned in the Bible and finds it surprising that Kir Hareseth is absent. He doubts that the reason is merely the fact that Kir Hareseth is in southern Moab, whereas the inscription concentrates on matters to the north (eleven of twelve place-names in the inscription are north of the Arnon River, and the inscription itself was in Dibon, a northern city). Instead he argues that Qarḥo (related to Dibon) is to be identified with Kir Hareseth as his royal residence. This would explain why in the Mesha Inscription Qarḥo/Dibon seems to be Mesha’s capital, whereas in the Bible (though not explicitly stated) Kir Hareseth appears to be Mesha’s capital. The identification of Kir Hareseth with modern el Kerak in central traditional Moab, as Smelik and Miller⁴¹ note, is weak, based on the dubious interpretation of the Aramaic targum that rendered the name *kark*. However, this is not a place-name but the word for “fortified place, capital.” Moreover, Isaiah lists Kir Hareseth with other cities north of the Arnon, not cities of southern traditional Moab (Isa 16:7, 11). Smelik takes the name Kir Hareseth to mean “shard city,” which may be some sort of pun on Qarḥo. Na’aman, who accepts Smelik’s identification of Qarḥo with Kir Hareseth, argues very plausibly that el Kerak should now be identified with the Horonaim of Mesha’s southern campaign rather than Kir Hareseth, supporting that identification with references to Horonaim/Oronaim in the Bible and Josephus.⁴²

If Kir Hareseth is north of the Arnon in northern Moab, then the Bible’s statement about a seven-day journey that the confederate army required becomes plausible rather than absurd (2 Kgs 3:9). It also means that there is no contradiction between the Mesha Inscription on the one hand and 2 Kings 3 regarding the extent of Moabite territory, since the Bible would then make no claim about the extent of Mesha’s occupation of territory south of the Arnon River but allows for Edom or other groups to occupy significant territory between the Zered and the Arnon. It follows that lack of archaeological confirmation of the invasion in that region is by no means surprising.

³⁹ Smelik, *Converting the Past*, 82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85-89.

⁴¹ J. Maxwell Miller, “Moab and the Moabites,” *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ed. J. Andrew Dearman; *Archaeology and Biblical Studies* 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 35-36.

⁴² Na’aman, “Horonaim,” 28-29. The exact identification of Horonaim had been considered uncertain, but all proposals agreed it is south of the Arnon. Cf. Dearman, “Historical Reconstruction,” 188, for earlier suggestions.

Except for Aroer to the southeast, the other cities fortified by Mesha (Beth-bamoth, Bezer, Medeba, Beth-diblathaim, and Beth Baal-meon) appear to be north of Dibon.⁴³ Thus, the southern route chosen

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by Jehoram avoided the main population centers and fortifications of Moab, and instead passed through sparsely populated regions, some of which may have been occupied by his ally Edom. Such a route makes sense militarily. Moreover, Smelik's thesis makes understandable, given the way Mesha claims to have fortified Qarḥo according to his inscription, why Israel had a hard time conquering it.

The composite nature of the account in 2 Kings 3 is not proof of lack of historicity, since the various sources used may all be accurate historically. I suggest that there were two main sources used by the biblical narrator. The first is a historical chronicle that records Israel's invasion of Moab under Jehoram and his failure to win it back that formed the basis of 2 Kgs 3:1, 4-6 and the essence of 26-27. Such chronicles as a genre tend to be by-and-large reliable for historical reconstruction. Accordingly, statements about the date of Jehoram of Samaria's ascension to the throne (18th year of Jehoshaphat), the length of his reign (12 years), the date of Meshas rebellion and withholding of tribute (after the death of Ahab), the fact of Jehoram's invasion and his ultimate failure and withdrawal can all be adopted as a reliable basis for historical reconstruction.⁴⁴ Conversely, modern historical reconstructions that claim to "correct" these statements—seeing Jehoram of Samaria as identical with Jehoram of Judah,⁴⁵ eliminating Jehoram of Israel altogether as unhistoric,⁴⁶ or moving the date of the invasion to well after 845 to around 800 and replacing

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Jehoram with some other Israelite king⁴⁷—have the burden of proving that they are more than just interesting speculations.

⁴³ Dearman ("Historical Reconstruction," 170-89) gives detailed discussion of what is known of the place-names in the Mesha Inscription. Dibon, the site of the sanctuary of Chemosh which Mesha dedicates and Mesha's capital, is known from the modern city of Dhiban three or four miles north of the Arnon River. Dhiban was where the inscription was discovered, making this identification well established. The location of Medeba appears established by the modern city of Medeba some fifteen or so miles north of Dibon. Aroer appears to be the modern Kh. 'Ara'ir which is about two or three miles southeast of Dibon on the northern edge of the Arnon and controlled the King's Highway from the south. Beth-bamoth is not known with certainty but appears from the Mesha Inscription to be near Medeba. Bezer according to the Bible was a levitical city in the southern part of the Transjordan Israelite occupation of Reuben (Deut 4:43) and is clearly north of the Arnon, but the exact identity of its location is uncertain (Jalul and Um al 'Amad near Medeba are likely candidates). Beth-diblathaim's location is rather uncertain, but Beth Baal-meon is probably to be identified with the modern village of Main about five miles southwest of Medeba.

⁴⁴ J. M. Miller ("Another Look at the Chronology of the Early Divided Monarchy," *JBL* 86 [1967] 276-88) argues that Lucianic manuscripts of the LXX, whose chronology diverges widely from that of the MT, preserve a more reliable chronology than the MT for the period from Omri to Jehu. Internal evidence within that tradition, however, makes it much more likely that these divergences represent an early attempt to revise imagined difficulties in the MT tradition, as argued by Cogan, "Chronology"; and E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of Hebrew Kings* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983) 84-86.

⁴⁵ J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 280-82.

⁴⁶ Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 36-37.

⁴⁷ Bernhardt, "Time of King Mesha," 163.

A second source used in the process of compilation is the stories of Elijah and Elisha which included a narrative concerning Elisha's role in Jehoram's unsuccessful campaign that formed the basis for most of 2 Kgs 3:6-25 and perhaps elements of vv. 26-27 that assume the earlier story. The presence of Elisha in this narrative relates to the larger issue of the historicity of the Elijah-Elisha Cycles, widely questioned by scholars.

The reliability of the Elijah-Elisha source for historical reconstruction is difficult to establish. Presuppositions clearly play a large role in how much evidence one requires before accepting a narrative as primarily historical. Religious fundamentalists take the miracle stories in the Bible at face value regardless of historical difficulties, though their failure to face these difficulties and integrate the Bible with extrabiblical data undermines their credibility. Nonfundamentalists with a religious commitment to the Bible and/or with a general respect for the biblical historians based on archaeology (e.g., the old Albright School) in some cases adopt an "innocent until proven guilty attitude toward biblical text and so often give the Bible the benefit of the doubt. Critical historians are methodological naturalists who exclude from the realm of "history" all affirmations of miracles or the supernatural, and biblical minimalists in particular are especially skeptical of reconstructing history from stories involving miracles.

Yet even among those who for methodological and/or philosophical reasons are suspicious of miracle stories, not all miracle stories need be dismissed as worthless for historical reconstruction. As Hallo⁴⁸ observes, historians can, by reasonable deductions, derive valid historical conclusions from even legendary materials; moreover, excessive skepticism unnecessarily hampers historical reconstruction. Some miracle stories have at least a grain of historical truth, and others may even have considerable truth, regardless of what one may think of the claimed miracle.

Both the Mesha Inscription and 2 Kings 3 are to some degree miracle stories. The Mesha Inscription speaks often of the acts of Chemosh: his deliverance of Mesha from all assaults and handing over to Mesha his adversaries; his anger toward his land; his dwelling in Medeba; Chemosh's prophecy "Go, take Nebo from Israel"; Chemosh's driving out the Israelites before him at Jahaz, and his prophecy to fight against Horonaim and his coming to "dwell" there (lines 4-5, 9, 14, 19, 32-33). If reference to supernatural happenings disqualifies a text from use

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for historical reconstruction, then we can write no history of this period. Yet even the historical minimalists, while discounting Mesha's claims about Chemosh, nonetheless find the Mesha Inscription of value for historical reconstruction. Returning to 2 Kings 3, it is likewise possible to use the account for historical reconstruction despite its references to the supernatural. It is possible to conclude, as does J. Liver, that "Despite these popular elements [salient features of a folk-tale], however, the data contained in the story are in the main authentic."⁴⁹

There must surely have been a historical Elisha from whom the biblical stories of Elisha developed, just as there was a real Alexander around whom the legends of Alexander developed, and a real Sargon of Akkad around whom the legends of Sargon developed. In

⁴⁸ W. W. Hallo, "The Limits of Skepticism," *JAOS* (110) 187-99.

⁴⁹ Liver, "The Wars of Mesha," 27.

such stories, some genuine historical memories often survive; perhaps historical details survive in this Elisha narrative as well.

The miracles in this particular narrative are not especially fantastic ones. The miracle of the water, for example, gains at least some historical plausibility by virtue of its reflecting local color (no pun intended)⁵⁰ appropriate to the geographic setting in the wilderness of Edom: not of torrents of water down the wadis as Liver states,⁵¹ but, with Brichto, the rising up from the ground of subterranean waters into the pits dug by the Israelites, a ground swell that reached the allies' side before it reached the Moabite. As Brichto notes, in that part of the world, "the driest of these water beds support vegetation in the summer's drought, and digging there will often expose water a few inches or a foot or two below the parched surface."⁵² For the Israelites to have dug one day but found water in the pits only the next day is hardly an astounding miracle, though they would no doubt have believed such an occurrence to be an act of God. Moreover, if Moabite forces misinterpreted this water as blood pools from a battle among the allies and as a result exposed themselves to a vicious counterattack, that too would have been seen as an act of divine providence, just as the Nazi delay at Dunkirk during World War II that allowed the Allied armies to escape intact was widely seen by religious people at the time as providential.

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Other prophetic stories, if they have an historical basis whatsoever, suggest that prophets sometimes wandered around to strange places outside their own country. The young prophet of Judah travels across national borders to give a prophecy against Israel (1 Kings 13), as does Amos from Tekoa in Judah (Amos 1:1; 7:10-17). Elijah is said to have lived for a while at Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs 17:2-7) east of the Jordan, at Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:8-24) in the jurisdiction of Sidon, and traveled to Mount Horeb south of Judah (2 Kgs 19:1-21). Elisha is said to have traveled to Damascus and appointed Hazael as king (2 Kgs 8:7-15), and he sent one of the "sons of the prophets" to the troops at Ramath Gilead on the Syrian border to anoint Jehu king (2 Kgs 9:113). The strange appearance of Elisha in the Edomite wilderness in 2 Kings 3 fits with this pattern of wandering prophets that could reflect genuine tradition.

Biblical narratives suggest that it was not unusual for an Israelite or Judahite king to consult a prophet. A prophet, once consulted, would by the law of averages often predict victory, and any victories won in that culture would automatically be attributed to the national deity. Mesha attributed his victories over Israel to Chemosh, so Israel would attribute any victories over Moab to the fact that Yahweh had handed Moab over to them. Moreover, where a prophet makes a specific prediction—cutting down trees, stopping up wells, ruining fields with stones—there would be a tendency for the recipients of that positive-sounding prophecy to act in such a way as to fulfill it. Later, Israel's failure to take Kir Hareseth, probably as a result of a plague among the troops, would likewise have been interpreted in terms of the result of divine "wrath" (2 Kgs 3:27). In sum, this particular miracle story generally appears sufficiently true to life that it is at least conceivable that substantial elements of it are

⁵⁰ The name Edom is related to the word "red," and so the biblical account in 2 Kings 3 may be hinting at a pun when it states that waters that came from Edom (עֲדוֹם; Red-land; v. 20) were "red" (דָּמָא; 'āḏummîm) as blood (v. 22). It is not that the king of Edom was included artificially to enhance this pun (contra Bartlett, "The Campaign against Moab," 143) but that the pun presented itself to the narrator as an amusing way to tell what he believed to have happened.

⁵¹ Liver, "The Wars of Mesha," 28.

⁵² Brichto, *Poetics*, 206.

historical, whether or not one believes in miracles. A historian might want to qualify a reconstruction based on such material as being based on tales about the prophets which cannot be externally verified, but to leave such tales out of consideration altogether is too extreme.

One need not deny that 2 Kings 3 has been told in such a way as to bring out parallels between that narrative and the earlier prophetic narrative of 1 Kings 22. This does not necessarily mean, however, that either narrative is unhistorical.⁵³ It is possible that there

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were genuine parallels in the two events that the storyteller could highlight to underscore his theological purpose of showing how Jehoshaphat's excessively close identification with Israel and her ways represents a betrayal of Judah's vocation to be the true Israel.⁵⁴

The different pictures painted by the Mesha Inscription and 2 Kings 3 must be analyzed with the purposes of each text in mind. Once this is done, it is possible to affirm that both texts may well be essentially accurate so far as they go. The fact that the slaughter of the Gadites plays no role in 2 Kings 3 is understandable given the biblical text's purpose: it is a theologically-oriented prophetic narrative, not a historically-oriented chronicle. Only those events that somehow contribute to theological purposes of the book of Kings are recorded. What the narrator wants to emphasize are the sins of Jehoram of Israel, not the sins of Mesha. The "wrath" in 2 Kgs 3:27 in this narrative context can be taken as the wrath of Yahweh for Israel's violation of the rules for just war in Deut 20:10-15, 19-20 by cutting down the fruit trees and for Israel's generally vindictive military behavior.⁵⁵ To have included the Gadite incident, an event which might have struck readers as a legitimate grievance justifying Israel's slaughter and vindictive acts against Moab's population, would have been subversive of the biblical author's moral and theological purposes.

Likewise, the Mesha Inscription, like most royal inscriptions from ancient times, served as a piece of propaganda to glorify the king rather than as a sober, objective historical account of what happened. Hence, its silence about defeats or casualties is probably not because none occurred, but because the mention of them would not be in keeping with the purpose of the inscription. This explains, for example, the lack of any mention of Mesha's sacrifice of his son. As Smelik states,

⁵³ The historicity of 1 Kings 22 is also widely contested (cf. Dearman, "Historical Reconstruction," 160-61). Those who reject the historicity of the story point to the following problems: The biblical narrative indicates only wars against Syria during the latter part of Ahab's reign (1 Kings 20 and 22), but the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III indicates that Ahab was allied with Syria against Assyria in the Battle of Qarqar in 853 at the end of his reign (the 853 dating of the Battle of Qarqar is known with certainty based on Assyrian chronology, and Ahab's death appears to be around 853). The Bible indicates that the king of Syria with whom Ahab fought at the end of his life was Ben-hadad, but the Black Obelisk calls the king of Damascus with whom Ahab was allied Hadad-ezer, not mentioned in the Bible. If the historicity of the biblical account is accepted, then the Battle of Qarqar must have occurred in the three years of peace between Israel and Syria before the battle with Syria where Ahab lost his life (1 Kgs 22:1). The Deuteronomistic Historian, in that case, omits the Battle of Qarqar, not necessarily because he was unaware of it, but because it did not fit his theological purposes to include it, though the original readers were invited to consult the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" to read what the Deuteronomistic Historian left out (1 Kgs 22:39). It follows that Ben-hadad must be the same as Hadad-ezer, the former name probably being a throne name (so J. Bright, *A History of Israel* [2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972] 239 n. 47).

⁵⁴ J. G. McConville, "Narrative and Meaning in the Book of Kings," *Bib* 70 (1989) 40.

⁵⁵ Cf. Brichto, *Poetics*, 207-8. I argue this thesis in detail in a separate paper.

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It is easy to understand why the author of the Mesha inscription did not elaborate on this topic [the sacrifice of his son]. He had to conceal how high the price was which Mesha was forced to pay for his victory.⁵⁶

The propagandistic nature of royal inscriptions is illustrated, for example, by the three different extant accounts describing the same Battle of Der between Sargon II of Assyria and the allied forces of Merodoch-baladan of Babylon and Humbanigash of Elam.⁵⁷ Sargon's inscription ascribes the victory to Sargon, and the Babylonian Chronicle ascribes it to Humbanigash in almost identical terms, while a cylinder left by Merodoch-baladan (amazingly) ascribes the victory to himself, even though the Babylonian Chronicle says he arrived too late for the action. Thus three inscriptions view the same battle in three entirely different ways. Compare also the Bible's account of Sennacherib's besiegement of Jerusalem and Sennacherib's own royal inscription, where "both claim victories of sorts!"⁵⁸ Yet even propagandistic stela provide true information that can be used for historical reconstruction, though the self-serving nature of the genre must always be borne in mind.

A HARMONIZATION OF 2 KINGS 3 AND THE MOABITE STONE

I now propose the following harmonization between the Mesha Inscription and 2 Kings 3.⁵⁹

Sometime after the death of David, perhaps around 886, in the last year of Baasha of Israel when Ben-Hadad of Aram invaded from the north and Asa of Judah invaded from the south, Moab expanded into and occupied southern sections of the tableland north of the Arnon.⁶⁰ Omri, around 884 or shortly thereafter forced Mesha's father, Chemosh-yat, to become Israel's vassal (Mesha Inscription, lines 1-5), took territory around Medeba north of the Arnon River (lines 7-8), and demanded heavy tribute from Moab's flocks (2 Kgs 3:4). This domination continued through the reign of Ahab and was not completely abandoned until the military failure of Jehoram, whom Mesha calls "his [Omri's] son" and whose military actions against Moab are

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represented in his statement (as portrayed by Mesha) "I will oppress Moab" (line 6). Mesha, who appears to be writing at the end of his reign and after the events of 2 Kings 3 since he recounts building projects that must have taken years to complete,⁶¹ goes on to say, "I saw

⁵⁶ Smelik, *Converting the Past*, 90.

⁵⁷ W. W. Hallo and W. K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 139.

⁵⁸ T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC 13; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985) 40.

⁵⁹ For other reconstructions with a high view of the historicity of 2 Kings 3, see Rendsburg, "A Reconstruction," 67-73; Siegfried H. Horn, "Why the Moabite Stone Was Blown to Pieces," *BAR* 12/3 (May-June 1986) 50-61; A. H. van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Pretoria Oriental Series 3; Leiden: Brill, 1960) 139-44; and Liver, "The Wars of Mesha," 14-31.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁶¹ Horn, "Moabite Stone," 61; contra Liver, "Wars of Mesha," 22. Liver holds that the Moabite Stone was written before the Israelite counteroffensive recorded in 2 Kings 3, arguing that the military fortifications described in the inscription must have been put up as quickly as possible after the Moabite rebellion and reconquest of formerly Israelite occupied territory. This is no doubt true for the fortifications but is less true of Mesha's religious sanctuaries. Although Mesha's sanctuary would have been less grand than Solomon's Temple, said to have taken seven years in construction (1 Kgs 6:28), nonetheless, his royal sanctuary in Dibon would probably have been sufficiently grand to take considerable time to construct. Moreover, it is doubtful that the

[my desire] upon him and his house" (line 7), that is, having seen Ahab's Israel weakened by the Battle of Qarqar in 853 against Shalmaneser III of Assyria, and Jehoram's father Ahab, himself shortly thereafter killed in war with Syria (1 Kings 22) and succeeded by the weak and sickly Ahaziah (2 Kings 1; cf. in 1:1 the first statement of Mesha's rebellion), occasions that provided an opportunity for Mesha to vie for freedom, Mesha ultimately "saw" not only the failure of Jehoram's campaigns but the extermination of his lineage in 841 by Jehu.

Mesha probably began fortifications of his residence, the Qarḥo district of Dibon, even before the death of Ahab, but his open rebellion occurred only afterwards. At first the rebellion consisted merely of failing to send tribute during the reign of Ahaziah, but after Jehoram tried to use force to make Mesha submit, Mesha went on to reconquer regions north of the Arnon around Medeba occupied by Israel, rebuilding and fortifying Baal-meon and Dirathaim, slaughtering the Israelites of the tribe of Gad at Ataroth and displacing them with Moabites, taking the city of Nebo from Israel and slaughtering its population of various national origins, driving Israel under Jehoram out of Jahaz and Dibon. Then using Israelite prisoners as forced laborers, he further repaired the city of Aroer which guarded the Highway at the River Arnon, as well as Beth-bamoth, Bezer, Medeba, Beth-diblathaim and Beth Baal-meon to the north (lines 8-30).

It is unfortunate that Mesha's account of his conquest of Horonaim (lines 31-35) is broken since it might well have contributed to our understanding of Edom or Judah's role in the war. Horonaim is definitely a city in the southern part of traditional Moab in the direction of Edom south of the Arnon, and is probably to be identified with el Kerak where Mesha left a second (though unfortunately poorly preserved) inscription. Mesha's Horonaim campaign may have been before 2 Kings 3, directed against Edomites or Judahites during Omri's

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reign. Or Mesha's attack of Horonaim may have been against the allies in conjunction with the campaign of Israel, Judah, and Moab in 2 Kings 3 in the first half of Jehoram's reign over Israel.⁶² Or it may have been a campaign late in Mesha's reign,⁶³ which would have been subsequent to the failed invasion of 2 Kings 3. Line 31 teases the historian with a possible reference (according to Lemaire's reading) to the "house of [Da]vid" (*bt.[d]wd*) in conjunction with the Horonaim campaign.⁶⁴

If the Horonaim campaign were against Edomites or Judahites before the events of 2 Kings 3, then this event encouraged Edom's and/or Judah's subsequent participation in the coalition with Israel. The Chronicler records that Moab, allied with Ammon, invaded Edom (Mt. Seir), the vassal of Judah, and slaughtered, among its population during the reign of Jehoshaphat of Judah, and Jehoshaphat counterattacked and won Edom back after the alliance between Moab and Ammon had broken down into battle among themselves (2 Chr 20:1, 22-23). This

construction would have begun before the militarily vital fortifications were complete or even while the imminent threat of war appeared likely.

⁶² Gibson, *Textbook*, 82.

⁶³ Na'aman, "Horonaim," 29.

⁶⁴ A. Lemaire, "La dynastie davidique (*byt dwd*) dans deux inscriptions ouestsémitique du IX^e 5. av. J.C.," *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente antico* 11 (1994) 17-19; accepted by K. A. Kitchen, "A Possible Mention of David in the Late Tenth Century BCE, and Deity *Dod as Dead as the Dodo?" *JSOT* 76 (1997) 35-36. Lemaire understands lines 31b-32a to say, "Now as for Horonaim, there dwelt therein the House of [Da]vid [and] (they) sa[id: ...? ...]. [And] Chemosh said to me, 'Go down, fight against Horonaim!'"

tradition, if reliable, could fit chronologically before the events of 2 Kings 3. The tradition in Chronicles gains plausibility as history in that it helps to explain why Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom were so willing to join in alliance with Jehoram against Moab and would explain why the "house of David" (assuming Lamaire's reading) occupied a city in southern Moab.

On the other hand, Horonaim may have been occupied by Israelites and their allies in conjunction with the invasion of 2 Kings 3. In that case, Mesha's Inscription could be a description of Mesha's engagement with the allies invading from the south. If so, Mesha emphasizes (at least in the part of the text preserved) the positive victory at Horonaim rather than the embarrassing defeats elsewhere and the humiliating death of his son as recorded in the Bible's account.

If the Horonaim invasion is at the end of Mesha's reign subsequent to the events of 2 Kings 3, then Mesha in his inscription has emphasized his successful southern campaign at Horonaim to the exclusion of his defeats south of the Arnon as recorded in 2 Kings 3. If the reading "house of David" is retained, then it would refer explicitly to the driving out of the remnant of Judah that had continued

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to occupy Horonaim south of the Arnon even after the withdrawal of the allies from Mesha's capital to the north. The placement of Mesha's attack of Horonaim at the end of his inscription suggests that this event is indeed after Mesha's earlier account of his liberation from Omri's son and hence is after the events of 2 Kings 3.

Whatever the case with Horonaim, the three allies—Jehoram, Jehoshaphat, and the unnamed king of Edom (really a vassal of Judah)—invaded from the south sometime into the reign of Jehoram after Israel's operations in the north had failed, say around 849. Judah was perhaps *de facto* a vassal of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In any case, given the difficulties they had previously had between Mesha and Judah's vassal Edom, Jehoshaphat was quick to cooperate with Jehoram's request for assistance and so Jehoshaphat, leaving his coregent son Jehoram in Jerusalem in case something happened to him in the battle, joined in the invasion.

Jehoram's southern route, avoiding as it did the newly fortified cities in the north, was a tactic unanticipated by Mesha. Even though Mesha became aware days in advance that the invasion was coming, he had insufficient time to build further fortifications of any significance. Jehoram's southern strategy thus gave him genuine military advantage. Moreover, Jehoram, enraged over earlier Moabite atrocities committed against the Gadites, was intent on teaching Mesha a lesson. It is for this reason he engaged in a scorched-earth policy against the poorly defended Moabite occupations south of the Arnon, some only recently established, slaughtering the population as Mesha had done to the Gadites, as well as devastating and ruining the agricultural land, its orchards, and its wells.

Prophetic traditions say the invaders took courage to go on despite low water supplies and to follow its scorched-earth policy as a result of Elisha's positive-sounding prophecy. And, sure enough, the needed water was found, and in accord with the prophetic word the enemy was routed.

But despite their early successes south of the Arnon, capturing Mesha's well-fortified capital of Kir Hareseth/Qarḥo/Dibon proved more difficult, though they had Mesha trapped there and outnumbered. Complete victory seemed to be within grasp. Mesha, meanwhile, was aware of his desperate position and, given the vicious scorched-earth policy of the Israelite south of the Arnon, held no hope of survival if he surrendered. And so, in a horrifying act of desperation that seared itself into the historical memory of Israel, he offered his son to Chemosh as a human sacrifice on the city wall in full view of the allies (2 Kgs 3:27). Shortly thereafter, a plague⁶⁵ broke out among

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the invaders, as can easily happen in the close quarters and unsanitary condition of an army on campaign, a plague that was interpreted as "wrath" from Yahweh, and led to their withdrawal.⁶⁶ Mesha took it as an act of deliverance by Chemosh in response to his supreme sacrifice, but it was seen by the biblical historian as a punishment from Yahweh for Jehoram's wickedness and the atrocities committed by the invaders.

After the dust of all this had settled and his independence was secure, Mesha built a sanctuary at his hometown and now capital of Qarḥo/Dibon to honor Chemosh, the god whom he believed to have delivered him from the Israelites. For its dedication he commissioned the writing of the Moabite Stone in which he looked back on the years of domination and struggle with Israel from the time of Omri (884 or shortly thereafter) to Jehoram (840s). Omitting defeats in Edom, southern Moab and the help provided by his sometimes ally Ammon, and taking a bit of poetic license in rounding up to the next higher decade to magnify the greatness of the oppression which he overcame (the 40 years of Omri and his descendant[s] in line 8), Mesha glorified his god and himself with this monument that preserved for antiquity achievements that also came to be recorded with less detail in 2 Kings 3.

The preceding shows that a reconstruction that takes both 2 Kings 3 and the Mesha Inscription as, in the main, accurate as history is possible and that the objections raised by historical minimalists to such a reconstruction, though not without weight, are by no means conclusive. Hence, historical maximalism for 2 Kings 3 remains a viable option.

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⁶⁵ Liver, "The Wars of Mesha," 30.

⁶⁶ Liver (ibid.) notes that, in the Iliad, Homer portrays the wrath of Apollo as manifesting itself as a plague among the Greeks, and in the Bible God's wrath can express itself in plague, as in Num 17:6-8 for Korah's rebellion and in 2 Samuel 24 for David's census-taking. Another option for the "wrath" of 2 Kgs 3:26-27 is a military reversal, but that seems less likely given the text's implication that Mesha had exhausted his military options.