

CHAPTER 9

New Prosperity

THE eighth century B.C. thus opened with a dramatic reversal of the fortunes of both Israel and Judah. New kings came to both thrones within a year or two of 800 B.C. Joash of Judah in his later years had rebelled against his priestly upbringing, thus making enemies; and his kingdom's weakness, coupled with some social unrest, probably increased a feeling of discontent with his régime. A Syrian invasion at the end of his reign increased popular feeling against him to such an extent that he was assassinated. There was no *coup d'état*, however; his 25-year-old son Amaziah succeeded to the throne without opposition, just a year after the death of Jehoahaz of Israel. The new king in Samaria was Jehoash,¹ son of Jehoahaz and grandson of Jehu.

The all-too-brief account of the reign of Amaziah given in 2 Kings 14 tells of the quarrel between the two Hebrew kingdoms, which led to a temporary set-back for Judah. But we may infer from the fuller details given in 2 Chronicles 25 that at the start of their reigns, Jehoash and Amaziah repaired the alliance which Jehu had breached two generations earlier. The two kingdoms appear to have made common cause in the reconquest of the territories east of the Jordan. In northern Transjordan, Jehoash achieved three signal victories over the Syrians (at the expense of the kingdom of Damascus); Judah's attention was of course focussed on the Edomites, who must be reconquered if the trade routes with Arabia were to be exploited once again. In central Transjordan, the Moabites and Ammonites were left alone for the time being.

In preparing for his assault on the Edomites, Amaziah at first

1. A longer form of the name "Joash". Both "Joash" of Judah and "Jehoash" of Israel are in fact spelled in both fashions in the biblical records.

planned to supplement his own forces by the use of troops from Israel. But in the event, due to prophetic advice, he decided against using these mercenary troops. He had already paid for their services, but since they could have profited to an even greater extent from booty taken in the campaign, they set out for home in no very good mood. Their resentment boiled over, and they took their booty from cities of Judah² instead, killing and looting on a large scale at a time when the armies of Judah were fully occupied in their campaign against Edom.

Amaziah's campaign went well, and Judah successfully re-established control over the northern part of Edom. Returning to his capital, flushed with victory, Amaziah was infuriated to discover the damage caused by the Israelite mercenaries, and immediately declared war on Israel. Jehoash could scarcely be held responsible for the mercenaries' behaviour, and he had no wish to quarrel with Amaziah; his words to Amaziah "You have defeated Edom . . . and it has gone to your head" (2 Kings 14:10) were true enough. But the contemptuous tone of Jehoash's message was not calculated to placate the angry king of Judah, and warfare inevitably resulted. Jehoash made good his boast; the armies of Judah were routed in battle at Beth-sheanesh, and the Israelite troops proceeded to capture Jerusalem itself. Jehoash was content to raid the royal and temple treasures, and to break down the northern fortifications of the city, as a reminder that he could recapture the city any time he chose. Having thus demonstrated conclusively that Israel was much the stronger of the two kingdoms, he withdrew — he had no wish to subjugate Judah.

Jehoash died not long afterwards, and was succeeded by his son Jeroboam II, who was to have a long and prosperous reign. It appeared that Israel had at last found stability, and a dynasty capable of holding on to the throne, though time was ultimately to prove otherwise. Judah, on the other hand, had dynastic stability, but nevertheless showed considerable discontent with individual rulers. Amaziah, like his father before him, died by assassination. The cause of the conspiracy is not recorded; the defeat by Israel cannot have been the immediate cause, since that disaster occurred more than fifteen years before the assassination, but it may perhaps have been one of many reasons for Amaziah's unpopularity. There was tension between the court and the priesthood at this period; and there may well have been those who never forgave him for his execution of his father's assassins. He took no reprisals against the latter's children; perhaps he paid for his leniency.

2. 2 Chronicles 25:13 is puzzling — the Israelite soldiery would scarcely have attacked their own capital, Samaria. Probably some other name, similar to Samaria, stood in the original Hebrew text.

However, under Amaziah's son and successor, Judah too found new prosperity. According to 2 Kings 15:2 he reigned for fifty-two years, though the figure probably includes a co-regency at each end of his reign.³ He is called both Azariah and Uzziah in the Bible; it has been reasonably conjectured that the former was his personal name, the latter his throne-name.⁴ By the end of his reign he appears to have become more powerful and influential than the Israelite king, but there is no hint of any further conflict between the two kingdoms. Evidently after the débâcle at Beth-shemesh Judah was content to let Israel well alone, and it was already Israel's policy to avoid molesting Judah. So, on amicable terms if not linked by formal treaty, the two kingdoms drew strength from each other's stability and influence, and, in effect, set about re-assembling David's empire.

Jeroboam II must have been one of the ablest kings Israel ever had, though we know all too little about his achievements. The prophet Jonah makes a brief appearance in the Books of Kings (2 Kings 14:25), to predict Jeroboam's victories in Transjordan. There Moab and Ammon were conquered once again, while the Syrians of the Damascus kingdom were not only driven out of all Israelite territories, but indeed made subject to Israel in their own homeland. The northern Israelite frontier was extended to the region of Hamath once again, just as it had been in David's time.

Strangely enough, the Books of Kings tell us even less about Uzziah's achievements, which are summed up in a single statement: "He built Elath and restored it to Judah" (2 Kings 14:22). This simple detail in fact implies the thorough subjugation of Edom — an achievement his father had begun, and one which Uzziah must have completed. Beyond that, we have to turn to 2 Chronicles for a list of Uzziah's successes and policies. In 2 Chronicles 26: 3-15 we read that he built up "a powerful fighting force" with which he defeated or overawed Philistines, Arabs, Meunites and Ammonites.⁵ Philistine territory was overrun as never before; he not only captured existing Philistine cities but built new Judaeian cities in their territory. The damage done to the fortifications of Jerusalem by Jehoash of Israel was put right, and he strengthened the defences of the southern wilderness region. He fostered new departures in military methods, and took a keen interest in agriculture: "he loved the soil", we are told. There is evidence that his "many cisterns" in the wilderness included some at Qumran, where centuries later the community which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls was to establish itself. The whole Negeb was settled and peopled as never before.

3. If E. R. Thiele's calculations are correct, he was sole ruler for no more than seventeen years (767-750 BC). See tables on p. 293.

4. See discussion in *IDB* iv, p. 742 (s.v. "Uzziah", by H. B. MacLean).

5. For details, cf. J. M. Myers, *II Chronicles* (AB: Garden City, 1965) *ad loc.*

The mention of "Ammonites" in 2 Chronicles 26:8 is of special interest. The accuracy of this reference has often been doubted; Ammon, after all, traditionally came within Israel's sphere of influence rather than Judah's, and — as we have seen — Uzziah provoked no quarrel with Israel while it was ruled by the equally powerful Jeroboam II. It is tempting to follow the Septuagint which again reads Meunites⁶ (a people of the Edomite area) as in the previous verse. However, there is adequate reason to take the Hebrew text seriously. Uzziah presently contracted leprosy, or some serious skin disease,⁷ and had to leave many of his official duties to his son Jotham (cf. 2 Kings 15:5); but there is evidence that till the end of his life he remained very much in control. The Assyrian armies reappeared west of the Euphrates at the very end of Uzziah's reign; the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III in 743 B.C. began a series of campaigns in the west, and some of the endangered states of Syria-Palestine quickly formed a coalition against him. The leader of the coalition, according to the Assyrian Annals, was "Az-ri-a-u" of "Ia-u-da-a", and it seems likely that this was none other than Azariah of Judah, unless the similarity of name is a mere coincidence.⁸

Jeroboam II had died two or three years before this coalition confronted the Assyrians, and at his death his kingdom had broken up into near-anarchy. His son Zechariah was assassinated after six months' reign, and the assassin (Shallum) achieved no more than a month's reign before yet another usurper (Menahem) unseated him. Menahem managed to restore order sufficiently to hold the throne for some years, but in reality Israel was now a spent force,⁹ and there was no longer any rival to Uzziah as regards power and influence. Hence he was not only the organizer of the coalition in northern Syria, he was also free to dominate and take tribute from the Ammonites, who had formerly been subject to Israel. The squabbling contenders for the throne in Samaria were in no position to give strong leadership to the satellite states around. Just as Jehu's usurpation had destroyed the authority of Israel built up by Omri's

6. In Hebrew, "Ammonites" and "Meunites" are extremely similar words, which could have been very easily confused in scribal transmission.

7. As the NEB margin indicates (2 Kings 15:5), it is clear that what the English Versions have traditionally rendered "leprosy" must in fact have included a variety of skin diseases.

8. Opinions have always been divided about the identity of Azriau; cf. *DOTT*, pp. 54ff. for text and brief discussion by D. J. Wiseman. More recent studies have deleted the place name "Yaudi" (?Judah) from consideration, thus reducing the coincidence of names to one; cf. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History (OTL: London 1977)* pp. 424f. Even so it seems unnecessary to postulate some unknown individual as leader of the coalition, so long as Azariah of Judah remains a possibility.

9. There is some likelihood that Menahem was not able to bring Transjordan under his control, and that Pekah (the future king of Israel) held that territory after Jeroboam's death. Cf. E. R. Thiele, *MNHK*, p. 124.

dynasty, so now in turn Jehu's dynasty's achievements were nullified abruptly by internal weakness and usurpation. There seems very good reason to believe that, as H. Tadmor has argued,¹⁰ Judah became natural heir to Israel's domains on the death of Jeroboam II.

The statement of 2 Chronicles 26:8 accordingly testifies not only to Judah's prosperity and power under Uzziah, but also to the sudden and disastrous weakness of the Northern Kingdom. The Books of Kings go a long way towards explaining the reasons for the downfall of Omri's dynasty, but since so little is said of Jeroboam's reign, we are less able to account definitively for the fall of Jehu's dynasty and for the subsequent anarchy. To be sure, there was an inbuilt dynastic weakness in Israel, and the personal ambitions of such men as Shallum, Menahem and Pekah undoubtedly played a big part in the events that followed Jeroboam's death. But a conspiracy requires some sort of motivation, and none of the three would have succeeded but for the existence of a large measure of discontent with Jeroboam's regime.

The documentation of Israelite discontent is available to us not in the historical books of the Old Testament but the prophetic. Both Amos and Hosea prophesied in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II,¹¹ and both spoke for the common man. Their message, of course, was largely religious in content, and they claimed to speak on God's behalf rather than man's; but the physical plight of many ordinary Israelites is a recurring note in their prophecies and denunciations. In his introductory denunciation of Judah, Amos is concerned only with religious malpractice (Amos 2:4); but the very first charge he makes against Israel is that "they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They grind the heads of the poor into the earth" (2:6f.). If we put aside the religious teaching of the two prophets for later consideration,¹² we can legitimately extract the social content of their sermons, in order to illustrate the social conditions of the era. The basic fact was that the old tribal order, when a strong feeling of kinship and mutual responsibilities prevailed, had broken down, giving place to a "go-getting" society, with a very marked gulf between the living standards of rich and poor. The excavations at Tīrzah, the capital of Israel before Samaria was built by Omri, have borne eloquent testimony to this stratification of society, as the archaeologists' spades have unearthed the well-to-do suburban mansions in one

10. Cf. *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8 (1961), pp. 232-271.

11. Cf. Amos 1:1; Hosea 1:1. The ministry of Amos was probably of short duration (about 760 BC), but that of Hosea continued for some years after the fall of Jehu's dynasty. See H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel*, (Exeter, 1969), pp. 71, 95f.

12. See below, pp. 237-243.

quarter, and the slums elsewhere; two centuries earlier, by contrast, all the houses had been of the same size and structure.¹³

Israel could blame no Industrial Revolution for this unhappy development. Admittedly, the invading Syrian armies had caused a great deal of hardship during the earlier period of Jehu's dynasty; the devastation of small farms will have reduced their owners to penury, forcing others to sell their children and even themselves into slavery; their mortgaged farms went to swell the large estates of the rich. Even for Syrian misdeeds, however, the ineptness of earlier Israelite rule could ultimately be blamed, though Amos voiced the popular resentment against the Syrians without making any such charges against the Israelite kings. He was more interested to denounce the more direct iniquities of the upper classes. The destitute were sold into slavery in utter callousness (2:6); those who tried desperately to scratch a living from the soil were subjected to extortionate taxes (5:11). When the pauper went to buy food, he was robbed and cheated (8:5f.); and if he sought to obtain legal redress, he discovered that he was thrust out of court (5:12) by a society which turned justice upside down (5:7). Hosea's first thrust was directed at the Israelite royal court; "the line of Jehu", he asserted, would be punished "for the blood shed in Jezreel" (Hosea 1:4). The murderous deeds of Jehu at Jezreel have already been recounted, but the point in the prophet's words (or rather, in the oracle he received from the LORD) must surely have been that bloodshed had become normal practice for the royal line to achieve its own selfish ends. Naboth, who had died that Ahab's royal estate might be built up, may well have been the first in a long line of innocent victims. "One deed of blood after another" was Hosea's more explicit condemnation (4:2). He reinforces the charges brought by Amos; the extortion practised by the rich men of Samaria he describes thus: "They are thieves, they break into houses; they are robbers, they strip people in the street" (7:1). The crown was heedless of the common man, the judiciary blind to the injustices meted out to him, and as for the representatives of Israel's faith, who should have been more concerned about the situation than anyone, they are dismissed in a contemptuous sentence: "Priest? By day and night you blunder on, you and the prophet with you" (4:5).

When we turn from the genuine, deeply-felt resentments of Hosea and Amos back to the historical books of the Old Testament, we can readily understand why Israelite society fell apart as it did on the death of Jeroboam, and why any pretender to the throne could command a following. Israel was doomed; both Amos and Hosea knew that her downfall was inevitable — and well-deserved.

13. Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*² (London, 1965), p. 72f.