

## MESHA'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

AN APPRECIATION OF THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF  
THE MOABITE STONE.

BY THE EDITOR.

ABOUT in the middle of the eastern coast of the Dead Sea there is a little river called the Arnon, which cuts up that territory into two parts; the northern stretch was inhabited by the Israelite tribe of Reuben, while the southern, mostly desert heather-land, belonged to the Moabites.

Though there is some good arable land in the district of Moab, the wealth of the country consisted in herds of sheep, and their chieftain was regarded in Israel as "a great sheepmaster." It is difficult to say whether we should call Moab a little nation or a tribe. They kept to themselves as nomadic peoples are apt to do, but their language was practically the same as the speech of the surrounding countries. Its dialectic differences from Hebrew are less than those of Saxon-Scotch from English, or of Dutch from German. Yet the feuds fought between Israel and Moab were as bitter as between England and Scotland.

The Moabites worshipped their own god, Chemosh, who in olden times resembled Yahveh in every respect except in name. In those days it was understood that Chemosh ruled in Moab while Yahveh ruled in Israel, and after the fashion of petty gods each god was jealous of the other. The twelve tribes, however, having been united under Saul and raised to great prominence under David, exercised for some time a kind of sovereignty over the surrounding districts, and Moab, too, was subject to Israel. When the Israelite empire was divided, the king of Israel, the northern kingdom, still held sway over Moab. Omri was a powerful monarch, and his capital Samaria must have been under his reign an important center of civilisation. Omri's successor, Ahab, main-

tained the renown of Israel; he overcame Ben-Hadad, King of Syria, but fell in the battle at Ramoth-Gilead. Ahab's sons no longer commanded the same respect as their grandfather, and we read in 2 Kings i. 1 that "then Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab."

We may well imagine that the hand of Israel had lain heavy on their poor neighbor. The tribute which they were forced to pay was exorbitant. In 2 Kings iii. 4 we read :

"And Mesha, King of Moab, was a sheepmaster, and rendered unto the King of Israel an hundred thousand lambs, and an hundred thousand rams, with the wool."

The Israelites garrisoned the Moabite border town Medeba, twelve miles east of the Dead Sea, and built the strongholds Ataroth and Yahas.

The eldest son of Ahab, Ahaziah, ruled in his father's place, but he fell through a lattice in the upper chamber of his residence at Samaria, and died in the second year of his reign.

Ahaziah's death is attributed by the writer of 2 Kings i. to his having inquired of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron, whether he would recover from his disease. The story is interesting because it characterises the rivalry that existed between the different gods of the several Semitic tribes. The messenger falls in on his way to Ekron with the Prophet Elijah, the same who had antagonised his father Ahab on account of his laxity in matters of religion (we should perhaps in our days call it tolerance of foreign religious cults) and also on account of the injustice done to Naboth. Obviously Elijah does not deny that there are gods in other countries: he only condemns the lack of patriotism, that an Israelite king should send for advice to the god of a neighboring country. He says with a ring of irony: "Is it not because there is not a god in Israel that ye go up to inquire of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron?" (2 Kings i. 3). The significance of the Yahvist prophet's words is indicated by their being repeated again and again in the same chapter. Elijah is described as "an hairy man, girt with a girdle of leather about his loins" (verse 8). This was the characteristic appearance of a Nazir, a man who still continued to lead the desert life, rejecting the civilised mode of living in cities and the use of things made by hand. Nazirs drank no wine, they lived not in houses, only in tents, and made fire in the old-fashioned way with the fire-sticks by friction, a method which had become mysterious to the people and was regarded as a miracle. The fire was supposed to come as if sent by

God, hence it was said to fall from heaven; and to be able to produce fire in this mysterious fashion was deemed among the people a sign of genuine prophecy.

It will be remembered that the Nazir institutions were re-established in a way during the revival of Jewish patriotism in the reign of the Maccabees, and it is more than probable that the sect of the Nazarenes to whom John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth belonged are thus historically connected with the old Nazir prophets, as which Elijah and Sampson are described.

At any rate, King Ahaziah died according to Elijah's prophecy, and Jehoram ascended the throne. In the meantime Moab had refused to pay the tribute imposed upon it by the powerful Omri of Samaria, and Jehoram tried to recover his authority over the lost territory. Judea and Edom, the latter lying directly south of Moab, joined the king of Samaria, and the three allies invaded the territory of the Moabite rebels.

In those days Mesha was king of Moab, and previous to the declaration of Moab's independence he had fortified the cities, had dug wells and cisterns so as to enable the inhabitants to stand a siege, and had in general way looked out for the defence of the country; yet such were the odds against the poor shepherd tribe that the chances of a final victory were slight. The word "Mesha" means "salvation," and the name occurs also among the Hebrews, where one of the sons of Caleb bears it (1 Chronicles ii. 42).

The war that took place between Moab on one side and the allied kings of Israel, Judea, and Edom on the other, is described in the Second Book of Kings (chapter iii.). The allied forces attacked Moab from the south, devastating the country and burning the towns, but they suffered greatly from want of water. The prophet Elisha, a successor to Elijah, advised them to dig ditches, and the ditches were filled with water. The water, we are told, shone red in the morning sun so that the Moabites thought it was blood. They attacked the allies and were beaten, and King Mesha retired into his stronghold Kir-Haraseth, the last stronghold left to the Moabites. If the town had been taken, the tribe would probably have been wiped out forever and the territory left subject to the Israelites, but the king in his despair, when he saw that he could no longer break through the lines of his besiegers, sacrificed his eldest son on the walls, and, states the Bible, "there was great indignation in<sup>1</sup> Israel, and they departed from him and they re-

<sup>1</sup> The authorised version translates "against," which destroys the sense. The idea is as pointed out before in *The Open Court*, No.

turned to their own land." The Israelites, having witnessed the sacrifice of a prayer for deliverance, which (as was assumed in those days) could not be left ungranted by the gods, gave up any further attempt at forcing Kir-Haraseth; and thus Moab, though the country had been greatly devastated, regained its independence and seems to have retained it. This *résumé* of events is based upon the records of the Old Testament.

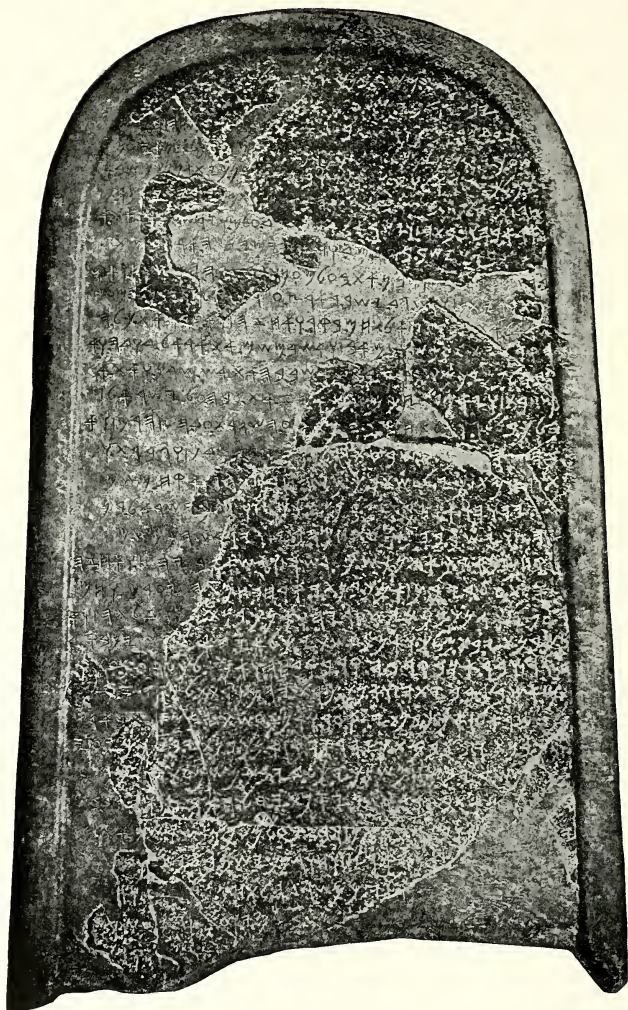
Now, it is interesting to know that a monument has been discovered which is a verification of these incidents, not so much in their specialised details, although none of them are positively contradicted, but certainly as to the most important main facts: the subjection of Moab to Israel; the revolt of Moab and Mesha's successful struggle for independence. The Rev. F. Klein, a missionary of the Church Society of Jerusalem, in an excursion through the desert heaths of Moab discovered at Dhiban, in the site of the ancient Dibon, four miles north of the Arnon, a black slab of bazalt about three and a half feet high by two feet wide, bearing an inscription, which was found to be King Mesha's statement of Moab's struggle for independence.

It is interesting to read Mesha's statement, and to see how in one respect the Moabite stone verifies the Biblical statement, and in another respect adds to it new facts; and perhaps the greatest interest is attached to it because we here have a statement of the other side. Here the god Chemosh appears as the Saviour of his country. He stands in the same relation to Moab as Yahveh, in the opinion of Elijah, stands to Israel.

Though Moab has been vilified by Israel, and we, having heard but one side of the story, are apt to have a contempt for them, yet we cannot but admire the pluck of Mesha's heroism and his love of liberty. True, he made his son pass through the fire, but so did Jephthah his daughter, and after all Mesha's offering was not in vain; and if his barbarous deed was the outcome of a superstition, it was appropriate for the age and produced the desired effect even upon the enemy.

The inscription is written in the Old Phœnician alphabet, the same script as was used in Israel at that period, as is evidenced by the Silvan inscription discovered in the ancient water conduit at Jerusalem. We here render a transcription into modern Hebrew, and a translation made by the Rev. Prof. S. R. Driver, of Oxford, quoted from the *Encyclopædia Biblica* (Vol. III., pages 3045-3046).

Mesha set up this stone in a sanctuary, which he called "Ba-



THE MASHA INSCRIPTION. MOAB'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

math Mesha" bearing at once his own name and having the significance of "the Mount of Salvation."<sup>1</sup>

Here is a transliteration of Mesha's inscription into modern Hebrew print:<sup>2</sup>

1	אנך . משע . בן . כמשכן . מלך . מאב . הר	1
2	יבני   אבי . מלך . על . מאב . שלשן . שת . ואנך . מלכ	2
3	תי . אחר . אבי   ואעש . הבמת . זאת . לכמש . בקרחה   בנמת . י	3
4	שע . כי . השעני . מכל . השלכן . וכי . הראני . בכל . שנאי   עמר	4
5	י . מלך . ישראל . ויענו . את . מאב . ימון . רבן . כי . זאנף . כמש . באר	5
6	צה   ויחלפה . בנה . ויאמר גם . הא . אענו . את . מאב   בימי . אמר .	6
7	וארא . בה . ובבתה   וישראל . אבד . אבד . עלם . וירש . עמרי . את . [אר]	7
8	ץ . מהדבא   וישב . בה . ימה . וחצי . ימי . בנה . ארבען . שת . זיש	8
9	בה . כמש . בימי   ואבן . את . בעלמען . ואעש . בה . האשוח . ואבן]	9
10	את . קריתן   ואש . נד . ישב . בארץ . עטרת . מעלם . ויבן . לה . מלך . י	10
11	שׂראל . את . עטרת   ואלתחם . בקר . ואחזה   ואהרג . את . כל . העם . [מ]	11
12	הקר . רית . לכמש . ולמאב   ואשב . משם . את . אראל . אורד . ואנס]	12
13	חבה . לפני . כמש . בקרית   ואשב . בה . את . אש . שרן . ואת . אש	13
14	מחרת   ויאמר . לי . כמש . לך . אחז . את . נבה . על . ישראל   וא	14
15	הלך . בללה . ואלתחם . בה . מבקע . השחרת . עד . הצהרם   ואח	15
16	זה . ואהרג . כלה . שבעת . אלפן . גברן . וגרן   וגברת . ונגר]	16
17	ת . ורחמת   כי . לעשתר . כמש . החרמתה   ואקח . משם . אנת . כ	17
18	לי . יהוה . ואסחב . הם . לפני . כמש   ומלך . ישראל . בנה . אה	18
19	יהץ . וישב . בה . בהלתחמה . בי   ויגרשה . כמש . מפני . ו	19
20	אקח . ממאב . מאתן . אש . כל . רשה   ואשאה . בהיץ . ואחזה	20
21	לספת . על . דיבן   אנך . בנתי . קרחה . חמת . היערן . וחמת	21
22	העפל   ואנך . בנתי . ששעריה . ואנך . בנתי . מנדלתה   וא	22
23	נך . בנתי . בת . מלך . ואנך . עשתי . כלאי . האשוח . למוזן . בקרב]	23
24	הקר   ובר . אן . בקרב . הקר . בקרחה . ואמר . לכל . העם . עשו . ל	24
25	כס . אש . בר . בביתה   ואנך . כרתי . המכרתת . לקרחה . באסר	25
26	י . ישראל   אנך . בנתי . ערער . ואנך . עשתי . המסלת . בארנן  ]	26
27	אנך . בנתי . בת . במת . כי . הרם . הא   אנך . בנתי . בצר . כי . עין .	27
28	ש . דיבן . חמשן . כי . כל . דיבן . משמעת   ואנך . מל	28
29	תני] מאת . בקרן . אשר . יספתי . על . הארץ   ואנך . בנת	29
30	י . ואת . זמהדבא . ובת . דבלתן   ובת . בעלמען . ואשא . שם . את . נקד	30
31	צאן . הארץ   וחורגן . ישב . בה . בת וק . אש	31
32	ויאמר . לי . כמש . רד . הלתחם . בחורגן   ואדד	32
33	ווישבה . כמש . בימי . ועל דה . משם . עש	33
34	שת . שדק   ואנ	34

TRANSLATION OF INSCRIPTION.

1. I am Mesha, son of Chemosh[kan?], king of Moab, the Dabonite.
2. My father reigned over Moab for thirty years, and I reigned
3. after my father. And I made this high place for Chemosh in KR[H]H, a [high place of sal]vation,

<sup>1</sup>The transcription is reproduced from the *Encyclopædia Biblica*, and the translation (with the one exception noted in a footnote) is from *The Records of the Past*.

<sup>2</sup>Reproduced from the Rev. S. R. Driver's article on "Mesha" in the *Encyclopædia Biblica*.

4. because he had saved me from all the assailants (?), and because he had let me see (my desire) upon all them that hated me. Omri,
5. king of Israel, afflicted Moab for many days, because Chemosh was angry with his land.
6. And his son succeeded him; and he also said I will afflict Moab. In my days said he [thus;]
7. but I saw (my desire) upon him, and upon his house, and Israel perished with an everlasting destruction. Omri took possession of the [la]nd
8. of Mehedeba, and it (i. e., Israel) dwelt therein, during his days, and [?] his son's days, forty years,<sup>1</sup> but Chemosh [resto]red
9. it in my days. And I built Ba'al-Me'on, and I made in it the reservoir (?); and I buil[t]
10. Kiryathen. And the men of Gad had dwelt in the land of 'Ataroth from of old; and the king of Israel
11. had built for himself 'Ataroth. And I fought against the city, and took it. And I slew all the people [t]rom]
12. the city, a gazingstock unto Chemosh, and unto Moab. And I brought back (*or*, took captive) thence the altar-hearth of Dawdoh (?), and I dragged
13. it before Chemosh in Keriyioth. And I settled therein the men of SRN, and the men of
14. MHRT. And Chemosh said unto me, Go, take Nebo against Israel. And I
15. went by night, and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon. And I took
16. it, and slew the whole of it, 7000 men and male strangers, and women and [female stranger]s,
17. and female slaves: for I had devoted it to 'Ashtor-Chemosh. And I took thence the [ves]sels
18. of Yahveh, and I dragged them before Chemosh. And the king of Israel had built
19. Yahas, and abode in it, while he fought against me. But Chemosh drave him out from before me; and
20. I took of Moab 200 men, even all its chiefs; and I led them up against Yahas, and took it
21. to add it unto Daibon. I built KRHH, the wall of Ye'arin (*or*, of the Woods), and the wall of
22. the Mound. And I built its gates, and I built its towers. And

<sup>1</sup> Here the reading is uncertain.

23. I built the king's palace, and I made the two reser[voirs(?) for wa]ter in the midst of  
 24. the City. And there was no cistern in the midst of the city, in KRHH. And I said to all the people, Make  
 25. you every man a cistern in his house. And I cut out the cutting for KRHH, with (the help of) prisoner[s  
 26. of] Israel. I built 'Aro'er, and I made the highway by the Arnon.  
 27. I built Beth-Bamoth, for it was pulled down. I built Beser, for ruins  
 28. [had it become. And the chie]fs of Daibon were fifty, for all Daibon was obedient (to me). And I reigned  
 29. [over] an hundred [chiefs] in the cities which I added to the land. And I built  
 30. [Mehe]de[b]a, and Beth-Diblahên, and Beth-Ba'al-Me'on; and I took thither the *nakaad*-keepers,  
 31. . . . .sheep of the land. And as for Horonên, there dwelt therein. . . . .  
 32. . . . .And Chemosh said unto me, Go down, fight against Horonên. And I went down. . . .  
 33. . . . .[and] Chemosh [resto]red it in my days. And. . . . .  
 34. . . . .And I. . . . .

If we had only Mesha's declaration of independence, we should think that his victory over the Israelites must have been extraordinary and complete, not merely a relinquishment of the booty, as it seems to have been according to the Biblical statement.

Mesha glories in his victory, and as Joshua puts all the prisoners to death because he had devoted them to Yahveh, so Mesha slays the Israelite captives of Nebo, seven thousand men and women, because he has "devoted it [i. e., the conquered city] to Ashtor Chemosh," but the sacred vessels of Yahveh too he presents to his God. No mention is made of the holocaust of his eldest son, or of the defeat when the Moabites mistook water-puddles for blood, or of the general devastation of the country.

If we assume that Mesha's column was set up soon after the expulsion of the allies, the Israelites, Jews, and Edomites, and that the story as reported in the Second Book of Kings iii. and the Second Book of Chronicles xx. took place afterwards, being an attempt of King Jehoram to punish the Moabites for their revolts, there should be no contradictions between the Israelite and the Moabite statements of the war. We know further that Mesha induced the



Edomites to join him in an expedition against Jerusalem which, however, failed on account of the jealousy between Moab and Edom. The Edomites, however, maintained their independence as related in 2 Chronicles xxi. 8, though the friendship between Edom and Moab did not continue.

\*                    \*                    \*

Dr. A. Neubauer, who was the first to make a translation of the Moabite stone, relates the further history of its fate after Klein's discovery of it as follows:<sup>1</sup>

"As soon as the natives learned that the infidels were in search of the monument, they began to interest all persons they could get hold of in it. Captain Warren (of the Palestine Exploration Fund) was informed of its existence some weeks after Klein's discovery, but knowing that the Berlin Museum was already concerned in the matter, he took no steps towards its acquisition till 1869. However, whilst the negotiations of the Prussian Government were making only slow progress, everything in the East moving but slowly, M. Clermont-Ganneau, then dragoman of the French Consulate in Jerusalem, wisely took at once the necessary steps for procuring squeezes and copies of the inscription, and finally endeavored to buy the monument itself. Fortunately he was successful in his attempt to obtain a squeeze of the inscription while the stone was still in its entirety, for it soon became too late. After the Turkish authorities had begun to interfere, the Bedouins of the country of Dhiban, rather than give up the monument for the benefit of the Pasha and Mûdir, broke the stone by first making a fire under it and then pouring cold water on it, and subsequently distributed the pieces among themselves to be used as amulets and charms. Thus, through the zeal of those who acted in the name of two European countries, one of the earliest Semitic monuments written in alphabetical characters was irretrievably ruined."

It is a pity that the Mesha stone has been broken; but fortunately, the squeezes that had been taken are plainly legible, and thus it is possible to restore the inscription, if not completely, yet sufficiently to leave no doubt as to its main contents. All the fragments of the broken stone that could be recovered were put together with the assistance of the squeezes in a plaster of Paris cast and form now one of the most valuable additions to the collection of the Louvre, and a copy of it can be found in almost every museum of Europe and North America.

<sup>1</sup>*R. cords of the Past*, edited by A. H. Sayce. New Series, Vol. II., p. 194 f.