

The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (D. Graves)

Sir Henry Layard discovered this black limestone obelisk in 1846 during his excavations at Kalhu, the ancient Assyrian capital. The obelisk, now on display in the British Museum, celebrates the military achievements of Shalmaneser III (reigned 858–824 BC).

Made of black limestone, the four-sided Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III is about 6-1/2 feet in height and its top is stepped and shaped like a ziggurat. Each side has five vertically carved relief scenes depicting a vassal king paying tribute / homage to the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III.

Viewing each carved relief and its Akkadian cuneiform in a counter clockwise direction around the obelisk, each scene tells a story about a different vassal king. Listing the kings from the top, scholars have determined who Shalmaneser conquered over 31 years of military campaigns:

1. Sua of Gilzanu (Northwest Iran): "I received tribute from Sua the Gilzanean: silver, gold, tin, bronze casseroles, the staffs of the king's hand, horses *and* two-humped camels."
2. Jehu of Bit Omri (Jehu of the House of Omri – Northern Kingdom of Israel): "I received tribute from Jehu, son of Omri: silver, gold, a gold bowl, a gold tureen, gold vessels, gold pails, tin, a staff of the king's hand, *and* wooden spears."
3. An unnamed ruler of Musri (Egypt?): "I received tribute from Mušri: two-humped camels, a water buffalo, a *rhinoceros*, an antelope, female elephants, female monkeys *and* apes."
4. Marduk-apil-usur of Suhi (middle Euphrates): "I received tribute from Marduk-apla-ušur, the Suhean: silver, gold, gold pails, ivory, spears, byssus, garments with multi-colored trim and linen *garments*."
5. Qalparunda of Patin (Antakya region of Turkey): "I received tribute from Qarparunda the Patinean: silver, gold, tin, bronze compound, bronze utensils, ivory *and* ebony." (1)

While there are other Assyrian and Babylonian texts that mention Hebrew kings, this obelisk depicts the earliest surviving picture of an Israelite king. The panels depict the Israelite King Jehu bringing tribute to King Shalmaneser III in around 841 BC. However, while the Black Obelisk states that Jehu is the son of Omri, 2 Kings 9:2, 14 states that Jehu is the son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi. How does one reconcile this apparent contradiction? There are three possible proposed solutions.

1. One of the two accounts is inaccurate. Either the Black Obelisk is inaccurate as our modern newspapers are often in error (2) or biblical critics would say the Bible is inaccurate.
2. Kyle McCarter challenges the reading of the Black Obelisk that it is not Jehu but is actually referring to Jehoram (Joram), the grandson of King Omri whom Jehu killed. (3) However, Gallil dismisses this interpretation on linguistic grounds. (4)
3. Tammi Schneider argues that Jehu may have been a descendant of Omri. (5)



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4. K. Lawson Younger has pointed out that it was the custom of the Assyrians to denote countries "by the name of the founder of the ruling dynasty at the time of their first acquaintance with it." (6) He gives a couple of other examples that support this claim. If this is true, Shalmaneser wasn't trying to make the (mistaken) claim that Jehu was of the same blood line or dynasty as Omri, but simply identifying him in the way they were accustomed to doing. This seems to explain the statement without having to resort to changing the text of the Black Obelisk (McCarter) or of the Bible (Schneider).

However, even if the mystery is not resolved, the presence of both Omri and Jehu mentioned in an extrabiblical text lends credibility to the notion that they were real historical individuals.



Accompanied by four attendants, King Shalmaneser III stands beneath a parasol with Jehu bowing before him
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Accompanied by two Assyrian officials, three Israeli tribute-bearers carry "silver, gold, gold vessels, tin"
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Five Israeli tribute-bearers carry a gold bowl, a golden tureen, gold vessels, gold pails, tin, the "staffs of the king's hand" / spears
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Five Israeli tribute-bearers carrying silver, gold, a gold bowl, a gold tureen, gold vessels, gold pails / tin
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Footnotes:

1. James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East, Volume 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 192.
2. Hal Flemings, *Examining Criticisms of the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2008), 109.
3. P. Kyle McCarter, "Yaw, Son of 'Omri': A Philological Note on Israelite Chronology," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 216 (December 1974): 5–7.
4. Gershon Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 33 n. 2.
5. Tammi Schneider, "Did King Jehu Kill His Own Family?," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21, no. 1 (1995): 26–33, 80–82.
6. Younger, *Context of Scripture*, vol 2, p. 267, n.5.