

The Historical Background of the Assassination of Amon, King of Judah

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THE sanguinary events described in 2 Kings xxi, 19-26, and in 2 Chron. xxiii, 21-25, the slaying of Amon, son of Manasseh, King of Judah, by his courtiers and the subsequent retaliation upon the conspirators by 'Am ha-'Ara — the 'people of the land' — have remained an enigma. The undercurrents of these court intrigues are overlooked in the Biblical account, and, so far, no suitable explanation has been discovered in the general historical development of the Ancient Near East. The theory, currently accepted among historians, attributes to these events merely a religious background: according to this theory the King of Judah was assassinated by the Religious Reform Party, but, as a reaction, the 'people of the land' restored the status quo.¹ There is, however, no undisputed evidence supporting this hypothesis, nor do the social classes involved in these events ('the servants of the King' and 'the people of the land') display dominantly religious characteristics. We shall endeavour to show that the regicide and the subsequent retaliation were enacted against a political and military background. We shall also endeavour to link these Judaeon fluctuations of power with other events in the contemporary history of the Near East.

The murder of Amon was doubtless an anti-Assyrian repercussion of his foreign policy, since the Bible unequivocally presents him as a loyal satellite of the Assyrian regime. In this respect, the Chronicler is most outspoken in describing Amon's devotion to Assyrian customs as being more extreme than that of his sire, Manasseh: 'But he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, as did Manasseh his father: for Amon sacrificed unto all the carved images which Manasseh his father had made, and served them. And humbled no

¹ Cf. E. Sellin: *Geschichte des israel.-jüd. Volkes*, I, 1924, p. 282; R. Kittel: *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, II, 1936, p. 402. On the other hand compare *Enciclop. Biblica*, I, 1950 (Hebrew) s.v. Amon.

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himself before the Lord, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself; but Amon trespassed more and more.' (2 Chron. xxxiii, 22-23). According to the most reasonable chronological calculation Amon's death occurred in the year 640-639.² Indeed from Assyrian sources we learn that in this very same period a rebellion was organized in 'Eber ha-Nahar, i.e. the region between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean Sea: the Arabians, including the tribes of Qedar and the Nebaioth, revolted against the rule of Ashurbanipal. This uprising seems to have been quite extensive, since we hear of it also in connection with the defection of Acre and Ushu (Tyre on the mainland). The Assyrians, however, were as yet strong enough to conduct a successful military campaign westward, and to defeat the Arabian tribes on the Syrian border (in the vicinity of Damascus and the Bashan region) decisively. The revolt was suppressed with all the usual severity, as we learn from the fate of Acre and Ushu. These cities fell at the end of Ashurbanipal's campaign and their inhabitants were killed or exiled to Assyria.³

It seems most likely that there was some connection between these events and the progress of matters in Judah. We may assume that the coup d'état in Jerusalem was aimed against the pro-Assyrian policy of Amon and that the conspirators wanted to join the general uprising against Ashurbanipal. However, upon the approach of the Assyrian army to Syria and Palestine and its initial successes against the rebels, those forces in Judah who wished to prevent a military encounter with Assyria gained the upper hand. Thus a counter-revolution was achieved and the nobles, who had wished to throw off the yoke of Assyrian rule, were exterminated. It was a stitch in time, and it seems to have placated the Assyrians, for we hear of no punitive action being taken against Judah by their army. A similar development took place among the Arabian tribes. The rebel chieftain, Uaite II, son of Bir-Dadda, was finally deposed by his subjects, in order that his tribe might escape the reprisals of the Assyrian army.

It is possible that during this same period other events occurred in Palestine, which were also connected with the general uprising against the Assyrian suzerainty: perhaps the Assyrian province of Samaria also joined the mutiny.

² Cf. E. R. Thiele, *JNES*, 3, 1944, p. 180.

³ Unfortunately we have no exact date for this campaign of Ashurbanipal; it was apparently the second one against the tribes in revolt. We may however assume that these events took place during the great revolt of Elam between the years 641-639 B. C.; cf. M. Srecek: *Ashurbanipal I*, 1916, p. ccclxi; *Cambridge Ancient History*, III, p. 125.

The note in Ezra iv, 9-10, concerning the settlement of foreign peoples in Samaria by Asenappar (usually identified with Ashurbanipal), may indicate an extreme measure against an uprising in that country. Evidence for deferring the date of this event to the period under consideration may be found in the list of nations exiled to Samaria, which includes exiles from Elam and its capital Susa. The last campaign of Ashurbanipal against Elam took place at the beginning of the year 642 and the complete destruction of Susa was accomplished by 641-640. Thus there is a connection between at least part of the nations that in the reign of Ashurbanipal were exiled to Samaria, beyond the Euphrates and Eber ha-Nahar in general, and his campaign to Syria and Palestine mentioned above.⁴

The list of exiles in Ezra, which is indeed somewhat questionable in its present form, also mentions settlers from Erech (Archevites) and Babylon. This information, if authentic, would tend to advance the date of that part of the list's contents by several years, i. e. until after the fall of Babylon (648). In this case the settling of these nations in Eber ha-Nahar would be linked with the first campaign of Ashurbanipal against the Arabian tribes. However, with regard to the settlers from Erech, it is worth noting that this city did not join the Babylonian revolt in the years 652-648: on the contrary, its governor fought at the side of the Assyrian King against Shamash-shum-ukin, the insurgent monarch of Babylon.⁵ It is, therefore, improbable that the inhabitants of Erech, if it is they who are actually referred to by the term 'Archevites',⁶ were exiled at that time. For this event too we must seek the background in a later period.

Along with the Babylonians and Elamites mentioned in the list of exiles there are also Persians (Apharsites): this fact seems to indicate that the list should be assigned to a later date. In two new passages from documents of Ashurbanipal, one published by Thompson⁷ and the other by Weidner,⁸ there is mention of Cyrus, King of Parsemash (whose inhabitants were Persians and rulers from other lands; 'Kings whose home is distant and who dwell on the far-off border of Elam'). The date of these documents and especially of the second passage, which tells that Cyrus I capitulated to the Assyrians after the

final destruction of Elam, was justly fixed by the publishers in the year 640-639.⁹ In any case, the mention of the Persians in connection with the abortive revolt of Elam is an interesting fact *per se*. To the writer's knowledge, its parallelism with the list of exiled nations in the time of Asenappar has yet to be pointed out.

It is not improbable that at the same time occurred Egypt's first actual attempts to annex Assyrian territories in Southern Palestine and especially those in the Philistine area. According to Herodotus (II, 157) the Egyptians besieged for 29 years the city of Ashdod, the capital of the Assyrian province in Philistia, until it fell at the hands of the Pharaoh Psamtik I. If we take as trustworthy the word of Herodotus, who is generally reliable where the history of the Near East during that period is concerned,¹⁰ then 639 is the latest possible date we can give for the beginning of the siege, as Psamtik I died in 610-609. A later date for this event, as has been suggested,¹¹ is out of the question. On the other hand, the date 640-639 serves well to link the event with the period of his reign (664-663 to 610-609), since several years previously (about 650) he had begun to throw off the Assyrian yoke.¹² Evidence of the control of Philistia by Psamtik I is provided by an Egyptian fortress of the same type as was erected by him in Daphne and Naukratis. This fortress was discovered by Petrie at Tell Jemmeh (13 km. south of Gaza), which he identified with Gerar.¹³ Herodotus' description (I, 105) of Psamtik's encounter with the Scythians, south of Ascalon, indicates a similar situation.¹⁴

If the above hypothesis agrees with the historical facts, we have, therefore, a new synchronism between Assyria, Judah, and Egypt, and so additional proof of the extensive political and military activity in Palestine in the year 640-639.

⁴ But compare also A. T. Olmstead: *A History of the Persian Empire*, 1948, p. 31, who connects the above event with the first revolt of Elam beginning in the year 651.

⁵ Cf. H. de Meulenaere: *Herodotus over de 26ste Dynastie*. Louvaine, 1951, p. 32, in which he relegates Herodotus' account of the siege of Ashdod to the status of a mere folk tradition.

⁶ Cf. Streck, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 3), p. cclxxii, who dates the beginning of the siege in 634.

⁷ There has already been one suggestion that this Pharaoh may have invaded Philistia in 640, but there has been no proof that he did so, no: has any attempt been made to integrate the extended siege of Ashdod in the reign of Psamtik. Cf. J. H. Breasted: *A History of Egypt*, 1945, p. 580.

⁸ Cf. F. Petrie: *Gerar*, 1928, p. 4. The same phenomenon is apparent from the results of Petrie's excavations at Tell ez-Zuweid, 15 km. south of Raphia, within the Sinai region, which was reconstructed rather late in the reign of Psamtik I. Cf. F. Petrie: *Anthebron*, 1937, p. 7.

⁹ For the details of this event and its chronology, cf. A. Malamat, *IEJ*, 1, 1950-51, esp. p. 156.

⁴ Cf. Streck, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 3), p. cclxiv ff. and also *Encycl. Biblica* I, s. v. Asenappar.

⁵ Cf. Streck, *op. cit.* (supra, n. 3), pp. cxxvi-cxxiii, ccxciv; *Cambridge Ancient History*, III, p. 122.

⁶ Against this identification cf. P. Jensen, *Zeitschr. f. alttest. Wiss.*, N. F., 11, 1934, p. 121 f., and N. Torczyner, *BJPES*, 14, 1945, p. 6.

⁷ R. C. Thompson & M. E. L. Mallowan, *AAA*, 20, 1933, p. 95.

⁸ E. Weidner, *Archiv f. Orientf.*, 7, 1931, p. 1 ff.