

*Menahem's Reign Before the  
Assyrian Invasion  
(2 Kings 15:14–16)*

PETER DUBOVSKÝ

The relationship between the history of Israel and Israel's history has been a highly debated topic in recent years. Several scholars have, like ancient potters, shaped the clay of this field to its present form. Prof. Peter Machinist has played an important role among these potters and it is thanks to him that I was also introduced to the twists and turns of this field.

This paper deals with a quite narrow period of Israelite history—Menahem's reign before Tiglath-pileser III's first invasion (743–738 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> Just before the Assyrian conquest of Israel, the Northern Kingdom underwent a series of revolts and rebellions. One of them was orchestrated by Menahem, who first killed Shallum and then attacked the city of Tiphseh. There are no extrabiblical sources documenting Menahem's reign before the Assyrian invasion. Thus we are confined in our analysis to the biblical account and to some archaeological data that can help us to contextualize Menahem's reign. The biblical account not only presents a later reflection of Menahem's reign, but also presents several textual and interpretative problems. Therefore our analysis starts with a close examination of the biblical text in its Greek and Hebrew versions. In doing so, I propose a new translation of 2 Kgs 15:16. This translation of the biblical text serves as the starting point for my reflection on the historiographic rendering of this tumultuous period of Israelite history.

---

1. Historians tend to dedicate little or no space to this historical period; see for example Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel* (London: Equinox, 2003); John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM, 1960).

*Textual problems and their solutions (2 Kgs 15:14, 16)*

יַעֲלֵ מִנַּחֵם בֶּן־גָּדִי מִתִּרְצָה וַיָּבֵא שְׁמֵרוֹן וַיַּךְ אֶת־שְׁלֹמֹם בֶּן־יִבְיָשׁ בְּשִׁמְרוֹן וַיִּמָּוֶת  
וַיִּמְלֹךְ תַּחְתָּיו

Then Menahem son of Gadi came up from Tirzah and came to Samaria; he struck down Shallum son of Jabesh in Samaria and killed him; he reigned in place of him. (2 Kgs 15:14; NRSV)

אִז יִכְהֵ מִנַּחֵם אֶת־תַּפְסָח וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֵׁר־בָּהּ וְאֶת־גְּבוּלֶיהָ מִתִּרְצָה כִּי לֹא פָתַח וַיַּךְ אֶת־  
כָּל־הָהָרוֹתִיהָ בַקֶּץ

At that time Menahem sacked Tiphseh, all who were in it and its territory from Tirzah on; because they did not open it to him, he sacked it. He ripped open all the pregnant women in it. (2 Kgs 15:16; NRSV)

Our entire knowledge of Menahem's activities before the Assyrian invasion is confined to these two verses, which present several problems that must be addressed in order both to interpret the passage properly as a whole and to understand more fully the historical vicissitudes of this deeply troubled period. The first group of difficulties concerns three geographical terms: תִּרְצָה in 15:14, and תַּפְסָח and a second instance of תִּרְצָה in 15:16. The problems are of two kinds: textual—there are different terms in the ancient manuscripts—and interpretative—Tiphseh is on the Euphrates and Tirzah is in the Northern Israel. Ancient scribes noticed these problems and, as a result of their attempts to resolve them, we have inherited several variants of the text, attested in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin manuscripts.<sup>2</sup>

Of the ancient versions, only the Vulgate reflects the MT without emendation, transliterating the three geographical terms תִּרְצָה, תַּפְסָח, and תִּרְצָה as *Thersa*, *Thapsa*, and *Thersa*, respectively.

A multiplicity of variants can be observed in the Greek translations. The first group of Greek translations (manuscripts borc<sub>2</sub>e<sub>2</sub>) closely follows the Hebrew text.<sup>3</sup> Thus the term תִּרְצָה is transliterated both times as Θερσα, which is a usual Greek rendering of the Hebrew toponym. However, the city struck by Menahem is translated in these manuscripts as Ταφωε/Ταφοε. This rendering may have been intended to solve the problem of geographical distance between תִּרְצָה (in modern Israel) and תַּפְסָח (in modern Iraq) by changing the latter to Ταφωε/Ταφοε, which corresponds to

2. The textual criticism is based on A. E. Brooke, N. M. A. McLean, and H. J. Thackeray, *I and II Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930).

3. For the abbreviations of the manuscripts see A. E. Brooke, N. M. A. McLean, and H. J. Thackeray, *I and II Samuel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927) v–ix. These mss are frequently referred to as the Lucianic group.

the site תפוח "Tappuah." Since these two cities, Θερσα and Ταφωε, are in the same vicinity, this rendering is the most logical interpretation of Menahem's expansion. This interpretation has gained acceptance among some modern scholars as well.<sup>4</sup>

The second group of Greek translations (manuscripts of group N) deviates from the usual rendering of תרצה as Θερσα, instead translating the term as Θερσιλα. The term תפסח is translated as Θερσα.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the logic of the interpretation of the Hebrew text is similar to the previous one. In both cases, the two instances of the site תרצה is translated with the same term, while the second location, תפסח, is translated with a different term.

A third variation appears in *Codex Vaticanus* (B), which coordinates the sites and renders the first תרצה in 15:14 as Θερσιλα and the other two locations, תפסח and תרצה, in verse 15:16 with the same term Θερσα, corresponding to Hebrew תרצה. This interpretation indicates that the city from which Menahem started his rebellion is different from the city he attacked after killing Shallum.

The last alternative is offered by *Codex Alexandrinus* (A). This codex renders each geographical location with a different term. Thus, תרצה in 15:14 is translated as Θερσιλα, תפסח in 15:16 as Θαιρα, and תרצה in 15:16 as Θερσα. According to this interpretation, Menahem started his rebellion in Θερσιλα and then attacked the cities of Θαιρα and Θερσα.

With the exception of the *Codex Vaticanus*, all ancient translations maintain the difference between תרצה and תפסח. Thus, we can safely conclude that the first and the third geographical term must have been the same: תרצה (= Θερσα). However, all the Greek manuscripts change the Hebrew תפסח to another geographical term in the territory of the Northern Kingdom. Only the Vulgate follows the Hebrew text. Because the Hebrew text represents the *lectio difficilior*, we can conclude that the original text had the sequence of the geographical terms as it has been preserved in the MT.

Once we have established that the MT in this case represents a superior reading to that of the Greek manuscripts, we must face the interpretative problem of the meaning of the expression מתרצה "from Tirzah" (15:16),

4. James A. Montgomery and Henry S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951) 449–50; John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 622; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation* (AB 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988) 169–71.

5. *Codex Basiliano-Vaticanus* and *Codex Venetus*.

which follows the list of objects bound to the verb נָכָה “to strike.” Both ancient and modern readers have discerned two difficulties here. The first is geographical: since Tirzah is distant (about 1,000 km) from Tiphseh, it seems impossible for Menahem to have dominated such a large region. The second is moral: if Tirzah is part of the destroyed region, then Menahem committed cruelties against his own people.<sup>6</sup> These problems have been addressed in three primary ways, as reflected in modern translations.

*Emendation:* Following many of the Greek manuscripts, translations belonging to this group prefer to change the difficult term תַּפְסַח to Tapuah (for example, NAB, NJB, and FBJ). These translations avoid the problems by opting for the *lectio facillior*.

*Literary translation:* Some translations place the expression “from Tirzah” after the list of destroyed regions (for example, NAS, NRSV, and Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible). These translations, however, do not clarify whether Tirzah was attacked by Menahem.

*Interpretative translation:* These translations tend to explain the difficulties by adding words or changing word order. The expression “from Tirzah” is interpreted as the starting point of Menahem’s campaign (for example, by NJPS, The Complete Jewish Bible, Bible de Jérusalem, and La Sacra Bibbia Nuova Riveduta), or as a part of the region attacked by Menahem “from Tirzah onwards” (for example, by NJB, Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible, and Sweeney).<sup>7</sup>

What, then, is the meaning of the expression מִתְרַצָּה in 2 Kgs 15:16? The preposition מִן can be interpreted here in three ways: as the preposition determining one border line of a certain territory (from Tirzah onwards); as an expression of Menahem’s origin (Menahem of Tirzah), or as the point from which Menahem began his expansion (starting from Tirzah).

The first solution, “from Tirzah onwards,” would mean that Menahem devastated the regions from Tirzah to Tiphseh. Such a feat seems implausible because it implies that Menahem destroyed the region from which he started his rebellion.

The second solution binds the expression “from Tirzah” to Menahem as his place of origin, and can thus be translated, “Menahem attacked . . . , (the one who was) from Tirzah.” However, this solution is also improbable because of insurmountable syntactical difficulties. In this case we should ask why this expression is so far from the proper name Menahem, which it qualifies. Because all the Greek manuscripts place the expression

6. Menahem Haran, “The Rise and Decline of the Empire of Jeroboam Ben Joash,” *VT* 17 (1967) 284–90.

7. Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 372.

“from Tirzah” after the list of destroyed regions, the position of this expression cannot be considered a scribal error.

The only possibility for maintaining the Hebrew *lectio difficilior* is to interpret the expression “from Tirzah” as the starting point of Menahem’s campaign. The expression מִתְּרִזָּה is a complement of place linked to the first occurrence of the verb נָכַח in this verse. Thus Menahem, after having killed Shallum, undertook another campaign against Tiphshah. The expression “from Tirzah” indicates that he started his campaign in Tirzah and moved toward Tiphshah. This interpretation, on the one hand, preserves the *lectio difficilior* and, on the other hand, avoids making the improbable claim that Menahem destroyed the entire region between Tirzah and Tiphshah.

Before we continue our investigation, let us summarize the results of the previous analysis. The Hebrew and Greek manuscripts differ mainly in rendering the geographical terms. I have argued that the Hebrew text represents the *lectio difficilior* and, thus, that we should keep both geographical sites—Tirzah and Tiphshah—in the order that they have been preserved in the Hebrew text. Moreover, both the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts place the second occurrence of “from Tirzah” after the description of the regions destroyed by Menahem. I have interpreted this expression as “starting from Tirzah,” meaning that Menahem started his campaign against Tiphshah from Tirzah. Thus, the city of Tirzah is not a part of the list of destroyed regions, but rather the starting point of his campaign, the solution preferred already by Keil.<sup>8</sup>

After these preliminary conclusions, we can now consider the early period of Menahem’s reign. The first analysis will investigate the nature of Menahem’s revolt, the second will discuss the importance of Tirzah, the third will analyze the extension of Menahem’s campaign toward the east, and the fourth will study the brutalities committed during Menahem’s campaign against Tiphshah.

### *Menahem's revolt*

The differences between the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts are confined mainly to the rendering of the geographical terms Tirzah and Tiphshah; all of them have a similar description of Menahem’s revolt. For our purposes, it is important to investigate the sequence of the verbs used to describe it:<sup>9</sup>

8. Carl F. Keil, *Die Bücher der Könige* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1876) 320.

9. Besides the translation of Tirzah discussed above, the variants regard the transliteration of Menahem’s and Gadi’s names. However, the main difference can be ob-

καὶ ἀνέβη . . . καὶ ἦλθεν . . . καὶ ἐπάταξεν . . . καὶ ἐθανάτωσεν . . . [καὶ ἐβασίλευεν . . .]

ויעל . . . ויבא . . . ויך . . . וימית . . . וימלך . . .

The sequence of verbs *נכה*, *מות*, and *מלך* occurs four times in this chapter, and altogether seven times in the Bible (1 Kgs 15:27–28; 16:10; 2 Kgs 12:22; 15:10, 14, 25, 30).<sup>10</sup> In all cases but ours, the sequence *נכה*, *מות*, and *מלך* is preceded by variants of the verb *קשר*. In our case the verse opens with the verb *עלה* followed by *בוא*. The differences in starting formulas are even more striking when we consider that four out of seven occurrences of the sequence of verbs *נכה*, *מות*, and *מלך* appear in our chapter. The following chart presents all the occurrences of the sequence of verbs *נכה*, *מות*, and *מלך* in the Bible.

Baasha's coup d'état (1 Kgs 15:27–28):	וּקְשַׁר . . . וַיָּבֵא . . . וַיַּךְ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .
Zimri's coup d'état (1 Kgs 16:9–10):	וּקְשַׁר . . . וַיָּבֵא . . . וַיַּךְ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .
Jozacar's coup d'état (2 Kgs 12:21–22):	וַיִּקְרְבוּ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .
Shallum's coup d'état (2 Kgs 15:10):	וּקְשַׁר . . . וַיַּךְ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .
Menahem's coup d'état (2 Kgs 15:14):	וַיְעַל . . . וַיָּבֵא . . . וַיַּךְ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .
Pekah's coup d'état (2 Kgs 15:25):	וּקְשַׁר . . . וַיַּךְ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .
Hoshea's coup d'état (2 Kgs 15:30):	וּקְשַׁר . . . וַיַּךְ . . . וַיְמִית . . . וַיְמַלֵּךְ . . .

The substitution of the verb *קשר* with the verbs *בוא* . . . *עלה* in the case of Menahem's coup d'état is attested in all manuscripts and therefore cannot be considered a scribal error; rather it must be considered an intentional change. It indicates that the biblical writers wanted to underline the contrast between the coups d'état of Shallum, Pekah, and Hoshea, and that of Menahem. In all cases except ours, the coup d'état is qualified as a conspiracy. Thus, we can conclude that the biblical authors did not want to put Menahem's coup d'état into the category of “conspiracy” with the others. How should we interpret the meaning of such a deliberate change in verb sequence, one that so clearly breaks the pattern evident in 2 Kgs 15?

An investigation of the combination *בוא* . . . *עלה* in the Bible indicates that it can describe a simple movement upwards (Gen 45:25; Exod 7:28; Num 13:22; Deut 1:24; Judg 20:26), a military campaign (Deut 1:22;

served at the end of the verse. Vulgate and manuscripts *Aborxyc<sub>2</sub>e<sub>2AS</sub>* follow the Hebrew text and add the phrase in brackets. This part is omitted in *Codex Vaticanus* (B).

10. To this list can be added a slightly modified variant of this formula in 2 Kgs 12:21; 14:19; 21:23, as well as the story of Jehu in 2 Kgs 9–10.

Josh 8:11; 2 Kgs 18:17; 24:10),<sup>11</sup> or a retreat from a campaign (Judg 11:16; 20:26). For our purposes, the most significant meaning is the second. There are several texts using this combination of verbs in the context of a military campaign: Israelite campaigns (Deut 1:22; Josh 8:11; 2 Sam 5:23; 1 Chr 14:14), an Aramean campaign against Joash (2 Chr 24:23), and the campaigns of Rab-shaqeh and Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18:17; 24:10). This terminology is also used for the description of Ahab's military action undertaken against Elijah (2 Kgs 1:13). The sequence of the verbs *עלה* . . . *ברא*, which opens 2 Kgs 15:14, within a military context can describe any kind of military campaign from a small local intervention against an unpleasant personage to a large-scale military operation such as a siege of a city or a conquest of an entire region. We can conclude that by choosing the combination *עלה* . . . *ברא* the biblical authors wished to emphasize that Menahem's "going up against Shallum" had a military character and was of a different nature than the conspiracies described in 2 Kgs 15. It refers to a military intervention of indeterminate size, including the advance of troops, that aimed at the elimination of the usurper Shallum.

### *Resurgence of Tirzah*

Our first analysis showed that the biblical writers emphasized the military nature of Menahem's revolt and did not want to classify it as a conspiracy. According to the biblical account, this revolt originated in Tirzah. The same expression "from Tirzah" occurs twice in our verses. The biblical authors, by emphasizing Tirzah as the starting point of both Menahem's revolt (2 Kgs 15:14) and his campaign toward the east (2 Kgs 15:16), linked a new, though short-lived, dynasty to the old capital Tirzah.<sup>12</sup> However, the term "from Tirzah" breaks the syntax of the Hebrew and, if we eliminate it from 15:16, it can be seen that the verse reads smoothly:

אז יכה־מנחם את־תפסח ואת־כל־אשר־בה ואת־גבוליה

Then Menahem attacked Tiphseh and all who were in it, and its territories.

In both cases, the verses would read quite smoothly should the expression "from Tirzah" be eliminated. In the following paragraphs I will explore the meaning of this addition.

11. To this group we can also add a poetic description in Ezek 38:9, 11.

12. Rudolph Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (3 vols.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1925) 2:351.

According to the biblical sources, Joshua defeated the king of Tirzah together with thirty other Canaanite kings (Josh 12:24). The city then disappears from the biblical account and reappears only after the division of Solomon's kingdom. The biblical text claims that Tirzah slowly gained ascendancy and eventually became a full-fledged capital of the Northern Kingdom. We can only assume that, in the early divided monarchy, it was the royal residence because the wife of Jeroboam I lived in it (1 Kgs 14:17). In the biblical account, the language used to describe the connection of the ruling dynasty to Tirzah is similar to that used to describe the relationship of the Davidic dynasty to Jerusalem and that of the Omrides to Samaria. Thus, Tirzah was the city where the king dwelled (1 Kgs 15:21) and ruled (1 Kgs 15:33; 16:8, 15, 23). For these purposes the city was fortified and contained a royal palace and a keep (1 Kgs 16:9, 16–18). Finally, the city became the place where the first Israelite kings were buried (1 Kgs 16:6). When Tirzah was burned down during a siege, Omri moved his seat to Samaria, and Tirzah disappears once again from the biblical account, only to reappear again in the account of Menahem's usurpation. It is depicted as the base from which Menahem's revolt started and served as the starting point for an ambitious military campaign, perhaps aspiring to enlarge the Israelite kingdom to the size of the kingdom of David and Solomon.<sup>13</sup> Its sudden reappearance prompts the question: Is this reappearance of Tirzah on the political stage of the Northern Kingdom plausible? Here the archaeological data may clarify the problem.

A. Chambon provided enough data to establish that Tirzah could be identified with Tell el-Far'ah North, excavated by R. de Vaux.<sup>14</sup> The site Tell el-Far'ah North is about 14 km east of Samaria. For our purposes the important strata are VIIb and VIIId. According to de Vaux and Chambon, the former is associated with the ninth century B.C., and the city of stratum VIIb was destroyed in a conflagration. The excavators attributed this destruction to Omri (1 Kgs 16).<sup>15</sup> Then the city was deserted during an interim period. Stratum VIIId witnesses the resurgence of urban life in Tell el-Far'ah North. Stratum VIIId was also destroyed, at the end of the eighth century B.C. The excavators attributed this destruction to the Assyrians.<sup>16</sup>

13. Cf. 2 Sam 8 and 1 Kgs 4–5. This resurgence of Tirzah may be the origin of its legendary beauty, which in Hebrew poetry can be compared to the beauty of Jerusalem (Song 6:4).

14. For another possible identification, see Dale W. Manor, "Tirzah," *ABD* 6: 573–74.

15. A. Chambon, "Far'ah, Tell el- (North)," *EAEHL* 2:439–40.

16. Chambon, "Far'ah, Tell el- (North)," 2:440.



From excavation reports we can distinguish two types of building in Stratum VIIId that are important for our purposes: the palace (Building no. 148) and three patrician houses (Buildings no. 327 and no. 328 from square II and Building no. 710 from square III).<sup>17</sup> These buildings were larger than the dwellings of Stratum VIIb. The plan of the Stratum VIIId is dominated by a large palace (Building no. 148), most likely a seat of a local leader. The comparison of the surface area of this palace with other similar buildings of approximately the same period demonstrates the importance of this site.

<i>Site</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Bibliographical reference</i>
Tell el-Far'ah North (Bld. 148)	450 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Tell el Far'ah I</i> , 44.
Samaria (Omri's palace)	1080 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Harvard Excavations at Samaria II</i> , pl. 5; <i>Samaria-Sebaste</i> , pl. II.
Samaria (Ostraca palace)	450 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Harvard Excavations at Samaria II</i> , pl. 5; <i>Samaria-Sebaste</i> , pl. II.
Samaria (Western building)	600 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Harvard Excavations at Samaria II</i> , pl. 5; <i>Samaria-Sebaste</i> , pl. II.
Megiddo (Bld. 6000; Str. VA-IVB)	450 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>EAEHL</i> 3:1017.
Megiddo (Bld. 1723; Str. IVB)	210 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Megiddo I</i> , fig. 12.
Megiddo (Bld. 1482; Str. VA-IVB)	680 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Megiddo I</i> , fig. 12.
Megiddo (Bld. 338; Str. IVA)	430 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Megiddo I</i> , fig. 49.
Megiddo (Bld. 1052; Str. III)	910 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Megiddo I</i> , fig. 89.
Megiddo (Bld. 1369; Str. III)	980 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Megiddo I</i> , fig. 89.
Hazor (Bld. 2; Area A; Str. V)	170 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Hazor II</i> , pl. CCIII.
Hazor (Citadel; Area B; Str. V)	540 m <sup>2</sup>	<i>Hazor II</i> , pl. CCV.

In this period, the palaces closest in importance to Building 148 of Tell el-Far'ah North are Building 338 of Megiddo (almost the same size), and Building 2 (twice as large) and the Citadel of Hazor. This comparison indicates that the largest buildings known in the Northern Kingdom before the Assyrian invasion were of a similar size to Building 148 of Tell el-Far'ah North. However, the royal palace of Samaria is twice as large as Building 148, while the Ostraca Palace and Western Building are of a comparable size.

These data indicate that in the period just before Tiglath-pileser's invasion, the site Tell el-Far'ah North had regained its prominence, and that its

17. A. Chambon, *Tell El-Fâr'ah I* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1984) plate 5.

main building was comparable in size to that of buildings in Megiddo and Hazor. Thus, if we accept Chambon's identification of Tirzah with Tell el-Far'ah North, both archaeological and textual evidence suggest that Tirzah played an important role in the political scene of the Northern Kingdom just before its fall.

This reappearance of Tirzah on the political scene must be seen in the context of the tumultuous last days of the Northern Kingdom. The biblical account mentions that the Northern Kingdom underwent three conspiracies and one revolt in its last fifty years. The bases from which the conspiracies and the revolt originated can illuminate the nature of the tensions and tumult of the Northern Kingdom. According to 2 Kgs 15:25, the elements fomenting the instability in the Northern Kingdom were the tensions between the Transjordan-based factions (Gilead) and the western tribes (Ephraim-Manasseh). My analysis adds another element to this complex picture: even within the western faction we can discern tensions between Samaria and Tirzah since Tirzah became a military base for a new revolt and the starting point of Menahem's campaign toward the east.<sup>18</sup>

However, the second appearance of Tirzah on the stage of Israelite history was even shorter than the first one. In 2 Kgs 15:17, the Deuteronomistic writers claim that Menahem lived in Samaria, and that a few years later it was burned down by the Assyrians.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that Menahem's dynasty did not survive the second generation, historians argue that it brought relative stability into a Northern Kingdom ravaged by several coups d'état.<sup>20</sup> Menahem is said to have reigned ten years, and his son Pekahiah two years, in contrast to their predecessors Zechariah and Shallum, who reigned only for a six months and one month, respectively.

### *Menahem's campaign against Tiphshah*

After having brought his military intervention against Shallum to its successful end (2 Kgs 15:14), Menahem undertook an expansionistic campaign toward the east (2 Kgs 15:16). Historians have been reluctant to accept that Menahem might have conquered Tiphshah on the Euphrates.<sup>21</sup> The city is identified with Thapsacus from Xenophon's *Anabasis* (I.4, 11,

18. This idea was already suggested by Rawson Lumby, *Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909) 152.

19. This verse can be read as a Deuteronomistic correction of the Tirzianic version of history, or as a factual statement affirming that once Menahem consolidated his power, he broke off with Tirzah and moved to Samaria.

20. Siegfried Herrmann, *Geschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1973) 305.

21. Keil, *Die Bücher der Könige*, 321.

17), located at the west bank of the middle Euphrates.<sup>22</sup> A military campaign to the Euphrates by a recent usurper in Israel does not seem to be credible.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, as discussed above, the city Tiphseh is sometimes emended following the several Greek manuscripts to Tappuah, located in northern Israel.<sup>24</sup> Others identify the city with modern Sheik Abu Zarad, about 10 km northwest of Shiloh.<sup>25</sup> Lumby accepts the reading Thapsa, an unidentifiable city, following Josephus.<sup>26</sup> I will argue that none of these solutions is necessary because, for the biblical writers, it would have made perfectly good sense to speak about a military campaign to the Euphrates.

The city of Tiphseh, with the exception of our verse, is mentioned only once in the Bible (1 Kgs 5:4). In 1 Kgs 4–5 the biblical authors describe the organization of Solomon's dominion, which reached from the Euphrates to Egypt, with Tiphseh marking its eastern border. These chapters do not mention Solomon's military campaigns, by which he might conceivably have established control as far as the Middle Euphrates. The implication is that he inherited control of this region from his father David, who is said to have conquered the regions along the Euphrates (2 Sam 8:3).<sup>27</sup> Since the term Tiphseh occurs only twice in the Bible, we can assume that the ancient historiographers wanted the reader to connect Menahem's expansionistic attempt with the period of David's and Solomon's control in the east. For historiographic purposes, it is not important whether Menahem actually conquered a city on the Euphrates. It is more important to read behind this verse the intention of the ancient historiographers, namely, that they wanted to emphasize that Menahem not only expanded his kingdom toward the east, but also attempted to enlarge it to the size of the Davidic-Solomonic kingdom.<sup>28</sup>

### *Menahem's brutalities*

In the previous analysis, I argued that Tirzah served as the base from which Menahem orchestrated not only his revolt against Shallum, but,

22. Martin J. Mulder and John Vriend, *1 Kings: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 192.

23. Trevor R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 196–97.

24. Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 213.

25. For example, Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 372.

26. Lumby, *Kings*, 152.

27. Cogan, *1 Kings*, 219.

28. House proposes that Menahem's attempt to enlarge his borders was an effort to consolidate northern gains made by Jeroboam II; Paul R. House, *1 and 2 Kings* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995) 330.

according to the biblical authors, also his campaign against Tiphshah on the Euphrates. Accepting the *lectio difficilior*, I argued that the geographical term Tiphshah should be retained and read through the lens of the expansion of Solomon's kingdom.

Before moving on to a discussion of what the biblical writers claim about Menahem's campaign in the east, we must dedicate a few lines to the syntactical problems of 2 Kgs 15:16, in particular to the meaning of the particle כִּי and to the grammatical subject of the phrase לֹא פָתַח in the verse:

אז יכה-מנחם את-תפסח ואת-כל-אשר-בה ואת-גבוליה מתרצה כי לא פתח ויך את  
כל-ההרוריה בקע

Modern translations universally take the particle כִּי as a causal conjunction, which leads to translations such as the following: "because they did not open it to him, he sacked it" (NRSV). According to this interpretation, the expression לֹא פָתַח כִּי is a causal clause explaining why Menahem destroyed the city: because the city (the subject of פָתַח would then be Tiphshah) or its citizens (the subject of פָתַח would be its citizens) did not open its/their gates.<sup>29</sup> Refusal to open the gates of the city, of course, signals opposition to Menahem. This interpretation has enjoyed wide support among ancient and modern commentators.<sup>30</sup>

Ancient textual witnesses differ in their presentation of this clause. The main stream of the Greek manuscripts (ABN) read ὅτι οὐκ ἤνοιξαν αὐτῷ, "because they did not open to him." This rendering is along the lines of the traditional interpretation noted above, but changes the subject from the third person singular to the third person plural and adds the pronoun αὐτῷ. Manuscripts bor<sub>2</sub>e<sub>2</sub>, however, keep the Hebrew form and translate the term פָתַח with the third person singular, ἤνοιξεν. There are two reasons to prefer the MT, supported by Greek manuscripts bor<sub>2</sub>e<sub>2</sub>, to the main stream of ancient and modern interpretations. The first is that, in other instances when the biblical writers wanted to convey the traditional meaning (the city/the people did not open the gates to him), they used the appropriate verbal form even in the case when the object (city gates) was omitted (Deut 20:11; Neh 13:19). The second is that the Hebrew text does not have the expression "to him," which often occurs in similar contexts (Ez 46:12; Ps 118:19). We can conclude that the MT, as reflected also in Greek manuscripts bor<sub>2</sub>e<sub>2</sub>, represents the *lectio difficilior* and that we should investigate whether it is possible to interpret it without chang-

29. The word "gate" is added in Targum Jonathan.

30. Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 171; Montgomery, *Kings*, 449.

ing the form of the verb פתח, as done by other Greek manuscripts and by modern interpreters.

If we want to keep the *lectio difficilior*, the grammatical subject of the verb פתח cannot be the city of Tiphseh, which is feminine in Hebrew.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the citizens of Tiphseh should be excluded as the subject of this clause because the verb פתח is singular. The only remaining singular masculine subject possible is Menahem.<sup>32</sup> I propose that the expression can be interpreted on the basis of a similar Akkadian expression *ālam petū*, “to open a city,” meaning to breach a city’s defenses:<sup>33</sup>

[*a-na*] *a-lim ra-za-ḥi<sup>ki</sup> ni-iṭ-ḥi-ma ṣa-b[u-um]*  
 [*a-la*] *m ip-te-te ṣa-la-sū iṣ-ḥ[i . . .]*

We approached the city of Razahum, the arm[y]  
 breached the [ci]ty and [ . . . ] took its booty (M.5423 lines 32’–33’).<sup>34</sup>

In the Mari texts, the idiom occurs twice as *a-lum ip-pé-et-ti-ma*; “if the town is breached (I am afraid that Qarni-lim will take possession of it)” (ARMT 28 165:17; see also 26 385 rev. 44’).

The Akkadian idiom would normally demand that the object of the verb be specified, but in 2 Kgs 15:16, although the object is omitted, it can be supplied from context:

אז יכה מנחם את־תפסח ואת־כל־אשר־בה ואת־גבוליה מתרצה כי לא פתח ויך את  
 כל־ההרותיה בקע

In this sense, the verb פתח can be interpreted as breaching the city, breaking through its walls or gates by making an opening. On the basis of this analysis, we can translate the clause, “At that time Menahem sacked Tiphseh, all who were in it and its territory from Tirzah on; because he did not breach (it), he sacked (it).” Such a translation, however, does not make sense and therefore should be placed in its context, which depends on the division of the verse.

The Masoretes placed an *atnah* under ויך and thus connected the expression כי לא פתח to ויך:

31. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 196. It is important to notice that through the whole verse, the city of Tiphseh is always feminine, which militates against taking it as the masculine subject of the verb.

32. Another option was taken by Gray, who assumed that the singular indicated an indefinite subject; compare the translation of Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible; and Gray, *Kings*, 622.

33. For similar cases, see CAD P: 351.

34. Dominique Charpin, “Toponymie Amorrite et toponymie biblique: La ville de Šibat/Šobah,” *RA* 92 (1998) 84.

אז יכה־מנחם את־תפסה ואת־כל־אשר־בה ואת־גבוליה מתרצה כי לא פתח ריב את  
 כל־ההרותיה בקע:

All major Greek manuscripts likewise divide the clauses after the verb and introduce the final clause with *καί*: ὅτι οὐκ ἤνοιξαν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐπάταξεν αὐτὴν καὶ τὰς ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσας ἀνέρρηξεν “because they did not open to him, and he smote it, and ripped up the women with child.”

As a consequence of this division and of the *lectio difficilior* discussed above, we can no longer interpret the particle **כי** as a causal conjunction, but rather as an emphatic particle stressing the preceding part of the verse.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the translation should be, “Indeed he did not (just) breach (it), but struck (it) down—he ripped open all its pregnant women!” Thus, Menahem did not satisfy himself with conquering the city, but destroyed it and its population. Our interpretation of the syntax has an impact on the evaluation of Menahem’s cruelties as well. If the particle **כי** is understood as an emphatic particle, the Bible does not provide reasons for his cruelties, but states simply that they extended even to ripping open pregnant women.

The biblical writers three times employed the verb **נכה** in 2 Kgs 15:14–16. Thus, Menahem struck and killed Shallum, struck and destroyed an entire region, and finally struck the city and ripped open the wombs of pregnant women. The sequence of these verses is progressive. First, he exterminated one person—King Shallum. Then he exterminated the inhabitants of the entire region, and finally he killed the not-yet born. Menahem’s violence did not stop at killing adults, but he exterminated prenatal life as well. Thus, the new dynasty of Tirzah, aspiring to expand the size of its domain to the size of the Davidic-Solomonic kingdom, did not hesitate to employ the most violent means ever used in the history of war.

What, then, is the meaning of Menahem’s cruelty for our understanding of how the biblical writers interpreted their past?

In the Hebrew Bible, there are three other texts describing the ripping open of pregnant women: 2 Kgs 8:11–12; Amos 1:13; and Hos 14:1. They describe brutalities committed by Arameans, Ammonites, and Assyrians, respectively, during their campaigns against Israel. In 2 Kgs 8:11–12 and Amos 1:13, these actions accompanied Aramean and Ammonite military actions. In Hos 14:1, this cruel image is used to describe the atrocities befalling the Samaritans because of their sins.<sup>36</sup>

In extrabiblical written sources, the ripping open of pregnant women is attested only in a Middle Assyrian heroic poem celebrating the victories of

35. HALOT 1:470.

36. Paul B. Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999) 83–86.

Tiglath-pileser I.<sup>37</sup> Despite the vivid depiction of several other atrocities, Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions do not mention that the Assyrian kings of that period ever ripped open pregnant women. However, this kind of brutality can be seen in a relief (BM 124927) depicting Ashurbanipal's campaign against the Arabs.<sup>38</sup> This is the only case discovered so far of such violence represented on a relief. In the context of the campaign against the Arabs, it can be seen as an extreme measure taken by the Assyrians to root out the resistance of the Arabian tribes.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, both biblical and extrabiblical sources attest that the ripping open of pregnant women was performed during military campaigns, but only in extreme cases. Since one Middle Assyrian text and one Neo-Assyrian relief contain similar cruelties, we can conclude that such actions did not contradict the military customs of the late second and early first millennia B.C. The biblical writers, however, considered this sort of violence to be unacceptable cruelty, practiced only by foreign invaders (Ammonites and Arameans); in 2 Kgs 8:11–12, Hazael compares a person doing it to a dog. No just king of Israel or Judah had ever resorted to similar brutalities. On this logic, then, King Menahem, who, like every Israelite king, was in theory supposed to guarantee order and justice, was instead promoting savage barbarity and behaving like an atrocious foreign invader.<sup>40</sup> Naturally, this way of conquering the east was in complete contrast to that of David and Solomon. Seeing Menahem's atrocities in terms of retributive justice (Exod 21:22–25; Amos 1:13–15), the prophet Hosea concluded that the Samaritans would eventually be punished by the same token (Hos 14:1): "Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open" (NRSV).

### Conclusion

My investigation of Menahem's reign depends on a new translation of 2 Kgs 15:16, which retains the *lectio difficilior* of the Hebrew text: "Then Menahem (started his campaign) from Tirzah and struck Tiphseh, and all who were in it, and all its territories. Indeed he did not (just) breach (it), he struck (it) down—he ripped open all its pregnant women!" This inter-

37. Mordechai Cogan, "Ripping Open Pregnant Women' in Light of an Assyrian Analogue," *JAOS* 103 (1983) 755–57.

38. Richard D. Barnett, *Sculptures from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (668–627 B.C.)* (London: British Museum Publications, 1976), plate 33.75.

39. Peter Dubovský, "Ripping Open Pregnant Arab Women: Reliefs in Room L of Ashurbanipal's North Palace." *Or* 78 (2009) 414–19.

40. Lumby, *Kings*, 153.

pretation can cast some light on the tensions in the Northern Kingdom during the tumultuous period just before Tiglath-pileser III's campaign against the west.

These tensions were fomented above all by the differences between the Transjordanian (Gilead) and hill-country tribes (Ephraim-Manasseh).<sup>41</sup> I argue, however, that the western block was far from being a unified entity. Tensions existed in the west, caused by the aspirations of cities and clan leaders who sought to usurp the throne in Samaria. Our interpretation of the Hebrew text suggests that the city of Tirzah may have fomented these tensions. Tirzah, after having been destroyed by Omri, reemerged and became a rival of Samaria. Menahem, a representative of Tirzah, usurped the throne in Samaria and linked a new, though ultimately short-lived, dynasty to the old capital of Israel. He made Tirzah a base not only for his revolt, but also for his expansionist policy to the east. According to the biblical writers, this campaign ambitiously aspired to extend the eastern frontiers of the Northern Kingdom to match those of the kingdom of David and Solomon. However, this military expansion was extremely brutal. Menahem, to achieve his goal, perpetrated one of the most violent acts imaginable—he ripped open pregnant women. This kind of atrocity was attested in the countries surrounding ancient Israel, but it was severely condemned by the biblical writers. If we interpret the presentation of Menahem's acts as a catalyst of retributive justice, we can better understand Hosea's prophecy, according to which the pregnant women of Samaria will themselves be ripped open (Hos 14:1).

The picture, as presented by the ancient historiographers, corresponds with archaeological data and with certain sociological dynamics reconstructed from the Samaria ostraca. Chambon identified Tirzah with Tell el-Far'ah North, which flourished in the eighth century B.C. The ambitions of the city can be seen in the architectural grandeur of stratum VII d. Its palace is comparable to the largest buildings of that period in the Northern Kingdom and it contained a sufficient quantity of storage jars to give material support to the military ambitions of its leaders. Three large "patrician" houses also witness to the well-being of its elite members. Thus, the city, located only few kilometers from the capital, and once having been the capital of the Northern Kingdom, could have easily nourished aspirations such as those attributed to Menahem.

---

41. Tomoo Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977) 173–76; Bustenay Oded, "The Historical Background of the Syro-Ephraimite War Reconsidered," *CBQ* 34 (1972) 162.



---

H. M. Niemann, in a study of the Samaria ostraca, has reconstructed a sociological dynamic that would reinforce such an interpretation.<sup>42</sup> He claims that in the Northern Kingdom the clans enjoyed substantial independence from the royal court. Kings Joash and Jeroboam II tried to extend their influence over the local clans, but they were unable to control the entire kingdom. Niemann concludes that the Samaria ostraca suggest that the royal residence of Samaria surrounded itself with loyal clan leaders. In this view, the real control of Samaria was confined to a few clans directly dependent upon the crown. The frequent coups d'état are signs that the clan leaders not only claimed their independence but also aspired to grasp the royal prerogatives concentrated in Samaria. The analysis above corresponds well with this picture and demonstrates that the ancient historiographers considered the Tirzah of Menahem's short-lived dynasty to be one of the cities aspiring to power not only over other clans, but even into the Middle Euphrates region. This ambitious expansion was, however, marked by extreme violence and thus, from the theological perspective of the later writers, it could have constituted one of the phenomena responsible for the collapse of the Northern Kingdom.

---

42. Hermann M. Niemann, "A New Look at the Samaria Ostraca: The King-Clan Relationship," *TA* 35 (2008) 249-66.