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 Muṣri: 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-usur, 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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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.

Footnotes: