

On Reading Ancient Inscriptions: The Monumental Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan

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The publication of the monumental Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan¹ excites the imagination and promises to illuminate an important chapter in the history of the area in the period of the Israelite monarchy. More is missing of the original inscription than has been found, so caution must be the rule when commenting on the fragment and its lost parts. An attempt to go beyond the edge and penetrate the unknown so as to suggest a better reading or a likely completion of a phrase, or even to speculate on the historic context, must be guided by a sound method of interpretation and not a little intuition. This important find from Tel Dan prompts me to present my own integrative approach in deciphering ancient texts.

A. Methodology

When examining an ancient inscription such as the Tel Dan fragment, five aspects should be clarified:

- 1) The *archaeological context* of the inscription, that is, whether it was found *in situ* or in a secondary use. This might help to establish its *Sitz im Leben* and date.
- 2) The *type of inscription* generally indicated by the writing surface.² Once the type of inscription has been ascertained, it can be compared to other Northwest Semitic inscriptions of the same genre. In this instance the Tel Dan fragment is part of a monumental display inscription. One should compare it to the Mesha Stele and the Zakkur and Kilamuwa inscriptions, which will provide a basis for a form analysis and for determining approximately where the fragment should be placed within the original document.

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1. A. Biran and J. Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan" *IEJ* 43 (1993), 81–96. A few small fragments of the inscription were found in the 1994 season and have yet to be published (see the Addendum to this article). They contain only broken words but possibly allude to historical persons and events of the mid-ninth century B.C.E. See also É. Puech, "La Stèle Araméenne de Dan: Bar Hadad II et la Coalition des Omrides et de la Maison de David," *RB* 101–2 (1994), 215–41.

2. A. Demsky, "Writing," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 (1971), 656ff; N. Avigad, "Hebrew Epigraphic Sources," in A. Malamat, ed., *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History* (Jerusalem, 1979), 20–43. See also J. M. Miller, "The Mesha Stele as a Memorial Inscription," *PEQ* 106 (1974), 9–18; J. Drinkard, "The Literary Genre of the Mesha^c Inscription," A. Dearman, ed., *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta, 1989), 131–54.

Display or memorial inscriptions generally have four sections: a) an introductory paragraph, opening with the word 'I' (^ʔ*anōki*, ^ʔ*ank*, ^ʔ*anh*) followed by a genealogical or biographical note stating the relationship of the speaker to the preceding monarch if any, mention of a particular threat to the speaker's rule, a plea to the patron deity for help, and a statement of indebtedness or piety *vis-à-vis* the god to whom the stele is probably dedicated; b) a second paragraph describing the affairs of war and diplomacy, giving the background of the king's prayer or petition; c) a section describing the king's social and economic reforms or innovations; and finally d) a curse formula.

- 3) A *paleographical analysis* of the letters and other markings like word dividers and numbers. The typology of the letters will give us a basis to date the inscription. In this case, the Tel Dan text is best compared to the Kilamuwa and Zakkur inscriptions, written in the Aramaic style of the late ninth century B.C.E.³
- 4) A *linguistic study* will determine the dialect. Also note the use of *matres lectiones*, whether infixed, just at the end of the word, or none at all.⁴ The analysis of names is important for linguistic, cultural, and historic reasons. Of course, phrases and expressions might be suggested for filling in the lacunae. Since monumental display inscriptions were composed at court by royal scribes, they not infrequently contain literary allusions in phrases, metre, and genre.⁵ The Tel Dan inscription promises much information regarding the Damascene dialect and its affinities to other Early Aramaic dialects as well as to Biblical Hebrew, for instance, in matters of phonetic dissimilation, as in the root *qtl*, and the verbal system.
- 4) An *historical synthesis* would be the last stage, bringing together political, military, economic, geographic, social, and religious data gathered from the inscription. Of course, documents like that of Tel Dan are historiographic in nature, meant to flatter both king and patron deity, and they may contradict known facts from other sources.

B. The Inscription

Bearing this program in mind, let us turn to the Tel Dan inscription. The Tel Dan fragment was obviously broken off by a returning Israelite king who reconquered Dan and used the stone as a building block no later than the mid-8th century

3. Biran & Naveh, 87; Puech, esp. 230ff.

4. See the summary by S. Ahituv, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* (Jerusalem, 1992), 2–3 [Hebrew]. The growing number of inscriptions, especially the Aramaic Tel Fekherye and now the Tel Dan inscription, indicate the wide use of this orthography already by the mid-ninth century B.C.E., suggesting that this feature is not a means of dating the documents.

5. H. L. Ginsberg, "Psalms and Inscriptions of Petitions and Acknowledgement," *L. Ginsberg Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1945), Eng. sec. 159–71; J. C. Greenfield, "The Zakir Inscription and the Danklied," *Proceedings of the Fifth World Congress for Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1969), 1:174–91; idem, "Scripture and Inscription: The Literary and Rhetorical Element in Some Early Phoenician Inscriptions," in H. Goedicke, ed., *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W. F. Albright* (Baltimore, 1971), 254–58; A. Demsky, "Mesopotamian and Canaanite Literary Traditions in the Ahirom Curse Formula," *Eretz-Israel* 14 (Jerusalem, 1978), 7–11 [Hebrew].

B.C.E., when the gate complex in which it was found in secondary use was destroyed by Tiglath Pileser III in 733/2 B.C.E.⁶ As noted above, the Tel Dan fragment is part of a *monumental display type inscription*. Accordingly, Naveh has correctly placed the fragment at the upper right hand corner of the original, where it probably begins as part of the third or fourth line of that text.⁷ It seems, then, that it retains some of the introduction regarding the former king's reign (l. 2) and death (l. 3), as well as mention of the historic conflict with Israel (ll. 3–4).⁸ I therefore propose to read ll. 3–4 . . . **ישב (מלך) ישראל קדם בארק אבי** . . .⁹ which I tentatively translate: "And the (king of) Israel dwelt aforesimes in the land of . . ."⁹ This may refer to the cities mentioned by Ben Hadad II to Ahab, "I will give back the towns which my father took from your father . . . (1 Kgs. 20:34)."

Somewhere in lines 4 and 5 we move from the introduction to the second paragraph describing the military conflict, crowned by the notice that Hadad, the national deity, led the Aramean king into victorious battle (l. 5), in which the Aramean tells the reader in line 6: "I killed the kin[g of . . .]" In their *paleographic analysis*, Naveh and Yardeni originally read **מנ**, which they completed **מנ[הם]** and translated "(And I killed) of them. . . ." However, they now accept that the letter is a fragmented *lamed*, most probably to be completed **מל[ך]**.¹⁰

If we are to complete the triad of military units in lines 6–7, then we should note that they are almost always listed in descending order: chariotry, cavalry, and infantry.¹¹ Furthermore, the numbers given for these units in the Bible as well as in

6. Biran & Naveh, 81–86.

7. *Ibid.*, 90–91.

8. Perhaps the first line should be completed **ויאמר** referring to a challenge or threat voiced by Omri whose expansionist policies are recorded in the Mesha Stele (ll. 4, 7–8). See also S. Ahituv, "Suzerain or Vassal? Notes on the Aramaic Inscription from Tel Dan," *IEJ* 43 (1993), 246, and Puech, 221.

9. On . . . **אבין** . **בארק** see below. Sensing the difficulty of this phrase, Ahituv divides it into two fragmentary sentences by reading ". . . Is]rael formerly in the land. My father [. . .," *ibid.*, 247. Also see Puech, 223, who reads **ישב מלך ישראל**, guided by the reading in the Mesha Stele.

10. On this phrase see below. See Ahituv "Suzerain or Vassal," 246, who completes: **כל ימי מלכי** (!) **רבם** (!) **ואקחל מלכם**—"all the days of *my reign* and I killed [many] kin[gs] . . ." Cf. also Puech, 224–25.

The difficult word **מלכי** in line 6 still defies understanding. In addition to the possible translations as "my king," referring to the speaker's temporal suzerain or to his patron deity, another possibility might be *milki*—"my advice" (Dan. 4:24). Then again, this might be an archaic masculine plural without the *nun*, as documented from the eighth century B.C.E. Samalian dialect and which became standard in later Eastern Aramaic. Another shared feature of this inscription and Samalian is the phonetically identical dissimilated *qtl*, for which see J. C. Greenfield, "Dialect Traits in Early Aramaic," *Leshonenu* 32 [1968], 60ff. [Hebrew]. On this phenomenon in biblical Hebrew, cf. Rabbi David Qimḥi, *Mikhlol*, ed. W. Chomsky (New York, 1952), sect. 45 c, d; M. Zeidel, *Hiqrei Lashon* (reprint: Jerusalem, 1986), I [Hebrew]; Z. Rin, "ēy-ending as Absolute Plural," *Leshonenu* 25 (1961), 17–19 [Hebrew]. In particular, one should also note that there is a divider dot in the word **כי מל** (!). This can be seen on the picture and of course by viewing the inscription. However, this overlooked observation does not give us a better reading, but might indicate that the engraver made a mistake and had a different spelling in mind. The engraver's sloppiness is also apparent in the fact that the first 6 lines of the fragment droop to the left. Only in the seventh line is this tendency corrected.

11. *Contra* Naveh, followed by Puech, who reads: "footsoldiers, chariots, and horsemen" and assigns definite numbers to each of the forces. But see 2 Kgs. 13:7, where chariots and horsemen are interchanged—**חמישים פרשים ועשרה רכב ועשרת אלפים רגלי**.

name,¹⁵ then perhaps the strange and fragmented ʔrq ʔby [. . . in line 4 is also a toponym. Tentatively, I would suggest the reading $\text{ʔrq ʔby}[lh]$ “the land of Abila,” which is the Aramaic of Abel, written with a *yod*. Other examples of the use of the *mater lectionis* in this inscription is the word בית (1.9) and perhaps ית (1.10).

Abel Beth-Maachah comes to mind immediately because of its proximity to Tel Dan. The possibility of Abilene (Ugaritic *Qrt Ablm* of the Tale of Aqhat) in southern Syria or Lebanon might also be considered.¹⁶ However, if Biran is correct regarding Ham, then I would look for a nearby Abila. Actually, some 8 km northwest of Irbid is Tel Abila, Abilene/Seleukia, one of the Decapolis and perhaps the Abila mentioned by Tiglath Pileser III in his conquest of the Gilead.¹⁷ If my reconstruction is indeed correct, then this part of the inscription describes a military confrontation in the northern Gilead in the general vicinity of Ramoth Gilead, along the latitudinal road westward to Irbid, biblical Beth Arbel (see Hos. 10:14). It would not be unusual, however, that in an inscription of this type the king would sum up all his victories on the various fronts other than at Dan, where the fragment was found.

Let us present our transcription and tentative suggestions for completion of lines, and accompanying translation:

[	... ויאמר עמרי ...]	.1
[	... אבייסקן]	.2
ישב.מלך.יש]	... וישכב אבי יהך אל]	.3
[	... אבילה. בארק.	.4
[	... אנה ויהך. הדר. קדמין]	.5
מאות.ר]	... י.מל. כיואקתל.מלן. ישראל ...]	.6
[	... כבואלפי. פרש. ורבון. רגל ...]	.7
מל]	... מלך. ישראל. וקתל]	.8
[... ביתדור. ואשם.]	.9
[... ית. ארק. הם. ל]	.10
מ]	... אחרן. ולה.]	.11
[... לך. על. יש. ראל ...]	.12
[... מצר. על.]	.13

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|----|---|------------------------|
| 1. | ... O[mri sa]id ... |] |
| 2. | ... my father went up ... |] |
| 3. | and my father died, he went to [his fate. . . . | dwelt the king of Is-] |

15. Perhaps the first two letters in line 10 ית are not part of the particle introducing a direct object (אית), but rather the first person suffix of a verb ending in *yod* in the perfect form like בניית, “I built” (cf. Zakkur, *passim*). or רבית, “I enlarged”.

16. See S. Spiegel, “Noah, Daniel and Job” *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1945), Eng. sec., 315, 336f. My thanks to Prof. Y. Muffs for bringing this reference to my attention. For relevant passages, cf. *ANET*, 152 B IV; 155 C IV and Enoch 13:9 “Abilim between Lebanon and Senir.” See also R. Dussaud, *Topographie historique de la Syrie antique et médiévale* (Paris, 1927), 111: Abel, 2 km south of Homs; 270: Abel identified with Souq Wadi Barada on the road to Damascus; 392: Abel at the foot of Mt. Ferdis east of Marj Ayoun.

17. H. Tadmor, “Tiglath-Pileser III in Ancient Palestine,” *Shnaton* 10 (1986–1989), 183. See also W. H. Mare, “Abila of the Decapolis,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:19f.

4. rael formerly in the Land of Abi[la(?). . . .]
5. I. Hadad went before me . . .]
6. . . . (my) ki.ng(s?) And I slew the Ki[ng of Israel. . . . hundreds of cha-]
7. riots and thousands of horsemen [and myriads of footsoldiers . . .]
8. the King of Israel. And (he / they) slew . . . [Kin-]
9. g of the House of David. And I put. . . .]
10. I (+ verb). The Land of Ham . . .]
11. others . . . [ru-]
12. led over Is[rael]]
13. seige upon . . .]

Let us now propose an *historical synthesis*. Three protagonists appear in this text: the king of Israel, the king of the Beth-David dynasty, and the anonymous hero of the stele, the king of Aram Damascus. Their relationship to each other is not clear from the fragment. What were the alliances? Was it the Aramean and Judean kings against the Israelite, as in the days of Ben Hadad I and Asa against Baasha (1 Kgs. 15:17ff.), or the Aramean and Israelite kings against the Judean, as in the time of Rezin and Pekah ben Remaliah against Ahaz (2 Kgs. 16:5–6; Isa. 7:4ff.), or—more likely—was it the Aramean king against the Israelite and Judean kings, as in the case of Ben Hadad II against Ahab and Jehoshafat¹⁸ (or Joram and Jehoshafat)?¹⁹ Certainly the paleographic evidence supports a mid-ninth century date.

It seems to me that another bit of evidence from the stele should be introduced, the phrase found in line 6 . . . וֹאֲקַתְלֵ מֶלֶךְ “and I killed the kin[g of. . . .” Where in the ninth century B.C.E. do we find a king killed in battle? The obvious candidate is King Ahab, who fell in one of the battles at Ramot Gilead defending the borders of his kingdom against the king of Damascus. Ahab’s death is described in 1 Kgs. 22 // Chr. 18. The event is set in a prophetic drama around the figure of Micaiah ben Imlah, who foretells the death of King Ahab. Ahab probably knew of his adversary’s plans to concentrate his efforts on killing him. “Now the king of Aram had instructed his thirty-two chariot officers: ‘Don’t attack anyone, small or great, except the king of Israel’” (v. 31). Taking an added precaution against the possibility of a check-mate maneuver, Ahab went into battle disguised (v. 30). In spite of this ruse, the historiographer tells us that the hand of Providence controlled events, so that “then a man drew his bow at *random* and struck the king of Israel between the plates of the armor.” Suffering from the mortal wound, Ahab heroically remained propped up in his chariot until he succumbed at dusk (v. 35). Be that as it may, the Israelite king died at the hands of the Arameans, and the battle was lost.

18. See Naveh’s discussion of the historical context of this fragment, Biran Naveh, 94ff., and Ahituv, “Suzerain or Vassal,” 246, as well as that of Puech, 233ff.

19. See M. C. Astour, “841 B.C.: The First Assyrian Invasion of Israel,” *JAOS* 91 (1971), 383–89, who follows earlier scholars in removing Ahab’s defeat at the hands of the Arameans at Ramot Gilead. Instead he proposes that there was a friendly relationship between Ahab and Ben Hadad II and that it was Joram, Ahab’s son who was wounded by the Assyrians at Ramot Gilead.

I propose that in relating this event from the Aramean perspective, the court scribe would put into the mouth of his king the words **וִאֲקַתַּל מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל**—"I killed the king of Israel." If this is indeed the case, the Tel Dan stele would most likely put a different slant on the story of the conflict between Aram Damascus and the Israelite alliance, just as one finds different accounts in the descriptions of Mesha's wars with Israel in the Mesha Stele and 2 Kgs. 1:1 and chapter 3 or Shishak's campaign as presented in his monumental list and in 1 Kgs. 14:25–28 and 2 Chr. 12:2–12.

In summation, we have presented an outline of how to decipher and study ancient inscriptions so as to get the maximum amount of data from them. Neither overly cautious regarding the biblical parallels nor unduly adventurous in reconstructing the text, we have focused on the newly discovered Tel Dan monumental fragment and suggested some new readings and corrections, as well as an alternate theory regarding the event that is related in this important find.

Addendum

The additional fragments of the Tel Dan inscription found during the summer of 1994 were published after this article went to press. See: A. Biran and J. Naveh, "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment," *IEJ* 45 (1995), 1–18. Actually, two small fragments were found some eight meters apart, and they have been joined to form Fragment B. My own examination of the new piece, courtesy of Professor Biran, confirms the match of the two fragments to each other. However, the publisher's attempt to make a join between these and the large Fragment A found in 1993 seems to me forced.