

# **The Tel Dan Stele**

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**From the class:**

**Ancient Israel**

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## **Introduction**

Tel Dan is an archaeological dig located at the foot of Mt. Hermon in the Galilee of Northern Israel. It is considered to be the biblical Dan mentioned in Judges 18:29. Excavations at the site were originally begun in 1966. It was not until July 21 1993 that a piece of a broken inscription on basalt stone was found. Eleven months later on June 20 1994 a second fragment was found and then ten days later on June 30 a third fragment was found. These last two fragments, which are referred to as B1 and B2 have been joined together in a manner that seems certain. Apparently all three fragments belonged to a larger monumental inscription that had been broken in pieces and these pieces in turn were used as ordinary stones in later construction. While B1 and B2 have been joined together with a high level of certainty, the joining of the B fragments to A is a little less certain.

## **Joining of the Pieces**

The connection between fragments A and B is most strongly made at line 5 of both. Apparently there is only one letter missing in the gap caused by the break. The other seven lines shared by the A and B fragments have increasing larger gaps the further they are from line 5. As Biran and Naveh state “Unfortunately, the letters of Fragment B do not constitute a direct continuation of the text of Fragment A in any line, and no line in Fragment B is complete at its end. Nevertheless, in most lines, after restoring some letters between the fragments and at the line ends, a more or less meaningful text was obtained.” (Biran/Naveh 45, p11)

Andre Lemaire states (p3) “I have checked myself...the placement of fragments A and B and I agree with the presentation of the editio princeps which seems to me the most probable, even if not practically certain.”

K.L.Noll is less confident in the reassembly and states (p8) “...because of the uncertainty of the monument's original size, I cannot accept any of the attempts to read continuously from one line to the next. (Thus, for example, I do not read the end of l. 3 and the beginning of l. 4 as one phrase, ‘the king of Israel’.)” Although Noll appears to be wisely conservative here

(perhaps overly so), it is only in order to discredit highly probable readings in order to develop his own hypothesis concerning the population of Dan.

### **Dan an Israelite city?**

Throughout the rest of his text Noll attempts to disassociate the dwellers of Dan from the political and religious entity called the Israelites. For example, Noll states “Even if one assumes a basic historical reliability in all references to a city of Dan (as opposed to a legendary individual or ‘tribe’ by that name) one will conclude that, according to the Bible, Dan was only marginally related to ancient Israel at all.” (Noll p13) He goes on to say that the Stele and the Bible, which he calls primary and secondary sources respectively, suggest that “...the ancient city was a non-Israelite city through most of the pre-Assyrian Iron Age, and the material cultural evidence does not contradict the conclusion.” (Noll p14) For someone who is so conservative about jumping to conclusions when reconstructing the text, Noll seems to place a different level of criticism on his own conclusions. He seems to try to discredit evidence from the Stele that disproves his conclusion. That evidence being that the end of line 3 most surely is continued at the beginning of line 4, as the word Israel could be guessed at even without the end of line 3. (Indeed Biran/Naveh did guess this very thing in 1993, see 43 p92) If the obvious reading is correct, then the Stele is suggesting that its author had placed it in what had been Israelite territory, for this is contrasted with the king of Israel formerly entering the author’s territory. The fact that the Stele was destroyed shortly after its creation testifies to the brevity of Syrian rule in Dan. This leaves Dan under Israelite domain, as the bible so strongly suggests when it claims in several different books that Dan was part of Israel. The history of the city as Israelite started in the period of the Judges and continued through the period shortly before the exile by Assyria (2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 30:5). The discovery of a destruction layer in Dan from the Assyrian/Israelite wars in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century testifies to the fact that it was an Israelite city at that time or at very least not part of the then bordering Assyrian empire. Thus it was most likely part of the kingdom of Israel as it would obviously not try to resist the Assyrians all by itself.

### **Dating the Stele**

Biran and Naveh suggested in 1993, before the discovery of the B fragments that

due to a small quantity of pottery fragments found directly beneath fragment A and which date no later than the middle 9<sup>th</sup> century, that the approximate date of the smashing of the Stele was around that time and that it was therefore likely erected around the beginning of the ninth century. This makes sense since, according to the Biblical records, Jehoram and Ahaziah died around 885-884. More modern scholarship however places the death of these kings about 43 years later, in 842 BC (Biran/Naveh 43 p95). They also claim that a destruction level was found dating to the same period, the first quarter of the ninth century. (43 p86) Having not yet learned of fragments B1 and B2 and having followed the modern school of dating, they ascribed this destruction to Ben-hadad I after his attack against the northern tribes and Baasha their king. The rebuilding of the city, and thus the smashing and incorporation of the fragments into the reconstruction they accredited to Ahab. (43 p95) This campaign they dated around 885. It seems, based on the paleographic dating (see below), the pottery evidence, and the destruction layer that they got the date right, but due to following the modern trend of dating the early Israelite kings about 40 years later than the scriptures show, they looked at the wrong event. Had the chronology that is obtained from the Bible (especially of the kings of Judah) been followed, they could have likely predicted at that time that Jehoram and Ahaziah's confrontation with Hazael was the subject of the inscription. (For alternatives to the current school of thought concerning Israelite and Assyrian dating, see Jones or Anstey.)

Concerning the paleographic dating of the inscription they state, "the Dan fragment can be dated to the middle of the ninth century BCE. However, this date should not be taken as definite and it might fall within a range of some decades earlier or later" (Biran/Naveh 43 p95). Although they are probably correct, it seems that a date in the range of even 50 years earlier or later (Noll p7 note 12) is as precise as one can get with such a small sample of the language.

### **Jehoram and Ahaziah**

I would agree with the scholars that claim that Jehoram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah are the two kings mentioned in lines 7 and 8 of the inscription in fragment B. This fragment helped to narrow the time period the inscription refers to and to complete some of the details. Namely who was killed by the person in the inscription. The fact pointed out by Biran/Naveh (45 p9) that Jehoram is the only king of Israel or Judah whose name

ends with the Hebrew letters resh and mem is correct. Since we know from the bible that both men were killed at the same time, the conclusion that the ‘yahu’ ending in line 8 of B refers to Ahaziah seems very logical, especially since the only other ruler of Judah in that time period with that ending was queen Athaliah.

However Noll makes a good point when he demonstrates that these kings may not be the ones referred to in the inscription. (Noll p9) He shows that the fragmentary state of the inscription does not allow a final decision to be made concerning the few letters that do remain and seem to point to Jehoram and Ahaziah. He claims that the resh and mem may just as well refer to [Hi]ram Bar [X, king of Tyre]. This interpretation according to him would allow the YHW (‘yahu’) to apply to a different king such as Ahaziah son of Ahab (Noll p10). Although I do not consider Noll’s ideas to be correct because they rely on the claim that fragments A and B are not joined properly and that the left edge of B may have extended much further, they do seem to demonstrate how easily a mistake in reconstructing this fragmentary text could occur.

It seems to me that the Jehoram and Ahaziah reconstructions are the simplest answer and also a logical answer, since we know they both died at the same time and that this occurred in the period of Hazael’s reign, which also fits with the archaeological and paleographic dating.

### **Hazael**

King Hazael of Syria was apparently a usurper to the throne (see below). He reigned from just before the time Jehu slew Jehoram and Ahaziah till more than forty years later, to a time after Jehu’s death. Both Hazael’s son and predecessor are named Ben-hadad. Hadad was apparently the name of the main Syrian deity. Hazael’s name however seems to be of Hebrew origin, consisting of the words for vision and God and may have come from his experience with Elisha as recorded in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:7-13.

Though many including Lemaire (p10) consider the inscription to be concerning the deeds or claimed deeds of Hazael of Syria, his name is not anywhere found in the inscription and there is evidence in the inscription that he was not Hazael. Namely that he seems to claim the previous king as his father. Biran/Naveh support the idea that his father was not the king by referring to 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:7-15 and to his being called the ‘son of nobody’ in an inscription accredited to Shalmaneser 3<sup>rd</sup> (*ANET*, p280b). Additionally

they feel as though the statement in line 4 that Hadad, the Syrian deity, made him king shows that he was a usurper and not rightful heir. However the strongest of these arguments seems to be from the biblical text which seems to present him as only an official in Ben-hadad's court and not as his son. Note especially 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:14 where Hazael "came to his master". It seems that the use of the term master here instead of father indicates he was not the heir. This is the same way Naaman's relationship to the king of Syria is described in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 5:1,18, and he was clearly not a son, but rather the commander of the army. Compare this to the account of Sennacherib's death by the hands of his sons in 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 32:21 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 19:37 where the author makes a point of saying it was Sennacherib's sons that killed him. However this does not rule out Hazael as the subject of the inscription, for he may have lied about the former king having been his father. Royal inscriptions in general are known to contain lies which make the king sound more important or successful than he actually was.

Concerning the problem of Hazael not actually being the son of the former king, and yet calling him father, Lemaire states "This is not new in the royal historiographical tradition of the ancient Near East. It is well known in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom and probably attested in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, especially for Tiglath-Pileser III. In the Bible itself, David once calls Saul אבִי 'my father' (1st Sam. 24:11)." (Lemaire pp5-6)

Lemaire (pp4-5) wants to understand line 3 of the inscription - 'and my father lay down; he went to his fathers' - as referring to the illness of Ben-Hadad and his death in bed as recorded in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:7-15. This fits well with the biblical passage but can only be considered as circumstantial evidence since we have no names of the father or the son recorded in the inscription nor does it specifically say the father was sick.

Victor Sasson states "Considering that in biblical times frequently a monarch had several wives and various heirs, it is possible that Ben Hadad was Hazael's father." (Sasson p547) Still in light of my above argument and the fact that bible refers to David's various wife's sons as 'sons', this argument does not seem that strong. I would be more willing to grant that perhaps Hazael was not the son of a wife but rather of a concubine. It seems that the sons of concubines had a lesser standing and may not have been considered as potential heirs. The other possibility is that

Ben-Hadad had no sons and that Hazael was enthroned in the absence of an heir. This has been known to happen throughout history and seems entirely reasonable here.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19:15, God commands Elijah to anoint Hazael as king over Syria. It is entirely possible that Elijah actually did this while Ben-Hadad was still very healthy and before he was defeated in battle by Ahab. It is also entirely possible that Elijah did this in a public manner such that the Syrians in general and Ben-Hadad specifically knew that Hazael was successor to the throne. We know from this passage and also 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:7ff, that both Elijah and Elisha were known to visit Damascus and that from this latter passage that the king of Syria revered Elisha's word. Therefore if Elijah had anointed Hazael several years previous, it seems that Ben-hadad would have accepted that as making Hazael his successor. The concept of adopting a servant as heir in the case of no natural heir was common in the ancient near east (Sarna p122ff writing concerning the Nuzi archives), though normally in the case of kings, they would simply take another wife. However if the biological problem was with the king himself, then the adoption of a chief servant would have been the method for obtaining an heir.

Sasson in his article, puts forward the idea that the biblical account does not claim that Hazael killed Ben-Hadad. He even goes so far as to suggest that Ben-Hadad committed suicide due to "Grave personal forebodings about his recovery, or unbearable pain..." (Sasson p549) He states that as far as he knows no one has put forward this idea before. I would say with good reason! Considering that Ben-Hadad sent Hazael to Elisha to find out from the prophet if he would recover and considering that the answer was that he would recover, it seems highly unlikely that right after he gets a positive answer that he would give up all hope and kill himself. Sasson's reasoning does not seem logical at this point. This leaves only two options for his death, murder or accident. Sasson's other idea that the king himself put the wet cloth on his face and then accidentally suffocated to death seems highly unlikely. If the king was able to put the cloth there in the first place, he could have just as easily removed it. Sasson also states "Regicide was considered a heinous crime, and neither the biblical texts nor Hazael's political and military achievements ... warrant to place him in that very low category." (Sasson p549) Apparently Sasson doesn't consider dashing infants and ripping open pregnant woman to be as bad as regicide. (see 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:12)

Sasson goes on to contradict his logic by stating that Jehu was “a disgustingly ruthless butcher of innocent people we know from the way he had seventy persons of Ahab's royal lineage executed by their own well-respected citizens”. Yet Jehu was just fulfilling the word of God to Ahab in 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 21:21. Obviously if Sasson wants to judge Jehu this harshly, he should logically judge Hazael, who ripped open pregnant women, even harder. The biblical text seems quite clear; Hazael killed Ben-Hadad and reigned in his place.

The idea that Hazael was a usurper or at least was not the son of Ben-Hadad may further be supported by Amos 1:4 where the ‘house of Hazael’ is mentioned. If this type of phrase (‘house of...’) refers to a royal line, as it seems to, then this verse may indicate that a new royal line started with Hazael, just as Omri’s sons are referred to as the house of Omri, since he was the first in a new royal line in Israel.

Lemaire also sees in lines 4-5 “a clear hint that the succession between Hadadezer and Hazael was not natural” (Lemaire p6). He bases this on Biran/Naveh’s translation that reads ‘and Hadad made me - myself - king’. However this translation is not entirely sure and even if it was, it is again, only circumstantial evidence.

Before the discovery of fragment B1 and B2, Biran and Naveh almost completely ruled out Hazael due to the mention of ‘my father’. (43 p95) After the discovery of the B fragments, they changed their view on this, yet still they stated, “It is unusual for a usurper to mention his father in his royal inscription. The writer of the stele, however, mentions ‘my father’ at least three times” (45 p17). In their 1993 article (volume 43) they proposed several ideas based on speculation and wisely and perhaps prophetically concluded at that time “The nature of biblical sources on the one hand and the fragmentary state of the Dan inscription on the other, do not allow us to draw definite conclusions. There may be other possible scenarios, and only the uncovering of additional pieces of the stele may provide answers to the problems raised by the discovery of our fragment” (43 p98) Even after the discovery of the B fragments this conclusions remains true, perhaps even more so.

The Syrian writer may well have thought that their forces killed Jehoram and

possibly Ahaziah, for in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 8:28ff (cf.9:15) Jehoram is wounded in battle by Hazael's forces and when the Syrians heard of the death of these two kings they may have thought it was a result of the battle wounds they inflicted. If the writer had heard the story of Jehu having killed these two kings, he may have dismissed it as a false claim, since he already 'knew' that the Syrians had mortally wounded Jehoram.

Thus even though there is much evidence from the inscription, the bible and secondary sources that Hazael was not the subject of the inscription, it is still very reasonable to think he was.

### **Jehu**

The similarities between the text and the account in the bible cannot be overlooked. Both Jehoram king of Israel, son of Ahab and Ahaziah of Judah of the house of David were killed at the same time. The biblical account attributes this to Jehu who in turn became king of Israel and battled, not so well, with Hazael.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 10:1ff we read of Jehu's order to put to death the 70 sons of Ahab, all of whom were potential kings. This seems very similar to line 6 where, according to the reconstruction, the author of the inscription claims to have killed 70 kings. Lemaire states "By this time, there were probably only 32 kings in the whole of Transeuphrates, and if Hazael succeeded, for a while, to dominate all these kingdoms, he probably did not kill all these kings!" (Lemaire p8) He also states that "Palaeographically, the reading 'seventy' is based only on a very small fragment of a letter which is interpreted as part of an 'ayin but could also be part of another letter" (p8). Yet still the similarity to the account of Jehu in the Bible should not be ignored.

### **House of David**

The most obvious understanding of the term BYTDWD is that it refers to a political entity and is thus translated literally as House of David and refers to the monarchy in Jerusalem. Noll correctly states that this is the simplest and most obvious understanding of the term. (Noll p8)

Ehud Ben Zvi states "...the weight of the biblical evidence supports the reading of bytdwd as 'the House of David' because דוד בית meaning 'the House of David' is well attested to in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 1st Kgs 12:19;

Isa. 7:2). Moreover, the biblical occurrences of the expression **בית דוד** do not suggest any other plausible alternative for **bytdwd** in the Tel Dan inscription.” (Ben Zvi p 26) In spite of his view here, Ben Zvi goes on in his article to attempt some alternative understandings for the term. He states “Alternative interpretations of **bytdwd** do exist, cannot be ruled out, and should be kept in mind.” (Ben Zvi p.29) However the alternative suggestions that he makes don’t seem highly likely. One of them is that the David mentioned here is just an officer in the army of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and that his house is some sort of provincial government office in Dan. (Ben Zvi p28). This sounds far-fetched. The other idea is that **DWD** is a reference to a deity, perhaps even **YHVH**. (Ben Zvi p27) Yet we have no record whatsoever to support such an idea. Ben Zvi notes in his addendum that Lemaire’s new reading of line 31 in the Mesha inscription as ‘house of David’ strengthens the understanding that **bytdwd** here is to be understood as ‘the house of David’. (Ben Zvi p30)

The mention of the “house of David” both in the Tel Dan Stele and in the Mesha Stele show that David was indeed the founding monarch of the Judean monarchy. Under David, both Moab and Syria become subjected as recorded in the bible: “Then he defeated Moab...So the Moabites became David's servants, and brought tribute” (2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 8:2). Also concerning the Syrians: “...David killed 22,000 of the Syrians. Then David put garrisons in Syria of Damascus; and the Syrians became David's servants, and brought tribute...” (2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 9:5b-6a) It is obvious that since David subjected these nations, that their kings would make a point of delivering their people from the ‘house of David’. This is not to ignore the fact that the Mesha inscription deals mainly with the ‘house of Omri’ and the oppression the Moabites suffered under that king. It must be remembered that at the same time according to 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 20:1ff the king of Moab (probably Mesha) with his allies went to war against Jehoshaphat king of Judah. Thus it should not be surprising to find a mention in the MI of ‘the house of David’ especially in connection with a city (**הורבן**) which was relatively closer to the kingdom of Judah than Israel.

Lemaire who provided the new reading for the MI states “...both inscriptions

probably date from the same period...and Mesha was very probably an ally or vassal of Hazael. The mention of B(Y)TDWD by two enemies of Judah very probably reveals that it was part of the official diplomatic language of this period.” (Lemaire p10) His conclusion seems logical as other monarchies are referred to in similar ways, including the monarchy of the northern tribes being called the “house of Omri” in the Mesha Stele (lines 4-5)

Perhaps also is reflected in the mention of the house of David, the wide spread understanding in the ancient world that the rightful kings of Judah were descended from David. For YHVH had promised David as follows “And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 7:16) As ancient peoples all wanted to boast in the superiority of their own gods, it is likely that enemy nations would naturally want to claim that their gods were greater than YHVH in that they had a victory over the house of David.

### **Hadad**

Harrison calls Hadad the ‘storm diety’ and identifies him with Baal (Harrison p168, 1971). ‘Hadad’ was also the name of at least two kings of Edom (1<sup>st</sup> Chron. 1:46, 50), plus a third person from Edom who was a descendant of a king and became an adversary to Solomon (1<sup>st</sup> Kings 11:14ff). Thus the name was not limited to Syrian/Aramaic usage.

Noll in his essay ‘The God Who is Among the Danites’ (*JSOT* 80 1998 p3-23) defends that suggestion Hadad was a “patron deity” of Laish/Dan during the first centuries of the first millennium. Although this suggestion comes from those who claimed that BYTDWD was a local religious structure, Noll disagrees with that interpretation stating that it probably refers to the “...the chiefdom centered in the Jerusalem of the mid-ninth century BCE.” (Noll p8) Noll however refers to line 4 and 5 as follows “These are the only unambiguous instances of religious expression on the stone. They demonstrate amply that the stone gives voice to a representative form of Iron Age state-sponsored religion, namely the religion of the patron god.” Firstly, though it seems that Hadad is here a deity,

even that cannot be completely proved from the fragmented text. For the two acts that Hadad seems to do in the text are firstly to cause someone to reign and secondly, and this is less clear, to go ahead of the author. Though a deity might be credited with causing someone to reign, the previous king or the populace of a country or a foreign ruler could also be credited with such an action. For example in 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 23:34 Pharaoh Necho makes Eliakim to reign. In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 12:1 all Israel goes to Shechem to make Rehoboam king. In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 1:43 David makes Solomon king. And in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15:11 YHVH regrets making Saul king. Additionally the text is broken at the verb and all that is actually readable is HMLK which can be translated as ‘the king’ thus it could read ‘the king Hadad’. The use of the definite article in such a construction is testified to in 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 5:3 which reads ‘the king David’. Further what has been reconstructed as the direct object of the supposed verb is not there. Only a piece of the first letter exists. If that letter is indeed aleph, then the word might be AVI, thus ‘the king Hadad my father’. At any rate, Biran and Naveh call their own reconstruction “awkward” (Biran/Naveh p15). Sasson calls their reconstruction “arbitrary and unwarranted” (Sasson p553)

The second thing Hadad is supposedly credited with in the inscription is ‘going before’ the author. Indeed this is something that is especially known for God to do in the bible. However the translation of the phrase in the Tel Dan inscription is less than certain and the word QDMI is right at the break. Thus we cannot even say with certainty that Hadad in the inscription is the Syrian deity.

Concerning the religion of Dan, Noll states “there is nothing (yet!) to suggest that Yahweh worship was introduced to the city” (Noll p23) Yet he seems to overlook the fact that in Judges 18 the men of the tribe of Dan bring with them a young Levite to be their priest when they go and conquer Laish. We know the Levite was a worshipper of Yahweh for he previously states “Go in peace. The presence of YHVH be with you on your way.” (Judges 18:6)

Noll’s conclusion that “the city’s patron god was Hadad” (Noll p23), which he tries to base on the Tel Dan inscription is not well founded. He is reading far too much into the text. The text itself does not even mention the geographical location to which it pertains except for ‘my father’s land’ in line 4, and that could be anywhere. The inscription could be from anywhere and may have never even been set up in the city of

Dan (see below under ‘Creation of the Stele’).

What are the possibilities that Hadad was the way the city of Dan and/or the Syrians referred to El-Shadai? We know that Dan was one of the locations that Jeroboam son of Nabat placed a golden calf. The choice of a calf as the symbol of the God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt does not seem so obvious. Apparently the calf was not supposed to represent a different deity than YHVH but rather to act as the idol of him. Even Jehu who was so zealous for YHVH left the golden calves intact, although he destroyed completely the Baal cult. The term Hadad 𐤇𐤇𐤍 can be translated as “the breast” in Hebrew (Ezekiel 23:3, 8, 21; Proverbs 5:19). Could this have been a name developed from the name El-Shadai? Shad in Hebrew also can mean breast.

What I’m getting at is that if the term Hadad can be connected to the Israelite calf worship, then the whole Stele would fit perfectly with Jehu. The fact that it is written in Aramaic is not troublesome as the city of Dan was on the border with Aram and apparently changed hands between Aram and Israel more than once. It seems that from the diverse pottery remains that the Danites were greatly involved in commerce (Noll p5 note 7) and therefore Aramaic would have been well known and used in that city. Additionally the conclusion that the Stele is written in Aramaic is not absolute. It may well be a far northern dialect of Hebrew that was used in Dan at that time.

### **Creation of the Stele**

The stele was almost definitely created as a type of monumental inscription declaring the greatness of the ruler whose deeds it recounts. Obviously it would have been created in the lifetime of the ruler as he speaks in the first person and acts as the author. Unfortunately we do not know who this ruler was.

When this Stele was created has been dealt with above, but where it was created and where it was intended to be displayed are questions which will be dealt with here. While based on the mineral contents the stone is said to be local basalt (Biran/Naveh 43 p84), this does not narrow the area down to the Tel Dan region. We do not therefore know exactly where the stone was mined, nor after it was mined, where it was subsequently smoothed and engraved. Nor do we know where it was intended to be displayed. It may well have been intended to be displayed in Damascus and was never delivered, but was captured in battle or broken by accident or rejected by the king for

some flaw or undesired statement, with its fragments later collected by the workers who remodeled what we call Tel Dan. All we know for sure is that three fragments of it ended up at Tel Dan where they were used as ordinary stones in building projects. Biran/Naveh state “Until further fragments of the stele are found, questions concerning its exact date, proper meaning and the circumstances of its erection at Tel Dan remain open.” (Biran/Naveh 45 p18) Even in this cautionary statement they make a big assumption that the stele was erected at Tel Dan. That is not known, nor can it be proved at this time.

### **Destruction of the Stele**

The date of the destruction of the Stele is placed not earlier than the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century based on a small quantity of pottery fragments found in a layer below the pavement in which fragment B2 was found. The destruction layer on top of this pavement was dated to the time of Tiglath-pileser 3<sup>rd</sup>. Thus B2 was incorporated into a pavement that was likely built between about 820-730 BC. While a later date is not possible, an earlier date is possible due to the nature of dating pottery fragments and the small quantity of fragments that were actually found. Additionally, while the B2 fragment was found incorporated into this pavement, that does not actually indicate when it was smashed. All it indicates is the latest possible time at which it was smashed. (see Biran/Naveh 45 p8)

The varying locations where the fragments were found seem to indicate that the Stele had sometime previously been destroyed rather than having been deliberately destroyed by vengeful Israelites at the time when the building improvements were underway. If the understanding that the kings mentioned in the stele are Jehoram and Ahaziah, then its creation and subsequent destruction are after their deaths.

2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 13:25 states that Joash (Jehoash) recaptured the cities that had been lost to Hazael from his son Ben-hadad (II). It is likely at this period or during the reign of his son Jeroboam that the Stele was destroyed. Biran/Naveh (45 p9) state “Neither (king of Israel) would have tolerated a reminder of the former weakness of their kingdom.” However this argument seems weak as the Israelite scriptures contain so much larger records of weaknesses and losses to the kingdom of Israel.

Possibly, who ever was directly in charge of the construction at Tel Dan read it,

laughed at the history that Hazael claimed for himself and told one of his workers to smash it. Although admittedly, Joash may have ordered it destroyed since it claimed the deeds of his grandfather Jehu for a king of Syria.

It is also entirely possible that the Syrians themselves destroyed the stele at the time of its creation due to too many errors by the scribe. Just as the ancients burnt scrolls that had too many errors, in like manner the easiest way to be rid of an inscription in rock is to smash it. Of course chiseling off the face of the writing is another way. Thutmose 3<sup>rd</sup> of Egypt completely erased all the accounts of his aunt who had been queen in this manner.

Basically we do not know the reason for its destruction. It may have been an accident or it may have been on purpose. If it was on purpose, the possible motivations are many, it may have been by enemies or by successors to the throne or by the king himself or by the manager of the monument shop. Any theory that is put forward concerning its destruction is pure speculation at this point.

### **Conclusion**

The Tel Dan inscription, like other early inscriptions that make mention of Israel, Judah and their kings is a very exciting find. The fact that it mentions the House of David brings this find special attention. Perhaps more than it deserves. A number of scholars have written articles about this stele, putting forward their own hypothetical twist on history. Perhaps one of them will be proved correct in the future, but for now, there is simply not much new information to be gained from this stele. It seems the biggest gains are linguistically, for now we have a few more words in a Semitic script that is the same as that used by the Israelites, with closely related vocabulary and sentence structure from the period of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. It seems reasonable to hope that more of the fragments of this stele will be found in the future. It may be worth taking the Tel completely apart so that if the fragments are in other parts of the pavement or in the walls of the Tel, they can be discovered. However even if all the fragments are found and the letters that were lost in the cracks can be reconstructed and the original account completely understood, we would still only have a royal monumental inscription intended as propaganda wherein a king is only interested in boasting of his own imagined greatness with details only very loosely based on actual history. With this and all

monumental inscriptions, the professional scholar must be very cautious in reconstructing history based upon them.

Of the articles reviewed in this paper, I strongly recommend those by Biran/Naveh and Lemaire. These are scholars who seem willing to accept obvious conclusions without being dogmatic, while remaining open-minded. The article by Ben Zvi is also worth referring to. Sasson and Noll need to apply the level of criticism that they use against the generally accepted views of scholarship to their own works. I am very disappointed with both of their articles, but especially Noll's.

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 IEJ Israel Exploration Journal  
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 SJOT Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament

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