# MUTILATION OF FOREIGN NAMES BY BIBLE WRITERS:
## A POSSIBLE EXAMPLE FROM TELL EL-ᶜUMEIRI

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One way in which the biblical text can be checked for its accuracy is to compare the form in which it has preserved the names of foreign personages with the forms in which those names have been preserved in extra-biblical sources. For example, the names of some half dozen Assyrian kings appear in the biblical text, and—given known phonetic shifts between ancient Semitic languages—these appear to have been preserved in the biblical text quite accurately. The 1984 season of excavation by the Andrews University archaeological expedition to Tell el-ᶜUmeiri in Jordan has, however, discovered a seal impression containing the name of an Ammonite king, Baalis, in sufficiently different form from its occurrence in Jer 40:14 to pose a problem that requires investigation.[1]

Lawrence T. Geraty, in his discussion of this find in the preliminary report published as the preceding piece in this issue of *AUSS* (which in turn benefited from Larry G. Herr's analysis for the official publication), has suggested several possible explanations for the divergence.[2] When first receiving information last summer on the reading of the seal impression,[3] I independently opted—on linguistic grounds and because of paralleling examples—for the

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[1]The earliest report appeared under the title "Madaba Plains Project Report: The First Two Weeks," in *Newsletter, The Horn Museum Institute of Archaeology* 5/2 (Spring 1984): 1. The discovery was made by Lloyd Willis of Spicer Memorial College, Pune, India, on the second day of field activity. He found the cone-shaped object bearing the seal impression just beneath the surface of the soil in his square.

[2]See p. 100, above.

[3]My attention was first drawn to the find by the article cited in n. 1, above—which article contains a drawing of the impression. Upon Lawrence Geraty's return from Jordan, I also had opportunity to examine the sealing itself, which is currently on loan to the Horn Museum from the Jordanian Department of Antiquities.

first of the three suggestions made in Geraty's report: namely, that of intentional pious change.[4]

Since information on the making of the discovery and Herr's reading of the text are provided in Geraty's report, details in regard to these matters may be omitted here. It will suffice to mention that I agree with Herr's reading—$B^cLYŠ^c$—and to note that although in the drawing (see p. 99, above) the fourth letter might be considered a *lamed*, examination of the seal itself indicates that it is indeed a *yod*, as Herr has presented the reading of it.

$B^cLYŠ^c$ is a good Semitic sentence-name, which may be translated as "Baal saves"/"Baal delivers." In Jer 40:14, however, the name is written $B^cLYS$. Not only is the last letter of the name on the seal impression (*ayin*) lacking in the biblical occurrence, but the S-type letters differ significantly, as well. In the sealing, the letter is a *śin/shin*, while in the biblical text it is a *samek*. A phonetic shift is not adequate to explain this difference, because the verbal root $yš^c$ occurs both in biblical Hebrew and among other Ammonite personal names from sealings, and in *both* languages it was written with a *shin*, not with a *samek*.[5] Thus, in the name's occurrence in Jeremiah, only the preformative $Y$ of the verbal element in this name has survived in its original form. How then, could this name have come to be so badly garbled in the biblical text?

Given these linguistic problems the question can be raised: Do we really have the same individual referred to on this sealing and in Jer 40:14? In all likelihood we do. From the biblical text, from Assyrian texts, and from Ammonite inscriptions, we now possess a list of nine names of Ammonite kings from the tenth century through the sixth century B.C. The Baalis of Jeremiah is the only one that contains "Baal" as a theophoric element. In addition, there is the comparison with the Ammonite onomasticon which we

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[4]See p. 100, above.

[5]Note, e.g., the Ammonite personal names on sealings which include this verbal root: $^ʔl-yš^c$, $^ʔl-š^c$, $yš^c$, $yš^c{}^ʔl$, all written with *shin*, none with *samek*. Cf. nos. 14, 25, 53, 54 in K. P. Jackson, "Ammonite Personal Names in the Context of the West Semitic Onomasticon," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, Ind., 1983), pp. 507-521.

currently possess, in which 106 names are present, and in which Baalis is the only name containing "Baal" as its theophoric element. As far as our present knowledge goes, therefore, the name of the god Baal as belonging to an Ammonite king's name is exclusive to the king of this sealing and the king mentioned in Jer 40:14. The convergence of these lines of evidence is sufficiently strong and specific to conclude that the two references are to one and the same individual, even though the verbal element in the name differs.

That difference in the verbal element requires some explanation. Two main explanations are possible here: Either Jeremiah wrote it incorrectly (whether done inadvertently or purposely), or a later scribe somewhere along the line of transmission garbled it through an error in writing. Without Jeremiah's autograph, the case cannot be decided definitively, but I would like to suggest that there is some weight of probability in favor of the first of these two possibilities.

As a sentence-name, $B^cLY\check{S}^c$ makes perfectly good sense, while $B^cLYS$ makes no sense at all. In the latter case, the final element should have been written $YSX$ for a weak verb, or $YSXY$ for a strong verb. For a later scribe to have altered this name from $Y\check{S}^c$ to $YS$ would mean that he would have changed it from an understandable form to an unintelligible one. While this could have occurred inadvertently, it should have been recognized as such; and thus, scribal error seems to be the less likely of the two possibilities. Indeed, for a scribe to have copied an impossible form would more likely suggest that he had received that impossible form from the scroll that he was copying.[6]

This leads us back to Jeremiah himself, and to the two possible explanations for his altering the name of this Ammonite king. Either Jeremiah did not know the name of this monarch well enough to have recorded it accurately, or he did have accurate knowledge of the name, but deliberately wrote it incorrectly. Given Jeremiah's presence in the land while all of these events were transpiring, it seems unlikely that he would not have known this Ammonite king's name well enough to have recorded it accurately.

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[6]It should be recognized, of course, that the scribes were exceedingly careful to copy sacred texts faithfully and accurately irrespective of whether or not those texts made sense to them.

This line of probabilities leads to the hypothesis that Jeremiah deliberately miswrote this king's name in his text. Working with that hypothesis, one might ask the question as to why he would have done so. What was there about this name and its verbal element that he would wish to deface? The sentence-name of this Ammonite king makes a statement about Baal, and that statement is that Baal "saves, delivers." In other words, Baal is the savior, the deliverer.

That concept does not, of course, square with Jeremiah's theology; for he knew that the true savior and deliverer was Yahweh, not Baal. It appears to me, therefore, that what Jeremiah did in recording the Ammonite king's name was to deface the verbal element to a degree sufficient to deflect the original meaning of the name into an unintelligible statement about Baal—a statement no longer conveying the original meaning. Thus, I would suggest that the name of Baalis in Jer 40:14 stems from a deliberate alteration made by the author himself for theological reasons.

In a previous study, I have noted a similar phenomenon in connection with the name of Abed-Nego in the book of Daniel (1:7ff.).[7] This name should mean "servant of (the god) Nego." But no such god as Nego is known in the Babylonian pantheon. Transparently, this name should read "Abed-Nabu," "servant of (the god) Nabu." Nabu was a well-known deity in Babylon, and his name appears as a part of many personal names in Babylonian sources. But, for the biblical writer to describe the good Yahwist Azariah as a "servant of Nabu" appears to have been too distasteful, and what he did was simply to move one letter further down in the alphabet and substitute a *gimel* for the *beth* formerly present in Nabu's name. In this way, he changed a perfectly sensible Babylonian statement about a known Babylonian god into a statement about an unidentifiable god, or a non-entity.

This case in Daniel appears to fall into a similar category with what we find in the case of the name Baalis in Jeremiah. There are some differences, of course. The former name belonged to a Judahite, while the latter name belonged to an Ammonite. Nevertheless, the kind of alterations made in both of these names

served a similar purpose: namely, to deny a predication about a foreign god.

Given the similarity of these two cases, it is worthy of note also that they occurred at approximately the same time in history. The episode in Daniel is dated just after the first exile from Judah in 605 b.c., while the episode in Jeremiah is dated just after the third exile from Judah in 586 b.c. These dates locate these two cases, therefore, in a similar time-frame of reference.

There are, of course, many occurrences of foreign names in the Bible which have been preserved accurately, even including names which contain predications about foreign and Yahwistically unacceptable gods. On the other hand, there do appear to have been some cases in which such names were deliberately altered for the theological reasons of the author, such as the two proposed cases of this kind that have been examined here.


*Supplementary Note:* At the galley-proof stage of the foregoing article, I have learned that Robert G. Boling, the first member of the archaeological team to identify the Ammonite king's name on the seal impression as the "Baalis" of Jer 40:14, had also suggested to the team in Amman the possibility of a solution to the name alteration which is similar to the solution I reached independently and discuss above. This information about Boling's suggestion with regard to the the sealing while the team was still in Amman has come to me through oral communication from knowledgeable sources, but I have had no direct contact with Boling himself on the matter.