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K. C. Moser and Churches of
Christ: A Theological Perspective
JOHN MARK HICKS

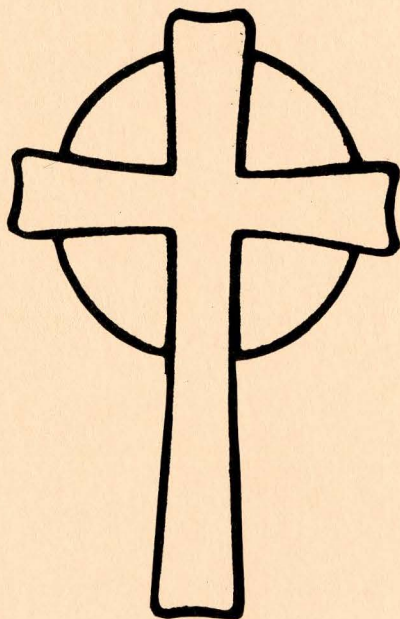
Philo on Pilate: Rhetoric or
Reality?
TOM THATCHER

The Newly Discovered
Fragmentary Aramaic Inscription
from Tel Dan
JOHN T. WILLIS

Strange Encounters of a
Lectionary Kind
TIM SENSING

Book Reviews

Book Notes



THE NEWLY DISCOVERED FRAGMENTARY ARAMAIC INSCRIPTION FROM TEL DAN¹

JOHN T. WILLIS

Abilene, TX

Serious scientific archaeological excavation began at Tel Dan (at that time called Tell el Qadi) in northern Israel at the foot of Mount Hermon in 1966 under the outstanding archaeologist Avraham Biran. In 1976, excavators discovered a bilingual inscription, written in Aramaic and Greek, mentioning "the god who is in Dan," demonstrating that this site is the location of the biblical Dan. Before the Danites took this city in the middle of the eleventh century BCE (a date based on the discoveries of distinctive collar-rim vessels in the final phase of Stratum V and of Philistine pottery dating from this time found in the eastern section of the excavation in 1971), it was called Leshem (Josh 19:47) or Laish (Judg 18:27), the name which it has in Egyptian Execration Texts of the nineteenth century BCE, in the Mari texts of the eighteenth century BCE, and in the list of cities conquered by Thutmose III in the middle of the fifteenth century BCE.

One important discovery at Tel Dan during twenty-eight seasons of excavating is the mud-brick gate with an arch constructed by the pre-Israelite (Canaanite) inhabitants of this site in the nineteenth–eighteenth century BCE. Another is a large stone platform called the *bamah* or "high place," measuring 18.2 × 18.7 meters, on the northwest corner of the tel (mound). One approached it by a flight of monumental stairs eight meters wide, which faced the city on the south. In 1974, excavators found near the stairs a small horned incense altar of Israelite type dating from the tenth or ninth century BCE.

Ancient Dan was protected by sloping ramparts built in the second half of the eighteenth century BCE. Excavations indicate that a complex with massive city walls 3.6 meters thick, an outer and inner (main) gate,

¹ Up to September 1, 1994, to my knowledge, the following articles have appeared on this inscription: A. Biran and J. Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *IEJ* 43 (1993) 81–98; F. H. Cryer, "On the Recently Discovered 'House of David' Inscription," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 8 (1994) 3–19; P. R. Davies, "'House of David' Built on Sand," *BAR* 20 (1994) 54–55; E. Puech, "La stèle arameenne de Dan: Bar Hadad II et la coalition des Omrides et de la maison de David," *RB* 101 (1994) 215–241; and [H. Shanks?], "'David' found at Dan," *BAR* 20 (1994) 26–39.

a stone-paved square and a stone-paved road protected the city on the south and east in the Israelite period. There was a low platform on the rectangular pavement, which the ruler of the city probably used to greet dignitaries when they entered the city along the processional route, and to its right a bench, where apparently the elders of the city sat to hear court cases, make deals, or carry on other types of activities. In 1992, excavators unearthed an eighth century BCE destruction level (evidently remains of the destruction by Tiglath-pileser III in 733/732 BCE, cf. 2 Kgs 15:29) outside the city-gate complex and, in the process, uncovered an additional outer gate leading to the city-gate complex which previously had not been known, dating to the ninth century BCE.

In 1993, excavators unearthed a huge pavement outside the outer city-gate and on the east struck a wall that had experienced a considerable change. On July 21, 1993, Gila Cook, surveyor for the Dan project, spotted ancient writing on a basalt stone, which had been broken and reused as a building stone in the wall. None of the pottery found beneath the wall is later than the middle of the ninth century BCE, indicating that the basalt stone was broken about that time and, therefore, that the stone with its inscription was set up originally in the first half of the ninth century BCE.

The portion of the stone that has been preserved is 32 centimeters high and 22 centimeters wide at its widest point. The stone has been smoothed on two sides for incising letters into the surface, and the letters which have been preserved are clear and unmistakable. Each word is separated from the preceding and following words by a dot. Only thirteen lines of the inscription have survived, with only three letters (parts of two words) in the first line, five in the last, and only fourteen letters at its widest, in line 5.

Transliteration and Translation

The language of this inscription is Aramaic, which we cannot distinguish from Phoenician in the ninth century BCE on the basis of our present knowledge of these two languages at that time. The transliteration (left column) and translation (right column) of the text are as follows:

Line 1	[]mr.ʿ[]	...
Line 2	[].ʔby.ysq[.]	... my father went up ...
Line 3	wyškḇ.ʔby.yhk.ʔl[. .yś]	... and my father died he went to [his fate ... Is-]

Line 4	r ^l .qdm.b ² rq. ² by[.]	rael formerly in my father's land . . .
Line 5	² nh.wyhhk.hdd.qdmy[.]	I [fought against Israel?] and Hadad went in front of me . . .
Line 6	y.mlky.w ² qtl.mn[hm. .r]	. . . my king. And I slew of [them X footmen, Y cha-]
Line 7	lb.w ² lpy.prš.[]	riots and two thousand horsemen . . .
Line 8	mlk.yšr ² l.wqtl[t. .ml]	the king of Israel. And [I] slew [. . . the kin]
Line 9	k.bytdwd.w ² šm.[²] g	of the House of David And I put . . .
Line 10	yt. ² rq.hm.l[]	their land . . .
Line 11	² hrn.wlh-[.m]	other . . . [. . .ru-]
Line 12	lk.š.yš[r ² .]	led over Is[rael . . .]
Line 13	msr.šl[.]	siege upon . . .

Thus far, most scholars agree that there is no way to restore the entire text of this inscription as it was originally because that text has not been found. But Puech has proposed its complete reconstruction based on the wording of inscriptions of a similar nature and on a general knowledge of Early Aramaic. His reconstructed text and translation are as follows:

Line 0	on the subject
Line 1	(\)l. ² rq(?). ² r]m.[.]mr.š[mry.mlk. yšr ² l.wysq.bh.]	of the territory (?) of Ara]m O[mri, king of Israel, has spoken, and he went up against it.
Line 2	wb]r[.]hdd. ² by.yseq[. mlk(?).yšr ² l. bymy.mlkh.]	But Ba]r Hadad, my father, went up [against the king (?) of Israel during the days of his reign.]
Line 3	wyškb. ² by.yhk. ² l[. byt.šlmh.wyšb. mlk.yš]	Then my father died; he went to [his eternal home. And the king of Is]rael occupied
Line 4	r ² l.qdm.b ² rq. ² by[. whmlkny.hdd. ² š. šnh.]	previously the territory of my father. But Hadad caused me to reign, I (who

Line 5	ʔnh.wyhk.hdd.qdmy[. wʔsq.blmk(?). yśrʔl.bym]	am) [a humble man]. And Hadad went before me [and I went against the king (?) of Israel during the days
Line 6	y.mlky.wʔqtl.mlkʔ[. wšbʕt.ʔlpn.gbr. wʔlp.r]	of my reign, and I killed the king [and seven thousand foot-soldiers and a thousand char-]
Line 7	kb.wʔlpy.prš.b[rmt. glʕd.bywm.hd. wmt.ʔhʔb.]	ioteers and two thousand horsemen at [Ramoth of Gilead, in a single day. And Ahab,]
Line 8	mlk.yśrʔl.wqtl[t. gbr.wrkb.wprš. lyhwšpt.ml]	the king of Israel, [died,] and [I] killed [foot-soldiers and charioteers and horsemen of Jehoshaphat, the ki-]
Line 9	k.bytdwd.wʔsm.[ʔyt. qyrt.hm.lhrbt. wʔhpk.ʔ]	ng of the house of David. And I put [their cities to ruin and I changed]
Line 10	yt.ʔrq.hm.l[yšmn. bʔśrh.mlk.ʕl. yśrʔl.mlk.]	their territory into [desert. After him there reigned over Israel an]other
Line 11	ʔhrn.wlhp[k(?).lʔ. ykl.wmt.wyhwrn br.ʔhʔb.m]	[king] and [he was not able to change (?) and he died (?). And Joram, son of Ahab, re-
Line 12	lk.ʕl.yś[rʔl.wybʕn. lmlk.ʕl.lmwšb. bʔrq.ʔby.wʔsm.]	igned over Is[rael and he tried to reign over (to occupy) the territory of my father. But I put]
Line 13	msr.ʕl[.šmrn.wʔ. . .	the siege against Samaria, and I . . . ²

² Puech, 218, 220.

Observations

Puech's restoration of the lost portions of this inscription is very extensive but has nothing to support it. It reflects Puech's creative mind and knowledge of ancient northwest Semitic languages and history, but there is no compelling reason to follow his reconstruction. The restored portions contain the specific names of people and places necessary for Puech's position. He insists that an examination of the fragment clearly reveals *b]r[.]hdd*, "Bar Hadad," at the beginning of line 2, which shows that the father of the author of the inscription was Bar Hadad I of Aram, and thus its author was Bar Hadad II=Hadadezer. Further, line 2 refers to conflict between Omri of Israel and Bar Hadad I. Line 4 mentions the time when the king of Israel ruled over the territory of Aram in the early part of the reign of Bar Hadad II=Hadadezer, referring to the rule of Ahab over the region in 856/855–853 BCE. In lines 5–10, Bar Hadad II=Hadadezer declares that his god Hadad went before him against Ahab, he killed Ahab at Ramoth of Gilead (853 BCE), overthrew the forces of Jehoshaphat of Judah who was Ahab's ally at the time, and devastated their land (cf. 1 Kgs 22:29–38). This happened shortly after Bar Hadad II=Hadadezer and Ahab fought side by side against Shalmaneser III of Assyria at Qarqar (853 BCE).³ Lines 10–11 refer to the brief reign of Ahaziah (son of Ahab) of Israel, and lines 11–12 to the reign of Joram (son of Ahab), whom Bar Hadad II besieged in Samaria (2 Kgs 6:8–7:20). Since Bar Hadad II died in 843 BCE, Puech reasons that the Dan inscription must have been set up originally between 852 and 843 BCE.⁴

Biran and Naveh are much more cautious than Puech and resist going beyond what the inscription actually seems to say. Because of the location of the stone on which the inscription was written and the dating of the pottery just beneath it, they conclude that the stone must have been set in the wall in the middle of the ninth century BCE, and thus that it was inscribed and set up in the first half of that same century. The paleography of the inscription *can* reflect the same period, although the same writing features characterize Aramaic several decades earlier and later than this time. The inscription might refer to the battle of Ramoth Gilead between Bar Hadad II of Aram on the one hand and Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat

³ For a description of this battle, see James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 278–79 [from the "Monolith Inscriptions" of Kurkh, trans. A. Leo Oppenheim].

⁴ Puech, 221–30, 233–40.

of Judah on the other (1 Kgs 22:29–38), or to the battle of Ramoth Gilead between Hazael of Aram on the one hand and Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah on the other (2 Kgs 8:28–29; 9:14–16), yet both of these battles occurred east of the Jordan, not in Galilee. 1 Kgs 15:16–22=2 Chron 16:1–6 describe a battle between Bar Hadad I of Aram and Baasha of Israel, stating specifically that Bar Hadad I overthrew Dan, along with other Israelite cities. However, Asa the king of Judah joined forces with Bar Hadad I against Baasha, yet the Dan inscription describes a war between Bar Hadad I of Aram on the one hand and the kings of Israel and of Judah on the other, which contradicts this biblical account. Another possibility is that the Dan inscription refers to a battle between the king of Beth Rehob or the king of Maacah (Aramean kings) on the one hand and a king of Israel and a king of Judah on the other, which the OT does not mention. Hence, Biran and Naveh wisely conclude: “The nature of the 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.”⁵ In essence, [Shanks] reports the views of Biran and Naveh.

Cryer is very skeptical about reconstructing the historical situation described on the inscription, in view of the various ways one might read *mlky* in line 6. He portrays three scenarios. First, *mlky* may mean “my king” referring to an earthly king, in which case the author of the inscription would be a chieftain. Second, *mlky* may mean “my king” referring to the god Hadad, to whom the author attributed his victories, in which case the author would be the earthly king of Aram. Third, *mlky* may mean “his king,” in which case the author would be the earthly king of Aram boasting of a victory in conjunction with, or perhaps over, the kings of Israel and of Betdwd.⁶

Scholars have sharply disagreed on the meaning of the term *bytdwd* in line 9. Biran and Naveh, [Shanks], and Puech think it means “the House of David,” referring to the dynasty ruling Judah, and cite parallel expressions such as Bit Humri, “the House of Omri,” for Israel, Bit Haza'ili, “the House of Hazael,” for Aram-Damascus.

Cryer suggests two ways to read and three ways to understand *bytdwd* and the (partially lost) word just before it: (1) The reading could

⁵ Biran and Naveh, 94–98 (quotation, p. 98).

⁶ Cryer, 18–19.

have been *yh]k.bytdwd*, "he went with Yatdawd." (2) It could have been *m]jk.bytdwd*. If one reads *bytdwd* as a place name, the meaning is "the king of Betdawd." (3) But if one reads *bytdwd* as a proper name in apposition to the preceding word, the meaning is "King Betdawd." Cryer believes that "Betdawd" is a more likely reading than "with Yatdawd" and that "Betdawd" is a place name. Thus he affirms that "Betdawd" was the author's designation for a geographical unit equivalent to all or part of Judah; that is, he referred to Judah by using the name of the lineage that governed it, which was collectively designated by the name of the eponymous ancestor.⁷ In reality, then, he concurs that *bytdwd* means "the House of David."

Davies denies emphatically that *bytdwd* means "the House of David." He insists, rather, that it is a place name and that the element *dwd* in the name may mean "uncle," "beloved," or "kettle."⁸ However, he gives no compelling arguments to support this view, nor does he venture to establish the location of "Betdawd."

Concluding Remarks

The preserved portion of the inscription discovered at Tel Dan is clear and, for the most part, easy to translate. Its author is an Aramean king or chieftain who is boasting about his victories over the king of Israel and his army and the king of Betdawd, probably Judah.

Thus far, suggestions that *bytdwd* in line 9 means something other than "the House of David" are much less convincing than that it means "the House of David." This being the case, this newly discovered inscription from Tel Dan contains the only certain ancient reference to David and the House of David outside the OT. Puech and Lemaire, however, think they have found "the House of David" on the Mesha Inscription (line 32 reads *bt[d]wd*),⁹ which apparently dates a few years later than the Tel Dan Inscription.

In my opinion, there is good reason to believe that more, if not all, of the Tel Dan Inscription will be discovered some day. Excavators have spent almost thirty seasons uncovering what lies beneath the surface of this mound, during which time they have unearthed approximately 5 percent of the known site. Many interesting artifacts and some inscriptions

⁷ Cryer, 16–18.

⁸ Davies, 54–55.

⁹ Puech, 227, n. 31; and André Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription," *BAR* 20 (May 1994) 30–37.

have already been found, and there is every reason to believe that more exciting, revealing, helpful treasures lie below. It is wise to be patient and to be content with what is available on the fragment which has already been discovered, rather than using that fragment to try to reconstruct the entire inscription. Undoubtedly, surprises await those who may be privileged to find and "decode" other portions of this intriguing stone.

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