

DOES THE STELE FROM TEL-DAN REFER TO A DEITY DÔD ?

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1. Introduction

The excavation of a fragment A of an Aramaic stele in Tel Dan¹ has provoked an interesting discussion on the interpretation of the lexeme *bytdwd* in line 9 of the inscription.² Three suggestions with regard to the meaning of this word have been made so far:

(1) The editors of the inscription supposed that ...*].k.bytdwd* stands in parallelism to *mlk.yšr'l*, 'king of Israel', in the preceding line and thus should be interpreted as a reference to the Davidic dynasty.³ This suggestion has been taken over by some scholars.⁴

(2) CRYER offered the possibility that *bytdwd* could be construed as a toponym and refer to an otherwise unknown Aramaic-Northern Israelite city state.⁵

(3) KNAUF, DE PURY & RÖMER suggested to interpret *bytdwd* as **baytDôd*, 'temple of Dôd' suggesting that Dod was worshipped by the Aramaic inhabitants of Dan in the ninth century BCE.⁶

The publication of two other fragments of the inscription⁷ does not shed new light on this point. The fragment B1 and B2, however, underscore the Aramaic character of the language of the inscription by giving two instances of the noun *br*, 'son' (B2:3'⁴) and by the use of the Aramaic verb *gr*, 'to cut' (B1:1').

Our contribution to the discussion does not aim at an overall interpretation of the inscription. It is confined to one observation regarding the third interpretation mentioned above. This view presumes the actual veneration of a deity Dôd in ancient Palestine. In our opinion this veneration can not be proved or made plausible.

2. The noun *רוד* in Hebrew and cognate languages

In the Hebrew Bible the noun *רוד* means 'Beloved', 'Love', 'Uncle' (father's brother). The

1 BIRAN & NAVEH 1993.

2 See e.g. LEMCHE & THOMPSON 1994; BECKING 1995.

3 BIRAN & NAVEH 1993:93.

4 Most recently by TROPPER 1993:402; BEN ZVI 1994; RENDSBURG 1995.

5 CRYER 1994.

6 KNAUF, DE PURY & RÖMER 1994:60-69; see also LEMCHE & THOMPSON 1994:12-15; P. DAVIES 1994.

7 BIRAN & NAVEH 1995.

etymology of the word is problematic.¹ The connection to the name David has become rickety.² It has been assumed that Dod serves in the Hebrew Bible as an epithet for Yahweh.³

In Akkadian the word *dādu(m)*, ‘Beloved’, ‘Darling’, used of family members, kings, and deities (*CAD D*, 149) is attested. A distinction should be made between the assumed Mesopotamian deities Dada, Dadu, Dadudu, on the one hand, and the kinship term **dād*, ‘paternal uncle’, used as a theophoric element in personal names.⁴ The names of the former group can probably all be related to the god Adad or Hadad.⁵ The use of *Dadu* as theophoric element in anthroponyms, on the other hand, is a case in point of the deification of dead kin, also evidenced by the use of Father and Brother as theophoric elements.⁶

3. Was *Dôd* venerated in Ancient Palestine?

Deities by the names of Dad and Dadat, reconstructed from onomastic evidence, are known from pre-classical North Arabic inscriptions from around the middle of the last millennium BCE.⁷ The element *dd* also appears in epigraphic Aramaic⁸, and Palmyrene onomastics.⁹ In Ugaritic we do not find *dd* as an element in theophoric names.¹⁰ However, divine appellatives constructed with forms from the root YDD are known, e.g. *mddb'l*, ‘Beloved of Baal’.¹¹ We note that in addition to the *dd*-names in ancient Arabic mentioned, pre-Islamic central Arabia also knew a major deity by the name of Wadd, ‘Love’. In ancient South Arabian religion Wadd was the official name for the popular moon god.¹²

Is the circumstantial, though ambiguous evidence strong enough to allege the veneration of a deity *Dôd* in ancient Palestine? In the next sections textual evidence from Palestine will be discussed which have been interpreted as referring to a deity *Dôd*.

3.1. *Mesha stele*:12

In the discussion of *dwd* some weight has been put on the expression אראל יודד occurring in the Mesha-inscription (*KAI* 181:12). It has been assumed that the word must have something

1 SANMARTIN-ASCASO 1977:153; *HALAT*³, 206.

2 STAMM 1960:166-169.

3 E.g. VAN ZIJL 1960:190.

4 HUFFMON 1965: 181-182; GELB 1980:17.574.

5 Cf. EBELING 1938.

6 DI VITO 1993:89-93, 254-256, 264-265.

7 HÖFNER 1965:432; 1970:369.371.

8 HERR 1978:16 no. 13.

9 STARK 1971:14.83.

10 GRÖNDAHL 1967:122.

11 GRÖNDAHL 1967:143.

6 12 HÖFNER 1965:476-477, 549-550.

to do with a deity (*KAI* II, 175); it has even been speculated that the word served as an epithet for Yahweh.¹ It is important to be aware of the fact that this understanding is based purely on guesswork. The immediate context is formed by the phrase *וּאֲשַׁב מִשָּׁם אֶת אֲרִיאֵל לְרוּחַ*, ‘I brought back Ariel/the fire-hearth of his *dwd*’. The interpretation ‘(paternal) uncle’ as well as the interpretation ‘beloved’ has been proposed.² The interpretation is complicated by the word *אֲרִיאֵל*, which could be construed as a personal name, ‘Ariel’, and as a noun, ‘fire hearth’. From the context it becomes clear that *אֲרִיאֵל* most probably refers to a cultic item since it could be “hauled before Chemosh in Kerioth” (*KAI* 181:12-13). Its specific function, however, remains unclear. Even in case *אֲרִיאֵל* should be construed as a fire-hearth dedicated to a deity *רוּחַ* does not have to refer to a deity, since it could also mean ‘his beloved’, being an epithet for a deity, or ‘his uncle’, referring to the uncle of the king of Israel who erected the fire-hearth in Atharoth. In view of these uncertainties Jackson’s claim must be repeated that “after one hundred years of study directed at the MI [= Mesha Inscription], it is safe to say that an exact understanding of these words is still a mystery”.³ In other words: the Mesha inscription does not provide us with clear evidence on the veneration of Dôd in the Transjordan area.⁴

3.2. *Amos 8:14*

In Amos 8:13-14 an oracle of woe is directed to those who swear by:

“The Ashima of Samaria,
and say:
‘By the life of your god, Dan,
and by the life of the *derek* of Beersheba”

The final clause in this swearing formula *כַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּאֶרְשֶׁבֶט*, “As the way of Beersheba lives” (RSV), has caused problems to the interpreters ever since antiquity.⁵ The main problem with this text concerns the rendering of *דֶּרֶךְ* with ‘way’, ‘road’. Even if *דֶּרֶךְ* may be translated also with ‘manner’ or ‘custom’, both the use of the verb ‘to swear’ + *וּחַי*, as well as the context, indicates strongly that we have a reference to some kind of deity in this text.

In the world of the Bible, roads—and more especially those used for pilgrimages—could acquire such status that they shared in the sphere of the gods. That is why many scholars still adhere to the view that in Am 8:14 the swearing is to the ‘pilgrimage to Beer-sheba’.⁶ They

1 VAN ZIJL 1960:190.

2 JACKSON 1989:112; SMELIK 1992:65.

3 JACKSON 1989:112.

4 See also MATTINGLY 1989; LEMAIRE 1994:142-145.

5 BARSTAD 1984:191-201; OLYAN 1991:121-127.

6 PAUL 1991:272.

sometimes compare the text with the Muslim practice of swearing by the pilgrimage route to Mecca. This custom, however, represents something quite different, and must be viewed within the broader context of Muslim swearing usage in general, where it is only attested in much later times. Also the occurrence of 'way' as a possible divine element in Akkadian (Šurpu V-VI:191: "the road, daughter of the great gods", *ḫar-ra-nu* DUMU.SAL DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ) concerns a different matter and must be viewed within the broader context of deification of objects which we may sometimes find in Mesopotamian religion. Even if such a usage is also attested at Elephantine, it is hardly relevant in relation to Am 8:14.¹

Scholarly discussion has come up with quite a number of different solutions to the problem of דרך in Am 8:14. Since 'way', 'road', or 'manner' appear not to provide us with satisfactory readings of דרך in Am 8:14, many scholars have emended the text to read another word. This, too, has turned out to be a problematic venture. One of the most common emendations has been to read דרך instead of דרך.² Yet there seems to be no need for changing the text here. The crux can hardly be solved on the basis of textual criticism. The context clearly demands that the reference is to some kind of deity. This was noted already by the Greek translator and is reflected in the ὁ θεός of the Old Greek. Though the other deities mentioned in Am 8:14 cannot be discussed in depth here, it is important to stress that the goddess Ashima is not so problematic as some scholars seem to believe.³ A goddess Ashima is now also attested in an Aramaic text as a part of a Göttertriade.⁴ There is sufficient evidence, then, to make the claim that Hebrew דרך may be connected with some kind of a deity. It appears from a survey of the occurrences of דרך in MT that we find also other texts where דרך apparently cannot be translated with the traditional 'way', 'road', 'manner'.⁵ Many scholars see a connection between these texts and the possibility that דרך in Hebrew, as in Ugaritic, can also mean 'dominion', 'might', 'power'. Also in Phoenician the word דרך occurs in the meaning 'dominion'.⁶ Relations with the Ugaritic epithet for Anat, *b'lt mlk b'lt drkt b'lt šmm rmm*, 'the Lady of Royalty, the Lady of Power, the Lady of Heavens on high'⁷ and with the much later Hellenistic legend of Derceto and her daughter Semiramis⁸ can not be discussed here.

All these observations imply that, although we are in general hardly allowed to say anything very definite about the mysterious דרך of Am 8:14, the phrase in this text does not refer to the veneration of a deity Dôd.

1 OLYAN 1991:127 n. 4.

2 OLYAN 1991:121-135.

3 BARSTAD 1984:157-181.

4 BEYER & LIVINGSTONE 1987:287-88.

5 E.g. HALAT³, 223.

6 CROSS 1979:43-44.

7 RS 24.252 lines 6-7; PARDEE 1988:101; see also KAI 15.

8 See BARSTAD 1984:196-197.

3.3. *Theophoric element in Personal Names*

Names in the Bible which may be composed with דוד as one of the elements! are problematic. In 2 Chron. 20:37 there appears the name דדוהו. In commentaries the reading דודיהו has become common.² That this reading is not so simple may be seen from the complex text history of this name, where such different forms as דודיהו; דודיהו; דודיהו; דדוהו; דדוהו; דדוהו; דדוהו; דדוהו; דדוהו are witnessed.³ Therefore, we are hardly able to say anything about the meaning of this name at all.

A seal in the Israel museum, of unknown provenance, has been thought to contain the name דדוהו.⁴ This reading, however, too is uncertain and most probably the name should be read עדיהו, i.e. the popular personal name Adayahu found in the Bible and also on a seal from Beth-Shemesh⁵ and on an Arad ostracoon (58:1).

Of interest, also, is the epigraphic Hebrew name דדוהו on a seal from Tel Jemmeh. The name is difficult to interpret: it might contain the name of a Hurrian deity *ddms*, could be seen as a Philistine personal name or as an Judahite one containing the element *ddy*. This name, too, may be read differently and can hardly be used decisively in any way⁶ and does not supply with convincing evidence concerning the veneration of Dôd as a deity.

LEMICHE & THOMPSON construed the name of the Philistine city אשדוד, 'Ashdod', as containing the element *dwd*.⁷ From a methodological point of view—and their paper is mainly on methodological weakness in the writing of historical maximalists—it should be noted that they unfortunately do not supply the reader with a full analysis of the name אשדוד which implies that their view is not open for debate since we do not know how to construe the name in its entirety.

Yet even if דוד should appear in theophoric names which might be read as 'Friend/Beloved of Yahweh', or 'Yahweh is a friend', or anything similar, this does not imply that the word necessarily must function as a divine epithet. It is methodologically unsound to classify all word elements appearing in 'theophoric' names as epithets of deities. Since names are constructed as sentences, different 'ordinary' words may be used in theophoric names. Not all predicates are automatically 'epithets'. From the above we may conclude that even if the occurrence of דוד/דד in names appears to have been widespread in the ancient Near East, there is little evidence to support the existence of a deity Dod.

1 SANMARTIN-ASCASO 1977:160.

2 Mostly following NOTH 1928:240; MYERS 1965:114.

3 NORIN 1986:182 n. 61.

4 G. DAVIES 1991:330.

5 HESTRIN & DAYAGI-MENDELS 1979 no. 56.

6 TIGAY 1986:76; LAYTON 1990:178.

7 LEMICHE & THOMPSON 1994:13.

3.4. *Dôd as a Metaphor for God*

The noun דוד does occur as an epithet or a metaphor for God in the 'Song of the Vineyard' (Isa. 5:1-7)¹ and in Israelite personal names as דודי (1 Kgs. 27:4); דודו (Judg. 10:1; 2 Sam. 23:9,24; 1 Chron. 11:12,26).² In this connection the Song of Songs should be mentioned. In the tradition of allegorical interpretation starting with the Targum, the word דוד, 'beloved', occurring various times in the Song of Songs has been interpreted as designation of God and later of Christ Jesus. It is interesting to see—from a methodological point of view—that Lemche & Thompson refer to this allegorical tradition as an argument in favour of their view and that they only make mention of the Anchor Bible commentary of Marvin Pope. A few remarks on other interpretation of the noun דוד in the Song of Songs therefore should be made here. Whereas it was earlier assumed by some scholars³ that the references to דוד in Song of Songs were to a vegetation and fertility god, consensus today quite correctly regards these texts as erotic poetry. The word דוד is used in this text to refer to the darling lover par excellence. This usage is close to Ugaritic *dd*, and no mythology should be read into this text. The term does not refer to Yahweh or any other god.

The fact that דוד has been used as a metaphor for God in ancient Palestine does not imply that a deity *Dôd* has been venerated. This can be illustrated by mentioning some other metaphors for the divine known from the Old Testament. The fact that YHWH is metaphorically compared with a 'stone' or a 'shepherd' does not imply that deities by the name of אבן, 'Eben', or רעהו, 'Ro'eh', were venerated in ancient Israel.

4. *Conclusions*

The analysis of the material known to us has shown that there is no evidence in Iron Age texts from Palestine and from the Old Testament supporting the existence or worship of a deity דוד. The word *dwd* may have been used as an appellative or epithet of deities in ancient Israel, including Yahweh, but the evidence is far from conclusive.

With regard to the Aramaic stele from Tel Dan, it should be concluded that the interpretation offered by KNAUF, DE PURY & RÖMER⁴ is far from convincing. On the other hand, the view that ביהודי does refer to the Davidic Dynasty provokes a comparable number of uncertainties, as has been shown by LEMCHE & THOMPSON.⁵ Therefore, we suggest to leave the lexeme under discussion untranslated for the time being; i.e. until new evidence shows up.

¹ KORPEL 1988.

² NOTH 1928:149-150.

³ AHLSTRÖM 1959:163-173.

⁴ KNAUF, DE PURY & RÖMER 1994:60-69.

⁵ LEMCHE & THOMPSON 1994.

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