Beth-David in the Aramaic Stela from Tel Dan

Nadav Na'aman

Following the publication of the Aramaic Stela fragment from Tel Dan, many articles were written in an attempt to reconstruct the text, describe its structure and contents, identify its author and understand its historical background. The meaning of the phrase *bytdwd* occupies a central place in the discussion. Various translations have been offered for the six letters resulting in conflicting interpretations of lines 5-10. In what follows I will critically examine some suggestions proposed by scholars for *bytdwd*, hoping to demonstrate that there is only one plausible solution for the controversial phrase.

A. Objections to the reading Beth-David

A. BIRAN and J. NAVEH (1993:93) published the text with the following note:

Line 9. ביתדוד . lit. 'the House of David', is the dynastic name of the kingdom of Judah; see *Bīt Ḫumri* for Israel, *Bīt Agusi* for Arpad, *Bīt Ḫaza'ili* for Aram-Damascus and *Bīt Adini* in the Assyrian inscriptions. Note also biblical Beth Rehob and Beth Maacah ...

BIRAN and NAVEH suggested restoring in lines 8-9 *[ml]k bytdwd* ("[the kin]g of the House of David") parallel to *mlk ysr'l* of line 8. They have concluded that "the stele must have described some circumstances in which the king of Judah was the ally of Israel, and the writer fought against both of them" (BIRAN and NAVEH 1993:96). The words ארק הם ("their land") in line 10 refer to the two kingdoms and thus corroborate this rendering of the text.

This restoration and interpretation was adopted by some scholars (AHITUV 1993; LEMAIRE 1994; PUECH 1994; MARGALIT 1994; FREEDMAN and GEOGHEGAN 1995). However, other suggestions soon appeared and they will all be examined in the following four sections.

1. KNAUF, DE PURY and RÖMER (1994) have suggested that DWD is a local deity and *bytdwd* refers to Dod's sanctuary or a cultic object therein (cf. BEN-ZVI 1994:27-29; UEHLINGER 1994:85-86). However, no unequivocal reference to a deity named Dōd is known from the entire corpus of ancient Near Eastern texts or from the Bible (SANMARTIN-ASCASO 1978, with earlier literature). The often cited reference to *'r'l dwdh* in line 12 of the Mesha inscription as an indication for the deity (DONNER and RÖLLIG 1966:175; AHLSTRÖM 1982:14; KNAUF a.o. 1994:66) is misleading. A pronominal suffix cannot be

attached to proper names and it is a mistake to translate in line 12 "the *'r'l* of (the god) Dōd".
Dwdh was sometimes interpreted as a name of a local god (Dawdoh) (CLERMONT-
GANNEAU 1887:101; DRIVER 1890:xci; COOKE 1903:11; DUSSAUD 1912:16;
ANDERSEN 1966:90, n. 2). But assuming that this interpretation is correct, *Dwdh* (Dawdoh)
differs from the assumed *dwd* (Dōd) of the Tel Dan stela. After a century and a half of research,
the putative god named Dōd is still missing from the enormous corpus of third to first millennia
BCE documents. We are therefore entitled to conclude that no god by this name was known in
the ancient Near East. The onus of proof rests on those who support the premise. They must
first of all bring clear indications (which the 'improved' and obscure text of Amos 6,10 is not)
to substantiate the suggestion, and may only then apply it to the text under discussion.

2. *Dwdh* in the Mesha inscription is sometimes interpreted as a reference to YHWH and
translated "its (i.e. the city's) Beloved" (DRIVER 1890:cxi; SEGERT 1961:213; LEMAIRE
1994:33). MÜLLER (1985:648 and n. 13) even assumed that "Dōd 'Geliebter' ist Beiname
verschiedener orientalischer Götter", but does not bring any evidence to support this argument.
It is then suggested that *dwd* in the Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan has a similar meaning,
i.e., a title of YHWH. *Bytdwd* would then be translated "the House of the Beloved" (see
DAVIES 1994:55). However, the assumption that a royal inscription of a foreign king would
mention the god's title (rather than his proper name), when referring to his temple, is doubtful
and has no known supportive analogy in the corpus of ancient Near Eastern texts. Why should
a foreign scribe use an epithet rather than the god's proper name? For this reason I question the
interpretation of *dwdh* in the Mesha Stela as a title of YHWH. Honorary names and titles are
well attested in different kinds of texts, but a victory stela of a foreign king is not the place to
look for them.

3. DAVIES (1994) suggested that *bytdwd* is a place name that may be read Beth-dōd. The town
must have been conquered by the author of the stela in the course of his campaign. However,
among the many thousand toponyms that appear in ancient Near Eastern texts and in the Bible,
none has the element *dōd*. This indicates that *dōd* (in the sense of "beloved, darling" or
"paternal uncle") was not a productive element in toponymy, and significantly weakens
DAVIES's hypothesis of a toponym whose name has this element.

Another problem with the above interpretations is the *plene* writing of the assumed title
dōd ("beloved"). In this early period one would expect it to be written *dd* with no *mater
lectionis*. The explanation offered by KNAUF a.o. (1994:66), that *dōd* is a Canaanite word in
Aramaic and that *plene* writing is known from ancient Aramaic for words of foreign origin, is
not convincing. The kinship term Dād is common in Aramaic personal names, appears all over
the Fertile Crescent (ZADOK 1977:57-58), and does not differ from other kinship terms that
were borrowed from the preceding Amorite/Canaanite language of the second millennium BCE.

The *plene* writing of *dwdh* in the Mesha inscription and *dwd* in the Tel Dan stela seems to indicate that some other word than *dōd* ("beloved") is intended here.

4. BEN-ZVI (1994:27) suggested that *dwd* may refer to a person bearing the title *dwd*. However, there is no evidence to support the assumption that *dwd* in the Mesha Stela is a title meaning "chief, leader" and is derived from the name David (LIPIŃKSKI 1966:333; GIBSON 1971:76, 80; JACKSON 1989:112-113). Moreover, if one admits that *dwd* in the new stela should be read David, why should we interpret it along such extremely hypothetical lines rather than connect it directly with the ruling house of Judah?

The four alternative solutions offered for *bytdwd* are unconvincing or even erroneous. I will now propose some arguments in support of the assumption that the six letters refer to the kingdom of Judah.

B. Supporting evidence for the reading Beth-David

A typical phenomenon of the south Anatolian, Syrian and Palestinian kingdoms in the period under discussion (the ninth century BCE) is the plurality of names. Alternate names for kingdoms in these areas are known from the Assyrian royal inscriptions and from local inscriptions (See LANDSBERGER 1948:18-23; NA'AMAN 1978:227-228). For example: the kingdom of Arpad is called Yaḫanu and Bīt-Agusi, Sam'al is called Bīt-Gabbari and Y'dy; ͨUnqi is called Patina and later Kullani; Damascus is called *ša Immerišu*, Bīt-Ḫazaili and Aram; Israel is called Bīt-Ḫumri and Samerina. The choice of kingdoms' names in the Assyrian royal inscriptions (which is the best known corpus of inscriptions) is quite random. For example: Ahab is called "the Israelite"; Jehu "of Bit-Humri"; Joash "the Samarian"; Menahen "the Samarian"; and in the annals of Tiglath-pileser III the kingdom is called Bīt-Ḫumri. The variety of eponymic/dynastic, territorial and city names reflects the complex nature of these kingdoms; indeed, the origin and meaning of some of these names is unknown.

The eponymic/dynastic name "*Bīt*-PN" is typical of many of the new West Semitic kingdoms that emerged in the Fertile Crescent in the early first millennium BCE. It mainly refers to new kingdoms whose territory is not congruent with that of former states (SADER 1987:272-273). The "son" (*mār*) of a tribal eponym or of the founder of a dynasty is designated "of *bīt* PN" (UNGNAD 1906). The Assyrians denoted kingdoms by the name of the dynasty's founder at the time of their first encounter with it, regardless of which dynasty was in power at the time of writing.

The following *bīt*-names in Syria-Palestine are known from the Assyrian royal inscriptions: Bīt-Adini, Bīt-Agusi (Arpad), Bīt-Gabbari (Sam'al), Bīt-Ḫazaili (Damascus), Bīt-Ruḫubi (Beth-rehob), Bit-Ḫumri (Israel), Bīt-Ammana (Ammon). The biblical toponym Abel-beth-maacah designates the Abel that at a certain stage belonged to Beth-Maacah.

It should be noted that our knowledge of the names of kingdoms depends mainly on the Assyrian inscriptions. For this reason only one name is known for peripheral West Semitic new kingdoms such as Judah, Ammon, Moab and Edom. Since many of the newly founded West Semitic kingdoms in the Fertile Crescent were called by *Bīt*-PN names, one would expect that the Palestinian West Semitic kingdoms were also called by such names. The name Beth-David for the kingdom of Judah is exactly what one would expect in light of this usage of name attribution, and the long-standing tradition of David as founder of the dynasty. Its absence in the Bible is easily explained by the late date at which the biblical texts were written. In the late seventh-sixth century BCE the tribal character of Judah (and that of Judah's neighbours as well) had considerably decreased, and the old dynastic name had lost its attraction. For this reason *byt dwd* is mentioned in the Bible only in the sense of "the House of David". Similarly, the eponymic/dynastic name Beth-Ammon is attested only in the Assyrian inscriptions, whereas only the abbreviated name Ammon is attested in the Bible.

BIRAN and NAVEH have restored *[ml]k bytdwd* ("[the kin]g of Beth-David") in lines 8-9 of the stela. KNAUF a.o. (1994:66) objected to this reading on the ground that neither in the biblical literature nor in other documents is there a construct combination "the king of Beth-PN". This is a very strange argument. The Assyrians usually used the abbreviated eponymic/dynastic name *mār* PN for the *Bīt*-PN kingdoms, and there are few references in which the construct state of the combination *Bīt*-PN may be examined. Nevertheless, there are some clear examples: "Ambaris king (*šar*) of Bīt-Puritish" (FUCHS 1994:125, line 201; GADD 1954:182, line 25); "the (ruling) family (*kimti*) of Bīt-Pa'alla" (FUCHS 1994:218, line 86); "the people (*nišē*) of Bīt-Jakin" (FUCHS 1994:178, line 408; 224, line 116); "the defeats (*dabdē*) of Bīt-Jakin" (FUCHS 1994:233, line 233); "Puduilu king of Bīt-Ammana" (BORGER 1956:60, line 62); "Amminadbi king of Bīt-Ammana" (STRECK 1916:140, line 34). Moreover, out of 18 references to *byt dwd* in the Bible, four appear in the construct state: *mptḥ byt dwd* ("the key of the house of David"; Isa 22:22); *tp'rt byt dwd* ("the glory of the house of David"; Zech 12:7); *mšpḥt byt dwd* ("the family of the house of David"; Zech 12:12); *ks'wt byt dwd* ("the throne of the house of David"; Ps 122:5). Regardless of whether *byt dwd* designates the kingdom's name or its dynasty, both appear in the construct state. What KNAUF a.o. (1994:66) called "expression qui serait une sorte de monstruosité sémantique" is in reality an excellent restoration for the text of the stela.

One may further suggest that a noun in the construct state (i.e., *mlk*) explains why *bytdwd* was written with no word divider. The three words *mlk byt dwd* have a double construct state ("king of the House of David"). To make the text clearer, the author wrote *bytdwd* as one word thereby avoiding the second construct state. Thus, the kings of Israel and Judah, who fought and were defeated by the author of the text, are registered one after the other in a similar manner: *mlk ysr'l* and *mlk bytdwd*.

KNAUF a.o. (1994:66) objected to the translation "Beth-David" on the ground that the two terms do not pertain to the same category; otherwise one would expect the use of parallel names (Israel-Judah; Beth-Omri - Beth-David). The claim, however, is unfounded. First, we have seen that the choice of names in royal inscriptions was arbitrary and that a scribe could select names at will. Secondly, in the list of kings who besieged Zakkur, king of Hamath and Lua^{c}ath, appear side by side tribal (Aram), dynastic ($brg\check{s}$ = Bît-Agusi), capital (Melid, Sam'al), and geographical-political (Que, ^{c}Umgi, Gurgum) names (DONNER and RÖLLIG 1966:no 202). Zakkur's inscription is written in Aramaic (like the Tel Dan inscription) and was erected in the late ninth century BCE. Also Kilamua, king of Sam'al, in his Phoenician inscription of the mid-ninth century BCE calls his kingdom by a local name ($Y'dy$) and his adversary by an ethnic name ("king of the $dnnym$") (DONNER and RÖLLIG 1966:no 24). Too little is known about the use of kingdom's names in Syria-Palestine in the ninth century BCE and one should avoid positing general rules about the assignment of names in local inscriptions.

KNAUF a.o. (1994:65) brought up two other objections to the identification of $bytdwd$ with the kingdom of Judah.

(a) They assumed that the battle was fought near Dan, where the stela was found and that such a location does not fit with the mention of the kingdom of Judah. This argument reflects a misunderstanding of the genre of royal summary inscriptions, in which the author may select events from different times and areas and organize them according to his literary and ideological aims. The battle against the kingdoms of Israel and Judah could have been conducted in some remote place and at a different time from the conquest of the city of Dan and the erection of the stela.

(b) KNAUF a.o. assumed that the mention of Beth-David implies that the king or his kingdom paid tribute to the Aramean king. The assumption is arbitrary, since the results of disastrous battles vary from one to another. The outcome of the battle is unknown and each scholar may reconstruct it according to his historical analysis of the inscription.

Finally, a methodological note regarding the relation of the inscription to the Bible is called for. Some scholars restored the text of the inscription and suggested a historical reconstruction which is heavily dependent on biblical prophetic stories (PUECH 1994; MARGALIT 1994; cf. BIRAN and NAVEH 1993:94-98; DIJKSTRA 1994:12-14). It should be remembered that in every case in which an extra-biblical text directly illuminated the history of Israel in the late tenth-ninth centuries BCE (i.e., the campaign of Shishak [c. 927/6 BCE], the battle of Qarqar [853 BCE], Mesha's rebellion, the tribute of Jehu [841 BCE]) there were serious problems in accommodating the two sources. This is due to the enormous time gap between the events and the period when the early history of Israel was written. Also, the biblical and extra-biblical texts belong to entirely different genres, and diverse genres relate past

events in different manners. We must not therefore expect a close accord between the biblical account and the text of the Aramaic royal inscription.

The alliance of the kings of Israel and Judah as reflected in the inscription fits well with the biblical prophetic stories of the cooperation between them in the campaigns against Israel's enemies. This is an important contribution of the new stela for the history of Israel in the ninth century BCE. It indicates that the stela is contemporaneous with the dynasty of Omri. The historical analysis depends mainly on the identification of the Aramean king who wrote the stela. Elsewhere I have suggested a date and a historical reconstruction for the stela (NA'AMAN forthcoming) and will not repeat it. But I would like to emphasize that in light of the deficiencies of the biblical narratives as historical sources, we must expect differences or even contradictions between the stela and the biblical accounts. Caution is the best advice that can be given to all scholars who will seek to use this most important document to understand the relations between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and Aram in the mid-ninth century BCE.

Addendum: After the completion of this paper, BIRAN and NAVEH (1995) published a new fragment of the stela which decisively corroborates the reading Beth-David in line 9. In light of the importance of several issues discussed in the present article, I decided to leave it in its original form.

Bibliography

AHITUV, S. 1993. Suzerain or Vassal? Notes on the Aramaic Inscription from Tel Dan, IEJ 43, 246-247.

AHLSTRÖM, G.W. 1982. Royal Administration and National Religion in Ancient Palestine, Leiden.

ANDERSEN, F.I. 1966. Moabite Syntax, Or. 35, 81-120.

BEN-ZVI, E. 1994. "On Reading 'bytdwd' in the Aramaic Stele from Tel Dan, JSOT 64, 25-31.

BIRAN, A. and NAVEH, J. 1993. An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan, IEJ 43, 81-98.

BIRAN, A. and NAVEH, J. 1995. The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment, IEJ 45, 1-18.

BORGER, R. 1956. Die Inschriften Asarhaddons Königs von Assyrien, AfO Beiheft 9, Osnabrück.

CLERMONT-GANNEAU, C. 1887. La stèle de Mésa, JA 9, 72-112.

COOKE, G.A. 1903. A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions, Oxford.

DAVIES, P.R. 1994. "House of David" Built on Sand, BARev 20/4, 54-55.

DIJKSTRA, M. 1994. An Epigraphic and Historical Note on the Stela of Tel Dan, BN 74, 10-14.

DONNER, H. and RÖLLIG, W. 1966. Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften, Wiesbaden.

DRIVER, S.R. 1890. Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel, Oxford.

DUSSAUD, R. 1912. Les monuments Palestiniens et Judaïques, Paris.

FREEDMAN, D.N. and GEOGHEGAN, J.C. 1995. House of David is There, BARev 21/2, 78-79.

FUCHS, A. 1994. Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad, Göttingen.

GADD, C.J. 1954. Inscribed Prisms of Sargon II from Nimrud, Iraq 16, 173-201.

GIBSON, J.C.L. 1971. Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, I. Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions, Oxford.

JACKSON, K.P. 1989. The Language of the Mesha Inscription, in A. DEARMAN (ed.), Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab, Atlanta, 96-130.

KNAUF, E.A., DE PURY, A. and RÖMER, TH. 1994. BaytDawid ou BaytDōd?, BN 72, 60-69.

LANDSBERGER, B. 1948. Sam'al. Studien zur Entdeckung der Ruinenstaette Karatepe, Ankara.

LEMAIRE, A. 1994. Epigraphie Palestinienne: nouveaux documents, I. Fragment de stèle Araméenne de Tell Dan (IXe s. av. J.-C.), Henoch 16, 87-93.

23

LIPIŃSKI, E. 1966. Etymological and Exegetical Notes on the Meša^c Inscription, Or. 40, 325-340.

MARGALIT, B. 1994. The Aram. Stele from t. Dan, NABU 1994/1, 20-21.

MÜLLER, H.-P. 1985. Moabitische-historische Inschriften, in O. Kaiser (ed.), Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments, I., Gütersloh, 646-650.

NA'AMAN, N. 1978. Looking for KTK, WdO 9, 220-239.

PUECH, E. 1994. La stèle araméenne de Dan: Bar Hadad II et la coalition des Omrides et de la Maison de David, RB 101, 215-241.

SADER, H. 1987. Les états Araméens de Syrie depuis leur formation jusqu'à leur transformation en provinces Assyriennes, Beirut.

SANMARTIN-ASCASO, J. 1978. דוֹד dôdh, in G.J. BOTTERWECK and H. RINGGREN (eds.), Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, III., Grand Rapids, 143-156.

SEGERT, S. 1961. Die Sprache der moabitischen Königsinschrift, Archiv Orientalni 29, 197-267.

STRECK, M. 1916. Assurbanipal und die letzten Assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergange Niniveh's, II., Leipzig.

UEHLINGER, C. 1994. Eine anthropomorphe Kultstatue des Gottes von Dan?, BN 72, 85-100.

UNGNAD, A. 1906. Jaua, mâr Ḫumrî, OLZ 9, 224-226.

ZADOK, R. 1977. On West Semites in Babylonia during the Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods, Jerusalem.