

Does the Stele from Tel Dan refer to a Deity Bethel?

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Almost ten years after the find of the first fragment of an inscription at Tel Dan on July 21, 1993, George Athas has published an impressive and scholarly monograph on the interpretation of the three Aramaic fragments.¹ After a very thorough investigation of the archaeological contexts of the finds and a painstaking epigraphical and paleographical analysis of the inscription, he arrives at the conclusion that the three fragments have been part of one large monumental inscription. Fragment A contains the remnants of the upper part of the inscription while fragments B1+2 should be placed below fragment A at about 20-25% from the bottom.² This well argued position is that convincing that I have to withdraw my earlier opinion that the fragments had been part of two separate inscriptions.³ The language of the inscription is in Athas' view Aramaic.⁴ He dates the text to the early eighth century BCE.⁵ The 'I' of the inscription most probably was the Aramaic king Bar Hadad II.⁶

Athas' investigation of the inscription itself has led to some new readings of the text, the most important of which can be found in A:3-4 where he proposes to read:

[... בבבל:א] (3) [ראל קדם בארק אלבי תאל...] (4)

He translates this clause as follows:

(3) [... at every] (4) ancient [h]earth on ground of El-Bay[thel ...]⁷

His reading is based on three features:

1. In a thorough analysis, based on the stele itself, he observed that the room between the /aleph/ and the /bêl/ in line 4 should not be construed as an accidental wide space. In fact the surface of the stone is damaged but a carved stroke is visible that could only be the

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¹ G. Athas, *The Tel Dan Inscription: A Reappraisal and a New Interpretation* (JSOT Sup, 360), Sheffield, 2003.

² Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 189-91; the idea has previously been suggested by A. Biran and J. Naveh, 'The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment', *IEJ* 45 (1995), 11; W. Dietrich, *Die frühe Königszeit in Israel: 10. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (BE, 3), Stuttgart Berlin Köln, 1997, 140.

³ B. Becking, 'The second Danite Inscription: Some Remarks', *BN* 81 (1996), 21-30.

⁴ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 245-54.

⁵ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, passim.

⁶ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 255-68.

⁷ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 193; philological commentary at pp. 208-11.

remnant of a *llāmedl* of which the ‘barb’ and half the ‘shank’ have been erased. Therefore, Athas proposes to read באַרְק־אַלְבִּין.⁸ This evidence-based proposal makes the reading of Biran and Naveh באַרְק־אַבִּין and its generally accepted translation ‘in the land of my father’ inaccurate.⁹

2. The first three characters of line A:4 have generally been interpreted as the final part of the toponym אַל־רֵאֵל [ישׁ ...], ‘[Is]rael’.¹⁰ Athas suggests to construe a proper noun אַל־רֵאֵל [...], ‘hearth’.¹¹ This noun also occurs in the Mesha Inscription (KAI 181):11 in the context of the booty captured by the Moabite king to present before his patron deity Chemosh.
3. Athas notes that the letters אַל־בִּין at the end of line (4) cannot be construed as related to a root אַל־ב. This root only occurs in West Semitic as an orthographic variant of the root אַל־י, ‘to instruct, incite’. A fitting sense cannot be found for this context, however. Next, he notes that the word באַרְק lacks the postpositional definite article indicating that the word is part of a construct chain. He restores [... אַל־בִּין] into [... אַל־בִּין־רֵאֵל], ‘El-Baythel’, since in his view no other meaningful alternative can be found.¹² Athas connects the deity Bethel with the stone-god Βαίτυλος, ‘Baythel’, known from classic sources and often identified with the Semitic Bethel.¹³

On the basis of this proposal Athas draws some interesting but far-reaching conclusions. These conclusions are reached by connecting his proposed reading with (a) archaeological evidence from Tel Dan and (b) his general interpretation of lines A:3-4 of the pertinent inscription.

(a) During archaeological excavations at Tel Dan, various ‘standing stones’ have been uncovered. These ‘standing stones’ can be connected to the מצבֹת known from the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴ As regards Tel Dan, Athas refers to two groups.¹⁵ (1) Along a fortification wall, just inside the so-called ‘outer gate’, five ‘standing stones’ or מצבֹת dating to the ninth-eighth century BCE were found. The archaeological context certifies a cultic interpretation of these

⁸ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 53-57.114-17.

⁹ J. Biran and A. Naveh, ‘An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan’, *IEJ* 43 (1993), 81-98.

¹⁰ Biran and Naveh, ‘An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan’.

¹¹ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 209-10.

¹² Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 210-11.

¹³ See S. Ribichini, ‘Baetyl’, in *DDD*², 157-59.

¹⁴ See T.N.D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (CB OT, 42), Stockholm, 1995, 135-97.

¹⁵ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 312-13.

'standing stones'.¹⁶ (2) A cluster of three 'standing stones' or מצבות were discovered at the base of Dan's city wall not far away from the gate chambers and the spot where the fragment B1 was discovered. These three 'standing stones' or מצבות were found on a stone platform.¹⁷

(b) Athas generally interprets lines A:3-4 as follows. He reads: (3) and my father will repose. May he go to [..... at every] (4) ancient [h]earth on ground of El-Bay[tel ...]. In his view these lines express the wish of Bar Hadad that his father Hazael as deified king will be joined with the divine and that he will remember '[... at every] ancient [h]earth on ground of El-Bay[tel ...]'.¹⁸

On the basis of these observations and assumptions Athas proposes that אֵל־בַּיִת [El-Baythel] refers to the platform not far away from the gate chambers on which three 'standing stones' or מצבות were found. He construes Baythel as an Aramaic/Phoenician deity that was represented by a standing stone. The compound אֵל־בַּיִת [El-Baythel], 'El-Baythel', is interpreted by him as 'the Bethel-stone, El' that most probably did stand next to the three 'standing stones' or מצבות just mentioned. In sum: the Tel Dan inscription contains the remnants of a commemorative stele devoted to remembrance of the deified father of Bar Hadad II invoking El, through his Bethel-stone for help.¹⁹

This is an intriguing proposal, but is it correct? As with many (re)constructions of the past it is difficult to testify this hypothesis by a procedure of falsification. Athas might be right in his re-enactment of the past. I, however, think that the following considerations will weaken his position.

(1) Athas renders the noun אֵל־בַּיִת with 'hearth', thus following the traditional translation.²⁰

He even extends the meaning of this noun when he proposes a reference to the platform.

In doing so, he overlooks the important analysis of Stephan Münger that this word should be construed as containing the proper noun אַרְיֵה, 'lion', and the theophoric element אֵל, 'El/god'.²¹ This implies, that an 'Ariel' cannot be a 'hearth' or a 'platform' for 'standing stones' or מצבות, but should be regarded as a lion-shaped representation of a deity.

¹⁶ A. Biran, *Biblical Dan*, Jerusalem, 1994, 238-45.

¹⁷ Biran and Naveh, 'Tel Dan Inscription', 1-3 with Fig. 1 and 2. See also T. Haettner Blomquist, *Gates and Gods: Cults in the City Gates of Iron Age Palestine. An Investigation of the Archaeological and Biblical Sources* (CB OT, 46), Stockholm, 1999.

¹⁸ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 313.

¹⁹ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 309-15.

²⁰ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 209-10; *DNWSI*, 101.

²¹ S. Münger, 'Ariel', in: *DDD²*, 88-89.

- (2) Athas renders the noun ארֶק in the expression בארֶק אֶלְבִּין with ‘ground’ instead of the more common ‘land’. He construes the noun as referring to a plot of land and not so much to a state entity.²² He correctly observes that this meaning is attested in some ostraca and documents from Elephantine.²³ What is correct for the Official Aramaic of the Persian Period, is not, however, true for the group of dialects that can be labelled as Old Aramaic. The meaning ‘ground, terrain, plot of land’ for אֶרֶק is not yet found in Old Aramaic Inscriptions. As far as I can see, the noun always refers to a territorial entity.²⁴
- (3) Bethel was a god of Phoenician origin. The oldest attestation of the deity can be found in a curse formula in the ‘treaties’ of Esarhaddon. In case King Baal of Tyre or one of the vassals of Esarhaddon would break the oath “Bethel and Anath-Bethel will deliver you into the paws of a man slaughtering lion”.²⁵ The name Bethel occurs as a theophoric element in Aramaic personal names, but not earlier than in the Neo Babylonian period.²⁶ The prominent place of a Phoenician deity in an Aramaic inscription of the early ninth century BCE is odd.
- (4) Athas construes ... אֶלְבִּין אֶתְאֵל, ‘El-Baythel’, as a compound name meaning ‘the Bethel-stone, El’. This proposal is based on the traditional interpretation of the divine names Anath-Bethel/Yahô, Herem-Bethel and Eshem-Bethel attested in the ‘Jewish’ documents from Elephantine. According to this view the divine names should be construed as compound names containing the names of two deities. In this interpretation Anath-Bethel/Yahô would be the consort of Yahô who was venerated under the name Bethel in Elephantine too.²⁷ Recent investigations, however, have made clear, that these names in Elephantine should be construed as containing a proper noun in connection with a divine name. Herem-Bethel, for instance, would mean: ‘the consecrated object of Bethel’.²⁸ This implies that in case we have to read the divine name ‘El-Baythel’ in the Tel Dan

²² Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 211.

²³ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 211 note 73; see also *DNWSI*, 110.

²⁴ See, e.g., the Aramaic part of the Bilingual Inscription from Tel Fekherye (A. Abou-Assaf, P. Bordreuil et A.R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* [ERC, 10], Paris, 1982):2; and the Sefire Treaties (*KAI* 222) A:26.28.

²⁵ Esarhaddon Treaty with Baal of Tyre (*SAA* II 5) iv:6-7; Esarhaddon Loyalty Oaths (*SAA* II 6):467.

²⁶ Listed in W. Röllig, ‘Bethel’, in: *DDD*², 174.

²⁷ See recently R. Albertz., *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit* (GAT, 8/1-2), Göttingen, 1992, 394-95; H. Niehr, *Religionen in Israels Umwelt* (NEB Ergänzungsband, 5), Würzburg, 1998, 162; J. Frey, ‘Temple and Rival Temple – The Cases of Elephantine, Mt. Gerizim and Leontopolis’, in: B. Ego, A. Lange und P. Pilhofer (Her.), *Gemeinde ohne Tempel – Community without Temple* (WUNT, 118), Tübingen, 1999, 174.

²⁸ M.H. Silverman, *Religious Values in the Jewish Proper Names at Elephantine* (AOAT, 217), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1985, 221-31; K. van der Toorn, ‘Herem-Bethel and Elephantine Oath Procedure’, *ZAW* 98 (1986), 282-285.

inscription A:4, this name cannot be interpreted as a compound name containing two divine names. Two further remarks should be made. In case we have to read the divine name 'El-Baythel' in the Tel Dan inscription A:4, then the element 'El' should be construed as a proper noun, leading to a translation 'the deity Bethel/Baethyl', which is not very meaningful. In Gen. 31:13, the name El-Bethel is not present. The text should be read as אֵל בֵּיתֵאל, "I am El, (with the name) Bethel".²⁹ These considerations make Athas' proposal rather unconvincing.

These considerations and arguments imply that Athas bold statement that 'No other meaningful alternative for understanding this lexeme (=... אֵלֵבִין] can be found',³⁰ should be treated with some care. In my view, the noun אֵרֶק should be rendered with 'land; territory' suggesting that [... אֵלֵבִין] would be the name of an as yet unknown king whose name contains the theophoric element אֵל.

In sum: Athas' proposal is interesting, intriguing and innovative, but not convincing. I hope to have made clear that the Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan only refers to the Aramaic deity Hadad (A:5 and B:4) but not to other divine beings, neither Dod³¹ nor Bethel.

²⁹ See J.C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism*. Second and Enlarged Edition (BETHL, 91), Leuven 1997, 196-97.

³⁰ Athas, *Tel Dan Inscription*, 210.

³¹ See H.M. Barstad and B. Becking, 'Does the Stele from Tel-Dan refer to a Deity Dôd?', *BN* 77 (1995), 5-12.