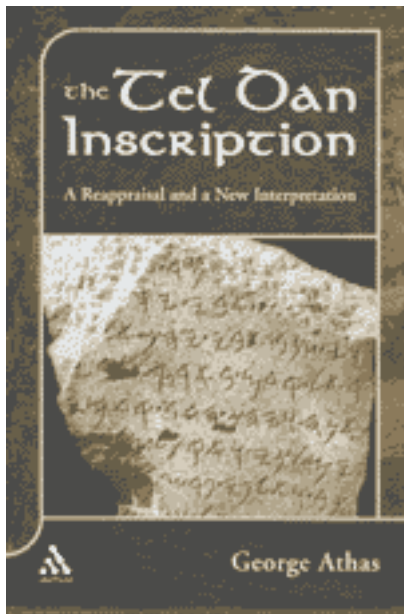


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Athas, George

The Tel Dan Inscription: A Reappraisal and a New Interpretation

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Three fragments of a royal Aramaic inscription have been found at Tel Dan. The first, comprising thirteen broken lines, was uncovered during the 1993 excavations at the site, and two smaller fragments were found during the 1994 excavations. Since the first publication of the inscription by Biran and Naveh, there has been an unending stream of articles dealing with its diverse direct and indirect implications. After a decade of extensive research, there was a feeling among scholars that the study of the inscription had reached fruition and that no significant advance could be made, unless more fragments were found in the excavations.

It is against this background that the book under review should be evaluated. The book, a rework of a dissertation submitted to the University of Sydney in 1999, deals with some aspects (notably the epigraphical, paleographical, and textual analysis) in such detail as could be done only in a doctoral dissertation. Considering that Athas is a beginning young scholar, the book is pretentious in the extreme. Athas believes that his study “will do much to quell the unhelpful passion and euphoria that the Tel Dan Inscription has evoked among scholars and interested persons alike” (319). Whether the book indeed generates “a rational interest in the inscription,” which until now suffered from “emotional scholarship” (319), will be demonstrated in the following analysis.

The book opens with a brief introduction (1–4) and a chapter on the “Archaeological Context of the Fragments” (15–17). This is followed by long chapters on “Epigraphical Analysis” (18–93), “Palaeographical Analysis” (94–174), “Arrangement of the Fragments” (175–91), “Textual Analysis” (192–254), and “Historical Commentary” (255–315). It ends with a short “Concluding Remarks” (316–19), a bibliography (320–26), and two indices of biblical references and authors.

In the chapter on the archaeological context of the three fragments, Athas discusses in detail the stratum and date in which each fragment was discovered. He dates the fracturing of the three fragments to the early eighth century B.C.E. (16). Unfortunately, Athas did not realize that Biran’s dating of the strata near the gate, the area where the fragments were found, rests mainly on historical and biblical foundations (the small fragmented pottery unearthed on and under the floors cannot supply an accurate date). Biran (*IEJ* 49 [1999]: 43–52) assumes that Tel Dan was conquered and destroyed three times: by Bar-Hadad I (1 Kgs 15:20), Hazael, and Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kgs 15:29); hence he dated Structure C to the first quarter of the ninth century, Structure B to the second half of the ninth century, and Structure A to the first half of the eighth century. The archaeological data alone can supply only a general *terminus ante quem* for the fracturing of the stela and is far less accurate than Athas assumes.

In the chapter on epigraphic analysis Athas addresses the two fragments separately, examining each line of the two fragments in great detail. Seeing the results of his detailed analysis, it is evident that he adds very little to what was already known. His reading of line 1 of Fragment A: [...] *tšr*. [...] is possibly correct (note that a printing error fell on page 39), but his restoration of line 2 [*wbh*]_s[*d*]_y. *’by* hardly matches the traces visible in the published photographs. Equally unlikely is his reading of line 4: *b’rq*. *’lby*[.....][...], as no trace of the *lamed* is visible in the photographs.

Eighty pages are devoted to the paleographic analysis of the two fragments, concluding with the suggestion that “the Tel Dan Inscription was written at some time close to 800 BCE.” Athas follows the approach of F. H. Cryer and for paleographic comparison lumps together all the known inscriptions from all over Hither Asia, cursive inscriptions included, from the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. He seems to think that the scribes and schools in this vast area shared the same paleographic tradition. The reviewer prefers the approach of J. Tropper (*UF* 25 [1993]: 395–406; *UF* 26 [1994]: 487–92), who used for comparison a classified corpus of lapidary inscription written within the Syro-Palestinian area and dated to the ninth-eighth centuries B.C.E. Moreover, Athas is unaware of the lesson learned from the Tell el-Fakhariyeh inscription of the limitations of script for pinning down an exact date of a given text (see S. Kaufman, *Maarav* 3 [1982]: 137–85; *HUCA* 57 [1986]: 1–14) and suggests a precise date for data that cannot produce

such precision. Since the oldest royal inscriptions written in alphabetical script discovered so far in the Syro-Palestinian area, outside the Phoenician coast, are no earlier than the latter half of the ninth century (i.e., those of Mesha, Bar-Hadad, Zakkur, and Kilamuwa), the Tel Dan inscription can safely be dated to about the third quarter of the ninth century B.C.E.

In the next chapter Athas suggests that “the arrangement of the fragments proposed by Biran and Naveh is unsustainable” (187). He rejects the combination of the fragments by claiming that there are great discrepancies in the alignment of the lines. His point of departure is his measuring of the slope of each line in the two fragments (27, 75), and he suggests that the trend of the lines in each fragment is different. It should be noted that the inscription does not follow a line of writing, so measuring the slope of each line might be quite misleading. Moreover, Fragment B is small and its lines short, which makes accurate measurement uncertain. In this reviewer’s opinion, Athas has failed to produce conclusive evidence to support his main thesis of separating the two fragments. Admittedly, the physical join of the two fragments is not conclusive, although it looks quite good in the photographs (see A. Biran and J. Naveh, *Qadmoniot* 28 [1995]: 42) and upon visual inspection. On the other hand, the textual restorations suggested by scholars (e.g., A. Lemaire, *JSOT* 81 [1998]: 3–4) for the combined two fragments fits exactly the gap that separates them and produces a coherent and clear text that befits a royal inscription. In the present state of our knowledge it is best to follow the widely accepted restoration of the two fragments until new evidence comes to light.

Athas’s textual analysis of the two separate fragments is not very illuminating and in some places is a step backward in the study of the inscription. Note the bizarre restoration of lines 3–4 of Fragment A: “May he go to [..... at every] ancient [h]earth on ground of El-Bay[tel]” (193, 208–11). Not only does the translation rest on doubtful textual restorations, but formulae of this kind are unknown in the first part of royal inscriptions. No less imaginative is his suggestion that *byt dwd* is a geographical name for Jerusalem (217–26, 271–81). There is no evidence that Jerusalem was ever called by this name, whereas there is ample documentation of the common use of dynastic names for first-millennium B.C.E. tribal kingdoms in the ancient Near East (see, e.g., N. Na’aman, *Biblische Notizen* 79 [1995]: 17–24). Finally, since Athas dates the inscription to the time of Joash of Israel (whose name he erroneously restores as *yhw’š*) and Amaziah of Judah, he is unable to restore the name of the ruler mentioned in Fragment B line 7 ([...] *rm br* [...]) (usually restored [*yw*] *rm br* [*’h’b*]).

In the historical conclusions, Athas suggests that the stela was erected by Bar-Hadad II, who fought against the alliance of Jehoahaz of Israel and Joash of Judah in 798 B.C.E. and killed the former in battle. But Israel and Judah were allies in the time of the Omrides,

until the revolts of Jehu in Israel and Joash in Judah brought the alliance to an end. Enmity and even an armed struggle replaced the former cordial relations and marriage between the two royal families, so the assumed alliance of the two kingdoms in the time of the Jehuites is a historical mirage. Moreover, Jehoahaz died peacefully (2 Kgs 13:7), and there is no evidence that he was killed in battle.

Athas attributes the Aramaic stela of Tel Dan to Bar-Hadad II, thus assigning to him the military achievements inscribed on the stela. However, there is no textual evidence for the assumed military achievements of Bar-Hadad; all the known victories were won by his father Hazael. Of Bar-Hadad we know that he failed to suppress the revolt of Zakkur, king of Hamath, was defeated by Adad-nirari III, king of Assyria, and later by Joash of Israel. Athas's dating of the siege of Hadrach after 796 (264–65) is historically unlikely, as the power of Damascus had been broken before this time. The siege should be dated to the first decade of Adad-nirari's reign (809–783), when Damascus was at the height of its power and its king was able to mobilize troops from all the Syro-Palestinian kingdoms (see A. Lemaire, *Eretz Israel* 24 [1993]: 148*–157*; P.-E. Dion, *Les Araméens à l'Âge du Fer: Histoire politique et structures sociales* [1997], 147–54). Rebellions must have broken in the great kingdom created by Hazael soon after his death, his son failed to suppress them, and with Adad-nirari's Syrian campaigns his power was broken. Hence the attribution of the Tel Dan stela to Bar-Hadad II is unlikely.

Athas's historical discussion is replete with other mistakes and misunderstandings (e.g., Adad-nirari as the “saviour” in 2 Kgs 13:5; the histories of Philistine Gath and Bethshemesh; the analysis of 1 Kgs 22; Makbiram of the Hazor inscription) to the extent that I would advise readers to skip this chapter. I am surprised that Athas's dissertation was approved before the historical chapter was thoroughly revised and corrected.

The bibliography is incomplete, and some important works are missing. Some works have been cited in the present review, but for the sake of completion I add some other works that should have been consulted before the book was written: H.-P. Müller, *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 8 (1995): 121–39; W. Dietrich, *Theologische Zeitschrift* 53 (1997): 17–32; I. Kottsieper in “Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf”: *Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient. Festschrift für Oswald Loretz zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres* (ed. M. Dietrich and I. Kottsieper; 1998), 475–500; P.-E. Dion in *Michael: Historical, Epigraphical and Biblical Studies in Honor of Prof. Michael Heltzer* (ed. Y. Avishur and R. Deutsch; 1999), 145–56; N. Na'aman, *IEJ* 50 (2000): 92–104; J. A. Emerton, *VT* 50 (2000): 27–37; A. Lemaire in *Prophètes et rois: Bibel et Proche Orient* (ed. A. Lemaire; 2001), 86–93.