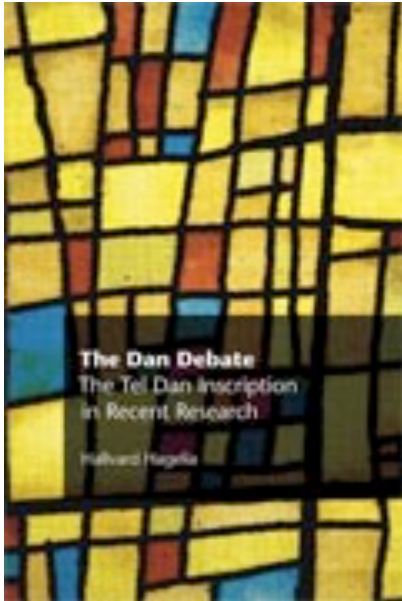


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Hagelia, Hallvard

The Dan Debate: The Tel Dan Inscription in Recent Research

Recent Research in Biblical Studies 4

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George Athas
Moore Theological College
Newtown, Australia

This book is Hagelia's second major contribution to discussions about the Tel Dan Inscription, following his 2006 monograph *The Tel Dan Inscription: A Critical Investigation of Recent Research on Its Palaeography and Philology* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 72; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet). In that first volume, Hagelia sought to weigh up debate on the Tel Dan Inscription and provide his own interpretation on its palaeographical and philological aspects. In this more recent offering, Hagelia attempts simply to survey the history of debate over the fragments of the Tel Dan Inscription from the time the first fragment was discovered in 1993 through to the time of writing in 2009.

In the preface, Hagelia gives some mixed signals as to his specific purpose. On the one hand, he states that his investigation is "a critical research history" that contains not just a summary of the debate, but also his own critique and evaluations of it (vii), yet on the following page he claims, "No single thesis is set forth, defended or refuted, for this work seeks to illuminate the different theses set forth, illuminated, supported or refuted by others who have written on the Tel Dan Inscription" (viii). A little later he asserts that his intention is to chronicle the debate over the inscription "without seeking to debunk or otherwise filter the presented views" (9). As one follows the actual presentation of the

issues and the various contributions to the debate, however, one does indeed find Hagelia's own evaluative comments. Furthermore, as someone who has contributed to scholarship on the inscription, I was somewhat disappointed to find some of my own contributions significantly filtered (see further comments below). Accordingly, the reader should be aware that the book is not a totally neutral presentation of the history of investigation on the inscription.

What follows is a series of chapters set out along the lines of the major issues surrounding the inscription. In the first chapter, Hagelia summarizes how the fragments were found and gives a thumbnail sketch capturing something of the initial excitement about their discovery. The major omission in this opening chapter is a fuller discussion of the complete archaeological context in which the fragments were discovered. Hagelia has not advanced the discussion beyond the original presentation by Biran and Naveh, when he could have taken into consideration the excavation reports from Tel Dan subsequent to the discovery of the fragments, which provided a much fuller knowledge of their context. This would have provided a more carefully considered introduction to the inscription. It appears, then, from the outset that Hagelia is firmly aligned with the original interpretation offered by Biran and Naveh, which was published well before the area in which the fragments were found had been thoroughly excavated.

This is confirmed in chapter 2, where Hagelia gives what he believes is the text of the inscription. The text that he gives here is essentially identical to that of Biran and Naveh, the original publishers of the fragments. The chapter practically ignores the vigorous debate to establish the text. Hagelia does refer the reader to his first monograph for more detailed discussion of the "33 different reconstructions" (11). However, this merely imports the shortcomings of that first monograph into the current one. There are a number of major objections to bring forward here. First, in placing the text of the inscription before the discussion of the arrangement of the fragments (ch. 4), Hagelia effectively sidelines those theories that disagree with the arrangement of the fragments and the text proposed by Biran and Naveh. That is, by first decreeing what the text of the inscription is, Hagelia undermines his attempt to provide a neutral analysis of alternative theories later in the book. This is a methodological faux pas, and, as such, it is hard for these alternative readings to receive a fair hearing. Second, as I have indicated in my own monograph from 2003 (*The Tel Dan Inscription: A Reappraisal and a New Interpretation* [London: T&T Clark, 2003]), the arrangement and the text that Biran and Naveh propose is totally undone by the fact that there is an extra letter in line 4 of Fragment A. It seems that, unfortunately, Hagelia has not examined the fragments closely enough to discern this. The final word of Fragment A, line 4, is not אבִי as Hagelia surmises here, but rather אֱלֹהֵי. I have suggested that this is the beginning of the divine name אֱלֹהֵי בַיִתֵּל (El-Baytel). Regardless of how these four letters are interpreted, the text that Biran and Naveh espouse,

and to which Hagelia subscribes, cannot really stand in the face of this extra ל. Hagelia's first monograph failed to come to grips with this critical datum, and, unfortunately, that failure is replicated in this current monograph. The extra ל is not mentioned at all in chapter 2. The only other time it is alluded to is in chapter 7, where Hagelia dismisses the suggestion of a reference to El Baytel as being "without particular basis in the inscription itself" (80). As far as being a synopsis of debate, there are some critical failures here.

Chapter 3 deals with the claims of forgery. It briefly outlines the arguments of the major proponents (e.g., Garbini, Cryer) of the hypothesis that the Tel Dan Inscription was a fake artefact. Hagelia finishes the discussion with his own assessment on the issue, namely, that the inscription is likely to be genuine.

Chapter 4 discusses the relationship between the fragments. This is one of the most critical aspects of the debate over the inscription, as it is one of the key factors influencing the reconstruction of the text. Since Hagelia has already given his reconstruction of the text in chapter 2, the reader knows to expect that theories contrary to the one Hagelia favors will be dismissed. For example, my own proposed reconstruction receives less than four lines, with the argument not described at all but rather summarily dismissed without elaboration as unreliable. By contrast, the theory in favor of the arrangement of Biran and Naveh is given two and a half pages. While this particular observation may seem personally motivated on my part, and I do admit a modicum of disappointment, it is odd to see this in a book claiming to provide a neutral survey of various views. At the very minimum, however, the major theories are given headings, so the reader is at least made aware of their existence. The reader is then able to refer to the generally well-stocked bibliography at the end of the book to follow up those who have contributed to the debate.

Chapter 5 is slightly more balanced in its discussion of the inscription's author ("originator"), although the summary of the various arguments is quite brief. Given Hagelia's alignment with Biran and Naveh's interpretation, it is not surprising that he favors Hazael as the author. Chapter 6 is, likewise, reasonably balanced in its presentation of the ways the lexeme ביתדוד has been understood. This is the most substantial chapter of the book and helpfully covers the major viewpoints in a fairly systematic way. In the end, Hagelia offers his own assessment, which again is in keeping with Biran and Naveh's original proposal that the lexeme refers to Judah by a dynastic label, "House of David."

In chapter 7 Hagelia briefly surveys treatments of the historical religious aspects of the inscription's text. The chapter focuses predominantly on arguments dealing with the possibility that the lexeme ביתדוד refers to a deity, Dod. As mentioned earlier, Hagelia dismisses in this chapter the possibility that the inscription mentions the deity El-Baytel

because he fails to account for the extra ב that is present in line 4 of Fragment A. The failure to incorporate this hard datum leads him to surmise that “El is not actually mentioned in the text” (81), thereby overlooking a further avenue of inquiry for the history of religions. Nor, as a counterpoint, does Hagelia refer to Bob Becking’s critique of my suggestion about El-Baytel (“Does the Stele from Tel Dan Refer to a Deity Bethel,” *Biblische Notizen* 118 [2003]: 19–23). There are, therefore, some notable omissions in the discussion of this chapter.

Chapter 8 deals with how the Tel Dan Inscription relates to the Hebrew Bible. The material here is largely subsumed under two broad headings: a “minimalist” approach and a “maximalist” approach. While it is true that the discovery of the fragments did initially polarize the scholarly community into these two “camps,” it did not take long for more nuanced discussion to take place. The fact that Hagelia has preserved this early state of affairs in his discussion here perhaps demonstrates his personal conviction that Biran and Naveh got the interpretation of the inscription right from the outset. Unfortunately, it also serves to present a somewhat fossilized view of proceedings. In the conclusion at the end of the chapter, Hagelia offers his own evaluation, stating that the inscription is valuable for comparison with the biblical material because “the archaeologists have found something that somehow matches what we read in the Bible” (89). By this, he is touting Biran and Naveh’s proposal that the inscription was written by Hazael, who is taking credit for the slaying of Jehoram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah during the coup of Jehu. While I personally believe there is more than sufficient evidence to doubt this conclusion, it is still a view that is commonly held.

Chapter 9 is a more detailed discussion about the inscription’s value as a historiographical source. It would perhaps have been wiser to place this discussion before chapter 8, since logically one must determine the historiographical significance of the inscription before making comment about its connection (or lack thereof) to the Hebrew Bible. In this chapter, Hagelia churns through a wide variety of arguments on such aspects as the date of the inscription and the context to which the inscription speaks, including the identity of the kings mentioned. Once again, Hagelia’s treatment is colored by his agreement with Biran and Naveh that Hazael authored the inscription in the second half of the eighth century B.C.E. and refers to the assassination of both Jehoram and Ahaziah. I must also note the misleading statement that my own proposed date for the inscription (ca. 796 B.C.E.) is based on the precarious foundation of palaeographical analysis (118). The same claim is made in the following chapter (130). This is, however, patently incorrect, and I refer the reader to my own monograph, which bases the date predominantly on the archaeological context of the three fragments, to which palaeographical analysis is added, along with other data, as supplementary weight.

In chapter 10 Hagelia weighs into the larger debate about the intersection between archaeological investigation and biblical studies. Once again, Hagelia offers little more here than what Biran and Naveh have already offered. Again this is demonstrated by a discussion of “Minimalism vs. Maximalism” that lacks the nuances of the current state of affairs. Like Biran and Naveh, Hagelia comes down close to the maximalist position.

The final chapter is a brief epilogue that gives a short airing to the exchange between Victor Sasson and myself (*Journal of Semitic Studies* 51) and attempts to draw together the threads relating to the minimalist-maximalist debate.

There is some good summary material in this book on the history of scholarship surrounding the Tel Dan Inscription. However, it is not so much a neutral survey of this scholarship as it is a subtle apology for the position espoused by Biran and Naveh. Once the reader becomes aware of this, Hagelia’s nuanced presentation becomes quite obvious. The extensive bibliography at the end of the book is excellent, though, and it provides the reader with some direction to chase down the original arguments that Hagelia purports to summarize, especially where those other arguments depart significantly from Biran and Naveh’s proposals.