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DAVID VS. BALAK

High-tech study of ancient stone suggests new proof of King David's dynasty

After reading of 9th century BCE Mesha Stele replaces biblical king with Moabite figure, scholar says 3-D imaging proves 'House of David' is more likely, just as many thought

By **AMANDA BORSCHEL-DAN** | 3 May 2019, 6:41 am



Digital drawing of the proposed reading, end of line 31 of the Mesha Stele inscription. (© West Semitic Research/Michael Langlois)

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Since the early 1990s, scholars have pointed to a barely readable bit of text on a nearly 3,000-year-old stone as possibly the first extra-biblical historical proof of the Davidic Monarchy. The reading, based upon decades of educated guesses, is notable for what can't be fully discerned in the Moabite script almost as much as what can.

A pair of dueling papers, one of which was released on Thursday, again puts the tiny bit of inscription, as well as primitive copies of it, under a microscope, offering divergent views on what the 9th-century Mesha Stele arguably offers.

In a paper published in the *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* Thursday, a trio of scholars dismisses a decades-old hypothesis that line 31 of the stele refers to *Beit David*, the biblical House of David. However, using a combination of high-tech imaging methods, another researcher shores up the Davidic reading in an upcoming article in the Collège de France's *Semitica* journal.

While the battle over a few ancient letters in the Moabite alphabet may seem purely academic, it is only one of several dramas attached to this ancient monument inscribed with battles and the spoils of war.

Today the Mesha Stele is housed in the Louvre. Back in 1868, the block of basalt was unveiled to the western world in a scene straight out of Hollywood. Found by Bedouins in the rubble of Jordan's biblical Divon, it was initially offered

for sale to French missionary, F. A. Klein. Realizing its worth, he agreed to pay a handsome sum but was later outbid by a competing collector.



A plaster replica of the Mesha Stele found in Chicago's Oriental Institute. The basalt 9th century BCE original is found in the Louvre. (wikipedia commons via Taylor & Francis Group)

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After a tangled web of political intrigue, extortion and defiance against the ruling Ottoman Empire, however, the enraged Bedouin smashed the 1.15-meter-high, 60-68-centimeters-wide tablet to pieces. These were distributed among their tribesmen and many are yet to be recovered.

Slowly, painstakingly, the majority of the tablet was purchased piecemeal by some of the period's archaeological luminaries — the French Charles Clermont-Ganneau and British Captain Charles Warren. But Humpty Dumpty couldn't exactly be put back together again; only some 700 of its circa 1,000 Moabite script letters were in hand.

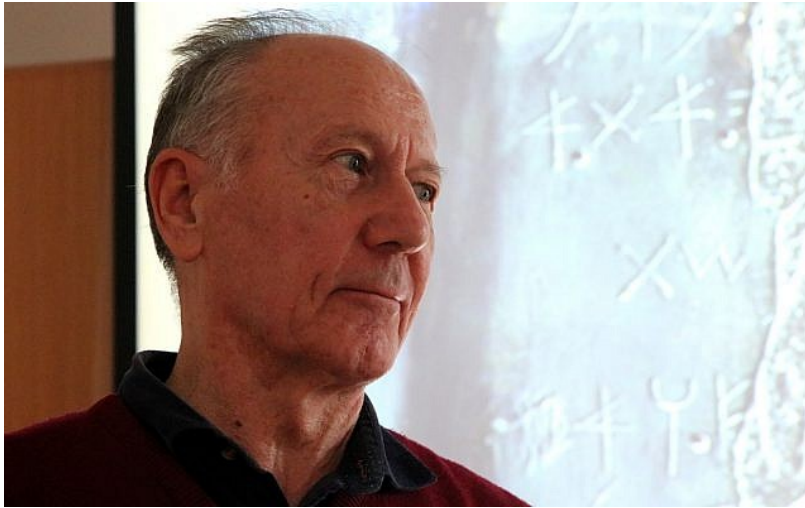
Amazingly, before it was smashed, an emissary of Clermont-Ganneau named Ya'qub Karavaca had made a visit to see the tablet lying in the rubble of Dhiban (biblical Divon), and made a "squeeze," or paper impression, of the monument. To make a squeeze, researchers wet paper and press it into every nook and cranny of carved stone.

But even while the paper was still wet, a violent fight erupted among the Bedouin: Karavaca's colleague Sheikh Jamil snatched up the drying squeeze from the rock — ripping it into seven pieces in the process — and took off on horseback, according to a [1994 Biblical Archaeology Review](#) article on the stele and its House of David hypothesis.

"This squeeze remains the only evidence of the inscription in its original condition," writes scholar André Lemaire in the article.

Betting on Beit

Due to the wear on the stone, a break down the middle, and lack of pieces, only a few of the Moabite letters are clear enough for confirmation and could arguably be read as — a *bet*, a gap, and then a *waw* and a *daled*.



Scholar André Lemaire lectures on the Mesha Stele at the French Research Center in Jerusalem on November 29, 2018. (Matthew Morgenstern)

In 1992, Lemaire, a French philologist and epigrapher, built on the work of decades of proposed readings of the mysterious line 31, and proposed a controversial combination of his own: *Beit David*, or the House of David.

There is precedence in the Bible for the compound syntactic structure *Beit David*. Likewise, other examples of dynasties are similarly named in inscriptions after kings, such as *Beit Omri*.

But, even if the letters did all add up to spell *Beit David*, the meaning of the word could range from a place name — such as *Beit-El* — or a proper name. Likewise, there is some thinking that “David” could be a title, such as “Beloved,” or even the name of an ancient, little-known god, epigrapher and historian [Michael Langlois](#) told *The Times of Israel*.

A lucky find came on the heels of Lemaire’s proposal: a second inscription, almost exactly the spelling of his hypothesized *House of David*, on a stone from the same period found at Tel Dan.



The Tel Dan stele mentions, 'House of David.' It was discovered by Avraham Biran in 1993. (Drawing by Ada Yardeni; courtesy Prof. Yosef Garfinkel)

Plan B

But this reading of the Mesha stele still rests on assumption that the missing letters would fill in the rest of the word to spell out *House of David*.

Now, however, based on new interpretations of high-resolution images of the paper squeeze, two Tel Aviv University professors — archaeologist Israel Finkelstein and Jewish historian Nadav Na’aman — and Collège de France biblical scholar Thomas Römer are proposing that the hypothesized documentation of a Davidic dynasty should be dismissed.

In “[Restoring Line 31 in the Mesha Stele: The ‘House of David’ or Biblical Balak?](#)” the trio describes an important “vertical stroke” that, according to the authors, “marks a transition between two sentences.”

“In most cases, it is followed by a word starting with a *waw*, as is the case here. This stroke can be seen in the squeeze and the upper part of it can also possibly be detected in the small original part of the stele that was inserted into the plaster restoration; this, in turn, may explain the full restoration of a dividing line in the plaster-restored section,” the authors write.

Rather than the missing letters spelling out the end of Beit and the beginning of the word David, the scholars say the *waw* letter previously assumed to be the middle letter of “David” is actually the start of a new word.



Detail from a scene depicting a young David in new Tower of David Night Experience, March 2018 (Naftali Hilger)

What that means is that rather than “Beit,” the letter “bet” is the start of a name.

In interpreting the new images, the renowned scholars (none of whom are trained epigraphers) cautiously propose that perhaps the name of the biblical Moabite King Balak is recorded there instead.

In the Bible, Balak predates David by hundreds of years. In one of the stranger episodes recorded in the Pentateuch, Balak attempts to have the then-wandering Jews nearing his land cursed by the prophet Balaam. Instead, aided by his talking donkey, Balaam blesses the Hebrews with the famous epitaph “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob.”



A print from the Phillip Medhurst Collection of Bible illustrations showing Balaam blessing the Jews as Balak looks on. (Phillip Medhurst Collection, CC BY-SA Wikimedia commons)

A new picture, an old reading

Not all scholars are convinced by the Balak theory. As Ronald Hendel, a professor of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish studies at the University of California, Berkeley, [told LiveScience](#), “We can read one letter, b, which they’re guessing may be filled out as Balak, even though the following letters are missing... It’s just a guess. It could be Bilbo or Barack, for all we know.”

Contacted by the Times of Israel this week, Langlois was similarly dismissive of the Balak hypothesis.

Puzzled, he said, “there is no such divider on the picture — including on the picture they used.” Rather, the line break comes below it on the subsequent line 32.

Langlois has spent years poring over these lines of text and will soon publish a groundbreaking paper that employs a mix of high-tech imaging to confirm the House of David as the most likely reading of the line being looked at.

There are many ways in which the faint letters can be read, said the Sorbonne-trained Langlois, but the House of David interpretation definitely cannot be ruled out — quite the contrary. Likewise, in terms of the other researchers’ paper’s claim that there isn’t enough space to write House of David, Langlois said, “The space is exactly perfect — no more, and no less.”

With a background in formal sciences, including mathematics, computer science, physics and chemistry, a few years ago Langlois decided to take on a long-term project in which he would utilize computer algorithms to perform Polynomial Texture Mapping (PTM) of the stele.

The result would be a much more detailed, 3-D image, utilizing photographs of the stone itself as well as the paper squeeze rescued by Sheikh Jamil on horseback and others made later by Clermont-Ganneau on the already broken stone.

Using Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) — essentially taking pictures of the artifact from a variety of angles and light sources — in 2015 Langlois and a team of scientists photographed the stele and its original squeeze at the Louvre, as well as additional squeezes in the Academy of Inscriptions and Fine Letters. Additionally, in 2018, the Louvre with the help of a professional photographer created a high-resolution backlit image of the squeeze, which also indicates depth of engraving.



Michael Langlois holds a PhD in Historical and Philological Sciences from the Sorbonne and is today a researcher at the French Researcher Center in Jerusalem. (Veikko Somerpuro)

After layering the images together, in a startling discovery, Langlois found a previously overlooked dot, which indicates a break between words throughout the entire tablet, as was customary among scribes at the time. The word-breaking dot, which is very clear under the new imaging, comes exactly after the area interpreted to read “House of David” and indicates a space after the final *daled* of David.

That rules out the Tel Aviv University paper’s proposed “vertical stroke,” said Langlois. No new sentence could start before the *vav*, since there are no Moabite words that are spelled only with a *vav* and final *daled*.



Digital drawing of the proposed reading, end of line 31 of the Mesha Stele inscription. (© West Semitic Research/Michael Langlois)

Langlois repeatedly stated to The Times of Israel that he is not trying to “prove the Bible.” However, he said, “from a purely historical standpoint, the most obvious solution is that there was a kingdom of David.”

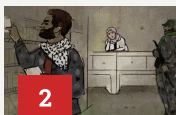
“In my paper I’m not trying to discuss whether King David exists, just trying to read the stone, and my conclusion for line 31 is that the most likely reading is Beit David, which takes into account the traces of letters and the combination of them,” said Langlois. To read any other way, he said, is basically stating a refusal to believe in the possibility of a biblical King David.

“The new imaging technology that we have confirms the reading of Beit David,” said Langlois, adding, “It’s a good thing when science can confirm a hypothesis.”

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