Restoring Line 31 in the Mesha Stele: The 'House of David' or Biblical Balak?

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After studying new photographs of the Mesha Stele and the squeeze of the stele prepared before the stone was broken, we dismiss Lemaire's proposal to read TI[T] ('House of David') on Line 31. It is now clear that there are three consonants in the name of the monarch mentioned there, and that the first is a *beth*. We cautiously propose that the name on Line 31 be read as Balak, the king of Moab referred to in the Balaam story in Numbers 22–24.

KEYWORDS Mesha Stele, Mesha, Moab, Beth David, Balak, Horonaim, Horon

The bottom part of the Mesha Stele, which includes Line 31, is broken (Fig. 1). About seven letters are missing from the beginning of the line, followed by the words צאן ("sheep/small cattle of the land"). Next there is a vertical stroke that marks the transition to a new sentence, which opens with the words הארץ ("And Hawronen dwelt therein"). Evidently a name is expected to follow. Then there is a legible *beth*, followed by a partially eroded, partially broken section with space for two letters, followed by a *waw* and an unclear letter. The rest of the line, with space for three letters, is missing.

Scholars have offered a variety of possibilities in an effort to complete and decipher the eroded and missing part of Line 31 after ישב בה. Clermont-Ganneau (1875: 173; 1887: 107) read here ב[..] and suggested that "il faut très probablement y chercher un ou deux noms propres d'homme" (1887: 107). Lidzbarski (1898: Pl. 1; 1902: 9 and Tab. 1), on the

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FIGURE 1 The Mesha Stele, marking Line 31 (plaster replica of the original in the Louvre Museum).

other hand, reconstructed בת-וק, and his reading of a *qoph* (rather than *dalet*) was adopted by Cooke (1903: 2) and Jackson and Dearman (1989: 95). Dussaud (1912: 5) assumed בת-וד; Beyerlin (1985: 257) dismissed the *dalet* and translated "Haus von Wa[...]". Notably, no solution for the missing name was proposed in these publications.²

A turn in research took place after the publication of the Aramaic stele from Tel Dan (Biran and Naveh 1993; 1995), where the title בתדוד appears as a designation for the Kingdom of Judah (i.e., 'Beth David'). Accordingly, Lemaire, after examining the squeeze (1994a; 1994b), made before the stele had been broken, suggested restoring the five letters in Line 31 as בת[ד] ('House of David'), that is, the Jerusalemite dynasty. He interpreted this designation as evidence of the rule of David's dynasty in southern Moab. In the same year, Puech (1994: 223, n. 19; 227, n. 31) proposed a similar solution. This rendering was adopted by several scholars, among them Kitchen (1997: 35–37), Rainey (1998: 249–250; 2001: 293, 307), Aḥituv (2008: 393, 395, 417) and Weippert (2010: 248 and n. 49; 2014: 134–135).

However, reconstructing 'House of David' in this place raises three serious issues (see Ben Zvi 1994: 31; Na'aman 1997: 89). First, there is a difference between the term בית דוד in the Tel Dan Aramaic inscription (a name for the Kingdom of Judah) and its assumed meaning here (a designation for Judah's dynasty). Second, why should Mesha call the enemy by a collective term ('House of David')? Why not call him by his proper name, like Omri, the King of Israel in Lines 4–5 of the inscription (see Bordreuil 2001: 162–163 n. 14)? Third, not only is there no evidence for the assumed possession of southern Moab in the late 9th century BCE by the weak Jerusalem dynasty, the assumed Judahite conquest of the area south of the Arnon River contradicts the narrative in 2 Kings 3, which recounts a failed campaign of the kings of Israel and Judah to this territory (see also Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 50–51).

It is thus evident that the restoration בת[7] is dubious and that a personal name should be sought in the fragmented text of Line 31 (as already noted by Clermont-Ganneau).

An exhibition titled 'Mésha et la Bible', held recently at the Collège de France in collaboration with the Louvre Museum (September 14 to October 14, 2018) displayed, among other objects, the squeeze of the Mesha Stele. This was an opportunity to take new, high-resolution photographs of the squeeze and examine it in detail vis-à-vis the stele.³

A careful examination of the photograph of the stele and the new images of the squeeze (Figs. 2–3) sheds new light on the five letters that follow ישב בה in Line 31. The beginning of this segment starts with a *beth*, followed by a space for one letter, still part of the original stone (compare Line 30 above it). Then comes a section restored with plaster, which ends immediately before a *waw*, the latter again on the original stone; a small piece of the original stone is inserted in the plaster-restored section. The original part of the stone

² Clermont-Ganneau (1887: 107) rejected the suggestion of Rudolph Smend and Albert Socin (1886: 12, 28-29) to render here בן דדן ודדן ("son of Dedan and Dedan").

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makes it clear that the two letters after the *beth* were already eroded when the squeeze was produced; this is why no letter is seen in the squeeze between the *beth* and the *waw*. Three observations follow:

- 1. The *taw* that follows the *beth* in Lemaire's rendering of בת[7]וד does not exist.
- 2. More importantly, before the waw of 71[--] a vertical stroke appears, that—like many similar strokes in the stele—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.
- 3. The letter after the *waw* is indeed a *dalet*, the left side of which is slightly damaged.

These observations refute any possibility of reading $\neg [\tau] \neg [\tau]$ in Line 31. Instead, we are dealing with a three-consonant word which is most probably a personal name: it starts with a *beth*, followed by a space for two missing letters that is followed by the vertical stroke, and then begins a new sentence ([....] \neg).

What personal name with three consonants, starting with the letter *beth*, could the stele have been referring to? A variety of names might fit here (e.g., Bedad, Bedan, Becher, Bela', Ba'al, Barak), but one name stands as the most likely candidate, i.e., Balak.

This name appears in the Balaam narrative in the Book of Numbers, which probably contains the latest texts of the Torah, but also integrates older memories (for more details, see Römer 2007). The story of Balaam is one of these older traditions. Its original form was probably written down under Jeroboam II/the Nimshide dynasty (see for instance Bickert 2009: 204-209). Chapters 22-24 are the result of multiple revisions and in their present form reflect preoccupations from the late Persian period (Achenbach 2003: 414 speaks of a "réécriture eines älteren Stoffes durch den Hexateuch-Redaktor"). There have been many attempts to separate the prose narrative from the (later) oracles, but without some oracles the narration does not stand (Milgrom 1990: 467–768). For our purposes it is not necessary to reconstruct the original Balaam narrative (for different attempts, see Gross 1974; Rouillard 1985; Bickert 2009: 189–204, with discussion of other theories). We basically agree with Witte (2002), who suggested that the original story can be detected in 22:2-20, 36-41*; 23:1-24*, 24:10-13, 25. This original narrative may contain, like Numbers 21, memories of pre-Mesha realities (Finkelstein and Römer 2016; Na'aman 2018: 207-212) that were collected and written down in the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century BCE.

In this narrative Balak appears as King of Moab. According to Numbers 22:36, Balak went from his capital to meet Balaam "at the city of Moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the boundary". Thus, according to the story, Balak's kingdom was located south of the Arnon River, and the text relates that he went to meet Balaam in a peripheral town located along the northeastern border of Moab, on the boundary of the Israelite territory.

For the hypothesis that 'ir was originally 'Ar, see Achenbach 2003: 406, especially n. 60.

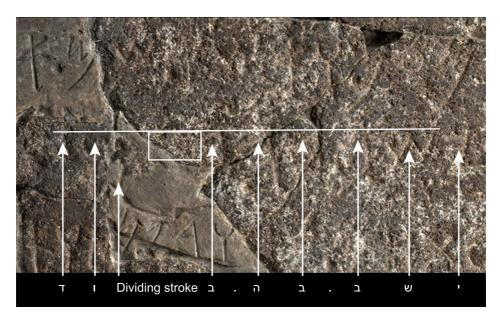


FIGURE 2 The Mesha Stele: The part of Line 31 discussed in the article. The line marks the top of the characters in Line 31. The rectangle marks the eroded space after the *beth* of a name with three consonants.

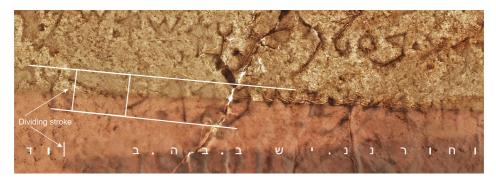


FIGURE 3 The squeeze of the Mesha Stele: The part of Line 31 discussed in the article. The lines mark the top and bottom of the characters in Line 31. The rectangle marks the space after the *beth* of a name with three consonants (courtesy of the Louvre Museum).

The seat of the king referred to in Line 31 of the Mesha Stele was at Horonaim. This place is mentioned four times in the Bible (Isa 15:5; Jer 48:3, 5, 34) in relation to the Moabite territory south of the Arnon River.⁵ Thus, Balak may be a historical personality like Balaam, who, before the discovery of the Deir Alla inscription, was considered to be an 'invented' figure (for the name Balak, see Zadok 1980: 109).

The exact location of the city of Horonaim is debated (see, e.g., Schottroff 1966:190–208; Worschech and Knauf 1986: 80–85; Dearman 1989: 188–189, with earlier literature; Dearman 1992; Smelik 1992: 85–89; Na'aman 1997; Finkelstein and Römer 2016: 720–721, 723–724) and is not our concern here.

Balak might have been memorialized in Transjordan for many generations and when the author of the Balaam story composed his work, he selected this name for the Moabite king. Note in this connection the possible preservation in Numbers 21:21–30 of North Israelite memories of the Omride occupation of the *mishor* (see, e.g., Meyer 1881; Weippert 1979: 21–22; Finkelstein and Römer 2016: 717–718; Na'aman 2018: 193, with earlier literature in n. 28). This supports the assumption mentioned above that early Israelite traditions have survived in these chapters in the Book of Numbers.

In light of these considerations, we cautiously suggest restoring the name Ba[lak] in the introduction to the Horonaim episode in the Mesha Stele. According to this proposal, the biblical Balak may have been a historical figure—the king of the region south of the Arnon River until Mesha conquered his kingdom. Mesha must have been either the ruler of a small kingdom located around Dibon or a usurper from the city of Dibon, who expanded north (into Omride territory in the *mishor*) and south (into the territory of Horonaim) and established the Kingdom of Moab on the borders that are reflected in the prophetic texts of the late 8th—early 6th centuries BCE.⁶

What might have been the content of the broken parts of the Mesha Stele in Lines 31b–32a? In Line 31a Mesha relates that a certain king dwelt in Horonaim. When the text in Line 32 resumes, it states that "Chemosh said to me, 'Go down, fight against Hawronēn'".

If the name of Hawronēn (and biblical Horonaim) is related to the deity Horon (*Ḥaurōn*), the fight against the ruler residing there could have been considered as a fight between Chemosh and Horon. The deity Horon is well-attested already in Ugarit and Egypt and its cult spread during the first millennium in the Levant and the Mediterranean basin (Lilyquist 1994; Rüterswörden 1999, with earlier literature). The city-name Beth-horon attests that Horon was also worshipped in Canaan, perhaps as a deity of arid regions (Görg 1991).

What remains unknown is the content of the text that appears between these two sentences. Puech (1994: 227, n. 31) restored it [יבן? לה את חורנן? ("et [avait rebâti? pour elle Hawronaïn²]"); and Rainey (1998: 249–250; cf. Aḥituv 2008: 393, 395) restored the missing text [כֹן הלתחם בי] ("[wh]ile [it made war on me"), where 'it' refers to the House of David. We have already dismissed the restoration 'House of David' in Line 31. Moreover, it is clear that the new sentence starts with a waw, most probably followed by a dalet; neither fits these reconstructions. Also, the number of missing letters in Line 32 is about nine, longer than the seven letters restored by Rainey. However, the idea that the gap in the text includes an explanation of Mesha's attack on Horonaim is reasonable (see also Jackson 1989: 98; Weippert 2010: 248). According to common ancient Near Eastern norms, the Bible included, justification is required to conduct an offensive against a rival kingdom (see Na'aman 2018: 190, with earlier literature). In the first part of his stele, Mesha justified his offensive against the Israelite territories in Transjordan and the massacre of his enemies by the earlier Omride subjugation of his land. Thus, we may assume that the broken sentence in Lines 31b–32a included a justification of Mesha's offensive against Horonaim and its ruler. This parallel would make the idea of a war against Balak and Horon even more plausible.

For recent discussions of biblical and historical Moab, see Finkelstein and Römer 2016; Na'aman 2018, with earlier literature.

In the same way that Chemosh and Mesha triumphed over YHWH and Israel, the end of the inscription would have celebrated Chemosh's and Mesha's victory over Horon and Balak.

To summarize, the new photographs of the Mesha Stele and the squeeze indicate that the reading, 'House of David' (*btdwd*), is no longer an option. The missing part in the Horonaim episode after "שב בה must have recorded a personal name of a monarch, but the letters are eroded. With due caution we suggest restoring here the name of the Moabite king Balak, who, according to the story of Numbers 22–24, sought to bring a divine curse on the people of Israel. Evidently, as pointed out above, the Balaam story was written down later than the time of the Moabite king referred to in the Mesha Stele. Yet, to give a sense of authenticity to his story, its author must have integrated into the plot certain elements borrowed from the ancient reality, such as several Transjordan toponyms (Bamoth Ba'al, Pisgah, Pe'or; see Dijkstra 1995) and two personal names—Balaam and Balak.

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⁷ Other possible restorations are [אָן מָנָה?] and אוֹרָ [בַ?]ר? שָׁ[טְנָה?] and זיִרְ בַּ?]ר? שָׁ[טְנָה?].

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