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The Mesha Inscription and Relations with Moab and Edom

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The Mesha Inscription and Its Background

The Mesha Inscription, or Moabite Stone, is an inscribed black basalt stone (a stele) dating to the ninth century BCE and now exhibited in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (fig. 36.1). It was found in 1868 in Dhiban (ancient Dibon), a village located in central Transjordan east of the Dead Sea, an area known in biblical times as the land of Moab. The surviving fragments of the stele, some original and others reconstructed from a squeeze made at the time of the discovery, contain at least thirty-four lines written in Moabite, a language very close to Biblical Hebrew, using the Phoenician alphabetic script. According to the inscription, the stele was commissioned by the Moabite king Mesha (ca. 850 BCE) for the purpose of recording his reign's accomplishments, such as erecting a temple, rebuilding cities, and, most particularly, the defeat of the Israelites occupying part of Moab. As an external witness to the Hebrew Bible, the Mesha Inscription constitutes one of the most important textual sources for studying the history of the ancient

Israelite kingdoms and their relationships with their Transjordanian neighbors. It provides the earliest extrabiblical attestation of Yahweh as Israel's god and mentions for the first time the kingdom of Israel's house of Omri and probably Judah's house of David. Also, twelve of the seventeen place-names present in the inscription are also mentioned in the biblical text, which makes it a good source for biblical geography.

The kingdom of Moab was one of the three main polities that existed in Transjordan during the Iron Age, the others being Ammon, to the north in the region of modern Amman, and Edom, to the south. Like most of the small local political entities of this period, Moab did not have fixed boundaries but rather established areas of political hegemony or kinship relationships that fluctuated episodically, sometimes expanding and sometimes contracting. The land upon which Moab could claim supremacy of territory comprised the plateau east of the Dead Sea between the Wadi al-Hasa (the biblical Zered) in the south and the territory north of the Wadi Mujib (the biblical Arnon).



Fig. 36.1. The Mesha Inscription, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The earliest sources that refer to Moab date back to the thirteenth century BCE, when the ancient Egyptians carried out several military campaigns in the region and recorded the name of the land (*mu'a-bu*) and of a few of its settlements, among which was probably Dibon. According to the archaeological evidence, during the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE numerous sites were founded—most of which were clustered along the wadis (dry river beds) that flood to the Dead Sea—either as a result of the immigration of new people or because of local nomadic inhabitants adopting a new, settled way of life (Dearman 1989a, 155; Routledge 2004, 58–113; B. W. Porter 2013, 57–68).

Although we are not completely certain how this society transformed into what is known

as the “kingdom” of Moab, during the last decades in scholarship there has been a shift in paradigm toward viewing Moab, and to a large extent all the Iron Age Transjordanian polities, as based on tribal or “segmentary” identities that at certain times coalesced into larger political units. The Mesha Inscription is one of the main sources for recognizing these local identities, as it mentions several territorial units within Moab, forming a clear hierarchy of segments. In the upper level stand larger territorial units denoted with the phrase “land of [location],” such as the “land of Atarot” and the “land of Madaba,” while lower-level segments were identified with the expression “men of [location]”—for example, “men of Sharon” and “men of Maharoth” (see Routledge 2004, 133–53). The answers to certain questions are still not clear, such as how many levels of hierarchy existed, whether these segments were blood-related or based only in the territory, and, relatedly, what is the precise relationship between these segments and the idealistic tribe/clan/family social organization presented in the Hebrew Bible.

The tribal nature of these societies, coupled with the lack of the classical features attributed to ancient states—such as large urban centers, three-tiered settlement patterns, and monumental architecture—and the predominance of nomadic pastoralism as the main economic activity have led some scholars to avoid the use of the term “state” for these polities. Alternative terms such as “tribal kingdom,” “segmentary state,” and “chiefdom” are nowadays preferred (Routledge 2004; Bienkowski 2009; Tebes 2014).

The Hebrew Bible and the Moabite War

The biblical account of the Moabite War is only one record of a series of conflicts between Israelites, Moabites, and other Transjordanian polities that go back to the times of the exodus. In the story of the exodus, Moab is

already presented as a fully formed kingdom: the children of Israel pass through southern Transjordan not engaging with Edom and circumventing Moab (Num. 21:11–24:25; cf. Deut. 2:8b–36). There is a suspicious insistence in noting Moab's northern boundary in the Arnon, north of which lay the territory of King Sihon of the Amorites, conquered militarily by the Israelites. This probably betrays the Israelite claim to the rights of the lands north of the Arnon, which some biblical texts attribute to the tribes of Gad and Reuben. In the Mesha Inscription the area north of the Arnon is precisely the center of Mesha's operations. The book of Judges recounts how the Moabite king Eglon subdued Israel for eighteen years before being murdered by Ehud (Judg. 3:12–30). It was King David who finally defeated the Moabites and subjected them to tribute (2 Sam. 8:2).

But this situation did not last long. Second Kings 3:4–27 records the rebellion of Moab against the northern kingdom of Israel: "Now King Mesha of Moab was a sheep breeder, who used to deliver to the king of Israel one hundred thousand lambs, and the wool of one hundred thousand rams. But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel" (vv. 4–5). King Jehoram of Israel (Ahab's son), allied with King Jehoshaphat of Judah and an unnamed king of Edom, attacked Moab in its southern flank by entering "by the way of the wilderness of Edom" (v. 8). But after seven days in the desert, the army was short of water, so Jehoshaphat decided to ask the prophet Elisha, who was in the area, for help. The prophet, showing only scorn to Jehoram but respecting the king of Judah, transmitted Yahweh's order that they should dig ditches because the valley would be full of water with no wind and no rain, and also predicted that Yahweh would put Moab under their power. The next morning, "water began to flow from the direction of Edom" and the valley was flooded with water (vv. 16–20). The Moabites, viewing the water as red as blood and believing that the kings

were fighting one another, rapidly approached the camp only to be defeated by the coalition army. After destroying towns, ruining fields, blocking water holes, and cutting down trees, the three kings finally besieged Mesha at his capital, Kir Hareseth. The story ends abruptly recounting how a desperate Mesha offered in sacrifice his firstborn son on the city wall, an action after which "great wrath came upon Israel" (v. 27) and they abandoned the siege and left for their homeland.

As can be easily perceived, this chapter in 2 Kings has many problems of interpretation, most of which revolve around the discrepancy with the events and chronology as recorded on the Mesha Inscription (see J. M. Miller 1989, 34–40; Dearman 1989a, 197–201; P. Stern 1993). Events: while the biblical account paints a picture of the march of an undefeated Israelite-Judaean-Edomite army until they retreat without losses, the war in the Mesha Inscription is one of a series of undisputed Moabite victories against Israel. Chronology: in 2 Kings 3 Moab's revolt occurs *after* Ahab's death; in the inscription Mesha rebels *during* Omri's son's (Ahab's) reign. Geography: the three kings invade Moab from the south via Edom, whereas in the inscription the core of Mesha's activities occurs north of the Wadi Mujib. Another problem is the identification of Mesha's capital as Kir Hareseth, traditionally identified as Kerak because of the similarity of names and its localization in southern Moab, thus fitting the geography of 2 Kings 3. However, in the Mesha Inscription Mesha's capital is clearly Dibon in northern Moab. Characters: none of the three allied kings nor Elisha is referred to by name in the inscription.

In fact, in regard to the third player in the anti-Moabite coalition, not only is the anonymous king of Edom a shadowy figure in the biblical narrative but also his mention contradicts the statement in 1 Kings 22:47 that during Jehoshaphat's reign "there was no king in Edom; a deputy was king." The land of Edom

was the southernmost and most arid of the territories of Iron Age Transjordan, and the local inhabitants resorted to nomadic pastoralism as their main economic activity. During the Late Bronze Age the area probably was occupied by nomadic tribes known as "Shasu" in contemporary Egyptian sources. During the tenth and ninth centuries BCE the earliest sedentary settlements were established in the rich copper-mining lowland area of Wadi Faynan, forming a short-lived chiefdom that lasted until the end of the ninth century BCE (Tebes 2014, 7–10). If one takes the narrative of 2 Kings 3 at face value, the Edomite king could be just a local chief of this desert polity or the "deputy" appointed by the Israelites in Edom. But it could also be a product of a later interpolation, when the "classical" kingdom of Edom was flourishing.

Predictably, the prophet Elisha's intervention goes unnoticed in the Mesha Inscription, while his miracle and (unfulfilled?) prophecy follow the usual lines of the relationship between prophets and monarchs in the biblical narrative. Last but not least, mention should be made of the unexpected conclusion after Mesha's sacrifice of his own son. Although the reason for the allied army's flight is not altogether clear, it seems clear that the writer(s) was (were) aware of the significance of the child-sacrifice. This would be a rare case of recognition in the Bible of other people's god's effectiveness in their own homeland, a view that is common in the religious world of the ancient Near East (Mattingly 1989, 230).

Mesha's Account: War with Israel and Moabite Society

The Mesha Inscription is a memorial inscription intended to celebrate King Mesha's main accomplishments, and we can conjecture that it probably was displayed in a temple. As such, it shares many features with contemporary inscriptions of the same genre, such as the king's

constant self-reference demonstrated in the use of the first person, a summary of his achievements, the role of the homeland's god, the use of hyperbolic language, and the strong sentiment of identity. The inscription's main theme is the "holy war" against the Israelites and their god, Yahweh, and as such it follows the usual lines of "holy war" texts that are customary in ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions and in the Hebrew Bible: angry deity and consequent punishment, divine command, divine intervention, ritual consecration to deity (*herem*), victory of our god against yours, and construction of a temple. It has long been debated whether the inscription recounts, in line with 2 Kings 3:4–27, only one conflict in a restricted period of time or a series of military campaigns over a period of several years. It was typical for ancient Near Eastern kings to record their building activities, and Mesha is no exception to the rule. He concentrated special efforts in Qarhoh, where he built or rebuilt walls, gates, towers, a palace, and a reservoir.

The content of the inscription can be roughly divided into five main parts (following Routledge 2004, 142):

1. Introduction: Mesha and Moab (lines 1–4)
2. Campaigns in northern Moab (lines 5–21a)
3. Kingly construction in northern Moab (lines 21b–31a)
4. Campaigns in southern Moab (lines 31b–34)
5. Kingly construction in southern Moab (lines 34–broken) (missing)

"I am Mesha, son of Kishlim, king of Moab, the Dibonite" (line 1).¹ Echoing analogous

1. I follow the translation of Jackson 1989. Many other translations exist of the inscription including Pritchard 1969a, 320–21; Routledge 2004, 135–36. For the transcription, see KAI 181. The most extensive study is still Dearman 1989b.

memorial inscriptions, the inscription starts by indicating the king's name, his father's name, and his place of origin. His father is traditionally identified as Kemoshyat, a name also known from a short inscription found at Kerak that probably should also be ascribed to Mesha. Given its central role in the inscription, Dibon was most likely the capital of Mesha's kingdom, if not his (and his father's) homeland. This can be ascertained from several biblical verses that clearly associate Dibon with Moab (Num. 21:30; Isa. 15:2; Jer. 48:18, 22), but also from verses describing the land allotted to the tribe of Reuben or Gad (Num. 32:3, 34; 33:45–46; Josh. 13:17). The remains of ancient Dibon probably are located in the modern village of Dhiban (Dearman 1989a, 171–74), where archaeological excavations in the 1950–60s and in the 2000s unearthed remains of a town dated to the ninth century BCE with a palace, a wall, and a gate (Routledge 2004, 162–68).

The stele most likely was made to be displayed in a temple, the “high place” (*bmt*) of the god Kemosh in Qarhoh (line 3). The reference to Qarhoh is still enigmatic, although it has been suggested that it refers to the royal quarter of Dibon or, based on the similarity of the name, modern Kerak, identified by some scholars as the Kir Hareseth of 2 Kings 3:25.

Apparently, Mesha's radius of operation was circumscribed to the area north of the Wadi al Mujib (the biblical Arnon, e.g., Num. 21:13; Isa. 16:2; also mentioned in the inscription's line 26), which is the region where Dibon was located and where most of his military and building activities occurred. It is noteworthy that Mesha portrays himself as a “Dibonite” and not as a “Moabite,” while similar references to local identities inside Moab proliferate in the text. Although Mesha apparently intended to transcend those identities through allusion to a larger pan-Moabite polity, the tribal system continued to be the central framework of the central Transjordanian identities (Routledge 2004, 114–32).

It has been suggested that in Mesha's time Dibon was the name of Mesha's tribe, the leading tribe in the Moabite confederation, while the “seat” of the Dibonite tribe was known as Qarhoh, modern Dhiban. Sometime after Mesha's death the name of the tribe was transferred to Qarqoh, and the Moabite capital began to be known as Dibon. If this identification is correct, then a major riddle is solved. In the biblical account of Mesha's war, the name of the Moabite capital is Kir Hasereth, not Dibon. Kir Hasereth would then be Qarhoh, the old name of Dibon, an identification that would fit well on philological and historical grounds (van der Steen and Smelik 2007).

Line 5 reads, “Omri was king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab for many days because Kemosh was angry with his country.” This is the earliest extrabiblical attestation to the northern kingdom of Israel as a political entity. Although Omri, king of Israel (885–874 BCE) after several years of internal strife, was not the founder of this kingdom and he and his dynasty were seen by the biblical writers in a very negative light, he certainly was one of Israel's most important monarchs, establishing a four-reign dynasty and building a new capital at Samaria (1 Kings 16:16–28). In fact, five Neo-Assyrian inscriptions refer to the kingdom of Israel as the “land of Omri” (*Māt Ḥumrī*) or “the house of Omri” (*Bīt Ḥumrī*).²

The inscription continues by recounting that Omri was succeeded by “his son, and he also said, ‘I will oppress Moab’” (line 6). Omri's son was Ahab (874–853 BCE) (1 Kings 16:29–22:40), known in the Neo-Assyrian sources as one of the Levantine kings who fought against Shalmaneser III in the Battle of Qarqar (853 BCE) (Pritchard 1969a, 278–79). But Mesha “prevailed over him and over his house, and Israel utterly perished forever” (line 7).

2. See, for example, the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (COS 2:269–70).

According to the inscription, Omri had taken the land of Madaba (modern Medeba) and “he lived in it during his days and half of the days of his son(s)-forty years; but Kemosh returned it in my days” (lines 7–8). The inscription is pointing to an unnamed successor of Omri, but there is a difficulty here because *bnh* can be read as either “his son” or “his sons,” so it can be referring to Ahab or to his successors and sons Ahaziah (853–852 BCE) and Jehoram (852–841 BCE) (1 Kings 22:51–2 Kings 1:18; 2 Kings 3; 9:14–24). Although potentially useful, the reference to “forty years” can be a figurative number, something like “many years.”

Although the stele is badly preserved, the important historical connotations of the Mesha Inscription for the history of the ancient Israelites are amplified by new readings of the fourth section, of which survives only an allusion to events taking place in Horonen (biblical Horonaim [Isa. 15:5; Jer. 48:3, 5, 34]) in southern Moab. In 1994 epigraphist André Lemaire proposed to restore in line 31 the word *btdwd*, thus reading the phrase as “and the [house of Dav]id dwelt in Horonen” (Lemaire 1994). If this reading is correct, which is not certain, then it is one of the earliest extrabiblical attestations to the name by which the kingdom of Judah was probably known, paralleled by the reference to *bytdwd*, read by most scholars as “house of David,” in the contemporary Aramaic stele of Tel Dan discovered in 1993. However, there are some historical and philological problems with this reading. Not only had no king of Judah ever “dwelt” in Horonen, but in Jerusalem; further, he is identified not by his name but by a collective designation. There is the additional fact that we would expect to read the justification for the conquest of southern Moab, as in the case of the war against Omri, in the first part of the inscription (Na‘aman 1997b, 89).

The Mesha Inscription contains several place-names that are paralleled in the Bible. While some texts—mostly of poetic or pro-

phetic nature—attribute these sites to the Moabites, other texts dealing with the distribution of territory taken from the Amorite king Sihon assign them to the Israelite tribes Reuben and Gad. Sites that can be identified reasonably well include Madaba/Medeba (Num. 21:30; Josh. 13:9, 16; Isa. 15:2), ‘Ataroth/Ataroth (Num. 32:3, 34; Josh. 16:2, 7), Nebo (Num. 32:38; Deut. 32:49; 34:1; Isa. 15:2; Jer. 48:1, 22), and Jahaz (Isa. 15:4; Jer. 48:21, 34//Josh. 13:18) (see Dearman 1989a, 170–96; B. MacDonald 2000, 101–55).

Mesha turned his attention toward the land of ‘Ataroth (modern Khirbat Ataruz), where “the Gadites had lived . . . forever, and the king of Israel had rebuilt ‘Ataroth for himself” (lines 10–11). The allusion to the Gadites is clearly reminiscent of Gad, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, but whose references in the biblical text are in short supply. However, here the Gadites seem to have a distant, if any, relationship with the Israelites; in fact, they are said to have lived there “forever.” This reference does not necessarily contradict the biblical account, because we know that in ancient societies genealogical links were fluid and in constant change owing to diverse social, political, and geographical reasons. It is obvious that this was a frontier zone with borders and alliances of political and kinship nature in constant flux. The Gadites could have had shifting loyalties between Israel and Moab, while the biblical author(s) could have incorporated them into their own genealogies, as well, in order to reaffirm the Israelite claims to the lands east of the Jordan.

Lines 12–13 contain one of the most troublesome readings of the stele. After taking the city of ‘Ataroth and killing its entire population, Mesha “brought back from there the *’r l dwdh* and [dr]agged it before Kemosh in Qiryat.” That some sort of cultic equipment is meant here is clear because in lines 17–18 we have a parallel allusion to the “[ves]els of Yahweh” that Mesha dragged before Kemosh. What does *’r l dwdh* mean? Following some

biblical verses, translators usually translate the word *ʾl* as “altar hearth,” well within the lines of the implied cultic connotation (Jackson 1989, 112–13). As for *dwdh*, some have suggested it is a reference to a certain god “Dod,” or, if we follow its meaning in Biblical Hebrew (“beloved”), it could have been used as an epithet for Yahweh (Barstad 1995, 493–94). It may also represent the name “David,” as was proposed for line 31, but *dwdh* carries a final possessive *h*. Personal names in Hebrew usually do not carry possessive endings, so either *dwd* does not mean “David” and is something else (Philip Davies 2008, 97), or the possessive *h* is intended for the preceding word, *ʾl*, the entire phrase thus being translated as “its Davidic altar hearth” (Rainey 2001a, 300).

Two more towns were taken by Mesha from Israel: Nebo (Khirbet al Muḥaiyat?) and Jahaz (lines 14–21a). Lines 17–18 narrate that, after taking the city of Nebo and devoting its inhabitants to Kemosh, Mesha “took from there th[e ves]sels of Yahweh (*ʾt kly yhw*) and dragged them before Kemosh.” This is almost unmistakably the earliest reference to the name “Yahweh” as a deity outside the Hebrew Bible.³ This allusion is usually seen as Moabite

3. Earlier possible references to Yahweh appear in Egyptian inscriptions dating to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE (van der Toorn 1995b, 1714), but these are most likely toponym or tribal names in Edom and Midian, probably related to the deity’s name but not direct references to him.

recognition of Yahweh as “the official god of the Israelites” (van der Toorn 1995b, 1713), and although the text seems to imply a high status of Yahweh in the Israelite cult, this does not necessarily mean that Yahweh was the only deity worshiped at that time in Israel.

What about the god Kemosh? Kemosh was the national deity of Moab, or at least of Moab’s reigning dynasties, and as such is present as a theophoric element in the name “Kemoshyat” and in other Moabite kings’ names known from Neo-Assyrian sources. Little is known about Kemosh and his characteristics. He was already known in Ebla and Ugarit, while he is referred to in a few biblical passages with the usual diatribes against foreign gods (Mattingly 1989; Müller 1995). Although he is clearly identified as Moab’s god (Num. 21:29; Jer. 48:7, 13, 46; see Judg. 11:24 for his incorrect attribution to the Ammonites), the cult of “Kemosh, the abomination of Moab” was introduced in Israel by Solomon (1 Kings 11:7 [NRSV: “Chemosh”]) and terminated by Josiah (2 Kings 23:13).

In sum, despite the many problems in translation and interpretation, the Mesha Inscription is still a gold mine of information about the history of Israel and its Transjordanian neighbors. New, innovative approaches drawing from anthropology and ethnography are certainly helping to place this inscription within the larger tribal framework of Iron Age Moab.

Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

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