

# Tel dan stele essay

[Family](#), [Father](#)



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## **INTRODUCTION**

A strong debate has been forming regarding the correlation of the Tel Dan inscription with the description of the battle depicted in 2 Kings 9 of the Old Testament. The Tel Dan Stele was located in 1993 and 1994 in Tel Dan, and it depicts various victories in battle against Israel and the House of David. The author of the stele is strongly implied to be Hazael, a king of Damascus. It is entirely possible that the Tel Dan inscription can provide “ a different view of the death of Jehoram king of Israel than that provided in the Bible” (Demskey, p. 72). The Biblical passage that details the same event is 2 Kings 9; comparing these two texts, it should be said that the Biblical text is more likely to be an accurate representation of the events of the fall of the House of David. This is due to the fragmented nature of the stele, and the perspective of the potential writer, who found it in his best interests to describe his own conquering of a nation.

The primary debate between the legitimacy of either text is the discrepancy that is found between the way in which Jehoran and Ahaziah were killed by Jehu. According to 2 Kings 9, Jehu rebelled against the house of Ahab, coinciding with Elijah’s and Elisha’s prophecies. However, the author of the

Tel Dan Stele states that he, in fact, slayed Jehoram and Ahaziah. Since the author of this text is strongly implied to be Hazael, how does this fit into the narrative of 2 Kings 9? (“ New Fragment,” 1995).

The most important thing to consider about the value of the Tel Dan Stele is that it “ easily establishes the importance of Israel and Judah on the international scene at this time - no doubt to the chagrin of those modern scholars who maintain that nothing in the Bible before the Babylonian exile can lay claim to any historical accuracy” (“ House of David,” pp. 31-32).

The Tel Dan Stele was found in a secondary location, far away from the site where it was likely written or contextualized. It was a free-standing stele, meaning that it was not inscribed on a surface or building blocks (Demskey, 2007). It was thought to be “ the remains of a wall bordering the eastern section of a large pavement or piazza at the entrance to the outer gate of the city of Dan” (“ Aramaic Stele,” p. 81). The latest possible time the secondary use of the first fragment could have is around the end of the eighth century BCE, when Tiglat-Pileser III conquered northern Israel. The wall may have been destroyed around the beginning of the ninth century BCE, likely by Ben Hadad, who attacked Dan as 1 Kings 15: 20 describes.

The first fragment contained 13 lines which were preserved - a very small part of the fragment, and only in subsequent fragments could a reasonable idea of the text be discerned. The stele may have been erected by Hazael's vassal Ahab, thus possibly removing the attribution of Hazael himself to the authorship of the stele. Line 9 of the fragment contains a mention of the ‘

house of David,' showing the participation of the king of Judah, presumably Azariah. (" Aramaic Stele," 1993).

Even the authorship of the Tel Dan Stele is in doubt; Athas (2006), in a minimalistic examination of the stele, claims the author to be Bar Hadad II, Hazael's son. He did this in order to keep the faith and maintain the loyalty of the people, who were in danger of defecting to Jehoash, depicting himself as " the able successor to his illustrious father, Hazael, who had etched out a small empire in the Levant" (p. 253).

Of course, this did not work for him, but the dating and the motive for its erection lends legitimacy to the theory, thus making the theory that Hazael himself wrote it even more dubious.

Another chink in the armor of authorship comes in line 6 of the stele, when the author refers to ' my king,' implying that a king was not the person who wrote it - rather, it was a dependent, like a commander or loyal citizen. This becomes confusing, then, when the inscription implies that the writer has a right to the throne, and talks about his father's land, indicating ownership by him through blood (" Aramaic Stele," 1993). The discussion of the father could also be attributed to Bar Hadad II, attempting to live in his father's shadow and thrive within it, using his accomplishments to boost his own power. Given all of these myriad issues with the authorship, many of the facts contained within the stele can be thrown into question.

The second fragments of the Tel Dan Stele were found to be dated around the start of the eighth century BCE, and it is completely unknown who may

have broken or smashed the stele. It is theorized, however, that Jehoash and Jaroboam II, his son, may have done it. It may have been done in order to undo the power of Damascus, which they had recently been undone.

Jehoash, in 2 Kings 13: 25, takes back all the cities that the Arameans had conquered; in light of this victory, it would have been a slight to these kings to have that stele still exist. Therefore, the stele, which Hazael likely erected, was smashed by Jehoash (“ New Fragment”, 1995).

Based on these fragments, there is mention of two kinds of Israel and Judah; since the only fragments seen are resh and mem, the only real candidate that fits this criteria is the king Jehoram; also included in this mix is his son, Ahaziah. It is also revealed that Hazael wrote the stele himself; he was a usurper as well, a Shalmeneser text referring to him as ‘ the son of nobody.’ One fact that casts doubt on this, however, is several mentions of Hazael’s father, stating that the man fought and died, and that the king of Israel entered his father’s land. (“ New Fragment,” 1995).

The mention of the father becomes slightly more sensible, then, when one considers royal historiography of this region, as someone’s mentor or person to whom you will become heir can be referred to as a father. David calls Saul his ‘ father’ in 1 Samuel 24: 11, despite the fact their relation is not biological. The same can be applied to this instance; Hazael could have been referring to Hadadezer, the person whom he was succeeding – this is a traditional way to legitimize the chain of succession (Lemaire, 1998).

One dubious number that casts doubt on the legitimacy of the stele is the mention of ‘ two thousand horsemen.’ Of course, this is but one instance of a

plural interpretation of the text, as both fragments together mention 'thousands of chariots and thousands of horsemen', decidedly different from the two thousand horsemen. Whichever one is true does not matter as much as the doubt these dual interpretations casts on the fragment as a whole. However, it is possible that Assyrian royal inscriptions, as was often done, just gives the rote number of the enemy without classifying it; what's more, the number of the army is comparable to the battle of Qarqar's army, which had taken place twelve years previous to this. As a result, it is not completely far fetched to believe that the Israelite and Judean chariots were included in that number, or that a simple mistake increased the number of horsemen beyond what it actually was (Lemaire, 1998).

According to the Tel Dan stele, Hazael was the one who erected it, but the date is somewhat fuzzy as to the actual placing of it. In all probability, the stele was meant to depict the deeds of Hazael in memoriam. In it, it talks about Hazael's early years as king, in which he waged war on many different kings and kingdoms. Within this list, are Jehoram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah, indicating that he, and not Jehu, killed them. Due to the shattering of the stele, and the recovery of mere fragments, it is impossible to tell exactly how long and how detailed the stele was supposed to be when first erected ("New Fragment," 1995).

Despite the discrepancy inherent in the Tel Dan Stele, it is clear that a king in the latter years of his rule would have an incentive to exaggerate his feats; it is very unlikely that a king in his early years would conquer 'seventy kings'; therefore, this leads us the implication that it is possible for these

claims to be at least not entirely accurate. There is at least a chance that Hazael did not actually personally kill Jehoram and Ahaziah ("New Fragments," 1995).

2 Kings 9: 24-28 states that "both Jehoram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah were slain by Jehu," occurring after Hazael defeated Jehoram and Ben Hada II. This links the stele to this information, as Hazael was said to have fought against both Jehoram and Ahaziah, making the timelines coincide ("New Fragment," 1995).

There is a Biblical basis for the location of Tel Dan; in Judges, the biblical Dan is mentioned, particularly as 'from Dan to Beersheba.' ("Aramaic Stele", 1993). The events of the Bible about the states of Israel and Judah were written more than a hundred years after the Tel Dan inscription.

Comparing the Tel Dan stele to 2 Kings 9 is a quite difficult process; however, there are some surprising parallels. In line 3, there is mention of a king who was injured in battle; this matches closely with the authorship of the stele in 2 Kings 8: 29 and 9: 15. The injured king later died, indicating either Jehoram or Ahaziah (Lemaire, 1998).

The use of the word 'father' to signify 'king' or 'mentor' is also used in Kings as well, lending a legitimizing parallel to the Tel Dan stele. To 'lay with your father' is to succeed him on the throne, whether by blood or appointment. At the same time, Hazael's status as a usurper lends the term 'father' a very strange familiarity, as that is not normally a term one would use for someone whose throne you will forcefully overtake (Suriano, 2007).

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, there are many reasons to believe that either of these texts are legitimate. For one, they both follow a very similar timeline (the fall of Judah and Israel taking place near the ninth century BCE). They both involve the kings Jehoram and Ahaziah, both of whom were defeated by a superior force. What's more, their narratives both include the arrival of Jehoash, who was the likely candidate for smashing the stele to remove that humiliation from his recently reclaimed land. However, the main difference (who killed the kings, Hazael or Jehu) throws both texts into question.

In the end, it is far more likely that the Biblical text rings truer. For one, there is a reasonable doubt that what scholars have discerned from the text is incomplete, due to the fragmented nature of the text. Furthermore, the exaggerations inherent in the stele - killing seventy kings, there being two thousand horsemen - make it seem as if the author is making more of the battle than there was. Not only that, a king in the latter years of his rule (Hazael), and one prone to usurping and dissemination, would be far more likely to have a stele written exaggerating his feats. With these circumstances in mind, it is probable that the fate of Jehoram and Azahiah described in 2 Kings 9 is slightly more legitimate.

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