

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
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Shiur #6b: *Tanakh* and Archaeology

B. From Achav onwards

The latest period in which controversy arises regarding the relationship between the Biblical text and the archaeological record is from the reign of King Achav, in the first half of the 9th century B.C.E., onwards.^[1] Archaeological discoveries dating from this time – which many researchers believe to be the period during which the Books of the Torah and of the Prophets were written – do generally accord with the textual account, and therefore scholars acknowledge the basic reliability of the *Tanakh's* historical descriptions from this period onwards. These discoveries are very exciting in their own right, lending a powerful sense of connection to the world of the *Tanakh* through a direct, unmediated encounter with the remains of the concrete reality described in the text. Indeed, the discovery of the first relevant findings, in the 19th century, refuted some prevalent critical approaches which had maintained that all the biblical narratives were later creations, severed from any historical context. We shall discuss some of the most famous findings relating to narratives about the Israelite kingdom from the period of Achav onwards.

1. In *Sefer Melakhim* we read:

"And Mesha, king of Moav, was a sheepmaster, and he delivered to the king of Israel a hundred thousand lambs, and a hundred thousand rams, with the wool. But it was, when Achav died, that the king of Moav rebelled against the king of Israel..." (*Melakhim* II 3:4-5)

In 1868, a stele (inscribed stone) dating to the 9th century B.C.E. was discovered in what is now Jordan. Its inscription shows that it was established by this same Mesha, king of Moav.^[2] It opens with the words, "I am Mesha, son of Kemosh, king of Moav."^[3] Mesha records that the people of Moav were subservient to Omri, king of Israel, for a long time ["Omri, king of Israel, and they afflicted Moav for many days"] and describes at length how he prevailed against Omri's son, until Israel was annihilated. The Mesha Stele, then, is the earliest external evidence of Moav's battle against Israel, as recorded in the text, and of the existence of the House of Omri.^[4]

2. Achav also appears in the Kurkh Monolith (Kurkh is located in south-eastern Turkey), describing the military campaigns of the Assyrian king Shalmanesser III.^[5] The inscription is written in cuneiform, against an engraved image of a king. Extensive attention is given to the battle of Karka, which took place in the sixth year of Shalmanesser's reign (863 B.C.E.). It records that an enormous army, led by twelve

kings, was ranged against him, including the "two thousand chariots, ten thousand foot-soldiers of Achav the Israelite," and that amongst this alliance against him, Achav was the king with the largest army. There is no mention whatsoever of this battle in the *Tanakh*, lending support to the view that the *Tanakh* is not a history book that records every event (or even every major event), unless the event is considered to have some element that is worth recording for posterity. In any event, the inscription does support the textual description of Achav, king of Israel, as a warrior with a large and significant army.

3. *Sefer Melakhim* describes the water system devised by King Chizkiyahu^[6]:

"... and how he made the pool and the aqueduct, and brought water into the city..." (*Melakhim* II 20:20)

The system is described in greater detail in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

"And when Yechizkiyahu saw that Sancheriv had come, and that he intended to fight against Jerusalem, he took counsel with his ministers and his mighty men, to stop the water of the springs which were outside of the city, and they helped him. So a great many people gathered together, and they stopped up all the springs, and also the stream that ran through the midst of the land, saying, Why should the kings of Assyria come and find abundant water?" (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:2-4)

"And this same Yechizkiyahu stopped up the upper watercourse of the Gichon, and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David" (*ibid.*, verse 30).

More explicit still is the description in *Sefer Ben Sira* (48:22-23):

"Yechizkiyahu fortified his city by bringing water into its midst. He dug into the hard rock with iron, and made wells for water."

In 1880 an inscription was found in Chizkiyahu's (Hezekiah's) Tunnel, dating to the 8th century B.C.E., describing the final stages of the digging of the tunnel designed to lead water from the Gichon spring, outside of the city, to a pool inside of the city.^[7]

Since, as we have seen, there is a relative abundance of archaeological material from the period of Achav onwards, the main arguments surrounding archaeology and the Biblical text concern earlier periods – from the time of the forefathers until the unified kingdom of David and Shlomo.

There have been scholars of both the nihilist and minimalist schools^[8] who questioned even the historical existence of the House of David, but in 1993-1994 fragments of an Aramaic inscription were found by a delegation of researchers headed by Avraham Biran, at Tel Dan.^[9] The author of the Tel Dan Stele (apparently Chazael,

king of Aram), which dates to the 9th or 8th century B.C.E., describes his victory over the king of Israel and over the king of the "House of David".^[10] This finding also shed light on the inscription on the Mesha Stele,^[11] with the result that the existence of the House of David came to be accepted as historical fact by the vast majority of scholars, including those affiliated with the minimalist school, although not those of the nihilist school.^[12]

We shall now proceed by examining five periods prior to that of Achav in which apparent conflict arises between archaeological findings and the biblical account: the period of the forefathers; the Children of Israel in Egypt; the conquest of the land; the period of settlement of the land; and the period of the unified kingdom, in the days of David and Shlomo.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] See *Melakhim I*, ch.16 onwards

^[2] Concerning the inscription and its interpretation, see S. Achituv, *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Mikhtav*, Jerusalem 5765, pp. 355-373. At the end of his discussion he refers the reader to a bibliography pertaining to the inscription.

^[3] Kemosh is well known in the *Tanakh* as the god of Moav. For example, "Woe to you, Moav! You are done for, O people of Kemosh!" ([Bamidbar 21:29](#)); "Then Shlomo built a high place for Kemosh, the abomination of Moav" (*Melakhim I* 11:7).

^[4] The inscription includes many other aspects and details of Moav's war against Israel which do not appear in the biblical text. *Inter alia*, the stele records that Moav conquered some cities in Israel, and destroyed others; it describes the "vessels of God's House" (apparently a reference to a local temple) being taken as spoils from the city of Nevo and being brought before Kemosh; and Mesha is documented as having taken captives from Israel and making them his slaves who took part in some of his fortification and construction projects. On this subject see E. Samet, *Pirkei Elisha*, Jerusalem 5767, pp. 99-100. Concerning the connection between the content of the Mesha Stele and the "burden of Moav" in [Yishayahu 15-16](#) and in [Yirmiyahu 48](#), see Y. Elitzur, *Yisrael ve-ha-Mikra*, Jerusalem 5760, pp. 175-182.

^[5] For more on the inscription see, *inter alia*, S. Yaron, *Olam ha-Tanakh: Melakhim I*, Tel Aviv 1994, pp. 205-206.

^[6] Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, lived c. 739 B.C.E. to c. 687 B.C.E.

^[7] Concerning the inscription, and for a bibliography in its regard, see Achituv (above, n. 1), pp. 15-20. Some scholars of the minimalist school sought to suggest that the inscription was from the Hasmonean period, but this possibility was rejected outright by paleographic experts; see Talshir, p. 20, and no. 18 ad loc.

^[8] See the previous shiur.

[9] For more on this inscription see A. Biran and Y. Naveh, "Ketovet Aramit mi-Tekufat Bayit Rishon mi-Tel Dan," *Kadmoniot* 26, 3-4 (5754), pp. 74-81; A. Biran, "Ha-Ketovet mi-Dan, ha-Matzevot ve-ha-Chutzot," *Kadmoniot* 28, 1 (5755 – 1995), pp. 39-45.

[10] The inscription is not intact, but scholars have concluded that, with the missing letters, it should read: "[And I killed Yeho]ram son of [Achav] the king of Israel, and I killed [Achaz]yahu son of [Yehoram, the ki]ng of the House of David." This would seem to contradict the textual record (*Melakhim* II 9:14-27) which attributes the killing of these two kings to Yehu. Some scholars have granted greater reliability to the account on the stele than to the biblical account, arguing that the story about Yehu is not historically correct (see, for example, N. Neeman, "Ha-Ketovet ha-Aramit be-Tel Dan be-He'ara Historit," *Eretz Yisrael* 29, 5759, pp. 112-118). However, it should be noted that the missing letters are not proven (a significant problem with the proposed completion of the inscription is raised by D.M. Levi and Y. Rothstein, *Mikra ve-Archeologia*, Jerusalem 5768, pp. 202-204). Even if the completion of the inscription were certain, this version does not necessarily represent a contradiction: Yehoram, son of Achav, was indeed wounded in the war against the army of Aram (*Melakhim* II 8:28-29), and it was in these circumstances that he found his death. It is therefore no wonder that the king of Aram credits himself with killing Yehoram, and he does the same concerning Achazyahu, king of Yehuda. Neeman himself cites scholars who maintain that exaggerated claims of might and achievement are a well-known phenomenon when it comes to royal inscriptions (see also D. Binenfeld, "Mi Harag et ha-Melakhim Yehoram ve-Achazyah," *Beit Mikra* 48, 3 (174), pp. 302-308). For this reason, there is no reason to assume that Yehu was connected in any way to Chazael, king of Aram, and acting as his agent. (See, for example, Y. Finkelstein and N.A. Silverman, *David u-Shelomo – Beit Metziut Historit le-Mitos*, Jerusalem 5766, p. 243; the authors themselves tend towards the view that the contradiction arises from the tension between historical reality and the biblical legend.) However, this explanation, too, may be derived directly from the text, especially from Eliyahu's prophecy at Chorev: "He who escapes the sword of Chazael shall be slain by Yehu" (*Melakhim* I 19:17).

[11] On the Mesha Stele, the king mentions (line 12) his capture of "אראל דודה". Many scholars have interpreted this expression, too, as being related to King David, perhaps meaning "Ariel of David" as a reference to one of David's warriors: cf. "And Benayahu, son of Yehoyada, the son of a valiant man of Kavtze'el, who had performed many acts, killed **two lion-hearted men (shenei ariel)** of Moav" ([Shmuel II 23:20](#)). Further on (line 31), the inscription records that "וד [] בת בה []". Following the discovery of the Tel Dan Stele, many scholars have suggested that the full sentence is meant to read, "וד [] בת בה []" – "the House of David dwelled in Chouranen," i.e., the city (known to us as Choronayim – see [Yishayahu 15:5](#); [Yirmiyahu 48:3](#)) was under the rule of the House of David (Achituv, pp. 371-372).

[12] See, for example, Y. Finkelstein and N.A. Silberman, *Reshit Yisrael – Archeologia, Mikra ve-Zikaron Histori*, Tel Aviv 2003, pp. 135-136. Concerning the attempts by the "nihilists" to minimize the significance of the finding, see A. Lipschitz, "Pulmus 'Beit David' – be-Ikvot ha-Ketovet mi-Tel Dan," in: Y. Zakovitch et al. (eds.), *David Melekh Yisrael Chai ve-Kayam*, Jerusalem 5757, pp. 9-77. Z. Talshir, p. 19, summarizes:

"The appearance of the House of David as a consolidated political concept represented a real problem for deniers of Ancient Israel. They went to great

lengths to try to rid themselves of this most inconvenient evidence. Davis proposed impossible alternative readings, which no self-respecting scholar would dare to mention; Lemke, despairing of any other solution, decided that the inscription was a forgery. No other scholar in the academic world has cast the slightest doubt on the reliability of the inscription, the circumstances of its discovery, or its epigraphic identity. There is nothing problematic about this inscription, other than the fact that it deals a mortal blow to a priori claims against the history of the House of David."