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The Balaamites of Deir ᶜAlla as Aramean Deportees*

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The Balaamite inscription found in Tell Deir ᶜAlla has raised questions as to its language, its script, its relationship to the Aramaic inscriptions found in the same archeological context, and its connection with the biblical story of Balaam. The present article argues that these questions find a satisfactory solution if we assume that the Balaamites who wrote the inscription were a colony of Aramean exiles who had been deported from northern Syria to Gilead by the Neo-Assyrians in the late eighth century B.C.E. This proposal comports well with the paleographical date of the inscription (ca. 700 B.C.E.), the Neo-Assyrian policy of deportation at this time, and the archeological evidence which suggests that the Balaamites were newcomers in Deir ᶜAlla and had connections with northern Syria. In the light of this proposal, it is argued that the script of the Balaamite text represents a link between the Aramaic and Ammonite traditions of writing, that its language is an archaic form of Aramaic, related to that of the associated inscriptions as sacred language to daily speech, and that it preserves an ancient prophecy of the biblical figure Balaam son of Be'or, the Aramean diviner from northern Syria.

The epigraphic finds at Tell Deir ᶜAlla, notably the plaster inscription mentioning the name of "Balaam son of Be'or", present us with a number of puzzles which continue to be the subject of scholarly debate. Quite apart from all kinds of disputed questions of philological detail, there is no consensus about the identity of the language in which the Balaamite[1] text is written, or even whether it should be classified as an Aramaic or Canaanite dialect. Suggested identifications range from Aramaic[2] to Ammonite,[3] "Gileadite",[4] and Midianite.[5] There is also dis-

(*) I would like to thank A. Lemaire (Paris), P. Dion (Toronto), J. Naveh (Jerusalem), and G. van der Kooij (Leiden) for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

(1) I am resurrecting this venerable English word to describe the people and the cult that were associated with the sanctuary at Tell Deir ᶜAlla. I prefer to speak of the "Balaamite text" rather than the "Balaam text" because Combination II of the inscription may represent a distinct composition with no direct reference to Balaam, though it clearly did function within a cult which revered him.

(2) E.g., J. Hoftijzer and G. Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir ᶜAlla* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 300–302; and A. Caquot and A. Lemaire, "Les textes araméens de Deir ᶜAlla," *Syria* 54(1977)189–208; see also the reviews of Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij by J.A. Fitzmyer,

agreement about the script in which the plaster text is written: does it belong in the Aramaic[6] or in an independent Ammonite[7] series? Then there is the question of the shorter inscriptions on pottery and stone, undeniably written in Aramaic, which were found in the same archeological context: can they be associated with the larger inscription in the unknown dialect,[8] or is it unsound methodologically to assume a connection?[9] Finally, there is the broader issue of the religious significance of the Balaamite inscription: does it teach us something about the Israelite tradition concerning Balaam son of Be'or?[10] In general, it is striking that the inscription appears to be non-Israelite in religion as well as in language and script, though it was found in what was the Gilead of the Bible.

In this paper I would like to put forward a hypothesis which can help to clarify these issues. My proposal is that the Balaamites of Tell Deir ᶜAlla were a colony of exiles who had been deported there by the Assyrians from one of the Aramean states of northern Syria. I suggest that they settled in the newly-created Assyrian province of Gal'ada some time after 732 B.C.E., taking with them their ancestral religion. In what follows, I shall first show that this hypothesis comports well with what we know about the date of the inscription, the deportation policies of the Assyrians at this time, the archeological stratum in which the inscription

CBQ 40(1978)93–95, S. Segert, *WZKM* 72(1980)182–189, and S.A. Kaufman, *BASOR* 239(1980)71–74.

(3) See J.C. Greenfield, Review of Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, *JSS* 25(1980)251. Ammonite is also considered a possibility by J. Naveh in his review of the same volume, *IEJ* 29(1979)136; and by V. Sasson, "The Book of the Oracular Visions of Balaam from Deir ᶜAlla," *UF* 17(1986)284.

(4) J. Naveh, Review of Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, *IEJ* 29(1979)136.

(5) A. Rofé, *The Book of Balaam (Numbers 22:2–24:25)* (Jerusalem: Simor, 1979) [in Hebrew], 69–70; *idem*, in *Biblical Archeology Today*, 365.

(6) J. Naveh, "The Date of the Deir ᶜAlla Inscription in Aramaic Script," *IEJ* 17(1967) 236–238; *idem*, Review of Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, *IEJ* 29(1979) 133, 135; A. Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Deir ᶜAlla et la littérature araméenne antique," *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* (1985) 271.

(7) F.M. Cross, "Notes on the Ammonite Inscription from Tell Siran," *BASOR* 212(1973)13; J.A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ᶜAlla* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 31; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1984) 18.

(8) Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, 274–275, 285; Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Deir ᶜAlla," 273–274; *idem*, "L'inscription de Balaam trouvée à Deir ᶜAlla: épigraphie," in *Biblical Archeology Today. Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archeology, Jerusalem, April 1984* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), 320.

(9) B. Levine, "The Balaam Inscription from Deir ᶜAlla: Historical Aspects," in *Biblical Archeology Today*, 328.

(10) See e.g., H.P. Müller, "Einige alttestamentliche Probleme zur aramäischen Inschrift von Deir ᶜAlla," *ZDPV* 94(1978)56–97; M. Delcor, "Le texte de Deir ᶜAlla et les oracles bibliques de Balaᶜam," *SVT* 32(1981)52–73.

was found, and the clues connecting it with Aramean states north of Damascus. Thereafter, I shall discuss how this hypothesis sheds light on the disputed questions we have mentioned.

The plaster text from Tell Deir ᶜAlla is usually dated, on paleographical grounds, to the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.E. A minority position is held by Joseph Naveh, who has argued for a mid-eighth century date.[11] He has recently been followed by André Lemaire.[12] It is safer, however, to follow Van der Kooij,[13] Cross,[14] and Hackett[15] in fixing the date at approximately 700 B.C.E., as the great majority of scholars have done.[16] Puech has suggested a date of 725,[17] and Weinfeld 720,[18] but for our purposes these are relatively insignificant variations. (It is important to notice that the paleographical dating refers to the time that the plaster text was actually inscribed, not to the time, possibly much later, that it was destroyed.)[19] The significance of the widespread agreement on the paleographical date is that it tells us that the inscription was in all likelihood written *after* the Assyrian conquest of Transjordan in 732 B.C.E.[20] In other words, the Balaamite text was put on the wall of the sanctuary at Tell Deir ᶜAlla at a time when Gilead had already become the Assyrian province of Gal'aza or Gal'ada.[21] The political context of the inscription was therefore no longer the Israelite Northern

(11) J. Naveh, "The Date of the Deir ᶜAlla Inscription," 258; *idem, Early History of the Alphabet. An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography* (Jerusalem: Magnes, and Leiden: Brill, 1982) 109.

(12) Lemaire, "Les inscriptions de Deir ᶜAlla," 272; *idem,* "Fragments from the Book of Balaam Found at Deir ᶜAlla," *BARev* 11(1985)30. In the latter article Lemaire now associates the destruction of the plaster text with the earthquake of 750 B.C.E. (See note 19 below.) Previous to 1985 he had dated the inscription more broadly to the last half of the eighth century; see Caquot-Lemaire, "Les textes araméens", 192; A. Lemaire, Review of Hackett, *Balaam Text, Syria* 61(1984)143; *idem,* "L'inscription: épigraphie," 315.

(13) Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts,* 96.

(14) F.M. Cross, "Ammonite Ostraca from Heshbon: Heshbon Ostraca IV-VIII," *AUSS* 13(1975)12: "early seventh century B.C."; *idem,* in *Biblical Archeology Today,* 369: "700 B.C.E. plus or minus twenty-five years."

(15) Hackett, *Balaam Text,* 19: "beginning of the 7th century".

(16) E.g., J. Hoftijzer, V. Sasson, A.R. Millard, H.P. Müller, S.A. Kaufman, P. Kyle McCarter, Jr.

(17) E. Puech, Review of Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts, RB* 85(1978)116.

(18) M. Weinfeld, in *Biblical Archeology Today,* 367.

(19) A. Lemaire now seems to conflate the two dates, so that the date of writing and the date of destruction are both 750 B.C.E. (See note 12 above.)

(20) *Pace* Levine, "Historical Aspects," 327, and *passim.*

(21) See B. Oded, "Observations on Methods of Assyrian Rule in Transjordania After the Palestinian Campaign of Piglath-Pileser, III," *JNES* 29(1970)179–180. Oded now accepts Weippert's reading *gal'ada*; see Oded's contribution in WHJP, First Series, Volume IV,1: *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History* (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979) 270 and 362, note 111.

Kingdom, but the Neo-Assyrian empire of Tiglath-Pileser III and his successors.

Within that empire the policy of mass deportations to and from the conquered areas was being carried out at that time on an unprecedented scale. Bustenay Oded, in his excellent monograph, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979), gives a well-documented account of this practice, which has been called "one of the foundations upon which this empire was built."[22] He calculates that over a period of three centuries the Neo-Assyrians deported approximately four and a half million people to various parts of their empire, and points out that the practice peaked under Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib in the late eighth and early seventh century B.C.E.[23] — precisely the period to which the Balaamite inscription is dated. Oded also points out that it was part of the implementation of this imperial policy to allow the deportees to preserve their social and cultural identity:

> . . . the Assyrians did not tend to split up transplanted communities into individual families, dispersing them throughout the empire, but, on the contrary, were anxious to preserve the community life of the deportees by resettling them together as homogeneous small groups, as far as kinship, religion and culture were concerned.[24]

As a matter of fact, the deportees were given the legal right "to maintain their ancestral traditions",[25] and were therefore entitled to perpetuate their own language and religion in the land of their exile.

We know from both biblical and Assyrian sources that this general policy of mass deportation was also applied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel when it fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. The Assyrians deported a select group of Israelites (as a general rule, "the deportees were chosen mainly from among the leaders of the community and from the artisans")[26] to Assyria, Media, and northern Syria (2 K 17:6). In return, we read that

> . . . the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites. (2 K 17:24, *NIV*)

(22) This statement is found in I. Eph'al, "Israel: Fall and Exile," in WHJP, First Series, Volume, IV,1: *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1979) 189.

(23) B. Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1979) 19–21.

(24) Oded, *op. cit.*, 25; cf. 23.

(25) Oded, *op. cit.*, 87.

(26) Oded, *op. cit.*, 47.

These incoming deportees, as we might expect, brought along their own gods and cultic practices:

> But every nation still made gods of its own . . ., the men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, and the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech, the gods of Sepharvaim. (2 K 17:29–31. *RSV*)

The fact that this passage occurs in a context which discredits as syncretistic the later religion of the Samaritans does not detract from its value as illustration of our overall point: those who were deported by the Assyrians in the late eighth century reestablished their own cult when they arrived in their new homeland. They "worshipped their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been deported" (2 K 17:33).

For the purposes of our present discussion it is of special interest to inquire whether the general pattern of Assyrian deportation also applied specifically to the land of Gilead, since it was in this region that the Balaamite inscription was found. We must bear in mind that Gilead, together with the rest of Transjordan, had fallen to the Assyrians in 732, a decade before the fall of the capital, Samaria.[27] We do know that the inhabitants of Transjordan, "the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh," were deported by Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Chr 5:26), and that their lands were reconstituted as a province of the Assyrian empire.[28] Although no record has been preserved of deportations *into* this newly-created province, it is a reasonable assumption that they did take place. Oded tells us that there must have been Assyrian deportations of which we have no record,[29] and the general rule appears to hold that "the Assyrian kings brought people from the outside into every area from which people had been deported."[30] In fact Oded, the leading authority in these matters, considers it virtually certain that deportees were settled in the Assyrian province created in Transjordan. As he writes elsewhere:

> . . . the deportation of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half Manasseh (I Chr. 5:26) must have been accompanied by the settlement

(27) Ephᶜal, "Israel: Fall and Exile," 185.
(28) Oded, "Observations," 177–180.
(29) Oded, *Mass Deportations*, 18.
(30) Oded, *Mass Deportations*, 29.

> on their lands of exiles brought from other conquered territories, since there is no reason to suppose that, in the case of Transjordania, Tiglath-Pileser III did not follow the usual Assyrian practice.[31]

Consequently, quite apart from the inscription found at Tell Deir ᶜAlla, there is good reason to assume that colonies of non-Israelite deportees were settled in this general area in the late eighth century B.C.E.

This assumption also fits our present knowledge concerning phase M, the designation given by Franken to the archeological level in which the Balaamite inscription was found. Unfortunately the non-inscriptional finds of this level have not yet been published, but the reports of the excavations already contain a number of significant conclusions.

Franken distinguishes three periods of Iron Age occupation, with Phase M (or Phase IX, as it is now known)[32] representing the last (or almost the last) level of the second period.[33] This second period is not one of continuous occupation, however; there is good reason to believe that "there was a period after phase L in which the tell was hardly occupied".[34] Franken takes this break in occupation, which is the one immediately preceding Phase M, to have been relatively short,[35] although it may also have been quite long.[36] However long it was, its significance is that the Balaamites, who were the Phase M inhabitants of Deir ᶜAlla, occupied this site after it had been abandoned, or virtually abandoned, for some time.

To this evidence of a Balaamite resettlement of the deserted tell must be added that of the pottery. According to Franken, Phase M "contains some pottery shapes which do not belong to the village repertoire,"[37] that is, to the ceramic tradition of the immediately preceding levels. Ap-

(31) B. Oded, "Observations," 183.

(32) M. Ibrahim and G. van der Kooij, in their reports on excavations at Tell Deir ᶜAlla in *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 23(1979)41–50, and *Archiv für Orientforschung* 29/30(1983/84)260–263.

(33) H.J. Franken, *Excavations at Tell Deir ᶜAlla I. A Stratigraphical and Analytical Study of the Early Iron Age Pottery* (Leiden: Brill, 1969) 19–22; 44–63. On p. 63 Franken suggests, in a later note, that there may be a phase between M and N which also belongs to this period, thus making M the penultimate phase. Later excavators (see previous note) have distinguished a second intermediate phase, so that Franken's phases M and N correspond to the later designations IX (=M), VIII, VII and VI (=N).

(34) Franken, *Excavations I,* 61.

(35) Franken, *Excavations I,* 61.

(36) In *Excavations I,* 247, Franken dates Phases E-L between 1150 and 1050 B.C., which would put Phase M much later (since the latter is commonly dated, also by Franken, to the late eighth century).

(37) Franken, *Excavations I,* 61.

parently a new style of pottery was introduced to Deir ᶜAlla by its Phase M inhabitants. What is even more striking is that the clay of some types of Phase M pottery contains materials which are not indigenous to the Deir ᶜAlla area. In fact, Franken argues that these types "indicate different geological regions as the place of origin."[38] It seems that not only the style, but also the physical composition of this distinctive Phase M pottery is foreign to Deir ᶜAlla.[38a]

These archeological givens clearly lend support to the hypothesis of a colony of deportees at Deir ᶜAlla. Deportees would have taken along some of their own pottery, as well as their own style of pottery making, and would have settled on sites that had previously been abandoned — perhaps abandoned by the Transjordanian Israelites who had themselves been recently deported by the Assyrians.

If the Balaamites of Tell Deir ᶜAlla were indeed such a colony of deportees, then the question arises as to their place of origin. It is unlikely that we will be able to pinpoint their homeland exactly, but there are two kinds of evidence which allow us to identify, with a fair degree of certainty, the general area from which they came. Both the overall pattern of Assyrian deportations to Israelite territory and the archeological data of Tell Deir ᶜAlla suggest that the Balaamites hailed from one of the northern Aramean states which were conquered by Tiglath-Pileser III in the mid-eighth century.

We have seen that 2 Kings speaks of deportees in the towns of Samaria who came from "Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim" (2 K 17:24, 30–31). The last three of these probably all designate cities in northern Syria,[39] which was dominated until the Assyrian conquest by a number of small Aramean kingdoms.[40] But the deportations from the first two, which belong geographically to Babylonia, probably also involved Aramean populations. Oded tells us that most of the people deported from Babylonia were "from Chaldaean

(38) Franken in Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, 11.

(38a) G. van der Kooij has kindly informed me (personal communication, Nov. 9, 1987) that the excavators no longer assign the distinctive pottery in question to Phase M. If this proves to be correct, then the above argument based on the pottery no longer applies to the Balaamites. In the meantime, note that a similar conclusion to my own is drawn in the entry "Deir ᶜAlla (Tell)" in Abraham Negev (ed.), *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*. Revised Edition (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 116: "In the later stages of the Iron Age settlers identified as Arameans, with a completely different ceramic tradition typical of the 8th to 7th century B.C., inhabited the site."

(39) See John Gray, *I and II Kings. A Commentary*. Second, Fully Revised, Edition (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1970), 651–652. Note that the place named *ᶜawwâ* (or *ᶜiwwâ*) is associated with other North Syrian cities in 2 K 18:34.

(40) A. Malamat, "Aram, Arameans," *EncJud* 3.255.

and Aramaean tribes."[41] The general picture which seems to emerge is that the Assyrians settled Israelite territory with people of Aramean stock, drawn from lands on the other side of Aram-Damascus. The inhabitants of Damascus itself, on the other hand, were settled outside of Israel in Kir,[42] probably because Damascus had traditionally been the archenemy of the Northern Kingdom.

Again, the archeological evidence from Tell Deir ᶜAlla lends credence to our hypothesis. The inscriptions on stone and pottery which were found associated with the Balaamite text are written in Aramaic,[43] and the script of the text itself — whether or not we take its language to be Aramaic — is identical with, or very similar to, the eighth-century Aramaic script.[44] Van der Kooij sees its closest paleographical analogue in an eighth-century inscription of Hamath, the Aramean city-state immediately to the north of Damascus.[45] Also, the presence of the word *br* in the name "Balaam son of Be'or" (*blᶜm br bᶜr*), even if it is explained as an Aramaism in an otherwise Canaanite text, nevertheless shows that Balaam — and by probable association, the Balaamite cult — was of Aramean extraction. Furthermore, the type of plaster used for the inscription in Tell Deir ᶜAlla seems to be related, according to Van der Kooij, to plaster found in the two North-Syrian Aramean cities of Til-Barsib and Arslan Tash.[46] These bits of archeological evidence again suggest an Aramean origin beyond Damascus.

To recapitulate our argument to this point, we can say that there would be nothing surprising, from a historical point of view, about finding a colony of Aramean deportees practising their own religion in Gilead around 700 B.C.E., and that the archeological evidence of Tell Deir ᶜAlla, even apart from the language and religion of the Balaamite inscription, tends to confirm this possibility.

We turn now to the bearing which our proposal has on the puzzling aspects of the inscription which we listed earlier. With respect to the script of our text, the question whether it is Aramaic or Ammonite need no longer be posed as a dilemma. It is important to note that this in-

(41) Oded, *Mass Deportations*, 26: cf. 63.

(42) Amos 1:5 and 2 K 16:9. The location of Kir has not been identified, but is generally agreed to be outside of Israelite territory, possibly near Elam (cf. Isa.22:6).

(43) Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts* 267, 300. That these inscriptions are Aramaic is universally accepted.

(44) See note 6 and the statement by Avigad that the Balaamite script "has pronounced Aramaic features", in WHJP, First Series, Volume IV, 1: *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History* (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979) 42.

(45) Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, 95.

(46) Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, 28.

scription, if it is indeed paleographically part of the Ammonite series, is "our earliest example" of that series.[47] It could, in fact, represent its beginning. In other words, the Balaamite exiles may have introduced into the region bordering on Ammon a variety of Aramaic writing which *developed into* the characteristic script of the Ammonites. It is generally argued that Ammonite diverged from the standard Aramaic paleographical tradition at about 750,[48] or some decades later.[49] It is entirely possible that the Balaamite script represents the point at which Ammonite branches off from Aramaic — a kind of paleographical missing-link which is continuous with both traditions. Perhaps it was the influence of these Aramean deportees, newly arrived on the borders of Ammon, which was the catalyst for the development of the distinctive Ammonite variety of Aramaic writing.[50] If, as A. Lemaire has suggested, there was something like a school at Tell Deir ᶜAlla,[51] it is possible that for a time Ammonite scribes learned their trade there. There is in fact evidence of an Ammonite presence at Tell Deir ᶜAlla in the seventh century.[52] If the later Ammonite scribes did learn their style of writing from the Balaamites, this would account for the markedly slower development of the Ammonite script as compared to Aramaic,[53] since the deportees who taught it, like colonists and immigrants everywhere, would tend to be conservative with respect to their own cultural heritage.

Turning now to the language of the Balaamite inscription, we have seen that it does not fit the pattern of any known Northwest Semitic dialect. (The suggestion that it is Ammonite has now been clearly ruled out by the work of Garr.)[54] Since it possesses features which seem to

(47) Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 18; see also L.G. Herr, "The Formal Scripts of Iron Age Transjordan," *BASOR* 238(1980)21–26. The script of the Amman Citadel Inscription (ninth century) is included in the Ammonite series by E. Puech, "L'inscription de la statue d'Amman et la paléographie ammonite," *RB* 92(1985)10, but is usually considered Aramaic; see F.M. Cross, "Notes on the Ammonite Inscription," 13.

(48) F.M. Cross, "Notes on the Ammonite Inscription," 13.

(49) L.G. Herr, *The Scripts of Ancient Northwest Semitic Seals* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 18; Missoula: Scholars, 1978) 58; 192 (ca. 730); *idem*, "The Formal Scripts", 26, 32.

(50) Cf. Herr, "The Formal Scripts," 26, who takes the Assyrian conquest to have been the catalyst.

(51) Lemaire, "Fragments from the Book," 39; *idem*, "Les inscriptions de Deir ᶜAlla," 283; *idem*, "L'inscription: épigraphie," 321–322.

(52) S. Abbadi, "Ein neues ammonitisches Siegel," *ZDPV* 95(1979)36–38. The most recent excavations at Tell Deir ᶜAlla have also turned up "mehrere Ostraka mit aramäischer oder ammonitischer Schrift" in the levels subsequent to that of the Balaamite inscription; see the report by M. Ibrahim and G. Van der Kooij in *Archiv für Orientforschung* 29/30(1983/84)263.

(53) F.M. Cross, "Ammonite Ostraca from Heshbon," 12; Herr, "The Formal Scripts," 23.

align it with both Aramaic and Canaanite, scholars have debated whether it is a form of Aramaic shot through with Canaanisms,[55] or a form of Canaanite laced with Aramaisms.[56]

In the light of the hypothesis we are proposing, the question can be resolved in one of two ways. One possibility is that the language of the Aramean deportees, after a period of immersion in a Canaanite linguistic context, was "Canaanized" to such an extent that it would be difficult to classify the resulting hybrid as clearly either Aramaic or Canaanite. Something similar seems to have happened in Arslan Tash, where a Phoenician linguistic enclave seems to have been partially assimilated to an Aramaic environment.[57] However, this solution to the language problem meets with the objection that the linguistic assimilation it presupposes would have had to take place in a relatively brief period, between the Assyrian conquest of 732 and the writing of the inscription around 700.

Consequently, I look upon the second possibility as much more plausible, as well as more intriguing from a linguistic point of view. We must keep in mind that the Balaamite inscription is a prophetic text displayed in a sanctuary, and therefore presumably had the status of a sacred text in the Balaamite cult. If the Balaamites were deportees, this sacred text was no doubt part of the ancestral traditions which they took with them from their homeland, and might therefore be quite ancient. Indeed, Lemaire has suggested that by the eighth century it might have been hundreds of years old.[58] In that case the language of this prophetic text would be archaic, having been preserved in the written form which prophecies in the Ancient Near East were commonly given soon after being delivered.[59] In fact, as H.P. Müller has suggested, the language of the Balaamite inscription may represent an early stage of Aramaic when it was not yet clearly differentiated from Canaanite.[60]

(54) W. Randall Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586* B.C.E. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 205–240.

(55) E.g., P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "The Balaam Texts from Deir ᶜAlla: The First Combination," *BASOR* 239(1980)50–51; and H.P. Müller, "Die aramäische Inschrift von Deir ᶜAlla und die älteren Bileamsprüche," *ZAW* 94(1982)215.

(56) E.g., Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 109–124; B. Levine, "Historical Aspects," 327–330.

(57) J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Vol. 3* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 79–80. But cf. J. Teixidor, "Les tablettes d'Arslan Tash au Musée d'Alep," *Aula Orientalis* 1(1983)105–108.

(58) See Lemaire, "Fragments from the Book," 38; *idem*, "Les inscriptions de Deir ᶜAlla," 283.

(59) See A.R. Millard, "La prophétie et l'écriture — Israël, Aram, Assyrie," *RHR* 202(1985)125–144.

(60) Müller, *op. cit.*, 215–216.

What I am suggesting, in other words, is that the sacred text of the Balaamites preserves a very old form of Aramaic which shares features with the later Canaanite dialects because it is still historically close to the parent of those dialects. After all, to use S.A. Kaufman's words, "that an archaic Aramaic dialect should be more like Canaanite than later Aramaic is self-evident."[61] The Aramaic character of the Deir ᶜAlla dialect has been decisively vindicated, in my judgment, by the recent work of Garr[62] and Lemaire.[63] The apparent Canaanisms, such as the consecutive imperfect and the intensifying use of the absolute infinitive, which our dialect shares with some of the Old Aramaic inscriptions, may well represent archaic features of Northwest Semitic which were later preserved only in certain Canaanite dialects.[64] In that case, they are clues which suggest that the sacred language of the Balaamites was indeed an archaic form of Aramaic.

One group of Old Aramaic inscriptions deserves special attention in this context, namely those written in the dialect of Sam'al.[65] This dialect stands apart from the rest of Old Aramaic in a number of ways, and has been described by S. Segert as "a remnant of the linguistic state before the clear separation of the dialects of the Northwest Semites into Canaanite and Aramaic ones."[66] It is therefore noteworthy that the Deir ᶜAlla dialect shows some striking correspondences specifically with Samalian. These correspondences, which do not seem to have been pointed out before, include the absence of an article,[67] the occurrence of an N conjugation,[68] the long form of the third masculine plural imperfect without final *nun*,[69] and a G infinitive without preformative

(61) S.A. Kaufman, Review of Hoftijzer-Van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts*, *BASOR* 239(1980)73.

(62) Garr, *Dialect Geography*. From the comparative charts in Garr's final chapter, it appears that out of 44 points on which the Deir ᶜAlla dialect can be safely compared with other Northwest Semitic dialects of this period, 37 align it with Aramaic against one or more Canaanite dialects.

(63) Lemaire, "L'inscription: épigraphie," 320–321; *idem*, "Les inscriptions de Deir ᶜAlla," 282–283; *idem*, "La langue de l'inscription sur plâtre de Deir ᶜAlla," *Comptes-rendus du Groupe Linguistique d'Etudes Chamito-Sémitiques* 24–28 (1979–84) 317–340.

(64) Cf. Garr, *Dialect Geography*, 186.

(65) See P. Dion, *La langue de Ya'udi. Description et classement de l'ancien parler de Zencirli dans le cadre des langues sémitiques du nord-ouest* (Waterloo: La Corporation pour la Publication des Etudes Académiques en Religion au Canada, 1974).

(66) S. Segert, *Altaramäische Grammatik, mit Bibliographie, Chrestomathie und Glossar* (Leipzig: Enzyklopädie, 1975) 37 (my translation).

(67) Dion, *La langue*, 137; Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 113–114. All alleged cases of the article in the Balaamite inscription are disputable; see also Garr, *Dialect Geography*, 88.

(68) Dion, *La langue*, 133, 208–209; Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 117. Note that Garr, *Dialect Geography*, 121, mistakenly reports "no evidence" on this point for Samalian.

mem.[70] The last three of these features, oddly enough, are adduced by Hackett as positive proof that the Deir ᶜAlla dialect must be Canaanite,[71] whereas in fact they link this dialect with a form of Old Aramaic which, if Segert is right, constitutes a kind of linguistic fossil of early Northwest Semitic.[72]

If the Balaamite dialect of the plaster inscription is indeed an archaic form of Northwest Semitic, then it must be distinguished from the current speech of the Aramean deportees, which was no doubt a familiar form of eighth-century Old Aramaic. This explains why the inscriptions on stone and pottery at Tell Deir ᶜAlla, not being part of the sacred textual tradition, are clearly recognizable as Aramaic. Such a disparity between a people's ordinary speech and the archaic language of their sacred texts is of course a common phenomenon. We need only think of the difference between the classical Arabic of the Qur'an and the modern Arabic dialects of Moslems today, between Biblical Hebrew and the Israeli Hebrew of Jews in contemporary Israel, or even between the seventeenth-century English of the King James Version of the Bible and the American speech of many present-day Protestants in the U.S. It is entirely plausible that a similar disparity existed among the Balaamites at Tell Deir ᶜAlla.

To sum up, we can say that the hypothesis which identifies the Balaamites of Tell Deir ᶜAlla as Aramean deportees is not only supported by solid historical and archeological evidence, but also provides a plausible solution for the problems with which we began this essay. The reconstruction we propose accounts 1) for the non-Israelite character of the language, script, and religion of the inscription, 2) for the connections of its script with both Aramaic and Ammonite, 3) for the ambiguous linguistic status of the Balaamite text, and 4) for the association of the inscription on plaster with the unambiguously Aramaic inscriptions on stone and pottery.

Finally, a word needs to be said about Tell Deir ᶜAlla and the Bible. The prophet Micah, who was a contemporary of the Balaamites in Gilead, makes reference to the Israelite tradition about Balaam and Balak in Micah 6:5, putting them in the period just before the Israelite Conquest. He is clearly referring to the story told in Numbers 22–24, where Balaam is described as a pagan diviner who is summoned by Balak from

(69) Dion, *La langue*, 184–185; Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 69 n. 73, 118.

(70) Dion, *La langue*, 128, 194; Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 118.

(71) Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 117–118.

(72) Dion, *La langue*, 338–341, argues that Samalian is an offshoot of Old Aramaic which branched off around 920 B.C. (cf. p. 504 n. 24).

Aram, from his home on the Euphrates, and who ends up blessing Israel in spite of himself. The story in Numbers incorporates the seven oracles which Balaam pronounces; these are preserved in an archaic form of Hebrew poetry which is commonly dated as early as the twelfth or eleventh century B.C.E.[73] In other words, the Israelite tradition associates Balaam with paganism, with an Aramean homeland, with a geographical location in northern Syria, and with a time period hundreds of years before the eighth century. All of this dovetails nicely with our hypothesis. The Balaamites of Tell Deir ᶜAlla may well represent an Aramean religious tradition which goes back to an actual pagan prophet called Balaam who lived in northern Syria centuries before the Neo-Assyrian deportations. Like the oracles of Balaam in Numbers, the plaster inscription of the Aramean deportees may well preserve an authentic tradition of ancient pagan prophecy.[74]

(73) W.F. Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," *JBL* 63 (1944) 207–233, dates them to about 1200 B.C. An eleventh century date is defended by D.N. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy. Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980) 14, 88–90, 118–119, 178. See also D.K. Stuart, *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 13; Missoula: Scholars, 1976) 109. A pre-Conquest date is defended by D. Vetter, *Seherspruch und Segenschilderung* (Calwer Theologische Monographien 4; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1974), pp. 9, 24, 61–62.

(74) After completion of this article my attention was drawn to E.A. Knauf's review of Hackett, *Balaam Text*, in *ZDPV* 101(1985)187–191. Knauf's comments with respect to the language of the Balaamite inscription, and its relation to the associated Aramaic inscriptions (pp. 190–191), run parallel to my own. (I would like to thank Michael S. Moore for bringing Knauf's review to my attention.)