The Balaam Inscription from Deir ʿAlla: Historical Aspects*

The recent discovery of inscribed plaster fragments fallen onto the floor within the walls of the Iron Age temple at Deir ʿAlla, has caused a curious sensation: on these fragments a literary composition is preserved in which the name of Balaam son of Beor (written: *blʿm br bʿr*) is repeatedly mentioned. He is designated a divine seer (*ḥzh ʾlhn*). This fact alone, quite apart from the intriguing character of the text as a whole, enhances the realism of biblical poetry and historiography. An epic figure known only from the Hebrew Bible (and from post-biblical interpretive literature) was, in fact, renowned in the Jordan Valley during the pre-exilic biblical period at a site just north of the lower Jabbok (Zerqa), some 12 km north-northeast of its juncture with the Jordan. This area, known in the Bible as the Valley of Succoth (Psalms 60:8, 108:89), is not all that remote from the Plains of Moab, the site of Balaam's encounter with the Israelites, which biblical historiography assigns to an earlier period.

The discovery of the Deir ʿAlla fragments has raised the question of just how the biblical Balaam saga and the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla are related to one another, for surely a relationship exists. It is this awareness of connection that is basic to the field we call biblical archaeology, and to the comparative method in the study of ancient civilizations.

The study of the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla is affected by four principal types of evidence: historical, archaeological, epigraphic and biblical. In each class of evidence we encounter difficulties of interpretation, and suffer, at the present time, from grossly inadequate information. In fact, this is perhaps the most uncertain time to venture historical hypotheses regarding the Balaam text! The pottery from Phase M, H.J. Franken's designation for the level in which the plaster fragments were found, has not yet been published. Thus, his assertion that the ceramic assemblage characteristic of Phase M is distinct from that found west of the Jordan during the same period cannot as yet be evaluated.[1]

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[1] J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, eds., *Aramaic Texts from Deir ʿAlla* (Leiden, 1976). See H.J. Franken, "Archaeological Evidence Relating to the Interpretation of the Text," *ibid.*, especially his comments on the pottery on pp. 11–12. See also, H.J. Franken and M.M. Ibrahim, "Two Seasons of Excavation at Tell Deir ʿAlla," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities, Jordan* 2 (1977–78): 57–10, with a note by J. Hoftijzer; M. Ibrahim, J. Sauer, K. Yassine, "The East Jordan Valley Survey, 1975," *BASOR* 222 (1976):

The stratigraphy of Tell Deir ʿAlla is far from clear, due to natural conditions, and to the limited excavations carried out. Work has been resumed under G. van der Kooij, who accomplished the palaeographic study of the inscription for the 1976 publication, and a Jordanian archaeologist, M. Ibrahim. The present excavations are concentrated on the higher levels of the mound, and thus promise to provide us with information about the strata most relevant to the Balaam text. We are awaiting publication of the report of J.B. Pritchard's excavations at nearby Tell es-Saʿidiyeh, and that of Mohammed Kh. Yassine, at Tell el-Mazār. One hopes that additional plaster inscriptions may be uncovered at one or another of these sites. Within the near future we should, in any event, know much more about the material culture of the immediate area.

Historically, we know less about life in Gilead during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. than we do, on the basis of Egyptian, Assyrian and Aramean sources, about the preceding centuries, and the same imbalance characterizes the biblical record. Finally, the state of the fragments has made their reading an uncertain enterprise, and even the alignment of the fragments has proved to be precarious. Palaeographic analysis has yielded diverse dates, and disagreement persists even on the language of the text. An extensive literature has arisen on the subject of the Balaam text, and the divergence of views expressed only further reinforces our uncertainties regarding its proper interpretation.

In historical terms, the primary question confronting us is whether the Balaam text was a product of the period *prior* to the Assyrian subjugation of Gilead, a series of events probably extending from 734 to 721 B.C.E. under Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon, or whether it was a product of the period *subsequent* to these pivotal events. The Assyrian campaigns must be regarded as a watershed in any attempt to ascertain whose temple it was at Deir ʿAlla that had the Balaam text inscribed within its rooms; to know for whom this text speaks, and by whom it was authored. In the wake of the Assyrian campaigns there were mass deportations of the inhabitants of Gilead, and the demography of the Valley of Succoth changed radically. Before the Assyrian campaigns the population was probably predominantly Israelite, although direct evidence bearing on this conclusion is admittedly sparse. Settlement patterns are often complex, and the population may well have been mixed. On the other hand, it is quite clear that after the Assyrian deportations there is less likelihood that the population of the area was predominantly Israelite, and consequently, it is less likely that our text would have been the work of Israelite authors.

I prefer to outline my hypothesis on the historical provenience of the Balaam text at this point, so that the discussion to follow may be accepted as an attempt to deal with specific historical problems.

I submit that the Balaam text may well preserve a literary composition antedating the Assyrian subjugation of Gilead. Palaeographic analysis allows for

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41–66. An interesting attempt to synthesize the biblical record with external evidence is provided by O. Ottosson, *Gilead: Tradition and History* (Lund, 1969).

this conclusion, though it by no means compels its acceptance. I further submit, with greater assurance, that the language of the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla is *not* Aramaic, as we know it from the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., but rather a regional language. Whatever limited features of the language that point us in the direction of Old Aramaic can be explained either as originally dialectal, or as the result of language contact with Aramaic, introduced into the area by Arameans. Nothing in the Deir ʿAlla language suggests that the Balaam text is culturally remote from contemporaneous Hebrew, Moabite or Ammonite creativity.

In literary form and with respect to its themes and diction, the Balaam text bears striking affinities to biblical literature, and of course, to the biblical Balaam saga itself; to the point of suggesting that the biblical saga is of Transjordanian origin! There is also a great similarity between "Combination II" of the Balaam text (according to Hoftijzer's delineation) and the Sheol oracle of Isaiah 14. Many such similarities are documented in my earlier study, where I stopped short of attempting to explain these affinities in literary-historical terms.[2]

It is possible that the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla speaks for the predominantly Israelite population of Gilead before the Assyrian subjugation. When further evidence becomes available this hypothesis will be tested, but for the moment it should not be excluded, *a priori*, simply because of the context of the text itself. This is a polytheistic text, of a mythological character, in which the Syro-Canaanite deity El is prominent, and in which a goddess, Shagar weʿIshtar, plays a role. It is my assessment, nonetheless, that Israelite culture was more pervasive in the pre-exilic period than was Israelite monotheism, and that the existence of non-Yahwistic, Israelite temples in Judah, in northern Israel or in Transjordan (which was at various periods incorporated within the northern Israelite kingdom) should not be denied, in principle or in fact. Judging from the content of the Balaam text, one may conclude that the Iron Age temple at Deir ʿAlla was an El temple.

Having prefaced these general remarks, I may now begin a more detailed analysis of the text in historical perspective.

It would be well to engage the language question at this point. The Aramaic label that was affixed to the Deir ʿAlla text has, in my opinion, impeded a proper historical and cultural assessment of its provenience.

In Phase M at Deir ʿAlla, four brief Aramaic inscriptions were found. One of them, on a clay jar, reads: *zy ś/šrʿ*, "belonging to X," attesting the Aramaic relative pronoun. The same name appears on the handle of a stone jar. A third inscription preserves a partial abecedary and the fourth is too fragmentary to be intelligible. Both Franken and Hoftijzer, as well as others it seems, have assumed a direct connection between these Aramaic inscriptions and the language

[2] B.A. Levine, "The Deir ʿAlla Plaster Inscriptions," *JAOS* 101 (1981): 196–205. {*VOL 1, PP. 125–41*}

of the literary Balaam text.[3] This assumption is unsound methodologically. One would only expect to find Aramaic administrative notations at a site governed by Arameans, or at a later time by Assyrians, if that proved to be the case. The name *ś/šrʿ* is not likely a divine name, as Franken and Hoftijzer suggest, but rather an official name. It does not occur in the Balaam text, nor should it logically be restored there as the name of a goddess. There is no warrant for adducing the presence of these Aramaic administrative notations as evidence for the language of the Balaam text.

As uncertain readings are reexamined, it becomes evident that there are fewer clear indications of Aramaic factors in the Deir ʿAlla language. An instructive example occurs near the beginning of "Combination I." Once, a preferred reading was: *kmlyʾ ʾl*, "according to these words," the sense being that the "gods" (*ʾlhn*) spoke to Balaam. Just as my study was going to press, I benefited from a suggestion by É. Puech that *kmśʾ ʾl* should be read "according to the revelation of El." Later, I learned that A. Rofé had suggested the same reading, and now I find that the Weipperts have adopted it as well, and it is gaining wider acceptance.[4] In terms of linguistic assignment, the effect of this reading has been to eliminate the only putative attestation of the Aramaic post-positive determination in the Balaam text!

An example of another type illustrates how the Aramaic label may condition the mind of the exegete, and lead one to seek validation for an undemonstrated conclusion. According to my understanding of the text, the second feminine suffix, *-ky*, which is suggestive of Old Aramaic and of later dialects, but surely not an unequivocal indication of such, does not actually occur in the Balaam text. There are three attestations of *ky*, in close succession, and I prefer to take all of them as the particle *ky*, "for" or "that," and as initiating discrete clauses:

1. *ky šm ḥsk wʾl ngh*, "So that darkness and no brilliance will be there."
2. *ky thby ḥtt*, "That you may instill dread!"
3. *ky ss ʿgr ḥrpt nšr*, "For the swift [and] crane will shriek insult to the eagle."

As far as I can determine, the only phonetic feature of the Deir ʿAlla language that is common to Old Aramaic is the representation of the phoneme *Ḍod* as *Qoph*, rather than as a *Ṣade* or *ʿAyin*, as is normal in the Canaanite languages. Thus, we have the verbal form *hqrqt*, "She put to flight," late in "Combination I," and probably a few more examples. Most important is the word *nqr*, which occurs three times in "Combination II." It means "corpse, the dead," and is cog-

[3] For comments on these Aramaic notations, see Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts* (note 1), pp. 15, 267f., 274f., and 285f.

[4] Cf. A. Rofé, *The Book of Balaam* (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 61, s.v. line 2 (Hebrew); H. and M. Weippert, "Die Bileam-Inschrift von Tell Der ʿAlla," *ZDPV* 98 (1982): 77–103, especially 83, s.v. line 2. Now see J. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ʿAlla* (Scholars Press, 1984), p. 25, line 2, and commentary, and p. 33.

nate to the Hebrew *hapax nēṣer* in Isaiah 14:19, unrelated to נצר, "shoot." Deir ʿAlla *nqr* and Hebrew נצר of Isaiah 14:19 may be derived from a root *nḍl* (or *nḍr*), given the Syriac form *neṣlā*ʾ, "carrion." In this connection, J. Naveh has overstated his case for claiming that no such sound-shift is attested in the Balaam text.[5]

What does the occurrence of this sound-shift, usually regarded as critical in the differentiation of Old Aramaic from the Canaanite languages of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., truly indicate? It is, in my judgment, an error to base the linguistic assignment of the Balaam text solely on one criterion. We should evaluate the overall linguistic character of a given text. Similarly, the probable occurrence of Ethpeʿel forms (such as *lytmlk*, "He will not consult") is not conclusive in morphological terms. Nor does a text become Aramaic because it uses a number of verbs uncharacteristic of the Canaanite languages and known mostly from Aramaic, such as *ʿbd*, "to do, make" (Aramaic connotation), *qrq*, "to flee," *ʿll*, "to enter," and the verb *ḥwy*," to show, tell." The form *ḥad*, "one," is not a clear indication of Aramaic, and as Naveh has pointed out, *br* (instead of *bn*), "son," occurs only in the name of Balaam, and no more makes this text Aramaic than does the name *klmw br ḥy*(ʾ) ("Kilamuwa son of Ḥayya," render a Phoenician text from Samal Aramaic![6]

On balance, what is most revealing about the language of the Balaam text is its dominant syntax, which is based on the consecutive tense, with the *Waw* of succession, as W. Moran calls it (or the *Waw* conversive, if you will). This tense system is not at home in Aramaic. It does no good to cite the several occurrences of the consecutive tense in the inscription of Zakur of Hamath, dated to the end of the ninth or the beginning of the eighth century B.C.E., as evidence for the currency of this tense system in Aramaic. If anything, the occurrence of this tense in the Zakur inscription reflects the earlier, native culture of the kingdom of Hamath, prior to its Aramaization, when the language of the area was a form of Canaanite (or northwest Semitic, if you will), coexisting with a form of Hittite. Indeed, the Zakur inscription is a salient example of the expansion of the Aramaic language, but not, in and of itself, a paradigm of Old Aramaic![7]

Although the Deir ʿAlla language exhibits some phonetic and morphological peculiarities when compared to Hebrew, Moabite and Ammonite, as well as Phoenician, it is much closer to the Canaanite group than it is to Old Aramaic, as

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[5] Cf. J. Naveh, *IEJ* 29 (1979): 133–136, which is a review of Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts* (see note 1). Also see Levine, "The Deir ʿAlla Inscriptions" (note 2), p. 200, s.v. lines 27, 35; and p. 201, s.v. line 05 {VOL 1, PP. 133F.}. See also Hackett, *The Balaam Text* (note 4), Ch. IV: The Dialect, pp. 109–124.

[6] The occurrence of Aramaic *bar*, "son," is explained in this manner by Naveh, *IEJ* (note 5), p. 136, as an official representation of the name of the seer perceived as an Aramean.

[7] See discussion of this question by J. Hoftijzer, in Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts* (see note 1), p. 296, n. 23.

preserved in the Sefire inscriptions, for example. Historically, this analysis, if correct, is quite significant because it endorses the conclusion that the Balaam text is a native literary creation of the immediate region, not one imported from Syria or elsewhere.

A word about palaeography is now in order. Scholars such as van der Kooij, Naveh, Cross and now Puech have utilized palaeographic criteria in dating the Balaam text and, to the extent that script has a bearing on language and cultural provenience, to determine whose text this was. The script derives from the Aramaic script group. Cross, and now Puech, suggest that it exhibits characteristics of Ammonite script.[8]

This discussion has only indirect bearing on the language question, because script and language are different phenomena. At a site such as Deir ʿAlla, so close to Ammonite territory, one might expect Ammonite scribes to be at work, just as one would expect to find Aramean scribes at this site, which was at certain periods under Aramean administration. It is not unknown for one group or people to employ the script of another, for political or sociological reasons. The determining factors in ascertaining the cultural provenience of a given literary text are language and diction, in addition to specific content, of course.

The value of palaeographic analysis for dating a given script must also be stated cautiously. Van der Kooij subjected the script to painstaking analysis, character by character, even describing the movement of the nib used to write on the plaster in forming each character. He does not relate to any historical event, such as the Assyrian campaigns, but provides a qualified date of 700 B.C.E., give or take twenty-five years, as is customary. Naveh dates the script to around the middle of the eighth century B.C.E., perhaps a bit earlier, and Puech now suggests a date of ca. 725 B.C.E., plus or minus twenty-five years, favoring a pre-Assyrian provenience. Cross fixed a date of ca. 700 B.C.E., and has verbally stated that the Balaam text postdated the Assyrian campaigns, and that he does not consider it an Israelite creation.[9]

Palaeographic analysis alone cannot answer the most pressing historical questions regarding the Balaam text, certainly not in the present state of the overall evidence. At best, it can project sequences, differentiate between lapi-

[8] See the careful treatment of the script by G. van der Kooij in Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts* (see note 1), pp. 23–170. This study includes a detailed description of the method of writing used at Deir ʿAlla. In addition to Naveh's review of 1979 and his early analysis of the script in *IEJ* 17 (1967): 256–258, we have two statements by F.M. Cross Jr., "Epigraphic Notes on the Amman Citadel Inscription," *BASOR* 193 (1969): 13–19, especially p. 14, n. 2, where he tends to agree with Naveh's early dating in the eighth century B.C.E. with reservations, and "Notes on the Ammonite Inscription from Tell Siran," *BASOR* 212 (1973): 12–15, where he alters his view. Also see É. Puech, "L'Inscription de la Statue d'Amman et la Paléographie Ammonite," *RB* 92 (1985): 5–24.

[9] Cf. the remarks in É. Puech, "Response – l'Inscription sur plâtre de Tell Deir ʿAlla, *Biblical Archaeology Today* (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 354–365; and by F.M. Cross Jr., *ibid*., p. 369.

dary and cursive scripts and their respective rates of change and development, and trace the emergence of new forms, geographically.

I have already referred to the tentative state of the archaeological evidence. On the basis of what is presently known (April 1984), it seems that Phase M at Deir ʿAlla though it may have survived the Assyrian campaigns by a brief span, is primarily a pre-Assyrian phase and most probably not one initiated after 721 B.C.E. This seems to be Franken's conclusion, although his discussion is difficult to follow on this point.[10] The radio-carbon testing of a charred grain sample from Phase M yielded a date of ca. 800 B.C.E., plus or minus seventy years, with a 66% probability.[11] According to Franken, the lower limit of Phase M is ca. 650 B.C.E., because it was at about that time that wheel-turned pottery, absent from Phase M, was introduced to the area. The pottery changed between Phases M and N, according to Franken, and there may even have been an intermediate M–to–N phase. This matter will undoubtedly be clarified by the current excavations at the site. It is quite possible that the Ammonites did not move into the area until quite late in the seventh century B.C.E., and not very soon after the Assyrian subjugation of the area, as has been supposed.

What is at stake in this discussion is a clear indication of the demography of the Valley of Succoth at the time the Balaam text appeared on the inner walls of the Deir ʿAlla temple. There were two radical changes in the demography of the immediate area, one at the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200 B.C.E.) and the other as a consequence of the Assyrian deportations, occurring near the end of the eighth century B.C.E.

The Late Bronze Age culture of the lower Jabbok is called Canaanite for lack of a more precise term. We know that Egypt was interested in the area, as evidenced by the scarab of Taossert found at Deir ʿAlla, dating to the thirteenth century B.C.E.[12] The Late Bronze Age II temple at Deir ʿAlla was destroyed ca. 1200 B.C.E. — exactly how is not presently known. Construction at Deir ʿAlla was resumed early in the twelfth century. Clear historical information about the Valley of Succoth begins to appear only late in the tenth century B.C.E. I prefer, pending the publication of the Late Bronze Age II pottery and the Iron Age material, not to discuss in detail what has been reported about the finds of the early Iron Age at Deir ʿAlla. We are told that, after a brief Israelite period, there was an extended period characterized by Philistine-type pottery, perhaps of local manufacture. Then followed the period of the United Monarchy.

Very soon after the breakup of the United Monarchy, Jeroboam I fortified Penuel (1 Kings 12:25). Very shortly thereafter, early in the last quarter of the tenth century B.C.E., Shishak overran the Valley of Succoth, and his stele at Kar-

[10] See the discussion by Franken, in Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts* (note 1), pp. 12f.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 16 under "Note."

[12] See J. Yoyotte, "Un Souvenir du 'Pharaon' Taossert en Jordanie," *VT* 12 (1962): 464f.

nak, so effectively illuminated by Mazar, mentions no less than six sites in the area: Adam, a site named Kadesh, Penuel, Succoth, Mahanaim and Zaphon. Whether Deir ʿAlla is indeed ancient Succoth, or some other mound a few kilometers away, is not yet certain and matters little for the present discussion.[13]

At the time of Shishak's campaign, the Valley of Succoth was a fertile, densely populated area fed by the waters of the Jabbok as they poured down into the Jordan. In effect, Shishak went out of his way to reach this area, undoubtedly so as to reassert Egyptian interests here, and perhaps as punishment imposed on Jeroboam who had in some way displeased the Egyptians, after having found refuge in Egypt during the last days of Solomon. According to the latest information available to me, there is as yet no evidence of a Shishak destruction-level at Deir ʿAlla, but such evidence has turned up at Nimrin, a site south of Deir ʿAlla in the direction of Jericho and the Dead Sea. Further excavations may clarify this matter considerably.[14]

As Mazar emphasizes, the importance of the Valley of Succoth declined sharply after Shishak's campaign, and we have very little information about the area in the biblical record. The focus of international attention shifted to Ashtaroth in the Bashan and to Ramoth Gilead, both important stations on the international route linking up with the King's Highway and proceeding northward to Damascus.

With interruptions and setbacks, Aramean expansion, beginning in the early ninth century B.C.E. under Ben-Hadad II and continuing until near the end of the century under Hazael, eventually encompassed all of Gilead. At the end of the ninth century the campaigns of Adad-Nirari III weakened Aram-Damascus considerably, and for a time Israelite hegemony was reasserted under Joash and Jeroboam II. But sometime before the campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III, Rezin, the Aramean king, probably regained control of Transjordan. We do not know how extensive the Aramean presence was in the Valley of Succoth during this period, but the discovery of the Aramaic administrative notations in Phase M at Deir ʿAlla indicates at least an official presence, if we are correct in dating Phase M prior to the Assyrian subjugation of Gilead.

H. Tadmor has meticulously summarized what is known of the effects of the Assyrian subjugation in Bashan and Gilead, showing that the forces of Tiglath-Pileser III reached all the way south to Moab. There were mass deportations from Gilead and Galilee.[15]

In the period prior to the Assyrian campaigns we have some evidence of a strong Israelite factor in the population of Gilead. Possibly as many as four kings of northern Israel were Gileadites! Pekah son of Remaliah was a Gileadite

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[13] See B. Mazar, "Shishak's Campaign to Eretz-Israel," in *Canaan and Israel: Historical Essays* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 234–244, especially 236–237. (Hebrew)

[14] Nimrin is perhaps biblical בית נמרה (Numbers 32:3, 36, Joshua 13:27).

[15] See H. Tadmor, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol. VIII (Jerusalem, 1982), s.v. *Tiglat-Pilʾeser*, pp. 415f., especially 423f. (Hebrew).

and came to power with the assistance of a group of important Gileadites (2 Kings 15:25). It is also probable that Menahem son of Gadi (that is, a resident of the territory of Gad) was a Gileadite, which would make his son, Pekahiah, a Gileadite as well (2 Kings 15:14–17, 23). Come to think of it, Shallum son of Jabesh (2 Kings 15:13) must have been a Gileadite, from Jabesh of Gilead.[16] We would thus have a sequence of four kings in northern Israel who were Gileadites, from Shallum to Pekah, ruling from 748/47 to 733/32 B.C.E. Without overstating the implications of this political reality, it is safe to say that even during periods of Aramean hegemony in Transjordan, Gilead was part of the political configuration of the northern Israelite kingdom.

In summary, a date prior to the Assyrian campaigns for the Deir ʿAlla plasters would not be incompatible with the evidence currently available. At the present time, pending further evidence, the strongest argument for a Transjordan-Israelite provenience, as against a non-Israelite provenience, is the character of the Balaam text itself, especially its close affinity to certain biblical literary traditions. It is this complex of affinities which can be explored productively at the present time, always with an eye to historical questions but in a manner that does not presuppose as certain one set of historical conclusions. We turn now to the literary-historical provenience of the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla.

In the light of a restoration proposed independently by both G. Hamilton and É. Puech, and pursuant to my earlier interpretation, we may now read, near the beginning of "Combination I," the following:

> (*wyḥz mḥzh*) *kmśʾ ʾl*, "He [Balaam] beheld a vision according to the revelation of El."

This reading, with its specific reference to the deity El, links the two "Combinations" of the Balaam text to one another more firmly than was previously possible. Near the beginning of "Combination II" we read:

> (*ddn*) *yrwy ʾl wyʿbd ʾl byt ʿlmn*, El sates himself with lovemaking; then El fashioned a netherworld.

El emerges as the dominant deity in the Balaam text, one who shows compassion by revealing to Balaam, through his divine messengers, the imminence of disaster. Subsequently, El provides a proper burial and residence for the rejected, though heroic seer, Balaam. The exact relationship of the goddess Shagar weʿIshtar to El is not explicit; but El is clearly concerned with her fate.

All this means that the Iron Age temple at Deir ʿAlla was most probably an El temple. This should hardly surprise us, either during the eighth or the seventh century B.C.E. in the Valley of Succoth, whatever the demography of the region. El is by far the most frequent element in the Ammonite theophoric onomasticon,

[16] The name of the town is יב(י)ש in 1 Samuel 11:1, 3, *passim*; in 1 Samuel 31:12, etc.

as known primarily from the seventh century B.C.E.[17] Biblical traditions inform us that El was specifically associated with the Valley of Succoth in earlier centuries. This is most clearly epitomized in the Genesis narratives, which relate that Jacob became *Yisrael* at Penuel (Genesis 32:25–32)! This narrative qualifies as a *hieros logos* of Penuel, much in the same way that Genesis 28:10–22 represent a *hieros logos* of Bethel. The *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Penuel episode is most logically the period prior to Shishak's invasion, although in its present form it is probably a later composition.

The entire complex of El traditions associated with the Patriarchs is topically relevant to the present discussion, but is far too involved to be dealt with here in any detail. Suffice it to say that in contrast to Baal, who was utterly rejected in monotheistic circles early in the monarchic period, the last persons properly to be given Baalistic names being Saul's sons, El was generally welcomed, and the attitude toward El remained positive. El was synthesized or fused with Yahweh, the God of Israel. Some of the Genesis traditions betray an awareness that the Patriarchs (or, to put it less traditionally, the earliest Israelites) were devoted to El. This hindsight is not expressed with any disapproval, as evidenced by the startling statement in Exodus 6:2–4.

In the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla, El is the proper name of a deity and certainly not a common noun, or a way of referring to the God of Israel!

The classification of the Iron Age temple at Deir ʿAlla as an El temple leads one to conclusions of both historical and literary relevance. In historical perspective, it means that there was more than one pattern to cult practice and religious life in pre-exilic Israel. Yahwistic temples and cult sites could be "polluted" by the introduction of pagan rites or the like, and this situation is repeatedly called to our attention by biblical prophets and historiographers. There was another pattern whereby temples and cult sites dedicated to pagan gods coexisted with Yahwistic ones. There was a Baal temple in (or outside of) Samaria, which was put out of commission by Jehu (2 Kings 10:18f.) and subsequently, after Athaliah's backsliding, by the priests under Jehoiada (2 Kings 11:17f.).

As for Gilead, we know that there was a temple of Yahweh in Nebo around the middle of the ninth century B.C.E. Mesha tells us that, upon conquering Nebo, then an Israelite stronghold, he dragged "the vessels of Yahweh" before Ashtar-Kemosh, at his capital of Dibon.[18] The presence of an El temple in Gilead during the eighth century B.C.E. does not mean that Israelite monotheism

[17] See K.P. Jackson, *The Ammonite Language of the Iron Age* (Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 95f., and his study, "Ammonite Personal Names in the Context of the West Semitic Onomasticon," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth. Essays in Honor of D.N. Freedman* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 507–521.

[18] See H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, vol. I (Wiesbaden, 1962), p. 33, no. 181, lines 17–18, as restored: *wʾqḥ mšm ʾ*[*t k*]*ly YHWH*, "I took from there [Nebo] the vessels of Yahweh," etc.

was not established there, but only that it coexisted, in this case, with an autochthonous El cult of probable great antiquity.

The northern Israelite prophet of the eighth century B.C.E., Hosea, twice speaks of Gilead in his denunciations of improper worship and societal wickedness. Both passages are somewhat cryptic but, if studied in depth, may prove to be relevant to our discussion. Our starting point is Hosea 6:4. Continuing with deletions until verse 10, we read the text as follows:

> 4. What can I do for you Ephraim,
> What can I do for you, *Israel*,
> When your goodness is like morning clouds,
> Like dew early gone? …
> 6. For I desire goodness, not sacrifice,
> Obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings!
> 7. But they, in *Adam* have transgressed the covenant,
> There they have been false to Me.
> 8. Gilead is a city of evildoers, Tracked up with blood!
> 9. The gang of priests is
> Like the *ambuscade* of bandits
> Who murder on the road to Shechem,
> For they have encouraged depravity.
> 10. *At Beth Shean* I have seen
> A horrible thing:
> Ephraim has fornicated there,
> Israel has defiled himself![19]

Hosea is condemning the undue emphasis on cult and worship to the utter disregard for "steadfast love," a theme frequent in biblical prophecy, and in which sexual depravity, even if not actual, serves as a poignant way of expressing Israel's infidelity. What is significant is the fact that Hosea, like other prophets, targets certain towns as focal points of iniquity. He includes sites on both sides of the Jordan, starting with Adam and Gilead, projected as a town not a region (perhaps intending Jabesh-Gilead), and going on to encompass two major sites west of the Jordan, Shechem and Beth-Shean.

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[19] H.L. Ginsberg has suggested that in transmission of Hosea from northern Israel to Judah, archetypal *Yod*s, originally standing for ישראל, were misunderstood as referring to יהודה. This explains the proposed reading ישראל, "Israel," in v. 4. See H.L. Ginsberg, "Hosea, Book of," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 8:1015. For this reading, and for the reading בית-שאן instead of בית-ישראל in v. 10, see *The Prophets* (Jewish Publication Society of America: New York, 1978), to Hosea 6:4f., and notes, pp. 774–775. For the reading באדם, "in Adam," instead of Masoretic כאדם, "to a man," see E. Sellin, "Die Geschichtliche Orientierung der Prophetie des Hosea," *Neue kirchliche Zeitschrift* 36 (1925): 607–658, especially 624–625. In v. 9, Masoretic וכחני probably misrepresents a form of the verb חבא, "to conceal," as suggested by Sellin and others. Cf. H. Tadmor, "The Historical Background of Hosea's Prophecies," in *Y. Kaufmann Jubilee Volume*, ed. M. Haran (Jerusalem, 1962), pp. 84–88.

The geographic scope reflected in this list of places points to ancient realities affecting economy, trade and culture. *En route* from central Gilead to the Mediterranean, one could cross the Jordan at Adam. The route branched off west of the Jordan, northward to Beth-Shean, then westward to Megiddo, where it linked up with the "Via Maria." Another branch of the same route continued in a westerly direction to a point between Shechem and Tirzah, also linking up with the "Via Maria," either by way of Samaria or Dothan. Beth-Shean was also a station on the route from Jabesh-Gilead, which extended from the King's Highway in Transjordan to the "Via Maria." At various points, these routes exploited rifts in the northern mountains.[20]

Hosea 11 tells the same story, albeit in much less detail. In verse 11 we read:

> As for Gilead, it is worthless,
> And to no purpose have they
> Been sacrificing oxen in Gilgal.
> The altars of these are also
> Like stone heaps upon a plowed field.

It is not our purpose to suggest that Hosea is necessarily referring to the pattern of pagan worship we have proposed as applicable to an El temple at Deir ʿAlla, during the eighth century B.C.E. It is sufficient, in terms of our argument, to note that he is speaking of an Israelite society in the Gilead of his time, and that, in so doing, he perceives a societal configuration on both sides of the Jordan that is parallel with the political configuration discernible in the history of the northern Israelite monarchy during the same period.

Our literary analysis begins with the observation that the closest biblical parallels to the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla are, as one would expect, the biblical Balaam oracles and the narrative saga. I am not speaking merely of topical parallels but of close affinities in diction. This prompts me to suggest the existence of an El repertoire, emanating from centers of the El cult, upon which biblical writers drew for their materials. Some of chose centers were in Transjordan, and this would explain how a complex of traditions and oracles about Balaam, originating at sites such as Deir ʿAlla, found its way into biblical literature. Monotheistic writers fused El with Yahweh, by using אל in parallelism with יהוה, or with such terms as אלהים/אלה. Often אל was used as a common noun or as an epithet of Yahweh. It is difficult, of course, to ascertain where in the Hebrew Bible אל was intended by the ancient writers to designate a deity, Syro-Canaanite El. It is, however, precisely in those biblical poetic passages most similar in diction to the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla that this is most likely the case! Let us begin with the Sheol oracle of Isaiah 14, which I have compared to "Combination II" of the Balaam text.

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[20] See Y. Aharoni and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (New York, 1968), map no. 10, p. 17.

There are salient dictional affinities for comparison: Isaiah 14:19 refers to "the wrap of the slain" (לובש הרוגים), while "Combination II" has (*mn*) *mškb mtksn lbš*, "From the bed, they cover themselves with a wrap." Further compare Isaiah 14:11: "Your covering is the worm" (ומכסיך תולעת). Isaiah 14:18 states "They all repose in honor, each in his own 'house'" (כלם שכבו בכבוד), while "Combination II" has *tškb mškby ʿlmyk*, "you will repose on your eternal bed."

A remarkable parallel is provided by the term נצר, "carrion, corpse" in Isaiah 14:19 "You have been cast from your grave like loathsome carrion" (ואתה השלכתה מקברך כנצר תצב). In "Combination II," the term *nqr*, as it is expressed in the phonetic system of the Deir ʿAlla language, occurs three times. Two of the occurrences appear in clear contexts:

1. *nʾnḥ nqr blbbh*, "The corpse moans in his heart."
2. *lbb nqr šhh*, "The heart of the corpse is desolate."

These affinities would suggest that the two compositions derive from the same repertoire, and indeed the Sheol oracle of Isaiah 14 is El literature! Long ago M.D. Cassuto speculated that the term אל in Isaiah 14:13–14, in the boastful speech of the pagan king, was not a common noun referring to the God of Israel, but a reference to the well-known Syro-Canaanite deity, El.[21] The passage reads:

I will ascend to the heavens;
I will set my throne above the stars of *El* (ממעל לכוכבי-אל);
I will mount the back of a dense cloud;
I will be comparable to Elyon (אדמה לעליון)!

In contrast to words attributed to a pagan king, the tone of the Balaam oracles is passionately monotheistic. The biblical poets sing a paean of praise to Yahweh, and carefully synthesize El with Yahweh. In the first instance, this is shown through poetic parallelism (Numbers 23:8):

How can I curse what אל has not cursed?
How can I condemn what Yahweh (יהוה) has not damned?

Nonetheless, the derivation of the Balaam oracles from an El repertoire glares through the Yahwistic fusion. In citing the following verses, I render the Hebrew אל as *El* in italics, to show that one could just as well read these verses (Numbers 23:19) as referring to the deity, El:

El is not a person that he would deceive,
No mortal man, that he would retract.

And Numbers 23:22 and 24:8:

El, who freed them from Egypt,

[21] See M. D. Cassuto, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol. I (1955), pp. 283–284, s.v. אל, p. 2 (Hebrew). Also see O. Eissfeldt, "El and Yahweh," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 25–37.

Has horns like a wild ox!

And Numbers 23:24:

It is promptly told to Jacob,
To Israel—what *El* has done.

The third and fourth oracles open with a statement about Balaam himself (Numbers 24:3–4):

The oration of Balaam, son of Beor
The oration of the man whose vision is clear;
The oration of one who hears *El*'s oracles,
Who beholds the vision of Shaddai—
Prostrate, but with eyes wide open!

In the opening statement of the fourth oracle, the following words are added (Numbers 24:15–46):

Who possesses knowledge of Elyon

In addition to the El theme, there are other links between the biblical Balaam saga and the Deir ʿAlla text. In both, divine beings "come" to Balaam at night, and in both he beholds visions and relates to others what has been disclosed to him. He tells what the gods are doing, conveyed by the verb פעל/*pʿl*. In both, Shaddai or Shaddai-gods play a role.

Apart from the sources being discussed here because of their direct bearing on the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla, there are other inroads of the El repertoire in biblical literature. One example, of a later period, is the book of Job which, exclusive of the prologue and epilogue, may well be of Transjordanian origin. One also recalls the opening lines of Psalm 19:

The heavens relate the glory of *El*;
The firmament tells of his handiwork.

Although the biblical Balaam oracles may antedate the version of the Balaam text from Deir ʿAlla, the latter has the advantage of showing us an example of El literature as it was, unaffected by the Yahwistic monotheism of the biblical writers. Given the history of Transjordan as it has been outlined here, one may suppose that contacts across the Jordan, in both directions, were normal throughout the tenth to the late eighth centuries B.C.E., allowing for continuous cultural interaction. Biblical writers drew on native, Transjordanian traditions, and it is probable that Transjordanian writers, no less skilled and artistic—whether Israelite or not—were affected by literary movements west of the Jordan, primarily in northern Israel.

Bible scholars will now be required to focus attention on the Transjordanian factor in biblical literature, just as we have been seeking to identify Judean and north Israelite factors. The discovery of the inscribed plaster fragments at Deir ʿAlla has initiated a new era in Bible scholarship, as well as in the study of the ancient cultures of Transjordan. It is hoped that increased archaeological activity

on the soil of ancient Transjordan, especially in the Zerqa Valley, will provide valuable materials for study to all students of Near Eastern antiquity.[22]

[22] I am grateful to Profs. H.L. Ginsberg and B. Mazar for the pleasure of discussing this study with them. Prof. Sauer was kind enough to share with me his extensive knowledge of the archaeological history of ancient Transjordan.

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