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Source: *Vetus Testamentum*, Apr., 1991, Vol. 41, Fasc. 2 (Apr., 1991), pp. 186-191

Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1518890>

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PSEUDO-PHILONIC PARALLELS TO THE INSCRIPTIONS OF DEIR 'ALLA¹

by

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In the spring of 1967 fragments of inscriptions written on plaster were discovered by a Dutch expedition in Deir 'Alla, Jordan. According to experts, the writings seem to be in Aramaic or some ancient language even closer to Biblical Hebrew. The biblical prophet Balaam plays a prominent role in the text. The texts and all relevant documentation were published by J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij in 1976. Hoftijzer prepared the translation and the philological commentary on the text; all this was accompanied by an impressive array of biblical, post-biblical and other ancient eastern parallels. A 1979 study by A. Rofé provides further important observations and especially biblical parallels. The present study undertakes a comparison of the Deir 'Alla texts to relevant parts of Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Book of Biblical Antiquities, hereafter referred to as LAB).

Pseudo-Philo's book, which has been preserved only in medieval manuscripts of a Latin translation, was printed in 1949 by G. Kisch in a new scholarly edition.² Hebrew fragments from the Middle Ages do not alter this situation, since they are re-translations from the Latin (Harrington). It is generally accepted, however, that Hebrew is the original language of the LAB. We shall not dwell on this and other problems of the LAB; most of the important items are sufficiently dealt with in L. H. Feldman's Prolegomenon to M. R. James's English translation of the LAB and in the literature cited there. Nevertheless it should be noted that a considerable

¹ A list of works cited will be found at the end of this article.

² The quotations from LAB in this article will be according to Kisch's edition and M. R. James's English translation; we shall not deal with problems of text and translation of the LAB, but occasionally we shall prefer an alternative reading or translation.

number of Aramaic words and post-biblical Hebrew expressions are easily detected in the Latin LAB (Zeron, 1973, pp. 33-40).

Another relevant feature of the LAB is the mosaicist technique used by the author, who, on the one hand, relates the biblical narratives from Adam to the death of King Saul in abridged form, but, on the other hand, disperses through his book, in the form of flashbacks, small items omitted before, and also attributes deeds and features of certain biblical figures to other biblical and even non-biblical persons. This mosaic is enlarged and convoluted by smaller and larger pieces of post-biblical material, especially Rabbinic exegesis (Zeron, 1973, p. 34). The fragments of Deir ʿAlla are the first which demonstrate the use of a text contemporary with biblical literature by Pseudo-Philo. Here too he seems to have used his mosaic technique to interweave Deir ʿAlla expressions and ideas in different parts of his work. Obviously, we cannot see in the LAB an impartial witness for the text from Deir ʿAlla, but there are enough parts in the LAB which are borrowed essentially word for word from biblical and other sources to justify considering LAB as a potential witness for Deir ʿAlla texts. As the LAB seems to include numerous parallels to the Deir ʿAlla fragments, we shall present here only the most striking material.

The inscriptions of Deir ʿAlla were discovered as a great quantity of severely damaged fragments. These were ingeniously arranged by the discoverers in twelve so-called combinations (Hoftijzer, pp. 173-7). Hereafter, we shall refer to the Deir ʿAlla texts as DA. The first two combinations of these texts are the most important, and we shall deal only with these, referring to them as DA 1 and DA 2, and indicating lines as DA1.1; DA 2.12, etc.

The Weeping Prophet

In DA 1.5-6 we are told that the seer Balaam wept after a nighttime encounter with a god (or goddess). Someone asks: “Why does not the seer weep?” (*lmh. hzh. ybkh.*), a question which is put afterwards to the prophet himself (*hlmh. tbkh.*). In the biblical traditions of Balaam (Num. xxii-xxiv, xxv, xxxi 8, 16; Deut. xxiii 5-6; Josh. xiii 22, xxiv 9-10; Micah vi 5; Neh. xiii 2) nothing is said about a weeping prophet, and later Jewish exegesis (Rofé, pp. 45-9) had in general too little sympathy with Balaam to depict him weeping. Pseudo-Philo, on the other hand, did have sympathy with Balaam

and treated him as a prophet to the gentiles (cf. Num. Rab. XX 1). He put words of bitter regret into the prophet's mouth (LAB xviii 12): "Ego autem stridebo dentibus pro eo quod seductus sum, et quia transgressus sum que dicta sunt ad me noctu" (James, p. 126: "But I shall gnash my teeth because I was deceived and did transgress that which was said to me in the night").

The likeness to DA becomes clearer if we turn to Pseudo-Philo's narrative of Joshua (LAB xx-xxiv). At this point we should recall Pseudo-Philo's technique of transplanting parts of narratives from one figure to another. In LAB xxiii 2 we are told that Joshua sent messengers to gather the people in Shiloh (cf. Josh. xviii 1, xxiv 1), and said to them: "Et ideo sustinete ista nocte, et videte quid loquatur ad me pro vobis Deus" (James, p. 141: "...and therefore tarry ye here this night and see what God will say unto me concerning you"). This is followed in *v.* 3 by: "Et expectantibus populis illa nocte, visus est Dominus Ihesu in oromate, et dixit ei: Secundum sermones hos loquere huic populo" (James, p. 141: "And as the people waited there that night the Lord appeared unto Jesus in a vision and spake saying: According to all these words will I speak unto this people"; Hartom, p. 67, and Dietzfelbinger, p. 164, prefer "speak" without "I will"). As James (p. 141) already has seen, this is clearly borrowed from Num. xxii 19(-20). Thus, in LAB xx 2, where God asks Joshua "Ut quid luges?" (Why do you weep?; Hartom, p. 60, translated felicitously: *lamah tibkeh*), what we have is another piece of the Balaam tradition, this time borrowed from Deir 'Alla 1.6.

Thereafter God orders Joshua (LAB xx 2) "Sed accipe vestimenta sapientie ipsius et indu te et zona scientie eius precinge lumbos tuos, etc." (James, p. 133: "Take the garments of his wisdom and put them on thee, and gird thy loins with the girdle of his knowledge, etc."). The inspiration for this picture could be the book of Job (xxxviii 3, xl 7) and the post-biblical Testament (Words) of Job (chs xlvii ff.).³ It could, however, be influence by Da 1.14: (*l*)*nš*².²*zr.qrn.ḥšb.ḥšb.wḥšb*, which possibly describes somebody (or a group of people) who needs to gird himself with a belt made of horn. Since the person (or group) is urged to "think, think, and

³ Parallels to the Testament of Job can be detected in the story of Cenez's three daughters (LAB xxix) and in the necrologies for Joshua (LAB xxiv 6) and Deborah (LAB xxxiii 6); cf. Brock, pp. 54 ff.

think'', the belt might be the girdle of wisdom (cf. Rofé, p. 67, n. 35), possibly intended for the wise men (*lhkmn*) mentioned in the line above (DA 1.13). A similar appeal may be heard in the words of Balaam (LAB xviii 12): "Et sapientes et intelligentes verba mea meditabuntur" (James, p. 126: "And the wise and prudent shall remember my words"). Even the words Balaam said here before: "Et prophetia mea manifesta permanebit, et verba mea vivent" ("And my prophecy shall remain manifest and my words shall live") could correspond to an inscription of Deir ʿAlla.

At any rate, wise men (*hākāmīm*) seem to play a part only in the Balaam traditions of LAB and Deir ʿAlla.

Threats and Curses

The fragments of Deir ʿAlla and some parallels lead to the assumption that Deir ʿAlla was a pagan centre, where inscriptions on walls and (or) stelae advertised on the one hand sexual rites and pleasures and on the other hand proclaimed the devastating power of local deities. However, because of the character of the ancient script, it is often extremely difficult to establish the meaning of a word or even a line. What complicates the deciphering even more is the fact that the same combination of letters may represent, even in a single sentence, two opposite meanings.

In DA 2.6 *byt. lmn* Hoftijzer (pp. 180, 224-5) prefers the meaning "graves", and accordingly he interprets the whole section as an oracle of doom. However, another interpretation suggested by Rofé (p. 62, 68), "house of juvenescent power", leads to the subject of fertility rites. In DA 2.11 he interprets *tškb. mškb. lmyk* as "You will sleep the sleep of death". A similar expression is used in God's words to Moses in LAB xix 12: "...et requiem dabo tibi in dormitione tua, et sepeliam te cum pace" (James, p. 130: "...and give thee rest in thy slumber, and bury thee in peace...").

Obviously, to put somebody to sleep may have several meanings. In the next line (DA 2.12), the word *nʾnh* ("groan") appears twice. The groaning one could be one who was put to sleep in line 11. The idea of poor creatures buried by heavenly intervention who lie groaning in their graves may have been used in LAB xvi 6: "Et suspiravit post hec Choreb et sinagoga eius, quousque redderetur firmamentum terre" (James, p. 122: "And thereafter Choreb and his company groaned, until the firmament of the earth should be

delivered back’’). Their fate was announced in LAB xvi 3, where God speaks of the doomed as living in darkness and destruction: “Et erit habitatio eorum in tenebris et perditione”. The thread of darkness (*ḥšk*), caused, as it seems by closing the sky, is included in a theophany in DA 1.8-9: *skry.šmyn...ḥšk*. The section can be understood as a threat but also as a reminder of danger averted by divine intervention (Hoftijzer, pp. 179, 193-7). A similar message is delivered by Joshua in the morning after his encounter with God (LAB xxiii 10): “...et *inclinavi celos et descendi*, et solidavi flamman ignis, et obturavi venas abyssi, et... suspendi tempestatem miliciarum, ut non corrumperem testamentum meum...” (James, p. 143: “...and I *bowed the heavens and came down* [cf. Ps. xviii 10], and I congealed the flame of the fire, and stopped up the springs of the deep, ...and interrupted the storm of the hosts, that I should not break my covenant...”).

It may be a curse of a prophecy of doom which is uttered in DA 2.13: ...*mwt. ʿl.rḥm...*, translated by Hoftijzer (p. 180): “Death takes away the child in (?) the womb”. Hosea’s curse (ix 14), *tēn lāhem reḥem maškil*, expresses precisely the same idea. Curses of this kind are sometimes connected with the threat of drought (cf. Deut. xxviii 18). In LAB xlv 10 God threatens: “mandabo celo et menciatur eis pluviam...mandabo morti et abnegabit eis fructum ventris eorum” (James, p. 203: “I will command the heaven and it shall defraud them of rain...I will command death and it shall deny them the fruit of their body”). If we combine DA 2.13 with DA 1.8-9, we again have the threat of closing the sky together with the threat of miscarriage. This could support Rofé’s suggestion (p. 66, n. 27) that the gods decided to send a drought. DA 2.8: *mn.phzy.bny. ʾš*, etc. seems to represent another curse. Here Hoftijzer (pp. 174, 226-8) conjectures: “From the tribes of mankind and from... (you will be driven away)”. The expression “tribes of mankind” is reminiscent of “tribus gentium” in Pseudo-Philo’s story of Chora (LAB xvi 3; we mentioned previously another parallel to DA in LAB xvi 6). The striking similarity to Hoftijzer’s suggested reading is that here too God prescribes a separate lot for the sinners (see also LAB xlv 8, 10: “genus hominum”).

The present article has attempted to solve some problems of Deir ʿAlla. If these explanations are accepted, many new questions arise: for instance where did Pseudo-Philo obtain this material. But these questions lead too far afield.

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