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The Dialect of the Plaster Text from Tell Deir 'Alla

Jo Ann HACKETT

The plaster text from Tell Deir 'Alla was discovered during the 1967 season at the Jordan Valley site, and published in a comprehensive volume in 1976 [1]. The "first combination" (the phrase used in the *editio princeps* to describe the combination of fragments that must form the beginning of the text) can now be read with some assurance [2]. It relates a vision which is given at night to Balaam son of Beor, who is described as a seer of the gods (*ḥẓh 'lhn*). The vision tells of a meeting of the Divine Council wherein a goddess (whose name is unfortunately not preserved) is asked by a group of gods called *šdyn* to cover the earth with darkness because of the unnatural happenings below. There is a break, we do not know how long, before the "second combination" takes up the story. This group of fragments is far from secure in interpretation, but seems to describe some ritual focusing on death and on a character referred to as the "sprout" (*nqr*). Perhaps this ritual is meant to be a curative for the situation described in the first combination.

The Deir 'Alla text has been a matter of considerable debate from the beginning. The exacavator, H. J. Franken, first published the next as belonging to the Persian period [3]. J. Naveh and F. M. Cross both suggested an earlier date, Naveh proposing mid-eighth century and Cross opting for ca. 700 B.C.E., based on their analyses of the script of the inscription [4]. In the *editio princeps*, epigrapher G. van der Kooij placed the date of the text at 700 B.C.E. ± 25 years, and Franken also has accepted this date [5]. Debate over the script and the final dating goes on, however [6].

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[1] J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla* (Leiden 1976), hereafter cited as *ATDA*.

[2] See n. 15 below, and further, my dissertation, "Studies in the Plaster Text from Tell Deir 'Allā", Harvard University, 1980 (forthcoming in the Harvard Semitic Monographs series); also P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., in *BASOR* 239 (1980) 49-60.

[3] *VT* 17 (1967) 480-81.

[4] See Naveh in *IEJ* 17 (1967) 256-58. Cross, in *BASOR* 193 (1969) 14 n. 2, provisionally accepted this date, but later revised his dating to 700 B.C.E. (*BASOR* 212 [1973] 13-14, especially n. 7, and *AUSS* 13 [1975] 10-17).

[5] *ATDA* 96, 12 (resp.).

[6] In my dissertation (cited above, n. 2; pp. 12-29), I concluded that the script of the Deir 'Alla inscription was similar to Ammonite scripts rather than contemporary Aramaic scripts. There are archaic elements in the Deir 'Alla script, which might date the script as 8th century Aramaic; however, several letters exhibit developments later than 8th century Aramaic, yet different from 7th century Aramaic cursive. Many of these characteristics

No less controversial is the language in which the text is written. The text has been published as Aramaic, but always with the restriction that it is indeed an odd and unexpected form of Aramaic. Hoftijzer presented the problem this way:

> Provided one wants to maintain the distinction between Canaanite and Aramaic languages (a distinction which can only have a very relative value), there can be no doubt that here we have to do with an Aramaic one [7].

P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., agreed with Hoftijzer, and expanded on one of his suggestions:

> Hoftijzer's caution in describing the language of the plaster texts as Aramaic is, therefore, entirely justified. I think there is enough evidence to retain the term Aramaic here, but a further nuance is needed, and Hoftijzer's suggestion that this is "a 'poetic' language" (1976:301) is probably on the right track. If "poetic" is too precise a term to use at this point in our study of the texts, at least we can speak of a "literary" dialect. [8]

Fitzmyer concurred with the Aramaic designation; he is not bothered by Canaanisms in an Old Aramaic text: "In my opinion, the language in which the text is written is a form of Old Aramaic", although he admits to "a few surprises" [9]. McCarter dealt with the Canaanisms in the text by suggesting that the language of the Deir 'Alla text was an attempt by Aramaic speakers to imitate the literary language with which they were familiar, the literary language of their area, which was "primarily Canaanite in character" [10]. Hoftijzer, Fitzmyer, and McCarter are struggling with a situation that is obviously not easily resolvable, but each maintains that the language of the text is at least a form of Aramaic. Caquot and Lemaire agreed: "celle-ci [the language] est clairement de l'araméen" [11].

The argument in favor of an Aramaic classification for the dialect of the Deir 'Alla text has centered around the representation of consonants in the text, the discovery of the emphatic 'alep ending within the text, the supposed Aramaic writing system, the use of the –wh 3 m. sg. suffix, and the fact that two small inscriptions found in the same level as our text are clearly Aramaic [12]. It is possible to maintain, however, that none of these points is convincing, and, moreover, that the weight of the "peculiarities" in this dialect becomes too great to permit the Aramaic classification. This paper will present a brief description of the dialect, concentrating on those points which might distinguish the South Canaanite aspects of a dialect from the Aramaic. The writer hopes to make a convincing argument that the case for the Aramaic

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(the archaic elements as well as the developments) are paralleled in the known Ammonite inscriptions: the archaic 'alep instead of the star 'alep; the closed dalet, 'ayin, reš; the N–shaped het; the triangular-headed kap; the horizontal zigzag mem; the open-circle qop; the long X–shaped taw. For another discussion of the script, see McCarter, BASOR 239, 50.

[7] ATDA 300.
[8] McCarter, BASOR 239, 50.
[9] CBQ 40 (1978) 94.
[10] McCarter, BASOR 239, 51.
[11] Syria 54 (1977) 208.
[12] ATDA 267.

classification, which has seemed so obvious from an examination of the phonology of the text, is much weaker than has been realized and that, in fact, the dialect of the Deir 'Alla text has far more affinities to the South Canaanite dialects in the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. [13]

The confusion over the precise classification of the Deir 'Alla dialect is justified. Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the inscription is the lack of a clear definite article or relative pronoun. Hoftijzer nominated several final 'alep's as possible emphatic endings, but none of them is convincing. The reading bškmt' in I, 3/4, of the *editio princeps* disappears with a revised arrangement of the text. Caquot and Lemaire proposed that Fragments I(c) and (d) should be moved up two lines, to combine bk of I, 3, with h of I, 6 (according to the original numbering). They also proposed combining Fragments VIII(d) and XII(c) so that bl'm brb'r could be read [14]. Both these proposals are quite correct, and, in fact, should be combined. Fragments VIII(d) and XII(c) fit nicely together within lines 3 and 4 of the first combination, if I(c) and (d) are moved up as Caquot and Lemaire suggest. Consequently, the word bškmt' is no longer a part of the text [15].

Several other 'alep's have been interpreted as the emphatic ending by Caquot and Lemaire, and by McCarter [16], but in each case, the 'alep occurs in a broken or questionable context. The 'alep's preceding a word divider in the rubric in I, 2, and at the beginning of I, 3, follow breaks in the text, and are surely not satisfactory tests of the use of emphatic 'alep in this text. The 'alep within 'ḥr'h is difficult to explain on any grounds, and is, therefore, also not a suitable proof for the existence of emphatic 'alep in the Deir 'Alla text [17]. Consequently, I think we must proceed with the assumption that no emphatic 'alep was used in this inscription. Although it cannot, of course, be said that the lack of emphatic 'alep argues against the Aramaic classification, we can say that this failure to use emphatic 'alep eliminates one of the strongest arguments put forward so far in favor of the Aramaic classification of the

[13] M. Dahood has also suggested that "one [may] surmise that the language is more akin to Canaanite than to Aramaic" in his review of *ATDA* in *Biblica* 62 (1981) 124-27, especially 126-27.

[14] Caquot and Lemaire, *Syria* 54, 193.

[15] A more noticeable consequence of the new arrangement of the fragments is the necessity for re-numbering the lines in Combination I. *ATDA*'s kmt' (I read kmš') at the beginning of line I, 4, is now to be placed at the beginning of line I, 2. wyqm is now at the beginning of line 3 and h.ybkh is the beginning of line 4 (lining up with wbk at the end of line 3). From this point on, the new placement gives us the same beginnings and endings of lines as *ATDA*'s, but we must now subtract two from the number of each line, since we moved the beginnings up two lines. I.e., *ATDA*'s I, 8, is my I, 6, and so on. I now read the first four lines of the first combination as follows (including Fragments V[e] and XV[c] correctly inserted at the end of line 1 by Gordon Hamilton, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University):

'lwh

1   spr[.bl'm.brb']r.'š.ḥżh.'lhn[.]h'[.]wy'tw.'lhn.blylh.wyḥz.mḥzh

2   kmš'.'l.wy'mrw.l[bl']m.brb'r.ḥh.yp°l[.   ]'.'ḥr'h.'š.lr[   ]'t[.]

3   wyqm.bl'm.mn.mḥr[.   ]l.y[   ].mn.[   ]šh.wlyk[1.1   .]wbk

4   h.ybkh.wy'l.'mh.'lwh.[wy'mrw.l]h[.]bl'm.brb'r.lm.tṣm.wtbkh.wy'

[16] Caquot and Lemaire, *Syria* 54, 194-95; McCarter, *BASOR* 239, 52.

[17] Cf. McCarter, ibid.

dialect. Furthermore, there is no other candidate for a definite article in the inscription (such as initial *h*-), so it would seem that no definite article whatsoever was used in this inscription.

There is a similar problem with the relative pronoun. McCarter has suggested that *pḥzy* in II, 8, may be divided into *pḥ* and *zy*, so that *zy* would be used in a determinative sense here[18], but, as with the definite article, finding the relative pronoun in difficult contexts while at the same time failing to find it in clear contexts, leaves us on very shaky ground. On the other hand, '*š* in I, 1, can easily be read as the relative pronoun. The opening statement should read "... Balaam, son of Beor, who was a seer of the gods", in which *h*', the first word in black ink, functions as a copula to complete the relative clause[19]. This is a perfectly reasonable context for the use of the relative pronoun, and, were it not for the variation in ink color, we would always have read the opening statement this way. Consequently, we can tentatively propose that Canaanite '*š* is used as the relative pronoun in this inscription[20].

I have argued elsewhere, following F. M. Cross, that the script of the Deir ʿAlla inscription is related to that of several Ammonite inscriptions[21]. The script of these Ammonite inscriptions is an offshoot of the Aramaic script, and probably branched off around 750 B.C.E. The language of the Ammonite inscriptions in question, however, is clearly Canaanite, so the origin of the script of an inscription is not necessarily a clue to the language of the text (cf. the Kilamuwa inscription). Thus the use of this particular script is no argument for the Aramaic classification of the dialect.

[18] McCarter, ibid. 59 n. 3.

[19] F. M. Cross has also suggested (private communication) that this is the preferred reading. I have recently been convinced by Gordon Hamilton that the red-ink sections in Combination I are not complete statements in themselves, but instead simply extend approximately half-way across the line in which they are written. Note that the rubric in I, 2, begins at the same point in the line where the rubric in I, 1, leaves off. Consequently, the variation in ink color should not be taken into account in problems of syntax, and the beginning statement in line 1 may properly be read as extending into the black ink section. (J. Fitzmyer [*CBQ* 40 (1978) 94-95], J. Naveh [*IEJ* 29 (1979) 134-35], B. Levine [*JAOS* 101 (1981) 196], and J. Greenfield [*JSS* 25 (1980) 250] [all review articles of *ATDA*], all agree in ignoring the ink color, although they do not translate '*š* as the relative pronoun.) This insight is especially useful in this instance since the sense of the text is much improved if we take *h*' with what precedes rather than with what follows.
For the relative pronoun followed by a third person independent pronoun, see *KAI* 43:4-5, and several biblical Hebrew examples (Gen 9:3; Lev 11:26; Num 9:13, etc.). In each of these cases, the personal pronoun follows the relative immediately, but the order should not affect the sense of the clause. (The order in our text is followed for negative relative clauses in biblical Hebrew — Gen 7:2; 17:12; Deut 17:15, etc. — and for the subject pronoun following *ki* — e.g., *KAI* 10:9; Exod 34:14; Num 21:26. Cf. also the Old Aramaic Sefire text, III, 8, *kl zy rḥm h' ly*, where the pronoun falls in the middle of the relative clause.)

[20] For '*š*, see Z. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language* (New Haven 1936) 54-55; "*š₁*" in C.-F. Jean and J. Hoftijzer, *Dictionnaire des inscriptions sémitiques de l'ouest* (Leiden 1965) 285-86. As Harris points out, '*š* must be related to Akkadian *ša* and Hebrew *š*-, not to Hebrew '*ašer*, which is from *'aṯr*. At some point this *š*- or *ša* relative must have acquired a prosthetic '*alep* and probably lost the short final vowel.

[21] See the citation and summary of findings in n. 6, above. Cross discussed the script in *BASOR* 212 (1973) 13-14, and *AUSS* 13 (1975) 10-17.

The Deir ʿAlla dialect has been discussed as Aramaic largely because of one feature of the representation of consonants within the inscription. At Deir ʿAlla, as in the Old Aramaic inscriptions, the reflex of Proto-Semitic *$\underline{d}$ is represented q [22]. It should be pointed out, however, that this is not actually a "merger" shared by the Deir ʿAlla and Old Aramaic dialects. We know that the use of q for *$\underline{d}$ did not imply a merger within Old Aramaic because in later Aramaic *$\underline{d}$ has merged with *ʿ. Thus the $q < *\underline{d}$ of the Old Aramaic inscriptions represents a *stage* in this process of merger, rather than an actual merger of *$\underline{d}$ and *q. Presumably, of course, the scribes considered that the pronunciation of *$\underline{d}$ at that time was best represented (among the symbols at their disposal) by q.

When we turn to the Deir ʿAlla inscription we are on less secure ground, because we do not have, so far as we know, any examples of the text's dialect in a later stage. We might argue that here *$\underline{d}$ really has merged with *q, but our experience with the Old Aramaic inscriptions makes us think, rather, that here also we are dealing with a stage in the process, and not a merger. We note further that in no known Semitic language is there an actual merger between *$\underline{d}$ and *q. Thus, the *most* we can say about the use of q at Deir ʿAlla is that it represents two original phonemes, *q and *$\underline{d}$, and, as we said concerning the Old Aramaic inscriptions, the scribes must have felt that however *$\underline{d}$ was being pronounced in their dialect at the time, the most appropriate symbol for it in the alphabet they used was q. Whether *$\underline{d}$ was actually pronounced [q] at Deir ʿAlla and had, therefore, actually merged with *q, we cannot say. (We can say it is unlikely.) In sum, then, we know positively that a merger of *$\underline{d}$ and *q had *not* taken place in the Old Aramaic inscriptions; the situation in the Deir ʿAlla text is not as clear because of that text's (i.e., that dialect's) isolation in time, that is, we have no (known) later inscription in the same dialect. Thus, it is correct to maintain that the representation of consonants is the same for the Old Aramaic inscriptions and the Deir ʿAlla text, but it is not correct to posit that the phonology of the dialect of the Deir ʿAlla text was that of Old Aramaic.

In any event, the argument from phonology carries less weight than might appear at first glance. Consider, for example, that if the Old Aramaic inscriptions were to be classified primarily according to consonant representation, they would have to be considered South Canaanite [23]. We may further point out that even biblical Hebrew is difficult to classify if one phonological point is stressed to the exclusion of other arguments. Biblical Hebrew resists the merger of $\acute{s}$ and $\check{s}$ throughout its history, yet it is still classified Canaanite (along with Phoenician, where the $\acute{s}$ and $\check{s}$ apparently merged at an early date) rather than Aramaic (where the distinction between $\acute{s}$ and $\check{s}$ is kept as late as biblical Aramaic).

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[22] I would argue that the representation of *$\underline{d}$ as q is secure from *hqrqt* in I, 15. Although there is virtually no context here, the root of the word must be *$\underline{d}rq$, known to us from Sefire and elsewhere (cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefîre* [Rome 1967] 107-08).

[23] These inscriptions were, in fact, not easy to classify. For a discussion of the problems and process of their classification, see F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* (New Haven 1952) 22-23.

It is clear, then, that the phonological situation at Deir 'Alla is not ne-
cessarily to be related to that of the Old Aramaic inscriptions, and that, fur-
thermore, phonology alone cannot be used to determine the classification of
a dialect. We must look to an entire complex of features within the inscrip-
tion, including verbal system, pronominal system, orthography, and vocab-
ulary, in an attempt to determine the correct classification of the dialect.
When this entire complex is taken into account, it is by no means clear that
the dialect of the Deir 'Alla text is more closely related to Aramaic than to
South Canaanite.

The verbal system of the Deir 'Alla inscription is the most difficult problem
for the proponents of the Aramaic classification of the dialect. The verbal
system of this text contains several features otherwise unknown or quite rare
within Aramaic. There are two clear N forms in the extant inscription,
nṣbw in I, 6, and *n'nḥ* in II, 12 (bis). (I read *mšpṭ* rather than *nšpṭ* in II, 17.)
The N conjugation is unknown in extant Aramaic [24]. It is possible that
Aramaic had an N conjugation at some point in its history. Certainly, Proto-
Northwest Semitic included an N conjugation, since it is present in every
other NWS dialect except the Aramaic ones. At present, however, we have
no evidence of an N form within a distinguishably Aramaic inscription. If
the N conjugation ever existed in Aramaic, it fell out of use very early, certainly
earlier than 700 B.C.E. Hence, we would expect a genuine N verb in an
Aramaic inscription in 700 B.C.E. only if the dialect of the inscription were
extremely conservative, and had retained the N centuries longer than any
other known Aramaic. This is, of course, not likely.

Besides the un-Aramaic N forms, the Deir 'Alla inscription uses *waw*
consecutives in I, 1, 2, 3, and 4/5. Although several *waw* consecutives occur
in the Aramaic Zakkur inscription, they are restricted to the prayer section
and are usually described as archaizing or Canaanizing [25]. In other words,
it still cannot be demonstrated that the *waw* consecutive was retained as a
frozen form within Aramaic, as it was in Canaanite. Moreover, the *waw*
consecutives at Deir 'Alla, unlike the forms in the Zakkur inscription, are used
in what seems to be narrative prose, as past tense forms. This is precisely
what we would expect for a South Canaanite dialect.

There are three other aspects of the verbal system at Deir 'Alla which
require comment in this context. There may be a 3 m. pl. imperfect in II, 13,
written without final –*n*. The readings are not secure, but if *yḥzw* is function-
ing as an imperfect rather than a jussive [26], it represents another distinction
from the known Old Aramaic inscriptions. Secondly, the I–*w* infinitive
construct is written with final –*t*, in *ld't*, II, 17. It is true that we have no
evidence of I–*w* infinitives construct from the Old Aramaic inscriptions, so
we do not know how such a form was written before the advent of the *m*–pre-

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[24] See S. Segert, *Altaramäische Grammatik* (Leipzig 1975) §5.6.7.3.7, for
the form *nšḥt* in Text 15.10 in A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Cen-
tury* B.C. (Oxford 1923). Segert calls the form a *Nif'al*, but he believes it is
a Phoenicianism.

[25] See R. Degen, *Altaramäische Grammatik* (Wiesbaden 1969) 114-15
n. 21, for a discussion of the various theories concerning *waw* consecutive in
the Zakkur inscription.

[26] See Hoftijzer's translation, *ATDA* 180, 240.

formative infinitive in Aramaic. Thus, it is possible that in 700 B.C.E. the Aramaic I–w infinitive construct was written with final $-t$, but as it stands, such a form does not exist in Aramaic. In a South Canaanite dialect, of course, the final $-t$ is expected on I–w infinitives construct.

Finally, the form '*tyḥdw* in I, 5, makes use of the '*alep*–preformative for a **Dt** verb. The '*alep*–preformative is unknown in Canaanite outside of the prosthetic '*alep* in the Ugaritic **Gt** imperative[27]. However, we seem to have a h–preformative in this inscription as well, in *hqrqt*, I, 15, which is most easily read as a causative 3 f. sg. perfect. Thus there is a confusion in the form of the preformative, if all of the readings are correct[28]. Such a confusion occurs at Sefire[29], but would be unusual (although not impossible) in a Canaanite text.

With the exception of the confusion in preformatives just discussed, then, the verbal system of the Deir 'Alla inscription as a whole argues strongly that the dialect is closer to South Canaanite than to Aramaic.

There is one strong argument for the classification of the text as Aramaic, and that is the use of the $-wh$ 3 m. sg. suffix on the preposition 'l (and perhaps on the word *kpwh* in IXa, 3, and on what is possibly the end of a word, *t'wh* in VIIIb, 2, but the contexts there are too broken for analysis). This suffix is known only in Aramaic, and has been described as $-aw$ reduced from *$-ayhū$, plus the addition of a secondary h[30]. This explanation of the formation of the suffix has not been particularly satisfying, however, in that the source of the secondary suffix is something of a problem. Nevertheless, this addition apparently did not take place in Canaanite, so that the appearance of the $-wh$ suffix in this text is actually the strongest argument for the Aramaic classification of the text. I hope to demonstrate, however, that the evidence toward South Canaanite outweighs this one factor.

The orthography of the Deir 'Alla inscription conforms to that of several Semitic dialects around 700 B.C.E. Our text is written with final *matres lectionis* to mark long vowels, but medial vowels are not marked. Diphthongs are not contracted. This is precisely the situation in the Aramaic of this period and in Judahite Hebrew. The Mesha inscription presents us with mixed evidence regarding diphthong contraction, but some diphthongs remain uncontracted there also. The Ammonite inscriptions also offer mixed results: *ywmt* in line 7 of the Tell Siran inscription must represent uncontracted $-aw-$, but *yn* of Heshbon Ostracon IV (lines 7/8) shows contracted $-ay-$. Both inscriptions date from ca. 600 B.C.E.

Although the vocabulary of a given text is one of the items most immediately identifiable as characteristic of one language or another, it is at the same time the least reliable measure of affiliation. In the first place, we must

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[27] C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome 1965) I, §9.33.

[28] The h in *hqrqt* is clear, but the context is broken and the sense is not sure. It is difficult to find an interpretation for this word, however, other than as a causative verb with h–preformative. The ' of '*tyḥdw* is not as clear, and on studying the photographs (the plaster with this letter is no longer extant) I still have some doubts about the reading of this letter as '*alep*. Van der Kooij was certain of the reading (*ATDA* 110).

[29] See J. Fitzmyer, *Aramaic Inscriptions* 157.

[30] Cross and Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography* 29, no. 68.

assume, theoretically, that the entire Semitic lexicon was available to any dialect, although in any given dialect, the vocabulary would already have been considerably narrowed down by this period. And more practically, considerable caution is advisable in distinguishing between dialects so far removed from us in time and with such scant epigraphic evidence as South Canaanite and Aramaic in the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. Surely the actual vocabulary was many times larger than our meager texts would indicate, especially in the case of the Aramaic of this period. It is simply impossible to classify a given lexical item as belonging to one dialect to the exclusion of any other. There are a few items in our text which are unusual, however, even within this cautious handling of the lexicon: the use of the D of *dbr* (II, 17), "to speak", is characteristically South Canaanite; the use of *lkw* as the imperative plural for *hlk* is unknown in Aramaic; the use of *pʿl* instead of *ʿbd* for the verb "to make" in I, 2, is characteristically Canaanite as opposed to Aramaic; *rʾh* as the common verb for seeing (I, 5) as opposed to *ḥzh* for prophetic seeing (I, 1) is not Aramaic. On the other hand, the use of *yhb* in a context other than imperative (I, 7) is unknown in South Canaanite but is known as an imperfect from the Old Aramaic inscriptions; *br* instead of *bn* in Balaam's patronymic suggests Aramaic rather than Canaanite, although the same form occurs in the Phoenician Kilamuwa inscription within Kilamuwa's name (i.e., *brbʿr* was probably simply the proper spelling of Balaam's patronymic and no indication of the Deir ʿAlla vocabulary); the numeral *ḥd* (II, 10) is the normal Aramaic form, while the South Canaanite form is *ʾḥd* (with the exception of *ḥd* in Ezek 33:30).

The appearance of *dbr* and *lkw* seems especially significant, since they represent developments which simply did not take place in Aramaic. *pʿl* rather than *ʿbd* would be striking in any Aramaic text, although nominal forms of *pʿl* are known in Aramaic. Similarly, the root *yhb* is used as a verb in South Canaanite texts, but never so far in any mood but imperative. The other distinctions listed above are less important. It should be clear that the lexicon of our text, no matter how cautiously we handle it, can hardly be said to support an Aramaic designation for the dialect, even though it is still too risky to posit that it gives positive support for a Canaanite designation.

In summary we have seen that the usual assumption that the dialect of the Deir ʿAlla inscription is some form of Aramaic, based largely on the occurrence of *q* to represent **ḍ* within the inscription, must be challenged. The basic question which must be asked is this: is it more difficult to posit a South Canaanite dialect which utilizes *q* for **ḍ* and has the *–wh* suffix, or to posit an Aramaic dialect with N verbal forms and *waw* consecutives and no emphatic endings whatsoever? Added to this are *ldʿt* and the vocabulary problems, plus a probable *ʾš* relative pronoun.

The flux within phonological systems in this period is well-documented and has not been, traditionally, sufficient grounds for classification when the rest of the evidence weighs against the phonological argument. In the total picture, the consonant representation is outweighed by several features which argue strongly for a classification for our text that is closer to South Canaanite. (Furthermore, we have seen that the consonant representation in question does not represent an actual merger in either Old Aramaic or the Deir ʿAlla dialect, so that the issue is less important as an element in classification.)

In particular, the verbal system has a decidedly Canaanite flavor, with the N conjugation and the *waw* consecutive used several times. The emphatic *'alep* does not appear in the text, nor does any definite article, so far as we can read securely, so this element is not a factor in the classification. On the other hand, *'š*, a Canaanite relative pronoun, appears to be used in I, 1. Finally, while the 3 m. sg. pronominal suffix on the preposition *'l* is the characteristically Aramaic *–wh*, several lexical items exhibit a development that took place outside Aramaic dialects. Taken together, these points suggest a classification for the dialect of the Deir 'Alla plaster text that is closer to South Canaanite, rather than the now familiar "peculiar" Aramaic.

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