

MESHA STELE. Discovered at Dhiban in 1868 by a Protestant missionary traveling in Transjordan, the 35-line Mesha Inscription (hereafter MI, sometimes called the Moabite Stone) remains the longest-known royal inscription from the Iron Age discovered in the area of greater Palestine. As such, it has been examined repeatedly by scholars and is available in a number of modern translations (*ANET, DOTT*).

Formally, the MI is like other royal inscriptions of a dedicatory nature from the period. Mesha, king of Moab, recounts the favor of Moab's chief deity, Chemosh (Kemosh), in delivering Moab from the control of its neighbor, Israel. While the MI contains considerable historical detail, formal parallels suggest the Moabite king was selective in arranging the sequence of events to serve his main purpose of honoring Chemosh. This purpose is indicated by lines 3-4 of the MI, where Mesha says that he erected the stele at the "high place" in Qarh\oh, which had been built to venerate Chemosh.

The date of the MI can be set with a 20-30-year variance. It must have been written either just before the Israelite king Ahab's death (ca. 853/852 B.C.) or a decade or so after his demise. The reference to Ahab is indicated by the reference in line 8 to Omri's "son," or perhaps "sons" (unfortunately, without some additional information, it is impossible to tell morphologically whether the word [*bnh*] is singular or plural). Ahab apparently died not long after the battle of Qarqar, in the spring of 853, when a coalition of states in S Syria/Palestine, of which Ahab was a leader, faced the encroaching Assyrians under Shalmaneser III. The date of the MI proposed here would agree with the consensus of paleography for a mid-9th century date, ca. 840-830 B.C.

There was little initially with which to compare the language of the MI other than classical Hebrew and some Phoenician texts. In the intervening years, however, a number of significant texts have been discovered which provide linguists with good comparative material (and tantalizing questions). The initial observation—that the Moabite language seemed similar to classical Hebrew - has been largely confirmed; nowadays, it appears Moabite had more similarities with Hebrew than with old Aramaic. It can be classified as a Northwest Semitic dialect close to Ammonite and Hebrew, though it does possess some Aramaic features (e.g., final *nun* [*n*] for the masculine plural absolute, final *he* [*h*] for the third person pronominal suffixes). With the political and economic domination of Moab by Israel during parts of the 10th and 9th centuries, it is not surprising that Moabite would be similar to Hebrew or, since Ammonite would be Moabite's closest Transjordanian neighbor, that these two languages have a number of elements in common. At this stage of analysis several of the outstanding philological issues relate to the source of the remaining peculiarities of Moabite.

Although Israel is the only enemy of Moab and Chemosh mentioned in the MI, it seems likely that this results from the text's genre as a dedicatory inscription and its abbreviated style. Moabite relations with Israel were but a subset of the complicated and rapidly changing political landscape among states of this era and region.

According to Assyrian annals, the Syro-Palestinian coalition that opposed Assyrian expansion was led by the kings of Israel, Damascus, and Hamath. Omri's son Ahab is specifically named in these extrabiblical texts. It is probable that these three states had worked out "parity" agreements among themselves, and the Phoenician ports and Arab caravans would have contributed to the strength of the coalition. Individually, these three would have had relations with smaller regional entities as their vassals, and Moab's subservience to Israel under the Omrides would fall under this latter category. Therefore, Moab's successful revolt is best understood as part of a breakdown of the larger coalition and the subsequent changing of certain vassal relationships.

The treatment of the Omride dynasty in 1-2 Kings concentrates on the kings' theological and moral failures, especially those of Ahab and his Phoenician queen, Jezebel. At best, the Assyrian threat is in the background of the biblical narrative. Warfare between Aram and Israel is noted during Ahab's last years (2 Kings 20, 22), however, a situation that would be repeated later (2 Kgs 10:32-33; 13:1-25). When one compares the biblical and Assyrian texts of the period, two problems stand out immediately. First, the Assyrian versions seem to presuppose that Israel and Aram were allies in the anti-Assyrian coalition. Second, there are different names given to the Aramean king in the two accounts. In the Assyrian version, he is called *Hadad-idri*, while the biblical account refers to him as Ben Hadad. 2 Kings refers to a revolt of Mesha after Ahab's death and to an abortive attempt by Ahab's son, Jehoram, with Judean and Edomite allies, to regain control of Moab by attacking the S Moabite plateau from the SW (2 Kgs 1:1; 3:1-27). In 2 Kings, therefore, nothing is said about the military campaigns in that part of Moab N of the Arnon, the subject matter of the MI.

Numerous historical analyses have been proffered to understand the MI in its context. Perhaps the best starting point for any reconstruction is the observation that the anti-Assyrian coalition fell apart and that the "ripple effects" of this dissolution are reflected variously in the MI and in 1-2 Kings. The MI recounts in selective fashion elements of the struggle in order to venerate Chemosh, while 1-2 Kings concentrates on Israelite (and particularly Omride) failures and the Israelites' struggles with their Aramean neighbors. Moab's freedom and Chemosh's faithfulness were paramount issues for Mesha. Those who compiled 1-2 Kings wanted to show Israel's failure with historical examples, and the account of Jehoram's failure to regain control of Moab was only an illustration of the larger pattern. It is possible, therefore, to provide a plausible historical setting for the MI with several different sequences when

comparing it with the Assyrian texts and 1-2 Kings. A first option can fit the events of the MI into the sequence of 1-2 Kings by assuming that just after the 853 battle with Shalmaneser III, the Israelite/Aramean alliance fell apart, Ahab was killed, Mesha revolted and took control of the N plateau, and Jehoram failed to reinstitute Israelite control in his S assault. A variation would have Jehoram's assault coming first after an initial Moabite revolt, followed by Mesha's successful reconquest of the N plateau as narrated in the MI. A second option would begin with the assumption that the Israelite/Aramean alliance was strong as long as Ahab lived, with the Aramean wars attributed to him in 1 Kings really belonging to Jehoram or members of the Jehu dynasty. But by 841, about 13 years later, the alliance had been broken, new dynasties had been established in Samaria (Jehu) and Damascus (Hazeal), and the former vassal relationship between Moab and Israel had been broken by Mesha's successful revolt. Thus, the Assyrian policy of divide and conquer had been at least partially successful. A third option simply begins with the MI, without a concern to coordinate events with those narrated in 1-2 Kings, and with the understanding that line 8 requires the start of Mesha's revolt before Ahab dies (i.e., reading the term *bnh* as "his [Omri's] son").

Chemosh, the god of Moab, was well known in the ANE long before the time of Mesha. For example, the name in cognate form appears in the Ebla and Ugaritic texts of N Syria. Line 17 of the MI refers to >Ashtar-Kemosh, a compound name that perhaps indicates a hypostatic union, with >Ashtar representing the feminine element (cf. Ishtar and Ashtarte) and Kemosh the masculine. Others have identified >Ashtar with the male deity, Attar, in the Ugaritic texts and among certain early Arab tribes.

The MI attributes a previous Moabite decline to Chemosh's "humbling" (line 5) of his land, and Moab's recovery under Mesha was viewed as a sign of Chemosh's deliverance. Mesha states that Chemosh spoke to him (line 14), likely through a prophetic or priestly oracle. On at least two occasions, Mesha ritually slaughtered Israelites and dragged trophies of war before Chemosh as a sign of thanksgiving (lines 11-18). One verb (*h\rm*) used to describe the assault on Nebo puts the city under a ban, terminology which is like that used several times in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the MI as a whole reads almost like a narrative from the Hebrew Bible. (For bibliography, see EPIGRAPHY, TRANSJORDANIAN.)

J. ANDREW DEARMAN

GERALD L. MATTINGLY