

Ataroth and the Inscribed Altar: Who Won the War Between Moab and Israel?

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/ataroth-and-the-inscribed-altar-who-won-the-war-between-moab-and-israel>
Ataroth is an obscure Transjordanian city, referenced only twice in the Bible. Nevertheless, due to modern archaeological discoveries, it has become a central piece of evidence for reconstructing the history of the Moabite rebellion against Israel and King Mesha's expansion of the Moabite kingdom described in both 2 Kings and the Mesha Stele.

Adam L. Bean and Christopher A. Rollston



Chris Rollston examining the Khirbat Ataruz altar inscription. Photo Courtesy of C. Rollston

The Transjordanian city of Ataroth (עַטְרוֹת, *ʿāṭārôt*) appears only twice in the Torah and nowhere else in the Bible.^[1] It would have remained little more than an obscure biblical toponym (place name) were it not for two modern archaeological discoveries that have made it a showcase example of the connection of biblical narrative to archaeological and epigraphic data.^[2]

Ataroth in the Torah

Both references to the city in the Torah appear in Numbers 32, as part of the territory that the tribes of Gad and Reuben settle. Its first appearance is among the cities Gad and Reuben list, when they ask Moses for permission to settle in the region, due to its suitability for raising cattle:

במדבר לביב: וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי גַד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֱלֶעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶל נְשִׂיאי הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר. לביג:
עֲטָרוֹת וְדִיבֹן וַיַּעֲזֵר וְנִמְרָה וְחִשְׁבֹּן וְאֱלֶעֱלָה וְשָׁבֶם וְנָבו וְבָעַן. לביז: **הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה יְהוָה לְפָנָי עַד־תּוֹ
 יִשְׂרָאֵל אָרֶץ מִקְנָה הוּא וְלַעֲבָדַי מִקְנָה.**

Num 32:2 The Gadites and the Reubenites came to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the chieftains of the community, and said, 32:3 “**Ataroth**, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon— 32:4 the land that YHWH has conquered for the community of Israel is cattle country, and your servants have cattle...”

The Gadites and Reubenites request this area as their lot, and after some back and forth, Moses grants the request on the condition that the men of Gad and Reuben first participate in the conquest of Canaan with the other tribes.

במדבר לביד: וַיִּבְנוּ בְנֵי גַד אֶת דִּיבֹן וְאֶת עֲטָרוֹת וְאֶת עָרֹעַר. לבילה: וְאֶת עֲטָרוֹת שׁוֹפָן וְאֶת יַעֲזָר וַיִּגְבְּהָהּ. לבילו:
 וְאֶת בֵּית נִמְרָה וְאֶת בֵּית הָרֶן עָרֵי מִבְּצָר וּגְדֵרוֹת צֶאֱן. לבילוז: וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן בָּנוּ...

Num 32:34 The Gadites built Dibon, **Ataroth**, Aroer, 32:35 Atroth-shophan, Jazer, Jogbehah, 32:36 Beth-nimrah, and Beth-haran as fortified towns or as enclosures for flocks. 32:37 The Reubenites built...

Nothing about this city stands out in these verses in comparison to the other cities. This changed, however, with the discovery of the Mesha Stele, a monumental inscription of the Moabite king Mesha from the 9th century B.C.E. at Dhiban, Jordan.^[3]

Ataroth in the Mesha Inscription

First brought to the attention of interested European travelers by local residents in 1868, the Mesha Stele, written in the Moabite language, which is very similar to biblical Hebrew, presents itself as a first-person account from the same King Mesha named in 2 Kgs 3:4, opening with **משע... מלך**. אנכ. “I, Mesha..., king of Moab.” In the Mesha Inscription, Mesha declares how the Moabite god Kemosh had punitively allowed Moab to be subjected to the hegemony of King Omri of Israel, but that in the reign of Omri’s “son,”^[4] Mesha rebelled and reconquered much of the historic Moabite territory.

Mesha also boasts of his public works, including building activities at many locations within Moab that he acknowledges were previously built up by the Israelite King Omri. Among all these fascinating details, of most importance for this discussion are the events narrated in lines 10–14:

ואש. גד. ישב. בארצ. עטרת. מעלמ. ויבנ. לה. מלכ. ישראל. את. עטרת |

Now the people of Gad had dwelt in the region of Ataroth (*trt*) for a long time, and the king of Israel built Ataroth for them.

ואלתחמ. בקר. ואחזה | ואהרג. את. כל. העם. הקר. רית. לכמש. ולמאב |

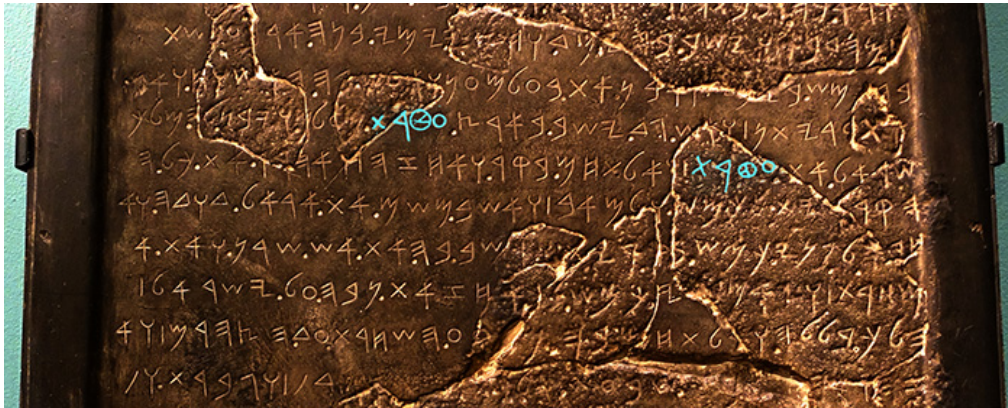
But I fought against the city and I took it, and I killed all the people, and the city was a satiation^[5] for Kemosh and for Moab.

ואשב. משמ. את. אראל. דודה. ואס חבה. לפני. כמש. בקרית |

And I took from there its *r’ldwd*^[6] and I brought it before Kemosh in Qiryat.

ואשב. בה. את. אש. שרן. ואת. אש. מחרת |

And I settled the Sharonites and the Maḥarites in it.



Mesha Stele, mentioning Atarot. Wikimedia adapted

To be sure, this epigraphic witness does not relate directly to the events described in Numbers 32, nor does it say anything about their specific correlation with historical reality, but it does put Ataroth “on the map” by the 9th century B.C.E. and confirms its association with a people group named Gad and the Northern Kingdom of Israel.^[7]

The Excavations at Khirbat Ataruz



Further light on this city has been shed by studying the ruin of Khirbat Ataruz, located 24 km southwest of Madaba in Jordan. The site has long been identified as the location of ancient Ataroth, based on both its geographical location and the approximate preservation of its ancient name in the modern Arabic place name. In 2000, Prof. Chang-Ho Ji of La Sierra University began excavation of

the site, uncovering remarkable finds, including cultic architecture of multiple phases and many religious artifacts.^[8]

The Ataruz Inscribed Altar

During the 2010 excavation season, a cylindrical stone altar bearing seven lines of inscribed text was discovered in a small sanctuary room.^[9] The language of this inscription is Moabite, and its script can be dated paleographically to the late 9th or early 8th centuries B.C.E.

The inscription provides important new details about the Moabite language, supplying a number of words and grammatical features attested in Moabite for the first time. Additionally, in contrast to the earlier script of the Mesha Inscription, which is identical to contemporary Hebrew script, the Ataruz Inscribed altar shows an “Early Moabite Script” diverging from the Hebrew script, and is now possibly the earliest extant inscription employing this script.



Inscribed altar from the Moabite sanctuary. Photo courtesy of A. Bean, C. Rollston

To explain, while the Mesha Stele (hailing from, as noted above, a generation or two earlier than the Ataruz inscriptions) is written in the Moabite language, it uses the Old Hebrew script, not a distinctive Moabite national script.^[10] One could thus contend that after the hegemony of the Omrides of Israel concluded, a fledgling, distinctive Moabite national script soon developed.^[11]

This distinctive Moabite script and language are also attested in later inscriptions such as the Mudeyineh Incense Altar Inscription.^[12] Based on its stratigraphic location and this script, the Ataruz Inscribed Altar is dated to the decades following the Moabite conquest described in the Mesha Stele.

The inscribed altar bears seven lines of text, representing two separate inscriptions: one (A) of three lines, and a second (B) of four lines, at perpendicular orientation to the other. Its contents have been difficult to decipher, as it uses hieratic numerals (a numbering system originating in Egypt), abbreviations, and some idiosyncratic letter forms, but some tentative conclusions have been reached in our publication of the inscription.^[13]

Inscription A records a sum of 10 shekels of bronze, using hieratic numerals for the quantities, the abbreviation שָׁל (*šl*) for shekels, and the abbreviation נ (*n*) for נְחֶשֶׁת (*nḥšt*), “bronze.” The word בָּז (*bz*), “plunder,” may occur, possibly indicating that the recorded bronze was plundered at the conquered site and, based on the context of the inscription, dedicated in the shrine where the altar was found.

Inscription B consists of four difficult lines of text which appear to refer to:

- קר הצדת (*qr hšdt*), “the desolated city”—This phrase uses the distinctive Moabite word for city קר (*qr*), also used in reference to Ataroth in the Mesha Inscription.^[14] The description of the city as “desolated” uses language very similar to Zeph 3:6.
- גרנ פשנ (*grn pšn*) “scattered foreigners”—This phrase includes the noun *gr* that is also found in the Mesha Inscription and is cognate to biblical Hebrew גר (*gēr*).
- עברנ (*brn*) “Hebrews” (with the Moabite plural ending *nun*)—The reading of these letters is clear, but “Hebrews” is only one of multiple possible interpretations. This would arguably be the earliest extant epigraphic occurrence of this word if so interpreted.^[15]

The cluster of these possible readings suggests that the inscription may be commemorative/dedicatory in nature and might actually evoke events related to the Moabite conquest of the city. As such, this finding contributes to an issue scholars have discussed ever since the Mesha Inscription was found, namely the tension between Mesha’s story and the biblical account of this war in 2 Kings 3.

“The King of Moab Rebelled against Israel”—2 Kings 3:5

When the Mesha Inscription was first discovered, scholars immediately noted how it provides a remarkable contemporary witness to the conflict between Moab and the Northern Kingdom of Israel under the Omride Dynasty as described in Kings. In fact, on one level, it correlates remarkably with the biblical account, which mentions the rebellion of Moab against the Omrides and names Mesha specifically:

מלכים ב ג:ד. וַיִּשְׁעֵם מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב הִיא נִקְדָּה וְהִשִּׁיב לְמֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָה אֶלְפֵי כָרִים וּמֵאָה אֶלְפֵי אֵילִים צֶמֶר. ג. וְהִיא כְּמוֹת אַחְזָב וַיִּפְשַׁע מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב בְּמֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

^{2 Kgs 3:4} Now King Mesha of Moab was a sheep breeder; and he used to pay as tribute to the king of Israel a hundred thousand lambs and the wool of a hundred thousand rams. ^{3:5} But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.

The story continues with the Israelite response to this rebellion, in which King Jehoram of Israel, King Jehoshaphat of Judah, and the (unnamed) king of Edom march together against Moab. In 2 Kings 3:24–25, that conflict is presented as an initial rout of Moab,

מלכים ב ג:כד. וַיִּקְמוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּכּוּ אֶת מוֹאָב וַיִּנְסוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם (וַיָּבוּ) [וַיַּכּוּ] בָּהּ וְהַכּוֹת אֶת מוֹאָב. ג. וְהָעָרִים יַהֲרִסוּ וְכָל חֻלְקָה טוֹבָה יִשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ אֲבָנוֹ וּמִלְאוּהָ וְכָל מַעַן מַיִם יִסְתַּמּוּ וְכָל עֵץ טוֹב יִפְּלוּ עַד הַשָּׂאִיר אֲבָנֶיהָ בְּקִיר חֲרָשֶׁת וַיִּסְבּוּ הַקְּלָעִים וַיַּכּוּהָ.

^{2 Kgs 3:24} ...And the Israelites arose and attacked the Moabites, who fled before them. They advanced, constantly attacking the Moabites, ^{3:25} and they destroyed the towns. Every man threw a stone into each fertile field, so that it was covered over; and they stopped up every spring and felled every fruit tree. Only the walls of Kir-hareseth were left, and then the slingers surrounded it and attacked it.

Israel’s rapid advance against Moab having come to a halt at Moab’s capital at Kir-hareseth (usually identified as the city of Karak, Jordan), the story ends with a surprising twist:

מלכים ב ג:כז. וַיֵּרָא מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב כִּי חִזַּק מִמֶּנּוּ הַמִּלְחָמָה וַיִּקַּח אוֹתוֹ שְׁבַע מֵאוֹת אִישׁ שֶׁלֶף חֲרָב לְהַבְקִיעַ אֶל מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹם וְלֹא יָכֹל. ג. וַיִּקַּח אֶת בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר יְמִלְךָ תַּחֲתָיו וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עֲלֶיהָ עַל הַחֲמָה וַיְהִי קֶצֶף גָּדוֹל עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ מֵעֲלָיו וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לְאָרְצָם.

^{2 Kgs 3:26} Seeing that the battle was going against him, the king of Moab led an attempt of seven hundred swordsmen to break a way through to the king of Edom; but they failed. ^{3:27} So he took his first-born son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him up on the wall as a burnt offering. A great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and went back to [their own] land.

Whatever the phrase “great wrath” means,^[16] Mesha’s sacrifice of his own son works;^[17] the Israelite coalition gives up on its attempt to conquer Moab and returns home.

On one hand, this story does not *contradict* Mesha’s description exactly. The Bible admits that the attempt to take Moab’s capital fails, and says nothing about whether Israel maintains control over the rest of Moab or not. And yet, the accounts are quite different from each other in tone and implication.

The Bible describes how the coalition of Israelite, Judahite, and Edomite armies destroyed all other cities except the Moabite capital, implying that Moab was greatly weakened though not destroyed. Mesha’s account, however, makes no mention of an Israelite incursion and, more importantly, presents this rebellion as a decisive and enduring victory in which Mesha retakes the area north of the Arnon River all the way to Nebo from Israel. It further describes how he resettled those areas and commenced various royal building projects, implying that Israel was no longer a factor at all, and that Mesha’s victory was decisive and long-lasting.

While it is likely that the narrative has been given some “spin” on both sides, the evidence from Khirbat Ataruz lends further support to the validity of Mesha’s claim to have conquered, held, and resettled the city of Ataroth. First, the very existence of a Moabite Temple with an inscription on an altar in the Moabite language and in the Moabite script, the Ataruz Inscribed Altar, corroborates Mesha’s statement that he conquered the city of Ataroth and resettled it.

Furthermore, if the reading of Inscription B suggested above is correct, then it may be another inscription celebrating this victory at the site of one of the newly conquered Moabite towns. Notably, this conquest of Israelite territory by the Moabites is something the biblical picture of Mesha’s rebellion conceals in its version of the story. However, with the modern disciplines of archaeology and epigraphy, evidence of the scope of this Moabite conquest is slowly coming to light.

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View Footnotes

1. A city (or cities) named Ataroth appears in the description of the borders of the territory of Ephraim (Josh 16:2, 7). The term “ataroth” also appears as part of a toponym, such as Ataroth Shofan in the Transjordan (Num 32:35), Ataroth Adar in the territory of Ephraim (Josh 16:5, 18:13), and Ataroth Beth-Joab in Judah (1 Chron 2:54). The term may mean “cattle pens” (see *HALOT*), and thus such toponyms would mean, “the cattle pens of X.”

2. For the editio princeps of the Khirbat Ataruz Inscriptions, see Adam L. Bean, Christopher A. Rollston, P. Kyle McCarter, and Stefan J. Wimmer, “An Inscribed Altar from the Khirbat Ataruz Moabite Sanctuary,” *Levant* 50 (2018): 211–236. The authors are very grateful to Chang-Ho Ji for his gracious invitation to publish these inscriptions. The research in this article has been generously supported by Johns Hopkins University, George Washington University, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. In addition, the authors are particularly grateful to the American Center of Oriental Research and the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research for facilitating the use of their libraries and residential facilities for the early portions of our research, collation, and photography of these inscriptions.
3. Of enduring usefulness with regard to the Mesha Stele is: Andrew Dearman (ed), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).
4. “Son” here could be referring either to Omri’s literal son Ahab, or perhaps to Omri’s grandson Jehoram, who came to the throne after the very brief reign of his brother Ahaziah.
5. Both the reading and meaning of this term have been heavily debated, but a majority view reads the word as *ryt*, indicating some kind of satiating offering to the deity based on possible cognates. See most recently: Aaron Schade, “RYT or HYT in Line 12 of the Mesha Inscription: A New Examination of the Stele and the Squeeze, and the Syntactic, Literary, and Cultic Implications of the Reading,” *BASOR* 378 (2017): 145–162.
6. The meaning of this compound term, likely referring to a cultic object, has been much debated and remains uncertain.
7. Editor’s note: For more discussions of the confluence and polemics between the Mesha inscription and the Bible regarding the tribe of Gad, see Aaron Koller, “The Tribe of Gad and the Mesha Stele,” *The Torah* (2013); Yigal Levin, “Dibon-Gad: Between the Torah and the Mesha Stele,” *The Torah* (2019). For other confluences and polemics between them, see David Ben-Gad HaCohen, “War at Yahatz: The Torah Versus the Mesha Stele,” *The Torah* (2015); Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Römer, “North Israelite Memories of the Transjordan and the Mesha Inscription,” *The Torah* (2018).

8. Chang-Ho Ji and Robert D. Bates, “Khirbat ‘Ataruz 2011-2012: A Preliminary Report,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52.1 (2014): 47–91; Chang-Ho Ji, “The Early Iron Age II Temple at Ḥirbet ‘Atārūs and Its Architecture and Selected Cultic Objects,” in *Temple Building and Temple Cult: Architecture and Cultic Paraphernalia of Temples in the Levant (2.-1. Mill. B.C.E.)*, ed. Jens Kamlah (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 203–221; Chang-Ho Ji, “Khirbat ‘Ataruz: An interim Overview of the 10 Years of Archaeological Architectural findings,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 55 (2011): 561–579.
9. Chang-Ho Ji, “A Moabite Sanctuary at Khirbat Ataruz, Jordan: Stratigraphy, Findings, and Archaeological Implications,” *Levant* 50 (2018): 173–210; Adam L. Bean, Christopher A. Rollston, P. Kyle McCarter, and Stefan J. Wimmer, “An Inscribed Altar from the Khirbat Ataruz Moabite Sanctuary,” *Levant* 50 (2018): 211–236.
10. For this view, see Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 65-66; Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 42, 52-54.
11. Regarding the Omrides, the 9th century B.C.E., and Moab, see Israel Finkelstein and Oded Lipschits, “Omride Architecture in Moab: Jahaz and Ataroth,” *ZDPV* 126 (2010): 29-42, especially 35 (with reference to the excavations at Ataruz). For a broader discussion, see also Israel Finkelstein and Oded Lipschits, “The Genesis of Moab: A Proposal,” *Levant* 43 (2011): 139-152 [148–150].
12. Paul E. Dion, and Michelle Daviau, “An Inscribed Incense Altar of Iron Age II at Ḥirbet el-Mudayine (Jordan),” *ZDPV* 116 (2000): 1-13. Dion and Daviau proposed a date of ca. 800 BCE. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel* (p. 63) dates the Mudayine Altar inscription to the first half of the 8th century BCE, thus, slightly later than the Ataruz Altar inscriptions.
13. The authors of this article are especially indebted to Stefan Wimmer for his work on the hieratic numerals of the Ataruz Altar Inscription. For further discussion on the use of Hieratic (especially the numerals) in the southern Levant, see in particular Stefan Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift, Ägypten und Altes Testament* 75 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008). Moreover, the authors of this article are also very grateful to P. Kyle McCarter for discussing numerous and sundry aspects of the Ataruz inscriptions with us.

14. This noun also has cognates in the Hebrew קָרְיָה, Phoenician *qrt* (reflected in the name of the city Carthage), and several Aramaic forms of the same noun.

15. Questions remain about each of these readings, as detailed in the *editio princeps* of the Ataruz Inscribed Altar.

16. The verse is unclear about this. Is it a divine wrath from the Israelite god YHWH, or the Moabite god, Kemosh? Or does it have some other meaning?

17. Editor's note: For a discussion of this act in the context of other biblical passages about child sacrifice, see Samuel Z. Glaser, "Biblical and Greek Ambivalence Towards Child Sacrifice," *The Torah* (2016).

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 9. Chang-Ho Ji, “A Moabite Sanctuary at Khirbat Ataruz, Jordan: Stratigraphy, Findings, and Archaeological Implications,” *Levant* 50 (2018): 173–210; Adam L. Bean, Christopher A. Rollston, P. Kyle McCarter, and Stefan J. Wimmer, “An Inscribed Altar from the Khirbat Ataruz Moabite Sanctuary,” *Levant* 50 (2018): 211–236.
 10. For this view, see Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 65-66; Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 42, 52-54.
 11. Regarding the Omrides, the 9th century B.C.E., and Moab, see Israel Finkelstein and Oded Lipschits, “Omride Architecture in Moab: Jahaz and Ataroth,” *ZDPV* 126 (2010): 29-42, especially 35 (with reference to the excavations at Ataruz). For a broader discussion, see also Israel Finkelstein and Oded Lipschits, “The Genesis of Moab: A Proposal,” *Levant* 43 (2011): 139-152 [148–150].
 12. Paul E. Dion, and Michelle Daviau, “An Inscribed Incense Altar of Iron Age II at Ḥirbet el-Mudeyine (Jordan),” *ZDPV* 116 (2000): 1-13. Dion and Daviau proposed a date of ca. 800 BCE. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel* (p. 63) dates the Mudeyine Altar inscription to the first half of the 8th century BCE, thus, slightly later than the Ataruz Altar inscriptions.
 13. The authors of this article are especially indebted to Stefan Wimmer for his work on the hieratic numerals of the Ataruz Altar Inscription. For further discussion on the use of Hieratic (especially the numerals) in the southern Levant, see in particular Stefan Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift, Ägypten und Altes Testament* 75 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008). Moreover, the authors of this article are also very grateful to P. Kyle McCarter for discussing numerous and sundry aspects of the Ataruz inscriptions with us.
 14. This noun also has cognates in the Hebrew קַרְיָה, Phoenician *qrt* (reflected in the name of the city Carthage), and several Aramaic forms of the same noun.
 15. Questions remain about each of these readings, as detailed in the *editio princeps* of the Ataruz Inscribed Altar.
 16. The verse is unclear about this. Is it a divine wrath from the Israelite god YHWH, or the Moabite god, Kemosh? Or does it have some other meaning?
 17. Editor’s note: For a discussion of this act in the context of other biblical passages about child sacrifice, see Samuel Z. Glaser, “Biblical and Greek Ambivalence Towards Child Sacrifice,” *The Torah* (2016).

Adam L. Bean is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Milligan University and will complete the Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Johns Hopkins University in Fall 2020. He is co-author with Chris... [Read more](#)

Prof. Christopher A. Rollston is Associate Professor of Northwest Semitic languages and literatures in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at George Washington University. He holds an... [Read more](#)