

Moabite Altar Inscription: Earliest Reference to 'Hebrews'?

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A recently deciphered inscription adds color to the biblical account.
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Moabite stone altar inscription

Adam Bean

A recently deciphered Moabite stone altar inscription may bear the earliest use of the term “Hebrews,” according to epigraphists Adam Bean and Prof. Christopher Rollston. The inscribed incense altar was discovered during the 2010 excavations at Khirbet Ataruz (biblical Ataroth), in Jordan. The find provides additional evidence for the existence of an **early Moabite nation**; demonstrates a developing, independent Moabite script; reveals the nation’s cultic practices; and helps fill out the biblical account of 2 Kings 3.

The 50 x 18.5 centimeter stone altar contains seven lines of text in two separate inscriptions: Three short horizontal lines make up Inscription A, and four longer vertical lines make up Inscription B. The inscriptions date to the late ninth–early eighth centuries B.C.E. **Research** of the script was conducted by Adam Bean, Christopher Rollston, P. Kyle McCarter and Stefan Wimmer; the team concluded that Inscription A was written first, followed by the partially overlapping Inscription B. Due to the poorly preserved nature of the inscriptions, there remains some measure of uncertainty regarding the proposed translations.

Inscription A reads:

For/with 8 shekels of bronze

And this: 2 shekels of bronze

Total plunder: 10

The use of the “shekel” measurement is quite common in the ancient world, and the term is mentioned 88 times in the Hebrew Bible. The inscription lists a quantity of looted bronze. The research team speculates that the bronze may have been taken when the city of Ataroth was conquered from the Israelites by the Moabites (more on this below), and was later offered at and recorded

on the shrine at the dedication of a cultic temple. Several clues from Inscription B suggest that it may have been for just such a purpose. Here is the proposed translation of Inscription B:

4 + 60 from the Hebrews ...

And 4,000 foreign men were scattered, and abandoned in great number

From the desolate city ... which ... a burnt offering/incense altar

Acquired/acquiring? land...

Sketch of the Ataruz Altar Inscription rotated on its side

Courtesy of Adam Bean/Council for British Research in the Levant

This suggested identification of the term “Hebrews” would thus make the Ataruz Altar the earliest known inscription to mention the term (not including the 14th century use of the term *Habiru* in the Amarna Letters—see [here](#) for more detail). The translation is tentative, however. The preserved letters are *‘brn*—in the Hebrew language, “Hebrews” is spelled *‘brim*. (The Moabites pluralized words with an *n* ending, unlike the Hebrew *m*. Further, the omission of the *i* is possibly due to the early nature of this inscription. The important root here is *‘br*.)

Alternatively, though, the original Moabite letters *‘brn* could perhaps refer to the biblical location Abarim (spelled exactly the same way as “Hebrews,” in Hebrew), or something else entirely. Until further discoveries are made, “Hebrews” is for now put forward as the “best guess,” the context as a significant factor. The inscription goes on to describe conquering and destruction—a theme that fits nicely alongside another Moabite inscription dated to a few decades earlier: the Mesha Stele.



Mesha Stele

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The **Mesha Stele** dates to the mid-late ninth century B.C.E. Though a Moabite item, this stele was written in the Old Hebrew script. The authors of the above report write: “This is arguably a result of Israelite hegemony over Moab during the reign of Omri and the reign of his son Ahab.” The Ataruz Altar is reliably dated the late ninth to early eighth centuries B.C.E, as it was found *in situ* in a pagan room. According to the epigraphists, the script is classified as Early Moabite in that it “differs in subtle ways from the Phoenician and Old Hebrew script series of this same chronological horizon.”

The Ataruz Inscriptions are written in a fledgling version of what eventually became a distinctive Moabite national script known from later finds.

The *Times of Israel* called the Ataruz inscription the “**missing link**” between the Old Hebrew and Early Moabite script series, signifying a divergence in the two Near Eastern forms of writing.

Evidence *Against* the Bible?

The same *Times of Israel* article also stated that these two inscriptions—the Ataruz Altar and the Mesha Stele—oppose the biblical account: “Taken alongside the Mesha Stele, the two new [Ataruz] inscriptions provide *strong counter evidence against* the biblical narrative” (emphasis added).

This claim is completely unfounded (and unexplained). Actually, the inscriptions thoroughly *back up* the biblical account!

The Bible states that King Mesha was a tributary to the Israelite king (2 Kings 3:4). “And Mesha king of Moab was a sheepmaster, and rendered unto the king of Israel” The latter part of the chapter describes a war between the Israelites and Moabites, which the Israelites won. The Mesha Stele and Ataruz Inscriptions, though, show that Mesha led an army against the Israelites and overthrew them. It seems the above-mentioned article assumes these conflicts to have been one and the same.

Not so! Here is the crucial passage (2 Kings 3:4-5):

And Mesha king of Moab was a sheepmaster, and rendered unto the king of Israel an hundred thousands lambs, and an hundred thousand rams, with the wool. But it came to pass, when Ahab was dead, that the *king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel*.

Also, 2 Kings 1:1:

Then Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab.

The Hebrew word used for *rebel* also means *to revolt*. Clearly, this was the period within which the inscriptions fit—a violent uprising and period of newfound independence, in which Moab would have reclaimed the border territory of Ataroth. In addition, 2 Chronicles 20 talks about an attempted audacious invasion into Judah by a Moabite-Ammonite force. This may well

have occurred at the same time. These stone inscriptions, then, actually corroborate the biblical account—they represent the celebratory commemorations of Moabite victories, just after the death of King Ahab, and just *before* the reprisal attack by the combined armies of Israel, Judah and Edom.

Professor Rollston acknowledges that the accounts compliment one another, stating that “when one combines the biblical material in Kings, the Mesha Stele and the Ataruz Inscriptions, a fairly full picture comes to life, one in which one can stitch together the biblical and inscriptional evidence and know a great deal about geopolitics in the ancient Levantine world of the late ninth and early eighth centuries.”

Beyond the rebellion, the inscriptions contain further parallels with the biblical account.

The Mesha Stele describes how King Mesha took the city of Ataroth from the “people of Gad, [who] had dwelt in the region of Ataroth for a long time.” It thus confirms the biblical account not only of the Israelite ownership of Ataroth, but also specifically that the tribe of *Gad* dwelt there. (As recorded in Numbers 32:34: the “children of Gad built Dibon, and *Ataroth*.”) That they dwelt there “a long time,” as the Mesha Stele states, is for sure—the biblical account puts the Gadites in the area around 500 years prior!

Numerous other details found in the Mesha Stele also back up the biblical account. Mesha is named. The Israelite king Omri is named. Reference is made to the Moabite god Chemosh, mentioned several times in the Bible. The Israelite oppression of Moab is mentioned. The name of God, YHWH, is mentioned. The fact that Israelites occupied territory that was originally Moabite is mentioned.

And now, the recently deciphered Ataruz Altar attests to the account of this epic Moabite rebellion, possibly even calling the opponents “Hebrews.” (Of

course, the fact that they were Israelite was already known, from the Mesha Stele.)

This newfound Moabite independence may have led to the development of this new Moabite script. The epigraphers concluded that “during the latter part of Mesha’s reign, or during the reign(s) of his immediate successor(s), the Moabite script broke off from the Old Hebrew series to become a distinct script series: Early Moabite.” This adds a fascinating new dimension to 2 Kings 3—not only a general rebellion, but also a reason for the genesis of a new written language.

Paganism—and Overthrow

What, then, of the site itself? Archaeological remains from Ataruz indicate the city was a major center of cultic practices both before, and after, the Moabite takeover. The earlier Iron IIA temple is described (in sterile manner) as “non-Moabite”—however, the fact that it was Israelite is clear, not only from the Bible, but from the Mesha Stele account itself. According to the Khirbet Ataruz website, “The temple complex was well laid out, centrally located and built at the highest point of the site. ... Further excavations suggest that a bull motif was also used to symbolize [the] god.” This bull motif is a likely connection with the Israelite worship of golden calves established by King Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28-29).

The Israelites built numerous “high places,” known as “houses of YHWH” around the land (pagan counterfeits of the temple of YHWH at Jerusalem). This is shown both in the Bible and in the archaeological record. The Bible references these in particular during this time period, identifying them as places where *incense* was burned (1 Kings 22:43).

Evidently, a house of YHWH had been built at Ataroth. The Mesha Stele describes that, after the defeat of the Israelites, the “vessels of YHWH” were plundered. The Ataruz Altar itself speaks of bronze plunder, likely used in some kind of altar rededication of the temple as a Moabite place of worship. This incense altar may well have been an Israelite one (again, 1 Kings 22:43), explaining why it was so crudely inscribed in secondary Moabite script.

The bloody takeover of Israelite Ataroth/Ataruz speaks to a general theme in the Bible: blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience. The Bible repeatedly condemns the use of “high places.” This one certainly came to a tragic end.

Victory in Righteousness ...

Yet the Moabite triumph did not last long. In response to this rebellion, King Jehoram of Israel made an alliance with the righteous King Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Edom to overthrow the Moabites. Their long march into Moab nearly ended in doom, however, due to lack of water—until the Prophet Elisha was found among the tired, dehydrated soldiers. Elisha stated that it was only in respect for righteous Jehoshaphat that he would even look at the other kings, much less hear them.

Through the prophet, God instructed the soldiers to dig ditches throughout the valley. In a double miracle, they filled with water, providing hydration for the soldiers—yet for the approaching Moabites, they appeared to be pools of blood, throwing them off guard in the assumption that the Israelites, Judahites and Edomites had turned on each other and wiped themselves out. The allied armies emerged from their camps, surprising the Moabites, and chased them deep into the land of Moab, overthrowing their cities. (For some fascinating archaeological evidence of the Prophet Elisha and his life, see [here](#).) This, then, temporarily capped the short-lived Moabite resurgence.

The inscriptions on the Ataruz Altar, then, do help confirm and add color to the biblical account, alongside the Mesha Stele. The altar represents a significant growth in the somewhat small corpus of Moabite inscriptions, and an invaluable insight into the new development of the language—as well as the likely reasons behind it. For more information about how archaeology corroborates the biblical history of the Moabites, please read our article **“Uncovering the Bible’s Buried Civilizations: The Moabites.”**