

Illustrated Bible Life

The Tel Dan Stele

On the page opposite this editorial, there is a photo of fragments of a basalt stele known as the Tel Dan stele or Tel Dan inscription. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, a stele is a stone slab or pillar, usually inscribed, used to commemorate something. This particular stele likely commemorated the death of Jehoram ([r. ca. 849-842], also known as Joram), king of Israel, and of Ahaziah, king of Judah [r. ca. 842].

The ancient city of Dan was the territory of one of the tribes of Israel. It was the northernmost city of the kingdom of Israel, and was located in the upper Galilee region, near ancient Caesarea Philippi. The fragments of this stele formed part of the city wall; they were discovered in the early 1990s by an archaeological team led by Avraham Biran (1909—2008). Ancient peoples were very good recyclers, and blocks, bricks, and even decorative columns from crumbled buildings and monuments—and inscriptions such as this one—were often repurposed in new building projects.

The story related in this inscription is told in 2 Kings 9:14-29, and it is a sad tale. Joram was the son of King Ahab of Israel, who was married to the infamous Jezebel and was the chief adversary of Elijah the prophet. The account of Joram and Ahaziah relates their deaths at the hands of one Jehu, who subsequently became king of Israel [r. ca. 842-815 BC].

As important as is this extra-biblical corroboration of the account in 2 Kings 9, of even greater significance is the mention of “the house of David.” If you look carefully at the photo, you'll see a highlighted section at the bottom right—this is the mention of the house of David. Archaeologists have dated this inscription to about 800 BC. This is important because it establishes that there was indeed a Davidic dynasty in Israel, and it was attested to a mere hundred years after David's death. Until this discovery, there were no extant references to the family of David as a distinct dynasty; some had argued that David, if he existed at all, was merely a local warlord whose legend grew until hundreds of years later, Jews wrote down an entirely fabricated history to establish their claim to their ancient kingdom. This inscription makes that assertion a non-starter.

It is a rare and remarkable thing when we find archaeological confirmation of events in the Bible. Not that we need them. Yet I am always pleased that God has given us these evidences of the events in His Word.