

Dier 'Alla Inscription Confirming the existence of Balaam son of Boer

Approximately 5 miles east of the Jordan River and .7 miles north of the Jabbok River lies the ancient ruins of Deir 'Alla in Jordan. Deir 'Alla suffered widespread destruction around the 13th-12th century B.C. and was rebuilt and continuously inhabited until the 5th century B.C. when it was destroyed by an earthquake. In March 1967, a team of archeologists led by Dr. Henk Franken discovered lettering on 119 fragments of plaster littering the floor of a large Bronze Age sanctuary in the earthquake's debris field.

Painted in red and black ink, the recovered fragments formed an inscription that was written in Aramaic. In their reconstruction, archeologists believe that the inscription was in a long column with more than 50 lines. Despite the damaged and fragmentary nature of the inscription, archeologists have reconstructed enough to see that it mentions "Balaam son of Boer" three times in the first four lines, and it tells of a prophecy by Balaam foretelling of the destruction of his people. The best Dier 'Alla Inscription reconstruction can be seen at the end of this article.



Carbon dating places the Dier 'Alla Inscription in the period of 840-760 B.C. Balaam of Beor existed some 600 years or so earlier. Scholars, aware of this discrepancy, note that the inscription refers to the "Book of Balaam" which indicates the presence of a pre-existing manuscript or scroll; thus, the date of the material is certainly earlier.

Other evidence attesting to the historical reality of Balaam of Beor is the geographical proximity of the Dier 'Alla Inscription to the biblical accounts of Balaam of Beor. The events of Numbers 22, 23 and 24 occurred in the plains of Moab near and east of the Jordan river and in the proximity of Jericho; Dier 'Alla was within twenty five miles of this area.

Also attesting to the biblical record and its dating is the evidence of an earthquake at Dier 'Alla. The prophet Amos preached two years before an earthquake (Amos 1:1), and archeological evidence from Hazor attested to a severe earthquake during the mid 8th century B.C. Amos mentions Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah (Amos 1:1) which suggests the date around 760 B.C.

The Dier 'Alla Inscription confirms the historical existence of Balaam of Beor who lived in the plains of Moab east of the Jordan River and appears to have been revered well after his existence.

Theologically there has been some controversy whether the Moabite prophet Balaam was a Believer in Yahweh the God of Israel especially as he states, "... I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God" (Num 22:18). It is likely that Balaam was a pagan prophet who attempted to manipulate God. Scripture condemns Balaam for his moral, ethical and religious failings:

God instructed the Israelites to take full vengeance on the Midianites, and Balaam was killed with the kings of Midian (Num 31:8, 16; Josh 13:22; 24:9-10).

God indicated who should be excluded from the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:3-6; Neh 13:1-2).

Balaam is portrayed as unrighteous (Mic 6:5; 2 Pet 2:15-16; Jude 1:11; Rev 2:14).

Dier 'Alla Inscription
Confirming the existence of Balaam son of Beor (page 2)

References:

1. Dijkstra M, "Is Balaam Also Among the Prophets?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 114: 43-64, 1995.
2. Franken HJ, *Excavations at Tell Deir Alla: the Late Bronze Age Sanctuary*, Leuven / Louvain: Peeters (1992).
3. Shea WH, "The Inscribed Tablets From Tell Deir 'Alla", *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27: 21-37; 97-119, 1989.
4. Wood BG, "Prophecy of Balaam Found in Jordan", *Bible and Spade*, 6: 121-24, 1977.
5. Walvoord JF and Zuck RB, eds., *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Wheaton: Victor Books, (1985).

Dier Alla Inscription

As the result of a ten year process, this currently is the best combination of fragments that renders the most discernible inscription. However, there are many fragments that cannot be placed in their proper sequence or missing; thus, the Deir' Alla Inscription is only a partial recovery of the original. To aid in understanding the inscription, translators have added some headings which can be seen in bold text.

Title

The misfortunes of the Book of Balaam, son of Beor. A divine seer was he.

The Theophany

The gods came to him at night.
And he beheld a vision in accordance with El's utterance.
They said to Balaam, son of Beor:
"So will it be done, with naught surviving.
No one has seen [the likes of] what you have heard!"

Balaam Reports his Vision to His Intimates

Balaam arose on the morrow;
He summoned the heads of the assembly to him,
And for two days he fasted, and wept bitterly.
Then his intimates entered into his presence,
and they said to Balaam, son of Beor,
"Why do you fast, and why do you weep?"
Then he said to them: "Be seated, and I will relate to you what the Shaddai gods have planned,
And go, see the acts of the god!"

Dier 'Alla Inscription
Confirming the existence of Balaam son of Beor (page 3)

Balaam Describes the Celestial Vision and Its Aftermath in the Land

"The gods have banded together;
The Shaddai gods have established a council,
And they have said to [the goddess] Shagar:
'Sew up, close up the heavens with dense cloud,
That darkness exist there, not brilliance;
Obscurity and not clarity;
So that you instill dread in dense darkness.
And - never utter a sound again!
It shall be that the swift and crane will shriek insult to the eagle,
And a nest of vultures shall cry out in response.
The stork, the young of the falcon and the owl,
The chicks of the heron, sparrow and cluster of eagles;
Pigeons and birds, [and fowl in the s]ky.
And a rod [shall flay the cat]tle;
Where there are ewes, a staff shall be brought.
Hares - eat together!
Free[ly feed], oh beasts [of the field]!
And [freely] drink, asses and hyenas!"

Balaam Acts to Save the Goddess and the Land

Heed the admonition, adversaries of Sha[gar-and-lštar]!
... skilled diviner.
To skilled diviners shall one take you, and to an oracle;
To a perfumer of myrrh and a priestess.
Who covers his body with oil,
And rubs himself with olive oil.
To one bearing an offering in a horn;
One augurer after another, and yet another.
As one augurer broke away from his colleagues,
The strikers departed ...

The Admonitions are Heeded; The Malevolent Gods are Punished, the Goddess Rescued, and the Land Saved

They heard incantations from afar
...
Then disease was unleashed
And all beheld acts of distress.
Shagar-and-lštar did not ...
The piglet [drove out] the leopard
And the ... drove out the young of the ...
... double offerings
And he beheld ...