

Mesha Stele

Text

André Lemaire and Jean-Philippe Delorme translation, 2022

•
I am Mesha, son of Kemoshyat, king of Moab, the Dibonite.
•
My father reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after my father.
•
I made this high place for Kemosh in Qarho because he saved me from all the kings and made me look down on all my enemies.
•
Omri was king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land.
•
And his son succeeded him, and he too said: I will oppress Moab. In my days, he said so.
•
But I looked down on him and on his house, and Israel has gone to ruin forever!
•
Omri had taken possession of the whole land of Medeba, and he lived there during his days and half the days of his son, forty years.
•
But Kemosh restored it in my days. I built Baal-Meon, and I made in it a reservoir.
•
I built Kiriathaim.
•
The men of Gad had dwelled in Ataroth from of old, and the king of Israel built Ataroth for himself.
•
But I fought against the city and captured it. I killed all the people from the city as a sacrifice for Kemosh and for Moab.
•
And I brought back from there the altar-hearth of his beloved, and I dragged it before Kemosh in Keriioth.
•
I settled in it the men of Sharon and the men of Maharith.
•
And Kemosh said to me, "Go, take Nebo from Israel!"
•
So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn till noon.
•
And I took it and killed all of them: 7,000 men, boys, women, girls, and maidservants, for I had devoted them to Ashtar-Kemosh.
•
And from there I took the vessels of Yahweh, and I dragged them before Kemosh.
•
And the king of Israel had built Jahaz and lived in it while he fought against me, but Kemosh drove him out before me.
•
I took from Moab 200 men, all its warriors, and I led them up against Jahaz and seized it to add it to Dibon.
•
I built Aroer, and I made the highway in the Arnon valley.
•
I built Beth-Bamoth, for it was destroyed. I built Bezer, for it was in ruins.
•
And the men of Dibon were armed, for all of Dibon was under my command.
•
I ruled over 100 towns that I added to the land.
•
And I built... [damaged]
•
...with the prisoners of Israel. I built...
•
...the house of the king. I made... [damaged]
•
...broad cisterns in the midst of the city.
•
And there was no cistern in the city of Qarho, and I said to all the people: "Make yourselves every man a cistern in his house."
•
And I cut out the moat for Qarho by means of prisoners from Israel.
•
I built Qarho, the wall of the forests and the wall of the citadel.
•
And the men of Horonaim dwelled in it before. And the House of David lived in Horonaim... [fragmentary]
•
And Kemosh said to me, "Go down, fight against Horonaim and seize it."
•
And I went down and fought against the city, and I took it and Kemosh restored it in my days.
•
...I built... [final lines too damaged to reconstruct fully]

Copy of the inscription by Herbert Fuller Bright Compston, 1919)

[illegible]

The Mesha Stele, also known as the Moabite Stone, is an inscribed basalt monument dating to approximately 840 BC, commissioned by King Mesha of Moab. The inscription, written in Moabite, a Northwest Semitic language closely related to Hebrew and using a script similar to paleo-Hebrew, consists of 34 lines. It records Mesha's military campaigns, construction projects, and religious devotion to the god Chemosh. Significantly, it contains references to Yahweh and to King Omri of the northern kingdom of Israel, establishing a significant historical parallel with the biblical account in [2 Kings 3](#).

The stele is roughly 60 cm wide and 60 cm thick, carved in durable black basalt. It provides one of the earliest extra-biblical attestations to figures and places mentioned in the Old Testament and offers a Moabite perspective on Israel-Moab relations in the 9th century BC.



Discovery and Preservation

The stele was first brought to the attention of Europeans in 1868, when it was shown to the Prussian missionary Frederick Augustus Klein by local Bedouins near Dhiban (ancient Dibon) in modern-day Jordan. News of the find triggered interest from France, Britain, and Prussia (the precursor of Germany). During negotiations to acquire the stone, and under pressure from the Ottoman authorities who were inclined to hand it over to the Prussians, the local Bedouin tribes, in an act of resistance, smashed the stele into multiple fragments.

Fortunately, before its destruction, a papier-mâché impression (known as a “squeeze”) had been made by a local Arab acting on behalf of Charles Simon Clermont-Ganneau, a French archaeologist stationed at the French consulate in Jerusalem. After the stone had been broken into pieces, Clermont-Ganneau acquired many of the fragments and used the squeeze to aid in a reconstruction. In 1873, the restored stele was transferred to the Louvre Museum in Paris, where it remains today.

Significance of the Stele

The Mesha Stele is of importance to biblical archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies because it confirms details found in [2 Kings 3](#). Not only does it contain a reference to Yahweh, it also mentions King Omri. Omri reigned in Israel from approximately 885 to 874 BC and is described in the text as having conquered Moab and made it a vassal state. This is consistent with the account in [2 Kings 3:4](#):

- King Mesha of Moab was a sheep breeder. He used to pay the king of Israel an annual tribute of 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams.

Following Omri's reign, his son Ahab (874–853 BC) maintained Israelite control over Moab. The biblical account in [2 Kings 3:5](#) states that after Ahab's death, Mesha rebelled against Israel:

- But after Ahab's death, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.

The inscription on the stele affirms this rebellion, attributing Mesha's success to the will of Chemosh, the national god of Moab. Mesha describes, in brutal terms, his military victories, including the slaughter of 7,000 inhabitants of the Israelite-held town of Nebo, including men, women, boys, girls and slaves. He also boasts of victories over the tribe of Gad and the reclamation of cities such as Ataroth and Jahaz. These events are generally dated to around 840 BC and appear to align closely with the biblical narrative, though told from Moab's perspective.

A debated element of the stele is found in line 31, which is fragmentary and very difficult to read. In 2022, scholars André Lemaire and Jean-Philippe Delorme, using advanced imaging technologies, proposed that this line refers to the “House of David” (דָּוִד אֵימָה). If accurate, this would make the Mesha Stele one of the earliest non-biblical references to the Davidic dynasty, complementing the Tel Dan Stele, which also mentions the “House of David.”

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