

# BIBLE ODYSSEY

## Places

HOME MESHA STELA

### The Mesha Stela

by Erasmus Gass

In 1868, Frederick Augustus Klein (1827–1903)—a German with French citizenship—started working for the British Church Missionary Society in Jordan. Late in the afternoon of August 19, during a coffee break, the sheikh of the Banī Hamīdi tribe informed Klein of a massive inscribed basalt stone (stela) lying on a nearby mound now known as Tell Dhiban. Although time was too short for a thorough inspection of the stone, Klein told Julius Henry Petermann, German consul and orientalist at Jerusalem, about the sensational discovery. Klein and Petermann’s attempt to keep the find secret was unsuccessful. News spread quickly. In addition to the Germans and French, the British became interested in acquiring the stone, and its price soared.



Before it was sold, the French sent expeditions to take impressions of the stela, known as squeezes, at times a life-threatening operation. After nerve-wracking negotiations, the Germans purchased the stela in 1869 for the sum of 120 napoleons (approximately \$480 at that time, about \$8,000 today). Yet they never took possession of it. In reaction to the pressure exerted by the much-hated pasha of Nablus, the Banī Hamīdi destroyed the stela by heating it and pouring cold water over it so that it broke into pieces. A rumor still circulates that the tribe thought there was gold in the stela.

Subsequently, the French archaeologist Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1846–1923) and the British General Charles Warren (1840–1927) independently collected about two-thirds of the pieces. Since Clermont-Ganneau had copies and a full impression of the original, he was able to arrange everything in the form that is now on display in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Copies of this reconstruction are in London, Berlin, and Amman (Jordan). In retribution for being cheated, the Germans published an illegal edition (Smend/Socin 1886). (In fact, an official edition has yet to be published, after nearly 150 years). Soon, money-hungry forgers produced numerous fakes, like the Medeba Stone or the Moabite pots, which in turn caused some to question—unjustifiably—the authenticity of the Mesha Stela.

So why is the Mesha Stela important? This large stone bears an inscription (34 lines long) commissioned by the Moabite king Mesha, who is also mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (2Kgs 3:4). The monument itself was erected at the dedication of the temple of the Moabite god, Kemosh, in the town of Qericho. The inscription commemorates Mesha’s achievement in liberating Moab from Israelite rule and in finishing a number of building projects through the country. It describes the destruction of Israelite temples in Ataroth and Nebo and the deportation of cultic equipment or symbols of Yahweh. The inscription also attests to the custom, referred to often in the Hebrew Bible, of placing the entire population of a conquered territory under a ban (*hērem*) to one’s deity. What this means is not clear, but it seems to refer to some sort of ritual sacrifice. Finally, the Mesha Stela mentions the Israelite king Omri and witnesses to the existence of a “House of David,” which is likely related to the Judean dynasty.

For scholars, the Mesha Stela will continue to hold its place among the most important sources for ancient Israel for four reasons. 1) Though written from a different perspective, it is an external source confirming the historicity of several details in the biblical account of an Omride king’s reign. 2) It provides crucial data for the reconstruction of the political and religious history of Transjordan. 3) Its script is relevant to the study of ancient writing systems. 4) Its language is very similar to ancient Hebrew and thus is relevant to the study of Hebrew and neighboring Semitic languages.

Erasmus Gass, "Mesha Stela", n.p. [cited 25 May 2016]. Online: <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/mesha-stela>

#### Contributors



**Erasmus Gass**  
Professor, University and Theological Faculty of Trier

Erasmus Gass is professor of Bible at the Theological Faculty of Trier, Germany. He is the author of *Die Moabiter: Geschichte und Kultur eines ostjordanischen Volkes im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Harrassowitz, 2009) and "New Moabite Inscriptions and Their Historical Relevance."

#### RELATED ARTICLES (4)



##### David

The biblical texts create a complex portrait of a King David who was both a revered leader and a flawed man.



##### Literacy in the Ancient World

The paucity of literary remains from Judah and Israel during the biblical period suggests that facility in reading and writing was

#### HarperCollins Dictionary

<b>Ataroth</b>	<b>David</b>
<b>Israelite</b>	<b>Moab,</b>
	<b>Moabites</b>
<b>Nebo</b>	<b>Omri</b>
<b>sacrifice</b>	<b>temples</b>
<b>Yahweh</b>	

#### Related Publications

- Ahab Agonistes: The Rise and Fall of the Omri Dynasty
- Biblical Archaeology Review 20, no. 3
- Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab

#### Related Links

- K.C. Chanson
- Livius