

# The Ariel of his David

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Abduction of cult images was one of the most effective methods to intimidate people in the ancient world. In this way the conqueror demonstrated his superior power and hoped to profit from the support of yet another deity.<sup>1</sup> The abduction deprived the defeated party of the support of the deities he worshipped. Also kings of smaller countries abducted cultic objects from their neighbors if they could. King Mesha of Moab, for example, waged war against Israel and other countries, allegedly by order of his national god Kemosh.<sup>2</sup> He boasts,

Mesha stele, 9-13

And I [(re)built] Qiryaten. Now the men of Gad had dwelt in the land of Aṭaroth a long time already, for the king of Israel had built Aṭaroth for them. But I fought against the city and took it. And I killed all inhabitants of the city, so that it became the property of Kemosh and Moab. And I captured from there the fire altar of his David ('t r'l dwdw) and [dr]aggged it before Kemosh in Qiryat(en).

The most likely cognate of Moabite 'r'l is Hebrew אַרְיֵאל, Ariel, 'fire altar'.<sup>3</sup> In Isa. 29:1 this is a nickname of Zion, 'Woe Ariel, Ariel, city where David encamped! Add year to year, let the festivals turn round!'. The verb נָקַף has to do with the turning point of the year (תְּקוּפָה), the autumnal New Year festival when the renewal of kingship was celebrated. Thus the verse hints at the yearly renewal of the Davidic kingship. In Israel the New Year festival developed into the Feast of Booths.<sup>4</sup>

This observation suggests a solution for the enigmatic etymology of אַרְיֵאל. Originally it may have been a compound of אַרְיֵ, Ugaritic 'ary 'clan, family',<sup>5</sup> and אֵל 'god', denoting, as in many other such compounds (Gabriel, Sarel, etc.), divine status. In Ugarit deified kings got names ending in 'il 'god'.<sup>6</sup> So, 'Ariel' was 'the deified clan', a designation of members of the Davidic dynasty.<sup>7</sup> A continuously burning fire hearth on the altar (cf. Lev. 6:6, 12-13) symbolized their lasting right to the throne. An extinguished hearth was a symbol of a family that had become extinct.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The cult image of the Babylonian supreme deity Marduk, for example, was carried away successively by Hittites, Assyrians and Elamites who according to Marduk himself profited greatly from his presence in their countries. See e.g. Hallo, *Cult Statue*; Sommerfeld, *Marduk*, 365; Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 179; Herring, *Divine Substitution*, 29-31.

<sup>2</sup> For this well-known inscription see e.g. Aḥituv, *Echoes*, 389-418 (with the new readings by A. Lemaire). See also Becking, *A Voice from Across the Jordan*, esp. 138-139.

<sup>3</sup> Hoftijzer, Jongeling, *Dictionary*, 100, under No. 2.

<sup>4</sup> De Moor, *New Year*.

<sup>5</sup> Del Olmo Lete, Sanmartín, *Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language*, Part 1, 111; Watson, *Lexical Studies in Ugaritic*, 137. Both give a number of other possibly related words in non-Semitic languages. This was already intimated by Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol. 2, 304-305

<sup>6</sup> De Moor, *Rise*, 320-321, 328-333.

<sup>7</sup> On the (semi-)divine status of the Davidic king see e.g. Psalm 2:67-7; 45:8; 110 and Mettinger, *King and Messiah*, 254-293; Otto, Zenger, "Mein Sohn bist du".

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Heimpel, *Herd*, 329. Similar expressions are found in 1 Samuel 2:3; 2 Samuel 14:7; Job 18:5-6.

Making fire was extremely difficult, so people preferred to keep the embers smouldering so that the fire could be stirred up with bellows and live coals could be transported to other places in firepans.<sup>9</sup>

Lamps burning continuously served the same purpose. Especially illuminating are 2 Samuel 21:17 'Then David's men adjured him, "You shall no more go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel." 1 Kings 11:36 'so that there will be a lamp for my servant David', 1 Kings 15:4 'for the sake of David the LORD our God has given him a lamp in Jerusalem', 2 Kings 8:19 'for the sake of David his servant since he had promised him to give him and his sons a lamp for ever' and Psalm 132:17, 'There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have arranged a lamp for my anointed' which can only mean that the lamp continuously burning in the temple was a symbol of David's everlasting kingship *coram deo*.

Therefore the long-debated *dwdw*<sup>10</sup> in line 12 of the Moabite Mesha inscription should be construed as the name of David<sup>11</sup> with a personal suffix. Personal suffixes were sometimes attached to divine names, e.g. in Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Chirbet el-Qom 'šrth ('his Asherah') and Ugarit 'nth ('his 'Anat').<sup>12</sup> In line 31 of the same inscription the new reading recovered by André Lemaire from an early cast of the stone the Davidic dynasty (*bt dwd*) is mentioned again.<sup>13</sup> This means that also according to the Moabite king the Omride dynasty of Northern Israel wanted to compete with Jerusalem as regards the claim to Davidic legitimacy. Possibly because they had captured the image from Jerusalem, a fact the biblical tradition for obvious reasons had to keep silent about.

On the strength of similar cultic setups elsewhere<sup>14</sup> Mesha seems to have assumed that the image before which a fire altar had burned continuously was an image of David, the deified founder of the Israelite dynasty. Possibly Mesha's capture of the Davidic fire altar was an act of revenge for destruction of 'the two of the fire altar of Moab' by Benayah, one of David's heroes, related in 2 Sam. 23:20. The 'two' may have been the deified couple that founded Mesha's dynasty.

### Summary

The long-debated 'r'l *dwdw* in line 12 of the Moabite Mesha inscription is explained as a continuously burning brazier before an image of the deified king David which symbolized the everlasting rule of his dynasty. Possibly Mesha captured this brazier as a revenge for the destruction of the brazier devoted to the founders of his own dynasty. The most likely etymology of the word 'ר'ל/אריאל is 'deified clan'.

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<sup>9</sup> Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, Vol. 6, 3-13.

<sup>10</sup> See the overview in Becking, *op. cit.*, 133-134.

<sup>11</sup> So also Ahituv, *Echoes*, 394, 406.

<sup>12</sup> Another example is found in Exod. 15:7, see my forthcoming article in *Vetus Testamentum*.

<sup>13</sup> As is well-known, *byt dwd* occurs also in the Tell Dan inscription, line 9.

<sup>14</sup> Braziers were kept burning before images of Assyrian deities, CAD K, 395; Van Driel 1969, 94-95, 100-101.

## Zusammenfassung

Die Bedeutung von *'r'l dwdw* in Zeile 12 der Mesha Inschrift aus Moab ist schon oft diskutiert worden und wird hier erklärt als ein ständig brennendes (oder glühendes) Feuer vor einem Bild des vergöttlichten Königs David, das die ewige Herrschaft seiner Dynastie symbolisierte. Möglicherweise eroberte Mesha das Feuer aus Rache für die Vernichtung des Feuers, das den Gründern seiner eigenen Dynastie gewidmet war. Wahrscheinlich ist die ursprüngliche Bedeutung von *'ry'l / אריאל* 'vergöttlichte Sippe'.

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