

Tell Dan

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by

Paul D. Weaver

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The city of Dan, located on the northern most part of Israel, is one that is referenced many times in the Old Testament. Prior to the Israelites conquest, this city was known as Laish (Judg 18:7) or Leshem (Josh 19:47). The tribe of Dan, renamed it Dan, after their tribal ancestor (Judg 18:29), who was the fifth son of Jacob, first-born son of Rachel's maid Bilhah (Gen 30:6). This city was at the base of Mount Hermon, near the Jordan River, in the region known as Upper Galilee. Archaeological discoveries show that it was well fortified, as one would expect since it was located at the northern frontier of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In ancient civilizations, water sources were of great importance. The city of Dan has a spring running alongside it, the Dan Spring, which is the largest of four that flow into the Jordan River.<sup>2</sup> Due to this spring, the area of Dan is very fertile as recorded in Judges 18:9. This city was also significant because it was located on an ancient trade route from Galilee to Damascus, making it the most important ancient city in the northern part of the Kingdom of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The first mentioning of the city of Dan is in Genesis 14:14, when Abraham went all the way to Dan to free his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive there. Moses refers to this city as Dan for the sake of his readers, even though at the time of the events of the story, it was still possessed by Canaanites, and called Laish. The book of Joshua records the conquering of Laish and its renaming (Josh 19:47). Such a conquest is visible in the archaeological remains.<sup>4</sup> The Scriptures also speak of the idol worship that transpired in the city of Dan, when they had no king (Judg 18:30-31). To prevent the reunification of the northern and southern tribe, Jeroboam I established a pagan worship center in Dan (the furthest northern city) and Bethel (the furthest southern city). Here they erected calf-idols (I Ki 12:26-29). Price calls this pagan worship center, called a "high place" (bhma) in Scripture, to be "the most dangerous site in the country."<sup>5</sup> The reason for this, it is what caused the anger of God to fall on the nation of Israel. Their idolatry, as prophesied by Amos (Amos 8:14), would be their downfall. The city of Dan was eventually conquered by Ben-hadad (I Ki 15:20; 2 Chr 16:4). The city was finally destroyed during the conquest of the Babylonians and later reoccupied at the beginning of the Hellenistic period and continued to be occupied during the Roman and Byzantine eras.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A discovery was made in 1980 uncovering a massive city wall sixty feet higher than the surrounding area. Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 106.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bibleplaces.com/dan.htm>, (accessed, 1/24/2014).

<sup>3</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/History/Pages/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Dan-%20The%20Biblical.aspx>, (accessed, 1/24/2014).

<sup>4</sup> These remains are described on the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, "Above the destruction level of the last Canaanite city, a new occupation level was revealed, very different in architectural character and material culture. This new settlement pattern represents the conquest and settlement of the city by the tribe of Dan." <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/History/Pages/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Dan-%20The%20Biblical.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals about the Truth of the Bible*. (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1997), 227.

<sup>6</sup> Negev, Avraham. *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, 3rd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1990), electronic edition, logos.

Edward Robinson first identified this ancient tell in 1838, but the majority of the discoveries were found under the late Israeli archaeologist, Avraham Biran. Biran began excavating in 1966. Under Biran, the majority of the significant discoveries were made. A bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription dated to the Hellenistic period was found in 1976.<sup>7</sup> This inscription reads, "to the god who is in Dan." This inscription provided positive identification of this site as the city of Dan recorded in Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

At the Tell of Dan, many significant archaeological discoveries were made. One of those is the Canaanite gate. This gate is sometimes called "Abraham's Gate," because Abraham may have entered through it when he went to rescue his nephew Lot (Gen 14:14). This gate is nearly twelve feet high and seventeen feet wide. It is a triple arch gate made from sun dried mud-brick. It is the only fully preserved gate which dates back to Old Testament Times.<sup>9</sup> It is believed that the gate was built in the mid-eighteenth century BC.<sup>10</sup> It is well preserved, in part because the entrance to the gate was filled in, when the gate location was changed.

A second gate was also discovered at Tell Dan. This gate is believed to have been built in the ninth century BC by Ahab. The Bible makes it clear that the gates to the city were very significant locations. Near this Israelite gate, a platform was discovered. Four decorated stones were also found which may have supported four pillars and a canopy. It could be that this canopy covered platform was where the king or judge would sit and make judgments for the people (2 Sam 19:9).<sup>11</sup> Near the gate a bench was also found, possibly a place where elders would have sat (Gen 19:1; Ru 4:1-2)<sup>12</sup> Outside this gate was discovered five erect stones which would have originally been 23 inches high. This may have been a location where a pagan idol would have resided. Scripture records Josiah tearing down the shrines which were located at the gates (2 Ki 23:8).

As previously referenced, in 1976 Avraham Biran discovered an inscription at the "bamah" (high place) which stated, "To the god who is in Dan." Biran believes that they found the sanctuary that was built by Jeroboam.<sup>13</sup> This high place would have been approximately 60 feet by 62 feet. Here the golden calves would have been located and worshiped. Archaeologists now think the platform was roofed. Steps are found leading up to the "bamah," and in front of this ancient pagan temple, a horned altar was discovered.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these cultic items,

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<sup>7</sup> <http://popular-archaeology.com/issue/december-2011/article/archaeologists-excavate-legendary-city-of-dan>, (accessed, 1/24/2014).

<sup>8</sup> <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/History/Pages/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Dan-%20The%20Biblical.aspx>, (accessed, 1/24/2014)

<sup>9</sup> Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Negev, *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*.

<sup>11</sup> <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/History/Pages/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Dan-%20The%20Biblical.aspx>, (accessed, 1/25/2014)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>13</sup> Price, *The Stones Cry Out*, 228.

many other objects used in pagan worship were found including: three large iron shovels, a clay bathtub, a small horned altar, incense stands, and figurines. Some of the figurines discovered were that of the pagan god Bes as well as the goddess Astarte, who is a fertility goddess. Large vessels referred to as snake pythos were also found. These vessels had large snakes around it. The snake also represented fertility.<sup>15</sup>

For years, minimalists have denied the existence of King David. They instead argued that the stories concerning David were merely legends which were popularized. A discovery at the Tell of Dan, namely the basalt stele, required such scholars to re-examine their theories. In 1993, near the Israelite gate, Avraham Biran discovered an inscription on a basalt slab. This was a victory stele. It was a stele written in Aramaic that described the victories of Hazael of Syria over his enemies. It is believed that it was probably erected by Hazael after he defeated the ancient city of Dan. This is a very significant discovery for two reasons: (1) it is very ancient, written around the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, and (2) it is the first ancient writing, outside the Bible, which speaks about the house of David. While this does not “prove” King David existed, it gives additional historical evidence for such a belief.<sup>16</sup> This victory stele can be seen in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

In addition to all of the specific discoveries listed above, there is also a large amount of archaeological artifacts that also confirm the biblical account, that the city of Dan (formerly Laish), was destroyed. This evidence includes: jars, cooking pots, oil lamps and other household utensils. These items were found in a layer of ashes and burnt bricks which were two to three feet deep.<sup>17</sup>

The significance of the discoveries at Tell Dan can hardly be overstated. These findings are of great value to the Biblical Archaeologist. One discovery may be circumstantial evidence for the biblical account of history, but all of the evidences brought together, makes a very strong case for the historicity and reliability of Scripture. None of these discoveries controvert the biblical account. The very opposite is true, they support it. A quick review of artifacts is helpful at this point. The archaeological strata gives clear evidence of a destruction that occurred at the same period of time when the Israelites were taking over Palestine (Judg 18:29). The discovery of the high-place and all of the accompanying pagan objects of worship, confirms the biblical account of Jeroboam building pagan centers of worship (I Ki 12:26-29). The Israeli gate discovered, platform, bench, and erect stones, all fit perfectly with biblical descriptions concerning the importance of, and functions at, ancient Israeli gates (2 Sam 19:9; Gen 19:1; Ru 4:1-2; 2 Ki 23:8). Finally, the victory stele gives extra-biblical support for the King David. Tell Dan is a minefield of archaeological riches.

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<sup>14</sup> According to the IMFA, this staircase was built during the reign of Jeroboam II, at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/IsraelExperience/History/Pages/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Dan-%20The%20Biblical.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> “Tel Dan - Archaeology in Israel,” in *The Jewish Magazine*, Sept 2002.  
<http://www.jewishmag.com/59mag/dan/dan.htm> (accessed, 1/24/2014).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>17</sup> Avraham, (electronic edition).



(Picture 1)  
Dan Spring, that flows down from Mount Hermon. It is the largest of four rivers that flow into the Jordan River.



(Pictures 2 & 3)  
This is the oldest Canaanite Gate discovered as of yet. It goes back to the Old Testament period. Workers in left picture are restoring a section of the gate to look original. A small doorway was



initially carved out, so that they could go inside to see if there were any additional artifacts to discover. The original gate was an archway that is still visible. I have a video I will try to send a link talking with these guys about their procedure



(Pictures 4&5) Erected stones just outside the Israeli gate, which would have originally been 23 inches high. This may have been a location where a pagan idol would have resided (2 Ki 23:8

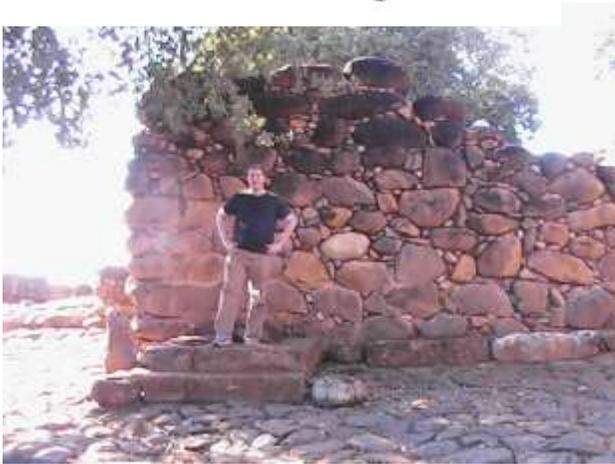




(Picture 6 & 7)  
Israeli gate believed to have been built by Ahab in the ninth century BC. Myself and colleagues on the left.



(Picture 8)  
The basalt slab discovered near the Israeli gate (picture above) in 1993. This was a victory stele written in Aramaic that described the victories of Hazael of Syria over his enemies. The first non-biblical reference to the house of David.



(Picture 9)  
A platform near the Israeli gate where four decorated stones were found which may have supported four pillars and a canopy. It could be that this canopy covered platform was where the king or judge would sit and make judgments for the people (2 Sam 19:9).



(Picture 10)  
The platform for the “bamah” (high place). An inscription was discovered here in 1976 which stated, “To the god who is in Dan.” Here the golden calves would have been located and worshiped. Archaeologists now think the platform was roofed.



(Picture 11)  
Location of the altar in front of the “high place”



(Picture 12&13)  
Small figurines discover in the  
cult area of Tell Dan, “the  
dancer” on the left, and Bes on  
the right.



(Picture 14)  
An Aerial layout of Tell Dan



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