

The Tel Dan Stele

With “House of David” Inscription

The Tel Dan Stele is one of the most remarkable archaeological finds in recent times. Written by an Aramaic king in the ninth century BCE, the text on this fragmentary basalt slab references the “House of David” (text highlighted in white), an allusion to the biblical king. Thus it is the earliest known mention of the royal House of David apart from in the Hebrew Bible. The slab is composed of three fragments discovered in Tel Dan in northern Israel. The first was found embedded in an ancient stone wall in 1993, while the other two were unearthed in 1994 during further excavations at the Tel Dan site.

Loaned by The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, from the collection of the Israel Antiquities Authority, the stele was once part of a monumental Aramaic inscription commemorating the military victories of King Hazael of Aram (a region in present-day Syria) over the kings of Israel and Judah in 842–806 BCE. Although Hazael’s name is not mentioned in the inscription, scholars believe he is its author. By this period the United Monarchy of Saul, David, and Solomon had split into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah—also known as the House of David—in the south. In the inscription, Hazael boasts of killing Jehoram, the king of Israel, and Ahaziah, the king of Judah, as well as laying siege to Israel under Jehu, the usurper king. The text, however, is not consistent with the biblical account of 2 Kings 9 in which Jehu kills Jehoram and Ahaziah.

The Tel Dan Stele, by explicitly citing the House of David, can be seen as a touchstone for understanding the history of the three monotheistic faiths in the Holy Land, connecting the creation of this inscription to the evolving narratives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam over the succeeding one thousand plus years.

The Jewish Museum is grateful to The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, where the Tel Dan Stele is on permanent display, and the Israel Antiquities Authority for their generous loan of this significant artifact. Its installation at the Jewish Museum is made possible by generous support from the Armstrong International Cultural Foundation, in collaboration with the Jerusalem-based Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and the Israel Antiquities Authority.