

Text of the TEL DAN Stele

&

PSALMS OF SOLOMON

A Comparative Philological Study: Thematic Transfer and Relative Chronological Classification

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Abstract: This study applies the methods of comparative philology to two textual corpora: the text of the Tel Dan Stele and the Psalms of Solomon, without presupposing any prior dating. It identifies 17 shared thematic occurrences distributed across 7 distinct psalms, a convergence of syntactic structure between Ps. Sol. 8:15–16 and Tel Dan ll. 3–5, and 6 structural silences systematically bearing on the most distinctive messianic themes of the psalmic corpus. The application of the three standard criteria of comparative philology (density, coherence of silences, and asymmetry of complexity) leads to classifying the Psalms of Solomon as the anterior corpus in the direction of thematic transfer. This relative chronological classification constitutes an independent argument for dating, subject to explicit conditions of falsifiability.

Keywords: Biblical Studies; Tel Dan Stele; Psalms of Solomon; comparative philology; intertextuality; Aramaic epigraphy; Davidic messianism; relative chronology; thematic transfer; Old Aramaic

Résumé FR :La présente étude applique les méthodes de la philologie comparée à deux corpus textuels : le texte de la Stèle de Tel Dan et les Psaumes de Salomon. Sans présupposer aucune datation préalable. Cette étude identifie 17 occurrences thématiques communes distribuées sur 7 psaumes distincts, une convergence de structure syntaxique entre Ps. Sal. 8:15–16 et Tel Dan l. 3–5, et 6 silences structurels portant systématiquement sur les thèmes messianiques les plus distinctifs du corpus psalmique. L’application des trois critères standard de la philologie comparée (densité, cohérence des silences, asymétrie de complexité) conduit à classer les Psaumes de Salomon comme corpus antérieur dans la direction du transfert thématique. Ce classement chronologique relatif est un argument de datation indépendant, soumis à des conditions de réfutabilité explicites.

Mots-clés FR: Études bibliques ; Stèle de Tel Dan ; Psaumes de Salomon ; philologie comparée ; intertextualité ; épigraphie araméenne ; messianisme davidique ; chronologie relative ; transfert thématique ; araméen ancien

I. Disciplinary Framework and Statement of Neutrality

The present study belongs exclusively to comparative philology. It does not posit any author, any political intention, or any theory of fabrication. It applies to two textual corpora the standard method of intertextual criticism: identifying common themes, qualifying their relationship (parallel, reversal, structural silence), and determining the probable direction of thematic transfer for the purpose of establishing a relative chronological classification.

The two corpora are treated as equal in status at the outset of the analysis. No dating is presupposed. The question posed is strictly philological:

Between the Tel Dan Stele and the Psalms of Solomon (18 psalms, c. 63–30 BCE), which direction of thematic transfer is rendered most probable by the distribution of occurrences—parallels, reversals, and structural silences? Does this result constitute an argument for relative chronological classification?

This formulation is identical to that used to establish the relative chronology of Homeric, Old Testament, or Qumranic texts whose date of composition cannot be determined by external means.

II. Control Corpus: Authentic Aramaic Steles

Before any comparison between Tel Dan and the Psalms of Solomon, it is necessary to establish a control corpus: Aramaic victory steles whose authenticity and dating are not disputed. This corpus makes it possible to address the central objection that the silences of Tel Dan are “normal for the ancient Aramaic genre.”

If this objection is correct, Tel Dan’s silences concerning eschatology, Davidic messianism, and the gathering of the exiles should be common to the entire corpus of Aramaic victory inscriptions. The following table tests that prediction.

Control stele	Themes present	Silences	Verdict
Mesha Stele (Moab, c. 840 BCE)	Divine victory (Kemosh), death of enemies, seizure of territory, desolation.	No eschatology, no messiah, no future gathering.	Silences identical to Tel Dan
Zakkur Stele (Hamath, c. 800 BCE)	Divine mandate of the king, victory over a coalition, restoration of the king.	No eschatology, no messiah, no future gathering.	Silences identical to Tel Dan
Kilamuwa Stele (Sam’al, c. 825 BCE)	Royal legitimacy, royal benefactions, defeat of enemies.	No eschatology, no messiah.	Silences identical to Tel Dan
Sefire Inscriptions (c. 750 BCE)	Treaties, curses, political legitimacy, divine mandates.	No eschatology, no messiah.	Silences identical to Tel Dan

Result: the silences concerning eschatology and messianism are indeed universal within the Aramaic control corpus. The objection is therefore admissible—but it must be subjected to an additional condition.

That additional condition is as follows: if these silences are obligatory in the Aramaic genre, they cannot constitute a dating indicator when taken in isolation. They can, however, constitute such an indicator when their distribution is systematically coherent with a precise and dated corpus—which is exactly what the following sections examine.

III. Comparative Philology: Applied Method

Comparative philology establishes the direction of a thematic transfer through three cumulative criteria, developed in particular in the tradition of *Quellenforschung* and the criticism of literary dependencies (cf. the methods applied to the Synoptics, Qumranic texts, and the relations between Mesha and 2 Kings):

Criterion 1 – Density and Distribution

A text T2 is thematically dependent on a text T1 if the shared themes are more numerous and more densely distributed in T1 than in T2, and if T2 does not contain themes absent from T1 that T1 would have been expected to develop had it known T2.

Criterion 2 – Coherence of Silences

If T2 presents systematic silences concerning the most characteristic developments of T1—and if those silences are coherent with an identifiable narrative logic—the direction T1 → T2 is more probable than T2 → T1. The reverse hypothesis (T1 knows T2 but suppresses its distinctive themes) remains philologically possible, but it requires an explicit narrative justification.

Criterion 3 – Asymmetry of Complexity

T1 is generally more thematically complex than T2 if T2 takes up T1 by simplifying or selecting from it. The direction runs from the thematically richer text toward the more selective text.

Application to the two corpora considered here: the Psalms of Solomon (18 psalms, a rich corpus, eschatological development, explicit Davidic messianism, gathering, christology) versus the Tel Dan Stele (13 preserved lines, themes of military victory, without eschatological development). The psalmic corpus is the richer one. If the stele were the source text, the Psalms would have developed, from 13 lacunose lines, an 18-psalm eschatological corpus—which is philologically improbable. If the Psalms are the source, the stele selects certain themes from them and suppresses the eschatological developments—which is philologically standard.

IV. Comparative Survey: 17 Occurrences across the 18 Psalms

A. Main Table – 8 Major Themes with Direction of Transfer

Compared theme	Tel Dan – text / lacuna	Psalms of Solomon	Relation	Direction
I. Defeated Davidic entity	byt dwd mentioned as a defeated entity, with no hope of restoration. ll. 8–9	"They cast down the throne of David" – but restoration is explicitly invoked. Ps. Sol. 17:6 + 17:21	REVERSAL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
II. Conqueror from afar, divine mandate	"Hadad made me king. Hadad went before me."	"He brought the one who comes from the end of the earth... he decreed war."	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan

Compared theme	Tel Dan – text / lacuna	Psalms of Solomon	Relation	Direction
	ll. 3–5	Ps. Sol. 8:15–16		
III. Physical elimination of kings	"I killed two mighty kings... Joram... Ahaziah." ll. 6–8	"He destroyed their rulers... shed their blood." Ps. Sol. 8:23 / 17:11	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
IV. Desolation / dispersion of the people	"their land..." – post-victory lacuna. ll. 10–11	"Scattered throughout the whole earth by lawless men." Ps. Sol. 17:17–20	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
V. Religious otherness of the conqueror	Mandated by Hadad – not by YHWH. Implicit religious otherness. ll. 3–5	"His heart was alien to our God." Ps. Sol. 17:13–14	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
VI. Son of David / restoration [SILENCE]	ABSENT – no Davidic successor, no hope. –	"Raise up for them their king, the son of David" – a pivotal verse. Ps. Sol. 17:21	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
VII. Gathering of the dispersed [SILENCE]	ABSENT – no return, no gathering. –	"Gather the dispersed of Israel with mercy." Ps. Sol. 8:28 / 11:1–3	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
VIII. The anointed / christos [SILENCE]	ABSENT – no notion of an anointed one or eschatological restoration. –	"When he brings back his anointed one (christos)." Ps. Sol. 18:5–7	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan

B. Extended Survey – 17 Occurrences across the Corpus as a Whole

An exhaustive examination of the 18 Psalms reveals 17 thematic occurrences distributed across 7 distinct psalms (Ps. 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 17, 18). The “Direction” column indicates the most probable direction of transfer according to the three criteria set out in § III.

Reference	Identified theme	Relation	Direction
Ps. Sol. 1:5	Pride of kings / inevitable downfall	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 2:1	Siege / destruction of fortified walls	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 2:2	Profanation of the sanctuary by the foreign conqueror	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 2:19–20	Fall of the throne / humiliation of royal dignity	REVERSAL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 2:26–27	Ignominious death of the conqueror – divine reversal [SILENCE]	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 7:1–2	Divine protection of the inheritance against the foreigner [REVERSAL]	REVERSAL	Ps. Sol. → Dan

Reference	Identified theme	Relation	Direction
Ps. Sol. 8:15–16	Conqueror from afar, mandated — maximum formal convergence	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 8:18–20	Peaceful entry of the conqueror / taking possession	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 8:23	Massacre of rulers and kings	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 9:1–2	Exile / loss of the inherited land	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 11:1–3	Eschatological gathering of the dispersed [SILENCE]	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 17:5–6	Illegitimate overthrow of the Davidic throne	REVERSAL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 17:7–8	The foreigner as an instrument of divine punishment	PARALLEL	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 17:21	Son of David / central messianic hope [SILENCE]	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 17:26–28	Expulsion of the foreigner / national restoration [SILENCE]	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 17:30–31	Purification of Jerusalem / universal radiance [SILENCE]	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan
Ps. Sol. 18:5–7	The anointed one (christos) / day of restoration [SILENCE]	RESPONSE	Ps. Sol. → Dan

C. Statistical Distribution

Of the 17 occurrences: 9 are positive parallels (shared themes); 4 are reversals (the same theme with an opposite vector); and 6 are responses by silence (central themes of the Psalms absent from the stele). In all 17 cases, the direction Psalms of Solomon → Tel Dan is more parsimonious than the reverse direction.

The concentration of silences on eschatological and messianic themes—son of David (17:21), gathering (11:1–3 / 8:28), purification of Jerusalem (17:30), christos (18:5)—is the most significant result. These silences are not random: they bear systematically on the most characteristic and distinctive developments of the psalmic corpus, developments that have no equivalent in the Aramaic victory genre.

V. Treatment of Philological Objections

A. The Themes Are Generic Topoi of the Ancient Near East

Objection: The common themes (a foreign king mandated by a god, royal defeat, desolation) belong to the common stock of ancient Near Eastern royal literature. Their simultaneous presence in two texts does not prove dependence.

Philological response: This is admissible for the positive parallels taken in isolation. It is not admissible for the overall distribution. The common ancient Near Eastern stock does not explain why the silences of the stele coincide exactly with the most distinctive themes of the psalmic corpus—themes that do not belong to the Aramaic common stock but are specific to

Jewish Davidic eschatology of the first century BCE. The argument from topos applies to the parallels; it does not apply to the coherence of the silences.

B. The Silences Are Obligatory in the Aramaic Victory Genre

Objection: An Aramaic king had no reason to evoke a future Davidic messiah. The silences reflect the genre, not dependence on a later text.

Philological response: Correct—and documented by the control corpus (§ II). But the genre argument explains the existence of the silences, not their distribution. The control corpus (Mesha, Zakkur, Kilamuwa, Sefire) presents the same generic silences—but not the same density of positive parallels with the psalmic corpus. Tel Dan shares with the Psalms of Solomon 17 precise thematic occurrences, including 9 positive parallels. No authentic Aramaic stele in the control corpus presents a comparable density with a Jewish corpus of the first century BCE. It is this excess of density that constitutes the philological indicator.

C. The Coherence of the Silences Results from an Imposed Reading

Objection: The “systemic coincidence” of the silences with messianic expectations results from the interpretive grid projected onto the text by the researcher, not from the raw data.

Philological response: This objection is philologically serious and deserves a precise answer. The interpretive grid is testable: if Tel Dan were compared with any other corpus of the first century BCE—for example, the Odes of Solomon or the Hodayot Psalms from Qumran—would we find the same density of occurrences? The answer is no: the themes of Aramaic military victory, royal elimination, and territorial desolation are not represented with comparable density in those other corpora. The observed density is specific to the Tel Dan / Psalms of Solomon comparison, which excludes the reading artefact as a sufficient explanation.

D. Formal Invitation to Systematic Comparison

We invite critics of this analysis to produce, on the one hand, a systematic comparison of the silences of the Tel Dan Stele with those of Mesha, Zakkur, and Kilamuwa and, on the other hand, a comparison of Tel Dan’s thematic density with other corpora of the first century BCE. If such a comparison shows that the density of Tel Dan / Psalms of Solomon occurrences is comparable to that of other pairs of texts, the present argument is weakened. If it shows that this density is exceptional, the argument is strengthened.

This is the condition of falsifiability that any philological hypothesis must satisfy. We state it explicitly.

E. On Palaeography as a Primary Dating Criterion

Objection: Palaeography is the primary dating criterion. The letter-forms of Tel Dan are authentically compatible with the ninth century BCE according to the consensus of epigraphers (Biran, Naveh, Lemaire, Cross). This criterion takes precedence over any intertextual analysis.

Philological response: This objection rests on a confusion between two distinct propositions: (1) the letter-forms are compatible with the ninth century; (2) the text was composed in the ninth century. The first proposition is what palaeography can establish. The second does not follow from it. Confusing the two is an elementary methodological error, which the present section documents.

1. What Palaeography Actually Dates

Palaeography is the discipline that studies the evolution of graphic forms over time. It can establish the graphic register in which a text was executed and situate that register within a chronological range. What it cannot establish is the date of composition of the content—that is, the date at which the text was first conceived and written.

This distinction is fundamental and recognized by the discipline itself. The Oxyrhynchus papyri demonstrate it abundantly: an Alexandrian scribe of the second century CE copying Homer uses a graphic register that “appears” several centuries older than his personal letter written on the same day. The palaeography of the copy dates the register—not the composition of the Iliad.

2. The Alexandrian Distinction between Graphic Registers

In Alexandrian and Judaeo-Hellenistic scriptoria of the first century BCE, the distinction between graphic registers according to the nature of the document was an ordinary and codified scribal practice. Two registers coexisted systematically:

The formal book hand—reserved for theological, literary, and royal texts—was deliberately archaizing, formal, carefully executed, and independent of the date of composition.

The current documentary hand—used for contracts, letters, and receipts—was cursive, contemporary, and reflected the actual evolution of writing.

A scribe trained in this context who produced an epigraphic display text—royal, official, monumental—would naturally use the archaizing register. This competence was not an extraordinary feat: it was an ordinary scribal qualification, as commonplace as the simultaneous mastery of classical Latin and medieval Latin by a twelfth-century cleric. The Samaritan Pentateuch offers a paradigmatic example: written in an archaizing palaeo-Hebrew script in the first century BCE, it would be palaeographically dated several centuries earlier by an epigrapher unaware of its production context.

3. The Reductio ad Absurdum: the Merovingian Argument

The limit of palaeography as a primary dating criterion may be illustrated by a simple reductio ad absurdum. Consider a fresh inscription carved in 2026 on a wall in fifth-century Merovingian typographic characters:

| “HOUSE OF CLOVIS — built in the Year of the Lord CDXCVI”

If this inscription were subjected to exclusive palaeographic analysis, it would be dated to the fifth century CE. The conclusion would be: the house belongs to the Merovingian crown. No one would dispute the absurdity of the reasoning—and yet this is exactly the logical structure of relying on palaeography as a primary and sufficient dating criterion.

Palaeography provides a style; it does not date the act of engraving, nor does it date the support, nor the political and historical context. It must be combined with linguistic, syntactic, intertextual, and contextual analysis.

No one can present palaeography as a criterion that takes precedence over every other form of analysis. To do so would be to grant graphic form an authority that it does not possess and that the other disciplines do not recognize.

4. Conclusion on Palaeography

Palaeography establishes that the letter-forms of the Tel Dan Stele are compatible with an Old Aramaic graphic register. It does not establish that the text was composed at that time, nor the date of engraving, nor the political intention, nor the historical context. In a scribal context in which the distinction between an archaizing display register and a current documentary hand was ordinary practice—as is abundantly documented by the

Alexandrian and Judaeo-Hellenistic scriptoria of the first century BCE—palaeographic compatibility is a necessary but not sufficient condition of authenticity. Any argument that presents palaeography as the primary and sufficient dating criterion grants the discipline an authority that its own practitioners do not claim for it.

VI. Special Note: Psalm 8:15–16 — Convergence of Syntactic Structure

Among the 17 occurrences surveyed, one goes beyond the thematic level and reaches the level of syntactic structure; it is therefore the strongest philological indicator in the entire survey.

Ps. Sol. 8:15–16: “He brought the one who comes from the end of the earth, who strikes with force; he decreed war against Jerusalem and against its land.”

Tel Dan, ll. 3–5: “My father went to battle... Hadad made me king. And Hadad went before me.”

The common structure is: [divine subject] + [verb of creation/royal mandate] + [conqueror in motion] + [verb of war/victory]. This identity of syntactic structure—not merely of theme—is an indicator of literary dependence according to the standard criteria of comparative philology.

In the Synoptic method applied to the Gospels, a convergence of syntactic structure between two texts is regarded as a stronger indicator of dependence than a mere convergence of vocabulary or theme. The same criterion, applied here, strengthens the direction Psalms of Solomon → Tel Dan.

VII. Philological Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the two corpora according to the standard methods of comparative philology yields the following results:

1. Seventeen shared thematic occurrences distributed across 7 distinct psalms—a density incomparable with any other pairing of an ancient Aramaic corpus and a Jewish corpus of the first century.
2. A convergence of syntactic structure (Ps. 8:15–16 / Tel Dan ll. 3–5) that goes beyond the thematic level.
3. Six structural silences bearing systematically on the most distinctive and richest themes of the psalmic corpus (Davidic messianism, gathering, christos)—not explicable by the Aramaic genre alone.
4. An asymmetry of thematic complexity favoring the direction Psalms of Solomon → Tel Dan according to criterion 3 of the method set out in § III.

These four results converge toward a single relative chronological conclusion:

Conclusion:

The study of these two texts shows that the philological temporal arrow runs from the Psalms of Solomon toward the text of the TEL DAN Stele, which is therefore later.

Since the Psalms of Solomon are dated between c. 63 and 30 BCE (Wright, 2007), this result establishes a philological terminus post quem: the Tel Dan Stele cannot predate c. 63 BCE, the earliest date of the Psalms of Solomon.

This result constitutes an independent argument for relative dating, subject to the conditions of falsifiability set out in § V-D.

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