

## IS THE SPELLING OF "BAALIS" IN JEREMIAH 40:14 A MUTILATION?

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A recent paper by William H. Shea published in *AUSS* suggests that the biblical spelling of Baalis (*ba<sup>c</sup>alis*), the Ammonite king mentioned in Jer 40:14, was probably a deliberate mutilation of the Ammonite spelling, *ba<sup>c</sup>alyi<sup>s</sup>a* (or, *ba<sup>c</sup>alya<sup>s</sup>a<sup>c</sup>*) found on a seal impression discovered at Tell el-<sup>c</sup>Umeiri during the 1984 Andrews University archaeological expedition to that site.<sup>1</sup> (This seal impression will be published by me in a forthcoming issue of the *Biblical Archaeologist*.) Shea's opinion is that Jeremiah himself changed the spelling in order "to deny a predication about a foreign god."<sup>2</sup> In this case, the name would mean "Baal is salvation," "Baal is savior," or "Baal saves"—all of which would be distasteful theological ideas to an orthodox Yahwist.

Prior to my detailed work on the impression I, too, held this view concerning the origin of the Jeremiah spelling. It had been suggested by Robert G. Boling after he had examined, at my behest, F. M. Cross's article on the Siran Bottle inscription, in which Cross lists the known Ammonite kings.<sup>3</sup> This view became, in fact, the consensus view among all staff members during and immediately following the excavation.

However, during my preparation of the impression for publication, several indications suggested that there was no mutilation. First of all, a rather general observation may be made: In writing

<sup>1</sup>W. H. Shea, "Mutilation of Foreign Theophoric Names by Bible Writers: A Case Brought to Light by the Excavation at Tell el-<sup>c</sup>Umeiri," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 111-115. See also L. T. Geraty, "A Preliminary Report on the First Season at Tell el-<sup>c</sup>Umeiri," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 85-110, especially pp. 98-100.

<sup>2</sup>Shea, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup>F. M. Cross, "Notes on the Ammonite Inscription from Tell Siran," *BASOR*, no. 212 (December 1973), p. 15. Boling stayed at the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman during the excavation and had easy access to its library.

the story of the murder of Gedaliah in Jer 40, Jeremiah would probably have cared less about the meaning of a foreign name (with its foreign theophoric element, of course) than about his audience's understanding of his story. In view of this, it is likely that he would have used a spelling familiar to his readers; and thus "Baalis" should have been the normal spelling of the name in Hebrew at that time. To have used a new spelling of a name would only have tended to confuse his audience.

Shea mentions "Abed-Nego" as an example of a name wherein the foreign theophoric element was changed, and compares it with "Baalis" as an example of foreign names in the Bible that are among "some cases" in which there appears to have been deliberate name alteration "for the theological reasons of the author."<sup>4</sup> Shea also recognizes that there "are, of course, many occurrences of foreign names in the Bible which have been preserved accurately, even including names which contain predications about foreign and Yahwistically unacceptable gods."<sup>5</sup> I feel, however, that he has not given due weight to the many names with foreign theophoric elements retained by Bible writers, including Jeremiah.

Indeed, although these writers did alter some names, as Shea indicates, *much* more often they did not. Israelites who had names with foreign theophoric elements include two named simply Baal (1 Chr 5:5, 8:30), and such others as Baalhanan (1 Chr 27:28), Beeliada (1 Chr 14:7), Esther=Ishtar (book of Esther), Meribaal (1 Chr 8:34), Mordecai=Marduk (book of Esther), and Resheph (1 Chr 7:25).

But more relevant to this discussion are non-Israelite names with similar theophoric elements: Baalhanan, an Edomite king (Gen 36:38); Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon (book of Daniel); Benhadad, the name of three kings of Damascus (1 Kgs 15:18, 20:1, 2 Kgs 13:3), or simply the throne name for the family of Aramean kings in Damascus (Jer 49:27); Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam, whose name contains the Elamite deity Kudur (Gen 14); Ethbaal, the father of Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:31); Evil Merodach, a son of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 52:31; Merodach=Marduk); Hadad, the name of three individuals, including two Edomite princes (Gen 36:35,

<sup>4</sup>Shea, pp. 114-115.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

1 Kgs 11:14) and a son of Ishmael (1 Chr 1:30); Hadadezer, a king of Zobah (2 Sam 8); Merodach Baladan, a king of Babylon (Isa 39); Nebuchadnezzar (book of Daniel; Nebu=Nabu); Nebushasban, a prince of Babylon (Jer 39:13); Nebuzaradan, Nebuchadnezzar's captain (Jer 39:9, et al.); and Nergalsharezer, the name of two princes of Babylon (Jer 39:3).

The book of Jeremiah itself contains six names with foreign theophoric elements: Benhadad, Evil Merodach, Nebushasban, Nebuzaradan, Nergalsharezer, and Nebuchadnezzar (=Nebuchadnezzar). The name “Nebuzaradan” occurs in chap. 40, the same chapter in which “Baalis” also occurs. Why would Jeremiah do nothing with these names, while stubbornly altering the name of the king of Ammon? Moreover, the name “Benhadad” is a direct Hebrew translation of the Aramaic “Barhadad,” the name of several kings of Damascus known from Aramean inscriptions. Both the Hebrew and Aramaic forms of the name mean exactly the same thing—“Son of Hadad.”<sup>6</sup> Why would the Bible writers, including Jeremiah, translate the name into their own language but retain the foreign theophoric element, if they wished to deny the importance of these foreign gods?

This question is especially relevant regarding the name Baal, which can also be a masculine title for men or gods. Wives called their husbands “baal” (Deut 22:22, 24:4, etc.). Although Bible writers were always careful not to give their own God the title Baal, since confusion could result, the habit of giving such a title to any god probably lies behind the frequent place names that incorporate the element Baal—such as, Baal Gad (not related to the tribe of Gad; Josh 11:17, et al.); Baal Hamon (Cant 8:11); Baal Hazor (2 Sam 13:23); Baal Hermon (Jgs 3:3); Baal Meon (Num 32:38, et al.); Baal Perazim (2 Sam 5:20); Baal Shalisha (2 Kgs 4:42); and Baal Tamar (Jgs 20:33). Many more place names incorporating the names, not simply titles, of foreign deities, could be listed. Most of these places were in Israelite hands, but there was no attempt to mutilate their names, either by the Israelites living in those places or by the Bible writers recording them. Several places were even

<sup>6</sup>See H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, 2d ed., 1 (Wiesbaden, 1966): 203 (nos. 201 and 202), and also commentary section in 2 (Wiesbaden, 1968): 203-211.

given their names by prominent Israelites, such as David (e.g., Baal Perazim).

If such a pattern were to be applied to the name *ba<sup>c</sup>alyiṣ<sup>c</sup>a*, the meaning would be "Lord of salvation," designating any god the parents had in mind. Shea has mentioned that the name Baal is not known as the theophoric element in other royal Ammonite names.<sup>7</sup> Not only is this true, but out of 152 names of Ammonites appearing on Ammonite inscriptions known to me, this name alone uses the element Baal.<sup>8</sup> We have, therefore, no solid indication of Baal-worship among the Ammonites. Indeed, the element Baal occurs much more frequently in Israelite names from the same period. Though it cannot be proved, it is very possible that the Baal element has been used as a title in this name. If such were the case, Jeremiah would have had no reason to alter the name.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that in two of the three biblical examples of clear mutilation given by Shea and Geraty ("Abed-Nego" from "Abed-Nebo" and "Moses" from "Ramose" or "Thutmose"),<sup>9</sup> it was the theophoric element itself that was mutilated—unlike the pattern in "Baalis." The one exception ("Jezebel" from "Ezebel") exhibits a very well-known pattern used with names including Baal in Israel, wherein a word-play based on a homonym having the meaning of "shame" was used to embarrass a particularly disliked person. Certainly, Jezebel falls into that category. But Baalis displays neither of these two patterns.

Thus, not only is there no reason to claim a history of mutilation of foreign theophoric elements by Bible writers, including Jeremiah; there is also no pattern which would fit "Baalis," if it were a mutilation. Actually, all three of the mutilated names mentioned above by Shea and Geraty probably were not mutilated by the Bible writers, but by the people using them in everyday language. The writers simply used the well-known, mutilated forms. Writers write to be understood and should, therefore, use the forms of names with which their audiences are familiar.

<sup>7</sup>Shea, pp. 112-113.

<sup>8</sup>See Kent P. Jackson, *The Ammonite Language of the Iron Age* (Chico, Calif., 1983), pp. 95-98.

<sup>9</sup>Geraty, p. 100, n. 15.

All of the above lines of argument show it to be highly unlikely that Jeremiah deliberately altered the spelling of Baalis. Moreover, in the light of two plausible alternative explanations for the origin of the spelling, it does not seem proper at this moment to suggest deliberate mutilation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 100, and nn. 16 and 17 on that page. I also treat further evidence in my own article, “The Servant of Baalis,” forthcoming in *BA*.