This is a long and expensive book that does not entirely repay its reader. A reworked dissertation from the University of Sydney in 1999, the book shows the marked influence of the Copenhagen International Seminar that published it. The bibliography sometimes omits articles (such as Dion’s excellent article in the Heltzer Festschrift) that postdate the dissertation. The most notable aspects of the study are the rearrangement of the fragments and the suggestion that bytdwd is a geographical name referring to Jerusalem.

The Tel Dan Inscription is dealt with here in the detail that could only be done in a doctoral dissertation. After a brief introduction, the volume includes a perfunctory chapter on the “Archaeological Context of the Fragments.” This is followed by chapters on “Epigraphical Analysis,” “Palaeographical Analysis,” “Arrangement of the Fragments,” “Textual Analysis,” “Historical Commentary,” a short set of concluding remarks, and the usual indices. The author’s hope is that his “study will do much to quell the unhelpful passion and euphoria” that have lured us all into “emotional scholarship” (319). Those are rather grand and pretentious aims for a doctoral dissertation, and I seriously doubt whether this book will really quell the alleged “hysteria or parochialism” (318).

The short chapter on the archaeological context (5–17) serves to date the inscription in the early eighth century (as opposed to the late ninth century, as the excavators had

According to Athas, Biran and Naveh were swept up “in the euphoria which surrounded the find of the fragments,” but fortunately Lemche and Thompson pointed out their “premature appraisal of Fragment A” and “its subsequent distorting effect” (6). To be sure, the discovery of Fragments B1 and B2 did clarify the archaeological context considerably. Athas, however, spends much space belittling the interpretation of the archaeological context of Fragment A (which was tentatively dated to the mid-ninth century) rather than concentrating on the dating that emerged as the result of subsequent discoveries of Fragments B1 and B2. This has the rhetorical effect of casting doubt on the archaeological conclusions of Biran, which will be critical to Athas’s eventual historical interpretation. Biran had contended that the pottery collected in a probe associated with Fragment B2 dated to the end of the ninth or beginning of the eighth century B.C.E. (Biran and Naveh, “The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment,” *IEJ* 45 [1995]: 8), which would suggest that at the latest the stela was destroyed by Jehoash, the grandson of Jehu (ca. 798–782 B.C.E.). Athas notes that Lemche and Thompson point out that “much of Iron Age II pottery is not distinctive” (9); this judgment naturally would make the archaeological context of limited significance. Since Athas will assign the inscription to Bar-Hadad II (ca. 800 B.C.E.), this would suggest that the inscription was broken shortly after its production.

In the chapter on epigraphic analysis, Athas addresses all the mundane details of the stela’s production. Here I would correct one oft-repeated assertion of Athas concerning my own article and especially a co-authored article with Bruce Zuckerman. Contrary to his assertion, we did not rely on “only computer imaging” but rather examined the actual physical stela both at the Israel Museum and in the Bowers Museum (when it was on loan in Orange County, California). Indeed, I accompanied Bruce Zuckerman when we studied and photographed the inscription in detail at the Bowers Museum for the exhibition there. To be fair, we were not at liberty to separate the three fragments, so I was not able to test physically my theory that the Fragment B should be rotated counterclockwise by ½ degree to create a better line relationship between Fragments A and B; however, there seemed nothing evident in our physical inspection of the fragments that would prevent such a minor rotation. Thus, Athas’s repeated appeals to his own physical inspection of the inscription (as opposed to other scholars) need to be read with some suspicion. I must admit that I could not visually see any physical evidence for Athas’s reconstruction of the beginning of line 2 (Fragment A)—either in the photographs or in my personal inspection. Preceding the important phrase “my father” in line 2, Athas reconstructs a yod. However, the reading of the lamed, as in ובא י [8--], still
seems quite certain, although everything that precedes the *lamed* remains speculative. On the other hand, Athas’s arguments for the reconstruction [ד.ר] as opposed to Biran and Naveh’s [ד.ר] is certainly possible. In such cases, Athas’s study does the service of pointing out just how tentative many of our reconstructions can be.

The paleographic analysis results in a rather precise dating to 800 B.C.E. (±20 years). This is both more precise and slightly later than I would accept, but it does have the advantage of directly supporting Athas’s historical interpretation of the stela. In other words, the precise dating suggests a certain circularity that develops in the total interpretation, but perhaps this is inevitable and reflects the attempt to create a synthetic interpretation.

Relying on suggestions by Cryer and Thompson, chapter 5 rearranges the fragments so that they no longer have any contextual relationship to one another. To do this, Athas must contend that the physical join “does not present an easy interlocking fit,” and Athas cites a personal communication with Biran, who apparently confessed that “nothing in the field was concretely certain” (177). In this context, it is difficult to understand why Athas had such problems with my ½-degree rotation of Fragment B. On the other hand, since such a rotation corrects the problem of the relationship of the lines between A and B, it is important rhetorically for Athas to insist on analyzing the fragments on the basis of the original photograph and positioning. The join certainly looks quite good upon visual inspection. However, the two parts apparently were glued together in Israel Museum shortly after the discovery of B1 and B2 so that we now are forced to rely on the judgments of professional restorers who put the fragments together. One must acknowledge that by separating A and B we lose their contextual relationship that aids and shapes most historical interpretations. As a result of separating A and B, the entire historical interpretation of the inscription becomes (needlessly?) much more tentative, as can be seen in Athas’s textual analysis and interpretation.

There are a number of imaginative suggestions in Athas’s textual analysis. Perhaps the most noteworthy new reading is in Fragment A lines 3–4, “[at every/]ancient [h]earth on the ground of El-Bay[tel . . . ], which may be compared to the original editors’ “And the king of I[s/rael entered previously in my father’s land.” The editors’ original reading was made before the discovery of Fragment B and was confirmed by B, yet the repositioning of B gives leave to the imaginative reconstruction suggested by Athas. In this case, Athas utilized computer imagining to make room for a letter that previously did not exist (57), thereby changing “my father” (according to Biran and Naveh) into “El-Baytel” (without a word divider). Scholars should take special note in this chapter of Athas’s suggestion for interpreting *bytdwd* as a geographical name, which relies on Thompson’s arguments. Athas repeats the unsubstantiated contention that the lack of a word divider makes the interpretation of this as the dynastic name of the kingdom of Judah improbable. However,
Biran and Naveh’s reconstruction, “the king of Israel” (lines 3–4) and Athas’s own “El-Baytel” are also missing a word divider; several scholars have pointed out that a missing word divider is not unusual for proper names in construct. The suggestion that replaces the straightforward reading of bytdwd as a dynastic name is that bytdwd is a geographical name for Jerusalem. We do not have any evidence that Jerusalem was called bytdwd; in contrast, the use of dynastic names in the Levant is well known in the Aramean states and in Assyrian royal inscriptions. This in hand, Athas cautiously advances a historical interpretation. He makes Bar-Hadad II the author of the inscription, which was produced in the latter stages of Aramean hegemony over Israel.

This book is a convenient summary of the analyses of the Copenhagen International Seminar, but it is unlikely to achieve the author’s stated aim of creating a more rational interpretation of the inscription. It should not be surprising, given how much attention the Dan Stela has received, that there is not much original here. Indeed, this makes one wonder about the value of the Tel Dan Inscription as a dissertation topic or as an expensive new monograph.