

Historical and Archaeological Overview of Dan

Lecture: 02-25 Lecture: Historical and Archaeological Overview of Dan | Israel 2026

SITE OVERVIEW

Location: Tel Dan (ancient name: Laish, later renamed Dan); northernmost boundary of classical Israel

Date of Visit: 2026-02-25 (based on content creation timestamp)

Biblical References:

- 2 Samuel 20:1, 6
- 2 Samuel 18:4
- 2 Kings 23:8
- Judges 3:15
- Judges 19:15
- Judges 20:16

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Dan represents the northernmost boundary of the classical “Dan to Beersheba” territorial formula promised to Israel

The tribe of Dan was originally assigned the Mediterranean coastal territory occupied by the Philistines; unable to overcome Philistine chariot forces, they migrated north, conquered the city of Laish, and renamed it Dan — making it, in Dr. Schilling’s words, a “hybrid location” not originally designated by God for this tribe

Jeroboam’s Cultic Schism (10th century B.C.): Following Solomon’s death, Rehoboam’s succession, and Jeroboam’s return from Egyptian exile, Jeroboam led the ten northern tribes in a political and religious split from the two southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin under Rehoboam). This formed:

- Northern Kingdom: Israel — King Jeroboam
- Southern Kingdom: Judah — King Rehoboam

To prevent his people from traveling to Jerusalem for worship, Jeroboam established two unauthorized (“cultic”) worship sites:

- Dan — northern extreme of his kingdom
- Bethel — southern extreme, bordering Judah

Jeroboam instituted three major religious reforms to sever ties with Jerusalem:

1. Replaced the role of the High Priest with royal participation in worship
2. Created an alternate religious calendar to eliminate competition with southern festivals
3. Installed a golden calf at each site as a throne or seat for Yahweh

The city gate at Dan is associated with the 8th century B.C. reign of Omri and Ahab; this gate functioned as a throne seat, military departure point, and place of civic judgment by city elders

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Tel Dan Stele (1993): During excavations at the city gate area, a stone inscription was discovered reading “The House of David, King of Israel” — providing extra-biblical confirmation of the historical existence of King David, parallel to the earlier discovery of Pontius Pilate’s name on a stone at Caesarea

Golden Calf: No golden calf has been discovered at Dan; Dr. Schilling suggests it was likely stolen, possibly by the Syrians. A bronze bull figurine from Ashkelon, approximately 4.5 inches tall, held in a museum collection, is cited as probable evidence that Jeroboam’s calves were small in scale, not life-size as popularly depicted (speculative inference)

City Gate Structure: The gate is dated to the period of Omri and Ahab (8th century B.C.) and features:

- A patio/entrance area measuring 65 feet by 32.5 feet, as referenced in Judges 19:15
- Evidence of four post-holders for a tent canopy, with the king’s throne positioned beneath
- Multi-period gate archaeology noted: an earlier gate layer predating the 8th-century structure is accessible above the current gate level

DR. SCHILLING’S KEY POINTS

The designation of Dan as a worship site was politically and religiously unauthorized (“cultic”) — not a reflection of divine instruction but of Jeroboam’s need for political control

The golden calf at Dan and Bethel was not an object of direct worship; rather, it functioned as a throne or footstool for Yahweh, analogous in concept to the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple

Correction of popular misconception: The golden calf, as depicted in The Ten Commandments film (full size), is almost certainly inaccurate given the immense quantity of gold that would require; archaeological evidence supports a miniature scale

The tribe of Benjamin appears to have intentionally trained soldiers to be left-handed (Judges 20:16 — 700 left-handed elite troops; Judges 3:15 — Ehud, whose Hebrew name suggests “restricted in the right hand”) as a tactical military adaptation: city gates were universally designed to force attackers to approach with their right (weapon) side exposed to defenders above; a left-handed soldier could hold a shield in the right hand and wield a sling or weapon with the left, protecting the body (Dr. Schilling characterizes this as intentional training rather than genetic predisposition — noted as interpretive)

The arc of history at Dan spans from the 10th century B.C. (David, Solomon, Jeroboam) through the 8th century B.C. (Omri, Ahab)

Solomon extended the “Dan to Beersheba” boundary beyond its classical limits (referenced via map shown earlier in the tour)

GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Dan to Beersheba: Classical north-south extent of the land of Israel; Dr. Schilling notes the group will visit Beersheba on the second day of the Dead Sea segment of the tour

Bethel: Southern boundary of the Northern Kingdom of Israel; once past Bethel, one entered the territory of Judah — making it the logical southern cultic site for Jeroboam

Dan’s strategic position: Located at the far north; the city’s elevation and gate approach required attackers to ascend a path with the city wall on the right, naturally exposing the right side — confirming the tactical logic behind left-handed Benjaminite soldiers

Original Danite territory: The Mediterranean coast, controlled by Philistines with superior chariot forces — terrain and military reality drove the tribe’s northward migration to Laish

QUOTABLE MOMENTS

“So Dan is a, dare I say, hybrid location. It’s not the original place that God had planned.” — Dr. Schilling on the legitimacy of Dan’s territorial status

“In 1993 they did the excavations here, and they found a stone with an inscription on it that said, ‘The House of David, King of Israel’... The Bible wins again.” — Exchange between Dr. Schilling and a participant (Speaker 2), underscoring the pattern of archaeology confirming disputed biblical figures

“So Benjamin potentially created left-handers. 700 of them, we’re told.” — On intentional military training versus genetic predisposition

PERSONAL NOTES

Follow up: Confirm museum location housing the Ashkelon bronze bull figurine — Dr. Schilling indicates it will be shown later on the tour

Cross-reference: Pontius Pilate inscription at Caesarea — useful parallel for the David stele argument regarding historicity

Question: What is the scholarly consensus on the dating of the Dan Stele (1993 find)? Verify whether “1993” or “1893” was the correct excavation date — Dr. Schilling states 1993 for the stele but later appears to reference “1893” in an unclear context; clarification needed

Note: Dr. Schilling conflates 2 Samuel 18:4 and the city gate context — verify whether this reference is to Dan specifically or a general gate typology

The path beyond the second gate is described as potentially muddy and transitions from stone to cobblestone — logistical note for site visits

Beersheba visit scheduled for the Dead Sea segment — anticipate corresponding notes on the southern boundary