

THE LANGUAGE OF REBELLION IN PSALM 2 AND IN THE PLASTER TEXTS FROM DEIR 'ALLA

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Editor's Note: The Deir `Alla material treated here by Victor Sasson is a portion of a lengthy inscription on plaster discovered in fragmentary state within the ruins of a building at Deir 'Alla in Transjordan. This inscription, which claims to be "the sayings of Balaam," had apparently fallen from an upright position, breaking into two main clusters of fragments plus a scattering of smaller clusters and individual pieces lying between those two larger groups. As the two main clusters were pieced together (with gaps in the text, of course), the reconstructions came to be designated as "combinations." Sasson's article deals with a section from the "first combination"—i.e., text pieced together from the main cluster of fragments representing the beginning portion of the inscription.

In Psalm 2:1-2 we read of a rebellion brewing among the nations against the sovereignty of YHWH and his anointed king:

lmh rgsw gwym
wl'mym yhgw ryq
ytysbw mlky 'rs
wrwznm nwsdw ybd
'l yhwh w 'l msyhw

Why are the nations in turmoil?
Why do the peoples hatch their futile plots?
The kings of the earth stand ready,
and the rulers conspire together
against the Lord and his anointed king. (NEB)

The "nations" in this psalm are generally understood to refer to those neighbors of the Hebrew Kingdom who are conspiring to rebel against YHWH and his anointed king. Thus, in seeking to

overthrow the sovereignty of the king, these pagan nations aim at overthrowing the sovereignty of God himself. On the whole, there is agreement among commentators and exegetes as to the general import of Ps 2:1-2, with recognition that these verses speak of conspiracy and revolt.¹

The plaster texts from Deir 'Alla are a fairly recent discovery and much discussion is going on aimed at clarifying them.² In my own detailed study of the first combination I have argued that the 'lhn and the *sdyn* are two separate and opposing groups of gods.³ I have maintained that the *sdyn* conspire against the 'lhn, who represent the established order in the world of men and in the cosmos. For some unknown reason, the *sdyn* seek to overthrow the rule of the 'lhn and bring about disorder and chaos to the world. Having formed a conspiracy in their assembly, the *sdyn* order the goddess *sgr w`str*—a lesser deity—to cover up the heavens with clouds of darkness and to bring about terror to the inhabitants of the world.⁹ She is also told to keep silent forever, a command which can only mean that she is to undertake her orders and execute them with obedience to the will of the *sdyn*. The pertinent section of the text—lines 18-27—is as follows, in transliteration and translation:

¹ See, e.g., Elmer A. Leslie, *The Psalms* (New York, 1949), pp. 89-91; M. Dahood, *Psalms I 1-50* (New York, 1966), p. 7; J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 1-50* (Cambridge, Eng., 1977), pp. 19-20.

² See the original edition by J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alta* (Leiden, 1976). All further references to Hoftijzer in this article are to this original edition, abbreviated as ATDA. See also A. Caquot and A. Lemaire, "Les textes arameens de Deir 'Alla," *Syria* 54 (1977): 189-208; G. Garbini, "L'iscrizione di Balaam Bar-Beor," *Henoah* 1 (1979): 166-188; P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "The Balaam Texts from Deir 'Alla: The First Combination," *BASOR*, no. 239 (1981), pp. 49-60; B. A. Levine, "The Deir 'Alla Plaster Inscriptions," *JAOS* 101 (1981): 195-205; and Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla* (Chico, Calif., 1984). For my discussion of the first combination, see my forthcoming article in *UF*.

³ The evidence is provided in my "The Book of Oracular Visions of Balaam from Deir 'Alla," forthcoming in *UF* 17 (1985; to be published in 1986). This article is a palaeographical, literary, and philological study of the first combination. Also, I have provided a short note entitled, "Two Unrecognized Terms in the Plaster Texts from Deir 'Alla," *PEQ* 117 (July-December 1985), pp. 102-103.

⁴ Apparently *sgr w`str* is an astral-fertility goddess who cannot but obey the command of the powerful *sdyn* gods.

Transliteration⁵

18. [' dr]n. [']tyhdw.
19. ⁶wnsbw. sdyn. mw'd.
20. [w'mr]w. ls[gr.]
21. ['l. ytk.] ry.
22. [s] kry. smyn. b'bky.
23. sm. hsk. [w'1.] n⁷gh.
24. 'tm. w[srh.]
25. [b]smrky. thby. ht.
26. [wyrb.] hsk.
27. w'l [.] thgy. 'd. 'lm.

Translation

18. [The migh]ty [ones] have conspired,
19. The *sdyn* have established a council.
20. They [have said] to s[gr :]
21. ["Let no] rain-water [fall!]
22. [S]hut the heavens with thy dense clouds!
23. Let darkness rule there [and not] light,
24. Impenetrable gloom and [distress!]
25. [With] thy darkness, bring about terror,
26. And obscurity [will increase,]
27. And keep thou silent forever!"

All of this is communicated to Balaam by the *'lhn* in a vision at night. What follows in the text is a depiction of a future series of events, events that will be contrary to what is deemed orderly, natural, or normal. We are told, among other things, that darkness will replace light, hares will feed without fear, men will fear to tread where ewes graze, and hyenas will listen to words of reform. As the *sdyn* assume power in the world and offend the *'lhn* by their action, even so does the weak, the insignificant, and the contemptible mock the strong and the noble. With the rebellion of the *sdyn* against the *'lhn*, the natural order in the animal kingdom and the social order in human society become chaotic.'

⁵ The numbers within the transliterated text indicate the sequence of lines according to the realignment of the fragments proposed by Caquot and Lemaire (see n. 2, above).

⁶ Most of the above comments were made public in a paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Dallas, Texas, in December 1983.

Some scholars have seen in the name *sdyn* an alternative or synonymous appellative for *'lhn*.⁷ The content of the first combination does not seem to me to support such an interpretation, however. My thesis that the *sdyn* and the *'lhn* are two opposing groups of deities and that the language of the Deir 'Alla texts speaks of a rebellion is now further strengthened by the linguistic evidence we have in Ps 2. Both this Psalm and the Deir 'Alla texts deal with conspiracy and rebellion against the major deity (or deities)—and thus against the established order. And moreover, both documents use similar terms in their description of the conspiracy and rebellion. A closer look at the language used in Ps 2:1-2 and in the first combination of the Deir 'Alla texts will reveal the following similarities:

Sovereigns:

Psalm 2—YHWH; *msyhw*.

Deir 'Alla—*'lhn*; (*sdyn* vis-a-vis *sgr w str*).

Rebels:

Psalm 2—*gwyrn*; *l'mym*; *mlky 'rs*; *rwznm*.

Deir 'Alla—*sdyn*; (*sgr w 'str* as a possible rebel vis-a-vis the *sdyn*).

Words of Same Roots in Context of Rebellion:

Psalm 2—*yhgw* (*hgh*); *ytysbw* (*ysb/nsb*); *yhd* (*yhd*).

Deir 'Alla—*'tyhdw* (*yhd*); *nsbzu* (*nsb*); *thgy* (*hgh*).

A brief discussion of the usage of the roots *yhd*, *ysb/nsb*, and *hgh* becomes necessary at this point. To begin with, all of these roots are found in the Hebrew Bible, used therein also in contexts that have nothing to do with opposition, conspiracy, or rebellion. Further, it is realized that the meaning of words from these roots in Biblical Hebrew and in the Deir 'Alla dialect need not be identical.⁸

⁷ So, for instance, McCarter and Hackett. The palaeographical and syntactical issues connected with my lines 18-19 are discussed in my UF article.

⁸ In my brief discussion of the Deir 'Alla dialect in the UF article, I conclude as follows: "In sum, the overall lexical, morphological and syntactical features of the dialect coupled with the markedly Canaanite nature and pulse of its poetry all indicate—at this stage of our knowledge—that the language of these texts is more related to Canaanite dialects than to Old Aramaic."

We will first examine the biblical root *yhd*, "be united."⁹ Certainly the root is related to Hebrew *'hd*, "one," just as Arabic *tawahhada* is related to *whd*, "one." In the Bible we encounter mostly the adverb *yhd*, "together," appearing in various contexts. A good example of the use of *yhd* as an adverb in a context of conspiracy occurs in Ps 31:14. As in Ps 2:2, the adverb here is used in conjunction with a verb from the root *ysd*:

ky sm 'ty dbt rbym mgwr msbyb
bhwsdm yhd 'ly lqht npsy zmmw

For I hear many men whispering
threats from every side,
in league against me as they are
and plotting to take my life. (NEB, 31:13; cf. 88:18)

A good example of the use of *yhd* as a verb occurs in Gen 49:6a, where the nouns *sdm* (root *ysd*) and *qhlm* are used parallel to each other. The context of Gen 49:5-6 speaks of murder and destruction brought about by the rebellious brothers, Simeon and Levi.

A striking use of the root *yhd*, in its Aramaic form, occurs in Haphel in an Old Aramaic inscription—the Zakkur inscription.¹⁰ Here King Zakkur reports that Barhadad has formed a league (i.e., conspired) with several other kings to fight against him:

whwhd. 'ly. brhdd. br. hz'l. mlk.
'rm. s 'sr. mlkn. (KAI, no. 202 A4-5)

The use of the preposition *'l*, "against," is clear in Pss 2 and 31 (where *yhd* is used as an adverb) and in the Zakkur inscription (where *yhd* is used as a verb). In the Deir 'Alla texts, on the other hand, the verb *'tyhdw* is used without the preposition *'l*. It would be hazardous, of course, to generalize from one instance as to

⁹ Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Lexicon*, p. 403 (hereinafter BDB).

¹⁰ Although Hoftijzer mentions Pss 2 and 82, the word *hwhd* in the Zakkur inscription, and other relevant biblical texts (see ATDA, pp. 192-193, 199), he steers a very different course in interpreting the first combination. Further, Hoftijzer believes that the *'lhn* and the *sdyn* do not constitute two separate and opposing groups of gods (see ATDA, pp. 275-276).

whether or not in the Deir ‘Alla dialect the verb *yhd* required the preposition *’l* (in the kind of context we are discussing). Be that as it may, it is obvious that when the text states that the *sdyn* gods *’tyhdw*, we are to understand that they got together for a dark purpose, and not for an innocent social hour. The *sdyn* isolated themselves in a particular place to hatch their plots and to issue their orders. They "got together" in conspiracy aimed at rebellion, just as the nations and kings in Ps 2 got together to overthrow the rule of YHWH and his anointed king. The verb *hwhd* in the Zakkur inscription gives further illustration of this particular usage.

Next to be examined are the roots *ysb/nsb*. The verb *ysb* (Hitpael) occurs several times in the Bible in contexts of opposition (positive or negative)—e.g., Ps 94:16; Deut 7:24 (11:25) and, of course, Ps 2:2. But *nsb*, too, can occur in context of opposition, as in Ps 82:1:

‘lhym nsb b’dt bqrb ‘lhym yspt
 God takes his stand in the court of heaven
 to deliver judgement among the gods themselves. (NEB)

This example is interesting because the verb *nsb* has God as its subject, just as the verb *nsb* in the first combination of the Deir ‘Alla texts has the *sdyn* gods as its subject. However, the meaning and usage of the verb *nsb* in the Deir ‘Alla texts is somewhat different. In Ps 82:1 God stands in the heavenly assembly (*’dt ’l*) in order that he may pronounce judgment against false deities.¹¹ In the Deir ‘Alla texts we are told that the *sdyn* have established (*nsbw*) an assembly (*mw’d*). On the other hand, we have seen that the *sdyn*'s assembly is formed for the purpose of rebellion. On the whole, it appears that Biblical-Hebrew (hereinafter BH) *nsb* and *ysb* and Deir-‘Alla *nsb* share something in common, especially when they are used in contexts that suggest opposition or rebellion.

According to the Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon, p. 426, *ytysbw* is Hitpael from the root *ysb* and this root occurs only in this form. The more recent Koehler-Baumgartner *Hebraisches and ara-*

¹¹ It is interesting that the false and unjust deities judged in Ps 82, very much like the *sdyn*, are at home in darkness amid "the shaken foundations" of the earth (vs. 5).

maisches Lexikon (Leiden, 1974), p. 408, makes the following parenthetical comment in its entry on *ysb*: "(alle ubrigen Stammformen zu *nsb*?)." Clearly, there is a problem as to the exact relation between *ysb* and *nsb*. It is beyond the scope of this study to dwell on this problem. However, the use of the phrase *wnsbw sdyn mw 'd* in the Deir 'Alla texts appears to me to suggest (1) that BH *ysb* in Ps 2 and Deir 'Alla *nsb* must have something in common, since both are used (albeit in different ways) in contexts of rebellion; (2) that BH *ysb* may well have originated in BH *nsb* (cf. Ps 82:1); and (3) that Biblia Hebraica's *ytysbw* for *ytysbw* in Ps 2:2 is an unwarranted suggestion and that Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia is correct in abandoning this suggestion (although it is not clear on what ground this abandonment was made). Surprisingly enough, *Hebraisches and aramaisches Lexikon* can still suggest *yty 'sw* as a replacement for MT *ytysbw* in Ps 2:2.

As a verb, *hgh* in BH has two distinct meanings: (1) "to moan, speak, muse, imagine, devise," and (2) "to remove."¹² It is clear that in Ps 2 the verb *hgh* is used in the sense of "imagine, devise" (cf. NEB's translation above). In the Deir 'Alla texts the verb *hgh* in the phrase *w'l thgy 'd 'lm* is best understood to mean "speak" (with a nuance of "imagine, devise"). Some scholars, however, have understood *hgh* here to mean "remove,"¹³ but the general context where the above phrase occurs does not support such an understanding of this verb. The linguistic evidence in Ps 2:1-2 now confirms the unlikelihood of this suggestion (see also Prov 24:1-2).

It should be noted that the first meaning of the verb *hgh* (see above) is the more prevalent one in the Bible, whereas the second is rather rare. To opt for the biblically rare meaning "remove" for the Deir 'Alla *hgh* on account of real or supposed difficulties in the preceding line(s) of the text is, surely, not the best methodology in this instance.¹⁴

In conclusion, both Ps 2 and the first combination of the Deir 'Alla texts use similar terms in their depiction of conspiracy and rebellion. In the case of Ps 2, the conspiracy and rebellion are those

¹² BDB, p. 211.

¹³ So, McCarter and Hackett.

¹⁴ The issues posed by the preceding lines are discussed in my articles in *PEQ* and *UF* (see n. 3, above).

of pagan nations against YHWH and his anointed king. In the case of the Deir 'Alla texts, the conspiracy and rebellion are primarily those of the *sdyn* against the '*lhn*. To accept this last conclusion regarding the first combination will naturally entail the rejection of the proposal that the '*lhn* and the *sdyn* are one single group of deities sharing a common purpose. The '*lhn* and the *sdyn* will be correctly viewed as two distinct and opposing groups of gods in conflict with each other. In fact, we can now characterize the rebellion in Ps 2 as universal rebellion and that in the Deir 'Alla texts as cosmic rebellion.

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