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

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Editor's Note: The Deir ʿAlla 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 ʿAlla 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:

\[ lmn \ r\overset{\text{g}}{s}w \ gwym \]
\[ wlm\overset{\text{y}}{m}ym \ yhgw \ ryq \]
\[ yty\overset{\text{s}}{b}w \ mlky \ \overset{\text{r}}{s} \]
\[ w\overset{\text{r}}{w}znym \ n\overset{\text{s}}{d}w \ yhd \]
\[ \overset{\text{c}}{l}yhw \ w\overset{\text{c}}{l} \ m\overset{\text{s}}{y}hw \]

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 ʾlhn and the ᵇdyn are two separate and opposing groups of gods.³ I have maintained that the ᵇdyn conspire against the ʾlhn, who represent the established order in the world of men and in the cosmos. For some unknown reason, the ᵇdyn seek to overthrow the rule of the ʾlhn and bring about disorder and chaos to the world. Having formed a conspiracy in their assembly, the ᵇdyn order the goddess šgr wʾštr—a lesser deity—to cover up the heavens with clouds of darkness and to bring about terror to the inhabitants of the world.⁴ 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 ᵇdyn. The pertinent section of the text—lines 18-27—is as follows, in transliteration and translation:


³The evidence is provided in my “The Book of Oracular Visions of Balaam from Deir ʾAlla,” 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 ʾAlla,” *PEQ* 117 (July-December 1985), pp. 102-103.

⁴Apparently šgr wʾštr is an astral-fertility goddess who cannot but obey the command of the powerful ᵇdyn gods.
Translation

18. [The mighty ones] have conspired,
19. The šdyn have established a council.
20. They [have said] to š[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 3lhn 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 šdyn assume power in the world and offend the 3lhn by their action, even so does the weak, the insignificant, and the contemptible mock the strong and the noble. With the rebellion of the šdyn against the 3lhn, the natural order in the animal kingdom and the social order in human society become chaotic.6

5The 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).

6Most 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 šdyn an alternative or synonymous appellative for ḫln. The content of the first combination does not seem to me to support such an interpretation, however. My thesis that the šdyn and the ḫln are two opposing groups of deities and that the language of the Deir ʿAlla texts speaks of a rebellion is now further strengthened by the linguistic evidence we have in Ps 2. Both this Psalm and the Deir ʿAlla 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 ʿAlla texts will reveal the following similarities:

Sovereigns:

Psalm 2—YHWH; mšyhw.

Deir ʿAlla—ḫln; (šdyn vis-à-vis šgr wštr).

Rebels:

Psalm 2—gwym; lʾnym; mlky ṭṣ; rwznym.

Deir ʿAlla—šdyn; (šgr wštr as a possible rebel vis-à-vis the šdyn).

Words of Same Roots in Context of Rebellion:

Psalm 2—yḥgw (ḥḥ); yṭšbw (yšb/nšb); yḥd (yḥd).

Deir ʿAlla—ṭyḥdw (yḥd); nšbw (nšb); thgy (ḥḥ).

A brief discussion of the usage of the roots yḥd, yšb/nšb, and ḥḥ 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 ʿAlla dialect need not be identical.8

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

8In my brief discussion of the Deir ʿAlla 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 *yḥd*, "be united."\(^9\) Certainly the root is related to Hebrew *ḥad*, "one," just as Arabic *tawahḥada* is related to *whd*, "one." In the Bible we encounter mostly the adverb *yḥd*, "together," appearing in various contexts. A good example of the use of *yḥd* 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 *yṣd*:

\[ \begin{align*}
ky \ \underline{\text{ṣm}^\text{cy} \ \underline{\text{dbt} \ \underline{\text{rbym} \ \underline{\text{mgwr} \ \underline{\text{msbyb}}} \ \underline{\text{bhwsdm} \ \underline{\text{yḥd} \ \underline{\text{ly} \ \underline{\text{lqḥt} \ \underline{\text{ntṣy} \ \underline{\text{zmmw}}}}}}}} \\
\text{For I hear many men whispering threats from every side,}
\text{in league against me as they are and plotting to take my life.} \quad \text{(NEB, 31:13; cf. 88:18)}
\end{align*} \]

A good example of the use of *yḥd* as a verb occurs in Gen 49:6a, where the nouns *sdm* (root *yṣd*) and *qḥlm* 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 *yḥd*, 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:

\[ \begin{align*}
\underline{\text{whḥḥd.} \ \underline{\text{'ly.} \ \underline{\text{brḥdd.} \ \underline{\text{br.} \ \underline{\text{ḥz}'l.} \ \underline{\text{mlk.}}} \ \underline{\text{rn.} \ \underline{\text{s.} \ \ldots} \ \underline{\text{'sr.} \ \underline{\text{mlkn.}}}}} \\
\text{(KAI, no. 202 A4-5)}
\end{align*} \]

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


\(^{10}\)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 *‘ln* and the *ṣdyn* 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 .Mail (in the kind of context we are discussing). Be that as it may, it is obvious that when the text states that the šdyn gods tyhdw, we are to understand that they got together for a dark purpose, and not for an innocent social hour. The šdyn 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 hwḥd in the Zakkur inscription gives further illustration of this particular usage.

Next to be examined are the roots ysh/nsh. The verb ysh (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 22. But nsh, too, can occur in context of opposition, as in Ps 82:1:

\[\text{God takes his stand in the court of heaven to deliver judgement among the gods themselves. (NEB)}\]

This example is interesting because the verb nsh has God as its subject, just as the verb nsh in the first combination of the Deir ‘Alla texts has the šdyn gods as its subject. However, the meaning and usage of the verb nsh in the Deir ‘Alla texts is somewhat different. In Ps 82:1 God stands in the heavenly assembly (‘dt .Mail) in order that he may pronounce judgment against false deities. In the Deir ‘Alla texts we are told that the šdyn have established (nshb) an assembly (mw<dt). On the other hand, we have seen that the šdyn’s assembly is formed for the purpose of rebellion. On the whole, it appears that Biblical-Hebrew (hereinafter BH) nsh and yshd and Deir-‘Alla nsh 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, ytyshbw is Hitpael from the root ysh and this root occurs only in this form. The more recent Koehler-Baumgartner Hebräisches und ara-

\[\text{It is interesting that the false and unjust deities judged in Ps 82, very much like the šdyn, are at home in darkness amid “the shaken foundations” of the earth (vs. 5).}\]
maisches Lexikon (Leiden, 1974), p. 408, makes the following parenthetical comment in its entry on yṣb: "(alle übrigen Stammformen zu nṣb?)." Clearly, there is a problem as to the exact relation between yṣb and nṣb. It is beyond the scope of this study to dwell on this problem. However, the use of the phrase wnṣbw šdyn mw cd in the Deir 'Alla texts appears to me to suggest (1) that BH yṣb in Ps 2 and Deir 'Alla nṣb must have something in common, since both are used (albeit in different ways) in contexts of rebellion; (2) that BH yṣb may well have originated in BH nṣb (cf. Ps 82:1); and (3) that Biblia Hebraica's yty cw for ytyṣbw 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, Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon can still suggest yty cw as a replacement for MT ytyṣbw 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." 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'lm thgy cdm is best understood to mean "speak" (with a nuance of "imagine, devise"). Some scholars, however, have understood hgh here to mean "remove," 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.

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

12BDB, p. 211.
13So, McCarter and Hackett.
14The 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 šdyn against the lhnh. To accept this last conclusion regarding the first combination will naturally entail the rejection of the proposal that the lhnh and the šdyn are one single group of deities sharing a common purpose. The lhnh and the šdyn 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.