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DIVINE CREATION OF THE KING
IN PSALMS 2:6

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It is a truism that Assyriology and archaeology are two of the fields that have done most to enable scholarship to shed new light on the Bible, despite the fact that it has been thoroughly scrutinized for over two millennia. At times they have made it possible to recognize a solution to a biblical problem that was available all along, but went unrecognized for lack of a parallel to show its plausibility. The present study proposes such a solution to a crux in Psalms 2. It is offered in honor of Miriam and Hayim Tadmor, masters of these fields, in grateful and affectionate tribute for their friendship and for all that I have learned from them.

Psalms 2 responds to a conspiracy by vassal states to overthrow the hegemony of a Judahite monarch. In the course of the psalm, God rebukes the vassals and indicates that He himself is the king (v. 6), and the king then quotes God’s declaration that he is His son and God’s promise of an empire (vv. 7–9).

One of the difficulties in this psalm is the meaning of מַעֲשֵׂה (מַעֲשֶׂה) in v. 6, מִמַּעֲשֵׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ מֶלֶךְ מִי הַמֶּלֶךְ מֶלֶךְ "But I Myself have made My king on Zion, My holy mountain." The most common English renderings, “set,” “put,” “installed,” “established” and “appointed,” which go back to the Septuagint and the Vulgate, have no real lexical basis and seem to have been inferred from the context. The rendering “enthroned” probably reflects the view that מַעֲשֵׂה is the verbal counterpart of מֶלֶךְ, “chief.” This view, also found in the midrash and endorsed by most medieval Hebrew commentators, is problematic for two reasons: (a) מְלָכָה is never used of Israelite rulers and (b) in at least one passage it seems to refer to officials subordinate to a king (Josh. 13:21). There is no reason to believe that the Davidic dynasty would have considered the noun an appropriate title or a cognate verb suitable for describing their enthronement. The rendering “consecrated” takes the verb to mean “consecrate (as מְלָכָה) by a libation,” a nuance supposedly derived from the basic meaning "pour a libation.” This view faces the same problem regarding the use of מְלָכָה, as well as two others: (a) “pour the king” would be an extremely elliptical way of saying “pour a libation to make king,” and (b) there is no evidence or reason to believe that libation played a role in Israelite coronation ceremonies. Finally, there is the view that מַעֲשֵׂה means “anoint,” first found in Symmachus and midrashic commentaries on our verse. This view is also problematic for two reasons: (a) it is מְלָכָה, not מְלָכָה, that means “anoint,” and (b) that verb is used only for hygienic anointing, and not ceremonial anointing, which is expressed by מַעֲשֵׂה.

A new approach was proposed by H. Gese, partially following the Septuagint, which renders the verse as “I have been made/appointed king by Him on His holy mountain.” The Septuagint construes the verb as passive and reads the pronominal suffixes as third person (putative Vorlage מַעֲשֵׂה...מַעֲשֵׂה), implying that the king is the speaker. Gese proposed that מַעֲשֵׂה should be pointed as מַעֲשֵׂה and understood as “I (the king) was formed,” מַעֲשֵׂה, “weave together.” Thus, the verse is to be read as מַעֲשֵׂה...מַעֲשֵׂה, “But I was created as his king on Zion, His holy mountain.” He bases his derivation of the verb from Ps. 139:13: מַעֲשֵׂה...מַעֲשֵׂה
The Lord created me at the beginning of His course
As the first of His works of old,
In the distant past I was fashioned,
At the beginning, at the origin of earth.
There was still no deep well when I was brought forth...

Because of the parallelism with כבנין and הכתרו in the adjacent verses, F. Hitzig and B. Gemser\textsuperscript{11} had concluded that קְצֵּךָ should be repointed as קְצִיךָ, and since Ps. 2:7 goes on to refer to God’s giving birth to the king, Gese argued that the same vocalization should be adopted in Ps. 2:6.

Contextually, the meaning “create,” “form,” is unexceptional, but Gese’s argument requires us to agree that the speaker in v. 6 is the king, despite the fact that v. 5 reads as the introduction to a speech by God, to adopt the Septuagint reading of the pronominal suffixes, to revocalize קְצִיךָ, and to rely on a meaning of מָכַר which is attested only once, in Ps. 139:13. Though each of these problems seems minor, they are nonetheless numerous. The purpose of the present study is to propose a derivation that yields the same meaning while avoiding these problems and is more consistent with the royal rhetoric of the psalm and extra-biblical counterparts. It agrees that מָכַר means “create,” but derives that meaning from the well-attested metallurgical sense of מָכַר, “pour,” “cast,” “found,” a suggestion already made in Midrash Tehillim but which has rarely figured in the discussion of the psalm since.\textsuperscript{12} This sense of מָכַר appears in Isa. 40:19 and 44:10 as the verb for making a statue,\textsuperscript{13} it underlies the noun מָכָר, “molten image,” and is well attested in Ugaritic and Phoenician/Punic.\textsuperscript{14}

The aptness of this nuance is indicated by a passage in the Akkadian Tukulti-Ninurta Epic. The epic describes the creation of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (thirteenth century BCE) by the gods:

By the decision of the Lord of all the lands (Enlil) his (Tukulti-Ninurta’s) pouring (šipkšu) proceeded smoothly in/through the channel of the womb of the gods. It is he who is the eternal image (šalmu) of Enlil...\textsuperscript{15}

The motif of divine creation of the king is a common one in Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. The verb used for creation is usually banā.\textsuperscript{16} Here a different term is used, šipku, “pouring,” derived from šapāku, “pilé up,” “pour.” It is cognate to Hebrew špk, “pour,” and synonymous with Hebrew, Ugaritic, and Phoenician/Punic מַכַר. The fact that the next line says that Tukulti-Ninurta is the “image” (šalmu, lit. “statue”) of Enlil implies that the term is used here in a metallurgical sense, equivalent to מַכַר. As observed by W.G. Lambart, “The context compels a meaning ‘create’ for špk in this context. Probably this is a metaphor from metal casting, as the root is used, e.g., of the manufacture of Gilgamesh’s arms... [in Gilgamesh Epic IV, 30–32].”\textsuperscript{17} In Akkadian, šapāku is used quite frequently in this sense.\textsuperscript{18} “Channel” (rātu) would thus be used here in its metallurgical sense of a channel through which molten metal is poured into a mold, as noted by Machinist,\textsuperscript{19} and the “womb of the gods” would be used metaphorically for the mold. On the other hand, as observed by Machinist, the image of the divine womb calls to mind mythological scenes in which the divine womb/birth goddess gives birth to gods and humans, and this may imply a double entendre in which šipku is also being used in the sense of “engendering.”\textsuperscript{20}

To judge from similar passages, the metallurgical sense is primary in the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic. Another Assyrian king, Adad-Nirari II (911–891 BCE), says that the great gods “have perfected (ušekilīma) my appearance in every respect, they have shaped (išpuk) my lordly body.”\textsuperscript{21} The metallurgical sense in this inscription is supported by the term for “perfected” (šukulu), which is commonly used in describing the manufacture of statues, as in Sennacherib’s description of how he had bull colossi made: “Upon the inspiration of the god, I built clay molds, poured (aštappaka) copper...
into each, and finished their forms as perfectly (ūṣakēlā) as half-shekel pieces.”

The metallurgical sense is also apparent in an Assyrian inscription referring to the creation of gods: “Aššur is the creator (šāpīk) of the Igigi and the Anunnaki, who molds (pātīq) the heaven and the nether world.” The parallel verb pātāq, “mold,” is another term used frequently in metallurgy.

In the context of the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic, the motif of divine creation of the king plays a role reminiscent of Psalms 2 in a number of respects. The epic tells of the Assyrian king’s conflict with the hostile Kassite king Khashilias, whom he accuses of treaty violation. The passage depicting Tukulti-Ninurta’s birth describes his military prowess and his divine or quasi-divine status (“his mass is reckoned with the flesh of the gods” and he is the “image of Enlil,” that is, the embodiment of his authority, majesty, or the like). It is followed immediately by a passage declaring that the god Enlil raised him “like a natural father” (kīma abu ālidu, lit. “like a father who begot him”), second only to Enlil’s first-born (Ninurta), and that no king could compete with him in battle. All this serves to justify Tukulti-Ninurta’s preferential status over all opponents, including Khashilias, and to assure his victory in battle. In these respects, the epic serves as an apt parallel to Psalms 2, in which the Davidic king, facing a rebellion by his vassals (who have implicitly repudiated their vassal treaties with him), is declared to have been created by God and adopted as His son (v. 7), thereby justifying the empire as his patrimony (vv. 8–9; cf. Ps. 89:28) and showing the futility of the vassals’ rebellion (vv. 1 and 4).

In light of this use of the synonymous šapāku in similar contexts, it is reasonable to conclude that the MT of Ps. 2:6 should be retained and אֶת אִמּוֹתָיו מֶלֶךְ interpreted as “But I Myself created my

king...”.

By the same derivation, the MT form הָנָךְ in Prov. 8:23 can be explained as a nif’al of הָנָךְ, meaning “I was created.” This being the case, the derivation of הָנָךְ in Ps. 139:13 should also be reconsidered. The Masoretic vocalization implies derivation from נָכוּ, “weave together;” for which appeal is made to Job 10:11: (Leningrad: רָשׁ בְּשָׁרָה הַחֲיָמָה הָנָךְ נָכוּ הָנָךְ) (תּוֹלְדוֹת).

“You clothed me with skin and flesh and wove me of bones and sinews.” However, Job 10:11 involves a unique and very specific metaphor which is not necessarily presupposed by Ps. 139:13. In view of the parallelism with הָנָךְ in the latter verse, as in Prov. 8:23, and the fact that the verb describes an action that took place in the womb, as in the Tukulti-Ninurta epic, it is quite plausible that the verb underlying הָנָךְ is נָכוּ and that it was originally vocalized הָנָךְ.

Since the motif of the divine creation of the king has not been identified elsewhere in the Bible, it is natural to wonder whether it was borrowed from elsewhere. If so, the parallels cited above would make Mesopotamian, perhaps specifically Assyrian, royal propaganda a likely source. But determining when Israelite psalmists were likely to have been aware of such Mesopotamian parallels is inseparable from the difficult question of the date of Psalms 2. These questions would take us too far afield to be pursued here.

The motif of the divine creation of the king in Psalms 2:6 is another example, along with the reference to the king as God’s son in v. 7, of ancient Near Eastern royal motifs paralleled in the psalm, and another reminder of how much the psalms reflect the elevated attitude toward kingship presumably held in the royal court of Jerusalem, as distinct from the more reserved view often expressed elsewhere in the Bible.

NOTES

1 Many scholars believe the occasion for such a psalm would have been the enthronement of a new king, since subject states would see the death of the previous king as an opportunity for rebellion, and in v. 7 God speaks of making the king His son “this day” (see, e.g., H. Gunkel, Die Psalmen [5th ed.], Göttingen, 1968, p. 5; A. Weiser, The Psalms (Old Testament Library), Philadelphia, 1962, p. 109; contrast H.-J. Kraus, Psalmen, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1966, 1:13–14). But rebellions are not planned only when monarchs die, but whenever they are perceived as weak.
Jer. 27 describes an occasion in Zedekiah's reign when several states of the Levant conferred in Jerusalem about rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar II. From Jeremiah's symbolic use of "thongs (עָרַד) and bars of a yoke" (Jer. 27:2) and his exhortation to the plotters to submit to the yoke (יִכְסָא) of the king of Babylon (vv. 8, 11, 12), it is evident that their plans amounted to exactly the same as the kings' in Ps. 2.3: "Let us break the cords of (this case, the Babylonians') yoke, shake off their ropes from us" (נַעֲשֶׂה אֶת מְצוּדָּתֵּנוֹ לְשִׁלְשִׁים מַעַּרְךֹּם). Historians presume that the meeting in question took place in Nebuchadnezzar's eleventh year (594/593 BCE; contrary to Jer. 27:1a, which implies Nebuchadnezzar's ninth year) and was inspired by a short-lived rebellion in Babylonia the previous winter (e.g., J. Bright, A History of Israel [3rd ed.], Philadelphia, 1981, p. 329; M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, II Kings [Anchor Bible 11]. New York, 1988, p. 322). Nor does "this day" in v. 7 indicate that the rebellion took place at the time of the king's enthronement. Instead, it is part of a quotation: in the context of the psalm the king is speaking during the rebellion and quoting the imperial promise that God made earlier, at the king's enthronement.

2 LXX καταερθότητι and Vulg. constitutus sum, both construing the verb as passive. The same meaning is given, though in the active voice, by Pesh 麀ירא.


4 The New English Bible.

5 Yalqut Psalms sec. 620, and Midrash Tehillim 2:8, third explanation; Ibn Ezra; Kimhi, commentary and Sefer Hashorashim; Meiri; Metzudat Zion. This view may also be reflected in the Targum's כִּכֶּב (see M. Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature, New York, 1950, p. 1441c, Pa'al, second definition "2" (a typo, I assume, for "3"!), but see below regarding "anoint.

6 Josh. 13:21; Ezek. 32:30; Ps. 83:12; Micah 5:4. כִּכֶּב also appears in the Aramaic Ahiqar, line 119, see A.E. Cowley, Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C., Oxford, 1923, p. 216. In Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian inscriptions, nasiku appears as a title of Aramean sheikhs, see J.A. Brinkman, A Political History of Post-Cassite Babylonia 1158–722 B.C., Rome, 1968, pp. 273–275; AHw, p. 754a. That the term does not refer to kingly status is indicated by Brinkman's observation that "[s]ome tribes have more than one sheikh (nasiku), and as many as six are attested for one group" (p. 273). He thinks it plausible that "sheikhs in the larger [tribes] generally ruled over sub-tribal units and that only smaller groups ... had a single sheikh" (p. 275).


Deut. 28:10; 2 Sam. 14:2; Micah 6:15; Ruth 3:3; Dan. 10:3; 2 Chron. 28:15.


Midrash Tehillim ed. Buber 2:8 (p. 14a); Yalqut Psalms sec. 620, where כִּכֶּב is defined as Aramaic כִּכֶּב: "I cast, or molded, him," citing the phrase מַעַּרְךֹּם כִּכֶּב as evidence of this meaning.


not the king’s biological father from birth, but adopted him at his enthronement (see also the dynastic oracle to David in 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:27–28; and 1 Chron. 17:13; 28:6). There is also a consensus that adoption is implied by the formula “you are my son.” See S.M. Paul, “Adoption Formulae: A Study of Cuneiform and Biblical Legal Clauses,” Maarav 2 (1980), pp. 173–185; T. Ishida, The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel, pp. 108–109 and 61, n. 30; cf. J. Tigay, “Adoption,” Encyclopaedia Judaica 2: 300–301. God’s adoption of the king is often considered to be a metaphorical or spiritual reflex of the ancient Near Eastern notion (itself possibly metaphorical in some cases) of the king as the gods’ son, see H. Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods, Chicago, 1948, pp. 299–301; W.W. Hallo, Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles, New Haven, 1957, pp. 134–136; A.W. Sjöberg, “Die göttliche Abstammung der sumerisch-babylonischen Herrscher,” Orientalia Suecana 21 (1972), pp. 87–112; Kirta (Keret) Epic, KTU 16:10–11, 20–23, trans. D. Pardee in Hallo and Younger (above, n. 20), 1:339. Especially pertinent in connection with “this day have I begotten you” is the view that in Egypt the king’s divine birth does not take place when he is first born, but only at his coronation (P.C. Craigie, cited by J.K. Hoffmeier, “Son of God: From Pharaoh to Israel’s Kings to Jesus,” Bible Review 13/3 [June 1997], p. 48). For a strong, and in many respects convincing, critique of the view that Ps. 2:6 and its biblical parallels refer to adoption, see J.J.M. Roberts, “Whose Child is This? Reflections on the Speaking Voice in Isaiah 9:5,” Harvard Theological Review 90 (1997), pp. 115–129. However, I do not believe that Roberts adequately accounts for “this day.”

Incidentally, Weinfeld holds that the biblical references to king as God’s son have nothing to do with the ancient Near Eastern notion of the king as the gods’ son, but are modeled on covenants of grant in which the donor adopts the recipient in order to provide a legal basis for transferring a grant (property, dynasty, etc.) to him. See M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” JAOS 90 (1970), pp. 184–203, esp. 190–194; “Addenda to JAOS 90 (1970), p. 184ff.”, JAOS 92 (1972), pp. 468–469. For a critique of this position, see G. Knoppers, “Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?” JAOS 116 (1996), pp. 670–697.

According to Ehrlich, “futility” is expressed not only by ירע, “vain things,” but also by the first word in the psalm,lekî, which he renders as “vergebung,” based on the use of לבק in Targ. Jon. to 1 Sam. 12:21; Isa. 2:22 and the use of לבק in Gen. Rab., ch. II. See Jastrow (above, n. 5, Dictionary), s.v. לבק II and s.v. לבק.

The significance of God’s creating the king on “Zion, My holy mountain” (v. 6b) is unclear, but it is noteworthy that the Sumerian king Gudea of Lagash (late 22nd century BCE) claims, in a passage reminiscent of both Ps. 2:7 and
the passage from the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic, to have been born in a sanctuary. Addressing Gatumdu(g), the goddess of his city, he says: “I have no mother, you are my mother. I have no father, you are my father; you had the seed of me implanted in the womb, made me to be born from the sanctuary” (Gudea Cylinder A, iii. 6–8, in D.O. Edzard, Gudea and His Dynasty, Toronto, 1997, p. 70; cf. p. 79, col. xvii, 12–14). A hymn of Shulgi, King of Ur (ca. 2094–2047) apparently claims that he too was born in a temple. See J. Klein, “The Birth of a Crown Prince in the Temple: A Neo-Sumerian Literary Topos,” in J.-M. Durand (ed.), La Femme dans le Proche-Orient Antique (RAI 33), Paris, 1987, pp. 97–106; idem, “The Birth of Shulgi in the Temple of Nippur,” in Hallo and Younger (above, n. 20), 1:552–553 and literature cited therein.

29 Judahite awareness of Assyrian royal propaganda is manifest in the eighth century BCE. See P.B. Machinist, “Assyria and its Image in First Isaiah,” JAOS 103 (1983), pp. 719–737. But this by no means settles the question. If the situation presupposed by the psalm — an uprising of vassal states against the Davidic monarchy — is a real one, it would seem to reflect the period following Solomon’s death, when the Davidic-Solomonic empire fell apart. In that case, it would be harder to make the case for direct awareness of Assyrian royal propaganda.