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## Psalm 23:2 Reconsidered

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Richard S. Tomback

## PSALM 23:2 RECONSIDERED

The text of Psalm 23:2 is usually rendered: "he makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters". Most translations of this verse are uniform, divergences being secondary.<sup>1</sup> This paper will attempt to examine the Sumero-Babylonian background of the aforementioned verse, its literary uses and possible origins. The investigation will concentrate along the lines of philology and conceptual thought. The lyric descriptions utilized by the Hebrew poet, it is hoped, will be convincingly traced back to the expanded metaphor of the king as a shepherd leading his people into "security and happiness".

The phrase *binēōt<sup>2</sup> deše' yarbišēni*, "he makes me lie, down in green pastures", appears only once<sup>3</sup> in the Old Testament. The combination being found only in our verse mentioned above. To pupils of semitic languages and the ancient near east it appears that the Hebrew *binēōt deše' yarbišēni*, is the equivalent of and in no way different in meaning than the Akkadian *ina šēri aburri (š) irabbis* "to lie down in green pastures" and its related phrase *šubta nehta šušubu* "to make PN dwell in security". Note in particular the phraseology in the genre of literature known as Akkadian prophecy: *alpu<sup>me3</sup> ina šēri a-bur-riš (irabbisu)* "The cattle will lie down in (green Pastures)" or its antithesis, (utilizing the related phrase cited above) *i-na palē-šu<sup>ku</sup> akkadiki šub-tum ni-i(h-tum ul uššab)* "during his reign Akkad (will not enjoy) a peaceful abode".<sup>4</sup> From the aforementioned citations it would seem necessary to conclude that the settling of domestic animals is a pre-requisite of, or at least, an important characteristic of

\* <sup>1</sup> *NEB*: He makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside the waters of peace . . . .

*AB* vol. 16, p. 145 "In green meadows He will make me lie down; near tranquil waters will He guide me . . . ."

*ICC* p. 203 "In grassy pastures He maketh me lie down; unto refreshing waters He leadeth me . . . ."

<sup>2</sup> Note the use of *nawū* as pasture land outlying a city in *ARM* 86:19 *eli na-we-e-em ša be-li-ia* "the pasture land of my lord". *ARM* 92:19-20 *u<sup>4</sup>ha-na<sup>m</sup>š-tu a-hu-na-a<sup>1</sup> a-na na-wi-im-ma is-ba-at* "concerning the Haneens who made route towards the pasture land (departing from) Abuna."

<sup>3</sup> On the subject of hapex legomena in the Old Testament see Harold R. Cohen *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (Scholars Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> A. K. Grayson and W. G. Lambert, "Akkadian Prophecies", *JOS* 18 (1964) 13, also p. 15n. 6. Also see A. K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (University of Toronto Press, 1975) p. 32-33.

security, being preceded in most cases by the removal of hostile elements.<sup>5</sup> Note in particular the significant phrase in the Epilogue to CH<sup>o</sup> where-in it is stated that before the people were settled in safety *nišī aburri ušarbiš mugallitam ul ušaršišinati* "I made the people lie down in safe pastures; I did not allow anyone to frighten them"; it became necessary to remove hostile elements from the surrounding areas *{nakri e'is u šapliš assuh}* "I removed enemies from everywhere" . . . *eliš ina baltū'im li-is sa-ah-šu* "here and above may he (Šamaš) remove him from among the living".<sup>6</sup>

It is significant, at this point, to note the corresponding use of the Hebrew verb *rābaš* in connection with the establishing of secure surroundings devoid of hostile elements: Ez. 34:10, 14 - *kō 'amar 'adōnāi 'elōhīm hinēni 'el-hārō'im wēdāraštī 'et-šōni miyyādām wēhišbaitim mēre'ōt šōn wēlō yir'ū 'od hārō'im 'otām wēhiššaltī šōni mippihem wēlō-teyyēnā lāhem lē'oklā . . . bemirē-tōb 'erē 'otām ubēhārē mērōm yisrā'el yiyeh nēwēhem šām tirbašnā bēnāweh tōb umire' šāmēn tir'ēnā 'el-hārē yisrā'el.* "These are the words of the Lord God: I am against the shepherds and will demand my sheep from them. I will dismiss those shepherds: they shall care only for themselves no longer; I will rescue my sheep from their jaws, and they shall feed on them no more . . . I will feed them on good grazing-ground, and their pasture shall be the high mountains of Israel. There they will rest, there in good pasture, and find rich grazing on the mountains of Israel" and the ideal picture of security as portrayed by Isaiah 11:6-7 *wēgār zē'eb 'im-kebes wēnāmēr 'im-gēdi yirbaš wē'egel ukēfir umēri yahdāw wēnā'ar qāšōn nōhēg bām ufārā wādōb tir'ēnā yahdāw yirbēnū yaldēhem wē'aryē kabāqār y'ōkal-tēben.* "Then the wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, and a little child shall lead them; the cow and the bear shall be friends, and their young shall lie down together."

Returning to our central concern, in an elaborate inscription of King Hammurabi of Babylon<sup>o</sup> where-in he lauds his accomplishments we find the Sumerian phrase: *mu-da-na u-sal-la mi-ni-in-na* "(the people) of my land I have settled in an abundant field".<sup>10</sup> Likewise in a more ancient

<sup>5</sup> Notice in particular, *šarrum u nakrūtum salimam Beck kannuma wassunu a-bu-ur-ri uššabu* "the king and (his) enemies will make peace and their people will be able to dwell in the open." YOS 10, 44:10; also the related phrase, *šubtum nehtami u-ša-ab* "the country will live a quiet life." YOS 10, 13:18, 20:13, 53:iii 30; *nībi Sippar . . . lubat nehti šu-šu-ba-am* "to make the people of Sippar live in security(?)." PBS 7 133:20 and its variant *tub libbim šušubum* "safely I settled them." YOS 9, 35:50-52.

<sup>6</sup> G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, Kt., *The Babylonian Laws*. (2 vols.; Oxford, 1968) I. 94-95 col. xxiv lines 30-60.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. col. xxiv lines 35-39.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. col. xxiv lines 30-31, col. xxvii lines 34-37

<sup>9</sup> A. Sjöberg, *Ein Selbstpreis des Königs Hammurabi von Babylon*. ZA 54 (1954) pp. 52-54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 57, also n. 36.

inscription from Ur, Warad Sin (c. 1834-1823 B.C.E.), son of Kudur Mabuk is extolled as *sib nig-si-sá uku-dagal-la-na ú-sal ne-in-naḍ-da* "shepherd of righteousness who makes his wide-spread people to lie down in peace".<sup>11</sup>

The imagery of the shepherd-king leading his people, is therefore traced back to the old Babylonian period, early second millennium (to circa 1800 B.C.E.).

Thus far we have demonstrated the unique relationship between the Biblical descriptions of "peace" as portrayed by the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel and the corresponding designation of "green fields" and "safe pastures" in Sumerio-Babylonian literature to characterize "good" as opposed to "bad" times.

At this point in our investigation a few words should be expressed concerning the second idiom in our verse, *'al-mê mēnuḥôt yēnahālēni*.<sup>12</sup> "He leads me beside the still waters." We interpret this metaphor in the generally accepted sense of Yahweh leading his celebrant through a period of uncertainty and forlorn hope.

Similar imagery may be noted in the recently published *dinger. ša, dib. ba* ("incantation for appeasing an angry god") incantation. The relevant verse reads: *ine me-e ni-hu-ti lū gi-šal-ti at-ta i-li i-na me-(e) šap-lu-ti lu-u pa-ri-si at-ta* "in still waters be my oar, my god, in deep waters be my steering paddle".<sup>13</sup> The author(s) of the incantation, facing obvious uncertainty and misfortune, calls upon his god for assistance.

While the prayers of the Babylonian communicant may be derived from a need to appease the anger and indignation of *Sin* or some "other" god, and the psalmist's words arise from trust and assurance, nevertheless, the argument is that the human response to the "divine", though motivated by different reasons, is naturally and inevitably one of awe.

The similarity in structure and phraseology of the Hebrew poetic expressions reviewed above to their Sumerio-Akkadian counterparts undoubtedly point out once again the common literary background from

<sup>11</sup> C. J. Gadd, *Ur Excavation Texts I* (Royal Inscriptions. London, 1928) ins. // 128, line 15. Also note CAD vol. 1 p. 90, sub *aburru. (giš.pa).a.ni.un.šar.ra si.sá.e.da.kalam.ma.a.ni.ú.sal.la.ná.da: hi-taš u el kišat niši šutēšuri māssu a-bur-riš šurbusi* "so that he may lead his people aright with his staff, let his country lie in safe pastures". 4R 12:19 f.

<sup>12</sup> See in this connection the related use of the Biblical Hebrew verb *nihel* "to lead, or guide" - Exod. 15:13 *Nehalta be'ozzka el newe qoḏseka* "Thou has guided them by thy strength to thy holy dwelling" and Isa. 49:10b *ki merahāmām yinhāgem w'e'al mabbū'e mayyim yēnahalēm* "for the One who loves them shall lead them and take them to water at bubbling streams".

<sup>13</sup> W. G. Lambert, "The *Dinger. Ša, Dib. Ba* Incantations", JNES pp. 290-91, line 21, for Sumerian translation of Akkadian: *a.tun.ma"giš(al.mu.ḥe m)e.en dinger mu.a.buru da.gi muš.ḥé re.en*

which neighboring civilizations, over several millennia, drew their inspiration. Perhaps with the publication of additional materials from such recent finds as Ebla, further connections will be made between Biblical expression and its Ancient Near Eastern counterparts.